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Benin

Benin is an emergent U.S. security partner in West Africa, a region that has seen a wave of military coups, the spillover of Islamist insurgent violence from the Sahel, and growing Russian influence. Democratic backsliding under President Patrice Talon has complicated U.S. engagement, however. Benin is a focus country under the U.S. Global Fragility Act (see below). Benin has also offered 2,000 troops to a U.S.-backed, Kenyan-led stabilization force planned for Haiti. Possible issues for Congress include oversight of U.S. aid and security cooperation amid challenging regional trends.

Politics and Governance

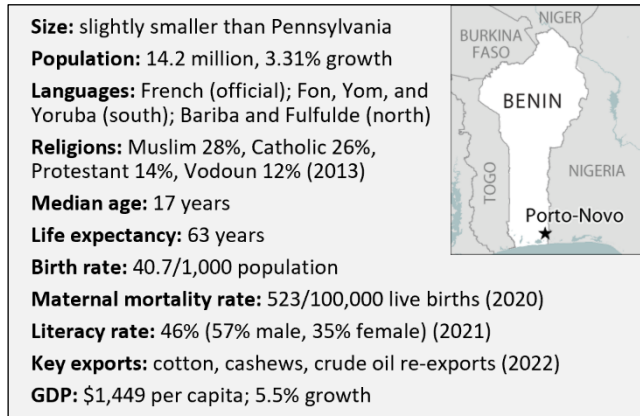
Benin transitioned to multiparty politics in 1990 after decades of military and one-party rule, leading to a series of peaceful, competitive elections. President Talon, first elected in 2016, has instituted a “semi-authoritarian regime,” however, sidelining the opposition and restricting freedoms of assembly and the press. New candidacy laws led to the disqualification of all opposition candidates in the 2019 National Assembly elections. State security forces dispersed protests and arrested opposition politicians ahead of the vote. In 2021, Talon won reelection against two little-known challengers, after the electoral commission disqualified more prominent candidates. Over 100 people were arrested during the 2021 elections period, and a special Court for the Repression of Economic and Terrorism Infractions later sentenced two opposition leaders to jail “based on virtually no evidence,” according to the State Department. Authorities have also arrested journalists and activists. The U.S.-based organization Freedom House downgraded Benin from “Free” to “Partly Free” in 2020.

The government has tentatively reopened some space for the opposition since 2022. Dozens of opposition supporters were released from jail that year, and opposition parties won 28 out of 109 seats in 2023 National Assembly elections. The next presidential election is slated for 2026, when President Talon will face term limits. Talon has pledged not to seek reelection. His predecessor Thomas Boni Yayi floated constitutional changes that could have paved the way to a third term, but ultimately stepped down. A member of parliament in Talon’s coalition proposed amendments in early 2024 to alter the election timeline, but these did not garner sufficient support to advance.

Security

Benin reported its first Islamist militant attack in 2019, when two French tourists and their local guide were kidnapped from a national park. (The French military rescued the tourists in neighboring Burkina Faso, also freeing an American and a South Korean hostage.) The Islamist armed group presence in Benin was previously “temporary, transitory and often limited in nature,” per one analysis. Since then, security conditions near Benin’s northern borders have deteriorated; some 150 violent incidents were reported in 2023.

Figure 1. Benin at a Glance



Sources: CIA *World Factbook*, IMF; 2023 estimates unless noted.

Two U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations are reportedly active in northern Benin: a regional Al Qaeda affiliate known as the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM) and the Islamic State (IS) Sahel affiliate. These Sahel-based groups have reportedly established a presence in cross-border national parks, where they allegedly “tax” local commerce and engage in smuggling, gold trafficking, and other illicit economic activity. U.N. global terrorism monitors have also relayed reports that the IS’s Nigeria-based affiliate (IS-West Africa) profits from ivory poaching in Benin. Some analysts assert that violence in northern Benin is shifting from a “foreign-based insurgency” to a “nascent civil conflict,” with JNIM cells increasingly locally embedded.

Ethnic and sectarian divisions may elevate risks of conflict in the north, where Benin’s Muslim minority population is concentrated. Some analysts warn that extremists might leverage grievances among the Peul (Fulani/Fulbe), a historically pastoralist, mainly Muslim ethnic group present across West and Central Africa. Tensions over conservation areas—where restricted access has disrupted local livelihoods—appear to provide additional opportunities for extremists, who have reportedly opened areas under their control to farming, grazing, and small-scale mining.

Benin’s government has expanded military deployments in the north, engaged in rapid military recruitment, and sought to procure military equipment from a range of countries including France, Turkey, China, and Russia. Benin also has pursued bilateral cooperation with Rwanda, which has offered to send troops to support counterterrorism. Benin participates in an African Union-authorized regional military force to combat Nigeria-based Boko Haram and IS-West Africa. About 250 Beninese troops served in the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali prior to its closure in late 2023; smaller numbers of Beninese personnel continue to serve in other U.N. missions.

Economy and Development Challenges

Benin is Africa's leading cotton producer, and cotton is its top export by far, followed by cashews. Benin's economy has seen strong growth, expanding by 5.5% in 2023; the International Monetary Fund (IMF) projects 6.3% growth in 2024. Informal trade is reportedly widespread: Nigeria's decision in 2023 to end domestic fuel subsidies reportedly led to a spike in black-market fuel prices in Benin. As of early 2024, Benin was one of seven countries that had signed, but not ratified, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement. (Forty-seven countries have ratified it.)

Benin is among the world's least developed countries, ranking 166 out of 191 on the 2022 U.N. Human Development Index (latest). One in five Beninese live below the international poverty line, and nearly 10% face food insecurity. Poverty rates are highest in the north, where access to primary education, clean water, and sanitation is also limited. Women and girls face large gaps in literacy and other educational and economic benchmarks. Women in Benin have among the world's highest birth and maternal mortality rates (3rd and 13th, respectively).

Foreign Relations

President Talon has participated in efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to push for a return to elected civilian rule in four West African states that have had military coups since 2020 (most recently Niger, in 2023). ECOWAS initially threatened, but did not carry out, a military intervention to reverse the coup in Niger, to which Benin pledged troops. After Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso stated plans to leave ECOWAS in early 2024, ECOWAS shifted tack and lifted economic sanctions on Niger. The sanctions had affected Benin's economy and security cooperation with Niger, leading President Talon in late 2023 to call for relations with Niger to be "quickly reestablished." The junta in Niger has reportedly maintained border restrictions that continue to hamper trade with Benin. President Talon, jointly with the leaders of Togo and Sierra Leone, has been designated by ECOWAS to engage with Niger on a political transition roadmap.

The People's Republic of China (PRC/China) is a top trade partner, and PRC entities have financed infrastructure projects in Benin. Benin signed a cooperation agreement under China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2019. President Talon met with China's President Xi Jinping in China in 2023, and both pledged to elevate ties to a "strategic partnership." Also in 2023, China reportedly agreed to partially cancel Benin's debt. A new China National Petroleum Corporation-operated pipeline, connecting oil fields in Niger to Benin's port of Seme, came online in March 2024. Some surveys indicate that a growing number of Beninese favor China's development model over that of the United States and that the vast majority view China's influence as broadly positive.

Benin has long-standing relations with Russia, although it is not a major Russian partner in Africa. President Talon has criticized Russia's actions in Ukraine, while declining to publicly criticize regional deployments by Russia's Wagner Group, a nominally private military company. (Since Wagner's official demise in mid-2023, Russian officials have pledged to continue Africa deployments under more direct control from Moscow.)

Former colonial ruler France remains a key partner, unlike in some West African countries. France has increased counterterrorism support for Benin as juntas in the Sahel have forced the withdrawal of French troops; the European Union agreed in 2023 to provide reconnaissance aircraft to the country. Recent French diplomatic cooperation has included the return of some artwork and cultural items looted from Benin during the colonial period.

U.S. Relations and Foreign Assistance

The State Department characterizes U.S.-Benin ties as "generally excellent," while noting that "the space for pluralism, dissent, and free expression narrowed" during President Talon's first term. While U.S. officials criticized the 2019 National Assembly elections and expressed concern about the 2021 presidential election process, the U.S. Embassy in Benin welcomed the 2023 National Assembly elections as "inclusive."

The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development allocated \$41 million in bilateral aid to Benin in FY2022, with \$42 million proposed for FY2024. FY2023 data are not yet public. Nearly all bilateral funds support health programs, including the President's Malaria Initiative. In 2023, Benin completed its second Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) aid compact, a five-year \$375 million program to expand access to electricity. In 2022, the MCC signed a concurrent regional compact for the development of a trade corridor between Benin and Niger. The MCC allocated \$202 million for Benin under the project, having previously announced that it would "significantly reduce" planned funds for Benin due to democratic backsliding. In 2023, the MCC suspended the Niger portion due to the coup in that country.

The Biden Administration has identified five coastal West African countries, including Benin, as a focus for assistance under the Global Fragility Act (GFA, Title V of Division J, P.L. 116-94), which aims to bolster resilience to security and governance challenges. The Administration's GFA plan for coastal West Africa seeks to "prevent the destabilizing expansion of terrorism and violent extremism" from the Sahel, by strengthening social cohesion and enhancing the responsiveness and accountability of state institutions and security forces. Planned activities in the region would support, e.g., conflict mediation, state service delivery, community radio, journalist training, and youth livelihoods.

Benin receives U.S. security assistance through regional and global programs, including the State Department-led Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and the Defense Department's global train and equip program under 10 U.S.C. §333. The North Dakota National Guard has a State Partnership Program with Benin, and Benin has participated in U.S. military exercises. U.S. special operations forces personnel have reportedly advised Beninese military forces on counterterrorism operations. Following the 2023 coup in Niger, U.S. officials have reportedly considered relocating U.S. regional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations from Niger to Benin and other coastal West African countries.

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