

# Benin

## A return to democracy is not in sight

by Katrin Gänsler

### Basic data

Benin gained independence from France on August 1, 1960, as the Republic of Dahomey. The country's capital is Porto-Novo while its economic, political, and cultural center is the port city of Cotonou. Benin borders on Togo, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria. Today around 11.4 million people live in the country. In addition to French, the official language, 54 indigenous languages are spoken in Benin. The literacy rate among residents is low at 38%. Benin is considered the cradle of voodoo, a tradition that has its own holiday on January 10. The majority of the population (48.5%) adheres to Christianity, while 27.7% is Muslim. According to official numbers, 11.6% of the population practice voodoo. Benin is often referred to as the "Quartier latin de l'Afrique".

### Political and economic issues

After independence in 1960, the country saw several coups. During the Cold War, Dahomey turned to Marxism-Leninism in 1974 and one year later became the People's Republic of Benin. The turnaround took place in 1989/1990 in the context of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Benin's new beginning was determined at a national conference that introduced a multi-party system. Ever since then, the Beninese Constitution has been regarded as a constitutional model in the region, and has remained unchanged for about 30 years. In 2016, Benin saw a peaceful change of power that established entrepreneur Patrice Talon as President. Among other things, he has earned his fortune in cotton trade, which Forbes magazine estimated at 400 million Euros in 2015. In 2019, Talon came under fire for admitting only two government-related parties to the parliamentary

elections on April 28. The five opposition parties were not placed on the ballot. Following the election, demonstrations broke out in Cotonou, shop windows were broken, and tires were set on fire. Benin ranks at position 96 (180) in the press freedom ranking and is frequently criticized for silencing oppositional voices in the media.

In the Human Development Index (HDI) developed by the United Nations (UN), Benin ranks at position 163 (188). In 2015, almost every second person (49.5%) lived below the poverty line. Compared to 2011 (53.1%), the poverty rate has only slightly improved. Benin recorded a growth rate of 6.9% in 2018. Gross domestic product (GDP) was just under \$10.4 billion and was broken down as follows: Agriculture 26.1%; Industry 22,8%; Services 51.1%. Remittances from migrants ranged at around \$ 368 million in 2018, which amounts to 3.6% of GDP. Benin has a negative trade balance and is dependent on the export of cotton and thus on falling and rising world market prices. Cotonou's port, which generates more than 60% of GDP, is particularly important for the economy. It is to be expanded from 2020 on, for which the government has budgeted 450 million Euros according to the investment plan. The port is known in the region above all as a huge transshipment point for used cars from Europe and the USA. However, the port is in competition with that of Lomé in Togo. In general, Benin's economy is extremely dependent on the neighboring country of Nigeria. Thus the effects of Nigerian crises or recessions like the one in 2016 are particularly noticeable in Benin. The Danktokpa Market in Cotonou, one of the largest open air markets in the region, is of high importance for traders in West Africa. In Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI), Benin ranks at position 85 (180).

Benin is still considered politically stable. However, there are fears that the country might develop into an autocracy under Talon. It is said that he in that sense could follow the model of Rwanda, which has been governed by Paul Kagame since 2000. Moreover, in May 2019, two French tourists were kidnapped and their Beninese tour guide was murdered in the Pendjari National Park in the north of the country. Fears are growing about terror groups in the Sahel - currently primarily via Burkina Faso - spreading towards the coast.

## **Migration movements**

Benin has long been considered a classic country of emigration. Various studies,

published between 2006 and 2012, estimated that between 412,000 and three million Beninese live outside the country, although it can be assumed that the numbers are higher. According to Professor John Igue, geographer, university professor, and formerly Benin's Minister of Industry and Trade, the country will increasingly become an immigration country, however. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) reports 2.3% of the population to be migrants with other estimates suggesting lower numbers (183,700). About three quarters of this migrant population originate from the neighboring countries of Nigeria, Togo, and Niger.

Togolese people have come to Benin in recent decades not only because of economic opportunities, but increasingly also to escape political crises. Since August 2017, violence against political opposition groups and activists from civil society has intensified in Togo. As a result of local riots in Cobly, a town in the north-west of Benin, more than 1,500 people became internally displaced in July 2018.

Benin remains attractive as a transit country to North Africa. Unlike in Nigerian cities such as Lagos or Port Harcourt, there are buses continuously going to the Nigerian capital Niamey. Traveling within ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) has been made possible by the 1979 Protocol on Free Movement of Persons, Residence, and Establishment. Although, normally, an ECOWAS passport is required to cross the border between Nigeria and Benin, a small sum of money (between one and three Euros) enables border-crossing at least at the checkpoint of Seme in the far south. Individual border officials emphasize that this is a fee. However, this is often unclear.

Seme Border is the most important border-crossing point between Benin and Nigeria and for years used to be a large construction site that did not have technical devices such as fingerprinting machines. The checkpoint was completed in October 2018. So far, no fingerprints have been taken at Beninese borders - at least not in Igolo in the north of Porto Novo, nor else in Hillacondji at the border with Togo. In Hillacondji the expansion of the transition is remarkable, however, where not only is the road being renewed, but apparently a long wall is also being built. The Cardinal Bernardin Gantin International Airport in Cotonou has passport scanners, and travelers' fingerprints are also taken there. Entry cards, which are common almost everywhere on the continent, are no longer in use.

There are currently 1,223 refugees living in the country. While 961 of them originate from the Central African Republic, 161 originate from the Ivory Coast.

The number of Beninese citizens who reach Europe by land continues to be small.

In 2018, only 508 persons from Benin applied for asylum in EU member states, in the USA, in Canada, Brazil, Morocco, Algeria, and South Africa. In Germany 108 asylum cases were filed, of which 81 had been rejected by the end of 2018. The worldwide admission rate was low at 4.4% and is declining. Unlike in several neighboring countries Benin's laws do not discriminate against homosexuality. However, same-sex relationships are far from socially accepted. Germany does not classify Benin as a safe country of origin, while the former colonial power France does. In 2010, France and Benin signed a bilateral re-admission agreement which has since been effective. France has established similar contracts with other former colonies, such as Burkina Faso and Cameroon.

Other countries are popular with migrant workers in the region: Gabon, Nigeria (where about 380,000 Beninese reside) and Ivory Coast, which is considered the country of immigration par excellence in Francophone Africa, according to the report on economic development in Africa (2018) by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). The flight connections to Abidjan is indicative of this development. Connections to Central Africa, to Gabon, and to the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Congo-Brazzaville have also been expanded.

Benin and Nigeria signed a bilateral agreement to combat human trafficking in 2009, as trafficking routes frequently run through Cotonou. The agreement regulates the prosecution of the suspected perpetrators and the return of the victims to their home country. In 2011, this was followed by another agreement, against child trafficking, with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. A further agreement has been in place since 2005, which specifies mutual cooperation in the combat of child trafficking between nine West African countries (Accord multilateral de Coopération en Matière de Lutte contre la Traite des Enfants en Afrique de l'Ouest). In April 2019, Interpol reported that 220 individuals had been freed from human traffickers in Benin and Nigeria.

Benin has furthermore signed the following agreements: ILO Migration for Employment Convention, Refugee Convention (1962), Refugee Protocol (1970), ILO Migrant Workers Convention (1980), Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), UN Migrant Workers Convention (1990), Human Trafficking Protocol (2004), Migrant Smuggling Protocol (2004).

# **EU engagement and cooperation**

The basis for the cooperation between the EU and Benin is the National Program 2014-2020 (National Indicative Program), which is part of the current European Development Fund for Africa (EDF). The area of good governance is funded with 184 million Euros, and that of sustainable development in agriculture with 80 million Euros. Another 80 million Euros is determined to go into improved access to energy supply. Support for civil society accounts for 18 million Euros. The sum in the previous EU development fund with similar priorities amounted to EUR 380.37 million.

In general, Benin has been a favorite partner in European development cooperation for decades, partly because it is politically stable. The Society for International Cooperation (GIZ) has been on site for 40 years boasting a staff of 360 (national, international, development workers). Numerous other public and private collaborations have been established.

In recent years, several projects on migration have been developed, especially at the regional level. At the beginning, the main goal was to collect missing data. Another program, co-directed with the countries of Mali, Cameroon, and Senegal, was the Partnership for Labor Migration Management, which was launched in 2009 as part of the EU-Africa partnership. It was devised specifically to disseminate and make public international job offers, and to create better networking opportunities between the West African countries.

## **NGOs and civil society**

Migration is ubiquitous in Benin. Families are proud of their children who study or work in Europe. There are regular information events and campaigns raising awareness about the risks of migration by land. However, the topic is not as present as it is among NGOs in Senegal or Mali.

In 2006, Franco-Beninese filmmaker Sylvestre Amoussou became internationally successful for "Africa Paradis." The satirical film, set in 2033, reverses current developments. A couple try to immigrate to the fictional "United States of Africa" and face massive problems entering the country, while experiencing discrimination. This shows that in Benin migration has been a relevant topic for years.

# Economic interests and armaments

Benin is part of the “Compact with Africa” initiative, founded in 2017 in the context of Germany’s G20 presidency, and could become increasingly interesting as an investment location for international partners. This trend is also driven by President Patrice Talon’s pro-business policies, and in particular his program “Bénin Révélé” which seeks to implement 45 basic infrastructure projects in nine sectors. However, NGOs and the poorer population criticize that the measures are socially very unbalanced and that the majority of the population will not benefit from this program.

Benin hosts the Multinational Maritime Coordination Center (MMCC, Multinational Maritime Coordination Center) of ECOWAS. In 2013, the EU committed around 4.5 million Euros to the Critical Maritime Routes in the Gulf of Guinea Program (CRIMGO).

Arms exports to Benin remain insignificant.

## Migration in numbers

2018: 508 asylum applications (worldwide), admission rate 4.4%

2018: 108 asylum applications (Germany), acceptance rate 0%

2006–2013: between 411,808 and up to three million Beninans live outside of Benin

2019: 1,223 refugees in Benin

2013: Between 183,700 and 262,200 migrants in Benin

2018: \$368 million remittances, 3.6% of GDP

2010: Informal agreements related to migration with France “Joint Migration Management”

Formal readmission agreements: France

Frontex cooperation: yes, cooperation from the African Intelligence Community

Internment camp: -

Illegal departure: criminal offence since 1990, imprisonment of up to 6 months

## Materials and sources

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Amt

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