

Benin

**Period of democratic transition: 1990–1991**

**Pro-democracy civic movement: present**

In 1972, Mathieu Kerekou took control of Benin, ending a series of coups and countercoups that had plagued the stability of the country since its independence from France in 1960. Three years later, Kerekou proclaimed a Marxist-Leninist dictatorship under the single-party rule and military leadership of General Kerekou himself. Seventeen years later, Kerekou still remained in power, but fiscal bankruptcy from economic mismanagement of the nation's coffers had weakened his rule.

In January 1989, university students demanding the return of guaranteed public sector employment and teachers angered by months of unpaid salaries began a stream of protests and strikes that lasted some 20 weeks. By the end of 1989, the movement had grown to include other civil society groups and had taken on a more general political nature, demanding the resignation of Kerekou and the implementation of democratic rule. In December alone, more than 40,000 citizens participated in street demonstrations in the country's two largest cities. With such political pressure, and the suspension of French financial and diplomatic support, Kerekou abolished Marxist-Leninism, legalized opposition parties, and announced the holding of a national conference in February 1990 to discuss the possibility of democratic rule. This conference, the first of its kind in Africa, brought together 488 delegates, including leaders from opposition political parties, unions, universities, religious associations, the army, human rights organizations, and women's groups. Despite Kerekou's resistance, the conference drafted a new democratic constitution, asserted sovereignty over the country, and organized competitive, national multiparty elections the following year.

Presidential elections were held in early 1991 and were won, in a second-round runoff, by opposition candidate Nicephore Soglo with 67 percent of the vote. In this way, Benin began the wave of democratic transitions that covered much of Africa. Although it continues to be among the poorest countries on the continent, Benin has remained one of Africa's most stable and respected democracies.