



Centre for Democracy & Development  
Centre pour la démocratie et le développement

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# BENIN'S 2026 VOTE

**Insecurity, Political Re-engineering, and  
the Erosion of Competition**



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**CDD-West Africa Report**

# **BENIN'S 2026 VOTE**

## **Insecurity, Political Re-engineering, and the Erosion of Competition**

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# Background:

## Benin's Democratic Trajectory

On the night of April 13, 2026, the head of Benin's electoral commission (CENA), Sacca Lafia, announced the result of the country's presidential election. Finance Minister Romuald Wadagni, the candidate of the alliance between the Progressive Union Renewal (UPR) and the Republican Bloc (BR) and the outgoing president's chosen successor, was declared the winner, having polled 94.05% of the total vote.<sup>1</sup> His opponent, a minor opposition figure, Paul Hounkpè, had received the remaining 5.95%. Before the final announcement, Hounkpè, who doubles as the leader of the small opposition party Forces Cauris pour un Bénin émergent (FCBE), had already conceded and congratulated Wadagni.

Ninety-four percent is particularly striking in a formal competitive election. With approximately 7.9 million eligible voters and a turnout of 58.75%, such a margin would expectedly demand scrutiny. Outcomes of this scale are typically associated with referendums in authoritarian systems or elections where opposition parties are banned, fragmented, or systematically weakened. In Benin's case, however, the explanation is more layered. The result points less to outright electoral fraud and more to a political environment shaped over time to eliminate meaningful competition.

Understanding how Benin arrived at this outcome requires a closer examination of the political and institutional developments preceding the election, particularly the processes governing candidate nomination. For over two decades, Benin stood out in West Africa for its record of peaceful democratic transitions, having achieved four successive transfers of power in a region often marked by coups, constitutional manipulation, and instability. This reputation earned it recognition as a model democracy: a relatively small and economically constrained country that nonetheless sustained multiparty competition.


This trajectory began to shift following the election of Patrice Talon in 2016.<sup>2</sup> A technocrat who campaigned on promises of modernisation, economic reform, and improved governance, Talon presided over a period of economic growth, infrastructure expansion, and a significant increase in Benin's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Yet, alongside these gains, the framework of political competition was gradually reengineered. Constitutional and electoral reforms introduced stricter requirements for candidate eligibility, effectively raising barriers to entry. For example, parliamentary candidates were required to secure endorsements from 15% of sitting legislators, while presidential aspirants needed backing from mayors, a threshold that proved nearly unattainable for opposition figures, particularly given the ruling coalition's dominance in key institutions.<sup>3</sup> To cap it all, President Talon orchestrated judicial capture by using presidential appointments to remake the Constitutional Court into a compliant body.

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<sup>1</sup> Deutsche Welle. "Benin's Finance Minister Wins Presidential Election with 94%." December 2025. <https://www.dw.com/en/benins-finance-minister-wins-presidential-election-with-94/a-76769500>

<sup>2</sup> Al Jazeera. "Benin's Foiled Coup: How It Unfolded and What We Know." December 8, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/12/8/benins-foiled-coup-how-it-unfolded-and-what-we-know>

<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera. "Benin's Real Coup Already Happened Under President Talon." Al Jazeera, December 9, 2025. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/12/9/benins-real-coup-already-happened-under-president-talon>



By 2026, critics such as Brookings, amongst other institutions, viewed Benin as having shifted sharply away from democracy.<sup>4</sup> Once lauded as a forerunner of Africa's democratic reforms in the 1990s, the country experienced a steep democratic decline since 2016. This decline is measured through the repression of the media through disinformation laws, the use of the courts to target opposition parties, and amendments to electoral laws that reduce the scope of contestation at local, parliamentary, and presidential elections. In December 2020, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights sounded the alarm and denounced about ten human rights violations in Benin, including the right to life, the right not to be subjected to torture, and the right to respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.<sup>5</sup>

The 2026 presidential election was the final product of that decade of political 'reengineering.'<sup>6</sup> The main opposition party, "*Les Démocrates*" (the Democrats), was rejected by the electoral commission, a move consolidated by the constitutional court, which barred the party's leader and candidate, Renaud Agbodjo, from competing on one of the Talon-era technicalities that he did not obtain a sufficient number of endorsements from members of parliament.<sup>7</sup> The race became a two-man show and a tilted playing field after the Constitutional Court had approved only two candidates to contest the April presidential election, with Wadagni, Talon's finance minister for ten years, and the governing coalition's candidate running against Houngpè, a former Minister of Culture under former President Boni Yayi and former mayor of Bopa.<sup>8</sup> With these judicial arrangements and legal amendments, the ruling party had mischievously paved the way for a weaker opposition, while decimating the stronger one. Hence, the result of the wide margin.

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<sup>4</sup> Danielle Resnick and Landry Signé, "Prospects for Democratic Resilience in Africa During Uncertain Times," Brookings Institution, September 12, 2025, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/prospects-for-democratic-resilience-in-africa-during-uncertain-times/>

<sup>5</sup> African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, African Union, <https://www.african-court.org/cpmt/storage/app/uploads/public/5fc9df11a/5fc9df11aeeaa193397844.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Africanews. "Benin's Main Opposition Party Barred from 2026 Presidential Race." Africanews, October 28, 2025. <https://www.africanews.com/2025/10/28/benins-main-opposition-party-barred-from-2026-presidential-race/>

<sup>7</sup> Jeune Afrique. "Présidentielle au Bénin : Romuald Wadagni n'aura qu'un seul adversaire." Jeune Afrique, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1740066/politique/presidentielle-au-benin-romuald-wadagni-naura-quun-seul-adversaire/>

<sup>8</sup> Siegle, Joseph, and Hany Wahila. "Africa's 2026 Elections: Navigating Complexity to Deliver for Citizens." *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, January 13, 2026. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-elections-2026/benin/>



# Rising Security Pressures in Northern Benin

Benin's democratic story has always been, at its core, a story about what a small, poor, densely populated West African country managed to build against the odds, as shown by the 1990 National Conference, the peaceful handovers of power, and its reputation as a regional model. What the Sahel crisis has done, arriving slowly and then all at once on Benin's northern doorstep, is to introduce a second kind of pressure on that story: understanding that challenge where it came from, how it has escalated, what it has demanded of the state, and how it filtered into the 2026 election is necessary for understanding the full weight of what the Wadagni administration is inheriting.

## ***A Reputation Disrupted***

For most of its modern history, northern Benin's defining qualities were not military. The Pendjari National Park and the W transfrontier complex (also known as W-Arly-Pendjari) were celebrated conservation zones. Tourism, however modest, was a source of local pride and modest revenue. The region was underdeveloped relative to the south, and its communities, predominantly Muslim, predominantly Bariba, Fulani, and Dendi, had long nursed quiet grievances about their peripheral status in a country whose political and economic gravity pulled firmly toward Cotonou and the coast. But it was quiet. The explosions taking place in Mali's north after 2012, in Burkina Faso's Sahel region after 2015, in the Tillabéri tri-border zone after 2017, were neighbouring tragedies, not Beninese ones.


That comfortable distinction began to dissolve in 2021. The jihadist insurgency in northern Benin began with low-level attacks near the Nigerian and Burkinabe borders, but escalated sharply in 2022 after the Beninese government launched heavy counterattacks. Benin became the first coastal West African country to host a permanent presence of the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) that had already swallowed large parts of the Sahel.<sup>9</sup>

The geopolitical conditions for this expansion were, from Benin's perspective, almost entirely external and almost entirely beyond its control. When the military seized power in Burkina Faso in January and September 2022 and in Niger in July 2023, they did not simply change the governments in Ouagadougou and Niamey. While some analysts argue that JNIM's movements reflect a breakdown in cross-border security cooperation that previously helped contain its expansion, others interpret its presence in northern Benin as displacement resulting from intensified military pressure in the central Sahel. In this context, JNIM has been reported to operate from parts of eastern Burkina Faso and southwestern Niger, extending into the W-Arly-Pendjari complex, including Park W, with activities along the Benin-Niger border and links to movements toward Nigeria.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, "A Front Line Drawn in the Sand: Jihadism Creeps into Northern Benin and Togo," Regional Programme Security Policy for West Africa, March 19, 2025. <https://www.kas.de/en/web/sipodi/single-title/-/content/a-front-line-drawn-in-the-sand-jihadism-creeps-into-northern-benin-and-togo>

<sup>10</sup> Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), New Frontlines: Jihadist Expansion is Reshaping the Benin, Niger, and Nigeria Borderlands, March 27, 2025, <https://acleddata.com/report/new-frontlines-jihadist-expansion-reshaping-benin-niger-and-nigeria-borderlands>



The park that rangers once monitored with camera traps became, in the span of a few years, a jihadist operational sanctuary. That transformation is, in miniature, the story of what happened to Benin's north.

### ***The Escalation Curve***

The violence that followed was not static. It grew in frequency, then in lethality, and finally in geographic reach. Extremist attacks in Benin surged from 71 in 2022 to 171 in 2023, giving Benin the highest rate of increase in jihadist attacks of any country on the African continent that year.<sup>11</sup> By 2024, the trajectory had shifted from frequency to ferocity. JNIM attacks in the first part of 2025 alone caused more fatalities than the entirety of 2024, while the rate of attacks actually fell by roughly a quarter; each operation had become significantly more lethal.<sup>12</sup>

The single most devastating demonstration of that shift came on January 8, 2025. JNIM launched an assault on a fortified military post inside Park W, killing at least 28 Beninese soldiers in what was, at that point, the deadliest single attack of the insurgency.<sup>13</sup> It was not the last. In April 2025, a strike near Koudou Falls produced sharply contested casualty figures; the government reported eight soldiers killed; JNIM claimed 70.<sup>14</sup> The discrepancy is itself a data point. The Beninese government has threatened newspapers with bans for reporting on the conflict in the north, which means the information environment around this conflict has been managed with the same instinct for control that characterises the political environment.

By the end of 2025, ACLED had designated the Benin-Niger-Nigeria border region as the new epicentre of jihadism in West Africa, and 2025 had become the deadliest year on record for the Beninese army.<sup>15</sup> Across the broader tri-border zone, violent incidents rose to 90 percent between 2024 and 2025, while related fatalities more than doubled, exceeding 1,000.<sup>16</sup>

### ***What the State Did: Operation Mirador and Its Contradictions***

The government's principal institutional response to the insurgency was Operation Mirador, launched in January 2022 with an initial deployment of 3,000 soldiers and a stated

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<sup>11</sup> Institute of Current World Affairs, "Pakistan's 'Open War' with the Taliban: Lessons from Escalation and the Path to De-escalation," ICWA Analysis, accessed June 10, 2026, [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls\\_id=12356&lid=7539](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=12356&lid=7539).


<sup>12</sup> Liam Karr and Kathryn Tyson, "Africa File, April 24, 2025: JNIM's Growing Pressure on Benin; Turkey to Somalia; Salafi-Jihadi Cells Continue to Grow Across Nigeria," Critical Threats Project (Critical Threats), April 24, 2025, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-april-24-2025-jnims-growing-pressure-on-benin-turkey-to-somalia-salafi-jihadi-cells-continue-to-grow-across-nigeria>.

<sup>13</sup> Institute of Current World Affairs (ICWA). "Pakistan's 'Open War' with the Taliban: Lessons from Escalation and the Path to De-escalation." ICWA Issue Brief, accessed June 10, 2026. [https://www.icwa.in/show\\_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls\\_id=12356&lid=7539](https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=1&ls_id=12356&lid=7539)

<sup>14</sup> The Africa Insight. "The Sub-Saharan Security Review." Substack, accessed June 10, 2026. <https://theafricainsight.substack.com/p/the-sub-saharan-security-review-ae9>

<sup>15</sup> African Insider. "Growing Insecurity in Benin's North Challenges Next President." *African Insider*, accessed June 10, 2026. <https://www.africaninsider.com/world/growing-insecurity-benins-north-challenges-next-president/>

<sup>16</sup> Sahara Reporters. "Al-Qaeda, ISIS Cells Expand in Niger, Benin, Nigeria Borders; Fighters Intensify Attacks – Report." Sahara Reporters, February 26, 2026. <https://saharareporters.com/2026/02/26/al-qaeda-isis-cells-expand-niger-benin-nigeria-borders-fighters-intensify-attacks-report>



ambition that went beyond military suppression. Under Operation Mirador's civil-military framework, the Beninese Armed Forces delivered water infrastructure boreholes powered by solar pumps and school construction to communities in the Kouandé and Kérou communes, with backing from the US Department of Defense and Spirit of America, framing the military as a development partner rather than purely a coercive force.<sup>17</sup> The army was simultaneously restructured and expanded: the National Guard was increased to five times its previous size, specialist units were established, and by February 2025, 8,200 soldiers were active on the front lines with 1,500 more in training.<sup>18</sup>

The results, against the backdrop of 2025's casualty figures, have been sobering. President Talon himself acknowledged in mid-2025 that his country's deteriorated relations with Niger and Burkina Faso were hampering the operation. "There is little intelligence sharing, so Operation Mirador is somewhat hampered," noted Lassina Diarra of the International Academy for Combating Terrorism.<sup>19</sup> The deterioration of bilateral relations between Benin and its Sahel neighbours, particularly Niger following recent political and diplomatic tensions, has significantly weakened existing frameworks for cross-border security cooperation. This breakdown has constrained Benin's operational reach into border areas and limited the coordinated pursuit of armed groups across shared ecosystems such as the park complexes where JNIM elements are known to shelter between attacks. At the same time, counterterrorism pressure from Burkinabe and Nigerien forces on their own sides of the border may have contributed to the displacement of Katiba Hanifa fighters into northern Benin, where they have sought relative refuge, effectively turning parts of Benin's territory into fallback zones rather than solely areas of direct confrontation.<sup>20</sup> More broadly, the erosion of cooperation has had wider implications for both security management and cross-border economic activity, disrupting livelihoods and trade networks that traditionally depend on porous but functional frontier relations.

JNIM's expansion into northern Benin was never purely military. The group is, as analysts of the Sahel conflict have long observed, a political entrepreneur as much as a military one. It moves where governance is absent, where communities feel abandoned, and where young men have reasons to be angry. Northern Benin offered all three. Economic hardship, poor governance, and ethnic rivalries have provided consistent recruitment opportunities, with JNIM successfully exploiting the marginalisation of communities that feel their grievances have gone unaddressed by the central government.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> African Press Agency (APA). "Benin Military Builds Infrastructure to Boost Northern Security." APA News, March 2, 2026. <https://apanews.net/benin-military-builds-infrastructure-to-boost-northern-security/>

<sup>18</sup> Anouar Boukhars, "Benin's Battle with Violent Militant Groups," Africa Security Brief No. 46, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 26, 2026. <https://africacenter.org/publication/asb46en-benin-battle-militant-groups/>

<sup>19</sup> The Defense Post. "Suspected Jihadists Kill 8 Soldiers in Benin." The Defense Post, April 19, 2025. <https://thedefensepost.com/2025/04/19/suspected-jihadists-benin/>

<sup>20</sup> Liam Karr and Kathryn Tyson, "Africa File, April 24, 2025: JNIM's Growing Pressure on Benin; Turkey to Somalia; Salafi-Jihadi Cells Continue to Grow Across Nigeria," Critical Threats Project (Institute for the Study of War), April 24, 2025, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/africa-file-april-24-2025-jnims-growing-pressure-on-benin-turkey-to-somalia-salafi-jihadi-cells-continue-to-grow-across-nigeria/>

<sup>21</sup> Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. "A Front Line Drawn in the Sand: Jihadism Creeps into Northern Benin and Togo." Regional Programme Security Policy Dialogue West Africa, March 19, 2025, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/sipodi/single-title/-/content/a-front-line-drawn-in-the-sand-jihadism-creeps-into-northern-benin-and-togo?>



The Fulani community, spread across the border regions and economically dependent on transhumance routes that militarisation has increasingly disrupted, became a particular flashpoint. President Talon met with Fulani community leaders in December 2024 in a visible attempt to arrest the risk of mass recruitment, an acknowledgement, however indirect, that the state's security posture had been generating alienation it could not afford. Field research conducted in 2025 on the Benin–Niger–Nigeria borderlands by researchers contributing to the PRIF Blog study *“Securitizing Borders and Local Conflict Dynamics: Insights from Benin”* found that Operation Mirador's security interventions, including patrols, arrests, and controls carried out with limited consultation, had weakened the position of traditional and religious leaders who had historically mediated relations between communities and the state.<sup>22</sup> One village chief described the practical consequence: “Before, security matters passed through us. Now interventions happen without warning, and we are asked afterwards to restore order without having been consulted.” When the state bypasses the people who know how to hold communities together, it does not simply lose an operational asset; it creates the vacuum that JNIM is designed to fill, as reported in PRIF Blog.<sup>23</sup>

### ***The Security–Democracy Nexus: How Insecurity Shaped the Election***

Less than a year before the 2026 presidential election, Benin experienced a failed coup attempt that heightened concerns about political stability and national security. Although the plot was foiled, it reinforced public anxieties about the country's security trajectory and became an important backdrop to the electoral campaign. On the ground, the evidence that security had become a national rather than a regional concern was unmistakable. Security was among the key issues during the January 2026 parliamentary campaign, as jihadist violence from Burkina Faso and Niger continued to spill over into Benin's north. In Cotonou, a motorcycle taxi driver told AFP that even in the south, people sensed the situation could escalate: “I listen to the candidates, especially on this point.”<sup>24</sup> A trader in Cotonou stated plainly that she wanted the incoming president to focus on security in the north, where JNIM had killed 54 soldiers in one attack and another 15 the month before the vote.<sup>25</sup> These testimonies matter not as anecdote but as evidence of a structural shift: for the first time in modern Beninese politics, the insecurity in the north was a southern conversation.

The candidates responded accordingly, if unevenly. Wadagni, laying out his platform on March 23, pledged to create municipal police forces and work with neighbouring countries to address the security challenges of the jihadist insurgency in the north.<sup>26</sup> The Pledge to

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<sup>22</sup> Kamal Donko and Simone Schnabel, “Securitizing Borders and Local Conflict Dynamics – Insights from Benin,” PRIF Blog, March 18, 2026, <https://blog.prif.org/2026/03/18/securitizing-borders-and-local-conflict-dynamics-insights-from-benin/>

<sup>23</sup> Kamal Donko and Simone Schnabel, “Securitizing Borders and Local Conflict Dynamics – Insights from Benin,” PRIF Blog, March 18, 2026, <https://blog.prif.org/2026/03/18/securitizing-borders-and-local-conflict-dynamics-insights-from-benin/>

<sup>24</sup> African Insider. “Growing Insecurity in Benin's North Challenges Next President.” African Insider, accessed June 10, 2026. <https://www.africaninsider.com/world/growing-insecurity-benins-north-challenges-next-president/>

<sup>25</sup> Al Jazeera. “Benin Holds Presidential Election Amid Deteriorating Security Situation.” Al Jazeera, April 12, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/12/benin-holds-presidential-election-amid-deteriorating-security-situation>

<sup>26</sup> Reuters. “Benin Presidential Candidate Vows New Police Forces to Fight Jihadists.” Reuters, March 23, 2026. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/benin-presidential-candidate-vows-new-police-forces-fight-jihadists-2026-03-23/>



work with neighbours was not only notable, given how thoroughly that neighbourhood had been restructured by coups, but it also signalled at least a rhetorical acknowledgement that Operation Mirador alone could not resolve the problem. The Islamist insurgency spreading from Burkina Faso and Niger ultimately dominated campaign discussions to a degree that previous Beninese elections, focused on governance and economic management, had never experienced.<sup>27</sup>

The December 2025 coup attempt made visible what the campaign could not say. The coup leaders' key complaints included the deterioration of security in northern Benin and the claim that soldiers were "neglected" on the front lines.<sup>28</sup> The soldiers cited favouritism in the military, the neglect of those killed on duty and their families, the deteriorating security situation in northern Benin, cuts to healthcare, and restrictions on political activity.<sup>29</sup> It was suppressed within hours, with Nigerian Air Force assistance marking that country's first foreign military intervention in 2025 since the Gambian constitutional crisis of 2017, a detail that speaks to how seriously the region's anchor state judged the stakes.<sup>30</sup> But the attempt itself was a political communication, sent by men who had run out of legitimate channels for expressing what was happening to them and their colleagues in the north.

### ***What Wadagni Inherits***

The new president takes office with a national security situation that is considerably more complex than the one Talon received in 2016. Collaboration is considered essential to preventing the tri-border area between Benin, Niger, and Nigeria from becoming another terror epicentre in West Africa, but the success of that effort will depend on whether the Alliance of Sahel States and ECOWAS can maintain dialogue and coordinate security and development efforts.<sup>31</sup> That is, in practice, a question about regional diplomacy in one of the most fractured periods in West African institutional history.

Without urgent measures to improve local governance, resolve land conflicts, and integrate marginalised communities, the region risks mirroring the Sahel's trajectory, in which state authority has collapsed in many areas and delayed action has proved catastrophic.<sup>32</sup> Benin is not at that point. But the distance between where it is and where it does not want to go is shorter than it appeared five years ago, and the political architecture that Wadagni has inherited, centralised, consultation-averse, and designed above all else for managed outcomes, is not obviously well suited to the messy, community-rooted, diplomatically demanding work that stabilising the north will require.

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<sup>27</sup> News-Pravda. "Nigeria: Security Alerts Over Rising Regional Instability and Cross-Border Threats." News-Pravda Africa, April 11, 2026. <https://niger-news-pravda.com/en/niger/2026/04/11/4044.html>

<sup>28</sup> Al Jazeera. "What's at Stake in Benin's Presidential Election?" Al Jazeera, April 11, 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/11/whats-at-stake-in-benins-presidential-election>

<sup>29</sup> Associated Press. "Benin Coup Attempt to Oust Talon Has Been Foiled, Interior Minister Says." Associated Press, December 7, 2025. <https://apnews.com/article/benin-coup-soldiers-66ac8edf0e5acf6ebfa37c46131713c8>

<sup>30</sup> YouTube, "Video," YouTube, accessed June 10, 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCIW6Bge2FE>.

<sup>31</sup> Jeannine Ella Abatan, "Can West African Nations Come Together to Stop Terrorism Spreading?" *ISS Today*, Institute for Security Studies, March 31, 2025, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/can-west-african-nations-come-together-to-stop-terrorism-spreading>

<sup>32</sup> Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. "A Front Line Drawn in the Sand: Jihadism Creeps into Northern Benin and Togo." Regional Programme Security Policy Dialogue West Africa, March 19, 2025, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/sipodi/single-title/-/content/a-front-line-drawn-in-the-sand-jihadism-creeps-into-northern-benin-and-togo>



The 94% tells you something about how Benin's democracy has been reshaped. The casualty figures from 2025 tell you something about how its security has been reshaped. The harder question and the one that will define this administration before any other is whether the new president can govern differently from the logic that produced both numbers.



# The Conduct of the 2026 Presidential Election

The conduct of Benin's April 2026 presidential election sits at the centre of debates over the country's evolving democratic character. On the surface, the election appeared orderly and efficiently managed. Polling stations opened on schedule across most parts of the country, voting proceeded peacefully, and results were promptly announced by the Autonomous National Electoral Commission (CENA). Official figures indicate that Finance Minister Romuald Wadagni secured a decisive victory with 94.05% of valid votes, while turnout stood at 58.75%, reinforcing perceptions of administrative competence in electoral delivery.<sup>33</sup> In terms of voter participation, CENA data further shows an expanded electoral base, with registered voters increasing from 7,834,608 in January 2026 to an estimated 7.96 million, alongside a rise in polling stations from 17,350 to 17,462, reflecting modest administrative expansion to improve access and reduce logistical pressure.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, the electoral process included 62,679 diaspora voters across 112 polling stations in diplomatic and consular missions, extending participation beyond national borders and demonstrating efforts to strengthen logistical inclusivity.<sup>35</sup>

However, the election can be situated within a longer trajectory of democratic transformation and reversal. Benin is often celebrated as one of Africa's earliest post-Cold War democratic success stories. In 1991, it became the first post-colonial African state to peacefully remove an incumbent through multiparty elections under universal suffrage, marking a foundational moment in the continent's democratic transition. This achievement positioned Benin as a regional exemplar during the broader post-Cold War wave of liberalisation, later followed by countries such as Zambia.

Yet, as highlighted in comparative research on Benin's democratic evolution, this early success also produced unintended consequences. The rapid proliferation of political parties and candidates in the decades that followed contributed to fragmentation, institutional instability, and electoral complexity. Over time, this environment became the justification for a series of institutional and constitutional reforms aimed at "rationalising" the political system. While framed as stabilisation measures, these reforms increasingly narrowed political competition and consolidated executive control, marking a shift toward what scholars describe as managed democracy or competitive authoritarianism.

The 2026 election reflects the culmination of this long process. The overwhelming victory of Wadagni cannot be separated from the structural redesign of the political arena, where eligibility rules, sponsorship requirements, and judicial interpretation of electoral laws have progressively limited who can meaningfully compete. As a result, the election was not merely a contest of popularity but the outcome of a political system in which competition had already been heavily engineered.

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<sup>33</sup> Frayer, Lauren. "Benin's Presidential Election Brings Finance Minister Romuald Wadagni to Power." The New York Times, April 14, 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/14/world/africa/benin-election-president-romuald-wadagni.html>

<sup>34</sup> Gildas Amoussou, "Présidentielle 2026 au Bénin : près de 7,9 millions d'électeurs attendus aux urnes," La Nouvelle Tribune, March 31, 2026, <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2026/03/presidentielle-2026-au-benin-pres-de-79-millions-delecteurs-attendus-aux-urnes/>

<sup>35</sup> Gildas Amoussou, "Présidentielle 2026 au Bénin : près de 7,9 millions d'électeurs attendus aux urnes," La Nouvelle Tribune, March 31, 2026, <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2026/03/presidentielle-2026-au-benin-pres-de-79-millions-delecteurs-attendus-aux-urnes/>



This is reinforced by the broader political environment leading up to the vote. The ruling coalition's dominance of the National Assembly, combined with the exclusion of major opposition actors such as *Les Démocrates*, significantly reduced electoral uncertainty. In effect, the race was decided long before election day, with Wadagni widely seen as the continuation of outgoing President Patrice Talon's political project. This aligns with broader analytical assessments that describe the election less as a democratic contest and more as a confirmation of a pre-designed succession pathway.

The IA-Forum analysis further emphasises that this trajectory reflects a shift from Benin's earlier democratic reputation toward a system increasingly defined by centralised authority and constrained political pluralism.<sup>36</sup> While formal democratic institutions remain intact, their substantive independence has weakened, producing a gap between procedural democracy and actual political competitiveness. In this context, elections continue to be held regularly, but their ability to produce genuine alternation of power has diminished significantly.

At the same time, this democratic contraction has been accompanied by notable economic and governance performance, particularly under Talon's administration and Wadagni's stewardship as finance minister. Strong GDP growth, infrastructure expansion, and improved macroeconomic stability have contributed to a narrative of developmental success. However, this has also enabled what some analysts describe as a trade-off between economic governance and political liberalism, where improved material performance coexists with shrinking civic and political space.

This duality is central to understanding the 2026 election in Benin. On one hand, the country continues to demonstrate administrative capacity, peaceful voting, and relatively efficient electoral logistics. On the other hand, the substantive conditions for competition and inclusion have been steadily weakened. The result is an electoral system that functions effectively in procedural terms but increasingly lacks the competitive depth that once defined Benin's democratic identity.

Thus, the 2026 presidential election illustrates not just an abrupt democratic collapse, but a gradual and structured transformation from a pioneering multiparty democracy into a managed political order. It is this slow institutional recalibration rather than a single electoral event that explains both the scale of the victory and the growing debate over whether Benin still belongs among Africa's democratic exemplars.

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<sup>36</sup> International Affairs Forum. "Friendship is something that creates equality and mutuality, not a reward for finding equality or a way of intensifying existing mutuality." IA-Forum, accessed 2026. <https://www.ia-forum.org/>



## Democratic Consolidation Under Strain: Progress or Not?

Benin's nearly three decades of democratic stability are not a minor achievement. Since it transitioned from military rule in 1990, the country has completed five cycles of presidential elections and four peaceful transfers of power. A record that most of its neighbours in West and Central Africa cannot match. At a time when Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, and Gabon have all experienced military coups since 2020, the fact that Benin's April 12 election took place on schedule, under civilian authority, without army interference, and with a losing candidate who conceded before the results were announced, matters.<sup>37</sup> These are not small things in a region where they are not guaranteed.

However, a stable and functioning election calendar is not the same as a functioning democracy, and the 2026 contest, won by Romuald Wadagni with a staggering 94.05% against a weak challenger, raises a more fundamental question about when the outward forms of democracy begin to mask their gradual erosion, a concern that becomes clearer when examining how political competition in Benin has evolved incrementally since Patrice Talon came to power in 2016.

The changes did not happen all at once. They accumulated, one legal amendment at a time. In 2018, new electoral rules required all parties to obtain a certificate of conformity from the Interior Ministry, a change that led to the disqualification of every opposition party from the 2019 legislative elections, handing Talon's allies total control of parliament.<sup>38</sup> In 2019, a constitutional amendment introduced a sponsorship requirement for presidential candidates: anyone wanting to run had to collect endorsements from at least 10% of all sitting MPs and mayors. Since Talon's bloc controlled most of those positions, they ultimately decided the ballot. By 2024, that threshold was raised again to 15%, necessitating a candidate to sign off from at least 28 elected officials in a parliament and local government system entirely dominated by pro-Talon parties. The nomination fee was simultaneously set at the equivalent of £328,000, one of the highest in West Africa, and a sum that would disqualify most credible challengers on financial grounds.

These changes were not made by force; each was passed by a legislature, reviewed by a constitutional court, and given legal legitimacy. The Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism (CRIET) was also established in 2016 and became a tool for silencing political rivals.<sup>39</sup> In December 2021, within the space of a week, opposition presidential candidate and constitutional law professor, Joël Aïvo, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for money laundering and crimes against the state, while Reckya Madougou, another opposition presidential candidate and former justice minister, was sentenced to 20 years for terrorism. Both trials lasted less than 24 hours.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Reuters. "Benin Opposition Fails to Secure Seats in Parliamentary Election." Reuters, January 19, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/benin-opposition-fails-secure-seats-parliamentary-election-2026-01-19/>

<sup>38</sup> Freedom House. "Benin: Freedom in the World 2024." Freedom in the World 2024, 2024. <https://chatgpt.com/c/6a27f312-3404-83ea-beee-b6ff6569aa64>

<sup>39</sup> African Arguments. "The Jailed Candidate: What Madougou's Case Tells Us About Benin." African Arguments, September 29, 2021. <https://africanarguments.org/2021/09/the-jailed-candidate-what-madougous-case-tells-us-about-benin/>

<sup>40</sup> Africanews, "Africa: The 7 Military Coups Over the Last Three Years," Africanews, August 30, 2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/08/30/africa-the-7-military-coups-over-the-last-three-years/>



The U.S. State Department reported that, as of October 2022, approximately 30 political prisoners had been convicted and sentenced by the Court for the Repression of Economic Offences and Terrorism. The cumulative effect by 2026 was stark.<sup>41</sup> The Democrats, Benin's main opposition party, were blocked from fielding a presidential candidate. The party had won 16% of the national vote in January 2026's parliamentary elections, but because the 2024 electoral code required parties to reach 20% in each of Benin's 24 individual electoral districts (not just nationally), they were shut out of parliament entirely.

Comparisons with Benin's neighbours are instructive but require precision. Senegal is often cited as a West African democratic success story, but it took a diversion in 2024 when President Macky Sall attempted to delay the presidential election, which was met with widespread protests and ultimately reversed.<sup>42</sup> The trajectory was redirected to the right path when the opposition candidate, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, won the presidency. Similarly, Nigeria maintains a model of democratic dispensation with a genuinely contested political environment. This is evident in the 2023 presidential election, which involved multiple credible candidates, significant regional variation in results, and a legal challenge that went to the Supreme Court, all hallmarks of real competition, however imperfect.<sup>43</sup>

All these tenets of democracy were not only visibly absent in Benin, they were also curiously cemented in the 2026 presidential election, thus confirming what scholars sometimes call "competitive authoritarianism."<sup>44</sup> As a concept, 'Competitive authoritarianism' refers to when a system retains the outlook of democracy (elections, courts, constitutions, term limits) while methodically removing the conditions that make competition real. Freedom House has downgraded Benin's democratic rating multiple times since 2016.<sup>45</sup> The Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem) now classifies Benin as an "electoral autocracy," a designation it shares with countries like Turkey and Hungary, where elections happen regularly but the outcome is, to a significant extent, determined in advance by who is allowed to compete.<sup>46</sup>

None of this amounts to the kind of democratic collapse that produces international headlines or sanctions. There are no political prisoners being executed, no press being shot at checkpoints, no elections being cancelled outright. The machinery of Beninese democracy continues to turn, ballots are printed, polling stations are staffed, and results are announced on television. But the 94% tells you what the machinery is actually

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<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of State, 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Benin, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2023, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/benin>

<sup>42</sup> Al Jazeera. "Senegal's Macky Sall Postpones Presidential Election." Al Jazeera, February 3, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/3/senegals-macky-sall-postpones-presidential-election>

<sup>43</sup> Al Jazeera. "Nigeria's Supreme Court Affirms Tinubu's Presidential Victory." Al Jazeera, October 26, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/26/nigerias-supreme-court-affirms-tinubus-presidential-victory>

<sup>44</sup> The Conversation. "Benin Election: Wadagni's Landslide Win Raises Questions About His Legitimacy." The Conversation, accessed June 10, 2026. <https://theconversation.com/benin-election-wadagnis-landslide-win-raises-questions-about-his-legitimacy-281005>

<sup>45</sup> Freedom House. "Benin: Freedom in the World 2024." Freedom in the World 2024, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/benin/freedom-world/2024>

<sup>46</sup> Pemstein et al., "The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data," V-Dem Working Paper No. 21, 2024, [https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/users\\_working\\_paper\\_24.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/users_working_paper_24.pdf).



producing. An election in which the main opposition is barred, the sole remaining challenger needed the ruling party's help to qualify, and the winner was publicly endorsed by the outgoing president weeks before voting began is not a competitive election, even if its outcomes were acclaimed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It is a managed succession wearing the clothes of one.

Whether Benin's new president, Romuald Wadagni, chooses to govern differently from his predecessor, and whether the institutions shaped over the past decade allow him to do so, will be crucial in determining the trajectory of the country's democracy after 2026. The outcome will show whether 2026 represents a turning point in democratic decline or simply another stage in a longer process.

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## About CDD-West Africa

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) was established in 1997 as an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation working to promote democratic governance, human security, and sustainable development across the West African sub-region.

With a core mandate to serve as a catalyst for change, CDD-West Africa brings together policymakers, civil society actors, academics, and development partners to advance evidence-based solutions to the region's most pressing challenges. The organisation's work spans rigorous research, strategic policy analysis, advocacy, capacity building, and civic engagement.

Through its programming, CDD-West Africa has led pioneering initiatives in election monitoring, anti-corruption, peacebuilding, countering disinformation, and strengthening democratic institutions. Its thematic focus areas include governance and transparency, peace and security, digital democracy, political inclusion, and the rule of law.

Headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria, with a strong regional network, CDD-West Africa plays a critical convening role in shaping democratic discourse and policy in West Africa. The Centre remains committed to amplifying citizen voices, defending civic space, and building a resilient, just, and democratic future for the region.



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