

World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Guinea

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Minorities and indigenous peoples

Main languages: French (official), Pulaar (Fulani) and other indigenous languages.

Main religions: Islam (85 per cent), Christianity (8 per cent), traditional beliefs (7 per cent).

A 2014 census estimated that Guinea had 10.52 million inhabitants, though the published statistics were not broken down by ethnicity. A July 2016 estimate put the population estimated at 12.1 million, including Fulani / Peuhl (33.9 per cent), Malinké (31.1 per cent), Soussou (19.1 per cent), Guerze (6 per cent), Kissi (4.7 per cent) and Toma (2.6 per cent).

Guinea's four major geographical regions largely correspond to four major ethno-linguistic groups.

Peuhl, who make up a third of the population, are cattle herders and are the predominant population in the Fouta Djallon mountain plateau of the western interior. There is some tension between Peuhl and smaller groups historically oppressed by them, including Conagui, Bassari, Badiaranké, and Diakhanké. Conagui share the area around Koundara in the northern part of Middle Guinea and into Guinea-Bissau with a host of other small ethnic groups. Together with Bassari they were once fairly widespread. Having been subject to slave raids by the dominant Malinké and Peuhl, they took refuge in the hills of north-central Guinea as their numbers dwindled. Bassari are one of the least Europeanized or Islamicized ethnic groups in Guinea (see also Senegal). Historically among the oldest inhabitants of Guinea, Bassari preserve their matrilineal organization, religion and way of life in the rugged areas of the Fouta Djallon close to the Guinea-Bissau and Senegal borders. Badiaranké are an ethnic group closely related to the Conagui and Bassari living on the Senegal-Guinea border. Beekeepers and farmers, they were once also renowned for cotton weaving. Only

assimilated into national life relatively recently, they have maintained a larger degree of cultural and religious autonomy than most of Guinea's ethnic groups. The Diakhanké Mandé population of the south and central part of the Fouta Djallon inhabited the Fouta before the Peuhl state was established in the eighteenth century. Some accepted Islam and stayed on as allies of the Peuhl while others fled to the south and east.

Malinké, a Mandé people, make up 31.1 per cent of the population. They are concentrated on the Niger plains of the north-east, towards the border with Mali.

Soussou, another Mandé people, make up 19.1 per cent of the population but have played the leading role in Guinean politics since 1984. They live predominantly along the coast, including the capital city, Conakry, and on the nearby plain. Other groups in this region include Peuhl, Dialonké, Conagui, Koranko and Valunka.

The fourth major geographical region is the forest highlands of the south-east. This is home to numerous smaller groups who initially fled here to escape domination by the Malinké. These groups include the Kissi, Kpelle (Guerze), Loma, Kono, Manon and Conagui. Kissi are a rice growing ethnic group in the Guékédou and Kissidougou areas of the Forest region. Other Kissi live just inside the borders of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Culturally and linguistically, Kissi are unrelated to the dominant Mandé speaking population in the north, and have therefore been neglected in the political and economic life of present-day Guinea. Kpelle is the term used by another ethnic group of the Forest region to designate themselves. In French, they are referred to as Guerze. In Guinea this group is mainly concentrated in the Nzérékore administrative district. They are linguistically most closely related to the Mende of Sierra Leone and thus represent an ancient intrusion of more northern people into the rainforest area of the south-west. Loma are concentrated to the east of the Kissi in the Macenta administrative region. Unrelated to their Kissi neighbours, they represent an early incursion of savanna peoples into the forest zone about 500 years ago. In Guinea, they are gradually being assimilated into the larger Malinké populations.

Current Issues

In July 2013 violent intercommunal clashes between members of the Guerze and Konianke minority ethnic groups in N'Nzérékoré and Beyla districts reportedly killed over 50 people, with over 150 more injured. The clashes were believed to have begun after a dispute in which two Guerze killed a Konianke they accused of theft. Mosques and churches were attacked during three days of violence. Five people were acquitted of involvement in the violence, and thirteen others received sentences ranging up to life in prison.

The Provisional National Commission on Reconciliation, set up in 2011 to investigate and address the roots of communal violence and co-chaired by Christian and Muslim leaders, facilitated consultations around the country in 2016. Its final report in 2016 recommended the establishment of

a truth and reconciliation commission, security and judicial reforms, justice for key perpetrators and reparations for victims.

The ICC opened a preliminary examination of the 2009 stadium massacre in Conakry in October 2009, and a Guinean judicial investigation into the massacre and its aftermath was opened the following year. Several serving government ministers were indicted in domestic courts in 2013 on charges of murder, rape and other crimes related to the massacre. Human rights activists welcomed the charges as an important step for justice and an end to impunity in the country, but expressed concerns that some of the accused remained in their high-level posts. The investigation has continued to make progress, with some new indictments and arrests. Most recently, one of those suspected of having played a key role in the massacre, Captain Aboubacar Sidiki Diakité, an aide-de-camp of Camara also known as 'Toumba', was arrested in Dakar in December 2016 and extradited to Guinea in March 2017. Ex-President Camara, who has also been charged in the case, is in exile in Burkina Faso.

Progress has also been made in addressing other past human rights violations. Guinea is reported to have the world's second highest rate of female genital mutilation and/or excision (FGM/E), exceeded only by Somalia: an estimated 97 per cent of women and girls aged 15 to 49 are believed to have suffered this practice. It persists across regions and across ethnic, religious and social groups, despite its being prohibited in national and international law. This is attributed by some sources to support by influential political and religious leaders, as well as lack of implementation of existing laws by judicial authorities. Efforts are underway across ethnic and religious groups and at a number of levels to address this widespread violation.

Background

Environment

Guinea is a state on the Atlantic Coast of West Africa bordered in the north by Guinea-Bissau, Senegal and Mali, in the south by Liberia and Sierra Leone, and in the south-east by Côte d'Ivoire. Dense tropical rainforests in the south-east give way to drier Sahel vegetation in the north. The highlands receive heavy rainfall, and Guinea is home to the headwaters of the Niger and Konkouré Rivers. The country has immense deposits of minerals, including gold, diamonds, iron ore and uranium. But its largest export is bauxite, and Guinea is thought to hold perhaps half of the world's entire reserve of the aluminium ore.

History

The name Guinea possibly originates from a Portuguese corruption of the Berber Akal n-Iguinawen, 'land of the black people'. It has been inhabited for tens of thousands of years. The great medieval kingdoms to the north, Ghana and Mali, incorporated parts or all of today's Guinea.

Portuguese explorers arrived in the 15th century, marking the beginning of trade with Europe along Guinea's coast. Gold, ivory and slaves were traded for guns and other European goods. However, slavery in Guinea was less intense than in other areas of West Africa.

France established a protectorate in Guinea in 1849, but faced fierce resistance from the Malinké under the leadership of Samory Touré, who fought French control until his capture in 1898. As a component of French West Africa, the Territory of Guinea was exploited to produce such cash crops as bananas and rubber. As Guinea's vast mineral wealth was being discovered after World War II, Guinea was moving toward independence.

Guinea was the first of the French colonies to claim independence, rejecting continued colonial association with France in a referendum in 1958 under the leadership of Ahmed Sékou Touré, a trade union leader and ardent nationalist. Initially isolated by a vengeful France, Guinea pressed for the independence of all African states and for radical socio-economic change in Guinea. Many of the earliest political groups in Guinea were ethnically- or regionally-based. Touré, a Malinké, at first succeeded in overcoming the dominance of this trend, creating a strong sense of Guinean identity.

Sekou Touré turned to the former Soviet Union for support. One-party domination, that of Touré's Democratic Party of Guinea, quickly became one-man rule, as an oligarchy of the political elite struggled for power within the confines of an increasingly autocratic and brutal state. Touré did not spare his own government, ordering the executions of several ministers in the 1960s. He grew increasingly fearful of plots to kill him, some real and some imagined. He stocked his government with fellow Malinkés, and sent thousands to prison. Under terrible conditions in prison, many were tortured and killed. Touré was particularly distrustful of the Peuhl, and they suffered disproportionately. Hundreds of thousands of Guineans fled the country to escape Touré's erratic rule.

Touré died in April 1984 and a military junta led by Lt. Col. Lansana Conté, a Soussou, quickly toppled the prime minister who had legally succeeded Touré. The junta abolished the constitution and Touré's party. Ruling by decree, it released political prisoners and opened its markets. Guinea developed a close political relationship with France, and expanded joint development of its mineral resources with many western countries, including the United States and Canada.

Under Conté, the Soussou gained favour much as the Malinké had under Touré. Under international pressure, Conté announced a transition to multiparty democracy under a new Constitution, but many of the opposition leaders who returned to Guinea for the campaign were arrested. Conté won a flawed election in 1993 and continued to run Guinea as an authoritarian. He narrowly missed falling to a coup attempt in 1996, and won another round of fraudulent elections in 1998. Following the vote, hundreds of opposition supporters, including the candidate from the predominantly Malinké party, were arrested. Conté added more of his fellow Soussou to his government.

From 2000, Guinea became increasingly involved in the wars in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia. Conté had already provided support to a predominantly Mandé (called Mandingo in Liberia) faction fighting the government of Liberian President Charles Taylor. In response, Taylor directed Sierra Leone's notorious Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to assist his forces in attacking Guinea. Tens of thousands of Guineans in the forest region were displaced, as were Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees staying in camps there.

The fighting led Conté to order Guinean army attacks on the RUF's bases in Sierra Leone and increase his support for anti-Taylor rebels in Liberia.

By means of a dubious referendum in November 2001, Conté amended the Constitution to extend presidential terms from five to seven years and abolish the limit on the number of terms that could be served. Amidst an opposition boycott, he won a third term in fraudulent December 2003 voting.

Guinea showed worsening signs of the political destabilization that began in 2006. As rampant corruption drove the economy into the ground, the government itself ran short of money to maintain its patronage network, including elements of the armed forces.

Guinea's labour unions launched a general strike in February 2006 to demand a voice in government. Conté reshuffled his government in response, but did not meet the demands. The unions launched a second national strike in June 2006, given added impetus by sharp rises in the price of rice and fuel. Security forces put down the protests, killing several protesters, and raping and beating others.

In December 2006, Conté personally released from prison two ministers who had been accused of large-scale embezzlement. The unions again called for a national strike, and in January 2007 tens of thousands of Guineans marched, calling for Conté's resignation. Conté replied by broadcasting a message from national radio: 'Those who want power must wait their turn. It is God who gives power and when he gives it to someone, everyone must stand behind him'. Security forces including the presidential guard opened fire on protesters, killing dozens. In stark contrast to western reaction to pro-democracy demonstrations in such places as Ukraine and Serbia, the international community did not provide support to civil society organizations in Guinea. The unions eventually agreed to a compromise with Conté: a consensus candidate for prime minister was appointed, who for the first time was supposed to have the powers of a head of government. But Conté reneged on the deal and instead appointed a loyalist, sparking another round of violence between protesters and state security in February 2007. However, his own National Assembly -- hitherto a rubber stamp for his decisions -- refused to prolong a 'state of siege', and with West African mediation, Conté eventually appointed compromise candidate Lansana Kouyaté as prime minister later that month, but sacked him again in May 2008. At that same time, an army mutiny over back pay made clear just how tenuous the civilian hold on power was.

While under Conté opposition parties were allowed some representation in parliament, the President controlled all the levers of power. These included the judiciary and the election commission. Beyond his substantial formal powers and control through his party apparatus, Conté used an extensive patronage network to steer the unwieldy military and civil service. Although Soussous were disproportionately represented in his government, Conté kept members of other ethnic groups in positions of power. He was ill for several years before his death in December 2008, and was rarely seen in public. Behind the scenes, factions representing different power centres and ethnic groups jockeyed for position in anticipation of a succession struggle.

A predominantly Malinké group of coup plotters led by Captain Moussa Dadis Camara seized power immediately following Conté's death, announcing the dissolution of government and suspension of the Constitution. Camara insisted that the putschists were bent only on stamping out corruption and paving the way for democratic elections in 2010. While many Guineans welcomed

the coup as a promised break from Conté's corrupt police state, others were more apprehensive, remembering that Conté had made very similar pledges when he seized power in 1984.

The presidential elections of 2010 ostensibly offered Guineans their first real opportunity to choose their own leaders. However, Camara announced his intention to run, and a peaceful demonstration by tens of thousands of opposition supporters at a Conakry stadium in September 2009 was brutally dispersed by security forces and militia. In several days of violence at least 150 people were killed and scores of women raped. More than 1,500 were wounded, and many others detained. The majority of victims were reported to be from the largest ethnic group, the Peuhl (Fula). The events at the stadium were placed under preliminary examination by the International Criminal Court (ICC). In February 2010, the deputy prosecutor Fatou Bensouda announced her belief that 'crimes constituting crimes against humanity were committed'.

In December 2009, Camara left the country after being shot by an aide. His deputy, General Sékouba Konaté, joined with opposition groups to form an interim government. He announced elections for mid-2010 and promised that no serving member of government would be allowed to stand. The first round of the elections, in July, was predominantly peaceful. Former prime minister Cellou Dalein Diallo, a Peuhl, won 43 per cent of the vote in June, so he and the runner-up, opposition leader Alpha Condé, moved to a second round in November.

The contest between Diallo and Condé, a Malinké, fuelled existing tensions between their ethnic groups. As mentioned above, Guinea's first President, Ahmed Sekou Touré, a Malinké, had led the country from independence in 1958 until 1984, and those from his ethnic group held relatively favoured status during his tenure. He distrusted the Peuhl, however, and they suffered disproportionately under what became an increasingly autocratic and brutal state. Though they represent the country's largest ethnic group, a Peuhl had never led the country, and many Diallo supporters felt that this situation was due to change.

The November 2010 run-off was carried out fairly peacefully, and international observers said that it appeared free and fair. However, violence erupted after Condé was found to have won by a narrow margin. A state of emergency was declared, imposing a curfew and granting security forces extra powers. Inter-communal violence, as well as violations by security forces accused of systematic attacks against Peuhls, reportedly resulted in at least seven deaths and several hundred people injured. However, the new government was installed peacefully. At the end of 2010 President Condé named himself defence minister. He promised to reform the military and to organize a truth and reconciliation commission to address past human rights violations.

Elections to choose the first National Assembly in five years, thereby completing the transition to civilian rule begun with presidential polls in 2010, were announced for May 2013. This led to increased tensions between the government of President Condé and the opposition, which accuses the former of illegitimacy and discrimination against its own ethnic Peuhl base. Inter-marriage between ethnic groups in Guinea is common, and many Guineans have mixed ancestry. Ethnic divisions, which have sharpened in recent years, appear to be rooted in competition for public resources and have been further exacerbated by political elections. A protest march over the electoral process led to clashes between Peuhl and Malinké in the capital Conakry in February and March 2013. At least five people were killed in incidents that at times involved security forces. Religious and other leaders called for calm.

The political parties signed a joint declaration of non-violence in April 2013, committing to peaceful means for resolving disputes. However, after more demonstrations in May, some of which led to ethnic violence in which at least a dozen people were killed and scores injured, including by security forces, the polls were postponed. Amid ongoing tensions, in July the UN Human Rights Council passed a resolution calling for peace and condemning all incitement to ethnic or racial hatred. The legislative elections went off peacefully in September 2013; however delays in issuing results led to accusations from the opposition of potential fraud. President Condé's party won a majority, a result upheld by the Supreme Court.

Governance

Following independence from France in 1958, Guinea was ruled by successive dictatorships. Its first leader was from the Malinké ethnic group, comprising 30 per cent of the population; no one from the largest ethnic group, the Peuhl (33.9 per cent of the population) has ever led the country. In 2010, Guineans had their first real opportunity to choose their leader: in that contest Alpha Condé, a Malinké, narrowly defeated his main opponent, a Peuhl, leading to intercommunal violence. Elections to choose the first National Assembly in five years, thereby completing the transition to civilian rule begun with presidential polls in 2010, were announced for May 2013. This led to increased tensions between the government of President Condé and the opposition, which accuses the former of illegitimacy and discrimination against its own ethnic Peuhl base.

Guinea has tremendous natural wealth, but in 2007 Transparency International ranked it as the fourth-most corrupt country in Africa. Criticism from abroad is muted, as major western aluminium and other companies rely on Guinea's mines to fill their needs for raw materials. Following the December 2008 coup, new President Camara promised he would review mining contracts and renegotiate those that rewarded Conté cronies. It remained to be seen whether renegotiated contracts would aim to serve the public good, or merely be redirected to benefit coup leaders and their supporters.

Ethnic and regional identity continued to be closely linked with political affiliation, with reports indicating that some politicians continued at times to play on ethnic tensions. The run-up to Guinea's second free presidential election, held in October 2015, was marred by election-related clashes between rival communities; primarily opposition supporters were arrested. Although some opposition supporters and candidates alleged fraud, the international community recognised the results, and President Condé was declared the winner. Local elections were scheduled for 2016 and then postponed to the latter part of 2017.