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AHMED SEKOU TOURE, A RADICAL HERO

By ERIC PACE

To Ahmed Sekou Toure, the President of Guinea, who died Monday in a Cleveland hospital, it was better for his western African country to live in poverty than to accept what he denounced as "riches in slavery" as part of the French Community.

The President, a towering charismatic and radical figure in Africa's post-colonial history, led his country to independence from France in 1958 and ruled it with a strong hand for 26 years. The 62-year-old leader was black Africa’s longest serving head of state. He presided over one of the world's poorest nations.

The Guinea radio said the President died of an apparent heart attack. He had gone to the Cleveland Clinic Monday for emergency heart treatment, and a spokesman there said yesterday that the President had succumbed during heart surgery.

Organizing a referendum in 1958 that rejected close ties with France, Mr. Toure said, "Guinea prefers poverty in freedom to riches in slavery."

After rejecting French ties, Mr. Toure made his country into a closed Soviet client state, and his Democratic Party of Guinea into its only political organization. Rights Violations Charged In his continent's troubled political landscape, Mr. Toure proved so strong a figure since becoming President in 1958 that he was called the Elephant and was repeatedly re-elected. From 1958 to 1972, he also served as his country's Prime Minister.

Mr. Toure ruled sternly, foiling repeated coup and assassination plots and drawing charges from Amnesty International and other human rights organizations that his rule was highly oppressive.

Over the years he variously charged that he was the target of plotting by the Soviet Union and Western nations, although he took economic aid from both sides.

He also repeatedly voiced distrust of other African countries while, by some estimates, 1.5 million Guineans fled to exile in such neighboring nations as Sierra Leone. Tensions within Guinea were underscored as more than a dozen of Mr. Toure's government ministers died in prison or by hanging or shooting and more than a dozen others received life prison sentences.

After Guinean exiles charged two years ago that Mr. Toure's regime "practices tyranny and torture on a daily basis" and that several high Guinean diplomats had disappeared, a State...
Department official declared, "While we have expressed concern over the Sekou Toure Government's performance with regard to human rights, we have noted the progress he has made in this area." U.S. Investments Sought

Mr. Toure's reply to such criticism was to offer to open Guinean prisons to inspection by any other African head of state who was prepared to take similar action. And diplomats in West Africa who were generally critical of Mr. Toure said that in the late 1970's his regime ceased carrying out executions, torture and mass arrests.

After his earlier policies turned Guinea into a Marxist enclave in the 1960's and 1970's, Mr. Toure reversed them with fanfare. At a news conference in Washington in July 1982, he urged greater American private investment in Guinea, which he said had "fabulous economic potential." United State diplomats said his appeal was almost a confession that Marxism had been a failure in his homeland.

A tropical country of 95,000 square miles on the West African coast, Guinea had an annual per capita income of only $140 at the time, although it has rich deposits of uranium, bauxite, iron ore and diamonds. The life expectancy of its five million inhabitants was still only 41 years and only 10 percent could read and write.

Yet Mr. Toure's passion for independence from outside influence caused him to lead his country into becoming, in 1958, the first French West African territory in West Africa to reject membership in the French Community despite an appeal by Charles de Gaulle, then Prime Minister, in Conakry, the Guinean capital.

It was then that Mr. Toure spurned "riches in slavery."

General de Gaulle angrily replied: "Then all you have to do is to vote 'no.' I pledge myself that nobody will stand in the way of your independence."

The Guinean electorate did vote no in the referendum and Guinea proclaimed itself a republic in October of that year. Work in the Post Office

In Mr. Toure's view, such defiance of France was his by birthright; he said he was descended from Samory Toure, an African hero who fought against French rule until his capture by the French in 1898.

The future President was born Jan. 9, 1922, in Faranah, an inland village beside the Niger River, one of seven children of Alpha and Aminata Toure. His father was a peasant farmer of the Malinke tribe.

The boy was raised a Moslem, attending a Koranic school and French primary schools. He then went to the Georges Poiret Technical College in Conakry where at the age of 15 he was expelled for leading a strike in protest against the school's food.

While still in his teens, he went to work in the postal and communications service of French Guinea in 1921, toiling in Conakry's post office.
A handsome young man with an infectious smile, he became a powerful public speaker in French as well as in African tongues. While in his early 20's he became active in the union representing postal and communications workers, rising to become its secretary general and taking it into the powerful Confederation Generale du Travail, the Communist-dominated French labor federation.

He held other high labor posts and went on to become, in 1946, one of the main organizers of the African Democratic Rally, a popular-front organization active in 12 French African territories. Known for His Eloquence

In the 1950's, he took a seat in the Guinean Legislative Assembly, became secretary general of the Guinean Democratic Party, Mayor of Conakry and a representative from Guinea to the French National Assembly, where he was known for his eloquence.

After Mr. Toure became President, many in France regarded him as a Communist, yet he managed to stay uncommitted. And those who knew him said any Marxist leaning he might have were secondary to his African nationalist zeal.

Mr. Toure's later years in office were sometimes stormy as well as full of change. He was the first African president to visit China, which also gave Guinea aid. In 1966 he briefly detained the American Ambassador for purported involvement in the seizure of Guinea's Foreign Minister in Ghana. When Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana went into exile in the same year, Mr. Toure invited him to replace him as Guinea's President.

Mr. Toure repeatedly claimed the West German Government was financing plots to kill him, and in 1971, asserting that soldiers from France and other European nations were poised to invade Guinea, he dismissed his armed forces' chief.

In that year, the Guinea Government radio reported that a "carnival atmosphere" prevailed in the country after the hanging of a number of what it called "Fifth Columnists." Criticism ensued from the president of the Council of Europe and from the World Council of Churches.

But Mr. Toure's stature in the third world was underscored by his becoming head of a nine-member Islamic mediation mission striving to end the Iran-Iraq war.

The decorations that Mr. Toure's received over the years included the Lenin Peace Prize, which he was awarded in 1960, and the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor of France.

Mr. Toure was married twice and said he had 50 children.