Massive Protests Call For An End To Togo’s 50-Year Political Dynasty

LOME, Sept 6 (Reuters) - Togo’s opposition chief called on Wednesday for the immediate resignation of President Faure Gnassingbe, the current head of a half century-old political dynasty, rejecting a government move to introduce term limits as protests gained momentum.

Tens of thousands of protesters clad in red, orange and pink - the colors of Togo’s opposition parties - marched through the streets of the capital Lome as security forces looked on, a Reuters witness said. Some carried banners bearing slogans including “Free Togo” and “Faure resign.”

Gnassingbe has ruled the West African nation since his father died in 2005 after 38 years in power. The late President Gnassingbe Eyadema passed a law in 1992 limiting the president to two terms in power, only to scrap it a decade later.

Togo’s cabinet on Tuesday adopted a draft bill to bring back the term limits, the government announced in a statement. But the decision did little to satisfy an increasingly rejuvenated opposition.

Speaking before a crowd of thousands of protesters in central Lome, Jean-Pierre Fabre, the head of the main ANC opposition party, said: “We will march again tomorrow. Faure should talk to us about the conditions for his departure. The (draft) law on mandates comes too late.”

Residents said similar protests were underway in Sokode, 340 km (210 miles) north of the coastal capital, as well as several other towns.

A number of long-serving African rulers, notably in Rwanda, Burundi and Burkina Faso, have moved to drop term limits in recent years in order to remain in power. In some cases this has sparked strong opposition that has led to violent unrest.

However, unlike marches last month during which at least two protesters were killed by security forces, there was no sign of violence by early afternoon on Wednesday.

Togo, which aspires to become an African Dubai and hosts the headquarters of pan-African lender Ecobank and other major firms, has a history of repression. Around 500 people were killed during protests against the current leader’s 2005 poll victory.

Supporters listen as opposition party leaders speaks during an anti-government rally in Lome on September 6, 2017.

But the move to reintroduce a two-term limit could represent an important volte-face by the president, whose government in 2015 voted against the introduction of regional term limits across the ECOWAS 15-nation zone which he currently chairs.

?(I) deplore the serious incidents in Sokode and Lome during the protests of 19 August and call upon the people to exercise calm, serenity and moderation,” Gnassingbe said in a statement released on Wednesday. He also pledged to improve living conditions in the country of nearly 8 million people.

It was not immediately known when the bill approved by the cabinet will be presented to parliament. Nor was it clear how the proposed change to article 59 of the constitution would affect Gnassingbe, who is now serving a third mandate which ends in 2020.

Government critics accused authorities of cutting mobile internet access on Wednesday in a move they said mirrored cuts imposed by other African incumbents, such as Gabon’s Ali Bongo, to control criticism at sensitive times.

However, the main internet gateway remained operational according to Dyn which monitors global internet traffic. A government official could not immediately be reached for comment.

(Writing by Emma Farge; Editing by Joe Bavier and Matthew Mpoke Bigg)