



# THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL CHIEFS IN COMMUNITY-BASED EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS AGAINST THE THREAT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN NORTHERN TOGO

## INTRODUCTION

Since 1 November 2021, the Savanes region<sup>1</sup> in northern Togo has faced insecurity due to jihadist attacks against the defence and security forces (FDS), especially in the prefecture of Kpendjal. The attack that took place in May 2022, claimed by the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) (Khalfaoui, 2025), led to the region being placed under a state of emergency from June 2022, and this measure has been extended until February 2026 (République Togolaise, 2025). In October 2025, according to UNHCR (2025), there were nearly 52,416 displaced persons in the region, 97% of whom were school-age children.

This situation is part of a wider trend of growing unrest in West Africa and the Lake Chad basin, whose epicentre is located in the Sahel region (Baudais et al., 2021; NATO, 2022). In 2024, Togo was considered to have experienced its worst year in terms of terrorism since the creation of the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2025). Violent extremism (VE) is defined as 'a willingness to resort to violence or support its use in the belief that it is the only way to resolve political, social or ideological conflicts' (G5 Sahel, 2020, p. 9)<sup>2</sup>. For traditional chiefs (TCs), VE mainly relates to murder, destruction of property, and any act that causes disorder, violence, or behaviour deemed unacceptable within the community. Security and civil-military strategies have shown their limitations<sup>3</sup>: jihadist attacks have increased, exacerbating the vulnerability of local communities (UNDP Togo, 2024; Khalfaoui, 2025). An alternative approach consists in mobilising local populations through the mechanisms of the Comité interministériel de prévention et de lutte contre l'extrémisme violent (Interministerial Committee for the Prevention and Combating of Violent Extremism, CIPLEV)<sup>4</sup>, implemented at the prefectural, cantonal, and local levels, where TCs<sup>5</sup> are key actors on the ground (Bogoulan, 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Owing to the difficulty of collecting data in the Savanes region, our chosen study area covers seven cantons in the prefectures of Kéran and Dankpen in the Kara region, which lie near the border with the Savanes region. <sup>2</sup> All translations from French into English are our own. <sup>3</sup> For example, in February and March 2021 units belonging to Operation Koundjouraré were reportedly involved in the repression of demonstrations by the population in the Savanes region, who were demanding the restoration of basic social services in the region. <sup>4</sup> The Comité interministériel de prévention et de lutte contre l'extrémisme violent was created by decree on 20 June 2019 in the framework of the Internal Security Act of 12 August 2019. CIPLEV coordinates community actions aimed at preventing violent extremism in Togo. It works at the prefectural, cantonal, and local levels through the CPPLEV, CCPLLEV, and CLPLEV (Comité préfectoral / cantonale / locale etc.). These tools are part of national plans to fight violent extremism, including the National Strategy 2022-2026 and the Programme d'urgence pour la région des Savanes (Emergency Programme for the Savanes Region, PURS) (Khalfaoui, 2025). <sup>5</sup> Traditional chiefs have been granted legal status in Togo. In reality, there are three types of traditional chiefs depending on the territorial unit: cantons, villages, and neighbourhoods may have a canton chief, a village chief, or a neighbourhood chief respectively. Only canton chiefs and village chiefs have legal status under Law No. 2007-002 of 8 January 2007 on traditional chieftancy and the status of traditional chiefs in Togo. Neighbourhood chiefs have social status, but not legal recognition. This is why only canton chiefs and village chiefs were interviewed during data collection.

This article is based on a qualitative approach combining documentary analysis, 22 in-depth interviews with TCs (7 canton chiefs and 15 village chiefs) conducted in seven cantons near the border between the Savanes and Kara regions, and a focus group with members of CIPLEV. As the Savanes region is inaccessible as a result of the ongoing state of emergency, we collected data in nearby areas that face similar public policies and have similar socio-cultural traits. The data collected makes it possible to study the role of TCs in the security system for combating VE (1). These chiefs appear to be the primary actors in intervention and community mobilisation for the prevention of violent extremism (PVE) (2). There are dynamics of cooperation but also tensions between TCs and the FDS, local authorities (municipal and prefectural authorities), and NGOs (3). These dynamics have a direct impact on PVE (4), leading to several recommendations for the actors concerned.

## 1 THE ROLE OF TCS IN THE STATE SYSTEM FOR PREVENTING AND COMBATING VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN TOGO

In Togo, the integration of traditional chieftancy into the system for combating VE rests on a legal and institutional framework, developed over time, that recognises the role of TCs in maintaining stability at the local level. Law No. 2007-002 established traditional chieftancy as an institution within territorial administration, with responsibility for preserving 'customs and traditions' and maintaining social cohesion. TCs have powers of arbitration and conciliation, and represent populations in dealings with the state and other actors. In the context of PVE, several TCs have taken part in meetings aimed at raising their awareness of security issues and assigning them a role in 'community monitoring'. One canton chief explained:

'There are meetings that bring us together to discuss violent extremism, and we're members of these committees alongside the security services. When someone sees a stranger, they must report it immediately<sup>6</sup>.'

However, these mechanisms remain fragile, as they rely on the transfer of security responsibilities to local actors with limited means. Several chiefs point to a lack of communication and transport resources, which hinders the follow-up of reports. One canton chief observed:

'resources may not be made available to us, even telephone resources or transport. We have to manage on our own<sup>7</sup>.'

The state apparatus follows a 'community-based security' or 'bottom-up' approach (Hagberg et al., 2017; Bouhlel, 2020; Autes-serre, 2021), whereby TCs act as relays for alerts and screening, feeding information to the FDS, but without being granted material resources commensurate with their responsibilities.

## 2 TCS AS KEY ACTORS IN COMMUNITY ACTION AND MOBILISATION FOR PVE

TCs play a key role in PVE, grounded in their legitimacy as customary authorities and their day-to-day proximity to local populations, which grant them a capacity to watch over the community and serve as go-betweens. They act as security alert relays, drawing on village information networks that encourage the reporting of any unfamiliar presence or behaviour deemed suspicious. One chief stated:

'If someone is hosting a stranger, they should report it, otherwise that stranger would be considered suspicious<sup>8</sup>.'

TCs also act as mediators between the population and the FDS. A village chief explained:

'If a stranger arrives and we don't know him, I take him to the canton chief so that he knows where he comes from<sup>9</sup>.'

This intermediary role helps to facilitate the work of the FDS while maintaining the trust of the population. Prevention also involves raising awareness among young people<sup>9</sup>. Several chiefs identified poverty and unemployment as factors that make people vulnerable to indoctrination. One canton chief noted:

'Young people get involved in it because of poverty and unemployment. We encourage them to learn a trade, or to farm or raise livestock, rather than succumbing to this scourge.'

The mobilisation of TCs also draws on cultural and religious values, acting as vectors of social cohesion. One chief noted:

'Everyone has the right to practise their religion, whether Muslim or Christian. What's not right is killing a man to change his religion.'

TCs therefore see themselves as 'moral guardians'<sup>9</sup> of their communities, capable of addressing the people directly, which gives them strong symbolic weight. One village chief explained:

'I was chosen<sup>10</sup> as a local chief for this reason, to manage and raise awareness. The population knows me, they listen to me.'

Through their customary networks, TCs gather information that the state cannot directly control and, despite material constraints, constitute the 'front line' of the national security system.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted 11 August 2025. <sup>7</sup> Interview conducted 13 August 2025. <sup>8</sup> There is a lack of official data on the number of young people who have joined terrorist groups in Togo. While a report indicates that 200 Ghanaians have been recruited into jihadist groups (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2022), it does not mention any cases involving Togo. Initiatives in the country are mainly focused on prevention (Koffi, 2022). <sup>9</sup> Interview conducted 18 August 2025. <sup>10</sup> Article 10 of Law No. 2007-002 of 8 January 2007 states that a traditional chief in Togo can be appointed and installed in two ways: by hereditary succession or by popular consultation.

### COOPERATION BETWEEN TCS AND OTHER ACTORS INVOLVED IN PVE, AND ITS IMPACT ON THE OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED SECURITY SYSTEM

The success of mechanisms for PVE relies heavily on the ability of TCs to work with state authorities and local actors. TCs are mobilised as partners in a complementary relationship with the FDS, whom they see as allies in preserving local peace. As one canton chief observed:

'there isn't any issue between them [TCs] and the security forces... they know full well that the security presence is there for their benefit, that they have to work together'<sup>11</sup>.

A canton chief explained:

'Very often, if someone sees a stranger, they report it so that the authorities can ask where the person is from'.

The informal partnership between chiefs, populations, and security forces transforms villages into spaces of collective vigilance, helping to cut the risk of infiltration and boost the sense of security. Another chief added:

'Since it started up until now, there hasn't been a single case of violent extremism... they know that their message is getting through to their community.'

These comments attest to the positive impact of local coordination on territorial stability.

The participation of TCs in joint training sessions on terrorism and VE (ATOP, 2023; IOM, 2022; Ministère de l'Administration Territoriale, 2025) with the security forces, particularly within the framework of CIPLEV, strengthens their capacity for action and for integration into prevention mechanisms. As one canton chief explained:

'We were instructed on what to do before, after, and how... it was a colonel who trained us for that'.

These courses help spread a community-based culture of vigilance and shared responsibility, in which chiefs act as teachers and go-betweens, translating national orders into guidance adapted to local needs. The impact of cooperation is therefore twofold: it strengthens trust between institutions and populations, and it promotes participatory security governance based on the smooth flow of information and the empowerment of residents.

Cooperation also strengthens social cohesion in areas weakened by poverty and religious diversity. TCs mobilise cultural and religious values to promote tolerance and prevent extremist speech. As a village chief explained to us:

Unlike imported religions, our customs and traditions don't impose a single religion on everyone. No one says that their religion is the best. I attend other religious events whenever I'm invited; sometimes celebrations, or weddings, or funerals among Christians or Muslims<sup>12</sup>.

Traditional celebrations become key moments for raising awareness and promoting solidarity, thereby embedding prevention in local symbolic practices and strengthening the sustainability of the security system. Interfaith peace remains a reality in Togo (Köbrich, 2025).

Finally, cooperation between TCs and state bodies has improved communication between the state (prefects, municipal mayors) and rural communities. As local intermediaries, TCs help communities take ownership of prevention-orientated public policies<sup>13</sup>, and allow the state to adapt its interventions to the situation on the ground. Chiefs act as transmission channels between administrative institutions and populations, strengthening perceptions of the legitimacy of public action. A village chief summarised the situation in these terms:

'We're closer to the people than the government or councillors. And the people ask a lot of us.'

### CONFLICTUAL RELATIONS BETWEEN TCS AND OTHER ACTORS INVOLVED IN PVE

Tensions between TCs and other actors involved in PVE stem mainly from a lack of resources, a lack of statutory recognition, and a failure to enforce laws. These tensions, variously attributed to the government, state authorities, or security institutions, are sometimes exacerbated by community resistance, which limits the potential impact of traditional chieftancy in the fight against VE.

Several TCs expressed a feeling of marginalisation, and lamented a lack of respect on the part of the authorities, which contributes to a gradual loss of their legitimacy (Lavagnon, 2010). One canton chief indicated that chiefs are only consulted on an ad hoc basis, particularly for meetings or community issues, in contrast to the importance accorded to TCs in Ghana. Furthermore, the legal powers granted to chiefs remain unclear, which increases their institutional fragility<sup>14</sup>.

Another source of conflict concerns the lack of institutional follow-up on reports submitted by TCs. When individuals who have been reported are released owing to lack of evidence of wrongdoing, some chiefs feel that their credibility has been undermined, not because of the decision itself, but because of the lack of feedback from the relevant authorities on the action taken in response

<sup>11</sup> Traditional chieftancy coexists with several community institutions at the local level. These include the prefecture, municipal authorities, local development committees, citizens' offices, and civil society organisations. All these institutions collaborate with one another, either within institutional frameworks, such as those of CIPLEV, or in less formal settings, such as community meetings. <sup>12</sup> Interview conducted 12 August 2025. <sup>13</sup> In this case, public policies constitute 'state initiatives' with three main dimensions: strengthening security through a military approach, promoting development as a way of improving basic social services, and creating social projects. <sup>14</sup> Articles 20-22 of Law No. 2007-002 define TCs as guardians of customs and traditions, with responsibility for social cohesion, and with powers for customary arbitration and representing populations before the state. They also provide for consultation with TCs on local development issues, but without specifying in operational terms their powers or their actual role in security arrangements, which contributes to the vagueness surrounding their powers.

to the reports. In this context, the expectation of sanctions, even small ones, reflects a demand for recognition of their role. This failure of communication fuels frustration and is one of the unintended consequences of the collaboration between TCs and the FDS. Forms of institutional indifference are also seen at the municipal level. One canton chief complained that, since the death of a mayor who actively supported the CIPLEV scheme, the new mayor has not maintained that support, which shows a lack of commitment and support for TCs.

Finally, lack of resources is a common cause of tension. TCs and members of their committees (cantonal or village development committees, 'scouts'), who are often volunteers, receive neither a salary nor allowances. The occasional support provided by the state (such as telephone credits) during CIPLEV training courses is considered insufficient and is not sustained. One canton chief indicated that the lack of sustained support and funds for projects gives the impression that promises are merely 'flattery'. Canton chiefs also highlighted the difficulties in mobilising and motivating their subordinates (village or neighbourhood chiefs, members of local development committees). During feedback meetings, participants ask for incentives or financial compensation, which the chiefs, lacking state support, cannot provide. TCs also sometimes face resistance at the community level, which can create tensions. While collaboration with the population is generally effective, some TCs encounter acts of resistance or insults. One canton leader reported being accused of not being 'honest' and of wanting to 'eat the state's money' because of his involvement in monitoring activities.

## CONCLUSION

The role of TCs in PVE is central and multifaceted. It is based on awareness-raising, community monitoring, and conflict mediation.

Collaboration between TCs and the FDS, through CIPLEV mechanisms, is considered to be effective and direct. Local initiatives, such as the setting up of 'scouts' or night-time monitoring committees, show local resilience. TCs acknowledge the positive impact of these actions, which help reduce violence and maintain a calmer climate in their areas.

However, the effectiveness of PVE is undermined by a lack of resources, recognition, and authority, weak monitoring of actions, insufficient training for young people and monitoring committees, and administrative tensions. The exposure of young people to risk factors remains a major challenge.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations listed below aim to move TCs from a largely voluntary role with limited institutional backing to a structured and sustainable institutional partnership.

Actor	Specific recommendations	Rationale (impact on PVE)
Central government	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provide transport (motorcycles, bicycles) and communication (mobile phones, credit) to TCs and monitoring committees.</li> <li>2. Formalise the status of TCs through official decrees or authorisations.</li> <li>3. Set up clear, strict tracking of projects, funding, and reported cases, while clarifying to TCs that reporting a suspect will not necessarily lead to a conviction.</li> <li>4. Develop income-generating projects and job opportunities for young people, including both graduates and non-graduates.</li> </ol>	<p>Ensures quick reporting and subsequent action by the FDS.</p> <p>Strengthens the authority of TCs and motivates volunteers to undertake long-term action.</p> <p>Strengthens the population's understanding of TC's reporting role.</p> <p>Reduces economic vulnerability, which is the main driver of recruitment to extremist groups.</p>
Local authorities (prefects, municipalities)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Guarantee ongoing support (telephone credit, fuel for travel).</li> <li>2. Accelerate the creation of conflict-resolution committees (for disputes over land, between herders and farmers, etc.) to relieve TCs of the burden of these frequent disputes.</li> </ol>	<p>Maintains the operational capacity of CIPLEV mechanisms and the mobilisation of TCs.</p> <p>Allows TCs to focus on PVE instead of internal disputes.</p>
TCs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continue—under the responsibility of the state and its partners—training for TCs and monitoring committees on PVE, identifying suspects, and communicating with the FDS.</li> <li>2. Continue harnessing cultural values and gatherings to promote social cohesion and indirect awareness-raising.</li> </ol>	<p>Improves prevention methods and the impact of monitoring activities.</p> <p>Anchors PVE in TCs' moral and cultural authority, and supports social harmony.</p>
NGOs and development partners	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use field studies to design projects tailored to local needs (means of communication, financing of income-generating activities, training in conflict management).</li> <li>2. Provide support in partnership with local authorities, in order to strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of the community-based security mechanism.</li> </ol>	<p>Ensures that aid is relevant and has a direct impact on reducing vulnerability.</p> <p>Complements government action, by focusing efforts where logistical deficits are most critical.</p>

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Funded by the European Union

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