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Freedom in the World - Guinea (2007)

Population:
9,800,000

Capital:
Conakry

Political Rights Score: 6
Civil Liberties Score: 5
Status: Not Free

Overview

In December 2005, Guinea held multiparty municipal elections marked by low turnout. The international community had considered the polls a test of democratic reforms undertaken by then-prime minister Cellou Dalein Diallo. The ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) won a majority of seats, prompting the main opposition party to withdraw from Parliament in protest over what it termed massive electoral fraud. Diallo was sacked in April 2006, and the position of prime minister remained vacant at year's end. Three new private radio stations went on the air in August, breaking a decades-long state monopoly on broadcasting, though local journalists continued to face repression and state censorship. Meanwhile, President Lansana Conte remained in ill health, increasing fears of a power vacuum should he die before the expiration of his term in 2010.

Under Ahmed Sekou Toure, Guinea declared independence from France in 1958. Alone among France's many African colonies, Guinea rejected continued close ties with France. Paris retaliated quickly, removing or destroying all "colonial property" and enforcing an unofficial but devastating economic boycott. Sekou Toure's one-party rule became highly repressive, and Guinea grew increasingly impoverished under his Soviet-style economic policies. Lansana Conte seized power in a 1984 coup and was nearly toppled by a 1996 army mutiny. In the midst of general looting in Conakry, he rallied loyal troops and reestablished his rule.

Conte was returned to office in a 1998 presidential election that was marked by state patronage, media that strongly backed the incumbent, broad manipulation of the electoral process, and opposition disunity. Although the poll was an improvement over past elections, hundreds of people were arrested after the vote, including the official third-place finisher, Alpha Conde. The June 2002 People's National Assembly elections, in which the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) easily won a two-thirds majority, were not considered fair because of an opposition boycott and the government's control of the electoral system. Conte won a third presidential term in a December 2003 election that was boycotted by the country's major opposition parties and which international observers criticized as neither free nor fair.

Guinea's first municipal elections in a decade were held on December 18, 2005. They were part of a series of reforms Guinea had undertaken to win back foreign aid, which had declined because of concerns over the country's record on governance and human rights. Conte's PUP won 272 out of 341 seats, though international media reports cited low turnout as a defining feature of the vote. Election observers said the conduct of the polls was essentially peaceful and

orderly, though they pointed to a number of procedural problems that could have compromised the tallies. Opposition leaders denounced the results as the product of massive fraud, and the main opposition Union of Progress and Renewal (UPR) withdrew in protest from Parliament in January 2006. The UPR had been the only opposition party represented in the legislature.

The elections had been seen as a test of Guinea's commitment to democratic reform as concerns mounted over the country's presidential succession should Conte die before the expiration of his term in 2010. The president, who rarely appears in public, has been in poor health in recent years and has sought treatment abroad; reports citing diplomats say Conte suffers from diabetes and a suspected heart ailment.

In an apparent sign of high-level power struggles between factions in the ruling party, Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Diallo was sacked from his position in April, only hours after Conte had approved a cabinet shuffle that would have given him more power. Diallo, an economist who was popular among the international community, had been the architect of Guinea's democratic reforms. The post of prime minister remained vacant at year's end. The Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) said that the political maneuvering displayed a "fundamental decrepitude, verging on anarchy, at the centre of a government incapable of taking decisions except by the decree of an individual [Conte] who is fickle at best and may now not be fully competent to act."

In June, local trade unions called a nationwide general strike to demand higher wages in the face of huge increases in the prices of basic goods. Rioting broke out across the country and in Conakry, with many protesters focusing their anger on the government and Conte. Human Rights Watch alleged that authorities had killed, raped, assaulted and robbed protesters and bystanders during the unrest. The strike ended after eight days with an agreement on prices and wages.

In August, three new private radio stations went on the air, ending a decades-long state monopoly on the broadcast media. Initially the stations aired mostly music; it was unclear whether they planned to issue independent news bulletins. The private press in Guinea, based entirely in Conakry, faces strict government surveillance; at least three local newspapers were suspended during the year for coverage deemed unacceptable by the government. Self-censorship is widespread.

Guinea is one of the world's largest producers of bauxite and is also rich in gold, diamonds, and iron ore. However, corruption, mismanagement, and conflict have negatively affected the economy. In the past two years, the government has struggled to stem mounting public discontent over high prices for staple goods, which have been blamed on corruption. The World Bank in 2004 halted the disbursement of further loans to Guinea and suspended field projects following the government's failure to pay off debt-servicing arrears. Lenders have cited Guinea for bad governance, lack of transparency, corruption, and improper economic practices.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Guinea is not an electoral democracy. A referendum held in 2001 proposed to extend presidential terms from five to seven years, allow for unlimited terms in office, and eliminate presidential age limits. The provisions were approved in a flawed vote that was boycotted by members of the opposition and marred by low

turnout. The referendum also granted President Lansana Conte the power to appoint local officials and Supreme Court judges. The 114 members of the unicameral People's National Assembly are elected by direct popular vote to serve five-year terms. The prime minister is head of government.

President Conte's Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) controls every level of the government as well as substantial patronage networks throughout the military and civil bureaucracy. Opposition parties include the Union for Progress and Renewal (UPR), which was the only opposition party represented in Parliament after the 2002 elections; the Union of Republican Forces (UFR), led by former prime minister Sidya Toure; and the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea.

The government controls the national election commission, as well as registration and election procedures. In the December 2003 presidential election, Conte, who reportedly captured more than 90 percent of the vote, faced only one relatively unknown opponent in the poll; a Supreme Court panel had disqualified six other presidential hopefuls for reasons ranging from a failure to pay the application fee to questionable dates of birth. The main opposition parties boycotted the election. While the opposition participated in the 2005 municipal elections, the leading opposition group pulled out of Parliament in January 2006 to protest the results.

The cabinet and the military leadership include members of all major ethnic groups in Guinea, but a disproportionate number of senior military officers belong to Conte's Soussou ethnic group. Politics and parties are largely divided along ethnic lines. The ruling party is more ethnically integrated than opposition parties, which have clear regional and ethnic bases. The International Crisis Group has warned that squabbling for power among Guinea's three main ethnic groups—the Soussou, the Peuhl, and the Malinke—and among the country's different political and military factions could plunge the country into the kind of chaos seen in neighboring Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire.

Corruption has been cited as a serious problem in the country by both the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Guinea was ranked 160 out of 163 countries surveyed by Transparency International in its 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index; this was the lowest ranking of any African country.

The government has wide powers to bar any communications that insult the president or disturb the peace, and defamation and slander are considered criminal offenses. Several newspapers in Conakry offer sharp criticism of the government despite frequent harassment. The print media have little impact in rural areas, where incomes are low and illiteracy is high. Foreign-based publications, such as the French news weekly *Jeune Afrique L'Intelligent*, are occasionally seized by authorities before distribution if they carry articles on sensitive topics, such as the president's health. While private radio stations went on the air in Guinea for the first time in 2006, it remained unclear whether they would be able to operate freely. Internet access is unrestricted, but exists almost solely in urban areas.

Constitutionally protected religious rights are respected in practice, though the main body representing the country's Muslims, who constitute a majority of the population, is government controlled. Academic freedom is generally respected, but the government influences hiring and the content of curriculums.

Several statutes restrict freedoms of association and assembly in apparent

contravention of constitutional guarantees. The government may ban any gathering that "threatens national unity." Nevertheless, several human rights groups and many other nongovernmental organizations operate openly in Guinea. The constitution provides for the right to form and join unions. Several labor confederations compete and have the right to bargain collectively. Unions in rural areas sometimes face harassment and government interference. A massive general strike in June 2006 was suspended after eight days, following an agreement between trade unions and the government on wages and the prices of basic goods.

While nominally independent, the judicial system remains affected by corruption, nepotism, ethnic bias, and political interference, and lacks resources and training. Minor civil cases are often handled by traditional ethnic courts. Arbitrary arrests and detention are common, and there are reports of persistent maltreatment and torture of detainees. Prison conditions are harsh and sometimes life-threatening. Security forces commit abuses, including torture and extrajudicial execution, with impunity.

Women have far fewer educational and employment opportunities than men, and many societal customs discriminate against women. Constitutionally protected women's rights are often unrealized. Women have access to land, credit, and business, but inheritance laws favor men. Violence against women is said to be prevalent. Spousal abuse is a criminal offense, but security forces rarely intervene in domestic matters. Women's groups are working to eradicate the illegal but widespread practice of female genital mutilation.