

The 2008 Guinea Conakry coup: Neither inevitable nor inexorable

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This article examines the issue of democratic governance in Guinea–Conakry and the impact that international donors had on the political debate in the last years of the Conté regime. Our contention here is that there was and continues to be an evolving pluralism and embryo group of self-defined civil society organisations in both urban and rural Guinea but as a result of the December 2008 military coup opportunities have been lost in the promotion of democratic governance and more pluralistic group dynamics in Guinea. Support for indigenous (and self-defined) civil society groups, including the development of political parties by the international community, is essential to the return to institutionalised governance.

Keywords: pluralism; civil society; democratic governance; international community; international donors

On 23 December 2008, the army captain Mousaa Dadis Camara seized power in a bloodless military coup in the West African country of Guinea (Conakry). Just hours before, the long-sitting authoritarian president Lansana Conté had died, ending one of the more bizarre death watches in Africa. Conté, who had held the office since 1984, had long been ill and speculation had been rife for at least the last decade as to his imminent demise. Both in Guinea and internationally, observers assumed that as soon as Conté departed the scene, the military would step in.

They did. The military putsch on 24 December 2008, led by Captain Camara a mere hours after the death of Lansana Conté, immediately suspended the constitution and curtailed all trade union and indigenous civil society activities. One of the first actions of the new military regime was to appoint military commanders as prefects throughout the country. In the days after the military coup, the new leader appeared increasingly erratic and messianic.

Subsequently, on 28 September 2009, elements of the Guinea military brutally attacked unarmed, peaceful civilian demonstrators and bystanders in a soccer stadium. At least 157 people were killed. Large numbers of women were raped and beaten in a breakdown of the rule of law. Another small, obscure country had been traumatised by an erratic, brutal military regime.

In the wake of the coup debates about transparent, democratic elections have returned to the fore. They had never been held during the last part of the Conté regime although they had been agreed to by union leaders, self-defined civil society groups and organisations in 2007 following major violence and a general strike.¹

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The September 2009 demonstrators were motivated by fears that elections scheduled for January 2010 would be hijacked by the military.

Violence and death had brought an end to a general strike of February 2007. Neither the Conté regime nor the opposition had ever recovered from the shocks of the February strikes, which left both sides increasingly divided, ethnically and regionally, particularly at the prefectural level. The issue of governance in Guinea–Conakry remains controversial and elusive especially in the months after the December 2008 military coup. This article examines the issue of democratic governance in Guinea–Conakry and the impact (or lack of it) that international donors had on the political debate in the last years of the Conté regime. Our contention here is that there was an evolving pluralistic society in both urban and rural Guinea and that, as a result of the coup, opportunities have been lost in the promotion of democratic governance and a more pluralistic society.

Our focus here is on elite perceptions of democracy, governance and genuine devolution of authority. Of concern is the extent to which there was a genuine commitment to governance reform among political elites as part of a move towards constitutional government, and whether there was the potential to further decentralise political interests as part of a broader move towards tolerance of pluralistic participation.

In the last decade the proliferation and strength of civil society groups has been the most important factor promoting conflict mitigation in Guinea–Conakry. In the last few years before Conté’s death, trade unions, opposition political parties and MPs became a source of opposition strength. However, despite disturbances throughout 2007, the international community failed to send a common message to the ruling elites.

Donors, timid in the face of potential military intervention, failed to push for free and unfettered elections and failed to support Guinean civil society. Nor had civil society groups been able to mobilise to resist the Conté regime. The result was continued dominance of Guinea by the Conté ‘presidential clan’² and a military that resisted democratic reforms. The 24 December coup was a military intervention that should not have happened. Donors’ fear of, and assumption that, the military would intervene may have led to a self-fulfilling prophecy while international ambivalence on democratic governance may have been a factor in the coup itself. However, elite perceptions need to be understood through the careful if fragmentary analysis we describe below.

The methodology

This article uses a ‘political economy approach’, based on stakeholder analysis, to examine the issue of democratic governance in Guinea. This shows some potential for responsible governance from the perspective of national stakeholders, decentralised governance and Guinean civil society.

From a political economy perspective, each country has a unique combination of complex historical variables within a unique political culture. They include (but are not limited to) external factors including the legacy of governance traditions inherited from imperial or colonial rule: experience with different patterns of external economic, financial, technical and military assistance; internal factors including institutional arrangements, political culture and social and economic

values, and sub-national ethnic or religious identification and the degree of conformity to the socio-political boundaries of a sovereign state; and the nature of formal and informal stakeholders and parallel governance systems and the social capital which maintains them.

The approach adopted here makes use of fragmentary information and, by using rapid appraisal methodology and targeted elite interviews, allows for an understanding of how political, social and economic constraints, such as authoritarian tendencies, patronage and clientelism, weaken accountability relationships at the national, intermediate and local levels (Druilhe et al. n.d., 31). Those interviewed have been kept anonymous (for their protection) but include senior political party leaders, civil servants, academics, heads of self-defined civil society organisations and others who could comment on the dynamic situation. The key question is what is/has been driving governance and specifically civil society reforms, what (or who) is opposing them (and who) and how can/should the reform agenda be influenced?

The authors have undertaken an analysis of stakeholders in order to determine the extent to which networks of those who understand the benefits of democratic governance view reform efforts and are organised to advocate for or against its effective implementation. Concern is with their interests, power and influence. Secondly, to what extent is resistance to democratic governance organised, and what is the nature of anti-democracy networks and their relationship to political party divisions? The particular concern is with how those opposed to democratic governance and overall political reform can be reassured that pluralism and political competition can be non-threatening and is a positive force.

The Francophone legacy and the colonial era

A legacy of the colonial period in Africa has been a control mechanism introduced as a hierarchical and prefectural model of control (the anglicised French term is now used as a general term for territorial administrators in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe and is also used to describe party-based territorial administrators in single-party regimes).

This territorial déconcentration is characterised by a powerful district commissioner, landdrost, or commandant controlled by a territorial governor or high commissioner. The mechanism was imposed in British, French and Lusophone Africa. The French centralised system with territorial administrators, initially members of the French overseas military, imposed particularly strong central control and allowed little local variation. This was in contrast to the highly decentralised system of many West African precolonial polities.

While some have considered the French system more autocratic and homogeneous than British models, in practice the differences between direct (assimilation) and indirect rule on traditional systems of governance were not that significant (Crowder 1970). In much of Africa, limited participatory and decentralisation policies were often introduced in urban areas only near the end of the colonial period as part of a gradual governance process based on the mother-country model in both Anglophone and Francophone Africa. The city of Conakry, for example, received a partly elected council only in 1953.

The French administrative system does have embedded within it a set of values about the state, state structures and law that has been passed on to its former

colonies in Africa. The authority of the state is considered not divisible but organic. The purpose of the strong state model is seen as part of the process to create a nation but has currently resulted in the failure to create strong devolved local structures in former French colonies. This has certainly been true in Guinea.

Despite international pressures for democratic governance, pluralist civil society, privatisation and decentralisation, Francophone political elites continue to put their faith in what the French call '*la planification*' centralised state planning as a basic principle (Le Vine 2004, 98). In Guinea, the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries provided foreign aid to the Sékou Touré regime in the 1960s contributing to a command economy framework that buttressed the need for centralised control.

French West African political culture also includes elements of the democratic principles inherited from the French revolution and republicanism. This stimulated African demands for meaningful assimilation efforts, supported the independence movements and fuelled the renewal of democratic values in the 1990s (Le Vine 2004, 99; Moudoud 1989). These residual cultural values led to pressures for reform as civil society evolved after 1987 in Guinea and were articulated among civil society groups in the last years of the Conté regime. Despite the fragility of the government and the decline of the economy, the Guinean state has maintained an integrity that has been denied its neighbours.

The French colonial administration in Guinea created an authoritarian centralised bureaucratic system without domestic political control (Graybeal and Picard 1991). It is these bureaucratic structures that define functional differences between administrative structures at national and sub-national levels in much of Africa (Eriksen 1999, 165). In addition, ethnic differences have often played out in political parties and regional governance structures in a way that ensures that many African political leaders are deeply suspicious of civil societies, political parties and sub-national government, a suspicion inherited from both the colonial and precolonial periods. According to Patrick Manning (1988, 155):

The centralization of administration in francophone Africa is revealed in aspects of the law. The national legal systems were based on the Napoleonic Code, and customary law lost virtually all formal standing with independence. Further, the working of the Napoleonic Code is such that old laws stay in place until explicitly replaced.

The inherited political system in Guinea created a highly centralised but soft state that has used instruments such as the military, the police, and the territorial administrator or prefect to ensure a modicum of uniformity of control throughout the country. It has also left a legacy of antipathy towards political participation although the colonial legacy alone does not explain the absence of democratic and decentralised governance (*ibid*, 74–8). Guinea, however, has been spared the fragmentation tendencies of its neighbours.

The French legacy left a highly centralised state system in West Africa (Guinean critics are fond of criticising the Jacobin or Napoleonic state) with little room for pluralism or local autonomy, although the colonial legacy provides some potential for déconcentration. Although the legacy of French colonialism needs to be understood, it is dangerous to rely on suggestions that there are parallels with contemporary France or Europe more generally. It was in the nature of all colonial systems to transfer nineteenth century administrative patterns from the métropole without participatory political structures. There is much less political space at the

local level in Guinea than currently exists in France or other European Union countries. Kindia is not Nantes.

In French West Africa there were only limited efforts by colonial administrations to promote civil society, democracy or decentralised governance (until very late in the colonial regime) nor did their successor African regimes do so. Many African states remain legally and formally decentralised but are de facto highly centralised and have territorially or functionally deconcentrated administration (where it exists), a legacy of the colonial period. State failure in Africa, according to Olowu and Wunsch (2004), has been strongly linked to the failures of democratic values, local governance and civil society.

Independence, collectivism and military intervention

In addition to the impact of colonialism, the nature of the mobilising socialist, anti-French, and ultimately predatory Sékou Touré regime, limited governance institutions from developing in Guinea after his death. The Sékou Touré regime, which has been described as Stalinist, violent and repressive (USAID 2005), lasted 24 years from 1960 to 1984. For different reasons, both the socialist Sékou Touré regime and the military regime that followed came to depend on the hierarchal prefectural administration to control the country, based upon the military Commandant de Cercle system that had its origins in the late nineteenth century.

Throughout its troubled 59 years of post-independent politics, Guinea–Conakry was characterised by deep but moderated ethnic divisions and extremely weak institutions and processes. There were restraints on the use of political violence only by comparison to the desperate measures resorted to in Liberia, Sierra Leone and the Ivory Coast during their civil wars. Despite French assimilation and association policies, indigenous traditional values and language affiliation continued to be important in the rural areas (Le Vine 2004, 95).

Beginning under Sékou Touré and extending into the military regime, there was a strong move particularly among rural Guineans to leave the formal economic system, as corruption and rent seeking became a way of life among officials. Many Guineans learnt to survive through the informal economy and networks of personal, family and clan (extended family) relationships, which Goran Hydan (1983, 8–11) calls ‘the economy of affection’. In Guinea, ‘participants in the economy learned to avoid taxes when possible, to pay bribes whenever necessary, and to steal when the opportunity rose’ (Manning 1988, 129). Payments to local officials were made in food, beer, firewood, cigarettes and, of course, money.

The authoritarian regimes that followed the French maintained hierarchical control at the national, regional and local levels. As a result, there has been a long history of centralisation and authoritarianism in Guinea, where the state has long dominated over social networks and the economy but paradoxically has had little impact on individual behaviour. This has resulted in a lack of concomitant financing by the central government for functions and service responsibilities to be devolved to communities and the failure to create much space for civil society groups and economic associations. This has led to institutionalised patterns of centralised control and increasing rent seeking that survived through the colonial period and the Sékou Touré regime and the post-1984 regime of President Lansana Conté.

Democracy debates

Debate about governance in Guinea was sporadic and often donor-stimulated prior to 1990. Electoral controversies and the dynamics of democracy began to occur in the mid-1990s in large part stimulated by the pressure of international donors but with some involvement of nascent civil society groups. The pressures for democratic renewal, the so-called African wave of democracy that swept through Francophone West Africa, affected the country (LeVine 2007, 254–62). There were elections in 1993 that were largely considered illegitimate by observers. The December 2005 elections, though flawed, brought to power elected local governments for the first time since independence in 1960. In the local government elections, the ruling party won over 300 seats while the opposition won only seven urban seats and 62 rural seats, though opposition parties did constitute a plurality in several local councils.

Despite their flaws, the implementation of the local government elections and the accompanying partial opening of the national political process were steps forward for the development of institutionalised governance. After threats of a boycott, the opposition alliance decision (except for one party group) to participate in electoral politics was significant. Symbolically at least, Guinea appeared to be opening up politically by 2006. There were a number of opposition newspapers, a private radio station, and political discussions with Guinean elites and administrators could be open and frank.

There were two opposition parties represented in parliament; one party with three seats withdrew from the assembly but the largest group had 20 seats out of 114 and was the official opposition. The opposition group served on four parliamentary committees and was a member of the parliamentary bureau. The opposition claimed to participate in all phases of the legislative process. There were opposition members of several rural and two urban councils.

Opposition leaders were critical of government and raised issues about the electoral process, about proposed changes in the rules, and the extent to which donor conditions were being enforced. One opposition spokesman noted, even though the government sometimes changed the electoral rules, the donors expressed no concern. As one opposition leader put it,

Why do the donors have some conditionalities which they apply and others which they don't and why do some collectivities benefit from donor help while others are excluded? Why not better take into account the needs of all of the people? The donor project process also needs to be made more transparent. The opposition pushes for the use of full proportional representation at local levels in councils since they are under-represented by first-past-the-post.

These are normal complaints of parties out of power, of course, as are complaints about donor insensitivity to political irregularities. That in and of itself was a good sign.

A stakeholder analysis of issues and interests: reformers and embedded resistance

By early 2007 there had been a 'transition watch' linked to the potential death of the president that was more than five years old. In large part due to uncertainties over the political transition and the incapacity of the president (who had long been rumoured to be severely ill and seldom appeared in public), national and local

political reform had stalled. Elements among civil society groups had become increasingly restless. While the primary causes of this restlessness were economic and strike-related (trade unions have had some teeth in Guinea), there is also concern among civil society organisations over human rights and constitutional governance issues. The dam burst in a nasty, violent general strike that broke out in early 2007. Still there was no resolution to the political crisis in sight. In December 2008, almost a year after the February 2007 popular revolt, the Guinean state had become fragile and the opposition remained weak and fragmented (Crisis Group 2007). The analysis here describes the state of the Guinea polity on the verge of the December 2008 military coup.

We identify seven sets of interested parties who can and will impact upon the debate over democratic governance. Several of these will be examined here. We divide them into two groups: an embedded resistance that we examine first and the nascent but growing number of reformers both among the leadership and civil society in Guinea. Allies of the late president included the ruling elite, civilian and military that surrounded him as well as the senior levels of the civil service, territorial administration and traditional authorities.

Those promoting reform are the international donor community, international non-governmental organisations and national non-governmental and civil society organisations. It is this second group, despite the December 2008 military coup, who deserve the support of the international community.

Key political and administrative leaders in Guinea are soldiers in mufti and, despite recent attempts to institutionalise participation, the regime under Lansana Conté can best be classified as a sanitised military regime. The military constitutes a privileged corporate structure with access to resources and subsidised goods that could be threatened in the event of a full transition to civilian government. Secondary patronage networks that allow the distribution of resources have included the then political party (with preferential access to jobs), the civil service (through rent seeking), the private sector (through contracting) and traditional leadership (through control of land and conflict resolution). Political participation, decentralisation and reform more generally could threaten some or all of these elements.

A dying president, the military and presidential allies

In 1958, Lansana Conté was an under-educated sergeant in the French colonial army. Some critics called him a peasant president who ran the country as his personal domain and who, throughout his regime, could call on the army to put down resistance. His inability to conceptualise the nuances of governance, combined with a patriarchal and dictatorial approach to leadership, reinforced the authoritarian political culture introduced under Sékou Touré.

As the decade-long deathwatch in Guinea moved on, the international press and other outside observers suggested that the president's poor health meant that he did not have much of a day-to-day role in government. Even his symbolic role was weak. He hardly ever appeared in public and was noticeably absent during the 2006 Independence Day celebrations. Given the fact that the office of prime minister was vacant for most of 2006 (a new prime minister, Lansana Kouyaté, was appointed from a list provided by trade unions on 1 March 2007 but lasted only a few months), whatever de facto coordination there was fell upon the chief of staff of the president

and his other senior advisers. Yet the perception of weakness may have been over-emphasised. As crisis followed crisis in the last few years of his rule, President Lansana Conté continued to reach out and protect his followers and supporters.

The president's political 'clan' was made up of various business and economic interests, components of the security forces, the regional and prefectural leaders, the PUP (Parti del'Unité et du Progrès, the Unity and Progress Party) leadership, the public administration and the loyal members of parliament. During the Conté regime, the ruling elite, dominated by the military came to resemble a primitive corporatist regime. This 'clan', even after Conté's death, continues to be at the forefront of elite formation in Guinea.

Traditionally, the commercial, service and professional sector, having its origins partly in the Middle East and to a lesser extent in North Africa, South and East Asia, is externalised from Guinean society. There is a limited European presence in the business sector given the realities of socialist intervention in the market during the first republic and the militarisation of business opportunities in the Conté period. Many of those entering business have ties to or were ex-military men. The indigenous micro-level private sector in areas such as construction and engineering maintenance, though it is very small, has an interest in local governance. This group also includes both small farmers and producers associations. There are probably fewer than 10,000 indigenous entrepreneurs in the country today.

Access to government contracts is the key to small business development. A horizontal analysis of governance and devolution suggests an increasing engagement of private and non-governmental organisations and public-private partnerships. The indigenous private sector's major role is to serve as contractors to government and the donor community. It is also the source of rent seeking and corruption throughout Guinea.

Critics suggest that patronage, corruption and rent seeking (the process of delaying decisions, and blocking funds and contracts to extort money) are endemic in Guinea and symbolic reforms in democratic governance and decentralisation are too little too late (Druilhe n.d., 17). Rent seeking is said to occur within the context of policy decision-making, resource allocation and the letting of contracts. Despite optimistic signs with codes being introduced to provide for devolved governance and civil society development in the last years of the Conté regime, endemic corruption and rent seeking remain by far the major impediment to the development of a more equitable and efficient institutionalised governance system (USAID 2005, 25).

In the next few years, patronage and clientelism is likely to become increasingly localised. The development of private and non-governmental organisations as private contractors will have a significant impact on sub-national political and administrative structures. Small farmers, producers, sellers and economic associations are all said to have an interest in the governance process. An expanded role for sub-national government will mean a greater opportunity for contractors to supply goods and services to local government.

At the apex of the rent seeking system is a group of family, military and business allies said to be closely allied to the late president. This group benefits from access to economic resources (including 'rent'), contracts and trade licences. Many members of the political elite class in Guinea are linked to the international donor community and, through various front organisations, have incomes via linkages with donor projects and government contracts. Modest reforms have been introduced restricting

ministerial elite privileges such as restrictions on the size of ministerial vehicles. Little was done substantively during the Conté administration to address this patronage system.

Because of the threat to centralised rent seeking, the ‘clan’ are said to oppose political reform and devolved governance efforts that would open up the political and economic systems at all levels of government. The senior members of the ‘clan’, as the primary patronage group in the country, are said to be not more than 120 people. Secondary patronage networks may incorporate as many as 3,500 middle-level administrators, military officers and private-sector businessmen.

The military and civilian corporate entities

The military, with its ties to the current president, play an institutionalised social, economic and political role in society, beyond security, at both the local and national levels. During the Sékou Touré period, the Guinean army had some of the characteristics of a revolutionary force. Under his successor, General Conté, the military has become a self serving corporate entity. As an interested group, the military is inherently conservative and concerned with continued access to money and subsidised goods and services.

Within the political leadership there are two problems that are related to democratic and devolved government. First, at centralised, regional and prefectural levels, there is concern about the electoral process, who wins and who controls access to money, programmes and projects. Secondly, there is a political control problem. There is not yet in place a liberal, transparent electoral and institutional transformation process. Devolved governance would be a step in opening up the process. However, the corporate nature of this leadership group (the ‘clan’) is such that it is reluctant to disrupt the flow of donor funds into the country. Despite its relevance to any democratic transition, the donor flow has not been leveraged into support for continued reform, particularly at the level of electoral and decentralised institutions.

One impact of the previous army interventions in Guinea has been a militarisation of the country’s system of public administration. By the time of the December 2008 military coup, the public sector had become ‘fossilised and unmotivated’ (IRIN 2008, 1). Outside observers ranked Guinea as Africa’s (and the world’s) most corrupt country. By the end of 2008, reports from the United Nations Office in Conakry indicated that corruption had choked off health care, water services and electricity, access to which all required what the UN called a ‘service for bribe system’ (ibid, 1).

The military throughout the Conté period was overpaid, coddled and deferred to. In Guinea, political authority had atrophied at regional and prefectural levels by the 1990s. In the wake of the failures of the Conté regime, particularly in its last few years, the ruling political party (PUP) had also declined significantly. In the last half of 2008, military initiated political violence, police cruelty and running street battles became increasingly common. Increasingly, the death watch in Guinea (whose citizens were sick and tired of despotic rule) pinned their hopes on the possibility of a ‘good’ military coup in Guinea to overthrow the old regime but which would not stay in power. A military coup is what occurred. However, there was to be little evidence that it would be benevolent. Only in May 2009 had an international contract group

been formed with the new regime, led by the UN's Office, to facilitate negotiations to bring the military regime to accept the need for internationally recognised elections. It was too late.

Observers had speculated on five future scenarios after the Guinea coup: the military would cling to power; the military would develop a populist framework and transform itself into a mobilising regime; the military could fracture leading to regional or civil conflict; the military would become increasingly authoritarian and resist moves towards civilian rule; and the military would be held responsible for an increasingly deteriorating economic system. Only the last option suggests the potential for a return to civilian rule. In reality, it appears to be only a slim possibility that the post-Conté military rulers would commit to genuine democratic governance.

The civil service as a whole represents a set of organised interests that plays a modest though important role in Guinea. There is evidence that within the deconcentrated ministries there is opposition to both more participatory models of governance and the devolution of policy and fiscal responsibility to sub-national authorities. Opposition to democratic governance is particularly strong within the Ministry of Finance and parts of the Department of Territorial Affairs. There is a limited incentives structure (salaries are low and there are few opportunities for reward for performance). The bureaucracy has socio-economic interests based on patronage and corruption; corporately the bureaucracy plays a role in macro-economic debates, and sub-national administrators guard their socio-economic values with regard to local governance options and sectoral priorities. Most importantly, the civil service is very involved in the rent seeking process.

There is significant opposition from within the Ministry of Finance (MOF) and the Ministry of Planning to institutionalised and particularly decentralised governance as it affects central control over finance. Senior officials in MOF, according to one well-placed observer, 'simply do not understand [community based government] collectivities and do not see them as a part of the state. This is a very old debate and gets at the heart of the centralised role of the state'. What is needed, he went on, is a clear, fully understood simple role for institutionalised governance and local government in Guinea. As they control access to funds, the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Planning must be seen as the 'movers and shakers' (and blockers) for reform efforts.

Territorial bureaucrats

Two stakeholder groups, the territorial administration and elected rural and urban councils are directly involved in the participation and devolved governance debate. The latter have vested interests but had little influence during the Conté regime. The role of the prefect is clear and direct. To quote one prefect: 'the prefect represents the head of state, the state and all of the state departments in Guinea. He also in this area is mandated to help transfer authority to the collectivities [local governments] and to support them operationally through the supervision of local authorities'. The territorial administrator has clientele relationships with central government policy elites and in many cases close ties to the military both locally, regionally and at the national level (Picard and Moudoud 2007).

Territorial administrators have an important stake in debates about democracy and local government. The several hundred territorial administrators in Guinea include governors, prefects and sub-prefects. There is a strong sense of respect within the civil service for the office of prefect and for the supervisory system that it represents. Some senior administrators in Conakry served as prefects early in their career and accept the thesis that decisions should come from the top. Others served in deconcentrated office of sector ministries.

The prefectural cadre has been clearly partisan and dependent on presidential patronage. This group was universally loyal to and represented the former president (and through him the military) and the network includes many from the former president's ethnic group, the Sousou, as well as a sprinkling of representatives of the other main ethnic groups. In theory, and often in practice, the prefect controls the actions of all of the ministries and departments in his area. His overall responsibility includes security, police and concern with developmental programmes. His prestige within the area remains extremely high particularly in rural Guinea. He is also feared by some in civil society. Prefects have important patronage advantages. Within the prefectural system there is fundamentally the problem of 'gifts' that are part and parcel of the process of getting decisions made, and generally getting things done. As senior authorities at the sub-regional level, prefects can use their authority to exploit (and extract money from) citizens in need of government services. This system administratively allows supervising officers such as the governor and the prefect to approve, disapprove, authorise, veto, change, suspend or cancel actions of local governments (municipalities and collectivities).

Prefects and sub-prefects during the Conté period could be active or former military officers. One source suggested that close to 40% of sub-prefects were members of the active military during the Conté administration. After the coup, the military appointed officers to all prefectural positions. One critic interviewed called the prefects 'small potentates'. Unless the office can be professionalised and separated from its military functions, the potential for significant reform in terms of local government is very limited. Local-level governance remains very difficult and reflective of the authoritarianism that is characteristic of a military regime. As one critic of the Conté government put it, 'the whole system is corrupt and is based on the extraction of resources from the people. At the grassroots, especially in the rural areas, the prefect intervenes in every aspect of life.'

At the prefectural level, the office of prefect and sub-prefect can exist without operating funds since the prefect can share in revenues collected on the ground through a mechanism that dates back to the Sékou Touré period. These funds are labelled bonuses, or grants, and are used by the prefect at their discretion. Because of their access to these funds, the prefect as an official is well treated in terms of service conditions. Though the amounts are not public, there is an understood formula that allocates a percentage of the collection taxes and rates to the prefect's office with the rest being sent to the centre. Even though no funds have been given to the prefect's office from the centre after 2005, the prefects continue to function on extracted 'tax' payments from the people living in their districts.

Meanwhile, although prefects and sub-prefects are powerful in representational terms and in security terms, they often lack the professional and educational skills needed to carry out their mission. There is a gap between the idea and reality of the supervisory system and there is no professional accountability and capacity at the

prefectural or sub-prefectural level to carry out their supervisory function in a supportive manner.

Traditional leaders, political culture and ethnicity

Traditional leaders in Guinea constitute a local-level parallel governance elite who determine decisions on the basis of a combination of consensus decision-making and group interests. They are linked to governance at the grassroots level through their involvement in heads of neighbourhoods and rural leadership choices. They have a role in the elite selection process and, during the Conté period, this included the selection of candidates for elections. Their influence is indirect but powerful and extends to the urban as well as rural areas.

Historically, traditional leaders have always dominated the collectivity (grass-roots) but not from the text, or code of the law but rather from their important influence over village level life. Though they have lost some strength over the last 30 years, particularly along the coast (both because of French colonial rule and the anti-traditional stand taken by the Sékou Touré regime), they remain very powerful actors in rural Guinea. Given the series of economic crises faced by the citizens of Guinea, there is a strong need for the individual and the family to have access to their kinship network to protect their social, economic and community interests. Traditional leaders are ethnically based and reflect the conservative nature of rural Guinea and the strong role that ethnic identity continues to play in the countryside.

Traditional leaders play a major role in land allocation, conflict resolution and community level decision-making. They also play a major communication role, interpreting government, particularly among the 75% of the Guinea population who do not speak French. As rural councils become more important, after a return to civilian rule, decisions would have to be made about the relationship between traditional leaders and elected councils particularly in areas where historically their functions overlap.

At the moment there is little evidence that traditional leaders are overtly in opposition to participation and decentralisation policies since local government does not play a significant role in the allocation of resources. That will change if local government is strengthened in future.

Democratic governance in Guinea: the reformers

A reforming elite and civil society

At the end of the Conté regime, there was evidence of a group of reformers (50–60 senior political and administrative leaders) within the ruling party, the civil service, private and non-profit sectors and among opposition groups and within the civil service, who were committed to greater pluralism, parliamentary rule and decentralised governance. This group included several influential leaders who could be candidates to succeed then former President Conté. The presence of this group is the most positive sign available that governance and governance reforms had the potential to succeed in Guinea and these reformers, weak though they may be, constituted the primary internal drivers for pluralistic reforms. The military coup slowed down but perhaps did not stop the transition process.

The reform group tended to be well placed, if scattered within government. There are a number of reformers throughout the political establishment and in the academic community, who tend to be better educated and concerned both with opening up the political system, parliamentary and political party development and decentralising government. They believe that decentralisation reforms are part of a broader process of the reformation of an authoritarian, over-centralised state system. This group is buttressed by members of the professional-level expatriate Guinean community, resident in France, the United States and elsewhere. Expatriate Guineans work in business, in the professions, and in international organisations and non-governmental groups. They often send remittances home to Guinea and constitute an important though under-utilised group in support of policy dialogue and debate. Many have strong ties to family and an emotional attachment to Guinea.

There are a number of international NGOs that maintain offices in Conakry and implement programmes including Africare, Caritas, Care, Catholic Relief Services, the Red Cross and Plan International. Estimates suggest that there are now more than 1,500 NGOs and civil society groups in Guinea and these civil society groups are beginning to define a vision for the future of the country (Crisis Group 2006). There are a number of international NGOs operating with donor, foundation or private support. Most indigenous NGOs have economic, or in a few cases, social goals. Few are yet overtly political or focus on human rights. These local NGOs are work-share, co-operative or marketing groups that see parliament and local government as ineffective and as interfering in local entrepreneurial activities through excessive regulation. NGOs receive almost no support from the government but many national ones do receive some support from the international community.

Compared to its neighbours in Francophone Africa, there is a sense of national identity in Guinea strengthened by the modest electoral and civil society reforms that have created social space particularly in urban Guinea. Included in civil society are the small indigenous private sector, trade unions, civil and religious organisations and both the government and opposition political parties.

Economic associations include those of workers and peasants, who provide training of farmers and also protection of the environment, and support for health management. They have the potential for increased support for both development and governance accountability and capacity at the local level, and strong consideration should be given to increased donor support for governance NGOs both from a participatory and a monitoring perspective.

Opposition political party groups have also seen governance and decentralisation as part of a series of needed guarantees of political competition, the definition of political space and political leadership debates, all of which require both a legal and intellectual framework. However, several informed observers dismiss the political opposition in Guinea as weak and ineffectual, both organisationally and financially. Moreover, most opposition political parties have not picked up on decentralisation as a primary issue; instead they focus on the weaknesses of parliament authoritarian tendencies of the Conté government including the politicised prefecture.

In interview, the leaders of the ruling political party, PUP, identified democracy, participation and decentralisation as important government initiatives. Whether this was sincere or based on assumptions as to what a donor-financed consultant might want to hear was not clear. Senior party spokesmen have stated that the goal of the party is to transfer power to all legal organisations at the sub-national levels, coming

out of the 2005 elections. This is particularly important in terms of primary education and rural water. Focus is on the rural village where the ruling party continues to have significant support. Other priorities include fisheries and agriculture. Collectivities, according to PUP spokespersons, should make decisions because they know the needs of the people. As one government party official put it:

What remains to be done is to transfer accountability and responsibility, install implementation mechanisms and transfer capacity to the collectivities. Collectivities also need development plans to identify the needs of people at the community level. This requires trained personnel working for local government entities. However, the reality is that local councils remain very weak throughout the country and within collectivities there is still a fear of prefects dominating them. Both prefects and ministry representatives need to be strengthened and educated to support local government development in a counseling rather than a dictatorial role.

Civil society unrest has increased over the last three years and reflects the increasing visibility of civil society as a set of organised interests. As part of strike activity, Guinea underwent a series of disruptions, some violent in March–May of 2006. A number of people were killed during civil society demonstrations. Press reports also suggested an increase in ethnic tensions throughout the country and that the threat of further social disorder is real.

Trade Union syndicates that are beginning to flex their muscles support democratic and decentralised institutions. Most unions are relatively disciplined and in a demonstration strike in March 2006 and the National Strike in February and March 2007, demonstrated their ability to influence the political process. Union leaders have demonstrated their concern over the possibility of a pre- or a post-succession military coup and the effect this would have on local and central institutions. At the same time, the trade union-civil society alliance was not able to extract concessions from the regime that could move Guinea towards national elections prior to President Conté's death.

The international donor community

What never happened under Conté is a national dialogue, a process never pushed by the international donor community, which (especially the World Bank, the US and France) was criticised for its timidity throughout the Conté period. Despite the growth and proliferation of civil society groups, the opposition forces remained deeply divided from each other. In the two years after the February 2006 crisis, signals of increasing political instability appeared not to have been taken seriously by the donor community. In the end there was to be no process of opening up the civil society community to negotiate with either the government or the military.

While there are varying levels of support for pluralism and decentralisation internally in Francophone Africa, such pressures have primarily come from external donor organisations (Druilhe et al. n.d., 7). The external origins of demands for governance reforms and the primary support for decentralised government remains located within the donor community. Donor pressures, which are often centrally demanded, also limit the extent to which competence can be transferred to collectivities. Effectively the only developmental, and in many cases the recurrent budgets, are from donors and international NGOs.

There are, in Guinea, among a number of donors, significant concerns for issues of transparency in the management of development efforts at all levels of government. In Guinea, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has initiated and tries to coordinate donor assistance in institutionalised governance, decentralisation, capacity building for decentralised government and its role in redressing poverty as a significant priority for the international donor community.

The UNDP through its Local Government Programme for Guinea (working in Haute Guinée), funded by the UN Capital Development Fund, has supported local-level capacity building in Guinea for several years. The goal of UNDP in terms of local governance is four-fold. It is concerned with providing some infrastructure support for local-level institutions, the promotion of local-level participation, the reduction of poverty in Guinea and the reduction of the potential for regional and local conflict. Close to half the funding goes to training activities, while project support is given to the health and primary education sectors and basic infrastructure (latrines, health posts, classrooms and markets). The goal of the UNDP is to work with rural collectivities in the planning and implementation of micro-project activities.

The World Bank has listed governance and decentralisation (largely undefined) in its 2003 Country Assistance Strategy and given priority to support for Rural Development Collectivities (CRD) as part of that process. However, despite its lip service in support of institutionalised governance, the World Bank in its reporting on decentralisation in Guinea (released only two months before the military coup) downplayed the importance of participation and pluralism pleading the restrictions placed upon the Bank to not interfere in a member country's domestic affairs (World Bank 2008).

A number of bilateral donors have promoted the development of collectivities (local councils), as well as civil action groups (USAID 2005) and most of the bilateral donors have direct or indirect concerns about aspects of local governance. The French government targets poverty alleviation, which has important implications for governance and decentralisation activities. French Technical Co-operation has provided support for the local court system, deconcentrated entities, and urban and rural collectivities. France has been a major supporter of decentralised capacity (Lama 2005).

USAID has committed itself to decentralised governance and civil society support for Guinea both in overall democracy and governance processes (such as support for independent media) and in terms of its priority areas of health, agriculture and primary education (and the support of parent-teacher associations). It seeks to heighten transparency and accountability within regional and local government units (USAID 2005). It also seeks to support the capacity to gather and interpret statistics in deconcentrated and devolved institutions. USAID works primarily through NGOs in the implementation of its activities a practice and this can have a negative impact on local capacity.

German Technical Assistance, by contrast, does not work in the area of governance or decentralisation per se but it does work in deconcentrated areas of education, health and poverty reduction and has supported pilot training activities in Futa Jalon in five urban and 48 rural communes. For various reasons there are fewer bilateral donors in Guinea than in most other West African countries. For example,

the Scandinavian countries, usually important supporters of democracy and civil society, do not have offices or programmes in Guinea.

There have been problems in terms of donor intervention to support democratic, deconcentrated and devolved entities. The Conté period has seen timidity on the part of the donors in putting pressure on the regime to democratise political institutions. There has been a lack of harmonisation of development partner activities, and overlapping and sometimes contradictory actions between and among donors, the national government and even from non-governmental groups. As an example of this, most of the donors require contributions in participation and contributions in kind leaving some villages heavily impacted by donors with heavy levels of contributory labour, which one commentator labelled almost like the *corvée* system (slavery). Needless to say, the donor community is further hamstrung by the constraints imposed on them because of the December 2008 military putsch.

The concern for transition

Economically, Guinea remained underdeveloped throughout the colonial period in comparison to the Ivory Coast and Senegal. Politically, the impact of ethnicity on local governance debates is both a sensitive and an important one in Guinea and remains important particularly within the military and in terms of the power of traditional leadership. The Maninka, Soussou or Peuhl were often seen as particularly over-represented by smaller groups.

Moreover, the military, both under Sékou Touré and President Conté, has developed a deeper corporate role in Guinea than in the other states in the region. Guinea is a fragile state, with a weakened economy, but it is not a collapsed state (as were its neighbours, Sierra Leone and Liberia over the past decade). Government institutions, though weak, do continue to function, albeit within the ambiance of severe rent seeking. Central to political authority in Guinea is not the former ruling political party (Party of Unity and Progress) but the military.

Given the threat of a non-constitutional transition, there was in early 2007 a concern on the part of both national leaders and the international development partners (donors) that ethnic rivalries could distort governance processes. Historically ethnicity has been a preoccupation in Guinea. As is the case with many West African countries, Guinea has an authoritarian regime but is a weak 'soft' state – that is, it cannot implement policies or impose its political will on large parts of its own territory.

That said, despite significant ethnic divisions and inter-ethnic resentment, the citizens of Guinea have a strong sense of national identity and Guinea is not likely to collapse into civil war in the way that most of its neighbours have. Guinea, according to one prefect interviewed, may be a fragile state but it is not a Liberia or Sierra Leone.

This relative stability is partly due to the centralising tendencies of the Touré regime but also because the military's role is conservative, corporate and interest-based rather than revolutionary. Thus, even in the worst-case scenario following the 2008 renewed military intervention, the Guinean state is not likely to fall apart, though there could be a temporary loss of control over peripheral areas such as the

Forest region. In part this is because of the role that the prefect and the military have played as a symbol of state unity in Guinea.

Guinea, however, has been affected over the past 10 years by regional instability and the civil wars of its West African neighbours; the Conté regime has intervened in these regional conflicts at various times. There are concerns in Guinea about regional insecurity, in some cases banditry, diamond smuggling and, in many parts of the country, severe threats from unsound health situations, extreme poverty, malnutrition and starvation. Some sources of instability are internal based on criminal behaviour and drug use while others have been external and related to regional political instability.

There is little question that an extra-territorial intervention involving Guinea further in the affairs of one or more of its neighbours could threaten the fragile state system. Outside Conakry, the territorial administration is now fully militarised and military elements (and ex-military) control transportation (and extract resources from travellers) through a vast system of road blocks that ring the capital and other towns.

The extent to which the extra-legal political transition has the potential to disrupt the long-term institutionalised governance process depends upon the nature of the long-term transition process. Observers at the end of 2007 saw four possible scenarios for the transition in Guinea. The speculation focused on:

1. A constitutional transition: Either the current president would finish his term and there were elections or should the president die, there would be new elections held within 90 days as required by Guinea law. This seemed unlikely at the time and the rapidity of the military coup in the wake of Conté's death suggests that it had been long planned.
2. The establishment of an extra-constitutional but negotiated transitional regime: that is, a (donor supported) representative national forum would be created and determine that there should be an interim government of national unity from 12–18 months with elections firmly scheduled at the end of this period. There are those who still hope for that. Thus far the new military regime has made noises in that direction but has failed even to consider leaving power in the foreseeable future.
3. There would be a soft military intervention in support of a transition with a firm commitment to return to civilian rule after elections. Though there was now a military installed regime, the regime is transitional and supported by major political factions with a limited period in power (12–18 months) with elections to follow. Guinea intellectuals and social leaders continue to hope for this but the irrationality of the military leadership suggests this is unlikely.
4. A hard- or long-term military government, led by ill-educated, messianic and erratic officers shows no prospect of returning to constitutional rule with continued or increased levels of rent-seeking behaviour and corruption. This appears to be the leadership that Guinea has found itself with.

Conclusion

The future appears grim for Guinea. In an age of economic crisis, few developed countries are likely to spare much time on this benighted state. Caught in a cycle of

bad governance, Guinea celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence on 2 October 2008. A scant three months later, Guineans woke up to yet another military coup. Hopes and aspirations for democratic governance would be put off perhaps for another generation. The citizenry deserves better.

Yet the donor community in Guinea would march on. The reports would continue. There would be a trickle of funds from the 'other government' to pay for humanitarian concerns, especially food and medicine (purchased, of course, from the developed countries). With the first and second scenarios lost, the donors will advocate the third while expecting the fourth. The best that could be hoped for is that the situation would not get worse. The bureaucracy, while dependent on donor funds and corruption for its livelihood, would not become increasingly predatory.

There is often concern expressed that democracy and devolution of power will lead to state fragmentation. This argument is most used by authoritarian leaders to justify their rule. There is little evidence available that suggests the constitutionally devolved governance and subsidiarity are likely to cause state collapse either in Guinea, Africa or other parts of the world. There is more evidence that institutionalised processes of subsidiarity and devolved governance provide increased space for pluralism and the articulation of civil society views. Indeed, it is pluralist governance, devolved authority and institutionalised democracy that are the last best hope for the Guineas of the world.

The World Bank and the donor community needs to continue to provide full support for democracy and politically devolved decentralisation efforts as a part of a broader process of promoting the development of pluralism and participatory civil society. There were the beginnings of institutionalised governance and civil society in Guinea at the end of 2008 that could have been better served by the international community.

Notes

1. We use the term civil society to either refer to self-defined indigenous civil society groups or to models of civil society that were promoted by the international donor community.
2. The use of the term has no anthropological meaning but is a term often used among Guinea elites to refer to the loose group of individuals who are close to and dependent upon the largesse of the late president. Quotation marks are used to distinguish this use of the term.

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