

Guinea Bissau: President assassinated in impoverished West African country

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On March 2 President João Bernardo Vieira of Guinea Bissau was assassinated in his own home by soldiers loyal to army chief of staff, General Batista Tagme Na Waie. Na Waie died the day before in a bomb blast in his office at military headquarters.

Na Waie's supporters blamed Vieira for his murder, although the military has stated that a group of renegade soldiers were responsible. Since Vieira's assassination the parliamentary speaker has been sworn in as interim president.

The political instability in this country, the impact of the Bretton Woods institutions on its economy, and the dire poverty suffered by the vast majority of the population, are not dissimilar to many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

Guinea Bissau became a Portuguese possession in the late 19th century. The boundaries of the tiny state were determined in 1886 by European powers partitioning Africa amongst themselves.

From 1961 onwards, the country's local inhabitants waged a successful guerrilla war against their colonial overlords, forcing their withdrawal from the territory and unilaterally declaring independence in 1973.

Following the fall of Salazar and his successor, Caetano, in Lisbon (partially precipitated by the Portuguese military's losses in their colonies), Guinea Bissau, then known as Portuguese Guinea, was formally granted independence along with all other Portuguese territories in Africa in 1974.

The newly independent country was ruled by a government under Luis Cabral. By the late 1970s, Vieira, initially one of Cabral's aides, rose to the position of prime minister and army commander. Attempts to build a nationally based economy, with grandiose schemes such as the building of an automobile plant in Bissau, the capital, ran into difficulties by the late 1970s.

In 1980 Vieira led a coup, ousting Cabral and installing himself as president. Soon afterwards he led a purge of the military forces, executing many army officers and banishing his rival, Na Waie, to an island off the coast of the country. Vieira established a provisional government responsible to a revolutionary council that he headed.

In 1984 Vieira dissolved the revolutionary council and established a single party government. Under this system, the president presided over the council of state and served as head of state and government. The president was also head of the PAIGC (Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde) and commander in chief of the armed forces. Vieira's rule was characterised by the imprisonment and assassination of political opponents, and numerous coup plots.

Having achieved dominance over the army and the organs of government, Vieira began lifting state controls over the economy. Since 1987 the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have had almost complete control over Guinea Bissau's economic policy. Structural Adjustment Programs have aimed at removing price controls, increasing private enterprise and reforming the public sector.

The restructuring of Guinea Bissau's economy according to free market principles has been socially catastrophic. Guinea Bissau is ranked amongst the ten poorest countries on earth. The average life expectancy is 45, with 43 percent of the population lacking access to safe drinking water, resulting in many infections and disease. Many of these ailments are easily preventable and treatable, but for the almost complete absence of medical services other than those provided by aid organisations. According to the United Nations Development Programme, 36.7 percent of the population is not expected to survive past 40. The GDP per capita is \$170 per annum, meaning that almost 90 percent of the population survives on less than 50 US cents a day. The current global economic crisis is almost certain to worsen the situation of the masses.

Most of the country's poor are reliant on agriculture, a sector lacking modern equipment and marked by low productivity. Cashew nuts accounted for more than 90 percent of the country's exports in 2007 and represented more than a quarter of GDP, according to the IMF. The economy contracted from the late 90s to 2007 with per capita income in 2007 nearly 17 percent lower than in 1996. As of January 2008, the country became eligible for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) scheme and although \$180 million was forgiven, over \$600 million is still left owing to Paris Club creditors.

Political and economic life in the country is dominated by a

tiny indigenous bourgeoisie which, in turn, is heavily reliant on the army. Struggles over resources and political power between sections of the bourgeoisie and factions in the army—combined with massive social inequalities—creates a highly unstable social system.

By 1991, Vieira had established almost total control over the country's main institutions. He lifted the ban on political formations other than the ruling PAIGC. In 1994 elections were held, and Vieira was elected as president.

In 1998 he dismissed his army chief of staff, General Mane. There was also increasing dissatisfaction with Vieira in ruling circles, who had proved himself incapable of dealing with the country's economic decline. These factors exploded into a devastating civil war between 1998 and 1999, in which Vieira's government troops backed by Senegal and Equatorial Guinea and a military junta under Mane struggled for control of the country resulting in the near destruction of the capital Bissau and the displacement of over 250,000 people.

The forces led by Mane ousted Vieira, forcing him to flee to Lisbon. In 2000 Kumba Ialá was elected as president.

In 2002 Ialá dismissed the government of Prime Minister Alamara Nhassa, dissolved the National Assembly and called for legislative elections. Two days afterwards, he appointed Prime Minister Maro Pires to lead a caretaker government controlled by presidential decree. These elections were postponed, and in 2003 Ialá was arrested by the army, allegedly for incompetence, and confined to house arrest. General Veríssimo Correia Seabra, the chief of staff of the armed forces, declared himself interim president. In September 2003 businessman Henrique Rosa was sworn in as president. Rosa was considered as someone able to divert and subdue the massive social tensions in a population wracked by poverty.

In October 2004 General Correia Seabra and Colonel Domingos de Baros were killed in a revolt by soldiers demanding payment of arrears owed to them for their service in the UN peacekeeping force in Liberia. No prosecutions were made and the revolt was ended by a deal with the military hierarchy, which included an amnesty for offences committed by soldiers between 1980 and 2004.

In March 2004 Guinea Bissau held legislative elections. Carlos Gomes Júnior became prime minister. After six years of exile in Portugal, Vieira returned to Guinea Bissau and contested the July 2005 presidential elections. The run up to the elections, won by Vieira, was marked by serious unrest with armed attacks on the Interior Ministry, the presidential palace and Vieira's home.

Prime Minister Gomes Júnior refused to accept the outcome of the presidential elections and was dismissed by Vieira. Soon afterwards former PAIGC official Aristide Gomes was installed as prime minister.

The following year fighting erupted between the armed forces and a dissident faction of the Senegalese separatist armed group, MFDC (Mouvements des forces démocratiques due

Casamance) led by Salif Sadio, which had entered Guinea Bissau territory. The fighting led to the isolation of over 20,000 people in the north of the country and the displacement of at least 10,000 people, of whom 2,000 fled to Senegal. The MFDC reportedly laid mines and explosive devices in the area.

In March 2007 the three main political parties, the PAIGC, the PRS (Partido para a Renovação) and PUSD (Partido Unido Social Democrático) agreed to push for a government of consensus and signed up to a stability pact. Vieira opposed the move, and in the same month the Popular Assembly passed a vote of no confidence in his political ally, Prime Minister Gomes, forcing his resignation. Martinho N'Dafa Cabi was appointed as the new prime minister. In February 2008 the PAIGC withdrew its support for Cabi, breaking the stability pact, and in July that year the PAIGC pulled out of the national unity government after its representatives were sacked from senior financial posts.

Vieira, embroiled in a power battle with Cabi, dissolved parliament in August 2008, precipitating the fall of the Cabi government.

In November 2008 Vieira survived an attack on his home by soldiers armed with machine guns and rocket propelled grenades. In January 2009 Na Waie was fired at by members of Vieira's 400-strong bodyguard.

Although media commentary has welcomed the fact that the death of Vieira was not immediately followed by a military coup, there is no reason to believe that the desperate plight of the ordinary citizens of the country will improve.

A further factor in these struggles in Guinea Bissau is the battle for control of a highly lucrative drug trade, which generates an income more than 10 times the national GDP. In recent years Guinea Bissau has become a transit point for drugs, mostly cocaine, en route from South America to Europe and other destinations.



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