

Benin: Under new management

Richard Cornwell★

In the middle of the 1970s there were few observers who would have predicted that Benin would come to provide Africa with examples of peaceful political transition. Benin's ethno-regionally fractured polity traditionally has pitched the south-east, south-west and north of the country into a bitter rivalry for national political power. Throughout the 1960s the army had frequently intervened to break the political deadlock created by civilian administrations, and in 1972 Mathieu Kérékou seized power and then sought to broaden his appeal to the militant student and trades union movements by embracing a pseudo-Marxist ideology and subsequently a single-party state. At this stage, impoverished Benin looked a more likely candidate for the title of the archetypal 'banana republic'.

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Yet in 1990 Benin became the first African dictatorship to make the transition to competitive multipartyism and to see the removal from power of a military ruler by civil society. It also saw, in 1996, the return to power by way of the ballot of a 'civilianised' Kérékou who, having shed his unconvincing Marxist mantle, had flirted briefly with Islam before embracing evangelical Christianity – hence his proudly adopted nickname 'The Chameleon'.

The latest presidential contest was enlivened in August 2005 when Kérékou made it clear that he had no intention of altering the constitution to do away with the age limit of 70 years for candidates, thus eliminating both himself and ex-President Nicephore Soglo (1991–1996) from the running. There were occasions when the members of his entourage apparently tried to change his mind, and certainly he made some curious statements at the time of the election, casting doubt on the fairness of the contest, which led to speculation that he might not hand over power, but instead seek to capitalise on electoral confusion to extend his rule by decree.

This was not to be, however, and Boni Yayi, a 54-year-old banker, with no political record, secured an overwhelming victory against Adreïn Houngbedji, a veteran presidential candidate now competing for the fourth time. Yayi had been an economic advisor to President Soglo as he tried briefly to rescue impoverished Benin's economy by applying neo-liberal nostrums. In 1994 Yayi took up the presidency of the West African Development Bank, where he achieved remarkable success as an institutional reformer before resigning this position to challenge Benin's political 'Old Guard'.

Now that he has emerged triumphant, his most daunting challenge is about to begin. Yayi campaigned on a ticket that promised renewal, good governance and a new beginning. The electorate's expectations are great; the country's economic resource base is not. Benin has few minerals, and its agricultural economy is dominated by the cotton sector, which is notoriously vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather and international markets. The port of Cotonou is underutilised and refurbishment might bring rewards, particularly as Abidjan is still partially paralysed by the Ivorian contretemps. Yayi has talked about privatisation, but this, and its attendant job losses, will bring him into direct confrontation with the vociferous trade unions. The border trade with Nigeria may once again flourish as the latter lifts restrictions on Benin's re-exports. Benin's own domestic market is too small and the country is ill configured to provide a basis for manufacturing growth.

In short, Yayi will enjoy less room for manoeuvre than his supporters may appreciate. He will also have to cope for a year at least with a fractured parliament pending legislative elections in 2007, and there are also questions about the repayment of political debts to those disappointed presidential candidates who supported him in the second round. His new cabinet is made up entirely of new faces, including a number of senior appointments for women.

The new president obviously enjoys the goodwill of other regional leaders, most of whom came to know him well during his long and successful presidency of the West African Development Bank. Several heads of state attended the inauguration, which was not without a certain irony, given that many of them are notably reluctant to retire from leadership.

A clean break with the past in Benin may not be as feasible as many would desire, though in the light of earlier events we may still be pleasantly surprised by Benin.