



Togo and Gabon's Admission to the Commonwealth: Member States Must Uphold Commonwealth Standards of Human Rights and Democracy

London, July 21 - With the recent addition of Togo and Gabon as the 55th and 56th members of the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) reiterates the need for Member States to comply with the fundamental principles and values as enshrined in Commonwealth frameworks, including the Commonwealth Charter and the Harare Declaration, as well as international standards and norms. Commonwealth membership processes should ensure that both existing and prospective members actively demonstrate their commitment to democracy and democratic processes, such as free and fair elections and representative legislatures; the rule of law and independence of the judiciary; good governance, including a well-trained public service and transparent public accounts; and protection of human rights, freedom of expression, and equality of opportunity.

The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting ([CHOGM](#)), held in Rwanda in June 2022, concluded with [the admission of Gabon and Togo as members of the Commonwealth](#). The French speaking countries are the first new members to join the Commonwealth since Rwanda was admitted in 2009.

A key [criterion for joining the Commonwealth](#) is the requirement for applicant states to accept and comply with Commonwealth values, such as those included in the [Harare Declaration](#) of 1991 and the [Commonwealth Charter](#) adopted in 2012, and demonstrate commitment to democracy, rule of law and the realisation of human rights. As CHRI expressed in 2009 in the [assessment of Rwanda's application for membership](#), it is crucial that the procedure for membership to the Commonwealth carefully considers the State's track record on human rights promotion and protection, good governance and democracy.

Once admitted, members of the association must not only continue to uphold Commonwealth values, but also put in place mechanisms to monitor their compliance. Indeed, the Commonwealth has in the past condemned the actions of some Member States, or suspended their membership, as was the case with [Nigeria](#) in 1995 and [Fiji](#) in 2009 - the two countries were readmitted once democracy was restored.

We agree with the 2007 Report on 'Membership of the Commonwealth', wherein the Committee on Commonwealth Membership affirmed that "adherence to the

Commonwealth's fundamental principles and values must remain the core criteria." The Committee further stated that "it is these values that define the modern Commonwealth and bind its members together." In this report, the Committee recommended as a core criteria for membership, that an applicant country must accept and comply with Commonwealth fundamental values, principles, and priorities; and that it must demonstrate commitment to democracy and democratic processes, the rule of law and independence of the judiciary, good governance, and the protection of human rights.

The decision to admit States to the Commonwealth must be made with great care, with full consideration of the applicant's record on human rights and democracy, as such decisions become a precedent for future applications.

[Gabon](#) and [Togo](#) have recently made some positive efforts towards affirming the promotion of human rights, such as integrating human rights mechanisms and policies into national legislation. However, cases of human rights violations are still prevalent. Between 2017 and 2018, [violations of the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly](#) were reported, including the suspension of the activities of unions and media expressing the political views of the opposition. During this period, the Government also carried out [arbitrary arrests](#) of members of the opposition. The right to liberty and dignity have also been curtailed in cases of [human trafficking, domestic violence](#) and [harsh prison conditions](#).

In Togo, freedom of expression is under threat as authorities impose media sanctions and threaten the right to privacy through mass surveillance. Additionally, [gender based violence](#) is a continuing problem and children are routinely engaged in the [worst forms of child labour](#) in various sectors of the economy. In 2021, several instances of [torture and other ill treatment](#) were reported against those who were opposed to or accused of destabilising the government.

If the Commonwealth wishes to protect its legitimacy and strengthen its leadership role in the world, it must be vocal in holding its peers to account - the Commonwealth must break its culture of silence.

To ensure that prospective and existing Member States of the Commonwealth uphold Commonwealth human rights principles and values, CHRI urges the Commonwealth Secretariat and Member States to:

1. Establish an Independent Membership Review Commission made up of eminent persons from the Commonwealth, representatives from Commonwealth Accredited Organisations including NGOs, the Commonwealth Foundation, and experts from the applicant State, with a mandate to undertake rigorous scrutiny of applications for Commonwealth membership.

2. As a core criteria for Commonwealth membership, ensure that both existing and prospective Member States adhere to Commonwealth values and principles, including those related to democracy, good governance and human rights.
3. Ensure that a transparent and consistent Commonwealth membership application process is in place, including making public the reports related to assessments of the applicant's compliance with standards of democracy, good governance and human rights.
4. Strengthen the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group ([CMAG](#)), in particular its mandate to assess violations of Commonwealth principles and values and threats to civil society, the media, freedom of expression, association and assembly, ensuring compliance by all Member States.
5. Ensure that issues of democracy, good governance and human rights are given priority when considering future applications for Commonwealth membership, including those of [South Sudan, Suriname and Burundi](#).
6. Provide a platform for periodic peer review of Member State's compliance with the Commonwealth's principles and values, including an inclusive process to propose recommendations to improve human rights standards.
7. Strengthen the Commonwealth Secretariat's Human Rights Unit by increasing resources and expanding its mandate to mainstream human rights in the work of the Secretariat, and to promote and support compliance with human rights principles and standards by Member States.

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The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-governmental, non-profit, organisation with offices in New Delhi, London, and Accra,. Since 1987, it has worked for the practical realisation of human rights through research, strategic advocacy, capacity building, engagement and mobilisation within the Commonwealth. CHRI specialises in the areas of access to justice, with a focus on police and prison reforms, and access to information. It works to address pressures on the freedom of expression and on media rights, as well as building the capacity of civil society in Small States to access UN human rights mechanisms. CHRI also works to support the achievement of SDG Target 8.7 and the eradication of contemporary forms of slavery and human trafficking through research and grassroots mobilisation.