

## 4.8 National Conferences

Michael Lund and  
Carlos Santiso

### 4.8 National Conferences

*National conferences and constituent assemblies have been a widely used mechanism for bringing together political groups to discuss and plan key aspects of a country's future development. They are a particularly useful means for reaching consensus on the political and institutional shape of a post-colonial or post-conflict state. In this section we consider the objectives of a national conference, how a national conference can be organized and implemented, and its advantages and weaknesses. In the case study that follows we look at how national conferences have impacted on the political development of five Francophone African countries.*

4.8.1–4.8.2 *What is a national conference?*

4.8.3 *Objectives*

4.8.4 *Implementation*

4.8.5 *Impact*

Factsheet 2 Organizing a National Conference (pp. 260–261)

#### 4.8.1 Introduction

Constituent assemblies were a common mechanism during the post-World War Two “decolonization decades” to bring politicians and constitutional experts together to write a new constitution for an independent nation. India’s independence Constitution, for example, was the result of three years of discussion and debate at a constituent assembly comprising eminent jurists, lawyers, academics and politicians. In other cases, such as Papua New Guinea, the elected parliament from the colonial era reconvened itself as a constituent assembly in 1975 to debate and then formally adopt a constitution. Other attempts have been less successful, such as the use of constituent assemblies to reach consensus on key political conflicts in Sri Lanka (1972) or to prepare an independence Constitution in Pakistan (1947–1954).

## 4.8 National Conferences

During the 1990s, however, there has been a new trend towards utilizing large national conferences, not as a means of decolonization but as a mechanism for political transition to democracy. The distinctive features of such national assemblies are that they typically include wide representation from civil society; are able to act with considerable autonomy from governments; and have proved particularly useful in forging an internal consensus on democratization and transition from conflict. This type of national assembly was widely used in Francophone Africa in the early 1990s as a means of harnessing pro-democracy forces. It has proven to be a key mechanism in promoting democratic transition and in effecting substantive political change (see Case Study National Conferences in Francophone Africa).

### 4.8.2 What is a national conference?

A national conference (or national debate, as it is referred to in some countries) is a public forum, held over an extended period, at which representatives from key political and civic groups are invited to discuss and develop a plan for the country's political future, preferably on a consensus basis. By convening a national conference, the central government allows other political groups to participate in a decision-making process, while still maintaining its own authority and control. In agreeing to hold and participate in a national conference the central government is not guaranteeing political freedom or the sharing of power with other political factions; rather it is agreeing to conduct a nationwide political dialogue and ideally, to jointly plan steps toward increased political representation and liberalization.

National conferences are designed typically to fulfil two goals: first, to address the demands for political liberalization, by being inclusive and highly visible, especially to the international community; and second, to achieve gradual, "managed" transition, often with the incumbent leadership believing that it can maintain control over the process. In many African countries, for example, national conferences opened up previously one-party systems by bringing together different actors to address the country's political problems, formulated new constitutional rules, and established electoral timetables. Some national conferences even achieved peaceful alternations in power. In this way they can be seen as an indigenously generated African contribution to political institution building and regime transition.

National conferences in Africa were usually "one-off" assemblies representing a wide range of individuals and corporate in-

*National conferences are designed typically to fulfil two goals: first, to address the demands for political liberalization, by being inclusive and highly visible, especially to the international community; and second, to achieve gradual, "managed" transition, often with the incumbent leadership believing that it can maintain control over the process.*

terests. They lasted from a few days to several months; contained several hundred to several thousand delegates (i.e., 500 in Benin, 1,200 in Congo, 4,000 in Zaire); and were often chaired by a nominally neutral church leader. Occurring in 12 African countries between 1990 and 1993, national conferences were largely a Francophone phenomenon (Benin, Chad, Comoros, Congo, Gabon, Mali, Niger, Togo and Zaire) although similar bodies were also convened in Ethiopia in July 1991, in South Africa in December 1991, and in Guinea-Bissau in 1992. Some attempts were also made in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, and Guinea. In Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal the national conference idea hardly took root, and multi-party elections only confirmed the old regimes in power. In the late 1990s, there has been a resurgence of calls for national conferences to build consensus on reforming state structures, initiating transitions to democracy and resolving deep-rooted conflicts, such as in Kenya in 1997 and in Nigeria after the death of Abacha in June 1998. The case study that follows elaborates on the use and results of national conferences in five Francophone countries.

### *4.8.3 Objectives of a national conference*

**Prevent conflict.** Initially, the objective of a national conference may be simply to prevent conflict by motivating political opposition groups to postpone violence while testing the government's actual commitment to peaceful political change.

**Build national consensus on a country's political future.** A fundamental objective of a national conference is to provide an opportunity for representatives of all sides to discuss, plan, and reach a maximum level of consensus on a country's political future, hence addressing potential and actual political crises. National conferences can be seen as democratic conflict management tools designed to negotiate democratic transitions by establishing new rules and institutions. A national conference or national debate also may be interpreted as a preliminary move toward limited democracy, in that it lays the foundation for crafting more inclusive institutions and democratic mechanisms, legalizing multipartism, drafting a new constitution and electoral system, achieving peaceful alternation of power, and setting a timetable for democratic transition.

**Bolster citizen's support for state institutions.** A government may initiate or agree to participate in a national conference to bolster its own legitimacy and popular support by creating a

## 4.8 National Conferences

more inclusive political climate, thereby reducing internal destabilizing factors. As a result of a national conference, the government may direct state institutions to be more representative and inclusive, in the hope that an increased perception of inclusiveness will in turn bolster citizens' support for state institutions. Non-government political groups participate in a national conference in the hope of increasing the government's accountability and expanding popular participation in the government.

**“Level the playing-field”.** In certain instances, a national conference may be agreed to by parties in conflict when there is a clear recognition or acknowledgement that the government in power is no longer in a position to maintain the status quo; and because of a demand by the opposition parties that the government alone cannot deliver a solution to the conflict. In such a case, an all-party national conference is often the first step on the road to substantive negotiations. This process may be disempowering for the government, as a common precondition for such a conference is that all parties are regarded as equal in status. The key objective is to “level the playing-field” between the parties during the negotiations, with the ultimate aim being to forge a national consensus.

Governments often show resistance to a national conference because of this “equal status” dilemma, as it often has the effect of lowering their own status and according real status to parties that previously they may have regarded as enemies and “terrorists”. One way to address this obstacle is to structure the conference so that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”. This can mean that the government does not feel that it loses its power when the process begins, but only if an ultimate agreement is reached which is acceptable to it. In many ways, it is critical that the negotiations simply commence, as that, in itself, may be the start of the process of dealing with perceptions and focusing on the real issues, both important objectives.

### 4.8.4 Implementation

**Prerequisites.** Prior to a national conference, *multipartism*, especially the legalization of opposition parties, must be allowed. *Freedom of association, speech and assembly* must be guaranteed. In addition, the *media* must be involved to monitor and report on the events.

**Organizers.** While *governments* generally take the initiative in convening a national conference, internal and external pressu-

res often have a significant influence. A foreign third party and/or domestic political pressure may play a role in convincing the government to hold a conference. A national conference can be organized by a committee consisting of members of various political groups, including opposition groups, as well as government members and the international community.

**Participants.** Without the participation of members of the *existing central government*, a national conference would have little significance. To maximize the impact of the conference, participants must include representatives of the key *social, religious, professional, and political interest groups* who wish to participate in the process. All possible participants should be invited to endorse the results of the conference, within limits of reason.

The presence of *international observers* may be helpful in assuring the process and results of the conference. Other participants may include academics, local government personnel, representatives from non-governmental organizations, human rights organizations, women's associations, trade unions and religious authorities, peasant groups and students, and aid donors.

**Activities.** Organizers of a national conference must agree on and draft an *agenda*, clarify the issues to be discussed, and convey the goals of the conference to all the participants. Depending on the outcome of the conference, it may be necessary for parties to agree on additional issues as well as on the implementation of the conference agreement, if any is reached. In such a situation, a *follow-up or "implementation group"* consisting of key parties, and perhaps members of the international community, should be formed and given the appropriate responsibility to ensure that progress made at the conference is consolidated and translated into action.

**Cost considerations.** Costs, such as preparation, transportation, and accommodation for the conference participants, may be prohibitive. The primary cost of the conference should always, if possible, be borne by the country itself. However, *foreign financial assistance* may often be necessary to organize a national conference and to help support its follow-up functions. Conference requirements include technical assistance and logistical support.

**Set-up time.** *Several months* are generally needed to plan and organize a conference. National conferences can be held over a long period (several months) or a short duration (from several days to a few weeks). The comparative experience ranges widely:

## 4.8 National Conferences

Benin (convened in February 1990 and lasted nine days), Congo (February 1991, three months), Togo (July 1991, one month), Mali (July 1991, 15 days), Niger (July 1991, 40 days), Zaire (August 1991, over a year, with interruptions), South Africa (December 1991, two years with interruptions), and Chad (January 1993, 11 weeks).

**Timeframe.** A national conference's ability to design sustainable institutional structures and mechanisms for conflict management is key. The impact of a national conference may be sustained if the conference is successfully used to develop a broad consensus on the country's "rules of the game" and political future, and if genuine follow-on actions are initiated. Adherence to the rules and mechanisms agreed upon largely depend on the political commitment of the parties and the underlying balance of power.

**Limitations on government.** Another consideration is the limitations placed on the powers of the government during the course of the conference. This may involve transitional arrangements aimed at ensuring that no action is undertaken that may affect the position of the parties or of the country. For example, the army may be confined to barracks, there may be a cease-fire agreement, or there may be a commitment to address key national issues such as education or economic policy jointly.

### 4.8.5 Impact

A national conference can have a different impact depending on the situation it seeks to redress: by *initiating political dialogue*, it can ease mounting tensions; as a *conflict resolution mechanism*, it can provide a framework for agreeing on the country's political institutions and rules through a negotiated democratic transition; and as a *conflict prevention forum*, it can create the rules and institutions for a stable democratic regime.

An announcement to organize a national conference can have a short-term effect on preventing conflict by groups previously involved in or planning political violence. These groups may adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and divert their efforts toward preparation for the conference. However, if no actual, substantive political changes result, such groups may return to violence with even greater zeal and additional disillusioned groups may choose to join them.

National conferences resulted in changes in government in Benin, Congo and Niger; and exerted significant political pres-

sure on incumbent rulers in Zaire and Togo. In many instances, national conferences laid the ground work for competitive founding elections (Benin, Congo, Gabon, Mali, Niger and South Africa). The comparative experience suggests the following lessons:

- A national conference can be a useful *democratic conflict management tool*, as it is both inclusive and participatory, and initiates political dialogue to ease political crises;
- National conferences can have a significant impact on *governance*, on the political system, and even on forming a new political culture based on negotiation and compromise, by persuading groups to participate more actively in the political decision-making process;
- As a conflict resolution mechanism, a national conference can have a decisive influence on *negotiating democratic transitions* from authoritarian rule to democratic pluralism. It can provide a framework for achieving a peaceful alternation in power, drafting a new constitution, designing a new electoral system and setting a democratic timetable;
- A national conference can have a significant impact on *promoting democracy*. However, to sustain the political results of national conferences, the public must continue to pressure the government to continue with democratic political development;
- Through a national conference, political groups and representatives from various sectors can negotiate a plan for the country's political future;
- A national conference may help state authorities *gain greater popular support and legitimacy*, and instil greater public confidence in the government. A national conference may lay the groundwork for establishing a transitional government and relatively open elections. An incumbent government may also gain greater legitimacy by actively participating in discussions on economic development, power-sharing arrangements, human rights, country management, etc;
- Conference participants, representing a country's diverse political groups, can set *guidelines for formulating new political institutions*, such as a legislature and an electoral system, that could contribute to easing tensions among various groups in the country. The result of a national conference may be government agreement to direct state institutions

#### 4.8 National Conferences

to be more representative and inclusive. Such agreements may be made in the hope that the increased perception of inclusiveness would in turn bolster citizens' support for state institutions;

- A national conference can help establish stable civilian governance and control and, at least in the short term, reduce the attraction of resorting to armed opposition for achieving political change.



## ORGANIZING A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

**National Conference:** *A national conference is a public forum at which representatives from key political and civic groups are invited to discuss and develop a plan for the country's political future, preferably on a consensus basis. National conferences are designed typically to fulfil two goals: first, to address the demands for political liberalization; and second, to achieve gradual, "pacted" or "managed" transition, often with the incumbent leadership believing that it can maintain control over the process.*

### IMPLEMENTATION

#### ***Sequence of Events:***

- Conferees acquire some degree of law-making authority;
- Existing constitutions are revised, legislatures suspended or reformed, and transitional governments established (in other words, a form of regime transition by peaceful means);
- Incumbent presidents are required to work with transitional governments or to surrender significant powers;
- Conference participants draft a new constitution, or establish an independent commission to do so, and submit it to a referendum;
- Free elections are held.

#### ***Prerequisites:***

- Multipartyism, especially legalization of opposition parties;
- Freedom of association, speech and assembly;
- Media involvement to monitor and report on events.

#### ***Organizers:***

- Governments usually, often influenced by foreign third party and/or domestic political pressure;
- A committee, consisting of representatives of government, other political groups and the international community can organize national conferences.

#### ***Participants:***

- Members of existing central government;
- Representatives of key social, religious, professional, and political interest groups;
- Other participants can include academics, local government personnel, NGOs, human rights organizations, women's organizations, trade unions, students, and aid donors;
- International observers.

## ORGANIZING A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

### ***Activities:***

- Draft an agenda; clarify issues to be discussed; convey conference goals to all participants;
- Depending on outcome, organize “implementation group” to ensure follow-up.

### ***Cost Considerations:***

- Primary cost of conference organization (preparation, transportation, accommodation, etc.) should be borne by the country itself, if possible;
- Additional foreign financial assistance may be needed for organization and follow-up.

### ***Set-Up Time:***

- Usually several months are needed to organize;
- Conference can last between several days and several months (Benin lasted nine days; Congo, three months; South Africa, two years with interruptions).

## ADVANTAGES OF A NATIONAL CONFERENCE

### ***Initiates new political dialogue:***

- Initiates political dialogue that is both inclusive and participatory, to ease crises;
- Can help develop a *new political culture* by persuading groups to participate more actively in the political decision-making process and by emphasizing compromise and negotiation.

### ***Conflict management mechanism:***

- Can negotiate democratic transitions from authoritarian rule to democratic pluralism;
- Can provide a framework for achieving a peaceful alternation in power by drafting a new constitution, designing a new electoral system, and establishing a democratic timetable.

### ***Conflict prevention forum:***

- Can help state authorities *gain greater popular support and legitimacy*, and instil greater public confidence in the government.
- Conference participants, representing a country’s diverse political groups, can set *guidelines for formulating new political institutions*, such as a legislature and an electoral system, that could contribute to easing tensions among various groups in the country.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Baker, Bruce. 1998. "The Class of 1990: How Have the Autocratic Leaders of Sub-Saharan Africa Fared under Democratisation?", *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1. pp. 115–127.

Boulaga, Eboussi. 1993. *Les Conférences Nationales en Afrique Noire*. Paris: Editions Karthala.

Bratton, Michael and Nicolas van de Walle. 1997. *Democratic Experiment in Africa. Regime Transitions in Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, John F. 1994. "The National Conference as an Instrument of Democratization in Francophone Africa", *Journal of Third World Studies*, vol. XI, no. 1. pp. 304–335.

Monga, Célestin. 1994. "National Conferences in Francophone Africa: An Assessment". Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the School of Advanced International Studies, SAIS, African Studies Programme, Washington DC, 15 April 1994.

Robinson, Pearl. 1994. "The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, no. 36. pp. 575–610.

Wiseman, John. 1996. *The New Struggle for Democracy in Africa*. Aldershot: Avebury.

# Case Study

## NATIONAL CONFERENCES





## Case Study: National Conferences in Francophone Africa

### NATIONAL CONFERENCES IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICA

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sub-Saharan African countries were faced with simultaneous pressures from within and from outside to liberalize their political systems. The economic crisis and the social unrest it created increased the demands on the political elite to liberalize the political system. The international environment also changed dramatically, as the Cold War and its system of “protectorates” in the developing world gave way to a greater emphasis on democracy and democratization, especially by donor governments and the international community.

Confronted with strong resistance, increasing protest, and economic crises, authoritarian rulers in many countries recognized the need to renew legitimacy by opening up the political system and beginning a dialogue with opposition forces on democratic reform. Citizens began to pressure single-party regimes to expose themselves to multi-party elections. One mechanism that helped facilitate this process was the use of national conferences. These conferences opened up space for political dialogue and consensus by including opposition political parties and civil society organizations.

As we have discussed, a national conference can provide a forum for opposing groups to discuss and negotiate political issues in a peaceful, structured environment, before a violent conflict erupts. In terms of conflict management, national conferences can provide a structured institutional framework for negotiation and consensus building and can be used to try to resolve growing political demands and opposition to the current regime without resorting to repression and force.

In this section we look at the impact of national conferences in five Francophone countries.

#### *Benin*

By 1989, Benin was in a state of crisis. The economic and social unrest that broke out in 1989 became a mass movement for democratic renewal. When government repression failed to curb protest, the military-installed President Mathieu Kérékou, who had been in power for 17 years, began to make political concessions, first by appointing a prominent human rights activist and legal reformer to the government, and second by announcing a broad amnesty for political opponents. However, the demands for greater political liberalization were not assuaged. Attempting to re-capture the political initiative, Kérékou announced in December 1989 that the People’s Revolutionary Party of Benin (PRPB) would abandon its Marxist ideology and its monopoly on power by permitting the legal formation of opposition parties, and by convening a national conference to discuss changes to the Constitution.

A commission was created to prepare a “national reconciliation conference” that would include broad elements of political society to discuss the country’s future. Participants would include the government, political parties (both from the nascent opposition and the majority), trade unions, religious associations, army representatives and women’s groups. Initially, the conference was to have no more than an advisory role and was regarded by some in the opposition as a diversionary tactic. In a strict legal sense, the conference had no constitutional standing at the outset. Furthermore, none of the participants to the conference could claim a popular electoral mandate because the membership of the conference was appointed rather than elected. However, the appointment of the Archbishop of Cotonou as chairman of the conference gave it a moral legitimacy.

By the time the national conference was convened in February 1990, Kérékou had lost control of political events. He hoped that the national conference would provide an opportunity for him to retain power and enlarge his power base by opening up the political system and by making certain concessions. However, the 488 delegates soon declared themselves sovereign. Kérékou’s immediate response was to describe this decision as a “*civilian coup d’état*”. In the end, however, he accepted the decision given his weak position, the popular support enjoyed by the democratic opposition, and the uncertain support of the army. The conference agreed to allow Kérékou to retain the presidency, pending democratic presidential elections and provided that he accepted the decision of the conference; it also decided that Kérékou would not be prosecuted for any “crimes” he had committed while in office.

Subsequently, the conference suspended the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly, created the post of prime minister and appointed Nicéphore Soglo, a former World Bank official, as prime minister. A new constitution was drafted, which allowed presidential term limits and multi-party elections. The Constitution was approved by referendum in December 1990 by 96 per cent of the population. Competitive parliamentary elections were held in February 1991 and presidential elections were held in March 1991. Twenty-four political parties and 13 candidates, including Kérékou and Soglo, contested the parliamentary elections. Soglo’s coalition, the Union for the Triumph of Democratic Renewal, won the largest share of parliamentary seats and Soglo became President.

Following this decisive electoral defeat, Kérékou asked for forgiveness for abusing power during his tenure in office. The interim Government agreed not to prosecute the outgoing dictator and Kérékou responded by pledging loyalty to the new government. Ultimately, Kérékou regained power through democratic elections in 1996.

What had begun as an assembly with no clearly defined agenda and somewhat arbitrary membership found itself within the space of a few days dismantling the

### Case Study: National Conferences in Francophone Africa

long established, albeit precarious, authoritarian regime and creating the institutional framework for the democratization of the political system of Benin.

#### *Congo (Brazzaville)*

Before democratization, the Congolese political system exhibited many similarities to that of Benin. The state was ruled by a militarized single party with strong Marxist-Leninist tendencies, the Congolese Labour Party (PCT) led by Col. Denis Sassou-Nguesso.

Deterioration of the economy and mounting social unrest led to the gradual erosion of the PCT's political monopoly, and by 1990, some liberalization of the political system was already underway. In July 1990, the principle of a transition to multipartism was accepted, political prisoners were released, and by the end of the year, Marxism-Leninism was abandoned. In January 1991, in the hope of controlling and neutralizing the process of political liberalization, Sassou-Nguesso took the initiative to legalize the formation of political parties. In early 1991, he convened an all-party national conference to chart the country's political future. The national conference comprised 30 political parties and 141 associations and was convened for a three-month period starting February 1991. However, almost immediately, the conference was suspended for one month because of a dispute between the PCT and the opposition concerning the balance of representation. In March, when the conference was reconvened, the various opposition groups gained an absolute majority of both conference delegates (700 out of the 1100) and seats on the conference governing body (seven of the 11 seats). As in Benin, a Roman Catholic bishop was elected as chairman of the conference.

Although Sassou-Nguesso had insisted that the conference should be consultative, he was forced to agree to opposition demands that the conference be declared a sovereign body that did not require government approval for its decisions. Having established its authority, the conference then proceeded to dismantle the existing authoritarian political structure before the conference itself was dissolved in June 1991. Sassou-Nguesso was allowed to retain the presidency for an interim period but lost most of his powers, including control of the army, which were transferred to the prime minister who became the head of the government. The conference established a new legislature, the High Council of the Republic, which drafted a new constitution to be submitted to a referendum. It also chose a new prime minister, André Milongo, a non-party political technocrat and World Bank official.

By December 1991, the interim legislature had produced a draft constitution but, in January 1992, the transition process was threatened by a mutiny by sections of the army. Popular protests and Sassou-Nguesso's unwillingness to support the coup foiled the attempt and the new constitution was approved by referendum in March 1992, after a five-month delay.



Multi-party elections took place in July–August 1992. Although Sassou-Nguesso and the PCT contested the presidential and parliamentary elections, they were defeated in both by the new opposition party, Pascal Lissouba's Pan-African Union for Social Democracy (UPDAS). The democratic experiment in Congo, however, collapsed in 1997–1998 when Sassou-Nguesso returned to power by force.

### *Mali*

In contrast to Benin and Congo (Brazzaville), the national conference in Mali had a more limited role in the transition process and served more as a consensus-building mechanism after the overthrow of Moussa Traoré's dictatorship.

Widespread opposition to harsh conditions under Traoré's 22-year dictatorship, and mounting demands for a multi-party system, erupted in rioting in the streets of the capital Bamako and other towns during the first months of 1991. On 26 March 1991, Traoré was ousted by a military coup under the reform-minded leadership of Amadou Toumani Touré. A Transitional Committee for the Salvation of the People (CTSP), composed of 10 military and 15 anti-Traoré civilians and headed by Touré, was formed. The CTSP appointed Soumana Sacko, a highly respected senior UNDP official, as Prime Minister and a technocratic government was formed. On 5 April 1991, the CTSP authorized the formation of political parties and declared its intention to rule for a nine-month period ending with a constitutional referendum and multi-party elections. From the outset it was decided that the CTSP was to act as a transitional authority pending the establishment of democratic institutions. As part of this process, the CTSP established a national conference in July and August 1991.

The conference was composed of 1,800 delegates, 42 political parties and 100 associations. These groups discussed the precise details of the transition to democracy and the drafting of a new constitution. The principle of the transition itself had already been decided upon before the conference opened. Thus, in contrast to the two previous examples, the conference did not feel the need to assert its sovereignty and it was accepted that Touré and the CTSP would remain in power until democratic elections could be held. Unlike Kérékou and Sassou-Nguesso, Touré made it clear that he had no intention of taking part in the elections.

The national conference in Mali was not primarily an arena for managing conflict between an incumbent regime and a competing opposition. The main task of the conference was to detail the way forward from the legacy of the past regime and to draw up a new constitution that could then be approved through referendum. The new constitution for what was designated as the Third Republic confirmed the existence of a multi-party system, together with the independence of the judiciary, freedom of association, speech and assembly, and the right to strike. The constitution was approved by referendum in January 1992 with elections taking place soon after, won by Alpha Oumar Konaré of the Adema party.

## Case Study: National Conferences in Francophone Africa

### *Togo*

For more than a quarter of a century, the Togolese political system has been dominated by the daunting figure of Etienne Eyadéma, who came to power in a coup in 1967. Since 1969, Togo had officially been a single-party state with the Rally of Togolese People (RPT) as the ruling party. In reality, the RPT was a military-backed front for the highly personalized rule of Eyadéma and his Northern Kabre ethnic tribe.

Encouraged by events elsewhere in the region, popular pressure for democratization built up from early 1990. In March 1991, Eyadéma agreed to the establishment of a multi-party system but refused to concede opposition demands for a national conference. It was clear that both the enthusiasm of the opposition for a conference and the reluctance of Eyadéma were influenced by the way both sides perceived events in Benin: whilst the opposition was eager to replicate the Benin experience, Eyadéma was determined to avoid it.

In June 1991 a new coalition of opposition forces formed the Democratic Opposition Front (FOD), which included political parties and trade unions, and launched an indefinite general strike. In the short term, this pressure paid off and Eyadéma agreed to a national conference, which opened in July 1991 with 1,000 delegates and with the bishop of Atakpame as chairman. The conference soon proclaimed itself sovereign. Government representatives rejected such a proclamation and walked out of the conference. Although they returned one week later, they refused to accept the conference's self-proclaimed sovereignty: Eyadéma argued that sovereignty could only be based on universal suffrage, which the conference lacked. Although government forces were represented at and participated in the conference, they made it clear that they would not be bound by any decision taken.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Togolese national conference significantly overestimated its own real power and underestimated that of the incumbent regime. As in Benin, the conference decided to strip Eyadéma of most of his powers, establish a new interim legislature and government, dissolve the RPT and choose a human rights lawyer as interim prime minister. On August 26, Eyadéma suspended the conference and surrounded it with troops. Although he subsequently allowed the conference to proceed to its ceremonial ending on August 28, it was clear that real power remained in Eyadéma's hands. After the conference, Eyadéma used the army to harass his political opponents and maintain a firm grip on power. Although presidential elections were held in 1993, they can hardly be considered "free and fair".

### *Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire)*

Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) also had a national conference, but former President Mobutu Sesi Seko managed to control and neutralize the process, frustrating all attempts by the national conference to accomplish any genuine and substantial regime change through multi-party elections. Until 1990, when Mobutu agreed to allow a multi-party system, Zaire was in theory a single-party state

with the Popular Movement of the Revolution (MPR) the only legal party to which every citizen automatically belonged. In practice, the MPR was simply a vehicle for the one-man rule of Mobutu, resting on his control of the army and especially the Presidential Guard.

In 1990, following mass pro-democracy demonstrations, anti-government strikes and pressure from external patrons, Mobutu agreed to allow the existence of opposition parties; 130 were formed, which meant that the opposition was highly fragmented. In April 1991, he announced that a national conference would be convened. Mobutu, following widespread anti-government protest, suspended the conference even before it convened. A fragile coalition known as the Sacred Union was ultimately formed and the Zairian national conference eventually opened in August 1991. Although it remained in formal existence until December 1992 (far longer than the other West African national conferences), it was frequently suspended and clashes between government and opposition forces occurred regularly. The conference produced a draft constitution, but Mobutu remained in control, and the country became chronically unstable.

Zaire's National Sovereign Conference in 1991–1992, and the follow-up High Council of the Republic in 1993–1994, while not succeeding as an instrument of democratic transition from Mobutu's authoritarian, have contributed to the opening of political space. These forums allowed opposition forces to wield some influence, to the point where at times there were competing claims of governmental authority from the High Council and the decaying Mobutuist regime. Prominent opposition figures such as Etienne Tshisekedi emerged to challenge the regime and even to briefly share power as the democratization experiment was launched, but before it lagged. Furthermore, the process led to extensive planning for elections slated for 1997 – elections that did not take place, after civil war broke out in the country and the rebel forces of current President Laurent Kabila defeated Mobutu's military. Nevertheless, many Congolese politicians, especially opposition figures, continue to refer to the work of the national conference, and particularly its constitutional vision of a federal democracy with a high degree of devolution. This vision of a federal state could set the stage for renewed efforts to democratize the Democratic Republic of Congo under the Kabila Government.

### ***Lessons Learned***

The national conferences in Benin, Congo and Mali were relatively successful in providing an institutional mechanism for the transition to a more democratic political system. However, it would be misleading to view a national conference as some sort of institutional magic wand that can be used to produce a democratic transition. The Togolese and Zairian experience failed to produce a democratic transition, even though this was the hope of the opposition in both cases. In the case of Togo, Eyadéma succeeded in controlling and neutralizing the process, sometimes with the use of force and intimidation, while in Zaire the entire process was a farce designed to regain some international legitimacy.

## Case Study: National Conferences in Francophone Africa

### Strengths

**Forum for all sides to express view.** A national conference provides a vehicle for all sides, from the national level to the grass-roots level, to express its views, interests and political objectives. This inclusive dialogue process facilitates the building of a national consensus on fundamental rights and interests with the intention of developing a stable and democratic social order. Arriving at a national consensus is critical especially during those times when government legitimacy is fading and political institution building is required. It is interesting to note that, without exception, all 11 countries that convened national conferences recorded advances in political liberalization up to 1992.

### Weaknesses and lessons

**Can be neutralized and manipulated by incumbent.** It is very difficult to anticipate which issues will be addressed at a national conference and how participants will manage a conference. A national conference can begin with chaotic disagreement over conference membership and participation, as the government and the opposition struggle for control over conference management. Although structural factors are important, the degree of control over the process of democratic transition by autocrats and their ability to impose conditions on the process should not be ignored. The national conference process can be neutralized and manipulated by incumbent rulers.

Indeed, the Francophone African experience demonstrates that, as conferences were convened one after the other, incumbent rulers tried to control the process and gradually learned how to neutralize it. Mobutu's Zaire illustrates a case of a neutralized and manipulated national conference used more as a tactical tool than a genuine forum for negotiated political reform. Some leaders refused to countenance a national conference at all (like Biya in Cameroon or Kolingba in the Central African Republic). Others tried to twist the process to their advantage: Bongo, in Gabon, caught the opposition off-guard when he convened a national conference without warning and manipulated the proceedings. Others remonstrated and dissembled: Eyadéma withdrew his government delegation from the Togo conference after it declared itself sovereign and suspended it altogether when the conferees attempted to remove his powers over the armed forces. In South Africa, the opposition ANC walked out of CODESA in June 1992, interrupting proceedings for several months and using their participation as a bargaining tool (see South Africa Case Study). Sassou-Nguesso's experience was a sharp lesson for presidents on the importance of controlling the transition personally. Seibou, in Niger, having been stripped of all but his honorific powers within a month by the national conference, took the decision to stand down from the presidential nomination rather than face humiliation. In some instances, heads of state used the military to intimidate, incarcerate or even eliminate opponents. In Traoré's case it was counterpro-

ductive, since the Malian army refused to be tools of oppression. By contrast, Eyadéma in Togo successfully used the army to direct the “democratization process” from 1990 until his re-election in 1993.

**Timing.** Although the different national conferences reflect different socio-economic contexts, they also were shaped by the different timing strategies used by the incumbent regimes: specifically a *fast/slow approach*. The fast approach by incumbents involved the establishment of the national conference at an early stage in order both to keep the initiative and not to give enough time to the opposition to organize; the slow approach consisted in delaying the speed of the subsequent process in order to buy time to construct support and deny that support to the opposition by, for instance, trying to split the opposition or co-opting it into the majority.

**Instability.** National conferences (with the exception of South Africa and Kenya) were predominantly a Francophone African phenomenon occurring in one-party regimes (10 out of the 11 countries) and in political systems resembling the French “semi-presidential” structure. This system can eventually lead to dual conflicting forces at the top if the parliamentary majority – and the government – is not congruent with the presidential majority (see section 4.3 on “Executive Type” in this handbook). This situation, when it occurred, tended to increase the instability of the political system.

**High expectations.** In some cases, national conferences raised exaggerated expectations regarding the efficacy of such a mechanism for democratic transition, irrespective of other circumstances – as the Benin experience reveals. Nevertheless, such a vehicle or mechanism may still present an opportunity to bring about genuine political change.

**Balance of power.** Comparison of the success and failure of the national conference in providing a genuine transition to a more democratic form of rule suggests that in many cases the outcome was largely determined by the resources of real power, especially economic and military power, which opposing sides in the conflict were able to employ against each other. These varied domestic power equations counted more than the procedural similarities or dissimilarities of the various conferences.