

## Guinea-Bissau 1998

### Democratic legality versus democratic legitimacy

**A**t 5 o'clock, in the early morning of Sunday, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1998, shooting was heard from the military installations at Santa Luzia in north-eastern Bissau, capital of the West-African republic of Guinea-Bissau, governed under multiparty constitutional democracy since parliamentary and presidential elections held in 1994. Fighting spread quickly to the military base at Brá, near the international airport, in the north-western parts of the city. In a radio broadcast the same day, president João Bernardo « Nino » Vieira held former commander-in-chief, brigadier Ansumane Mané, responsible for an armed revolt against the legal government.

Two days later, on June 9<sup>th</sup>, spokesmen of Ansumane Mané announced that a military 'junta' had been formed. It demanded the resignation of the president in order to create proper conditions, according to the rebels, for democratic elections to be held within sixty days. As the holding of elections before the end of the year had been the stated ambition also of the legal government, the real causes and motives behind the uprising did not stand out very clearly at this stage.

The initial impression conveyed by international media, based largely upon officious declarations from Bissau, was that this was a mutiny by a disgruntled group of military men that would in all probability be put down quite rapidly. There was also sincere surprise and consternation, both inside and outside Guinea-Bissau, that something like this could happen under the democratically elected regime which had recently begun to please « the international community » by showing signs of « good governance » and economic efficiency.

#### Conflict rapidly regionalized

Very soon, however, the situation appeared considerably more complex. As early as on June 9<sup>th</sup>, the very day of the rebels' initial declaration, 1,300 soldiers from Guinea-Bissau's northern neighbour Senegal, were already in place in Bissau on the president's demand to support the few loyalist troops, who did not even have access to munitions. On the following day, the Senegalese were joined by 400 soldiers from Guinée-

Conakry, the neighbour in the south. Thus the conflict was almost immediately regionalized.

### **Legality versus political legitimacy**

Quite soon, too, it became clear that the image of a simple mutiny against the legal, democratically elected government was very far from the whole truth. Legality and political legitimacy appear in this case to be far apart.

Constitutional democracy had reigned in Guinea-Bissau since 1994, true enough. A multi-party parliament, the National Assembly, had been installed as an important result of the election, where an active opposition faced the old ruling party, PAIGC (*Partido africano da independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*) which retained a majority position. President 'Nino' himself had barely been re-elected in 1994, in a close final round where he was challenged by Koumba Yalá, young, left-populist leader of the new Party of Social Renovation (PRS, *Partido da renovação social*).

But dissatisfaction with the corrupt presidential power and the harsh conditions of life had remained as rampant as before, or worse, even under democracy, both among common people and within the power apparatus, not least the military. After the first days of the 1998 war, which stalled the constitutional process of up-coming elections, the president stood politically isolated in society and abandoned by most of his army, reduced to relying on the military force of the Senegalese army to remain in office, and thus totally dependent upon foreign troops for his political and physical survival.

### **Open war for seven weeks in spite of mediation efforts**

For seven weeks all efforts to bring the belligerents together failed, although many actors tried: most importantly the bishop of Bissau, the foreign minister of Gambia, the Portuguese and Angolan foreign ministers acting together, and after some time also the Speaker of the National Assembly, the mandate period of which expired in July 1998.

The rebels remained all through in military control of important points around the capital, including the international airport, as well as large parts of the countryside. They declared themselves ready for talks, but demanded the withdrawal of the Senegalese troops. President « Nino » and his government were confined to the more central parts of the capital city – and this thanks only to the Senegalese troops, the number of which increased considerably as the war went on. In parts of the countryside, the situation was fluid, while the government-Senegalese troops held the northern border areas and the north-eastern parts of the country. Initially the president insisted that the rebels would have to lay down their arms without conditions.

The ministers of foreign affairs and defense of the member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met in Abidjan, the capital of Côte d'Ivoire, on July 3-4th. They decided that ECOMOG (« peace-monitoring group ») – the regional military force under Nigerian leadership which has intervened on behalf of ECOWAS to stop the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone – would have its mandate extended to

Guinea-Bissau. The conditions under which this could be realized remained unclear, considering that Senegal is a leading member of ECOWAS.

The European Union, on July 8th, voiced worries about abuses of human rights in the Guinea-Bissau war. On July 11th, the Commissioner of the European Union for Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific, declared that a military coup against a democratically elected government could, under no circumstances, be accepted. What could be discussed was how such crises should be avoided in the future. The Security Council of the United Nations remained passive.

### **Catastrophe for the Guinean people**

In the meantime about five sixths of Bissau's 300,000 inhabitants fled into the countryside and thousands into Senegal. Between one and two thousand, mostly foreigners, were evacuated by sea during the first weeks, as well as the entire diplomatic corps except the Portuguese and French ambassadors. Hundreds of people were killed, although no certain account of the death toll exists. The city of Bissau was mercilessly shelled by artillery from both sides resulting in great material destruction. Senegalese troops were reported to act as harsh foreign occupants rather than as forces of the legal government<sup>1</sup>. The rainy season was on. The food and sanitary situation rapidly became precarious for tens of thousands of people in overcrowded towns and villages, while international aid convoys were stopped by the Senegalese and Guinean authorities. A tragic catastrophe was underway for the Guinean people and their development efforts. Malaria, hunger and lack of elementary inputs sapped their force of resistance as well as their vulnerable livelihood base.

### **Complex background and more than a simple mutiny**

What had happened ? What is happening ? What is likely to happen ? The questions are multi-dimensional. It is too early for any certain answers to be attempted. Some facts and relationships are however known, and some provisional judgements may be a bit more well-founded than others.

Brigadier Ansumane Mané is a veteran of Guinea-Bissau's anti-colonial liberation war (1963-74), where he served with president « Nino ». He was suspended from his post as commander-in-chief of the armed forces in January 1998. The alleged reason was negligence in regard to controlling the illegal sale of Guinean arms to the rebels struggling for the independence of Casamance, the southern-most province of Senegal, across Guinea-Bissau's northern frontier. The Casamance rebellion has gone on with varying intensity since the first half of the nineteen-eighties. The Senegalese government has for long been worried by the easy flow of persons and, as it seems, arms between Guinea-Bissau and Casamance. Furthermore, the majority people of Casamance, the *diolas*, are culturally and historically close to important groups of people in northern Guinea-Bissau. This is thus a sensitive issue in the relations between the two countries. It goes far

1. One example is the reported destruction of the facilities of the Bissau social science and humanities research institute INEP (*Instituto nacional de estudos e pesquisa*), by Senegalese military units using the premises as their barracks. The major part of existing documentation on the cultural and historical patrimony of Guinea-Bissau had been assembled at INEP.

toward explaining the heavy military involvement of Senegal, with French support, in the crisis.

There are, however, no clear indications that the issue of arms trafficking as such can be traced specifically to Ansumane Mané. After his suspension in January, a parliamentary commission with multiparty representation began to investigate the charges under great secrecy. The results of the investigation were to have been presented to the parliament and the public on Monday, June 8th. But on Friday, June 5th, only a few days *before* the scheduled discussion of the report, a new commander-in-chief was suddenly designated by the president, five months after the suspension of Ansumane Mané. On Sunday morning, June 7th, as already said, fighting broke out near the domicile of the latter at Santa Luzia. The parliament never did meet to discuss the controversial report.

The chain of events now described has caused many people in Bissau to suspect that there is more to the story than a simple mutiny of disgruntled soldiers. Who wanted, at any cost, to stop the public discussion of the parliamentary report? This is the question raised. As yet, no documented answer is available<sup>2</sup>. The overwhelming absence of support for the legal government since June 1998, both within the army and among the population at large, is an eloquent indication of what many Guinean citizens may think.

### **Truce, followed by cease-fire**

After seven weeks of war leading to nothing but military and diplomatic stalemate, a «contact group» within the organization of the officially Portuguese-speaking countries CPLP (*Comunidade de países de língua portuguesa*), finally managed to achieve a fragile truce under the chairmanship of Cape Verde's foreign minister, José Luís de Jesus. On July 26th, both sides in the conflict signed the truce document on board the Portuguese frigate *Corte Real*, outside the coast of Guinea-Bissau. Thus the government of president «Nino» had been forced to accept the consequences of its political and military isolation inside its own land. Almost immediately people began to return to Bissau, evidently betting on peace, in spite of all difficulties to be expected.

CPLP is a «community» of states made up of Portugal, its former African colonies, and of Brazil. ECOWAS is the regional organisation of the West African states and their heads of state. These two groupings clearly have partly divergent stakes in the Guinea-Bissau conflict. Still they managed together, with some difficulty, to bring the belligerents back to negotiations. The outcome was a formal cease-fire agreement signed in Praia, the capital city of Cape Verde, on August 26th 1998, exactly one month after the first truce. The agreement froze the military stalemate, confirming, among other things the rebels in control, for the time being, of Bissau's international airport as well as the nearby military base.

2. On September 18th, 1998, Ansumane Mané gave his version of the origin of the conflict to a group of parliamentary mediators sent to visit him. His two-hour talk was broadcast the following day. Basically he claimed that the manipulations and treacheries of the president had pushed him and his military colleagues to a point of no return, where he had even wanted to kill the president. He denied all involvement in the Casamance arms trafficking.

### **Continued peace efforts**

The negotiations had been tough on both occasions. President « Nino » and his government continued to insist on their legal authority. The rebels on their side claimed that the old regime had lost all legitimacy and that the president must resign. They also demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the Senegalese and Guinean (Conakry) troops, now amounting to at least 3,000 men, while accepting a small and neutral force of military observers to replace them. This was firmly supported also by the political opposition parties, which have been quite active ever since mid-1998, organizing meetings and publishing resolutions particularly in Lisbon. In late October, a joint meeting of the Guinean and Senegalese parliamentary oppositions repeated in Paris the demand for withdrawal of Senegalese troops from Guinea-Bissau. Both sides in the conflict agreed on the necessity to organize elections as soon as materially and organizationally possible.

Clearly the positions of the rebels and the government could not be easily reconciled. The mediators' formula aimed to combine recognition of the rebels' political and military strength inside the country with the simultaneous recognition of the Senegalese government's desire to control its southern border, while adding some face-saving dimension for president « Nino » in connection with parliamentary and presidential elections to be held as soon as possible. The president, obviously, would not be a candidate in such elections. An attempt to reach agreement along these lines failed at negotiations held in Abidjan on September, 14-15th 1998. The foremost stumbling block was the military role of Senegal in Guinea-Bissau.

### **Peace agreement signed on November 1st 1998**

During October, it seemed that part of the initiative had moved from CPLP and ECOWAS to local civil society forces inside Guinea-Bissau. A negotiation group headed by former PAIGC prime minister Manuel Saturnino da Costa had established contacts with the rebels, while a national goodwill commission headed by the bishop of Bissau tried tirelessly to bring the belligerents together. Nevertheless, heavy fighting resumed on two occasions in October, on 9-10 and 18-21, resulting in decisive military gains for the rebel side and apparently causing president « Nino » to give up his last hopes for a military victory.

Having lost Bafata and Gabu, the two major towns in central and eastern Guinea-Bissau, to the rebels and being completely encircled with his foreign protectors in central Bissau – almost empty after the population had fled again – the president saw no other choice than accepting to meet with Ansumane Mané, the rebel leader. The meeting took place on October 29th and 30th, in Banjul, Gambia's capital city. In spite of two days' of intensive negotiations, the belligerents failed to agree on conditions for peace. Instead they flew together to Abuja, the capital city of Nigeria, where an assembled ECOWAS summit meeting finally pressured them, on November 1st 1998, into signing a peace agreement.

According to the Abuja agreement, as reported by media, a national unity government with rebel representation will be formed and remain in power, awaiting elections to be held presumably before the end of March. Another important point concerns the military forces of Senegal and Guinea-Conakry, which are to be withdrawn, and followed instead by other

ECOWAS troops, expected to control Guinea-Bissau's border with Senegal and also, presumably, to act as a force of 'interposition' in Bissau. The airport which has remained under rebel control all through will be opened, as well as the harbour. The president will remain in office for the time being.

The implementation of such an agreement is certain to be risky and tricky, loaded with potential conflicts as it is and not really reflecting the balance of forces on the ground, which is more favourable to the rebels than reflected in the cited points. Having been formally signed by the two chief protagonists of the conflict, in the presence of the president of Nigeria and other ECOWAS heads of state, the November 1st agreement may still turn out to be less fragile than the two preceding ones. The international and regional pressure in favour of its implementation, some way or other, is heavy.

### **The future ?**

At the moment of putting the final touches to this article<sup>3</sup>, « Nino » Vieira and Ansumane Mané had barely returned to Guinea-Bissau. Also the people had begun to return, but more cautiously it seemed than in July, after the first truce. Considering the alternatives available to the belligerents, as well as to the people, this may still be realistic, in spite of everything, including the October outbursts of renewed fighting which caused tens of thousands to flee for a second time. But there are certainly no guarantees. Years of misrule in Bissau have laid the country open and vulnerable to explosive regional and internal conflicts. These have nothing to do with the development of the country except in a very destructive sense which, furthermore, escapes control from within.

If, in spite of all obstacles, peace can be secured and elections held, then a new government under a new president may eventually come in place. Unless democratically legitimate, it will be unable to rule. Democratic legitimacy requires more than legality. In Guinea-Bissau, minimum requirements for future democratic legitimacy will be less governmental authoritarianism and more openness to ordinary people, less top-level corruption than before, and some commitment to development that is credible in the eyes of Guinean citizens. Otherwise reconstruction will be very difficult, politically as well as materially.

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*Although using in its initial parts the same formulations as a « briefing » written for Review of African Political Studies (Sheffield) in mid-July 1998, this article has been fundamentally revised and up-dated to include events until the beginning of November 1998. It is based on the reporting by international media, including most importantly the Lisbon daily O Público and the Portuguese news agency Lusa, as well as on unpublished written reports and direct reporting to the author by close and knowledgeable observers of the 1998 events, coupled with the author's previous knowledge of Guinea-Bissau.*

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3. November 6th, 1998.