

## THE END OF FRANÇAUFRIQUE? A STUDY CASE ON BENIN'S 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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### Abstract

*The elections that took place in 2016 in Benin are very significant in defining the new framework of the French-African relations per se. The so-called candidate of Françafrique, Lionel Zinsou, lost the elections mainly because he promoted during the electoral campaign a vision still devoted to maintaining close connections with the former colonial power, France. On the other side, Patrice Talon fiercely advocated for a new and strong position both in what regards the domestic affairs as well as externally, portraying himself as «le candidat de la rupture». In the end, this way of positioning during the electoral campaign brought him the victory in elections, besides France's support towards the other candidate. Taking into consideration all these elements, the main purpose of the paper is that of analysing the impact of the 2016 elections 'result on redefining and maybe even ending the French-African relations, long time known as Françafrique. In this approach, the analysis will mainly focus on the electoral campaign itself and especially on the way in which the colonial past and the reference to France have been used by the candidates as means of winning votes from the electorate and to positioning to one another during that period of time.*

**Keywords:** Benin, presidential elections, electoral campaign, colonial history, Françafrique

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## Introduction

The French-African relations bear a deep and complex history of interaction spanning from the colonial era until today. Their unique way of developing as well as their intensity have been known for a long period of time as *Françafrique*. But in the last years, the political events that took place in several former African colonies have brought up a new reality in which France seems to lose its grip on its former partners and clients.

The so-called French candidates involved election process organized in those African states are starting to lose especially because they are directly or indirectly linked to the former metropolis. Moreover, the anti-colonialist or anti-French discourse is starting to gain support among the people and increasingly becomes a driving-factor of change.

This is also the case of Benin, a former French colony with strong post-colonial links but also known for the outstanding positive democratic transition during the last decades. As many political analysts have considered in the last years, “Benin’s success comes with a number of electoral innovations that are challenging the *status quo* and could have important implications for the rest of the continent in the future.”<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that these implications are relevant for the internal democratic process but can also have an impact on Benin’s relations with the former colonial power. The 2016 elections brought to light exactly this new dynamic in the evolution of French-African relations which we assume to call and depict in this paper as the end of *Françafrique*.

The main research question of the paper is “Are the 2016 elections ‘results in Benin a sign of the end of *Françafrique*?’”. Further on, the subsequent questions are “Which were the means used by the candidates during the electoral campaign in order to gain votes?” and “Was the relation with France a cornerstone in influencing the electorate to distance from the so-called *Françafrique* candidate?”.

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<sup>1</sup> Vera Songwe, “Benin’s Landmark Elections: An Experiment in Political Transitions”, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2016/03/22/benins-landmark-elections-an-experiment-in-political-transitions/>>, accessed on 30 April 2021.

In finding an answer to all these research questions, the first part of this paper will mainly focus on defining very briefly the concept of *Françafrique* and then on establishing the main elements that need to be considered in analyzing this phenomenon. Secondly, we will look into the evolution of the electoral campaign and will analyze synthetically its results. We will mainly focus on the major moments of the electoral campaign and on the strategies used by the candidates during that period, paying a particular attention to the way in which the relation with France and the *Françafrique* have been used mostly as means of gaining electoral support.

### **Definitions and analysis elements**

The term of *Françafrique* has known a long yet tumultuous and controversial history throughout the decades. Since the purpose of this paper is rather a more empirical than a strictly theoretical one, we will very briefly present the definition and evolution of the term of *Françafrique*. In what regards the appearance and evolution of the term, it is of utmost importance to notice from the very beginning that it has been accepted and used throughout decades both by the French and African leaders bearing for a long time a similar significance and being associated to a particular way of interaction between France and its former African colonies.

From a historical point of view, the term was first coined by Ivory Coast's first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1955" to encapsulate the close and amicable ties between his own country and the former colonial power, France, referring to the specificity in which the Franco-African relationship have proliferated" <sup>2</sup>. This definition has been used for the next decades both by the French and the African side and it captured very well that unique post-colonial network from the African continent. For the former French colonies, it meant that then protector still existed and that

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<sup>2</sup> Maja Bovcon, "Françafrique and Regime Theory", *European Journal of International Relations*, 19(1), 2013, 5-26.

the traditional way of living coordinated by the former patron-state was still in place, together with its help and protection<sup>3</sup>.

For France it meant that it still kept its grip on the African states and it maintained its supremacy in that area. This translated into privileged access to the African states' resources and a significant influence also in their domestic affairs. This has been the reality for a long time after decolonization. Still, a change occurred starting with the 1990's when the new political, economic and institutional arrangements showed and brought a different perception of the concept.

In this context, the term received a negative connotation, especially following the publication of François-Xavier Verschave's well-known book, *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République*. He defined the concept as "the secret criminality in the upper echelons of French politics and economy, where a kind of underground Republic is hidden from view"<sup>4</sup>. From this moment on, the negative meaning of the term seemed to prevail for next decades and this had a great impact on the evolution of the African states<sup>5</sup>. As we will try to demonstrate in the sections of the paper its especially this way of seeing the *Françafrique* that brought changes in the African societies and that brought it finally to an end, as it is the case of Benin 2016's elections.

Having these elements as starting premises, in the next sections we will try to find an answer raised even from the title: "The end of *Françafrique*?". In this regard we will pay particular attention firstly to the

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<sup>3</sup> Historically, *Françafrique* also meant a system of centre-periphery clientelism, as shown in Sergiu Mișcoiu, Louis-Marie Kakdeu, "Authoritarian Clientelism: The Case of the President's 'Creatures' in Cameroon" in *Acta Politica*, 1(56), 2021.

<sup>4</sup> François-Xavier Verschave, *La Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République*, Paris, Stock, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Also see Sergiu Mișcoiu, "Introduction. Du récit des conflits au conflit des récits : Raconter les politiques conflictuelles en Afrique" in Simona Jișa, Sergiu Mișcoiu, Modibo Diarra (eds.), *Raconter les politiques conflictuelles en Afrique. Regards croisés*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2021, pp. 7-19; Sergiu Mișcoiu "Afrique et politique", in Simona Jișa, Sergiu Mișcoiu, Buata B. Malela (eds.), *Littérature et politique en Afrique francophone. Approche transdisciplinaire*, Paris, Editions du Cerf, 2018, pp. 345-348.

evolution of Benin's democratic transition and to the context in which the elections took place in 2016.

Then, in a second part we will analyze the messages and strategies used by the two main candidates: Zinsou and Patrice Talon. The primary objective is to see how the term and significations of *Françafrique* have been used by the candidates during their electoral campaign. Moreover, we will look into the history of each of the two candidates trying to identify connections with France and the way in which the local society has perceived them. Their background and especially the manner in which they used it during the campaign will be analyzed in this paper. Also, we will focus on assessing the influence that the association with France had on perceiving them and then how it reflected in the electorate's response. At the same time, we will focus on the results of the presidential elections and we will try to explain why the victory of Patrice Talon has been seen as a triumph of a new and strong Benin and also why the society fought so fiercely to detach from what they have negatively perceived as the *Françafrique* type of relations and on the meaning that this had on them, as well.

### **The case of 2016 Benin elections**

Benin has been for a long-time part of the French Colonial System and remained even after the end of the decolonization process as one of its most devoted allies in the Western Africa. Moreover, the country has known various periods of political instability and was ruled by various regimes including a Marxist-Leninist one before the beginning of the 1990s<sup>6</sup>. After these times of rapid change and uncertainty, Benin has undergone some important steps, extremely relevant for its future evolution. Therefore, this period of turmoil ended when the country initiated a reform of the constitution which established, for the first time, a

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<sup>6</sup> Sergiu Mişcoiu, Hygin Kakai, Kokou Folly Hetcheli (eds.), *Recul démocratique et néo-présidentialisme en Afrique centrale et occidentale*, Iaşi, Institutul European, 2015.

multiparty system, in 1990.<sup>7</sup> After this moment, from a political point of view, a new era began by starting a strong democratic process that took several years. At the end of it, the results were immensely profound and proved to be defining for its future political evolution as well as for its relations with France. It is important to notice that “with a total of 20 leadership transitions (defined as a change in the ruler/president of the country) overall since Benin’s independence, the last five have been contested multi-party elections.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, after this sequence, we can see that Benin stood for a long period of time as one of the West African states hardly involved in the democratic transition process throughout the last decades: “Many scholars consider electoral turnover of the executive a key indicator of democracy, and Benin’s success in peacefully electing successive new presidents without interruption is a sign that Benin is among Africa’s greatest democratic successes”.<sup>9</sup>

Strongly devoted to this process was not just the former leader, president Boni Yayi (who finally was not able to extend his term as president of the Republic) but also the civil society (and mainly the young people) which continuously manifested in favor of organizing the elections. This is why even if “both Kérékou and Boni Yayi considered attempting a third term (...) were blocked by popular opposition to such plans. Although Benin’s democracy has room for growth, its ability to regularly and peacefully replace its presidents is a role-model for many of its neighbors.”<sup>10</sup> All these elements created a favorable framework to assist in 2016 to a scrutiny which finally proved to have a significant impact not

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Duerksen, “The Testing of Benin’s Democracy”, <<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-testing-of-benin-democracy/>>, accessed on 1 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Songwe, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Tyson Roberts, “Here’s Why Benin’s Election Was a Step Forward for African Democratic Consolidation. And Why it Wasn’t.” in *Washington Post*, <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/22/heres-why-benins-election-was-a-step-forward-for-african-democratic-consolidation-and-why-it-wasnt/>> accessed on 30 April 2021.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem.*

only at local level but also for the evolution of the French-Beninese relations. The elections from 2016 are a crucial moment for both France and Benin and for what has been commonly known as *Françafrique*.

Before describing the electoral campaign and then assessing the results of the elections, there are some considerations that need to be made regarding the general framework in which the elections took place. First of all, as we have already mention in the first part of this section, the simple fact that the electoral process began just on time (at the end of the term of President Thomas Boni Yayi) is a significant step in the democratic evolution of the country. Secondly, the background of some candidates is rather uncommon for the ordinary political landscape of Benin. In the past, most of the candidates came from the public sector and were mainly leaders who are well-known for having strong connections with the former colonial power.<sup>11</sup> For example, Patrice Talon (who finally won the elections) comes from the private sector and is a business man. He never occupied a public function before. Moreover, an important element which needs to be taken into consideration when analyzing the Beninese elections of 2016 is also the amendment from the Constitution, made in 1995 which allowed the Beninese diaspora to vote, for the first time in history.<sup>12</sup> This had also an important effect on the results of the elections held in 2016.

All these elements are very relevant in assessing the state of democratic transition in the Beninese case. The emergence of new leaders, as it is the case of Patrice Talon, with a different background and having the private sector as a main supporter behind, reflects an important change in the evolution of the democratic practices in Benin. Before presenting the results of the elections and their impact on the evolution of the relations between France and Benin, a particular attention will be paid to the main arguments used by the candidates during the electoral campaign.

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<sup>11</sup> Songwe, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

The most strong and aggressive discourse was that of Patrice Talon, who from the beginning positioned himself as completely independent from any French influence. Moreover, he promoted strongly his story of life and his journey in becoming a successful businessman, trying to become a model for the younger Beninese population. "Talon had portrayed himself as a big-spender and a self-made man in his campaign, turning up for the first-round vote in a Porsche, white open-necked shirt, a fitted suit and sunglasses".<sup>13</sup> This had an important impact on the electorate especially because it was an out of the ordinary candidate if compared to the last elections that took place in Benin. At the same time, his life story, promoted as a model of success, set an example for the younger generations that a better future is not just possible but truly achievable: "From humble beginnings in the coastal town of Ouidah, he rose to become one of the most powerful men in Beninese business and bankrolled Boni Yayi's successful 2006 and 2011 presidential campaigns".<sup>14</sup>

This evolution brought enthusiasm and hope to the young electorate that strongly believed that Patrice Talon will have a powerful presidential agenda centered on growth and job creation in the years to come. Besides promoting himself as a role-model, Patrice Talon fiercely promoted a denigrating discourse towards his contender. Moreover, he constantly promoted himself as "*le candidat de la rupture*".<sup>15</sup> It is more than clear from this point of view that this way of portraying himself as a "new" candidate, fully detached from the colonial past has been a sound and very powerful part of his general message during the electoral campaign: that a new President and a new country project is strongly needed and that he is the image of a new generation of leaders for Benin. While building a strong

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<sup>13</sup> France 24, "Businessman 'Wins Benin's Presidential Election'", <<https://www.france24.com/en/Benin-presidential-elections-mark-victory-Talon>>, accessed on 29 April 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Mateso, «Bénin : Patrice Talon enfin président après une longue traversée du désert», <[https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/benin/benin-patrice-talon-enfin-president-apres-une-longue-traversee-du-desert\\_3060941.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/benin/benin-patrice-talon-enfin-president-apres-une-longue-traversee-du-desert_3060941.html)>, 27 April 2021.



image of himself as being an authentic, local contender, Talon criticized Lionel Zinsou for his foreign education and constantly named him as being the *Françafrique* candidate: "Talon repeatedly attacked Zinsou's dual French nationality during the election campaign, billing himself as the "authentic Beninese candidate".<sup>16</sup> It is clear that Zinsou's mission during this campaign was even harder in this context as he had to fight against all these critiques: "Zinsou struggled to overcome the perception that having spent a large part of his ministerial career abroad, he is an outsider in his country".<sup>17</sup> All these aspects brought him in a constantly defending position since he spent the first part of his life outside Benin, being born in France, educated in the United Kingdom and working for the French Government for a long period of time. This is why he permanently fought to overcome this image of foreigner during the electoral campaign and to come closer to the local population trying to avoid being perceived as the candidate of France. Moreover, Patrice Talon used every occasion he had to strongly criticize Lionel Zinsou for all the decisions made during his term as Prime-Minister of Benin. At the same time, he always tried to promote an unfavorable image of Zinsou claiming he was a stranger, who does not have an accurate and deep knowledge of the political and social realities of Benin." Talon harped on the record of Boni Yayi, whom he said had created "a banana republic" that had become "the laughing stock of the world", as well as questioning Zinsou's knowledge of Benin."<sup>18</sup> Also, he never refrained himself from directly attacking Zinsou, denigrating him and his campaign. This is why Zinsou's agenda and proposals for the future have been an important target of Patrice Talon's critiques during the electoral campaign: "He also launched a string of personal attacks against Zinsou,

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<sup>16</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Businessman Talon Wins Benin Presidential Race as Zinsou Concedes Defeat", <<https://www.dw.com/en/businessman-talon-wins-benin-presidential-race-as-zinsou-concedes-defeat/a-19131175>>, accessed on 27 April 2021.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> France 24, *op. cit.*

accusing him of acting like "a governor in a land of savages".<sup>19</sup> Also, during the televised debate he accused Zinsou as being part of a neocolonial system and as being responsible, together with President Boni Yayi for the disastrous economic situation of Benin and that he is also responsible for helping Yayi to transform Benin into "a rogue state"<sup>20</sup>.

Considering all these elements, it is clear that Zinsou's dual nationality (French and Beninese), alongside his educational and political background offered Talon a promising field to exercise his arguments and to build a powerful anti-French and generally anti-colonialist discourse. Moreover, it seems that Zinsou himself praised the former metropolis and its essential role in assuring the economic stability of the former African colonies, being convinced that "CFA Franc countries were better off with French involvement than without. That they *needed* France more than France needed them."<sup>21</sup> This can be considered an important disadvantage and setback for Zinsou's credibility as local leader and future president of Benin. Nevertheless, it is important to mention at this point that Talon himself has a history of connections with France even if he neglected to remind these elements during the 2016 campaign. He actually financially supported the two campaigns of President Thomas Boni Yayi and "when (...) was accused of attempting to poison President Boni Yayi in 2012 – he has subsequently been pardoned – he fled to France for safety".<sup>22</sup> Although this situation was well-known, he dismissed any direct link to the former colonial state and he criticized fiercely his opponent by claiming that he is actually the candidate of France.

Another significant element of the 2016 elections in Benin is strongly connected to the multiparty system and also to the collation forming process in order to win the electoral scrutiny of the country. As we

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Mateso, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Simon Allison, "Analysis: Benin's Election is a Setback for la Francafrique", in *Daily Maverick*, <<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2016-03-22-analysis-benins-election-is-a-setback-for-la-francafrique/>>, accessed on 30 April 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Allison, *op. cit.*

have already seen in this case, "rather than winning with the support of a strong party, Talon, like Boni Yayi, won with support from the business sector (Yayi Boni had many business supporters from a decade heading the West African Development Bank) and a coalition of supportive smaller parties."<sup>23</sup> Taking into consideration all these aspects, the last part of the paper will be centered on the results of the elections. In this part, we will highlight especially the driving factors that enabled this result to become possible in Benin in 2016.

### **Assessment of elections' results**

The results of the elections illustrated clearly that the strategy of Patrice Talon, together with the pressure from the younger generations were essential in securing the victory of the so-called local candidate, in the person of Patrice Talon. While in the first round, the two main candidates positioned themselves follows: "Lionel Zinsou: 28,43% and Patrice Talon: 24, 73%"<sup>24</sup>, in the second round Patrice Talon registered a full, strong victory winning 65. 37% of the total number of votes while Lionel Zinsou gained only 34.63% of the ballots and has publicly conceded even before finding out the official final results of the vote process.<sup>25</sup> Patrice Talon's decisive and, at first glance, even surprising win has been generally perceived by the main political analysts as a major setback for what has been commonly known for decades as *Françafrique*. The candidate Zinsou has been permanently associated with France and has been perceived as the former colonial power's candidate.

On a general note, we can see that Zinsou's electoral campaign had two major problems. First of all, "he fell victim to Benin's healthy multiparty democracy, which has seen regular changes in president and

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<sup>23</sup> Songwe, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> France 24, "Benin Heading for Presidential Run-Off Vote", <<https://www.france24.com/en/20160308-benin-second-round-presidential-election-zinsou-talon>>, accessed on 1 May 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Songwe, *op. cit.*

ruling party since the reintroduction of multiparty democracy in 1991”.<sup>26</sup> It seemed that, rather atypical for a former African colony the candidate who has not been supported by the main party, won the elections. In this context, we can easily notice that we assisted to an important change, result strongly motivated by the democratic evolution of the African countries and mainly by the insertion of a new, multi-party system.

Secondly, “Zinsou simply couldn’t shake off accusations that he was hand-picked by France for Benin’s top job. Opposition politicians claimed he was “parachuted in” from Paris, or that he was an impostor”.<sup>27</sup> Spending most of his life outside Benin and in key political positions within the French Administration he fought during the whole campaign to overcome the image of a stranger: “He has spent most of his working life in the French government, and much of that at a very senior level, most notably as speech writer for foreign minister Laurent Fabius. With this background, it’s hard to imagine him not toeing the French government line.”<sup>28</sup>

All these elements have been crucial in the evolution of the electoral campaign in 2016. The background of the candidates, alongside their proposals of actions as future presidents and with the perception of the society (mainly regarding their connections with the former colonial power) have created a special framework in which the elections took place in Benin. The results of the elections reflected the limits of the current French influence in Benin and also the perception of the electorate towards the relation with France. Patrice Talon used very carefully the strong ties of his contender with France and built an image of a stranger who has spent most of his life serving the former colonial power while he remained in his native country and become a real model of Beninese success.

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<sup>26</sup> Alisson, *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem.*

## Conclusion

As we have seen throughout the paper, the case of Benin stands out as a landmark from at least two significant perspectives. First of all, it stays as a successful example of democratic transition in Africa, especially for its neighboring countries.

At the same time, it shows the implications of this process on the relations of France with a former African colony. The new Beninese president Patrice Talon portrayed himself during the campaign as the main anti- *Françafrique* (although he had some old connections in the past) and used a strong anti-French discourse in presenting his electoral program during the pre-elections period.

While presenting himself as a role-model for the younger generations and an example of success, he constantly criticized Zinsou and made him look like an "outsider" in the Beninese politics. This image of "foreigner" has been a major setback for Lionel Zinsou during the whole electoral campaign as he has been associated permanently with the former colonial power and has been strongly tied to the *Françafrique* politics and relations from the past.

This way of resorting to the past and using it in order to "demonize" the other candidate has been a significant instrument of electoral campaign used by Patrice Talon who ultimately won the elections. In conclusion, it becomes more and more clearer that the connection with the past and especially with the former *Françafrique* practices remains a sensitive subject for the African societies in the last years. This is why the *Françafrique* associated candidates are starting to lose elections and this is definitely a significant downgrade for the current French-African relations.

Considering all these elements, we can easily notice that Benin's 2016 elections are an important reflection of the current status of the French-African relations. From a symbolic perspective, the elections can be considered as an end of the *Françafrique* relations. Nevertheless, we have to pay attention to the fact that Patrice Talon also shares some ties with the French leaders even if not so strong as in the case of Lionel Zinsou.

Therefore, the case of Benin's 2016 elections proves to be very significant in analyzing both the democratic transition of the former African colonies and the means through which they relate nowadays to France. What we have called as the end of *Françafrique* it is definitely not a complete shutdown of the past or even of the postcolonial practices but it is definitely a major setback in the evolution of France's relation with its former African colonies.

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