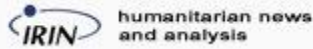


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Guinea: Ethnic Tensions Likely to Delay Elections

BY: GHANAMMA



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Conakry — Politics remain ethnically divisive in Guinea a year after violent clashes marred a bitterly divided Presidential election.

Analysts and civil servants say more concerted reconciliation efforts between ethnic groups are needed on the part of the President and opposition leaders to avoid another pitched battle in upcoming legislative elections.

Voting was originally scheduled for the end of 2011, but senior officials told IRIN it is more likely to take place early next year as the census, registration process and other key preparations are nowhere near complete.

“Ethnic tensions are getting worse, not better,” said Vincent Foucher – a researcher at the International Crisis Group (ICG), a conflict thinktank – who wrote *Putting the transition Back on Track*. “Everyone is playing the ethnic card... horrible statements are being made from all sides.”

The main political party, President Alpha Condé’s Rally the Guinean People (RPG) is supported by the Malinke, while main opposition leader Cellou Dalein Diallo’s party, the Union des Forces Democratiques de Guinée (UFDG), is closely associated with the Peulh community. Peulhs are the dominant ethnic group in Guinea, followed by the Malinke and Sousou.

Favouritism

Corinne Dufka, head of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in West Africa, says the current administration has fomented ethnic tension rather than trying to reduce it. The President has shown clear favouritism in appointing Malinke to civil service and ministerial posts, and has used the judicial system – based on French civil law, customary law, and decree – to discriminate against Peulh political groups.

Currently, Peulhs hold just six ministerial positions, including the Youth and Tourism portfolios, while the military is Malinke dominated.

Many people fear that Condé is concentrating power in the executive. “Past Presidents had to balance the ethnic positions at least a little, but now there is not as obvious a need,” said Foucher. Even military junta leader Dadis Camara had to put more effort into getting the support of different ethnicities during his short-lived time in power, he added.

Public discourse has been peppered with ethnic rhetoric in recent months. On 21 September 2011, the Governor of Conakry Region, Resco Camara, talked of ordering containers of water from the Mayimbo River to pour on protesters – the river is popularly believed to have dangerous powers against members of the Peulh community.

Mouctar Diallo, leader of the New Democratic Forces party (NFD) and President of a group of opposition parties, Collective Parties Politique Finalisation de la Transition, told IRIN he has never seen Guinea as divided as it is now. “You say your name and you know your ethnicity – and that is how people are defining themselves. An ethno-strategy has become part of the Guinean politics... the situation is very serious.” He too, has shocked many with his strong statements – earlier this year saying President Condé would need to expand his cemeteries and hospitals to bury protesting militants – referring to strong crackdowns by security forces on protesters.

A rice vendor at Concasseur market in the capital, Conakry, told IRIN that Peulhs feel increasingly marginalized in society and politics. Those in the diaspora have made a number of vitriolic statements, with online news site Guinée Presse speaking of impending civil war and a “genocide” being planned

against the Peulh community. “They talk of genocide when there are arrests. Key officials are making strong statements – it is worrying,” said Foucher.

Nevertheless, strained relations between the President’s party and the opposition improved recently when Condé held meetings with opposition leaders to discuss the upcoming elections. He described the meeting as “cordial and rewarding”.

Moustapha Naïte, director general of the Patrimoine Partie Politique, which is linked to the Presidency, told IRIN that although ethnic division is at a high pitch, poverty, not politics, is the root cause of tension between the various communities.

Economy not ethnicity

“People are mistaking economic issues for ethnic issues. What people are really concerned about is the economy and jobs, and that is starting to look up,” he told IRIN, referring to a recent spike in investment in the mining sector, and mining reform that could increase the government’s share in the sector by up to 35 percent.

“We are committed morally and religiously to reconciliation,” Naïte said. “We need to have a debate about the problems that have been posed. There is a sense of frustration in the country, and deepening poverty has accentuated some tensions, but the roots are much more in poverty than in ethnicity.”

Guineans have become poorer in the past 15 years. In 1995 some 40 percent of the population was living in poverty, but in 2010 this figure reached 58 percent, according to the UN.

Ousmane Balde, head of International Alert, a conflict resolution non-profit, agrees. “The biggest danger in Guinea is poverty. One percent of the population takes most of the country’s revenue – it is very corrupt – yet this is somehow socially tolerated.”

HRW’s Dufka said poverty need not be divisive. “All ethnic groups have suffered from bad governance, corruption and a weak rule of law,” she pointed out.

Marriages, baptisms

Some worry that politically driven ethnic division has seeped into communities, creating tension where previously there had been inclusion and tolerance. For instance, in the city of Conakry, most marriages and baptisms have traditionally been inclusive events to which all ethnic groups were invited. Dufka told IRIN that lately she has heard of more ceremonies being limited to one group or another.

In the marketplaces, a few Peulhs, who are angry with what they see as the government’s efforts to undermine them economically and politically, have started to set different prices for Peulhs and for others, say traders.

A Malinke woman at Concasseur market, who asked to remain unnamed, said she was charged 18,000 GF(US\$2.67) for a bottle of milk, while the Peulh woman just before her had been charged 15,000 (\$2.21). But, she said, this practice was far worse during the election period in 2010.

President Condé has tried to break up monopolies in the import market, traditionally dominated by Peulhs, causing some to feel targeted, said a vendor. Many Peulhs left Guinea for neighbouring Cote d’Ivoire when its President Alassane Ouattara eliminated taxes for traders there.

“Had President Condé pushed for inclusion – ‘let’s all work together; how can I encourage Peulhs to continue to invest in Guinea?’ – this could have mitigated some of these problems and would not have sabotaged the economy,” said Dufka.

Others feel it is high time that the power of what they call “mafias” – who manipulate the market and fix prices – is broken. “It is the President who says monopolies in the market should be broken up to help everyone compete for the benefit of the population... he has not stigmatized one ethnic group over another,” Diallo, a Conakry resident, told IRIN.

Moving forward

Ethnic tensions have long simmered in the country, but with so many Guineans having seen first-hand the impact of such violence in West African neighbours Sierra Leone and Liberia, the appetite for violence is low. Thousands of refugees from these countries fled to Guinea during their civil wars. “Ethnic problems are not fundamental here [Guinea], they’re power-related,” International Alert’s Balde told IRIN.

Diversity is so fundamental to most city-dwellers' lives that any degree of ethnic politicking will only go so far, a Conakry-based journalist says. "Many Guineans have more than one wife, each of a different ethnicity. It's not unusual to find a Guinean with a Peulh mother, a Malinke wife and a Soussou or Forestier father... things are mixed here."

Louency Camara, President of the Independent Election Commission (CENI) in Guinea, told IRIN he hoped ethnicity would play a far smaller role in upcoming legislative elections. The problem is that political debate remains highly polarized in the fledgling democracy. "We have never before seen a second round [of voting in an electoral process] – there is no real middle ground yet," he said.

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