

Benin

Ethnicity in Benin

Group selection

The classification of groups corresponds to the ancient kingdoms existing before French colonization in the region that later became the independent state of Dahomey. There were three main kingdoms: Dahomey (its capital being in Abomey in the south/center), Hogbonou (Porto Novo in the southeast) and Nikki (in the north). The hostilities between these historic kingdoms persisted during colonial time, determined the political cleavages in the newly independent state and keep playing a role even today (³⁹¹, 4). Ethnic groups are thus clustered into cultural blocs according to their historic kingdom-affiliation: “South/Central” (Fon and related groups), “Southeastern” (Goun and Yoruba/Nagot groups) and “Northern” (Bariba, Gurmanché/Betamaribe and others). These ethno-regional blocs were each represented by one of Dahomey’s three most important political leaders in the years after independence: the north by Hubert Maga, the south/center by Justin Ahomadegbe, and the southeast by Sourou Apithy.

One can additionally list the southwestern Adja group because of its considerable size and geographic concentration. There is, however, no evidence for any political significance of this group until the advent of multi-party democracy in 1990 when it began to be represented by a political party (the PSD, led by Bruno Amoussou).

The group sizes were coded based on the information available via the CIA ³⁹² and, where necessary, consulted additional sources. According to the World Factbook, 39.2% of Benin’s total population belong to the Fon and related groups. However, this figure also includes the Goun group, which should more appropriately be regarded as belonging to the same southeastern cluster as the Yoruba/Nagot group. According to the Ethnologue and the Joshua project, the Goun group constitutes roughly 4% of Beninese population. In light of this information, the group sizes of the south/central (Fon) cluster were coded at 35.2% and of the southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun) at 16.3% (12.3% in the ³⁹³).

The size of the southwestern Adja cluster is 15.2 % according to the World Factbook (³⁹⁴). In calculating the size of the northern cluster, the CIA figures of the Bariba (9.2%), Peulh/Fulani (7%), Ottamari (6.1 %), Yoa-Lokpa (4%) and Dendi (2.5%) groups were included. Furthermore, the small Gourmanchéma group that has a

³⁹¹ [Battle & Seely, 2007]

³⁹² [CIA World Factbook, 2014]

³⁹³ [CIA World Factbook, 2014]

³⁹⁴ [CIA World Factbook, 2014]

population of 62000 (approximately 0.6%) in Benin according to the Ethnologue was added. In total, the Northern cluster (Bariba, Peul, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma) was coded at 29.4 %.

Power relations

1960-1963

A “grand coalition government” was installed after independence (³⁹⁵). Maga is named president, and Apithy vice-president. Maga has a Bariba mother (³⁹⁶) and is generally perceived as a northern leader (³⁹⁷). Apithy is from Porto Novo (southeast). Therefore, the northern groups are coded as “senior partner” in the coalition, the southeastern groups as “junior partner”. Emile Zinsou (the “fourth man” in the country’s politics) represents the Fon group in this “grand coalition government”. Hence, the latter are also coded as “junior partner”.

³⁹⁵ [Dickie & Rake, 1973]

³⁹⁶ [Dickie & Rake, 1973]

³⁹⁷ [David, 1998]

1964-1965

After the overthrow of Maga, a “tandem government” is installed with Apithy and Ahomadegbe (who is from Abomey in the south/center) as leaders. The northerners remain excluded (³⁹⁸; ³⁹⁹). Thus, the Fon and the southeastern groups are both coded as “senior partners”, while the northern groups are considered “powerless”.

³⁹⁸ [Allen, 1988]

³⁹⁹ [Boko, no date]

1966-1967; Christophe Soglo’s 2nd coup (Oct 1965) and his rule until 1967

The Fon south/center clearly dominates the ruling military committee (⁴⁰⁰). Soglo himself is from this region. Therefore, the Fon are coded as “senior partner”. In general, the south was politically dominant during this period, so the northern groups are coded as “powerless”.

⁴⁰⁰ [Allen, 1988]

In contrast, there is no concrete evidence that the southeastern groups are excluded from power. Apithy is in exile but so is Ahomadegbe, the Fon political leader. Instead of the “old” political elite, new military leaders (such as Soglo) are now in power. Thus one can assume the southeastern groups to be a “junior partner” during Soglo’s regime as well.

1968-1969; Kouandété’s coup (Dec 1967) and another military regime

The dominant people in the highest circles of power are now mostly northerners, like Lieutenant-Colonel Alley and (above all) Major Kouandété. Also the government is mainly of northern origin (⁴⁰¹). However, the civilian president installed in 1968, Emile Zinsou, is from the Fon south/center. Moreover, Alley had the confidence of the “Abomey clique” (⁴⁰²). Therefore, the northern groups are coded as “senior partner” and the Fon as “junior partner”.

⁴⁰¹ [Allen, 1988]

⁴⁰² [Allen, 1988]

The southeastern groups, however, seem to have lost their influence under the northern-dominated regime. Therefore, the southeastern groups are coded as “powerless” in this period.

1970-1972; from the invention of the “presidential council” to Kérékou’s coup

After the aborted elections in 1970 and in order to avoid civil war, the country’s political elite invents a new formula of power sharing between the three important ethno-regions: a “presidential council” with the three big leaders, and a rotation system which gives each of them in turn the presidency for 2 years.

As Maga is the first to assume office, the northern groups are coded as “senior partner” in this period, while the Fon south/center and the southeastern groups are “junior partners”.

Ahomadegbe’s turn (initiating in May 1972) is not considered here since he first was unable to govern for the most part due to the joint obstruction by Maga and Apithy (⁴⁰³), and then was overthrown by Major Mathieu Kérékou.

⁴⁰³ [Dickie & Rake, 1973]

1973-1989; Kérékou’s reign

Kérékou, a northerner, becomes the dominant political figure. His military (later political) government, however, was a mixture of both southern and northern officers and politicians. There is a regional equilibrium within the junta, and no ethnic or regional group is favored during the dictatorship (⁴⁰⁴). Nevertheless, besides assuring an ethnic balance in the circles of power, Kérékou also enhanced northern representation and influence (⁴⁰⁵). Therefore, this period is conceived as an authoritarian power-sharing regime or, as Boko (⁴⁰⁶, 17) called it: an “equal opportunity dictatorship”, in which the northern groups are the “senior partner”, and the Fon and the southeastern groups the “junior partners”.

⁴⁰⁴ [Boko, no date]

⁴⁰⁵ [Allen, 1988]

⁴⁰⁶ [Boko, no date]

1990-1995; Year of the National Conference and Nicéphore Soglo’s presidential term

This period is coded as a period of power sharing. Head of the interim government is the later president Nicéphore Soglo from the Fon group in the south/central region. Thus, the latter are classified as “senior partner” in this year, and all other groups as “junior partners”.

With democratization and the advent of multipartyism, the southwestern Adja group is now also represented by a political party (PSD). Hence, from 1990 on, the group is coded as politically relevant.

The new electoral system forces the parties (and therefore the ethno-regional factions) to build national coalitions in order to win elections and to be able to govern. As all parties represent a certain ethno-regional group, the result is a de-facto ethnic power sharing

government (⁴⁰⁷).

Soglo and his party represent the Fon south/center, which are therefore coded as “senior partner”, while all other groups are given the status of “junior partners”.

1996-2006; Kérékou’s presidential terms

Kérékou becomes president again. His new ruling coalition includes several southern politicians and southern-based parties, such as, for example, Adrien Houngbédji (PRD), Albert Tévoédjré (NCC) both representing the southeastern groups, and Bruno Amoussou (PSD), representing the southwestern Adja group (⁴⁰⁸; ⁴⁰⁹; see also ⁴¹⁰, 9). Therefore, the northern groups are coded as “senior partner”, and the Adja and the southeastern groups as “junior partners”.

The Fon group is still represented by Soglo (and his wife) who finds himself in the opposition (⁴¹¹). According to the U.S. State Department’s Human Rights Report from 2005, no members of the opposition were included in the cabinet or in the National Assembly’s Executive Committee (⁴¹²). Yet, it still has some local power as can be seen by Soglo’s being elected mayor of Benin’s economic capital Cotonou in 2003. However, this does not justify coding political inclusion or even regional autonomy, since Soglo and other Fon remain excluded from central executive power and the Cotonou region does not have any sort of autonomous status, neither in de jure nor in de facto terms.

2007-2016

The presidential elections are held in March 2006, with Thomas Yayi Boni emerging as the winner, being inaugurated on April 6. Due to EPR’s January-1st-rule, the new period is coded as starting in 2007.

Yayi Boni himself can be seen as the actual personification of an ethno-political power-sharing. His father is a Yoruba/Nagot from the southeast, while his mother hails from northern ethnic groups; he was born as a Muslim and later converted to Christianity. His voter support - measured in a survey in the forefront of the election - was not ethnically-based either (⁴¹³, 12, 15-6). His party FCBE, moreover, is the only major party in Benin which cannot be considered an ethnic party (⁴¹⁴, 18). His first cabinet excluded all former political heavyweights and party leaders (⁴¹⁵).

The ethnic power-sharing practiced in Benin that covers the highest executive level is also confirmed by the U.S. State Department’s Human Rights Reports from 2006 to 2009 (⁴¹⁶).

Overall, however, it is not quite evident which ethno-regional bloc now occupies the leading position under the new president Yayi Boni. The U.S. State Department’s HR Reports from 2006 to 2009 provide a few figures but they do not exactly correspond to the politically relevant groups listed here:

- 2006: 7 cabinet ministers from the north; 16 ministers from the

⁴⁰⁷ [Creevey et al., 2005]

⁴⁰⁸ [David, 1998]

⁴⁰⁹ [Wantchekon, 2003]

⁴¹⁰ [Battle & Seely, 2007]

⁴¹¹ [Wantchekon, 2003]

⁴¹² [US State Department, 2005–2013]

⁴¹³ [Battle & Seely, 2007]

⁴¹⁴ [Basedau & Stroh, 2009]

⁴¹⁵ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008–2014]

⁴¹⁶ [US State Department, 2005–2013]

Fon, and the Goun and Yoruba/Nagot groups.

- 2007: 9 from the north; 14 from the Fon, Goun, and Adja groups; 3 from the Yoruba/Nagot.
- 2008 and 2009: 9 from the north; 15 from the Fon, Goun, and Adja groups; 3 from the Yoruba/Nagot.

These figures are based on purely linguistic criteria. Particularly, the 14/15 ministers from the Fon, Goun and Adja groups from 2007 to 2009 relate to three different ethno-regional groupings of this dataset. A first, rather safe deduction is that the Adja group cannot be more than a “junior partner”. This notion seems to be confirmed by the role of the group’s traditional party, the PSD, which is still clearly an ethnic Adja party (⁴¹⁷, 18; ⁴¹⁸, 12, 15-6), and formed part of the opposition alliance in the 2007 legislative elections. Hence, its role in the government will be somewhat limited.

⁴¹⁷ [Basedau & Stroh, 2009]

⁴¹⁸ [Battle & Seely, 2007]

Also the southeastern Goun and Yoruba/Nagot groups can hardly be more than a “junior partner” based on these numbers. (Yayi Boni, although Yoruba/Nagot from his father’s side, is generally seen more as a northern exponent, as explicated below).

Subtracting a few ministers for the Adja group and the southeast (Goun) from these 14/15 ministers indicated by the HR Reports for 2007-2009, the south/central Fon group will probably be left with less than the 9 ministers hailing from the north. Moreover, Nicéphore Soglo’s party RB still the traditional Fon party (⁴¹⁹, 18) also formed part of the opposition alliance in 2007. Soglo’s youngest son, Ganiou Soglo, was appointed as minister by Yayi Boni administering some minor portfolios (youth and sport; culture). Thus, the south/central Fon group is coded as a “junior partner” in Yayi Boni’s government as well.

⁴¹⁹ [Basedau & Stroh, 2009]

Although of mixed ethnic heritage, based on his regional origin Yayi Boni seems to be identified more often with the north than with any southern group (⁴²⁰, 17; ⁴²¹; and ⁴²²). Also, the northern groups (Bariba, Gurmanché/Betamaribe) are strongly represented in the cabinet (with perhaps more ministers than any other ethno-regional bloc). Thus, the northern groups are coded as “senior partner” again although their political weight has certainly decreased since Kérékou’s retirement.

⁴²⁰ [Battle & Seely, 2007]

⁴²¹ [FreedomHouse, 2017]

⁴²² [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008–2014]

Ethnic politics in Benin remained quite stable under Yayi Boni. The distribution of cabinet seats between the relevant groups has remained almost unchanged (⁴²³) over the years. According to most sources, president Yayi Boni’s regime is somewhat biased in favour of northern groups (Bariba, Peul, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma), yet still includes representatives from the other politically relevant groups as well (⁴²⁴, ⁴²⁵).

⁴²³ [US State Department, 2005–2013]

⁴²⁴ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008–2014]

⁴²⁵ [US State Department, 2005–2013]

In August 2013, president Boni reshuffled his cabinet due to increasing tensions with several ministers. However, there is no indication that, with the new cabinet in place, some ethnic groups were not included in executive power anymore (Porst, 2013). The coding is therefore extended until 2016.

2017-2021

After two terms in office, president Yayi Boni had to step down in spring 2016. In the presidential elections in March, the independent businessman Patrice Talon defeated former Prime Minister Lionel Zinsou in the second electoral round ⁽⁴²⁶⁾. The transfer of power happened peacefully ⁽⁴²⁷⁾. Patrice Talon can be seen as a representative of the Southern/Central ethnic groups. He is ethnic Fon and was born in Ouidah ⁽⁴²⁸⁾. He did not assign a prime minister, however two ministers of State, of which one is a Northerner and the other one comes from the central South as well ⁽⁴²⁹⁾. The sources consulted do not indicate any political exclusion of the ethnic groups that have formerly been part of Benin's government ^(430, 431). The Minister of maternal and primary education, for example, is of Southeastern origin, while the Minister of Living and Sustainable Development and the Minister of Finance stem from the Southwestern region ⁽⁴³²⁾. Rather than not including some ethnic groups, Talon is criticized for the very low number of women in his cabinet ^(433, 434, 435). Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of the cabinet members seems to be of central/southern origin, just as the president himself. This can be explained with the fact that the president, amongst others, appointed business partners and friends as ministers ^(436, 437).

The 2019 parliamentary elections and the 2020 local elections were heavily criticized domestically and internationally ^(438, 439, 440). Revisions to the electoral law in 2018 and 2019 raised the (financial) barriers for political parties to enter the polls ^(441, 442). Only two parties loyal to Talon met the requirements to take part in the 2019 parliamentary elections, excluding all opposition parties from running and resulting in a landslide victory for Talon's coalition ⁽⁴⁴³⁾. The oppression of opposition parties sparked violent protest in the country, while the Constitutional Court announced a turnout of 27,12% - the lowest turnout ever recorded ⁴⁴⁴. With the presidential elections taking place in 2021, the increase in control over the political arena is an alarming development. However, the developments have so far not affected the composition of the cabinet nor insinuated political discrimination against a specific ethnic group, leaving the EPR-coding unchanged.

In September 2019, a reshuffle of the cabinet saw 3 ministers leaving while 6 new ministers were added to the existing cabinet, increasing the number of ministers to 24 ⁽⁴⁴⁵⁾. Yet, this political development does not indicate the exclusion of any ethnic group from the cabinet ⁽⁴⁴⁶⁾. Since 2017, the South/Central ethnic groups are therefore coded as "Senior Partner", while the others are coded "Junior Partner".

⁴²⁶ [Agon, 2016]⁴²⁷ [FreedomHouse, 2017]⁴²⁸ [Global Black History, 2016]⁴²⁹ [BBC, 2016]⁴³⁰ [FreedomHouse, 2017]⁴³¹ [US State Department, 2017]⁴³² [Agon, 2016]⁴³³ [FreedomHouse, 2017]⁴³⁴ [Trade Bridge Consultants, 2016]⁴³⁵ [US State Department, 2017]⁴³⁶ [Africa Hot News, 2016]⁴³⁷ [Jeune Afrique, 2017]⁴³⁸ [Washington Post, 2019]⁴³⁹ [Al Jazeera, 2020]⁴⁴⁰ [FreedomHouse, 2020]⁴⁴¹ [Jeune Afrique, 2018]⁴⁴² [Institute for Security Studies, 2020]⁴⁴³ [BBC, 2019]⁴⁴⁴ [Institute for Security Studies, 2019]⁴⁴⁵ [APA News, 2019]⁴⁴⁶ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Benin

From 1960 until 1963

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	JUNIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	SENIOR PARTNER

From 1964 until 1965

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	SENIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	SENIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	POWERLESS

From 1966 until 1967

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	SENIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	POWERLESS

From 1968 until 1969

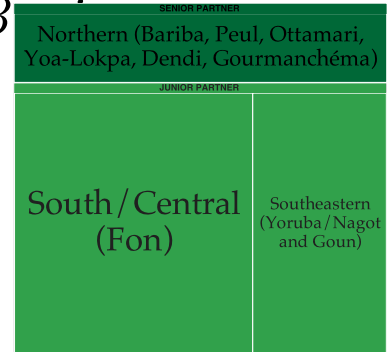


Figure 70: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1960-1963.

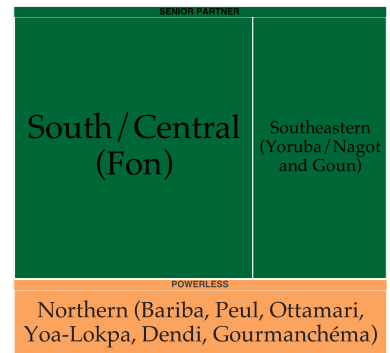


Figure 71: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1964-1965.

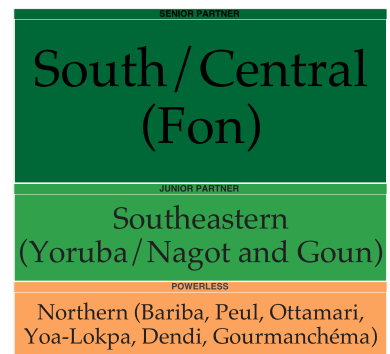


Figure 72: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1966-1967.

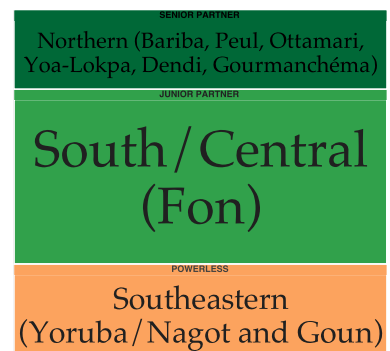


Figure 73: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1968-1969.

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	JUNIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	POWERLESS
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	SENIOR PARTNER

From 1970 until 1989

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	JUNIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	SENIOR PARTNER

From 1990 until 1995

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	SENIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	JUNIOR PARTNER
Southwestern (Adja)	0.15	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 1996 until 2006

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	POWERLESS
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	SENIOR PARTNER
Southwestern (Adja)	0.15	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 2007 until 2016

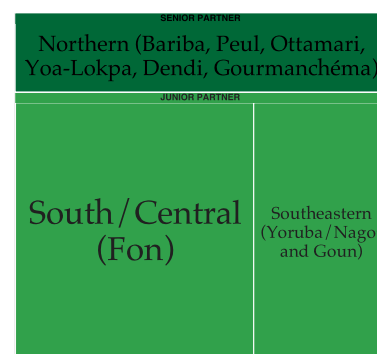


Figure 74: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1970-1989.

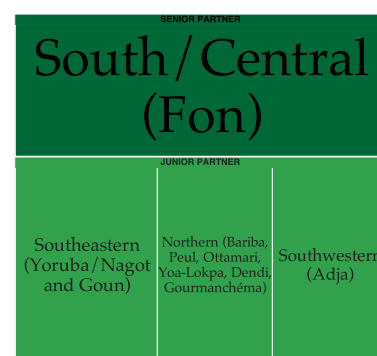


Figure 75: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1990-1995.

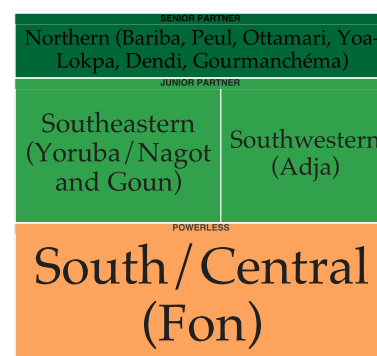


Figure 76: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 1996-2006.

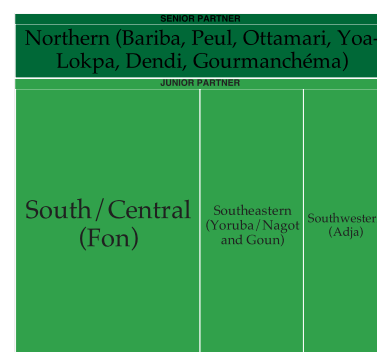


Figure 77: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 2007-2016.

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	JUNIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	SENIOR PARTNER
Southwestern (Adja)	0.15	JUNIOR PARTNER

From 2017 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
South/Central (Fon)	0.33	SENIOR PARTNER
Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	0.185	JUNIOR PARTNER
Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	0.15	JUNIOR PARTNER
Southwestern (Adja)	0.15	JUNIOR PARTNER

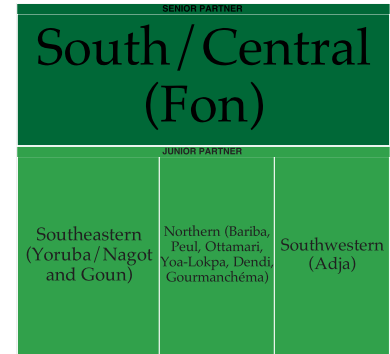


Figure 78: Political status of ethnic groups in Benin during 2017-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Benin

From 1960 until 1960

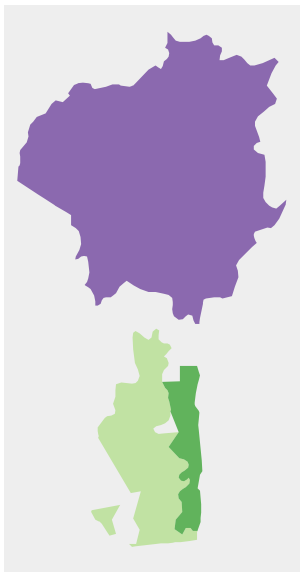


Figure 79: Map of ethnic groups in Benin during 1960-1960.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Northern (Bariba, Peul, Otta-mari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gour-manchéma)	69 129	Regionally based
■	South/Central (Fon)	16 282	Regionally based
■	Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	5434	Regionally based

Table 28: List of ethnic groups in Benin during 1960-1960.

From 1961 until 1989

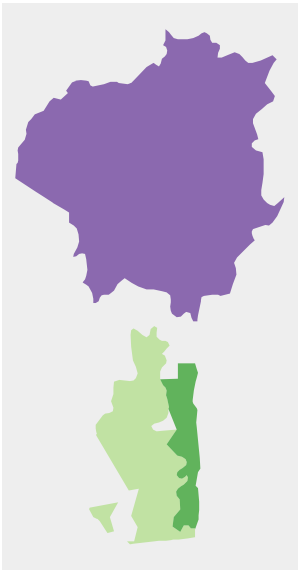


Figure 80: Map of ethnic groups in Benin during 1961-1989.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	69 129	Regionally based
■	South/Central (Fon)	16 282	Regionally based
■	Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	5434	Regionally based

Table 29: List of ethnic groups in Benin during 1961-1989.

From 1990 until 2021

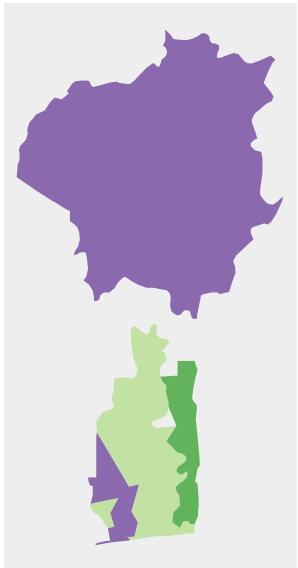


Figure 81: Map of ethnic groups in Benin during 1990-2021.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Northern (Bariba, Peul, Ottamari, Yoa-Lokpa, Dendi, Gourmanchéma)	69 129	Regionally based
■	South/Central (Fon)	16 282	Regionally based
■	Southeastern (Yoruba/Nagot and Goun)	5434	Regionally based
■	Southwestern (Adja)	3852	Regionally based

Table 30: List of ethnic groups in Benin during 1990-2021.