US and UN give tacit backing to Guinea Bissau coup

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A successful coup d'état in Guinea Bissau in West Africa has ousted President Kumba Yala and his Prime Minister Mario Pires. Yala later resigned to give the process a gloss of legality.

Yala's resignation came 24 hours after the coup leaders refused to reinstate him and declared that the coup was irreversible, despite official condemnation from all quarters, including the African Union, the United Nations, the United States and the former colonial power Portugal. These early objections were soon put aside as the coup was broadly welcomed inside the country. Foreign governments are already starting to make diplomatic contacts with the new regime.

The bloodless coup took place in the early hours of Sunday, September 14, the day after Yala postponed elections set for October. This was the fourth postponement since he suspended parliament last November following a vote of no confidence in his presidency.

The coup was led by Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces General Verissimo Correia Seabra, who claimed no intention of remaining in power. "We are in an unusual situation," he declared. "We are in a country with no constitution, no judiciary, no parliament, a crazy country, in other words." He insisted that it was not a coup, "but the putting right of a confused, intolerable situation." The 32-man junta also cited the ongoing friction between Yala and Pires as cause for action.

Yala's reign had become untenable, with the country bankrupt, public sector salaries unpaid for nine months and rumblings of discontent within the military and general population. The austerity measures required by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank in order for Guinea Bissau to continue servicing its debt led Yala to increasingly dictatorial measures, including numerous reshuffles and sackings of cabinet members, the sacking of high court judges and the attorney general and the appointment and sacking of five prime ministers.

Yala was accused of favouring his own Balante ethnic group (30 percent of the population, including most of the army) to the detriment of the Muslims who are almost half of the population. As part of a general clampdown and silencing of his political opponents Yala suspended the activities of the Ahmadiyya Islamic group, accusing it of destabilising the Muslim population.

The austerity measures required by international finance capital have provoked numerous strikes amongst public sector workers, who are owed nine months back pay. The National Union of Guinean Workers called off a general strike it had been organising earlier and urged people to return to work. The coup was widely welcomed by the population, who hope for both their wages and for elections.

Guinea Bissau is approximately the size of Taiwan, and is ranked 167 out of 173 in the UN's Human Development Index. The average wage is only 50 cents per day, with 88 percent of the 1.3 million population surviving on less than a dollar a day, according to World Bank figures. Life expectancy is between 45 and 50 years and food shortages are considered normal. These dire conditions were exacerbated by a civil war in the late 1990s, in which thousands were killed and many more made homeless and refugees.

In June, the UN declared Guinea Bissau to be on a downward course. Its economy is entirely dependent on cashew nuts, which account for 95 percent of its exports, and on foreign aid, much of which has been withheld recently in protest at the postponement of

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elections.

An editorial in the *Nation* of Nairobi draws a comparison between the coup in Guinea Bissau and the coup last July in São Tomé and Principe, both of which are former Portuguese colonies. In São Tomé, President Fradique de Menezes resumed control under pressure from foreign governments, particularly the US administration.

"It turns out, however, that Mr. Menezes was restored to power only because São Tomé is oil-rich and he had only just returned from a visit to the US, where he was feted and praised by President George Bush. The military was forced to hand back power because the world's most powerful states felt they couldn't trust São Tomé's oil wealth to an army. Bissau, on the other hand, is dirt poor."

The junta has established a 16-member committee headed by Archbishop Jose Comnate to oversee the establishment of a transitional government and plans for elections, which are pencilled in for six months time with presidential elections a year later. Despite initially placing the president and prime minister under house arrest, the junta has stated it does not object to Yala personally and he is free to stay in the country.

The committee has appointed businessman and ex-head of the National Electoral Commission, Henrique Rosa, as interim president and Antonio Artur Sanha as prime minister. Rosa is very close to the Catholic hierarchy and is a Balante. Sanha is secretary general of the ruling Social Renovation Party of former president Yala. Fifteen of the 17 parties consulted by the military objected to his appointment.

The objections were based on Sanha having been charged with killing a woman, Florinda Baptista, with whom he had a relationship in 2001. Yala removed him from government at the time of her death, though the charges were dropped for lack of evidence.

It would appear that IMF/World Bank pressure has required someone less erratic than Yala to control Guinea Bissau. The army, which has forces currently serving in an ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) peacekeeping force in Liberia, is the bulwark upon which the international agencies rely. Yala's tenure was sandwiched between two periods of military control of government and it is the military that will decide who shall be the next leader, based ultimately on the requirements of international capital.

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