

Guinea: Spearhead of Change or Eternal Maverick?

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The population of Guinea, a Muslim dominated West African country of about ten million inhabitants, is currently facing challenging times: After a permanent fall in standards of living and a rise in poverty in the last ten years, the country's economy has additionally been ravaged by the recent Ebola crisis. Guinea's current real food prices are among the highest in the world. Oxfam only lists Zimbabwe and Angola as countries with less affordable foodstuffs (Oxfam 2015). After the lives of thousands of Guineans have been claimed by the rampant Ebola epidemic, millions continue to suffer from the resulting economic isolation of the country.¹

Only a few years ago, things looked very promising in Guinea: Rising raw material prices and an emerging civil society have raised hopes for a nationwide renaissance, both in terms of economic development and of political clarity. Riding on a global wave of Southern "uprisings" that were discernible in the 2000s, the resource-rich country was courted by transnational mining companies and experienced a series of social movements demanding political change, more participation and better living conditions.² A result of these movements was Guinea's first credible presidential elections in 2010 (European Union 2011), which further fueled the population's hope to bring its country back onto the international political arena.

Both developments, the proudly announced economic take-off and the fragile political renaissance, lost momentum with the global economic

¹ For further information on Ebola see Rohwerder (2014), Schroven (2014), Lazuta (2015), Benton/Dionne (2015) and WHO (2016).

² The 2006/07 uprisings are described and discussed in a couple of academic studies and reports, amongst others International Crisis Group (2007), McGovern (2007), Engeler (2008), Human Rights Watch (2007), and Schroven (2010).

downturn that followed the global financial crisis since 2007/8. Shortly after spearheading global efforts of Southern governments to raise mining taxes and to impose higher transparency, the current government under Alpha Condé had to backpedal in 2013 by revising its newly published mining code, thereby giving in to the pressure of mining majors and the World Bank (cf. Knierzinger 2014).

The current situation can be compared with Guinea's independence and the years that followed. In 1958, the country's famous "Non" against General de Gaulle's plans for a reformed continuation of the French colonial empire, the *Communauté française*, pronounced by its fiery revolutionary leader Sékou Touré, was followed by nationwide euphoria, but eventually led to political isolation, ethnic tensions and increasing poverty.³ Cut off from trade in cash crops that had filled the state coffers and the pockets of thousands of petty farmers until the retreat of the colonialists, the socialist government solely relied on three bauxite mines controlled by a global aluminum oligopoly (cf. Campbell 2009). The political implications of this new economic direction can be compared with many other African countries being dependent on the extractive industry (Agnew/Grant 1996: 738): Depending almost exclusively on several thousand open pit miners, the political elite became increasingly alienated from its population and reinforced the country's extractivist path – at the expense of agriculture, processing and services. The neoliberal turnaround in 1984, when Sékou Touré passed away and Lansana Conté took over power, only catalyzed these tendencies in Guinea.

Only a few years after the change of government, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau descended into civil wars that seriously affected Guinea and its inhabitants, especially in the Forest Region. Against the predictions of international observers,⁴ Guinea proved to be more stable than its neighbors during that time, providing asylum for hundreds of thousands of refugees and representing a central hub for humanitarian aid agencies.

³ These topics have been widely debated. See e.g., Kaba (1977), Goerg et al. (2010), Schmidt (2007), Shundeyev (1974).

⁴ Cf. the publications of the International Crisis Group on Guinea from 2003 until 2007.

In one way or another, Guinea had always been at the forefront of global political changes: first by declaring its independence as the second West African country (one year after Ghana)⁵ and thereby strongly contributing to the end of the French colonial empire; then by playing a key role in the Cold War⁶ and the non-aligned movement (e.g. through its role in the formation of the International Bauxite Association, see Holloway 1988: 52–54); and lately by crafting a fairly progressive mining code and by imposing relatively high transparency standards. However, this continuous pole position also frequently put its population in an exposed and vulnerable position. The last time this happened only several years ago, when the strong Guinean trade unions and other civil society activists pushed for political change that eventually led to the coming into power of a military junta, the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD), from 2008 to 2009. The CNDD was initially supported by the majority of the social movements and was led by the previously little-known Chief of Fuels at the Guinean army base in Kindia, Moussa Dadis Camara (Arieff/Cook 2010). Dadis Camara's inconsistent, brutal, but nevertheless (at least temporarily) quite popular rule soon led to international isolation. On 28 September 2009, Guinean security forces opened fire on civilian demonstrators in Conakry who were protesting against the CNDD and Dadis Camara's intentions to run for president, killing over 150, injuring many more and raping numerous women (Arieff/Cook 2009; Human Rights Watch 2009). On 3 December 2009, Dadis Camara was shot and seriously wounded by a member of his own presidential guard. He was evacuated to Morocco for medical treatment. In Dadis Camara's absence, the CNDD defense minister, Brig. Gen. Sekouba Konaté, informally assumed the position of acting head of state (Arieff 2010; Gerdes 2009; Arieff/McGovern 2013). Only after another twelve months of transition, the country received probably its first democratically elected president, the former opposition leader and long-time expatriate Alpha Condé. Despite several violent

⁵ Liberia has never been colonized.

⁶ More than any other country, Guinea was seen by the Soviets as a bridgehead to Africa (Leimgruber 1990: 215–242).

clashes, this election and the related transition to legitimate rule can be described as relatively peaceful (Union Européenne 2011). However, a political deadlock, often linked to ethnic frictions, has nonetheless blocked substantial economic, political and social reforms since then (International Crisis Group 2013; 2014). In the last couple of months, on the eve of presidential elections scheduled for September 2015, socio-political tensions increased again, because the convalescent short-time dictator Dadis Camara, dressed in a nice suit instead of his army uniform, surprisingly announced to run for presidency.⁷ In the end, current president Alpha Condé was reelected in the first round with a majority of 57,8% (Union Européenne 2016).

This issue addresses the recent events in Guinea and the ways its population is trying to make the best out of this seemingly permanent state of emergency. These efforts will be discussed on various scales, and against the background of different research traditions, both in terms of disciplines and in terms of the authors' origins. In order to bridge the gap between Anglophone and Francophone academia, several articles of this edition were written in French.

In the first contribution, the historian **Mohamed Saliou Camara** will briefly recapitulate the turbulent period between 2005 and 2010 by focusing on the role of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and other major international stakeholders with regards to conflict-prevention and development assistance in Guinea. Before becoming a Professor of History and International Relations at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Florida, Prof. Camara was among other things a speech writer at the Presidential Press Bureau in Conakry and was thereby able to base his analysis on numerous encounters with central political players in Guinea.

The weakening of state institutions since 2005 and the drawback against mining firms in 2013 not only challenged the rentier state and its profiteers, but also went along with critical transformations in a variety of other

⁷ The interested reader might find additional information on that time period in Ammann/Engeler (2013).

arenas. Women's causes, for instance, have seen a clear comeback during the last decade. The largest social movement of the recent transition was led by Rabiadou Serah Diallo, a trade union leader, who became President of the National Transition Council in February 2010. But Rabiadou Diallo was the only most visible female figure. Various women's movements and struggles have lately been noticed: from demonstrations in the capital, over revolts in the mining towns, to daily contestations of their place in a male dominated society. In order to show this day-to-day relationship of women and the Guinean state, **Carole Ammann** analyzes the workaday life of market women and their interaction with local government officials in Kankan, Upper Guinea.

Another glance on everyday life in the midst of political transformation processes will be presented by **Michelle Engeler**, focusing on members of youth associations as political entrepreneurs in the remote Guéckédou borderland. Based on recent democratization efforts, on increasing development and humanitarian assistance and also as a reaction to the continuous reduction of public sector jobs, more and more young educated Guineans have founded non-profit organizations and self-help groups enabling them to reach out to international development agencies as well as to (local) economic and political elites in Guinea.

Another phenomenon that increasingly receives attention in Guinea could be called both a comeback and a continuous presence of "traditional" political formations, if we follow the insights of **Pascal Rey** in our fourth article. Rey claims that Sékou Touré's fight against (neo-)traditional actors within the framework of what the latter sometimes called "scientific socialism" actually never led to a retreat of chieftaincy in Guinea. By focusing on Maritime Guinea, Rey illustrates how – beyond the façade of presidential speeches and colorful parades – everyday political life rather adapted to a situation of "twilight" state institutions, leaving ample possibilities for brokerage by "traditional" actors.

In the two last contributions, the authors continue to observe recent developments in the mining sector. **Mathieu Bolay** will focus on the

growing importance of full time artisanal gold mining. Having been the most conflictual economic sector in the past decades, gold mining became both more transparent and regulated since the coming to power of Alpha Condé. However, the rocketing gold prices since 2004 also prompted many part time farmers to fully concentrate on petty mining and thereby heightened tensions again. After sketching general developments in this sector, Bolay describes the scattered social networks resulting from this new form of migratory labor in detail.

In the final article, **Johannes Knierzinger** will recount the recent history of the bauxite town Fria, about 100 km north of the capital Conakry. From the late 1950s until 2012, Fria had been the only African producer of aluminum oxide, the middling product between bauxite and aluminum. During a strike in April 2012, the workers of Fria were locked out by the owner Rusal, a Russian aluminum company, and since then the factory has not resumed production. Knierzinger analyzes competing narratives about this lock-out and reports on the severe consequences for the population of Fria. In 2012, the company itself stated that the city was “on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe”: With the shutdown of the factory, the city lost its power generators, faces shortages of potable water and the population has to cope with a halt of most social services. As Rusal’s salaries were its almost exclusive source of income, the city is dependent on food aid since then.

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