

**Salvaging Guinea's elections?
By International Crisis Group
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(Dakar/Brussels) The opposition's recent suspension of its participation in preparations for the May legislative elections illustrates the tensions threatening Guinea's fragile democratic transition. Worse still, they may undermine its brittle internal peace. The immediate reasons for the walkout – legal and technical concerns over the revision of voter rolls – should not distract from the country's deep divisions. The May vote, if it takes place, will do so amid severe distrust among political elites, heightened ethnic tensions and pervasive allegations of fraud. The potential for a failed electoral process to become a pretext for worse – protests degenerating into bloody clashes, communal violence, and perhaps even the return of military interference in civilian politics – is real. To avoid this, all parties need to step back, engage in genuine dialogue and work together to create an atmosphere in which election results have some chance of being accepted by all involved.

On 23 February, the two main Guinean opposition coalitions, together with a number of other parties, announced that they would withdraw from preparations for the legislative elections, finally scheduled for 12 May this year. They criticise the internal workings of the electoral commission, raise fears of fraud and contest the procedures for overhauling voter rolls, demanding that a new company for this task be selected through a competitive tender. They also denounce the exclusion of Guineans abroad, whose participation is provided for in the constitution and who cast ballots in the 2010 presidential polls – overwhelmingly for the opposition. New demonstrations have been called for today.

Guinea's recent political upheaval has meant repeated delays to the legislative vote, which should have taken place in 2007. The death of the long-serving dictator President Lansana Conté in 2008 opened the way for a further brutal spell of military rule. In 2010, the country's first free presidential election successfully ended military rule, but was marked by fierce competition, eighteen violent deaths and a rise in ethnic politicking. More than two years after assuming office, the winner of those polls, President Alpha Condé, a long-time democracy advocate, has not yet held the legislative elections. This is deliberate, say opposition politicians. They accuse President Condé of having won fraudulently in 2010 and, because his ethnic group is a minority, of using delays to the parliamentary vote to prepare the ground for rigging. For its part, the president's camp argues it tried to launch deep and important electoral reforms, which it was forced to abandon so as to accommodate the opposition, and that, even now, the opposition – which it portrays as a bunch of corrupt plutocrats – irresponsibly obstructs the holding of elections. Both sides' charges are grave.

Thus far, repeated national and international efforts to forge political consensus on the electoral system have failed. A "consultation" at the presidential palace, to which "all actors of socio-political life" have been invited, has been tabled for 4 March. Given that the 12 May date itself is contested, and that for a vote on that date President Condé must convene the election on 3 March, this meeting appears to be taking place too late. Moreover, its vague details, the bloated list of invitees, and the fact that it was called by the territorial administration minister rather than the president himself offer scant reassurance to opposition politicians that the government – thus far reluctant to engage them in meaningful dialogue – suddenly intends to do so.

The opposition's withdrawal bodes ill for a peaceful and legitimate vote. The precise implications of the election commission pushing ahead with a May date – as the commission's chair Bakary Fofana promises – without the consent of opposition-aligned commissioners, are troubling, if unclear. Nor is it clear what the opposition means by withdrawing from the current process while insisting it will not boycott the polls, or by its off-repeated threat to "block" the vote. Non-participation rarely proves a successful strategy. The opposition risks being left without a voice in decisions related to electoral mechanics, like the revision of voter rolls. Its exclusion, and the resulting polarisation, will make it almost impossible to manage the conflicts that will inevitably

arise during a contentious competition for power in a divided society with a recent violent past. Despite recent efforts by the judiciary to curb impunity, Guinea's security forces have a long history of heavy-handed repression. A scrappy election could present restless officers, who only recently submitted to civilian rule, with opportunities for troublemaking. The cost of divisive and violent elections for the young democracy could be enormous.

A preferable course – as Crisis Group's recent report recommended – would be to redouble efforts, while there is still time, to achieve at least a minimum consensus on the basic parameters for the vote. Both sides need to engage in a genuine dialogue and both need to give ground. President Condé, as incumbent, must demonstrate first his commitment to conciliatory politics. He needs to present opposition politicians with an alternative to either a boycott or passive acceptance of his will and offer a credible platform on which to engage them in direct conversations. He could, for example, concede to, and apply himself to raise funding for, the vote of the Guinean diaspora – who in 2010 comprised only just over 120,000 registered voters (of four million). In turn the opposition should take technical challenges seriously, in particular regarding the voter rolls, as it cannot afford to prove right those who accuse it of obstruction.

In working through the technical controversies, the UN Development Programme, the International Organisation of Francophonie and the European Union, who all provide assistance but have come under attack from one or the other side, are natural allies and should work on a joint intervention. Political engagement must accompany technical assistance: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), given its role during the transition two years ago, could offer its good offices to facilitate dialogue if necessary. Without urgent action, Guinea is headed towards a risky and divisive vote with grave implications for stability and the discredit of the entire political class.

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