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Freedom in the World 2009 - Guinea

Capital: Conakry

Population: 10,300,000

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 5

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change

Guinea's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 due to a military coup in December 2008 and mounting concerns that international drug cartels were gaining influence within the government and military.

Overview

In May 2008, President Lansana Conte unilaterally dismissed Lansana Kouyate, the prime minister he had appointed as part of a landmark agreement with trade unions and civil society groups in 2007. A faction of the army mutinied later that month, and security forces brutally suppressed a police mutiny in June as well as sporadic antigovernment demonstrations by civilians. Hopes for a peaceful political transition were further dampened in October, when officials announced that long-delayed legislative elections would not take place before the end of the year. The ailing president died in December, and junior officers quickly mounted a successful military coup, promising to hold elections in two years. Also during 2008, international analysts warned that Guinea was becoming a significant transit point for illegal narcotics trafficking.

Guinea declared independence from France in 1958, and Paris imposed an unofficial but devastating economic boycott when the country refused to maintain close bilateral ties. Guinean president Ahmed Sekou Toure's one-party rule became highly repressive, and the country grew increasingly impoverished under his Soviet-style economic policies. In 1984, after Sekou Toure died while receiving medical treatment overseas, a military junta led by Lieutenant Colonel Lansana Conte seized power in a bloodless coup. The junta abolished all political parties and the constitution, and began a program of economic liberalization.

A new constitution was adopted in 1990. Conte won the country's first multiparty presidential elections in 1993 with just over 51 percent of the vote, but international observers said the polls were deeply flawed. Presidential, legislative, and municipal elections over the next 12 years were similarly marred by state patronage, media bias,

broad manipulation of the electoral process, and opposition boycotts; all resulted in lopsided victories for Conte and the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP). This period was punctuated by a 1996 army mutiny and large-scale border attacks in 2000 by rebels from Sierra Leone and Liberia, with reported participation by some Guinean fighters.

In early 2007, a general strike to protest corruption, the cost of basic goods, and inadequate government services grew into nationwide antigovernment demonstrations. They were sparked in part by Conte's personal intervention to free a close associate charged with corruption. Security forces opened fire on demonstrators, killing at least 130. The president agreed under pressure to vest some executive powers in a new prime minister – the position had been vacant since April 2006. However, when a Conte ally was named to the post in February 2007, the protests resumed and spiraled into a near-revolt of unprecedented scale. Martial law was declared in mid-February. With mediation by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), union leaders agreed in late February to suspend the strike, while Conte pledged to control inflation, organize legislative elections, and name a "consensus" prime minister backed by unions and civil society. Conte tapped Lansana Kouyate, an experienced diplomat, and the choice was greeted with optimism within Guinea and abroad. However, Kouyate quickly lost public support as his reform plan was stymied by structural challenges, back-room opposition from the president and his associates, and perceptions that he was pursuing his own political agenda.

On May 20, 2008, Conte dismissed Kouyate by decree, appointing an ally, Ahmed Tidiane Souare, to replace him. Souare promised to continue Kouyate's reform agenda and appointed several opposition members to his cabinet. Nevertheless, Kouyate's dismissal dampened hopes for substantial political change. In late May 2008, a faction of the military led by dissident junior officers rioted in Conakry and several other urban centers, shooting in the air, looting shops, and taking a high-ranking military official hostage. The mutiny ended after Conte agreed to pay salary arrears, fire the defense minister, lower the subsidized price of rice for troops, and release soldiers held in connection with the 2007 crackdown on demonstrators. In early June, police officers in the capital engaged in a similar uprising, which was violently suppressed by the military. Throughout 2008, Conakry residents engaged in sporadic protests over high fuel prices and chronic shortages of electricity and water. Several of the demonstrations were dispersed by security forces firing live ammunition into crowds.

On December 23, 2008, Conte's death was announced on national television and radio, and a group of junior and mid-ranking military officers calling themselves the National Council for Democracy and Development (CNDD) announced they had taken power in a coup. The following day, the CNDD spokesman, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara, was named president. The CNDD suspended political and trade union activity, replaced regional administrators with military governors, ordered over 20 senior generals into retirement, and promised to crack down on corruption and drug trafficking. The junta also announced elections would be held within two years, and named the civilian economist Kabine Komara as prime minister. Concerns remained, however, that the military was tightening its grip on power, and that divisions within the military hierarchy could spark future instability.

Guinea is rich in mineral deposits and fertile soil, but the economy has long been hamstrung by corruption, mismanagement, and political instability. In 2007, foreign donors pledged over \$400 million in antipoverty assistance, in part due to economic reform efforts under Kouyate. However, high oil and food prices in 2008 threatened Guinea's economic growth and stability. In addition, international analysts and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) warned that the country was becoming a significant transit point for illegal drug trafficking between Latin America and Europe, and that drug cartels were gaining influence within the government and military.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Guinea is not an electoral democracy. The December 2008 military coup suspended all

civilian government institutions and the constitution. Previous elections under President Lansana Conte were deeply flawed. While the military junta, known as the CNDD, promised elections within two years, the organization and degree of independence of electoral institutions were unclear at year's end.

Prior to the coup, Conte's Party for Unity and Progress (PUP) controlled much of the government as well as substantial patronage networks in the military and civil bureaucracy.

There are several opposition parties, but only the Union for Progress and Renewal (UPR) was represented in the parliament after the 2002 elections. All political activity was suspended after the coup, though political parties continued to exist and the CNDD consulted with party leaders.

The cabinet and military leadership under Conte included members of all major ethnic groups, though a disproportionate number of the senior military officers reportedly belonged to his Soussou ethnic group. The 33 members of the CNDD were drawn from all major ethnic groups, while Camara is Guinea's first Christian president. However, ethnic factions were said to exist within the CNDD and the military as a whole. Most of the major political parties have clear regional and ethnic bases.

Corruption has been cited as a serious problem by international donors. Audits conducted in 2007 reportedly accused powerful Conte allies of embezzling the equivalent of \$620 million in less than two years, and many government activities are shrouded in secrecy. Guinea was ranked 173 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index. In justifying the military takeover in December 2008, the CNDD promised to crack down on corruption.

The government's control over the local press has loosened in recent years, and the country's first private radio stations were allowed to open in 2006. The Conte government nonetheless retained the power to bar communications that allegedly insulted the president or disturbed the peace, and defamation was deemed a criminal offense. Under martial law in February 2007, security forces raided two radio stations and arrested a number of journalists in apparent retaliation for critical programming. Several newspapers were banned for short periods in 2008 in connection with their political coverage, while in May 2008 officials reportedly harassed journalists working for the private radio station Nostalgie. Internet access is unrestricted, but exists solely in urban areas.

Constitutionally protected religious rights were respected in practice. Academic freedom was generally respected, but the government influenced hiring and curriculum content.

The Conte government restricted freedoms of association and assembly, and the law allowed authorities to ban any gathering that "threatens national unity." After the 2008 coup, the CNDD banned all political and union activity; however, union and political party leaders continued to make public statements and met with the CNDD on several occasions. At least one human rights group and many nongovernmental organizations operated openly, both before and after the coup. Under Conte, several labor confederations competed and had the right to bargain collectively. Trade unions demonstrated immense political influence in early 2007 by calling nationwide strikes that led Conte to delegate powers to a consensus prime minister, though the latter was dismissed in May 2008.

Under Conte, the nominally independent courts remained affected by corruption, a lack of resources, nepotism, ethnic bias, and political interference. Informal customary justice mechanisms operated in addition to official courts. Security forces have engaged in arbitrary arrests, torture of detainees, and extrajudicial execution with impunity, and prison conditions are harsh and sometimes life threatening. During the 2007 crackdown on demonstrations, security forces fired at unarmed protesters, leaving at least 137 people dead and nearly 2,000 wounded, according to Human Rights Watch. An official

inquiry into these incidents stalled, reportedly due to government interference, and troops repeatedly fired into crowds during sporadic protests in 2008. The CNDD suspended the judiciary following the 2008 coup.

While the law prohibited ethnic discrimination, the U.S. State Department's 2008 human rights report noted societal discrimination in employment, housing, and marriage patterns. Societal discrimination against women is also common, and while women have access to land, credit, and business, the inheritance laws and the traditional justice system have favored men. Security personnel raped dozens of women while responding to the 2007 demonstrations, according to local activists. Human Rights Watch reported in 2007 that thousands of young girls serving as unpaid domestic workers in Guinea were subject to beatings or rape by their employers. Guinea was a "source, transit point, and destination point" for human trafficking in 2008, according to the U.S. State Department. Advocacy groups are working to eradicate the illegal but nearly ubiquitous practice of female genital mutilation.

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