

THE 2011 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN BENIN

Explaining the Success of One of Two Firsts

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ABSTRACT

Since 1991 Benin has been considered a model of democratisation in Africa. Indeed, since its first multiparty elections in the post-Cold War era, held in March 1991, three different heads of state have alternated at the helm of the country, each coming and leaving according to the prevailing constitutional norms. All of them have been 'independent' candidates, not supported by a specific political party. Each of the presidential elections has gone into a run-off poll and the main opposition parties have failed to coalesce behind one of theirs in an attempt to win the presidency. But for the 2011 election, the main political parties formed an alliance, in the hope of defeating the incumbent candidate, who nevertheless won in the first round. It was the first time the opposition had formed such a formidable coalition and the first time, too, that a presidential candidate won without a run-off. This article attempts to explain this apparent 'anomaly' in Beninese politics and, in doing so, sheds some light on the main candidates in the 2011 election, the stakes involved and how the poll compared to previous ones. It concludes that incumbent president Boni Yayi may have won fairly on election day, but that a rigged voters' roll played a role in his victory.

INTRODUCTION

In early 1990, following decades of one-party regimes and military rule, General Mathieu Kérékou – like most of his counterparts on the continent – was forced by a combination of local and outside pressures to open up the political space in Benin and allow the restoration of a multiparty system in the country (Gbado 1996; Bratton & Van de Walle 1992, 1997; Clark & Gardiner 1997; Decalo 1997). Following a 'National Sovereign Conference' that would later become a model in many so-called Francophone African countries, myriad political parties were formed or

reconstituted with the aim of winning control of various levers of political power, particularly the presidency. Since the first multiparty presidential election, held in March 1991, competitive presidential elections have been organised in Benin every five years (1996, 2001, 2006) and have resulted in three changes of president (1991, 1996, 2006).

But all these changes in power benefited 'independent' candidates. Nicéphore Soglo in 1991, Mathieu Kérékou II in 1996,¹ and Boni Yayi in 2006 were supported by a broad array of political movements, parties and personalities, not by a single political party or even a registered coalition. They registered their candidacy as 'independent', without having to produce the supporting documents of the sponsorship of any political party.

Opposition disunity was thought to be the main factor in these 'independent' victories and opposition unity was therefore thought to be the bridge political parties had to cross to get to the Marina Palace in Porto Novo. For the March 2011 presidential poll, almost all the main political parties decided to try a 'unity strategy' and formed, as early as 2009, a formidable coalition, with a single candidate. This historical unity of opposition political parties aimed to achieve the first political party victory in post-Cold War Benin. But another first thwarted this ambition – the victory of the incumbent 'independent' candidate in the first round, with some 53 per cent of the vote, against 35 per cent won by the opposition coalition candidate, Adrien Houngbédji. No candidate since 1991 had ever won the presidency without a run-off poll.

This article seeks to explain this 'anomaly' in Beninese politics. Why and how did several opposition parties come together to form a formidable coalition and unite behind one of theirs even before the hypothetical second round? How did incumbent president Thomas Boni Yayi win despite the coalition and his involvement in some financial scandals and do so without the help of a run-off poll?

To answer these questions, the article is divided into four main sections. The first traces the history of Benin's political parties in their quest for the presidency; a history that shows their appreciation of the need to coalesce for the 2011 election. The second looks at the materialisation of the opposition's dream of unity and its disappointment at the results of the poll it thought it had won. The third section takes a closer look at Yayi, his record going into the polls, his stakes and his strategies. The final section offers some analyses of the organisation of the election, taking stock of some of the discussions in the previous two sections with regard to the position and views of both the opposition and the incumbent candidate.

1 The sequence 'II' refers to the second coming to power of Kérékou after his defeat in the historical 1991 presidential election and his graceful departure from power, only to return triumphantly in 1996 through the popular vote.

POLITICAL PARTIES IN BENIN AND THEIR QUEST FOR THE PRESIDENCY

If one defines 'regimes', for the purposes of this article, as the successive cabinets/governments of one leader, then Benin had 11 regimes from independence in 1960 to the end of the Cold War in 1990, including the two military regimes of Colonel/General Christophe Soglo and the two civilian ones of Hubert Maga. The military regime of Mathieu Kérékou (1972-1990) was the longest of them all.

The Popular Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB) that Kérékou formed became a Marxist-Leninist single party throughout the years of his rule (Decalo 1997; Gazibo 2005, pp 49-50). The few 'opposition' movements that were not co-opted and their leaders incarcerated either fled the country or took their activities underground (Noudjenoume 1999, pp 58-74; Banégas 1995; Dossou 1993). However, the socio-economic difficulties of the late 1980s, combined with recurring popular protests across the country eventually persuaded – if not forced – Kérékou to restore a multiparty system from 1990. This materialised after an historical National Sovereign Conference held in Cotonou, the country's biggest city and economic capital, from 19 to 28 February 1990 (Gbado 1996; Adamon 1995; Dossou 1993).

The first multiparty election: 1991

In line with one of the conditions for the holding of the conference various opposition movements and figures that had fallen out with the regime were given amnesty and many participated in the conference, including some of those that had gone to exile. Since this historic event these figures and movements have sought to win the presidency, in competition with 'independent' candidates and those of the ruling government of the day, starting with Kérékou himself, who stood in the March 1991 presidential election.

Nicéphore Soglo, prime minister in the transitional period (February 1990-March 1991) won this first election against Kérékou with some 67 per cent of the vote in the second round, having benefited from the support of various opposition parties and movements despite the fact that he was an 'independent' candidate. It was only after his victory that he took over the Benin Renaissance Party (RB), which had been founded by his wife (Bako-Afrifari 1995; Banégas 1997).

Soglo's election victory can be explained by a number of factors. First, as an acclaimed economist, having spent many years with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), his record during the transitional period had been impressive. Secondly, his position as prime minister during the transitional period, with enormous powers, allowed him to present the government's achievements as his

own, thus raising the hopes of the voters that he would do better as president. None of his other rivals in opposition ranks had such a privilege – most of them had been out of the country for many years or had tarnished their image through their association with the oppressive Kérékou regime. Thirdly, his only rival with a record of government was Kérékou, whose regime had been rejected by the popular uprisings of the late 1980s. Soglo, therefore, had a smooth passage to the Marina Palace, the seat of presidential power in Benin.

Subsequent multiparty elections

Although Soglo's economic record was impressive in the five years of his first term it would appear that he left many of his allies disgruntled. But given that he still had considerable support in the south of the country it became clear to most of his disgruntled former allies, who, like Soglo, came mainly from the south, that they would need a significant number of 'northern' votes to defeat him in the March 1996 election.

Ironically, it was the old Kérékou, a northerner with significant southern support garnered during his time in office, who emerged as the magic candidate, defeating Soglo. In fact, despite Soglo's inconclusive victory in the first round (35.62% against 33.94% for his main rival), Kérékou benefited from the support of various opposition movements, enabling him to win the run-off poll with 52.49 per cent of the votes (Houngnikpo 2007; Mayrargue 1996).

Kérékou's easy re-election in 2001, with an overwhelming 83.64 per cent of the vote in the second round, was the result of the main opposition parties boycotting the poll. Election boycotts are a popular strategy that opposition parties employ in many African countries, but it is a strategy that has not proved successful. On the contrary, while it has often served to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the ruling party in the short term, most ruling parties get over this liability in time (Beaulieu 2006; Smith 2009).

In the case of this election in Benin, Soglo (in a come-back), who had come second, with 27.12 per cent of the vote in the first round, boycotted the run-off poll, as did Adrian Houngbédji, who had come third, with 12.62 per cent. Both cited irregularities in the organisation of the second round to explain their withdrawal from the race, an argument that convinced neither the Electoral Commission nor the Constitutional Court. As a result Kérékou contested the run-off poll against the fourth-placed candidate in the first round, who was, ironically, a minister in the outgoing Cabinet, turning the poll into what Marsaud (2001) termed a 'friendly match' between him and his minister (see also Souaré 2010, p 78).

But it was in the March 2006 election that an opposition party candidate came closest to achieving the dream of becoming president. The main contenders were

the same as those who stood in 2011. Boni Yayi, the independent candidate, had won, with 35.78 per cent against 24.22 per cent for Houngbédji, who came second in the first round, thereby necessitating a run-off poll between the two. But due to rivalries among the various opposition candidates those who came third (with 16.29%), fourth (8.44%) and fifth (3.25%) all supported the independent candidate in the second round, giving him a landslide victory, with some 74.6 per cent of the vote, while Houngbédji only won 25.4 per cent.²

It has to be noted that beyond the failure of the opposition to unite, the victorious candidate had also crafted a very ingenious campaign strategy. As head of the West African Development Bank (BOAD), located in neighbouring Togo until a few months before the election, Boni Yayi had ensured for many years that he received maximum publicity from the various development projects funded by the bank in Benin. In this regard, he followed in Soglo's footsteps. But he also used his Obama-like multiethnic and multi-religious background and connections to position himself as the most consensual candidate of all the aspirants. He was born to Muslim parents but was raised by a Christian uncle who passed his religion on to him; his parents came from two different ethnic groups hailing from the north and the centre of the country and he married into a famous Christian household originating in the south.

Most importantly, he also emphasised his technocratic qualities and the fact that, unlike most of his rivals, who had been involved in Benin's 'polluted' political scene since 1990, he was an 'outsider' with new ideas, particularly for the development of the youth and women; a message that particularly appealed to many voters (Loko 2007; Seely 2007; Mayrargue 2006).

Given the failure of attempts by the main opposition candidates to win power alone and the rivalries between them, which prevented them from uniting, it became evident that the creation of a broad-based coalition had become the only viable strategy if they were to achieve their goal of acceding to the presidency for the first time since 1990. How did this coalition come to being? What was at stake for its main members? And how did it compare with Yayi when it went into the 2011 election?

THE OPPOSITION AND THE 2011 POLL

In preparation for the 2011 poll four of Benin's main political parties decided, as early as November 2009, to unite in a coalition, which they called 'Union Builds the Nation' (Union fait la nation – UN). The main parties in the coalition were

2 Author's interviews with several Beninese political figures and ordinary people in Cotonou, Porto Novo, Abomey and Ouidah in December 2007 (see Souaré 2010, p 226).

the Democratic Renewal Party (PRD) of Houngbédji, the RB party represented by Léhadi Soglo (son of Nicéphore), the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) of Bruno Amoussou, and the African Movement for Development and Progress (MADEP) party of Antoine Kolawolé Iji (Tossavi 2010; Maoussi 2010; Brathier 2010).

To understand more clearly the importance of this coalition to its member parties it is useful to look at the role in and impact of opposition coalitions (both theoretically and empirically) on their chances of victory as well as the true political weight of the main members of the coalition.

Coalition-building and opposition victories in Africa

In discussing regime alternation as part of his broader consideration of the strengths and alliances of political parties Duverger (1963, p 299) contended that regime turnover 'exists primarily in dualist countries [where the system] is like a pendulum movement, each party moving from opposition to office and from office to opposition'.

The two-party system referred to here is a system in which two political parties, among others, effectively dominate the political scene on a more or less equal basis in consecutive elections. But Duverger does not confine his theory to dualism even though it carries more weight for him. He acknowledges that 'there is no absolute coincidence with the two-party system; alternation may be encountered in a system with electoral coalitions' (Duverger 1963, p 301). Indeed. But Duverger's conception of coalition here is more durable than the formula we will highlight and which has been best theorised by other authors.

Other analysts have expanded on the coalition hypothesis, calling it the 'bipolarised' system – system by which many opposition parties come together to form a coalition against the ruling party to create an ad hoc two-party system and facilitate change (Quermonne 1988, pp 11-15). This makes for favourable conditions for opposition victory; victory being possible with either one, and even more likely if both conditions are met.

Data available on African elections between 1990 and 2010 confirm these two hypotheses. In this period 18 'partisan' opposition victories were recorded.³

3 The qualification of opposition as 'partisan' here is to restrict the data to opposition candidates presented by a specific 'political party' or a registered coalition of them in the first round of the poll. This excludes victories of 'independent candidates', even those from opposition ranks. This because their candidacy outside of party frameworks suggests their lack of trust in political parties as a means of gaining power. The victories of opposition candidates – even if they are supported by a political party – that occurred after a transitional period in which there was no candidate from the ruling regime (which often happens under transitional governments led by military juntas or constitutional caretakers) are also excluded. This is because no political party can be considered as being in 'opposition' as there is no 'ruling party'.

All these victories occurred in countries where there is a two-party system (Cape Verde 1991, 2001; Ghana 2000, 2008; Sierra Leone 2007) or where the opposition parties formed a coalition. In countries where the electoral formula is a simple majority, or first-past-the-post (FPTP) (Zambia 1991; Mauritius 1995, 2000, 2005; Kenya 2002) these coalitions were – and could only have been – formed before the first and only round of voting, while in countries practising absolute majority, two-round voting systems (Congo 1992; Burundi 1993; Madagascar 1993; Central African Republic 1993; Senegal 2000; Côte d’Ivoire 2010) the opposition almost always came together in the second round to win the poll. There are only two exceptional cases (Malawi 1994; Côte d’Ivoire 2000) in which opposition parties won elections without having to form a coalition and without their countries being two-party states (Souaré 2011). But these two exceptional cases can easily be explained.

In Côte d’Ivoire the erstwhile ruling Ivorian Democratic Party (PDCI) had boycotted the October election in question and the military junta that organised the poll had not allowed the popular Alassane Ouattara to run, on the pretext that he was not Ivorian. This meant that Laurent Gbagbo’s Ivorian Popular Front (IFP) had only one serious, but unpopular, challenger in the military junta and thus did not need a coalition to win the poll. Even then, Gbagbo had to force his way into the presidential palace when it appeared that the military junta was intent on hanging onto power (Souaré 2006, pp 49-53). Gbagbo himself did the same when he lost the 2010 election (Zounmenou & Souaré 2010).

In Malawi in 1994 Bakili Muluzi’s United Democratic Front (UDF) won the poll with 47 per cent of the vote against the Malawi Congress Party (MCP)’s long-term ruler, Hastings Banda (33.45%) and despite the presence of a popular third party, the Alliance for Democracy (AFORD), of trade union leader Chakufwa Chihana, who won 19 per cent of the vote (Kalipeni 1997; Van Donge 1995; Chirwa 1994). At least two factors may explain this. On the one hand, this historic election was heavily characterised by ethno-regional voting, based on the provenance of the main candidates. This situation heavily favoured the UDF, as the party was dominant in the southern region of the country, which represented about 50 per cent of the population and 10 of the 24 constituencies. In addition to this dominant role in ethno-regional politics, on the other hand, the UDF also benefited from support in other regions, particularly the central region, a stronghold of the party, as many of its cadres, including Muluzi, were former MCP members and thus had a following there (Tsoka 2009; Kalipeni 1997; Van Donge 1995; Posner 1995).

This shows the importance, both theoretically and empirically, of coalition-building in opposition victories in Africa and even beyond. It should, however, be noted that having a two-party system or forming a coalition are two *necessary* but *not sufficient* conditions for an opposition victory. Other important factors

include, particularly, the weight and coherence of the parties who are members of the coalition. How did the UN coalition fare in this regard?

The political weight of the UN coalition

The track record in previous elections since 1991 of the four main members of the UN coalition shows that they were indeed the main political parties in Benin as the 2011 poll approached. To illustrate this it is worth noting that the PRD party and its leader, Houngédji, had participated in all the presidential and legislative elections in Benin since 1991 and had obtained an average of 15 per cent in presidential elections and about 10 deputies in each legislative election. Houngédji came fifth, with 4.54 per cent of the vote in the 1991 presidential election; third, with 19.71 per cent in the 1996 poll; third again, with 16.62 per cent, in 2001 (although he boycotted the second round, alleging irregularities in the electoral process) and second, with 24.22 per cent, in the first round of the 2006 election. Nine of the 64 deputies elected to Parliament in 1991 were from his party; 18 of 83 in 1995; 11 of 83 in 1999 and 2003 and 10 of 83 in 2007.⁴

The RB party lost some of its popularity and appeal after Soglo left its leadership after the 2001 presidential election. The often ugly succession rivalries among his family members did much damage to the party and his son, Léhady, who carried the flag of the party to the UN coalition, was less charismatic and 'consensual' than his father. Still, the party's track record made it one of the leading parties in the country. Although Soglo only joined the RB after his election in 1991 it was on its platform that he contested the 1996 election, which he lost in the second round. However, he came second in the 2001 poll, with 27.12 per cent of the vote, only to boycott the run-off poll, as did Houndgédji.

The same assessment can be made of Amoussou's PSD. He came fourth in the 1991, 1996 and 2001 presidential elections before jumping to third place in 2006 with 16.29 per cent of the vote. The party has had a minimum of eight deputies after each election since 1991 even when it was part of a parliamentary coalition, as it often was. The MADEP party was the weakest link of the four main members of the UN coalition. As a new party it fielded its first presidential candidate in the 2006 poll and he won a mere 3.25 per cent of the vote. However, after the 1999 legislative elections the party had six members of Parliament and after the 2003 elections it had nine. A coalition named the Alliance for a Dynamic Democracy (ADD), which included the RB and PSD parties, had a total of 20 deputies in the post-2007 Parliament.

Taking the above into account one could argue that the UN coalition had

4 For details of these and subsequent results, see www.africanelections.tripod.com/zm.html

sufficient political mileage to challenge Yayi and win the 2011 election. Its position was also strengthened by the fact that it had managed to designate a single candidate more than six months before the poll. With the choice of this consensual candidate, in the person of Houngbédji, the coalition conformed to some of the main factors that generally contribute to a successful coalition.

It is clear from the studies of various theorists that the main objective of a coalition is to allow members of the alliance to unite their efforts and strengths in order to maximise the rewards of their specific course of action, hence the emphasis by some game theorists on the rational calculation of members of the coalition with regard to the various costs and benefits of adhering to the latter (Riker 1962).

It is possible to deduct from the existing literature four principal explanatory factors (not exhaustive) that facilitate the formation of a winning coalition. These are:

- the pay-offs expected by the actual or prospective members of the coalition;
- the contributions required from each member;
- personal or socio-political links among members of the coalition;
- the probability of success.

Gamson 1961; Chertkoff 1966

With regard to the first of these, Reisinger (1986, pp 553-4) notes that payoffs take different shapes in various circumstances. He argues that a payoff can involve either a distribution among some or all of the members of the coalition of some valued good or the selection of a particular course of action among a finite number of choices.

In the case of the UN coalition the pay-off expected by its members was clear – the conquest of the Marina Palace and the various ministerial portfolios and public positions its members could distribute among themselves in the event of victory.

With regard to the required contributions from each member, the choice of Houngbédji was pragmatic, for one could argue that his participation was key to the victory of any opposition coalition, given his political weight based on his previous record. Moreover, he was 69 years old on the eve of the poll, so, for him, the 2011 election was a case of ‘now or never’ as Benin’s Constitution limits the eligibility of aspirants to the presidency to age 70 before election day.

The representative of the PSD party could not stand – he had turned 70 in 2009. The RB representative was young enough (born in December 1960) to continue standing for president until 2026 and was likely to replace Houngbédji as

the opposition's candidate in 2016, as the latter would be unable to stand. Also, given the history of Houngbéji's electoral successes, it could be argued that the coalition had in him a candidate with the ability to mobilise significant votes, even on his own, and more with the support of other members of the coalition. This made the contributions of the various members of the coalition less costly and the probability of its success very high.

But Gamson (1961, p 375) and Mazur (1968, p 198) rightly note that not all benefits are quantifiable 'utilitarian' payoffs but include such considerations as personal preferences based on interpersonal or emotional attraction and ideological preferences. In addition, ethnic and regional considerations must be taken into account in dealing with political parties in Africa. In the case of the UN coalition regional and ethnic considerations played an important role in the coming together of its principal members. But herein lies one of the factors that partly account for its loss – none of the parties has a stronghold outside the southern and central regions of the country and the northern region, which has produced the majority of Benin's presidents, including the incumbent Boni Yayi, favoured both Yayi and Abdoulaye Bio Tchane, a popular independent candidate (hailing from the region), who made the election a three- rather than a two-horse race.

THE INCUMBENT CANDIDATE

Given that Benin's electoral commission has been considered to be generally credible since its inception in 1991 (Houngbéji 2011; ECA 2009 p 41) and that the electoral processes have been quite competitive, an evaluation of President Boni Yayi's standing in the run-up to the 2011 poll should first be made through his record in office since 2006. The strategies he adopted in his bid to win will then be analysed to complete the picture.

Yayi's record in government, 2006-2010

It would appear that President Boni Yayi scored quite poorly in relation to the procedural aspects of governance. For example, the media in Benin seem to have lost much of their pre-2006 dynamism and freedom, a situation amplified by the country's regression in the rankings of Reporters Without Borders (RSF).

For a comparative analysis in this regard it is worth recalling that Benin had come top of all the African countries and was ranked 21st in the world – ahead of countries such as the United States, Italy and France – in the first global ranking of media freedom released by RSF in 2002. It retained its leading position in Africa until 2006, with the exception of 2004, when it was surpassed by South

Africa, but remained ahead of countries such as the United Kingdom, Cape Verde, Italy and Spain. However, since 2006 the country has dropped considerably in the rankings: coming 53rd in the world in 2007 (behind Togo, 49th; Mali, 52nd and Mauritius/Namibia, 25th); 70th in 2008 (behind Burkina Faso, 63rd; Togo, 53rd; Mali/Ghana, 31st and Namibia, 23rd); and 72nd in 2009 (far behind France, 43rd; Italy, 47th and Liberia, 62nd).⁵

Many of the president's critics attribute this to his alleged attempts to muzzle the press. In fact, in its commentary on Benin's record since 2006 the RSF recognised that journalists in Benin were responsible for many mistakes during this period, including defamation, but regretted the many actions of the government aimed at intimidating the press through the use of laws that had been shelved since 2004, such as those providing for heavy prison terms for journalists. The organisation condemned the arrest and incarceration of several journalists and managers of numerous papers using the pretext of defamation.

There were also many instances of conflict between the president and the legislature amid accusations that Yayi was determined either to bypass the lawmakers or to weaken them. On many occasions parliamentarians summoned Cabinet ministers to appear before them to account for certain actions, but the ministers frequently refused to appear or ignored their verdicts, with the tacit support of the president.⁶

Some of these incidents related to cases of corruption in areas which involved the work of the ministers who had been summoned. A case in point is the financial scandal in mid-2010 involving a scam company called Investment Consultancy and Computing Services. The company had, for four years, collected funds from people on the pretext that they would be invested to yield unimaginable interest rates, going up to 200 per cent, but it turned out to be a scam. Lawmakers sought to question both the finance minister and the president himself, whom they threaten to impeach, but their bid eventually failed (Robespierre 2010).

But while this constituted a minus for Yayi he seems to have fared better on the economic development front, even according to some of his detractors. An economist himself, his main campaign slogan during the 2006 election was 'we can change, we should change, we will change' (Mayrargue 2006, pp 158-162). Economic success is very important for African leaders – as many opinion surveys have shown, many African populations tend to perceive and appreciate democracy through its economic and development 'dividends' (Coulibaly & Diarra 2004; Wantchekon & Taylor 2007; Logan, Wolf & Sentamu 2007).

5 While a single source such as this might not give the whole picture it nevertheless gives at least a partial idea, particularly given the credibility of the organisation.

6 I visited the National Assembly in December 2007 at a time when Parliament had not sat for a long time because of a conflict between it and the executive.

In a speech to the National Assembly in December 2009 President Yayi highlighted the many achievements of his government in this field since 2006.⁷ He maintained that the actions of his government had led to improvements in the living conditions of many citizens, particularly civil servants and rural peasants. By way of illustration he referred to the construction or rehabilitation of more than 1 500 kilometres of roads across the country, at a total cost of CFA 900-million; microcredit offered to half a million rural women; the funding through the National Fund for the Promotion of Youth Employment and Enterprise of some 602 small projects initiated by the youth, at a total cost of CFA 5-billion and pointed out that inflation and deficit rates had been controlled despite the global financial crisis of 2008/2009.

While this is an impressive record on the economic front, serious allegations of murky financial deals and lack of transparency were levelled against the president and many of his close collaborators. Beyond media reports and the accusations of his political opponents the largely credible Front of National Anti-Corruption Organisations (FONAC) produced irrefutable evidence establishing the truth in some of these cases and regretted the lack of cooperation from the executive in clarifying or punishing some of these acts, despite their recognition by the Council of Ministers. Some of these cases related to the administrative management and financial accounts of the Beninese embassies in Tokyo, Kinshasa, Addis Ababa and Paris, in addition to certain state and parastatal financial and commercial institutions.⁸

It is clear from the above that Yayi went into the 2011 election with a mixed record, tilted towards the negative side. This made his election strategy crucial in order to cover up or overcome his shortcomings and amplify his achievements.

The presidential strategy for the 2011 poll

Whereas he was elected in 2006 on a wave of popularity as a promising and 'unifying' political figure in the country, President Yayi knew that he needed to fight fiercely in order to be re-elected for a second term. Not only did he have to contend with the formidable UN opposition coalition he also had to ensure the continued loyalty of the majority of voters in the north vis-à-vis another popular challenger from that region, Abdoulaye Bio Tchane (ABT).

7 The full text of the speech, delivered to the National Assembly in Porto Novo on 29 December 2009 may be found at www.gouv.bj/spip.php?article1202

8 In addition to the press conference FONAC organised in Cotonou on 6 January 2010 to release its report, a conference that was widely reported by the Beninese media, I received a copy of the report from a member of the organisation in personal correspondence on 11 March 2010. While some of the 32 cases mentioned in the report dated back to before 2006, most related to incidents during President Yayi's term of office.

ABT was a source of concern for Yayi. Hailing from the same northern region, close to former president (and a potential kingmaker) Kérékou, whom he served as finance and economy minister (2002-2006), ABT had the same professional profile as the incumbent president. He, too, had served as director of the Africa Department of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and had headed the same West African Development Bank (BOAD) that Yayi had used as the launch pad for his campaign in 2006.⁹ The biggest danger for the incumbent was not so much that ABT might win but that he might seriously divide the northern vote (constituting about 35 per cent of the nationwide electorate), thereby giving an edge to the opposition coalition, with which ABT could have teamed up if there was a run-off poll.

In view of these challenges the incumbent president devised two main strategies. The first was what is generally known as 'vote buying', while the second consisted of distorting the voters' roll by means of a controversial Permanent Computerised Electoral List (LEPI) he had initiated soon after he came to power.

'Vote buying' is a common phenomenon in many African countries. In the case of Benin, many argue that Yayi laid the ground for his 2011 victory as early as 2008 when he organised the first local elections since 1991, doing so in a way that facilitated the election of many members of the political movement which supported his actions, which meant that he was assured of the support of many local councillors across the country (Perdrix 2011).

Another strategy, though it is something of a grey area, was the distribution of government positions in order to obtain the political support of various stakeholders. Although a characteristic of a functioning democracy and an obligation imposed on a ruling regime is the equal distribution of government positions and development projects among the various regions of the country it goes without saying that the way this is done, particularly when it is done close to an election, can feed into self-serving electoral calculations.

As far as the LEPI is concerned the original idea was to computerise the voters' roll to facilitate its revision, make it more accessible and smooth the organisation of future elections. However, it turned out to be a vehicle enabling Yayi to ensure massive registration in his electoral strongholds and to manipulate the census in other regions. As a result, the number of eligible voters dropped from 4.3-million in 2006 to 3.5-million in 2011, with the majority of the 700 000 voters who were omitted coming from opposition strongholds.

Opposition objections led to the postponement of the election on two occasions (27 February and 6 March 2011) and to the intervention of a joint

9 For more information about ABT see the web site at www.bio-tchane2011.com

delegation of the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN), which visited the country and urged the postponement of the poll, which was finally held on 13 March (AU 2011; Grogga-Bada 2011).

It should be noted that the opposition must shoulder part of the blame because at the start of the process, in an attempt to underscore its objections to the idea of LEPI, perhaps fearing its eventual manipulation, the opposition appeared to call for a boycott of the census. As a result, many opposition supporters refused to be registered and the agents of the electoral commission sometimes had to struggle with opposition followers in order to carry out their work (Grogga-Bada 2011).

In the event, the poll went ahead, using a contested and imperfect voters' roll, which was largely in favour of the incumbent president. President Yayi himself acknowledged the problem when he reportedly declared, soon after casting his vote: 'There have certainly been mistakes. This is why I present my apologies to the whole Nation and particularly those that were omitted in the voters' roll, if they exist' (*Jeune Afrique* / AFP 2011).

The organisation of the election

As noted above the March 2011 presidential election took place in a climate of contestation and mistrust among the principal actors in the electoral process (Gnacadjia, Oussou, Ganye & Diallo 2011). Despite this and notwithstanding a staggering deposit of CFA 100-million (up from CFA 5-million in 2006) required from all candidates, only to be refunded if the individual obtained at least 10 per cent of the vote, there were 14 candidates in the race for the presidency.

In reality, however, the poll was a three-horse race, comprising Yayi, Houngbédji and ABT. According to the Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Court, there were 3 668 558 registered voters, of whom 3 111 833 (an impressive 84.82%) voted and 2 972 445 of those votes were valid (Constitutional Court of Benin – CCB – 2011).

According to the results proclaimed by the Constitutional Court (see Table 1) the incumbent president won the poll outright in the first round, with 53.14 per cent of the vote against 35.64 per cent for Houngbédji and 6.14 per cent for ABT, his two main challengers. This was the first time a presidential candidate had won in Benin without a run-off poll, a situation that led the opposition to contest the results vehemently.

Indeed, in view of its unprecedented unity, the opposition coalition was confident of gaining more votes than the incumbent and winning the election at least in the run-off. It was therefore not surprising that both Houngbédji and ABT

Table 1
Final results at national level

Ranking	Candidate	Number and % of votes	Remarks
1st	Mr Thomas Boni Yayi	1 579 550 (53.64)	Incumbent president
2nd	Mr Adrien Houndgbedji	1 059 396 (35.64)	Opposition UN candidate
3rd	Mr Abdoulaye Bio-Tchané	182 484 (6.14)	Independent candidate
4th	Mr Salifou Issa	37 219 (1.29)	
5th	Mr Christian Enock Lagnide	19 221 (0.65)	
6th	Mr François J Yahouédeou	16 591 (0.56)	
7th	Mr Jean Yves Sinzogan	13 561 (0.46)	
8th	Mrs Akuavi M E C Gbedo	12 017 (0.40)	
9th	Mr Prudent Victor Topanou	11 516 (0.39)	
10th	Mr Késsilé Tchalla-Sare	9 469 (0.32)	
11th	Mr Cyr Kouagou-M'po	9 285 (0.31)	
12th	Mr Antoine Dayori	8 426 (0.28)	
13th	Mr Salomon J A Biokou	7 893 (0.27)	
14th	Mr Joachim Dahissihou	5 817 (0.20)	

Source: CCB 2011

took the matter to the Constitutional Court. The incumbent president did likewise, perhaps as a strategy to avoid suspicion, as the protests of the two opposition candidates were mainly directed at him.

In his charges the incumbent claimed that some officials of the local electoral commissions in two different constituencies, including one in the capital, Porto-Novo, had tampered with the results and reduced his share of the vote in favour of Houndgbedji. The Constitutional Court rejected these claims as being unfounded (CCB 2011, pp 45-46). The two main opposition candidates laid a total of 16 complaints, most of which were cross-cutting, in that they were filed by both Houndgbedji and ABT.

Among Houndgbedji's complaints was what he considered the 'unconstitutionality of the date on which the election was held' (less than 30 days before the expiry of the term of the incumbent president on 6 April). Both Houndgbedji and ABT claimed that they had not had sufficient notification about the final electoral list or about the number and situation of many voting stations; that

ghost voting stations had been set up by the electoral commission to help the incumbent president inflate his vote and that the incumbent had abused state funds for his electoral campaign.

ABT claimed that his agents had been prevented from going to certain polling stations, thereby making possible ballot stuffing by agents of the incumbent, that the latter continued to campaign for their principal, even on election day, including by putting his photograph in one of the voting booths in violation of specific electoral laws, and Houngbédji alleged that his agents had detected many instances of minors and foreigners voting in constituencies favourable to the incumbent.

The court rejected all these complaints on the basis of its own investigations, stating that they had not been substantiated by irrefutable evidence or that they had no bearing on the results (CCB 2011, pp 47-65). While the court's ruling on the majority of the complaints appears to be appropriate it seems that irregularities which might have been instigated by the incumbent president were cleverly couched in constitutional and legal terms that made it difficult to establish them as flagrant violations of any electoral law. It would therefore seem that Yayi's win was largely fair 'on election day' but that he had manipulated certain aspects of the electoral process. The voters' roll was the main avenue for this manipulation.

Indeed, and beyond accusations of vote rigging, a careful analysis of the detailed results of the election in the 12 districts (departments) of Benin, as well as in the diaspora, shows that Yayi managed to win an absolute majority in all four northern districts (which are the biggest in the country) and to garner respectable totals in other regions (he actually won two southern districts), while most votes for the opposition coalition came from the smaller southern and central regions (see Table 2).

Table 2
Percentage of votes for the three main candidates in each department

District	Region	B Yayi	A Houngbédji	A Bio-Tchané
Diaspora		62.81	29.82	4.78
Plateau	South	40.0	53.9	1.1
Ouémé	South	22.9	73.7	1.0
Littoral	South	37.9	56.5	3.0
Atlantique	South	50.4	37.9	7.2
Couffo	South	39.3	53.4	2.5

Mono	South	65.2	28.2	3.7
Collines	Centre	77.0	13.6	5.8
Zou	South	36.5	52.5	2.8
Alibori	North	78.2	1.2	4.5
Borgou	North	83.2	3.9	9.0
Donga	North	65.2	1.6	28.9
Atacora	North	73.2	3.5	16.4

Source: Adapted from CCB, 2011

CONCLUSION

This article has analysed critically the process and outcome of the 2011 presidential election in Benin. The election is interesting for two reasons. The first is that it was the only presidential election since the first multiparty election after the Cold War in March 1991 not to have required a run-off. The second is that it was the first election in which the main opposition parties succeeded in forming a formidable coalition. The article has attempted to provide some explanations for this apparent 'anomaly' in Beninese politics and, in doing so, to shed some light on the main candidates.

It traced the history of Benin's opposition political parties in their quest for the presidency; a history that explains the factors that contributed to their appreciation of the need to coalesce for the 2011 election. It then looked at the Union Builds the Nation coalition, which brought together four of the main political parties in addition to many other parties, movements and individuals. But it was noted that almost all the members of the coalition came from the south of the country, which did not augur well for them in terms of winning sufficient votes in the country as a whole.

The political standing of the third candidate, Abdoulaye Bio-Tchané, was analysed and the record in office, the stake in the election and the strategies of the incumbent president were scrutinised.

The analysis of the organisation of the election made it clear that it took place in a climate of controversy and mistrust among the main political actors in the country and the assessment of the results and the complaints of the three main candidates revealed that incumbent president Boni Yayi may, in fact, have won 'fairly' on election day but that he had also benefited from some unorthodox electoral engineering, particularly a rigged voters' roll, which may have contributed to his victory.

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