

Instability threatens Guinea after presidential election

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There are growing concerns that Guinea in West Africa could fall prey to the same instability as Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire).

The Guinean regime of Lansana Conté relies on similar methods of rule to those once employed by Liberia's Charles Taylor: internal repression, anti-foreigner rhetoric and support for armed groups that cause havoc for neighbouring countries. The difference is that while Taylor was condemned by Western governments, Conté has until recently enjoyed the backing of the United States, Britain and others. There are now signs that this support may be reduced or withdrawn, as the danger of instability increases in Guinea.

Guinea held elections on December 21 of last year, but these were boycotted by all the main opposition parties. According to the final official results, validated by the Supreme Court on January 8, President Lansana Conté, who seized power in a 1984 coup, was again elected with 95.2 percent of the vote. The government raised its claim for the turnout from 82.8 percent to 85.6 percent, although these claims are at odds with the low-key campaign and the lack of popular enthusiasm for the poll. The Republican Front for Democratic Change (FRAD) alliance of opposition parties, which boycotted the poll, estimated the turnout at less than 15 percent. FRAD chairman Ba Mamadou said, "We will not recognise the result, and, as far as we are concerned, we still do not have a president after the election."

Boubah.com, a Guinean news site, compared the results to those of elections in Iraq under Saddam Hussein (due to the high proportion of votes that Conté has claimed for himself). But in this contest between the incumbent president and a previously unknown member of a pro-government party, there was never any doubt about the outcome.

No international observers were sent in, due to the lack of an independent electoral commission.

Before the election, dozens of soldiers were detained in Conakry, the capital, in what was claimed to be a response to a coup attempt. Both before the election and since, any sign of independent reporting by the Guinean media has been met with police measures.

Conté is only the second president of Guinea since the country became independent, having seized power after the death of Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré. He is 69 and

suffers long-term illness linked to diabetes and heart problems, and can barely walk. His visits abroad are mainly for health reasons. There is currently no clear successor, although *Africa Confidential* names Fodé Soumah, a vice-governor of the central bank, as the man Conté is grooming for the role.

Since Guinea's constitution limited Conté's period in office to two five-year terms, he changed it by means of a referendum to allow himself to run for a third term—after nearly 20 years in power—and extended the term of office to seven years. The referendum also gave him the power to appoint local officials and supreme court judges.

Conté's regime routinely arrests political opponents (such as Alpha Condé, an opposition leader who was kept in jail for more than one and a half years), rigs elections and makes inflammatory speeches against the immigrant communities in Guinea, which have led to widespread attacks on immigrants. *Africa Confidential* describes the arrest and incarceration of a number of opposition leaders and then comments, "Ordinary opposition activists have also found themselves on the wrong end of the security forces' strong arm. Reports of serious human rights abuses trickle out."

For several years, Guinea has been the main backer of the rebel group Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) in Liberia. Lisa Misol, arms researcher for Human Rights Watch (HRW), said, "It's appalling that Guinea—a current member of the Security Council—has flouted the arms embargo on Liberia. The Security Council must hold Guinea accountable for this major breach."

This was following the release of a Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper in November 2003, detailing Guinea's support for LURD. This paper stated, "The government of Guinea, which facilitated the illicit supply of mortar rounds, bears an important measure of responsibility for the atrocities. It has long provided military and logistical support for LURD—despite LURD's documented record of committing violations of international humanitarian law amounting to war crimes and serious human rights abuses."

A section of the report entitled "Guinea's history of support for LURD" states that this support began in 1999, and was instrumental in LURD's advances on Monrovia, the Liberian capital, in which many were killed and thousands injured.

HRW explains, “While the US and Britain have admitted no involvement, the groups involved were in contact with military officers from these countries, and certainly disenchantment with Taylor runs high in both London and Washington.”

While their investigation “has not found evidence that US military aid to Guinea was directly misused, in terms of US-supplied weapons being forwarded to LURD,” it appears likely that the ability to get military aid from the US allowed Guinea to use weapons from other sources (including Iran and the UAE) to supply the LURD.

After years of unconditional US military aid for Guinea, “In 2002 the military aid package to Guinea included a \$3 million training program for a light infantry battalion,” but made this “conditional on Guinea’s breaking its ties to the Liberian insurgents.”

A probable reason for this change in tack can be seen in the *CIA Factbook on Guinea*, in which words of praise from the IMF and World Bank are followed by a more pessimistic assessment: “However, fighting along the Sierra Leonean and Liberian borders has caused major economic disruptions. In addition to direct defense costs, the violence has led to a sharp decline in investor confidence.”

France has long complained of double standards used by the US and Britain in opposing the regime of Charles Taylor in Liberia while supporting that of Conté in Guinea.

More than a million refugees from neighbouring Liberia, Cote d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone have sought shelter over the past decade in Guinea. There is a constant flux of refugees across the borders of Guinea and its neighbouring countries. Around 100,000 former migrants, who had been living in the Ivory Coast until troubles erupted there, have recently been forced to return to Guinea, and many are now eking out an existence without any stable income or food source. More than 100,000 people are living in refugee camps, and a recent survey estimated that another 50,000 mainly young refugees are living on the streets of the major cities. Attacks on Guinea’s borders from both Liberia and Sierra Leone began in 2000, and this helped to turn the local populations against the refugees living amongst them. To enhance their numbers, rebel groups have often coerced refugees into joining.

The influential International Crisis Group (ICG) based in Brussels has produced a detailed report on Guinea, which concentrates on the dangers of its being destabilised. “Guinea’s reputation for public passivity through police intimidation can no longer be taken as given,” according to Stephen Ellis, director of the Africa Program at ICG. “People are suffering heavily from the country’s social and economic crisis, and the leadership’s suppression of critical voices through state violence is now serving only to radicalise the population.”

As an example of “strong social agitation” in Conakry and other cities, the ICG makes references to strikes by students in the first half of 2003.

The ICG report explains that tens of thousands of former

LURD combatants are now idle, following the end of fighting in Liberia, and these could take up similar activities in Guinea due to the unstable situation there.

Recognising that the “flawed” elections will not solve Guinea’s problems, the ICG’s expectation is that Conté’s death will result in a military coup and worries that divisions in the army may cause difficulties.

Guinea is a mineral-rich country with a third of the world’s bauxite reserves (the ore from which aluminium is made), as well as gold, diamonds and vast deposits of iron ore. The country is the world’s second largest producer of bauxite, but the economy has suffered from a world drop in its price.

Basic infrastructure such as roads, telephones, railways and electricity are in a bad state, and water and electricity cutoffs are frequent. Inflation for essential items is high. From 1984 to 2001, infant mortality for those under five years old rose from 120 to 180 per thousand.

Guinea is also being squeezed by the IMF and European Union, which are refusing to make additional loans until it “repairs relations with donors,” in the words of *Africa Confidential*. After many years of support for Conté’s regime, the US is now also trying to disengage from it. The new undersecretary of state for African affairs, Charles Snyder, has publicly advised Conté to follow the example of ex-Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi, and go into retirement.

Conté has performed a useful service for the US in taking Guinea away from its former orientation to the Soviet Union under the previous ruler, Sekou Touré. With the dissolution of the USSR, however, the US no longer needs the services of men like Conté and is now seeking to exploit Guinea’s resources more directly.



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