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# **‘Good Muslim, bad Muslim’ in Togo: religious minority identity construction amid a sociopolitical crisis (2017–2018)\***

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## *ABSTRACT*

In Togo, the opposition movement behind the anti-government protests that broke out in 2017–2018 appears to reflect a greater role for Islam in politics. Tikpi Atchadam, leader of the Parti National Panafricain, was the preeminent figure in the movement, having built a solid grassroots base among his fellow Muslims. This article examines the unique role that Muslim leaders played in these protests, as well as the Faure Gnassingbé regime’s strategic response. The ruling party made spurious claims against Muslim opponents, associating them with a dangerous wave of political Islam. I argue that by portraying Atchadam as the leader of a radical ethnic and religious movement with Islamist goals, Faure Gnassingbé and his supporters sought to weaken this emerging challenger and deter members of the public from backing calls for political change. The strategy also helped garner support from Western countries while simultaneously driving a wedge between Muslim community leaders.

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso and attacks in the south-eastern regions of that country have raised fears of jihadism spreading to countries bordering the Gulf of Guinea. The two terrorist attacks in Côte d'Ivoire in March 2016 (Grand-Bassam) and June 2020 (Kafolo), as well as the kidnapping of two French tourists and the killing of their local guide in northern Benin have further stoked these concerns. A growing number of reports and analyses have discussed this threat (e.g., Tisseron 2019; Kwarkye *et al.* 2019; International Crisis Group 2019; *AFP* 2020). In Togo, in April 2019, the armed forces dismantled terrorist cells and arrested more than 20 suspected jihadists along the country's northern border with Burkina Faso (*RFI* 2019).

Although official statistics are not available, most estimates place the proportion of Muslims in Togo at between 10 and 20 percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> For its part, the *Union Musulmane du Togo* (UMT; Muslim Union of Togo) suggests the figure as high as 40 percent (UMT leaders 16.5.2019 int.). While researchers have shown considerable interest in Islam in predominantly Muslim countries in West Africa, Togo have remained virtually unexamined. In the 1980s, a few studies have revealed the dynamism of Islam in this country by analysing the creation of its first Muslim organizations in the early 1960s and the development of new Islamic currents in the 1970s (Delval 1980; Martin 1985). Although more recent studies have been published on the process of Islamisation (Barbier 1991; Anatoh 2019; Batchana & Ouro-Agoro 2019) and Muslims under the colonial rule (Adotevi 2011), no subsequent studies have addressed the transformations experienced by Togo's Muslim minority over the last four decades.

Historically, Muslims have played a very minor role in Togolese politics, while the Catholic Church (Bédard-St-Pierre 2006) and the thriving charismatic Pentecostal movements (Noret 2004) have exerted a growing political influence since the 2000s. However, the opposition movement

behind the anti-government protests that broke out in 2017 and continued into 2018 appears to reflect a greater role for Islam in politics. Tikpi Salifou Atchadam, leader of the *Parti National Panafricain* (PNP; Pan-African National Party), was the preeminent figure in the movement, having built a solid grassroots base in the central and northern regions of the country, including among his fellow Muslims.

This article examines the unique role that Muslim leaders played in the 2017–2018 protests, as well as the Faure Gnassingbé regime’s strategic response to the largest political opposition movement in Togo since the 1990–1991 demonstrations against former President Gnassingbé Eyadéma. The ruling party made spurious claims against Muslim opponents, associating them with a dangerous wave of political Islam. I argue that by portraying Atchadam as the leader of a radical ethnic and religious movement with Islamist goals, Faure Gnassingbé and his supporters sought to weaken this emerging challenger and deter members of the public from backing calls for political change. The strategy also helped garner support from Western countries while simultaneously driving a wedge between Muslim community leaders.

The regime’s efforts proved successful, insofar as they helped Faure Gnassingbé justify repressive measures and consolidate his power, if only temporarily, by winning a landslide victory in the 2020 presidential election and largely avoiding criticism from the international community. The sociopolitical crisis has also exacerbated tensions among the country’s Muslims, splitting the community along generational lines. UMT officials—the ‘good Muslims’—have supported the regime’s efforts to weather the crisis. This has seriously undermined the organization’s credibility with many Muslims, including young people, who are increasingly critical of the UMT’s unwavering loyalty to the state. As a result, new voices, among which young Francophone Muslim

intellectuals, have begun to claim the right to speak on behalf of the country's 'Muslim community.'

By examining how Muslims' political location as a minority in a Christian-majority setting affects their experiences, self-understandings and political stakes, this empirical case study on Togo contributes to scholarship on politics, identity, and religion in contemporary Africa. It also fills a large gap in the literature on Muslim minorities that so far, has mostly centred on Muslims in North American and European societies. The findings also provide insights into how the state—through its discourses and its management of issues related to citizenship, ethnicity, secularism, and religious pluralism—contributes to identity construction among Muslim minorities. Recent developments in Togo raise questions about the ability of Muslim elites in a minority context to mobilise symbolic resources to negotiate the terms of their subordination and their engagement in political clientelism, or to create spaces of autonomy to intervene in the public sphere and discuss issues of inclusion and exclusion, of religious tolerance, and of political participation in a secular state. This is especially relevant in a country in which the ruling regime has regularly employed 'paranoia and surveillance' to deflect opposition (Piot 2010). In particular, how has the heightened scrutiny of Muslims in the context of the 'global war on terror' (Seesemann 2007; Cesari 2010) affected the status and political engagement of these minorities?

Although President Gnassingbé may not have actually uttered phrases such as 'good Muslim' and 'bad Muslim,' his regime has nevertheless created a dichotomy between 'good' Muslim organizations (which are subservient to the state) and 'bad' ones (which are labelled 'radical' and treated as security threats). This is by no means a novel approach for political authorities in the region. For instance, German colonial policy toward Muslims in Togoland reflected two contradictory positions—one based on the 'potentiality' of 'harmless' Muslims, the other on the

‘threat of Islam’ (Weiss 2000). For their part, French colonial officials in West Africa distinguished between an accommodating ‘*Islam noir*’ (‘Black Islam’) and an ‘Arab Islam’ that was seen as subversive and threatening. They also drew contrasts between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Islamic brotherhoods (Triaud 2000). Similarly, British administrators in Northern Nigeria ‘took active steps to categorize the region’s Muslims as either “good” or “bad”’ (Reynolds 2001: 602).

More recently, several studies have shown how, in the context of the War on Terror, (neo-) authoritarian African states have been able to alleviate international pressure for democratic reforms by positioning themselves as allies in counter-terrorism to help ensure their own survival and weaken their domestic opponents. This approach is all the more significant in a context where the ‘politics of western aid and international development in general have become “securitized” and “militarized”’ since 9/11 (Fisher and Anderson 2015: 131; see also Abrahamsen 2018). Countries like Ethiopia, Uganda, Mauritania and Chad have therefore been able to attract increased support from Western states by demonstrating their reliability as partners in the fight against terrorism and as guarantors of regional stability (Whitaker 2010; Fisher 2013; Fisher & Anderson 2015). For instance, Jourde has used the concept of ‘extraversion’ (Bayart 2000) to show how the Mauritanian regime capitalised on the arrest of local opponents with alleged ties to transnational Islamist movements by portraying itself as a bastion against terrorism. As a result, it was able to secure American government support while also consolidating its machinery of repression (Jourde 2007). A similar point has been made by Pérouse de Montclos, who sees the fight against jihadism in the Sahel and French military operations in the region as ‘a key source of financial and diplomatic resources for corrupt regimes in the area’ (2020: 131), by helping to redeem or shore up authoritarian and ineffective governments.

This article is based on fieldwork in Lomé in spring 2019. Interviews were conducted with imams and preachers, as well as with leaders and activists from the country's main Islamic associations. The study also draws on a review of articles published in local and international newspapers. The first section analyses the rise of opposition politician Tikpi Atchadam and the PNP, in order to show how he disrupted the country's established geopolitical order by building an electoral base in regions seen as strongholds of the Gnassingbé family since 1967. The second section argues that the ruling regime, in its efforts to suppress the popular protests of August and September 2017, brandished the threat of Islamic terrorism to justify acts of repression and to attract sympathy from Western governments. The third and fourth sections analyse tensions within the Muslim community, tensions that the crisis has served to exacerbate. Whereas UMT officials continued to embrace their status as 'good Muslims' by resolutely supporting the regime and openly discouraging public protests, the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT; Association of Muslim Executives in Togo) broke with the community's official representatives and found itself inadvertently linked to the opposition.

#### *THE RISE OF TIKPI ATCHADAM AND THE PNP: A SHIFT IN TOGOLESE GEOPOLITICS*

Over the course of just a few weeks, Tikpi Atchadam went from virtual anonymity to becoming the public face of the Togolese opposition movement. The latter mobilised unprecedented popular protests against the rule of President Faure Gnassingbé. Atchadam was born in 1967 to a peasant family in Kparatao, a village on the outskirts of Sokodé, in central Togo. He studied law and anthropology at the University of Lomé. Atchadam was once a supporter of the *Parti Socialiste Panafricain* (Pan-African Socialist Party) and its leader, Taviu Amarin, who was assassinated in 1992. Atchadam went on to manage the youth wing of the *Parti Démocratique pour le Renouveau* (PDR; Democratic Party for Renewal), led by Zarifou Ayéva. Atchadam left the PDR in 2007,

when the party joined Faure Gnassingbé's presidential majority. After withdrawing from public life and spending some time in Europe, he founded the PNP in November 2014. A charismatic figure, Atchadam has proved himself to be an excellent speaker. He has made extensive use of WhatsApp and distributed DVD copies of his speeches in order to reach the most remote parts of the country. His meteoric rise in 2017 also received coverage from a range of Western media outlets: *TV5 Monde* (Sodji & Taoufiqi 2017), *Jeune Afrique* (d'Almeida, E. & G. Dougueli. 2017), *Le Monde* (2017a), *France 24* (Mazoué 2017), and *RFI* (Cantener 2017).

Atchadam made a splash in July 2017 by filling the 8,500-seat Agoè-Nyivé stadium in Lomé for a political rally. However, the massive demonstrations against the established regime that the PNP organised on 19 and 20 August—despite having no seats in the National Assembly at the time—are what truly marked his dramatic arrival on the political scene. The government was caught off guard by the scale of the demonstrations, which took place not only in Lomé (a traditional opposition stronghold) but also in the country's interior. In places like Sokodé, Bafilo, Mango and Dapaong, thousands of protesters showed up dressed in red, the colour of the PNP. The August protests were met with a brutal response, resulting in two deaths, more than 80 wounded, and 250 arrests (*RFI* 2017). President Faure Gnassingbé had never faced such a crisis since coming to power under chaotic circumstances in April 2005 following the sudden death of its father, President Gnassingbé Eyadéma.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the country's opposition movement showed signs of overcoming its reputation for fragmentation and disorganization, as 13 other groups joined forces with the PNP to establish C14. This coalition's demands included a return to the 1992 constitution (which limited presidential mandates to two terms), electoral reform,<sup>3</sup> and voting rights for members of the Togolese diaspora.



When the government refused to accept the opposition's demands, the demonstrations continued, and protesters began demanding the resignation of President Faure Gnassingbé. The marches held on 6 and 7 September were particularly large, with more than 100,000 people taking to the streets in Lomé and tens of thousands more following suit in other parts of the country. Over the course of two months, 12 protesters were killed (*Le Monde* 2017b). In mid-September 2017, the government attempted to take back control of the situation by announcing a set of constitutional reforms. The proposed bill accepted some opposition demands, namely a two-term limit on presidential mandates and a two-round voting system for presidential elections. However, a grandfather clause would allow the sitting president—who had already been elected in 2005, 2010, and 2015 (Seely 2011; Ahlin *et al.* 2015)—to stand for reelection in 2020 and 2025. The opposition boycotted the vote on the bill in the National Assembly, meaning the constitutional reforms could not be adopted. The demonstrations continued. Despite an attempt at mediation by ECOWAS in 2018, C14 boycotted the legislative elections of December 2018 to protest the composition of the *Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante* (CENI; Independent National Electoral Commission), and the president's refusal to definitively abandon his proposed constitutional reforms. After winning 59 of the 91 seats in the National Assembly, the ruling party was able to pass the controversial constitutional and institutional reforms in May 2019. Meanwhile, Atchadam went into exile at the end of 2017, virtually disappearing from public life. Accused of 'disturbing public order' and 'inciting hatred' for his role in the August 2017 protests, the opposition leader has been in hiding ever since.

The rise of Atchadam and the PNP completely transformed Togo's political landscape. Historically, the Gnassingbé family's power has been concentrated in the northern part of the country. Eyadéma had been implicated in the assassination of the country's first president,

Sylvanus Olympio (1960–1963), a Mina from the southern Togo.<sup>4</sup> Eyadéma then took power following a 1967 coup, claiming to have ‘saved’ the country from an ethnically unbalanced government in which the Ewé and Mina people from southern Togo were overrepresented. Although the Eyadéma regime and the *Rassemblement du Peuple Togolais* (RPT; Rally of the Togolese People) did have supporters in southern Togo, most top government and military officials were Kabyé—the Gnassingbé ethnic group—from the north (Heilbrunn 1996, 2019; Seely 2005; Osei 2018: 1465–67). This situation tended to create a north-south divide, as well as an ethnic divide between the Kabyé and the Ewé (Toulabor 1999). To this day, supporters of the current regime—the governing party was renamed the *Union pour la République* (UNIR; Union for the Republic) in 2012—are concentrated in northern Togo. By contrast, opposition parties—especially the *Alliance Nationale pour le Changement* (ANC; National Alliance for Change), led by Jean-Pierre Fabre, an Ewé—enjoy stronger support in the country’s south, which is seen as an opposition stronghold (Osei & Akinocho 2018: 338–39).

Nevertheless, under the leadership of Atchadam, the PNP managed to build a strong popular base in central and northern Togo, areas traditionally seen as regime strongholds. Sokodé, the country’s second-largest city, has become a bastion of the PNP. The city’s population is mainly Tem (or Kotokoli). The Tem, along with the Tchamba, are the ethnic groups with the largest proportion of Muslims in Togo. In addition to Sokodé, the cities of Bafilo and Mango, which also have large Muslim population, have become bastions of the opposition, and have faced fierce repression. Given Atchadam’s popularity among the Tem and Muslims, the regime was quick to criticise the PNP’s ‘regionalism’ and ‘tribalism.’ But above all, it focused on the so-called Islamist threat.

*THE PNP AS A SECTARIAN POLITICAL PARTY: USING THE FEAR OF ISLAMISM TO DETER PROTESTS*

The Faure Gnassingbé regime cynically manipulated the growing fear of Islamic terrorism prevailing since 2015, when Boko Haram violence began spreading beyond the Lake Chad Region. In 2016, the UMT launched a national anti-terror campaign, in response to the rise of Salafism among youth (*Togo Presse* 2016). The eloquent title used by the Republic of Togo news portal for an article on the initiative—‘Neither Wahhabi nor Salafi, but Togolese’—reinforced a dichotomy between a ‘local’ and ‘peaceful’ Togolese brand of Islam, and ‘foreign’ and ‘radical’ sources of Salafism (*République togolaise* 2016). Hoping to nip the protest movement in the bud after the massive demonstrations of August 2017, the regime began portraying the PNP as an ethnic and religious movement with Salafist, Islamist, and even jihadist goals. The party was also accused of receiving its funding from a shady Gulf-based network. Based on these accusations, which Atchadam regularly denied, the government sought to discourage people from joining the PNP-led popular movement for political change. The regime also tried to justify the introduction of new and harsh security measures, under the pretext of fighting against terrorism. In doing so, the regime sought indulgence from Western countries, especially France, that had been pushing for democratic reforms.

Indeed, since taking power, Faure Gnassingbé has aimed to bolster the country’s image abroad, skillfully portraying his government in a more favourable light. Eager to present itself as a model regime in the region, Togo has effectively made itself into much less of a pariah in recent years. For instance, between 2009 and 2011, the *Commission Vérité, Justice et Réconciliation* (CVJR; Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation Commission) pursued national reconciliation by investigating crimes committed under Eyadéma and during the crisis of 2005 (Ahadzi-Nonou 2014; Sarkin & Davi 2017). The Togolese navy has played an active role in the fight against piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and the country dispatched a contingent of soldiers to the United Nations Multidimensional

Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013. Togo has shown itself to be such a loyal ally of France that Faure Gnassingbé was invited to visit French President François Hollande at the Élysée Palace in November 2013 (*RFI* 2013). In October 2016, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls kicked off his West African tour in Togo. It was the first visit by such a high-ranking French official since 1989. Valls met with President Faure Gnassingbé and stated that ‘Togo is changing, and it is changing for the better. France believes in Togo and France wants a stronger relationship with Togo’ (*RFI* 2016).

In September 2017, Payadowa BoukpeSSI, Minister for Territorial Administration, Decentralization, and Local Government, stated in an interview with *Jeune Afrique* that, ‘in recent weeks, we have been witnessing the appearance of new types of political discourse that tend to play on religious feeling and promote sectarianism’ (Konan 2017). Atchadam has also faced criticism for his extensive financial resources and his strong support within the Togolese diaspora, especially in Germany. Colonel Yark Damehame, Minister of Security and Emergency Preparedness, told the French newspaper *Le Monde* that Atchadam ‘has yet to do anything illegal, but he is a source of concern.’ Damehame also noted that ‘one of [Atchadam’s] financial backers visited Saudi Arabia,’ but failed to provide any evidence to support his allegations, which were clearly intended to evoke an Islamist threat (Châtelot 2017).

Djobo Mohamed Alassani, a popular Sokodé imam who also goes by the name of Alfa Hassan Mollah, was arrested on 16 October 2017. A regional coordinator for the PNP and one of Atchadam’s closest advisers, he has long been known for his harsh criticism of the regime. His arrest triggered a wave of violence between the residents of Sokodé and security forces. Many buildings were set on fire, including the local headquarters of the UNIR and houses belonging to members of the ruling party. Clashes between protesters and security forces led to the deaths of

two civilians, and of two soldiers, who were lynched by a crowd during the night of 16-17 October (Amnesty International 2017).

According to an official statement issued by the government, ‘The arrest was made in response to incitement and repeated calls for violence, murder, and sedition on the part of this imam. [...] on Friday, 13 October 2017, Imam Djobo Mohamed Alassani’s sermon included calls for the murder of Togolese soldiers and citizens’ (d’Almeida 2017). The same statement described the popular protests that followed the imam’s arrest as ‘terrorist’ actions that ‘have the effect of destabilising state institutions and sowing terror among the population.’

Imam Alfa Abdoul Wahid of Bafilo, also known for his connections to the PNP, was arrested on 22 October. C14 had demanded the release of both imams as a condition for participating in political talks. They were ultimately released on 8 December 2017. Nevertheless, the government continued to accuse the PNP and its leader of extremism in the national and international media. The Togolese president himself did so unequivocally in an interview with *Jeune Afrique* in December 2017:

We find ourselves in West Africa, which is responding to a terrorist crisis that extends from Mali to Lake Chad. When, during demonstrations, we see people in Togo brandishing Kalashnikovs, when we hear imams calling for riots in certain mosques, when the security forces are compelled to recite verses from the Qur’an to save their lives, we take notice. Especially when the party behind these protests appeared very suddenly and when its sources of funding are unclear. [...]

**Question:** You seem to perceive, among the most hard-line opponents of your government, namely the PNP and Tikpi Atchadam, the influence of radical Islamist networks. On what do you base this theory?

I consider this theory to be reasonable. There is evidence to support it. The Sokodé region, the cradle of the PNP, is heavily Muslim. Weapons are circulating. A handful of radical imams are trying to inflame tensions by calling for jihad against the army and military families. Two of them were arrested but have since been released under court supervision as part of ongoing proceedings (Soudan 2017).

In January 2018, a government report on the progress of an investigation into ‘the lynching and murder of two soldiers in Sokodé’ stressed that a third soldier ‘had been saved because of his Muslim faith. His executioners had asked him to recite a surah in exchange for their mercy’ (*République togolaise* 2018a). Colonel Ouro-Koura Agadazi was Minister of Agriculture, Livestock, and Water at the time. His home in Sokodé was being guarded by the two soldiers killed following the imam’s arrest. While speaking on a local radio station, he accused Atchadam of having the same ‘*modus operandi* as West African jihadist movements’:

The virulent language used by certain imams who support the PNP, in sermons preached at mosques that aim to recruit and indoctrinate certain young people from working-class neighbourhoods by inciting them to commit murder; the destruction of public buildings to create an administrative vacuum in certain Togolese cities (Sokodé, Bafilo, and Mango) with an aim to instituting Islamic law [...] I can assure you that the risk of jihadist networks establishing themselves in Sokodé was very real’ (*Ici Lomé* 2018).

The ‘threat’ of jihadism was invoked by the government to justify a crackdown on rights and freedoms. On 7 December 2018, the National Assembly adopted a law on cybersecurity which, according to Amnesty International (2018), ‘significantly restricts freedom of expression’ and ‘contains vague terrorism and treason related provisions’ that ‘could easily be misused against

whistle-blowers and others reporting on human rights abuses.’ More recently, on 7 August 2019, the National Assembly passed a new law on national security severely limiting freedom of assembly in Togo. According to the authorities, the measure was justified by ‘security concerns.’ Legislators also amended an old law to allow the regime to strengthen the country’s security apparatus and better anticipate terrorist threats (*Jeune Afrique* 2019). According to Minister Boukpassi, the amendment ‘was designed to allow the government to adapt the legal system to new realities, including terrorist threats across West Africa and right on our country’s doorstep’ (VOA 2019). As Bertolt (2018) has shown in his work on Cameroon in the context of the fight against Boko Haram, the enactment of anti-terrorist laws also provides central authorities with a tool for legally subduing potential political adversaries. Whereas supporters of Atchadam and the PNP have been cast as a threat, the leaders of the UMT have been celebrated as ‘good Muslims’ for their steadfast loyalty to the government.

*‘GOOD MUSLIMS’: THE UMT AND ITS LOYALTY TO THE TOGOLESE REGIME*

On 20 October 2017, a few days after an imam was arrested in Sokodé, Prime Minister Komi Sélom Klassou met with UMT officials to discuss the country’s social and political situation. Seeking to reassure Togolese Muslims, he explained that ‘the Muslim community will in no way be profiled or targeted.’ He added that Muslims, like members of other faiths, had a positive role to play in ensuring civil peace (*République togolaise* 2017). In November, a similar gathering was organised in Dapaong, with several ministers and UMT leaders participating (Ametowoyona 2017). In fact, throughout the entire crisis, the state regularly showcased the UMT and its officials, the same ‘good Muslims’ that Atchadam dismissed as being ‘the UNIR’s footsoldiers’ and ‘vassals of the regime’ (*iciLomé Togo* 2017).

Since the UMT's creation in 1963, the Togolese state has treated it as the sole official representative of the country's Muslim community. In turn, the organization has consistently aligned itself closely with the regime. Over the years, much of the UMT leadership has been made up of well-connected former ministers, and politicians. The organization's first president, El hadj Safiou Djibril (1963–1970), had previously served as a member and later vice-speaker of the National Assembly. His successor, Mama Fousséni (1970–1972), was a Kotokoli from Sokodé who held several cabinet portfolios under President Nicolas Grunitzky (1963–1967). Fousséni was also appointed honorary president of the UMT from 1972 to 1983. Under the Eyadéma regime, he worked in the RPT's policy office and served in cabinet (Alfa Malam Saleh 22.5.2019 int.).

Indeed, Eyadéma could always count on UMT officials to show unwavering support for his regime and to organise prayers for it to remain in power (e.g., *Togo Presse* 1971). Togolese authorities have used the UMT to develop a state-sponsored Islam. In fact, the organization has virtually become a branch of the ruling party. The regime has therefore structured Muslim religious life in the country by regularly intervening in the UMT's internal disputes, with the aim of ensuring the organization remains politically impotent and steadfastly loyal (e.g., *Togo Presse* 1976).

Faure Gnassingbé's regime has pursued the same approach with the UMT. The organization's current president, Inoussa Bouraïma, took over following Ahmed Têtou's death in 2007. Handpicked by Eyadéma (Imam 20.5.2019 int.), Bouraïma has strong ties to the RPT/UNIR. Born in Sokodé in 1945, he holds a PhD in ecology from a French university. He began teaching at the Université de Lomé in 1975 and retired in 2006. He went on to serve as Minister of Environment and Tourism (1991) and later Minister of Defense (1992–1994) under Eyadéma. Bouraïma unsuccessfully ran as an RPT candidate in the 1994 legislative elections. In 1997, he joined the UMT's Advisory Council. He was appointed vice-president of the organization in 2004.



The regime's successful efforts to co-opt Muslim elites and secure their political support have primarily been focused on the UMT's powerful Advisory Council. Indeed, several barons of the regime, some of whom previously served under Eyadéma, sit on this body: Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, a former speaker of the National Assembly (2000–2005); Barry Moussa Barqué, who held various cabinet posts between 1979 and 1999, and who has served as a special advisor to the president since 1999; Mohamed Atcha Titikpina, who commanded the Presidential Guard Commando Regiment under Eyadéma and who has served as both Minister of Security and Emergency Preparedness (2006–2010) and Chief of Staff of the Togolese Armed Forces (2010–2013). Tikipina is currently the managing president of Hajj House in Lomé.

It should therefore be no surprise that the UMT regularly beseeches Allah to intervene on behalf of the country's political authorities. As one Togolese Muslim explained: 'When the current regime asks for prayers, the UMT is happy to comply. But when the opposition makes such a request, things aren't so straightforward' (ACMT activist 15.5.2019 int.). For instance, in 2012, the organisers of an event commemorating the October 5 movement<sup>5</sup> asked for permission to hold a Muslim prayer at Lomé's central mosque (*Le Rendez-Vous* 2012). The request, made by the *Collectif Sauvons le Togo* (Save Togo Collective, a coalition of civil society organizations and political parties) and the *Coalition Arc-en-Ciel* (Rainbow Coalition, made up of opposition political parties), was ultimately refused.

When the sociopolitical crisis broke out in August 2017, the *Conférence des Évêques du Togo* (CET; Conference of Bishops of Togo) was the first religious organization to issue an official statement on the situation in the country. Released on September 17, the 'Prayer and Statement of the Conference of Bishops of Togo in Support of Reform' reflected the Catholic Church's active engagement in the country's sociopolitical debates since the 1990s. Over the years, the Church has

chaired various commissions<sup>6</sup> and released pastoral letters that have sometimes been very critical of Togo's political leaders, such as the statements released during the 2005 elections (Conférence des Evêques du Togo 2015) and on the 56<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country's independence (Conférence des Evêques du Togo 2016). In the 2017 document, the CET expressed its 'deep concern over the violent measures taken by law enforcement and the security services against the public in response to the recent demonstrations.' It called on Togolese political authorities 'to urgently carry out the reforms requested by the people in accordance with the 1992 constitution' (Conférence des Evêques du Togo 2017).

Meanwhile, behind their facade of political neutrality, UMT leaders primarily worked to legitimise the regime by suppressing any opposition by Muslims to the Gnassingbé government. Instead of following the lead of the CET by lending its support to the public outcry against the regime's democratic shortcomings and authoritarian tendencies, UMT officials repeatedly appealed for calm. In his Eid al-Adha address on 1 September, Inoussa Bouraïma reaffirmed the support of Muslims for the head of state, who was hailed as being responsible for building the Hajj House that made it easier to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca (*Togomatin* 2017). A few days after the release of the CET's statement, the UMT made its own official declaration on 19 September. Instead of taking a stand in favour of the reforms demanded by protesters, Bouraïma publicly called on Muslims and their fellow Togolese citizens to keep the peace:

As a Muslim and as a citizen, it is important to help keep the peace [...] As Chapter 4, Verse 59 says: 'O ye who believe! Obey Allah, and obey the Messenger, and those charged with authority among you.' According to the Prophet Muhammad [...] all believers must listen and obey, both in what they love and what they detest [...] Our duty as Togolese is to work for peace and to preserve that peace [...] We call on all Togolese

to be patient [...] Citizens must therefore listen to those in power and obey them. At most, citizens should provide advice to their rulers in a gentle and well-mannered way [...] (*La Gazette du Togo* 2017).

Although the UMT did not issue any official statements in response to the arrest of the Sokodé imam, its officials did provide me with their perspective on the situation (UMT leaders 16.5.2019 int.). The Chairman of the UMT's Education Committee explained that the action was 'not taken against Islam,' but rather 'against the individual.' The imam in question 'had abandoned his religious duties and lapsed into politics, making statements that were unbecoming an imam [...] by inciting rebellion, civil war.' UMT Vice-President accused the arrested imam of 'acting outside the ethics of the imamate.' Bouraïma added that 'one does not insult the authorities [...] in a mosque during Friday prayers.'

UMT officials would continue to openly support the regime and to avoid showing any support for social demands. They adopted a posture of engaged withdrawal, shoring up the established regime by calling on the faithful to refrain from protesting and to maintain order and peace. In an Eid al-Adha address given in August 2018, shortly after several mosques had been desecrated on the outskirts of the capital,<sup>7</sup> Bouraïma reaffirmed the attachment of Muslims for President Gnassingbé's efforts to restore social peace. He also reminded the faithful that being a believer 'means respecting your parents, the head of your family, the leader of your neighbourhood, the chief of your village... it means respecting your local elected official, the people's representative. This is what makes a good believer, a true Muslim' (*République togolaise* 2018b). In October 2019, once again proclaiming his fondness for Chapter 4, Verse 59 of the Qur'an, Inoussa Bouraïma reminded the faithful that 'a true believer does not rebel against the established authorities. He has a responsibility to respect the hierarchy' (*La France au Togo* 2019).

The UMT maintained its position throughout the crisis and despite growing public anger with the regime, including among a significant proportion of Muslims. This situation only served to further delegitimise the official representatives of the community in the eyes of many Muslims. As a result, young Francophone Muslim intellectuals sought to participate more directly in national debates.

*'BAD MUSLIMS': THE ACMT IN THE POLITICAL ARENA*

In October 2019, Bouraïma asserted that his 'title as the top official of the Executive Committee of [the UMT] makes me the *de facto* religious leader of the entire Muslim community' (*La France au Togo* 2019). However, this status was increasingly being contested. To begin with, many Togolese Muslims deplored the seemingly never-ending 'interim' leadership of the organization's sitting president. Indeed, the UMT has yet to hold a congress to elect new officials since the death of Bouraïma's predecessor in 2007. Furthermore, a growing number of Muslims no longer believed that the UMT accurately reflected interests the community. They also condemned its rather obvious bias in favour of the existing regime. According to one imam in Lomé, the UMT as an organization 'is much more political than religious [...] so much so that Muslims do not identify with it' (Imam 14.5.2019 int.). For his part, another popular imam from Lomé asserted that 'the UMT is no longer capable of making independent statements' (Latif Mako 15.5.2019 int.) due to political influence. Yet another Muslim I spoke with lamented the fact that 'the organization is rather politicised.' He emphasised that 'there is really a gulf, if not an abyss between the community and the UMT leadership. Very few people listen to the UMT or take what it says into account' (ACMT leaders 19.5.2019 int.).

Meanwhile, a new generation of young Francophone Muslim leaders affiliated with the ACMT has emphasised the importance of engaging in public life as Muslim citizens. Several studies have underscored the growing role of Muslims who attended secular French-language schools and who

are pursuing careers in the civil service or the official economic sector. Such individuals have become increasingly active in the public sphere, taking positions on sociopolitical issues across West Africa (Miran-Guyon & Oyewolé 2015; Sounaye 2015; Madore 2020). Yaya Assadou Kolani, who presided over the ACMT from 2010 to 2018, is an eloquent example. Born to a father who had converted to Islam, Kolani became an activist with the *Association des Élèves et Étudiants Musulmans au Togo* (AEEMT; Association of Muslim Students in Togo) while studying anthropology at the Université de Lomé in 1997. Established in 1996, the AEEMT aims to ‘contribute to the better practice of Islam in schools, universities, professional training centres and university residences, whether public or private, secular or religious, across the entire country’ (AEEMT 2019). Kolani served as president of the AEEMT from 2002 to 2004, before joining the newly created ACMT in August 2006. The ACMT was founded by former members of the AEEMT, who had since completed their studies and entered the labour market, and who felt the need to create their own organization (ACMT leaders 19.5.2019 int.). From 2006 to 2010, Kolani held various positions with the ACMT, before being named the organization’s president in 2010. He stepped down in 2018, after serving two terms (Yaya Assadou Kolani 15.5.2019 int.).

Under Kolani’s leadership, the ACMT established the *Collectif des Associations Islamiques du Togo* (CAIT; Collective of Islamic Associations of Togo) in 2013. A conference on the revitalization of the UMT led to the signing of a petition, in the presence of the media, calling for a congress of the UMT to elect new officials. Once preparations were finally underway for a new congress, ACMT members served on the commissions responsible for revising the organization’s statutes (Mamadou Alioune Diouf 13.5.2019 int.). Kolani explained how the members of the UMT’s Advisory Board, ‘largely composed of former barons of the regime,’ cancelled the congress at the last minute, having ‘recognised the danger posed by the ideas being introduced into the

statutes.’ The UMT made it clear to ACMT leaders that ‘everyone simply needed to mind their own business’ (Yaya Assadou Kolani 15.5.2019 int.). When I asked about the lack of a new congress, one UMT officials explained that, ‘when a mandate coincides with major political difficulties, it is appropriate to extend the mandate.’ The UMT leadership also complained that ‘young people do not understand the major difficulties preventing us from organising elections,’ and that they are ‘in a rush,’ ‘politicised,’ and ‘manipulated’ (UMT leaders 16.5.2019 int.).

It was only after the crisis erupted in August 2017 that Kolani’s leadership truly allowed the ACMT to stake out its place in the public sphere. According to Kolani, the association’s leadership was initially very hesitant to start making official statements on the sociopolitical situation. The ACMT had ‘always been careful to allow the [UMT] to speak on behalf of the community’ and wanted to avoid publicly exposing divisions within Muslims (Yaya Assadou Kolani 15.5.2019 int.). Nevertheless, one ACMT official explained how, as Muslims and members of a ‘civil society organization,’ ‘we cannot remain silent when the public interest is threatened’ (ACMT leaders 19.5.2019 int.). The ACMT ultimately released a series of public statements throughout the crisis. The first, titled ‘Declaration on the Current Social and Political Situation in Togo,’ was issued on 10 October 2017 and picked up by the press. In addition to denouncing ‘violence committed by the defence and security forces against members of the public’ who had ‘simply exercised a basic right’ by participating in protest marches, the document stated that ‘The situation demands that we clearly condemn the ways that Islam has been manipulated to political ends in what is a fundamentally political conflict in need of a political solution’ (Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo 2017). In collaboration with the CAIT, the ACMT also held a press conference on 24 October. According to the spokesperson, speaking to the media had become necessary because ‘the crisis was taking on an anti-religious and, above all, anti-Muslim dimension’ (CAIT member 19.5.2019

int.). The CAIT also called on the president to release the two incarcerated imams, while joining the ACMT in denouncing the tendency to conflate religion with politics: ‘The crisis in Togo should not be mistaken for jihadism’ (*Togo Site* 2017).

A resurgence of violence coincided with the approach of the December 2018 legislative elections. At least four people were killed in Lomé and Sokodé on 8 and 10 December, at opposition-led demonstrations demanding a stop to the campaign. On December 20, the ACMT called for elections to be postponed ‘in the interest of all Togolese people.’ Covered by *RFI* (2018a), the statement echoed those already made by the Catholic Church on 15 November (Conférence des Evêques du Togo 2018) and by the *Églises Évangéliques Presbytérienne et Méthodiste du Togo* (EEPT; Evangelical Presbyterian and Methodist Churches of Togo) (*RFI* 2018b) earlier in December: ‘[...] Remaining silent in the face of such a situation would be tantamount to approval. [...] We cannot remain silent, either before God or before history. [...] all parties must agree to return to the negotiating table and commit to reaching an agreement that can bring an end to this crisis, so that free and fair elections can be organised once calm has returned’ (Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo 2018).

Meanwhile, the ACMT joined the *Forces vives ‘Espérance pour le Togo’* (Lifeblood ‘Hope for Togo’) movement, led by Father Pierre Marie Chanel Affognon of the Catholic Church. Created in September 2018, this organization brought together representatives of different religions with the aim of helping resolve the Togolese crisis. The movement sent a delegation, which included Kolani from the ACMT, to meet with Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo, one of the ECOWAS mediators, in Accra on 15 December (Zakari 2018). The UMT had yet to comment on the legislative elections, and none of its officials attended the meeting.

These various public actions by the ACMT did not go unnoticed. According to Kolani, they further soured relations with the UMT: ‘It was as if we were in the process of outmanoeuvring them.’ In response, ‘they accused us of all sorts of political misdeeds’ (Yaya Assadou Kolani 15.5.2019 int.). Another ACMT official explained how some activists distanced themselves from the organization once it began issuing public statements, out of fear of being associated with the opposition: ‘Our system is both dynastic and democratised. This makes it difficult for [Muslim] executives who work within the [presidential] camp and belong to the ACMT [...] They’re somewhat reluctant to continue openly participating in activities because for them, their livelihood is at stake’ (ACMT leaders 19.5.2019 int.).

As one imam in Lomé pointed out, the state had become suspicious of the ACMT, associating it with the opposition, because ‘people here have a “you’re either with us or against us” mentality. [...] There is no middle ground. [...] No one can be neutral. [...] For the majority [the government], being neutral means supporting the opposition. It’s hypocrisy’ (Imam 14.5.2019 int.). These remarks provide a good summary of the dilemma faced by members of Togo’s Muslim minority when they take positions that run contrary to those of the existing regime and of the community’s ‘official’ representatives. Take the example of Latif Mako, a well-known imam from Lomé. In October 2017, he gave a Friday sermon calling on ‘all Togolese people’ to respect Allah’s will by ‘working for change.’ He argued that the president had to do his part by accepting reforms (Bill Emile Davolk 2017). In the ensuing backlash, Mako received death threats and had tear gas fired at his home (Latif Mako 15.5.2019 int.). Another imam from Lomé explained that he had to be careful about what he said in his sermons, because ‘in the mosques, some of our brothers are working as informers’ and may report or even ‘misrepresent’ the message to the authorities. In his opinion, that was what led to the imam being arrested in Sokodé (Imam 20.5.2019 int.).



## *CONCLUSION*

Tikpi Atchadam was virtually unknown before 2017. Then, within the span of a few weeks, he became the rising star of Togo's opposition. The latter was calling for a return to the 1992 constitution and seeking to prevent President Faure Gnassingbé from running in 2020. Atchadam succeeded briefly in uniting the opposition parties and in organising large demonstrations in Lomé. However, his most dramatic political impact involved his ability to mobilise supporters in the country's interior (including in Sokodé, Bafilo, Mango and Dapaong), long considered a stronghold of the Gnassingbé family. Meanwhile, the ruling regime capitalised on Atchadam's popularity with his fellow Muslims, playing on people's fear of Islam to deter them from supporting the opposition. As Waal and Salam have pointed out, the War on Terror has created a situation where labels like 'terrorist' and 'jihad' are used as 'common currency, often with little reference to political realities, and with the intent of closing down the prospects for political dialogue and compromise' (2004: 247). In this way, the regime responded to the large-scale protests of August and September 2017 by employing a discursive strategy that divides Muslims into two distinct groups: so-called radical Islamists (those associated with the PNP) and moderate Muslims (those represented by the UMT). By regularly using terms such as 'destabilization,' 'jihad,' 'Islamism,' and 'terrorism', the regime sought not only to discredit the opposition, but also to establish its own legitimacy among Western countries.

Although it is difficult to assess just how effective this political tactic has been, President Gnassingbé nevertheless remains firmly in control of the country. The opposition movement has run out of steam, and the C14 unity shattered. In June 2019, UNIR gained 65% of municipal councillor seats in the first local elections in 32 years. Atchadam, still in exile, did not run for the 2020 presidential election while Gnassingbé has been re-elected for a fourth term in a landslide

victory (70,54% of votes in first round). His closest rival, Agbéyomé Kodjo (19,46%), who had received the support of Philippe Fanoko Kossi Kpodzro, Bishop Emeritus of Lomé, has refused to recognise the results accusing the ruling party of widespread electoral fraud. In July 2020, Togolese justice officials issued an international arrest warrant for the opposition politician, who has since gone into hiding.

Gnassingbé has been able to brush aside muted criticism from Western countries. Even if the U.S. Embassy in Togo has expressed concerns ‘about the limited observation efforts, including the CENI’s disappointing decision to revoke credentials from a U.S.-financed, neutral civil society organization to observe the electoral process’ in a press release (U.S. Embassy in Togo 2020), the Togolese regime has not faced any international sanctions. France, Germany, and the European Union were all initially quiet, waiting three weeks after the Constitutional Court confirmed the election results to send their congratulatory messages to the Togolese president. In a letter dated March 25, Emmanuel Macron sent Faure Gnassingbé ‘best wishes’ on the latter’s success, stating that, ‘Togo faces new challenges from a terrorist threat originating in the Sahel,’ and that, ‘This situation, which Togo has thus far been able to manage, makes it even more essential to pursue policies not only to promote national unity, but also to consolidate democratic institutions.’ The French president went on to ‘hail the progress made on economic governance and a business-friendly environment’ (*RFI* 2020).

Throughout the crisis in 2017–2018, while representatives of the Catholic Church in Togo have been highly critical of the state and shown support for reforms demanded by the opposition, UMT official have instead used their status as religious leaders to help defuse the protest movement. The UMT’s subservience to the regime and its role as a communication channel between the state and the Muslim community has only served to exacerbate the crisis of legitimacy face by the ‘official’

representatives of Muslims. A younger generation of Francophone Muslims, supportive of democratic reforms and represented by the ACMT, began to actively participate in public debates at a time when many Muslims felt marginalised because of how the established regime was seeking to exploit anti-Islamic sentiment. The traditional ‘political neutrality’ of all Togolese Muslim elites appear to be a thing of the past. Recent developments in Togo also illustrate the difficulties faced by Muslim minorities when participating in sociopolitical debates in a context where the political engagement of Muslims is equated with the rise of Islamism.

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#### NOTES

1. The last official census was conducted in 1981. Muslims accounted for 12.1% of the population, compared to 58.9% for animists and 28.3% for Christians. See Direction de la statistique, division de la démographie (1981).

2. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, ‘about 400 to 500 people were slain and thousands were wounded in Togo after the sudden death of its long-time president [Eyadéma] in February and disputed presidential elections in April.’ See *UN News* (2005).

3. In 2002, a constitutional amendment replaced the country’s two-round system of presidential elections, endorsed by the *Conférence nationale souveraine* (Sovereign National Conference) in 1992, with a one-round first-past-the-system.

4. For a historical analysis of what was West Africa’s first coup, see Skinner (2020).

5. An unprecedented wave of student protests, calling for an end to Eyadéma’s dictatorship, began on 5 October 1990. Demonstrations shook the country for several months, leading to opening of the *Conférence nationale souveraine* in July 1991.

6. In 1991, Philippe Fanoko Kossi Kpodzro, Bishop Emeritus of Lomé, chaired the executive committee of the *Conférence nationale souveraine*. He gave a highly memorable speech at the opening of the conference on 15 July 1991. For his part, Monseigneur Nicodème Barrigah-Benissan chaired the work of the CVJR (2009–2011).

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7. Over the course of two weeks, between late July and early August 2018, four mosques were vandalised: the interiors of the buildings were ransacked, and prayer rugs and Qur'ans were torn up or burned. A church in the northern suburbs of Lomé was also desecrated in September.