

## **GUINEA BISSAU: PRESIDENT ASSASSINATED, CONSTITUTION REMAINS IN FORCE**

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When he was assassinated by soldiers in his palace on March 2, Joao Bernardo Vieira, President of Guinea-Bissau, had been in office for a total of 23 years. His leadership style was controversial. The country is desperately poor, with unstable political structures and a meagre subsistence economy. Without a functioning administrative apparatus or a solid court system, but with a multitude of luxury mansions belonging to Brazilian drug lords and high-ranking officers of the local military, Guinea-Bissau has evolved into a major transshipment point for cocaine traffic destined for Europe, operations from which many of the military officers profit as well.

Neighbouring Guinea-Conakry and Senegal supported the former Portuguese Guinea in its War of Independence after they had gained their own independence. The independence movement in Guinea-Bissau and in the other Portuguese territories was also supported by the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC).

The civil war against the Portuguese began in 1961, two years after the inhabitants of Guinea-Bissau had been granted Portuguese citizenship, and the PAIGC gained control of large parts of the country. Formal independence was attained in 1974.

Under its first President, Luis de Almeida Cabral, Guinea-Bissau maintained close ties to the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and Portugal, which was by now under Socialist leadership. During his second year in office, Joao Bernardo Vieira, having become Prime Minister in 1978, overthrew Cabral with the aid of the military. The end of the Soviet era also brought the end of the socialist economic model and the single-party state in Guinea-Bissau. Civil liberties were granted in 1991, and a system of political parties began to develop.

However, none of this prevented the military coup of 1993, which was then followed by the arrest of all leading opposition politicians. Additional coups kept interrupting the democratization process in this country which had, along with its independence, acquired a large number of easily available weapons as well as former brothers-in-arms who continue to be active to this day, now mostly operating as guerrilleros. Since large groups in the north of the country joined forces with separatists from the Casamance of south Senegal, relations with neighbouring Senegal are not untroubled.

Vieira only narrowly escaped death during the coup of 1998 which resulted from the dismissal of the chief of the armed forces, Mané. At that time, he was supported by Senegal which was seeking a solution to the Casamance issue. However, attempts to restore Vieira to his office with the aid of the military failed, and the alliance of the Casamance rebels and the putschists from Guinea-Bissau, led by General Mané, turned out to be stable. A truce negotiated in December did not lead to the desired resolution of the conflict, and Vieira was ousted for good in 1999. He fled to Senegal.

But unrest continued to prevail in the West African nation even after the coup d'état. Three different presidents took office within a short period of time. When Kumba Yala called for new elections in 2005, Vieira, who had meanwhile returned, was re-elected – quite possibly because the electorate regarded him as the lesser evil and hoped for some stability. Vieira's chief of the armed forces, Tagmé Na Waié, who strictly prohibited his military from intervening in the Casamance conflict, was also considered reliable, especially so in Senegal.

There was one further, failed attempt to overthrow Vieira in November of 2008. Senegal's attempts at lending diplomatic support to Vieira were mostly unsuccessful. And when relations between the President and his chief of the armed forces deteriorated dramatically after the coup, the former got himself a private army, the Aguentas, for protection.

In January, Na Waié himself became the victim of an assassination attempt, and his relationship with Vieira turned to open hostility. It has been speculated that the cause of the conflict might be due to the fact that the two adversaries were members of different tribes. Fact is, however, that Na Waié, having been summoned by Vieira, was ambushed by snipers when he left the president's office. The chief of the armed forces and his followers suspected that the president had masterminded the plot. Only weeks later, in March of this year, Na Waié was killed by a bomb which also severely injured some of his officers. That very same night, followers of the assassinated Na Waié stormed the presidential palace and killed Vieira.

When news of the death of Guinea-Bissau's president spread over the airwaves on March 3, the chairman of the African Commission went to great lengths to avoid the term coup d'état. Both the Government of Guinea-Bissau and its military leadership referred to tragic events rather than a coup. The constitution remains in force.

A few days later, in accordance with the constitution, National Assembly speaker Pereira was appointed interim president. Presidential elections will be held within a few months, and it now falls to the interim government to not only see to it that the army's tendency to split into factions does not

harden, but also to limit the power of the drug cartels. These efforts on Pereira's part are being supported by Senegalese diplomacy as the neighbouring country knows only all too well that unrest in Guinea-Bissau does nothing but strengthen the Casamance separatists.

There are several reasons for the escalation of events in Guinea-Bissau. Not only did the president and his chief of the armed forces have different opinions about the country's economic and social development, but there are also the complex relations to neighbouring Senegal, the Casamance conflict, the interests of the large-scale drug traffickers which have also penetrated government and military circles, and, last but not least, the fact that the two slain adversaries belonged to different ethnic groups.

The Casamance conflict in Senegal is also connected to drug trafficking. Governmental and private efforts at pacifying the region suffer setbacks not only due to unpacified rebel bases, but also due to the economy of violence which results from drug and weapons trafficking. The weapons traffickers in particular are taking advantage of the impenetrable forested areas between the two countries to find cover and protection.

Furthermore, Guinea-Bissau is subject to the influence of other countries which themselves are governed by dictators and shaken by civil war. Weapons that had originally been used in the militant conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia found their way into Guinea-Bissau. The country's proximity to the Islamic Republic of Mauritania poses another problem, especially in view of the connections between the West African drug smugglers and Islamic forces which also constitute a high risk potential in Guinea-Bissau.

The enclave of Gambia is not exactly a model of democracy, either – it is considered a transit country for large parts of the drug and weapons smuggling operations which are destined for Guinea-Bissau and its neighbouring countries. Guinea-Bissau's neighbour to the east, Guinea, was long ruled by the dictator Conté who passed away only a year ago. For the past few months, that country has been governed by a young officer who himself seized power by means of violence and who is being eyed with suspicion by the neighbours in the region.

Casamance and Guinea are the parties who are primarily interested in a predictable peace. But Senegal is the only country in the West African coastal region that has democratic structures, and it is doubtful whether it can exert a stabilizing influence on the constant threats to Guinea-Bissau's democracy. After all, the interests of the weapons traffickers are too closely linked to the objectives of the region's drug mafia. Add to that ethnic tensions which culminate in violent, cross-border conflicts, and, last but not least, religious

tensions. To be sure, the situation in West Africa is not the same as in Sudan, but frictions between the Islamist north and the Catholic south cannot be denied.

There are several causes for these escalations. However, due to these factors, there is currently not much hope for a permanent peace in the region.

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