



Situation Report

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Short Commentary on Guinea-Bissau's Presidential Elections: "Óra na Tchiga!" (It's Time!)

Introduction

On 19 June 2005, Guinea-Bissau held the first round of its Presidential elections in what was generally regarded a peaceful, well-organised and free and fair ballot. Against more pessimistic scenarios, which warned of a return to civil war and the total collapse of the rule of law in that West African country, the election of 19 June was held without major incidents. Undoubtedly, the regional and international pressure that was brought to bear on the transitional government prior to the election, as well the presence of electoral observation missions of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), the United Nations (UN) as well as the European Union (EU), contributed to the general peaceful environment of the elections.

The results of the three main candidates were close: 35,45% to Malan Bacai Sanha² (a member of the ruling party, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Vert — the PAIGC); 28,87% to Nino Vieira (Independent); and 25% to Kumba Yala (from the Party for Social Renovation — the PRS). These results indicate that the two who earned the highest number of ballots were separated by a narrow margin of approximately 29,000 votes. This makes the 111,606 votes earned by Kumba Yala in the first round decisive to the outcome of the second.

With the announcement by Kumba Yala that he accepts the results of the first round of the elections, and the decision of the National Electoral Commission (CNE) to set the 24 July for the second round, what is the likely outcome of these elections?

Political Instability

Since the conflict that took place in 1998-99, Guinea-Bissau has been plunged in an environment of political instability.³ Persistent structural weaknesses have undermined both the consolidation of democratic institutions and the implementation of sustainable development strategies. Despite enjoying a certain degree of cohesion and a strong national identity, attributable in part to a rurally-based social organisation and the legacy of the liberation struggle, Guinean society has become, in recent years, increasingly polarized. This is evident both amidst the political and military elites (within and between parties) and in ethnic terms (the erosion of inter-ethnic dialogue and the growing politicization of this issue).

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One of the main causes of the political crisis lies in the state's institutional fragility and its lack of a solid democratic culture that goes further than the regular holding of elections. In this context, the assumption that the presidential elections that are currently taking place will set the seal on the transitional period is dangerous, and might have negative consequences for country's stability in the future.

Despite encouraging developments in the situation after the legislative elections that were held a year ago,⁴ with the transitional government working towards restoring the constitutional order and the revival of institutions, there is much that remains unresolved. The mutiny of 6 October 2004 highlighted the fragility of the democratic transition and revealed, once again, the army's omnipresence in the political management of the country.⁵ The general amnesty approved in the aftermath of the mutiny, the appointment of a completely new military high command (chosen by the mutineers), and the absence of any attempt to identify those who assassinated two high-ranking military officers all reflect the perpetuation of a culture of impunity. This weakens the government's executive power and undermines its efforts towards reconciliation.

Although the situation remains relatively calm, the existing tensions and veiled instability in the country are illustrated by several recent developments. These include the controversial candidature of Nino Vieira and Kumba Yala in the presidential election; the declaration by Kumba Yala on 15 May that he was the legitimate president; and his attempt to occupy the presidential palace during the early hours of 25 May with the help of a group of soldiers (including members of the presidential guard).⁶ The Supreme Court's decision to allow these two former presidents to stand was political rather than juridical, since there are major legal obstacles to their candidature. Vieira faces charges that he ordered the assassination of five senior military officers suspected of plotting a coup against him in 1985. And, under the terms of the transitional charter, Yala was banned from holding political office for five years after being overthrown in 2003.

The first round

The main objective of the presidential elections is to choose a successor to Henrique Rosa, the businessman appointed as transitional head of state by the armed forces and Guinea-Bissau's main political parties. The first round of voting was held on 19 June, a month later than originally planned in terms of the two-year transitional schedule. This time, there was none of the organisational chaos that characterized the parliamentary elections, when ballot boxes and voting slips failed to reach many of the polling stations in the capital, forcing them to reopen two days later. The regional and international pressure brought to bear on the transitional government in the interests of securing democracy and peace was a major factor in the successful conduct of the first round of voting. ECOWAS, the AU and the UN sent several missions, held meetings and made statements urging all sectors of society to refrain from any action that could provoke political dissatisfaction. They also called on all the presidential candidates to accept the results. These are good examples of the external — mainly African — interest in the Guinean elections. In terms of electoral monitoring, about 240 international observers were present during the election (including a 90-strong delegation from the European Union).

The results of the three main candidates were close: 35,45% to Malan Bacai Sanha⁷ (a member of the ruling party, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Vert — the PAIGC); 28,87% to Nino Vieira (Independent); and 25% to Kumba Yala (from the Party for Social Renovation — the PRS). These results indicate that the two who earned the highest number of ballots were separated by a narrow margin of approximately 29,000 votes — making the 111,606 votes earned by Kumba Yala in the first round decisive to the outcome of the second. The results of the first round were immediately challenged by the PRS, and an unauthorised protest, organised by Kumba Yala's supporters, ended in violent confrontations with the police.

In terms of regional and international linkages, some analysts in the field point out that Yala has traditionally been seen as supported by Senegal/France: whereas Vieira is seen to have the backing of Portugal. However, there have been some shifts in external alliances, and the situation is now more complex. On the one hand, while traditionally leaning towards the PAIGC, the Portuguese government has refrained from making any direct political statement, official pronouncements focusing instead on support for the holding of elections and the promotion of peace and democracy in the country. On the other hand, most external actors, including France, were apprehensive and feared that Kumba Yala would win another term in office, and therefore did their utmost to prevent it. In this regard, we should note that Bacai Sanha has been working to undermine the support that Yala has received in the past from President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal (largely a function of the fact that the authorities in Dakar were appreciative of Yala's swift moves to close down the cross-border bases of the Casamance guerrilla movement during his rule). However, the guarantees given by Bacai Sanha that he would support Senegal's efforts to end the conflict in the region, and diplomatic pressure from the French brought about a change of allegiance in the Senegalese regime, from Yala to Sanha.

Kumba Yala accepted the results of the first round after a meeting with President Wade, who had been commissioned by the AU to prevent a new political crisis in the country. This demonstrates the influence that Senegal still exerts over Guinea Bissau's politics. It is a relationship that is likely to be reinforced by new strategic and economic considerations, such as the discovery of oil reserves in the area north of Guinea-Bissau and south of Senegal.

From his part, Nino Vieira has spent the last six years in exile in Portugal. He enjoys major financial backing at both the international and regional levels. The former derives mainly from Portuguese entrepreneurs, and the latter from President Lansana Conte of Guinea-Conakry, another country neighbouring on Guinea-Bissau. Vieira has been running the best-financed election campaign and has maintained the highest profile, projecting himself as a figure of stability, and the only candidate capable of ensuring national unity. He has also bought people's votes through the lavish distribution of gifts⁸ and mysticism. In this context, some sectors of the population remember that during Vieira's term in office there were no arrears in the payment of civil servants' salaries, and that growth rates were higher than today's. This has led some to say that it would be better to have order under Vieira's rule than to continue to suffer disorder and unpredictable shifts in government. However, he remains a controversial figure, who for many brings back bitter memories of a dictatorial past. This is especially the case for the Balanta, who were widely discriminated against under Vieira's previous rule. This ethnic group comprises some 30% of the population.

But while Vieira tried to present an image of conciliation that would have a broad appeal, Yala played the ethnic and religious card, although with poor results. Perhaps the reason is that his erratic behaviour during his term of office, which alienated most of his former supporters, is still fresh in people's memories.⁹ Yala's support in the urban areas appears to have declined sharply; and he was expected to do much better than he did in the rural heartland of his Balanta ethnic group.

The fact that none of the candidates won 50% of the votes and the failure of Kumba Yala to qualify for the second round raises some important questions.¹⁰ First, it demonstrates that the PAIGC is virtually split down the middle, with many influential party leaders supporting Vieira rather than the party's official presidential candidate. Second, it shows that the ethnic vote, though still important (as illustrated by Yala's victory in the central region of Oio), is lower on the scale of priorities than the people's quest for peace and stability after years of political insecurity. This may ultimately turn the tide decisively in favour of Bacai Sanha, who has close links with the current government. It is widely recognized

that Henrique Rosa and his administration have made a serious effort to restore the country's credibility in the eyes of the rest of the world, by introducing measures to ensure transparency in government and sound management of public finances. In a country where the international community contributes 75% of the general budget, the establishment of an effective partnership with donors is essential to development. Probably the electoral results that will reflect support for this kind of reasoning will occur mainly in the urban areas, particularly in the capital, where Sanha won the first round with more than 40% of the total votes.

The questions arising in anticipation of the second round are:

- Who will the PAIGC members favour? and,
- For whom will Kumba Yala's vote swing?

Even if Kumba Yala declares his support of Nino Vieira's candidature, the Balanta elite is mainly against Vieira, and the reaction of the rest of the Balanta is unforeseeable. Geographically, the votes from the east of the country are likely to determine the election results. The two remaining candidates come from minority ethnic groups,¹¹ and the votes of the Fula, who are mainly concentrated in the eastern regions of Bafatá and Gabu (and account for more than 25% of those qualified to vote), will take on increased importance.¹²

This will be certainly one of the most closely contested elections in Guinea's history. Victory will depend on the individual charisma of each candidate and also on which of them is perceived to promise greater peace and stability. These considerations are likely to outweigh ethnic affiliations.

The army has pledged that it will remain on the sidelines and respect the outcome of the elections. However, the interventionist culture of the military and the events of the past raise serious concerns as to what may happen after the final results are known. With the Balanta accounting for some 90% of the soldiers in the army, any restructuring measures imposed on the national security apparatus could be regarded as an attack on this ethnic group. However, the recent political history of Guinea-Bissau, which has included several *coups d'état* carried out by members of the military such as Nino Vieira in 1980, Ansumane Mané in 1998 and Veríssimo Seabra in 2003, must also be taken into account. There is an urgent need for the new government to reunite the army and redefine its place in national affairs. Reform of the armed forces and security sector will therefore have to become a top priority for the new president, even though there is no consensus on what form such changes should take.

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 - ² Malam Bacai Sanha served briefly as interim president after the overthrow of Nino Vieira in May 1999, and ran as a candidate in the 1999 presidential elections, losing heavily to Kumba Yala in the second-round run-off.
 - ³ For a more detailed discussion see P Ferreira, Guinea-Bissau: Perspectives on the up-coming elections, *Situation Report*, African Security Analysis Programme, Institute for Security Studies, 26 March 2003. Also P Ferreira, Guinea-Bissau: Between conflict and democracy, *African Security Review*, No. 13.4, Institute for Security Studies, 2005. Both publications available on <www.iss.org.za>
 - ⁴ Legislative elections were held on 28-30 March 2004. The African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Vert (PAIGC) gained the largest number of seats (45) in the National Assembly; the Party for Social Renovation (PRS) won 35, and the United Socialist and Democratic Party (PUSD) of the former prime minister, Francisco Fadul, earned 17. A government led by Carlos Gomes Junior, the president of the PAIGC, was formed in May 2004.
 - ⁵ On 6 October 2004 a military uprising occurred in the capital. Armed soldiers occupied the city's intersections and strategic points to press their demand for the payment of the balance of five months' allowance owed to them for their participation in the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). They also claimed to be protesting against their poor living conditions and corruption in the military hierarchy. They assassinated General Veríssimo Seabra and Colonel Domingos de Barros. The National Assembly approved

- an amnesty on 26 November (86 parliamentarians, most of whom were from the PAIGC, having voted in favour), and a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with the mutineers on 10 October.
- 6 There is still argument over whether the short-lived occupation of the presidency was a token action intended to press Yala's claim to be Guinea-Bissau's legitimate and democratically-elected head of state, or a failed attempt to topple the present government.
 - 7 Malam Bacai Sanha served briefly as interim president after the overthrow of Vieira in May 1999, and ran as a candidate in the 1999 presidential elections, losing heavily to Kumba Yala in the second-round run-off.
 - 8 During the first round, he gave away hundreds of motorbikes and bicycles and thousands of T-shirts. In the course of the campaign, a cargo plane flew in from Dubai, bringing four-wheel drive cars and a fresh consignment of posters and T-shirts.
 - 9 Kumba Yala's method of government proved chaotic, and rapidly led the country towards bankruptcy. He dissolved parliament in 2002 and failed to call fresh elections, dismissed half of the Supreme Court's judges, indulged in constant cabinet reshuffles, and left civil servants unpaid for almost a year.
 - 10 The constitution stipulates that if no candidate wins more than 50% of the vote in the first ballot, a second-round run-off vote must take place 21 days after the official results of the first round have been confirmed.
 - 11 Nino Vieira is Papel and Bacai Sanha is Beafada (one of the Mandinga lineages). In the first round, the two candidates won in the regions where their ethnic groups are predominant. For instance, Nino Vieira won 68% of votes in Biombo (in the north, a sanctuary of the Papel), while Bacai Sanhá earned only 7% in the same region. In turn, Bacai Sanhá attained almost 50% in Quínara, where the Beafada are concentrated, as against 10% for Nino Vieira.
 - 12 In the first round Bacai Sanha won in Bafatá (39% of the votes, compared with 34% for Nino Vieira). In Gabu Vieira led with 41%, as against 34% for Sanha.