

Benin

General statistics

Population: 10,057,975 (2009)
Area: 245,857 km²
Independence: 2 October 1958 (France)
Capital: Conakry
Government: Presidential republic
Administrative language: French
Currency: Guinean franc (GNF)
GDP: 10.516 billion
GDP per capita: 991 USD
Calling code: + 224
Motto: Travail, Justice, Solidarité (Work, Justice, Solidarity)
Anthem: Liberté (freedom)



History

The Kingdom of Dahomey formed from a mixture of ethnic groups on the Abomey plain. Historians theorize that the insecurity caused by slave trading may have contributed to mass migrations of groups to modern day Abomey, including some Aja, a Gbe people who are believed to have founded the city. Those Aja living in Abomey mingled with the local Fon people, also a Gbe people, creating a new ethnic group known as "Dahomey".

The Gbe peoples are said to be descendents of a number of migrants from Wyo. Gangnihessou (a member of an Aja dynasty that in the 16th century along with the Aja populace had come from Tado before settling and ruling separately in what is now Abomey, Allada, and Porto Novo) became the first ruler of the Dahomey Kingdom. Dahomey had a military culture aimed at securing and eventually expanding the borders of the small kingdom with its capital at modern day Abomey.

The Dahomey Kingdom was known for its culture and traditions. Young boys were often apprenticed to older soldiers, and taught the kingdom's military customs until they were old enough to join the army.^[citation needed] Dahomey was also famous for instituting an elite female soldier corps, called Ahosi or "our mothers" in the Fongbe language, and known by many Europeans as the Dahomean Amazons. This emphasis on military preparation and achievement earned Dahomey the nickname of "black Sparta" from European observers and 19th century explorers like Sir Richard Burton.

The kings of Dahomey sold their war captives into transatlantic slavery;^[6] otherwise the captives would have been killed in a ceremony known as the Annual Customs. By c.1750, the King of Dahomey was earning an estimated £250,000 per year by selling Africans to the European slave-traders.^[7] Though the leaders of Dahomey appeared initially to resist the slave trade, it flourished in the region of Dahomey for almost three hundred years (beginning in 1472 with a trade agreement with Portuguese merchants), leading to the area being named "the Slave Coast". Court protocols, which demanded that a portion of war captives from the kingdom's many battles be decapitated, decreased the number of enslaved people exported from the area. The number went from 20,000 per year at the beginning of the seventeenth century to 12,000 at the beginning of the 19th century.^[citation needed] The decline was partly due to the banning^[citation needed] of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by Britain and other countries. This decline continued until 1885, when the last Portuguese slave ship departed from the coast of the present-day Benin Republic.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Dahomey started to lose its status as the regional power. This enabled the French to take over the area in 1892. In 1899, the French included the land called French Dahomey within the French West Africa colony. In 1958, France granted autonomy to the Republic of Dahomey, and full independence as of August 1, 1960. The president who led them to independence was Hubert Maga.

For the next twelve years, ethnic strife contributed to a period of turbulence. There were several coups and regime changes, with four figures dominating — Hubert Maga, Sourou Apithy, Justin Ahomadegbé and Emile Derlin Zinsou — the first three representing a different area and ethnicity of the country. These three agreed to form a presidential council after violence marred the 1970 elections.

On May 7, 1972, Maga turned over power to Ahomadegbe. On October 26, 1972, Lt. Col. Mathieu Kérékou overthrew the ruling triumvirate, becoming president and stating that the country will not "burden itself by copying foreign ideology, and wants neither Capitalism, Communism, nor Socialism". On November 30, however, he announced that the country was officially Marxist, under the control of the Military Council of the Revolution (CNR^[citation needed]), which nationalized the petroleum industry and banks. On November 30, 1975, he renamed the country to **People's Republic of Benin**.

In 1979, the CNR was dissolved, and Kérékou arranged show elections where he was the only allowed candidate. Establishing relations with the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and Libya, he put nearly all businesses and economic activities under state control, causing foreign investment in Benin to dry up.^[8] Kérékou attempted to reorganize education, pushing his own aphorisms such as "Poverty is not a fatality", resulting in a mass exodus of teachers, along with a large number of other professionals.^[8] The regime financed itself by contracting to take nuclear waste from France.^[8]

In 1980, Kérékou converted to Islam and changed his first name to Ahmed, then changed his name back after claiming to be a born-again Christian.

In 1989, riots broke out after the regime did not have money to pay its army. The banking system collapsed. Eventually Kérékou renounced Marxism and a convention forced Kérékou to release political prisoners and arrange elections.^[8]

The name of the country was changed to the **Republic of Benin** on March 1, 1990, once the newly formed country's constitution was complete, after the abolition of Marxism–Leninism in the nation in 1989.^{[9][10]}

In 1991, Kérékou was defeated by Nicéphore Soglo, and became the first black African president to step down after an election. Kérékou returned to power after winning the 1996 vote. In 2001, a closely fought election resulted in Kérékou winning another term, after which his opponents claimed election irregularities.

Kérékou and former president Soglo did not run in the 2006 elections, as both were barred by the constitution's restrictions on age and total terms of candidates. Kérékou is widely praised^[citation needed] for making no effort to change the constitution so that he could remain in office or run again, unlike many African leaders.

On March 5, 2006, an election was held that was considered free and fair. It resulted in a runoff between Yayi Boni and Adrien Houngbédji. The runoff election was held on March 19, and was won by Boni, who assumed office on April 6. The success of the fair multi-party elections in Benin won praise internationally. Benin is considered by a few to be a model democracy in Africa, but with such a short track record that only time will tell.

Climate

Benin's climate is hot and humid. Annual rainfall in the coastal area averages 1300 mm or about 51 inches. Benin has two rainy and two dry seasons per year. The principal rainy season is from April to late July, with a shorter less intense rainy period from late September to November. The main dry season is from December to April, with a short cooler dry season from late July to early September. Temperatures and humidity are high along the tropical coast. In Cotonou, the average maximum temperature is 31 °C (87.8 °F); the minimum is 24 °C (75.2 °F).^[13]

Variations in temperature increase when moving north through a savanna and plateau toward the Sahel. A dry wind from the Sahara called the Harmattan blows from December to March, during which grass dries up, the vegetation turns reddish brown, and a veil of fine dust hangs over the country, causing the skies to be overcast. It also is the season when farmers burn brush in the fields.