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Togo protest: Lome rocked by electoral reform unrest

Angry crowds are demonstrating in the capital of Togo in a third day of protests against electoral reforms they say favour the ruling party.

Two previous days of unrest in Lome saw violent clashes between security forces and thousands of demonstrators during which stones were thrown, tear gas was fired and about 30 people were injured.

It follows recent electoral reforms ahead of a poll this year.

Protesters want an end to the system allowing unlimited presidential terms.

Togo has been run by the same family for more than four decades.

President Faure Gnassingbe took power in 2005 following the death of his father, Gnassingbe Eyadema, who ruled Togo for 38 years. He was re-elected in 2010.

Buildings vandalised

The BBC's Ebow Godwin in the capital, Lome, says tens of thousands of people have taken part in the protests.

He says the unrest forced the closure of the city's main market, popularly known as Assigame, and other leading shops, paralysing commercial activities.

Anti-riot police fired tear gas at protesters who threw stones, vandalised buildings and set tyres on fire along the capital's streets.

At least 10 policemen and 17 protesters are thought to have been injured in the previous two days of protest.

At one stage on Wednesday evening, paramilitary police pursued several opposition protesters into a Catholic Church where they had sought refuge, our reporter says.

The protesters want a reversal of amendments to Togo's electoral code adopted by the country's parliament last week, which include parliamentary and constituency reforms.

They say the changes favour the ruling party.

Operation Save Togo, a coalition of campaign groups which organised the protests, said it would continue with the demonstrations until President Gnassingbe agrees to hold a dialogue over the reforms.

Demonstrators want a return to the Togo 1992 constitution which limits the mandate of a sitting head of state to two terms.

The constitution was amended in 2002 by parliament which was dominated by the ruling party.

Alphonse Kpogo, one of the Operation Save Togo leaders, told the BBC: "What puts more oil into the blazing fire is the adoption, unilaterally, of the new electoral code. The movement Save Togo says we cannot just adopt unilaterally new laws like that."

"There must be a consensus over the adoption of these laws. Either they accept to hold dialogue to get consensus before going to the elections or we will chase them out of power through a revolution."

The Togolese government, which has appealed for protesters to be law abiding, says the electoral reforms were the result of extensive dialogue with civil society.

Legislative polls are expected to be held in October, however a precise date has not been set.