

Togo – 1993 – Edward R. McMahon

Transcript

It was a hot and steamy day in Lomé, Togo at the airport in August of 1993. A passenger jet landed, and a large group of dignitaries were waiting in a line to meet former President Jimmy Carter, who was arriving to conduct an international election observation mission for presidential elections in Togo. When President Carter descended from the airplane, he did not, as usual, in terms of protocol, shake the hand of the first person in line who was the Prime Minister of Togo, or the second person who was the United States Ambassador to Togo. Instead, he went down the line about 15 or 20 people to me.

I was the Chief of Staff for this international election observation mission, and he made a point of shaking my hand first that has nothing to do with me personally. It had nothing to do with my level of protocol. Instead, he was making a larger point, and to understand what this was we need to have some background here. Let me step back for a minute and note that Togo, by 1993, had been under the control of a former military soldier, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, for almost 30 years, and he had ruled the country in an authoritarian, single party, dictatorial manner.

By the early 1990s, pressures were building up both domestically within Togo and externally in terms of the international environment that impelled him towards allowing some version of a political opening. After a very difficult period of time in the months leading up to August of 1993, an accord had finally been signed with the political opposition that created the groundwork for presidential elections that were to take place at the end of August. The Carter Center and the National Democratic Institute (NDI), of which I was an African region team lead, decided to jointly field an international observer delegation that would work alongside a domestic civil society election observer effort which was provided with technical advice and support from NDI. So, it was a joint mission.

Once the political accord between the ruling party and the opposition was signed in Ougadougou on July 11, elections were to take place within 6 weeks; because of the political tension in the country, it was viewed to be critically important that the elections be held expeditiously. We had staff in the country before my presence, and I arrived about 10 days before the elections. The evening that I arrived, I was jet lagged, but I was immediately summoned by the American Ambassador who informed me—we sat down in his living room—how important it was that this international observer effort take a positive view of the electoral process that was unfolding in Togo. He underlined the importance of stability in the region, and the various equities that the United States had, that rendered it very important that this be seen as a positive election.

Now, his statement was taking place against a backdrop of growing concerns about the willingness of the Government to permit fully legitimate elections to take place. So, I was rather taken aback by the Ambassador's position as to how an independent election observation mission should conduct its business, especially in this context, but I told him that I certainly would convey his views to President Carter. I did so immediately, letting his staff know that this was a dynamic that we were going to be encountering on the ground in Togo. So, the mission proceeded, and that is why the President decided that he wanted to emphasize the importance, when he landed right away, of the independence of the election mission. So that is why he shook my hand first when he descended off the plane, to emphasize the importance and independence of the election mission.

The Ambassador, in a subsequent meeting with President Carter and myself and a few other team members, again expressed his viewpoint. President Carter was quite emphatic in re-emphasizing the independence of the election international mission.

President Carter arrived just 4 or 5 days before the election, and the opposition candidates had been one by one dropping out, saying that the conditions were not acceptable for a legitimate election. The concerns centered particularly around the state of the voter registry—it being seen as not reflecting the voting population accurately—and concerns about other technical kinds of issues such as the type of ink that was being used to prevent double-voting, and concerns about the apparently partisan nature of the election administration process. For example, the ostensibly independent election commission ruled that domestic observers would not be able to observe the election.

So, this cascading number of problems resulted in 3 days before the election, I believe, there really was only one remaining credible opposition candidate in the race. Since his arrival in-country President Carter had been undertaking an effort to create a consensus about steps that could be taken that might require a postponement of the election, but that would be sufficient to create a sense on the part of opposition candidates that this could be a credible election. So, he was basically trying to negotiate an agreement that more time would be allowed for cleaning up of voter registry lists and for the efforts of the observers, the domestic observers, to be recognized and some other issues.

As part of this negotiating process, we met with President Eyadéma, and as a personal aside, I'll never forget exiting that meeting and there were some crowds that had been assembled by the ruling party to ostensibly demonstrate popular support for the President. These crowds had a rather antagonistic sort of attitude towards the international observers, and while we were exiting the building I had positioned myself right next to President Carter as we were going to our vehicles. When we got to the next meeting, the lead Secret service agent (as a former President Carter had Secret Service Protection), came up to me and said, "Excuse me, but nobody gets between the President and us". So, he was saying in a polite kind of way that if things went south, people like me would get thrown to the wolves. But they didn't. And I actually always felt that if things had gone bad, that they would have been concerned about us as well. Anyway, that didn't happen.

Unfortunately, Eyadéma and his ruling party were not prepared to undertake any last-minute changes in the electoral process. So, a couple of days before the election was supposed to take place, the last credible opposition candidate withdrew from the race. I and the observer delegation, which besides President Carter consisted of about a dozen international observers, then met to consider scenarios about what would it look like if this international delegation was still in country at a time when all credible opposition candidates had dropped out of the race. It was clear that in such a scenario we would be, in effect, lending legitimacy to a fundamentally illegitimate electoral process. So, I went to the lead Secret Service agent and asked him how quickly they could get the President out of the country if we made a determination that we were not going to stay in country for this election. I'll never forget, he said to me, "It will take as long as President Carter wants it to take".

I thus understood that we could move pretty quickly if we wanted to, and so when we got to 36 hours before the election without any meaningful progress on negotiating election campaign reforms, President Carter and I had that conversation and made the determination that the conditions were not appropriate for us to stay in Togo. We were fortunate enough that a democratic country, which had been at the forefront of the democratization processes in Africa in

the late 1980's and early 1990's, was right next door. That was the country of Benin, which had a thriving democratic system. So, the visuals were good for us to logistically be able to move by ground from Lomé, Togo to Cotonou, Benin, where we were located during the Togolese election.

When we step back and look at this particular episode, I think it was unfortunate, obviously, that the conditions were not present for legitimate elections, but I do think that it was very important that the international community was able to demonstrate through the Carter Center and NDI mission that we would not be countenancing or providing, you know, cover or legitimacy to a fundamentally illegitimate process. As a result, unfortunately, to this day, Togo's political, democratic political equilibrium does not really exist. But you know, I think this provides lessons for the importance of taking clear-cut, non-ambivalent positions, which, unfortunately, has not been the case with other types of international observer missions from other organizations.

Thank you for letting me share this story.