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CALL FOR PAPERS

Guinea in the Light of the Coup d'État: Events and Structures

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On 5 September 2021, President Alpha Condé was ousted in a military coup. Alpha Condé was elected head of state in 2010 after his time in opposition had led him to exile and prison, and was supposed to bring an end to the country's long history of authoritarianism. With the election won by Alpha Condé, therefore, for the first time since its independence in 1958, Guinea experienced a regime change that was not brought about by biological chance – that is, by the death of a president. The election marked the end of the military transition period between 2008 and 2010, which itself was a consequence of the death of General-President Lansana Conté at the end of 2008. In 2021, therefore, the regime in power was actively defeated for the first time in the country's history. Moreover, while his two predecessors had each governed the country for nearly a quarter of a century, Alpha Condé had been in power for little more than ten years. His defeat came at a time when the regime seemed to have survived the political turbulence linked to Condé's candidacy for a highly-contested third presidential term.

The opposition, which had been defeated in a manipulated electoral system, was under heavy police and judicial pressure, and had largely withdrawn from the formal political arena in protest. The National Front for the Defence of the Constitution (FNDC), a “citizens” movement that had led the struggle against the constitutional amendment authorising Condé’s renewed candidacy, had also been worn down by the police and the judiciary, and many of its leaders had been imprisoned. Last but not least, the country was experiencing a boom in mining revenues, with major new investments still on the horizon.

It only took a few hours to bring down Alpha Condé, but the coup raises important questions about the nature of power exercised by his regime, and more generally about the different temporalities of politics in Guinea. What are the social and political structures that shape the *longue durée* of politics, and what role do events and ruptures play in the transformation of these same structures? Does the coup d’état confirm that apart from the death of the prince, a palace revolution represents the only opportunity for change in a country in which the state still manages to impose its “*commandement*” (Mbembe, 2000)? Is Guinea condemned to wander “from military Charybdis to electoral Scylla” (Foucher, 2012) in a cycle of military rule, “transition”, civilian rule and coups d’état, with each phase of the cycle giving rise to hope and disappointment in turn? Or should we consider that the 2021 coup d’état is somehow different from the 2008 coup, and that it marks a break in this cycle? Can we consider that it was made possible by the exhaustion of Alpha Condé’s legitimacy and his ability to control the state and society in the face of a series of structural transformations? What would these transformations be? These are the questions this dossier intends to pose.

The *event* has long had a bad reputation in the social sciences, which have preferred the study of structures and the long term, particularly in France (Ricœur, 1992). But as the historian William Sewell (2005) notes, the *event* invites us to reinterpret the political order in which it occurs. For Sewell, a *historical event* (rather than a mere *happening* or *occurrence*) is the result of contradictions within social and political structures, and in turn transforms these same structures. The *event* is therefore the particular moment when structures reach their limits and new structures emerge. These structures are both social and political, in the sense that political power is based on and exercised through social organisation, and structures and the contradictions between and within them are always open to being politicised and contested.

In his latest book on Guinea’s postcolonial trajectory, anthropologist Mike McGovern (2017) uses Sewell’s work to analyse the 2006-2007 popular mobilisations against Lansana Conté’s regime (see also McGovern, 2008). He sees them as what might be called a *historical event* within Sewell’s meaning. He analyses them in terms of the death of Sékou Touré (who died in 1984) and the slow end to Lansana Conté’s life (he passed away in 2008). For McGovern, this was a decisive turning point, a break with the dual legacy of Conté and Touré, the two heads of state who had presided over the country’s destiny since 1958, and the affirmation of a “more demanding population”, breaking with the logic of the “*commandement*” (McGovern, 2017: 187). This affirmation, McGovern points out, owes its legitimacy to both specific legacies (especially the trade union tradition that is a feature of Guinea) and an immediate context (an economic downturn and the end of the sub-regional conflict that devastated Sierra Leone and Liberia from the 1990s on, and put a lid on any hint of protest). More broadly, beyond the political field in the strict sense of the term, it is possible to hypothesise that Guinean society has undergone a trajectory of “detotalisation” (Bayart, 1985: 348), a detachment of the state from society, a decline in its capacity to govern and command, and a disengagement that began when Lansana Conté seized power. However, this “detotalisation” cannot be summed up as a one-sided “liberalisation”. The *laissez-faire* politics of the Conté regime continued only for as long as its power remained unthreatened. In the face of these shifts in political and social structures, it may be that the military junta that took power on Conté’s death in 2008 was only a tragic interruption. In any case, it is this question of

structural shifts that this issue of *Politique Africaine* invites us to reflect on, by locating the 2021 coup d'état within the longer sequence begun by the 2006-2007 mobilisations.

With this objective in mind, this dossier invites researchers to propose texts that shed light on the structures and their transformations during the long period from the mobilisations of 2006-2007 to the army takeover in 2021.

Axis 1: Towards non-compliant mobilisations?

Guinea's post-colonial trajectory saw a moment of "compliant mobilization" under Sékou Touré that still leaves traces in the techniques and imagination of mobilisation, followed by a moment of "demobilisation" under Lansana Conté, a time that according to McGovern ended with the mobilisations of 2006-2007. Mobilisations have continued unceasingly since 2006, both during election campaigns and protests, and on political as well as social issues, despite the persisting lack of credibility of the elections and the brutality of the repression. These mobilisations must be analysed from the standpoint of their complex aggregate character: that is, as a crystallisation of a citizen-based critique and practice, reactive anger (Monga, 1995) and community-based dynamics.

As regards the latter, the record of the elections since 2010 is clear: when it comes to voting, a large proportion of the electorate has done so on a communal basis, with certain leaders or parties identified as quasi-obvious representatives. This vote is linked to the construction and renewal of divergent historical narratives, with each community revolving around a collective memory that features various brutal episodes, sometimes with demands for judicial redress. In the Forest Guinea region in particular, the Ebola epidemic and the tensions that have pitted local communities against each other or against national and multinational companies, especially in the mining and agribusiness sectors, have highlighted the importance of the community as a social and political bedrock. Successive regimes have each navigated these painful memories, this "competition of victims" (Chaumont, 1997), in their own way, not least by playing with ambiguity; however, the persistent euphemisation of community affiliations by Guineans, who speak more readily of "regional" origin, and the fact that political organisations themselves stage their national character more or less carefully ("the 'ethno-centrist' is always the other") indicate that one should not think in terms of a *reductio ad ethnicum*. Above all, from the "*forces vives*" to the FNDC, powerful currents regularly propose mobilisations that are truly national.

These forms of "citizen" mobilisation, which derive their political legitimacy from the fact that they are not a part of the formal political field, are not well known, from their modes of struggle and sub-regional connections with other similar movements to the relations they maintain with political actors identified as such: that is, political parties. Their trajectory merits reflection, too, especially in the Thermidorian moments following the revolutions. Thus, the gradual institutionalisation of the "*Forces Vives*" of 2006-2007, many of whose leaders were incorporated into the transitional institutions and the Condé regime, was followed by what seems to have been a new generational wave around the FNDC.

More generally, the axis on mobilisations asks which groups or structures are potentially part of mobilisations to support or challenge the power in place. It also hints at the question of temporality, as the (counter-)power of mobilisations is essentially demonstrated in events. These events can confirm the existence of established structures, but they can also surprise, and reveal unexpected structures (Philipps, 2013, 2018).

Axis 2: Political economy, public action and "reform"

In order to analyse the contemporary political configuration more effectively, the exploration of areas of public action will be encouraged. We would like to focus on “public action” rather than on “public policy”, since it involves an entanglement of national and international actors, both state and non-state, who contribute to the formulation of and attempts to resolve problems that are identified as public. As elsewhere in Africa today, the rhetoric and devices of “reform” (Hibou, 2009) and “emergence” along the lines of the “Africa Rising” narrative (Péclard *et al.*, 2020) play a central role. Beyond generalisations about the weak or imported state, the aim of this special issue is to shed light on the deployment of these rhetorics and mechanisms and their impact on the trajectory of Guinea. The idea is to place them in a more general framework of how the place of Africa in the world is currently being transformed and how transnational institutions govern the economy. To examine this from a political economy perspective, we invite contributions that analyse the (dys)functioning of specific sectors at the crossroads of *politics* and *policy*. Two key sectors – the mining sector and the military – are identified below, but many other sectors also offer relevant points of observation. This call invites us to examine, for example, education, agriculture, transport and health, and notably energy – a sector of major symbolic significance, as illustrated by the hydroelectric dam at Kaléta, the symbol of Alpha Condé’s “achievements”, but also by the back-up generators made available at key moments by companies allied to the government (Goerg, 2002).

The mining sector is inescapable, even if one should not be satisfied with the mechanistic simplicity of the “resource curse” theory. Over the decades, bauxite has enabled the Guinean authorities to satisfy large segments of the administration and the army, and to maintain the recruitment, training and circulation of civil servants across the national space, which is so crucial to the formation of national consciousness (Anderson, 1991). It has also been a diplomatic resource, with successive powers working to carefully balance international interests in bauxite (Barry, 2021). Moreover, with economic liberalisation, bauxite and iron have continued to offer opportunities for rent appropriation. Alongside bauxite and iron, which are necessarily exploited industrially, gold and diamonds allow for artisanal exploitation, which opens (or seems to open) much wider access to opportunities for prosperity (Diallo, 2017; Dessertine, 2016, 2021), but may also become a point of tension when the state decides to take control of the artisanal mining sector, or even reduce it. A study of the effects of the reform of the mining code proposed by Alpha Condé (Knierzinger, 2016; Bolay and Knierzinger, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2018) and also of the reality of the expected “trickle-down” effects of increased mining revenues will be particularly welcome.

A study of the “security sector reform”, which the Conde regime promoted as one of its great successes, although it clearly did not prevent the coup d’état, will also be very welcome. After the military became involved in cocaine trafficking under Lansana Conté and the violence employed against demonstrators in 2007 and 2009, Alpha Condé managed to take the army off the streets and out of Conakry, but apparently without really questioning or reforming how it functioned (Foucher, 2012). As in the case of the mining sector, the rhetoric and internationalised mechanisms of “reform” will be analysed, above all with regard to their effects and uses in the distribution of power inside the army and between the military and civilian actors.

Axis 3: Political topography

Analyses of Guinean politics are too often reduced to events in Conakry, or even Kaloum, the historic centre of the capital, where the president, strategic ministries and some of the largest military camps are based (Goerg, 2012). In a comparative work on the trajectories of several West African states, Catherine Boone (2003) insisted on the existence within the same state-national territory of a complex political topography, of variable configurations of relations between state and society linked to local orders, political economies and the history of state

deployment. Understanding this complex “political topography” is essential in order to better characterise the trajectory of the Guinean state. It is also indispensable because ethnic identities, which play a central role in the national political game, are constantly being constructed and reconstructed in specific spaces with their respective histories.

The dossier will therefore welcome analyses of this complex topography that shed light on any specific local order or comparing different cases, building on the work carried out by anthropologists working on Guinea (Sarro, 2008; McGovern, 2012; Schroven, 2019; Engeler, 2019). It will be important to achieve this without reducing diversity to the problematic and impoverishing representation of a quadripartite Guinea, which has recently been criticised (Goerg, 2011; McGovern, 2012; Foucher, 2018). From a local arena, be it a village or a regional capital, we welcome contributions that observe the encounter between local political dynamics and the central state, as well as the interplay of symmetrical discourses, those of national unity (from the *mise en valeur* carried by Sékou Touré to the neoliberal unified market) and those of autochthony.

The expected contributions should be based on original empirical material. Paper proposals should be sent to v.foucher@sciencespobordeaux.fr, joschka.philipps@uni-bayreuth.de and dielmora@hotmail.fr. They are due by 15 April in the form of a 500-600 word abstract, in French or English, presenting the objectives, hypotheses and materials to be examined. The first versions of the selected papers will need to be submitted by early June.

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