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West Africa Wins Again, With Twist

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DAKAR, Senegal, Feb. 26 - When Togo's military installed the son of the country's longtime strongman as president earlier this month, ignoring the Togolese Constitution, their actions seemed taken from a very old playbook, a throwback to an earlier era in African history when coups and tyrannical governments were the rule rather than the troublesome exception, and African leaders were reluctant to criticize one another, lest their own foibles come to light.

But the African response to the Togolese military's actions were taken out of a new playbook, one in which the old insistence on "African solutions to African problems," is no longer what it once seemed - a euphemism for African leaders looking the other way while despots and corrupt governments rampaged.

Faure Gnassingbé stepped down as interim president on Friday, following three weeks of intense pressure from Togo's neighbors to move the country back to constitutional rule. Mr. Gnassingbé is the 38-year-old son of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who died on Feb. 5. He had ruled the former French colony with an authoritarian hand since 1967, four years after he helped lead Africa's first post-colonial coup.

Mr. Gnassingbé's departure has been hailed as a huge success for African diplomacy.

"We have demonstrated a capacity to solve our own problems," Mohammad Ibn Chambas, executive secretary of the Economic Community of West African States, or Ecowas, the regional trade group that led the effort to restore the Constitution in Togo, said in a telephone interview on Saturday.

The swift reversal was one result of a new phenomenon: African leaders and institutions showing stiff resolve and complete unity, Mr. Chambas said. Ecowas and the African Union were quick and merciless in their condemnation, and worked from the first day of Mr. Gnassingbé's rule to push him from power.

"We have spoken with one voice, we have been clear about the principle and we have insisted that there is a minimum bar for governance, and when it is not met we will not tolerate it," Mr. Chambas said.

Olusegun Obasanjo, the president of Nigeria and the region's most powerful leader, was perhaps the most vociferous critic of the change of power in Togo, and he scolded Mr. Gnassingbé when the latter went to Abuja, the Nigerian capital, for talks. He also refused to accord him the pomp of an official state visit, a pointed and significant diplomatic snub. When Mr. Gnassingbé

offered to hold elections but remain in power until then, African leaders immediately dismissed the gesture as an insufficient half-measure.

Western nations played a role, but it was small. The United States, the United Nations and European countries issued strongly worded statements condemning the change of power and later insisted that Mr. Gnassingbé step down. But the diplomatic effort to force the Togolese government back to constitutional rule was almost entirely an African affair.

"Africans took the lead on this, which is precisely what we want them to do," said a senior Western diplomat in Lomé, the Togolese capital. "This is exactly how it is supposed to work."

But it often does not work that way.

Chris Landsberg, an analyst at the Center for Policy studies, a private, nonpartisan research institution in Johannesburg, who has written extensively about African diplomacy, said that the tough words on Togo were a good sign, but that Africa had plenty of tougher problems that called for action.

"If only they could insist on democratic norms, irrespective of the size of country, the historic legacy of country, if only you could be consistent," Mr. Landsberg said. "If only they can find a way to remind themselves that we must start to be tough with the Zimbabweans as well."

Togo, a tiny, poor country with a per capita income of \$270 per year and few allies, "just doesn't have any of the pretense of being a player from a power politics point of view," he said.

Zimbabwe has been ruled by Robert G. Mugabe for more than two decades and has slipped deeper into ruin as he has become increasingly despotic. But Mr. Mugabe is still widely seen as an icon of African resistance to colonial rule.

African leaders, notably South Africa's influential president, Thabo Mbeki, have advocated a policy of quiet diplomacy to nudge, not shove, Mr. Mugabe into retirement. This stance has put Mr. Mbeki at stark odds with the United States. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently called Zimbabwe an "outpost of tyranny."

In other examples of how African leaders have handled crises of governance, there were few objections when, in the vast, resource-rich but troubled Congo, Joseph Kabila was anointed to succeed his father, Laurent D. Kabila, as president after his killing in 2001. African - and Western - leaders have been reluctant to criticize other African leaders, too, who were at first heralded as hopes for a new era of democratic rule but who have since shown signs of leaning toward autocracy, like Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Kagame of Rwanda.

In the peculiar brotherhood of African leaders, a circle shaped by shared opposition to colonial and Western domination, it is one thing to criticize a change of power but another thing entirely to take a sitting leader to task. Before condemning Mr. Gnassingbé's actions, African leaders took pains to hail Mr. Eyadéma - who had been accused by human rights groups of massacring

his political opponents and who had won three deeply flawed elections - as a great African statesman.

"As much as you have a body of 25 countries showing eagerness and enthusiasm to break from the past, we can't remind ourselves enough that we have another 25 or more outside of that club," Mr. Landsberg said. "It is as though you have a contradictory, two-speed Africa: those that are serious about the future and those that aren't."

But such inconsistency is hardly unique to Africa, analysts are quick to point out. The United States rallied to the side of Ukraine's opposition leader, Viktor A. Yushchenko, and criticized the flawed election late last year that led to his initial defeat, but has treaded much more lightly in dealing with the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin, whose rapid centralization of power has led to serious questions about his commitment to democracy.

Mr. Chambas, the Ecowas official, said that Africa was just beginning its journey to democratic rule, and that bumps along the way were inevitable.

"Today we have made one step," he said. "We hope that we will continue to move forward in our efforts to bring democracy to our region."
