

Guinea-Bissau Coup: Many Challenges Ahead

The script sounds all too familiar. Shortly after nightfall, the tanks and armored cars rolled out of the barracks and troops seized the national radio station, the government offices and the homes of all the cabinet ministers. A few hours later, a radio bulletin announced that the government had been overthrown, the former president placed under house arrest, power assumed by a Revolutionary Council headed by the former Prime Minister. Chalk up one more coup to the colonial legacy of division and instability on a continent where underdevelopment can be measured in both political and economic impoverishment.

But this coup last November 14 was different. It took place in Guinea-Bissau, one of the former Portuguese colonies that many people have hoped would write a new script for African independence and development based on Africa's shared historic experience. Their political leadership and national unity had been tempered in the long struggle for independence. Their peasants and workers had been mobilized into the struggle, armed with the ideological and organizational tools to make their own history rather than serve as the tools of individual ambitions and jealousies.

Making the coup even harder to accept and understand was the fact that all of the main figures in the drama had distinguished themselves fighting side by side against the Portuguese under the banner of one of the continent's most coherent political parties, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands (PAIGC). Not only had deposed President Luis Cabral led the nation since its independence day, but his brother Amilcar had founded PAIGC and led it until his assassination in 1973 deprived Africa of one of its greatest leaders. Under the nom de guerre of Nino, coup leader Joao Bernardo Vieira had emerged as the party's most brilliant military strategist and war hero.

In the streets of Bissau, by all accounts, news that Luis Cabral had been ousted was greeted with dancing and singing. Among people around the world who had supported the struggle for independence in the Portuguese colonies, the same news was greeted with shock and dismay. A week later, Vieira dropped another bombshell that made the shock almost unanimous. Addressing a cheering crowd of more than 40,000 people in Bissau's Central Plaza, Nino announced that mass graves had been



Joao Bernardo (Nino) Vieira, left, with Luis Cabral in 1970. Both distinguished fighters in the liberation struggle.

discovered containing the bodies of at least 500 political opponents of the ousted regime. And he accused Luis Cabral of sharing responsibility for the executions with Aristides Pereira, secretary-general of PAIGC and president of the Republic of Cape Verde.

Now, more than four months later, both the initial popular enthusiasm and the first shock and disbelief appear to have subsided somewhat, and Nino has confirmed that Luis Cabral will soon be released to a coun-

try of his choice. A wait-and-see attitude and a common perception of the grave difficulties facing the small west African nation have replaced the initial enthusiasm.

In Bissau, recent visitors report, the mass euphoria touched off by the coup and amplified by the timely arrival of several shiploads of rice has diminished. "There is no more dancing in the streets," one longtime supporter and recent visitor said, but "people seem genuinely relieved, happy and hopeful." David Gallagher of Oxfam-

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Canada encountered abundant evidence of the severe economic and political difficulties that fueled discontent with Cabral's leadership. But he also spoke with many people for whom the coup had apparently revived expectations that the party and the government that drove out the Portuguese can now lead a vigorous attack on hunger, disease, and illiteracy.

Internationally, veteran supporters of the struggle in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde remain deeply divided in their assessments of the coup. Writing a few days after the event, noted Africanist Basil Davidson warned that "the aim and vision of the liberation struggle may not survive. If they are lost, the country could be expected to disappear, in due course, into the confusions of personal rule and racist obscurantism."

Similar concerns were voiced by Colm Foy of MAGIC (the Mozambique, Angola and Guinea-Bissau Information Center) following a brief visit to the Cape Verde islands. Before the coup, the two republics had been moving toward a complete merger under the leadership of the PAIGC. Now, Foy states with regret, the party and the chances for unity have both been shattered. Cape Verdean party activists have formed a new political organization, while Guinea-Bissau's leaders simultaneously vow their continued allegiance to the PAIGC and denounce party leader Pereira and general secretary for Guinea-Bissau Araujo for dictatorial actions and complicity in mass murder.

"All the coup has so far succeeded in doing," Foy stated to *Southern Africa*, "was to remove a few Cape Verdeans from their jobs and, most importantly, remove the people's democratic control over their government and their party."

Others took a very different view both of the coup itself and of the degree to which "the people's democratic control" really existed prior to the armed takeover. They noted that even PAIGC leader Pereira admitted "the party had atrophied" in some areas. And they pointed to the widespread popular unrest ignited by food shortages, petty corruption and grandiose development projects of dubious real value.

"I think that the chance of this change being a very positive thing is there," commented a long-time supporter who has been involved in ongoing projects in Guinea-Bissau. "But it will take time before things can start to move again. They have declared that projects like the car factory, the four-lane highway to the airport, and the peanut oil factory are scandalous prestige projects. They have also stopped the import of Volkswagens . . . and declared the number imported a scandal. They have started to evaluate all the aid projects and all the *cooperantes*' (foreign technical advisors)

work, as well as their salaries, to find out what and who they really need. All these things seem really to be good signs."

Based on his visit to Guinea-Bissau, David Gallagher basically concurs. "My sense was that we're going to have to keep a close eye on the situation," he remarked. "But people convinced me overall that it could be a positive thing."

All Was Not Well

The one point on which there appears to be virtually unanimous agreement is that Guinea-Bissau's economy is a shambles. Even while castigating the "golpistas," MAGIC's Foy urges that "the first thing to recognize are the faults of the deposed PAIGC regime. . . . In Guinea-Bissau, all was not well."

Gallagher underlined that harsh verdict. "We knew something was wrong with the people's stores," he told *Southern Africa*. "For the last three months before the coup, there was no rice, cooking oil, or sugar. And there appeared to be a total lack of government activity to resolve the problem." Similarly, according to Gallagher, health care and education programs received scant government attention and funding. In the latest budget, peasant agriculture, medical services, and schools each received less than ten percent of government expenditures. After an auspicious beginning boosted by the assistance of Brazilian literacy expert Paolo Freire, Guinea-Bissau's literacy campaign "had stopped in its tracks." Gallagher said, leaving ninety percent of the population unable to read.

Even while these essential development programs stagnated, according to Gallagher, Luis Cabral and other leaders enjoyed "Volvos and fancy houses, overseas trips, etcetera, and much collusion with subtly undermining aid projects."

Even though the government repeatedly proclaimed rural development its top priority, lavish industrial projects flourished. A four-lane super-highway to the tiny airport was planned at a cost of \$50 million. Construction started on a huge peanut processing plant that could handle the total harvest of Guinea's biggest export in just one month. Citroen contracted to set up an assembly plant to produce 500 cars a year. All the parts would have to be imported from France and within two years the domestic market would have been saturated.

But if there is general agreement on the massive problems plaguing Guinea-Bissau, there is equally widespread controversy over responsibility and remedies for those problems. Foy is prepared to assign major responsibility to "the deposed PAIGC regime." But if that is the case, he insists, then as members of that regime Nino and

his supporters must shoulder a good deal of the blame themselves. If they had opposed the direction Cabral's government was taking, he charged, why had they "never challenged him in the People's National Assembly before the coup nor in the party organs of which they were members?"

Likewise, Foy questioned the most shocking charge leveled by the Revolutionary Council against the ousted regime—the allegation that Cabral and former security chief Buscardini (the only ranking minister slain in the coup) were responsible for mass murder and repressive secret police tactics. Foy didn't dispute the fact that mass graves had been unearthed. But he contended that "most of the bodies date from the 1978 abortive coup which was suppressed by Nino Vieira himself."

According to supporters of the coup on the other hand, Luis Cabral had insulated himself from criticism by stacking the party's Permanent Commission with people loyal to him. Mario Cabral, who had served as minister of rural development under Luis Cabral (no relation), insists that Nino and others made every effort to win changes in government policy through established channels. "I stood by my position of opposition always," Mario Cabral told Gallagher, "and sometimes I could see that (Luis) Cabral would have liked to have killed me on the spot. . . . Nino was the principal antagonist."

Attempts to take criticisms through the party structures were rebuffed with threats and charges of disloyalty, he added. "Vasco Cabral [minister of planning, wounded in the coup but nevertheless committed to participating in the new government] even asked [Aristides] Pereira for Cabral's dismissal. He was ignored and told to be careful not to be seen going against the party. All objections were dealt with in this way, going against the party."

And there the case finally rests, boiling down essentially to whether it can be believed that only a coup could bring a halt to the party's straying from its avowed democratic policies and development priorities. Long-time supporters of the PAIGC are reduced to comparing lists of names—Who is in? Who is out? Whose judgement can you really trust?

As someone who last traveled in Guinea-Bissau in 1970 when I met most of the principals while the war still raged, it seems evident that the simple answers just don't apply. Nor do handy labels—"counter-revolutionary," "leftist," "rightist," "neo-colonialist."

I would have no idea where to place Nino Vieira and Luis Cabral on a scale measuring from left to right. Neither runs the risk of being confused with Amilcar Cabral as a Marxist theoretician and ideologist. But I never heard anyone speak of Nino with



Guerrilla soldiers during the liberation struggle. Still the political as well as military vanguard?

anything much short of adulation as a revolutionary leader. To the people in the villages, the peasants who make up the vast majority of the population, he was a hero mentioned with the awe usually reserved for Amílcar Cabral. Back in 1970, the arrival of this slender 28-year-old was guaranteed to transform the always effusive greeting for a group of PAIGC militants into a major event—"The Nino is here! The Nino!" Among those grouped around him are some, Mario Cabral for instance, who are widely respected for their political integrity and judgement. There are also others whose politics range from murky to suspect.

Great Expectations

The initial response to the coup suggests that Nino Vieira remains an inspirational figure to this day. "What is certain," reports one European who has worked extensively in Guinea-Bissau, "is that the population has great expectations, that now everything will be good, that the Nino has taken things into his hands and now they will finally be truly liberated and get the real independence. Being through so much suffering, as is the case during particularly the last eight or nine months before the coup, the hope for change and the potential for a new popular mobilization is certainly very strong."

Gallagher sees the same potential, the same great expectations. "Nino is such a figure to the people in the villages," he said, "in a nationalist sense, a populist sense." Gallagher cites nationalism and populism as "the two pillars" of support for Nino Vieira and the coup. But some

observers use other terms to define the same sentiments. Noting that Luis Cabral and most of those ousted along with him were of Cape Verdean ancestry, Colm Foy spoke of "racism" and Basil Davidson of the danger of "racist obscurantism."

On the night of the coup the threat of attacks on Cape Verdeans loomed very real. One time party leader Rafael Barboza, jailed since 1974 on charges of treason, came on the radio with anti-Cape Verdean diatribes. In the middle of his harangue, however, Barboza was hauled away from the microphone and back to his cell while an apology was broadcast. Since then, Gallagher reported, "There has been virtually no persecution of Cape Verdeans."

Supporters of the coup do not deny that frictions existed between the two republics and the two peoples. But they insist that Guineans had real grievances and that, in Mario Cabral's words, "it was the way Cabral and Pereira dealt with the situation that angered so many Guineans."

"We have, for example, 800,000 people to their 300,000 yet we did not have proportional representation," Mario Cabral asserted. "On the contrary, the leadership around Cabral were mostly Cape Verdeans and great Guinean heroes of war were being openly excluded from the political process. The law is such that to be President of Cape Verde you must be Cape Verdean but here, no you don't have to be Guinean, why should they be different? In Cape Verde there is no death penalty, but in Guinea there is. Why should they be so different if they come under the same party?"

To someone who had watched Guinean and Cape Verdean troops in the field

together during the liberation war, news of such tensions is saddening but not necessarily surprising. Although linked together through several centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, the peoples of Guinea and Cape Verde retain distinctive cultural and even physical features. In an army composed primarily of Guinean peasants, Cape Verdeans frequently stood out. Not only were they always lighter-skinned and often somewhat more educated, they also tended in many cases to keep themselves outside the firelit circle of games and dancing that brought soldiers and villagers together in the evenings.

The same distinction could be seen among many of the leaders now prominent on both sides of the coup. Nino Vieira was unmistakably at home among the peasant soldiers and villagers—joking, playing cards, teasing, often the center of an eddy of hilarity. Araujo, by contrast, seemed somewhat distant, offering a moving testament of his commitment by confiding, "If I had my choice of what to do with my life, I would have liked to be a lawyer in Lisbon." To some degree such differences undoubtedly reflect personality and temperament. But particularly when the pattern is duplicated with many of the personalities involved, it suggests real differences of culture and experience.

Such factors may help make Nino Vieira the populist and nationalist hero Gallagher describes. But translating the initial enthusiasm into a "new popular mobilization" will require a coherent program and a drive to revitalize the two organizations that once represented the mobilized masses of Guinea-Bissau—the party and the army.

So far, the new government has expressed its program in terms of a return to the resolutions of the Third Congress. Those include a concentration on rural development through building village cooperatives. "The three or four people I spoke with at rural development headquarters were just ecstatic because of the change," Gallagher said. "They were all saying, 'Now we can get going.'"

Ultimately, however, they will only be able to go as far as the peasants can be mobilized to take them. Which is where the party and the army come in. "Because of the centralizing," Gallagher said, "the party did wither in the countryside. All the talk now is about how important it is to revitalize it."

Similarly, the army that once represented the political as well as the military vanguard of the revolution had been largely demobilized, according to Gallagher. Nino Vieira and coup leader Paolo Correia had reportedly resisted the shift from a peasant army to a more conventional military. As

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head of the ministry for veterans, Gallagher said, Correia was "looking desperately for a way to keep people and not lose their energy. He wanted the army to be very active in setting up cooperatives and training programs."

Now with the war-time military leaders heading the government, the true test of the army as a political force will come. But the answer may take a while. "If the army represents the peasants as a class," Gallagher speculated, "it's not clear what level of class consciousness it represents. Most of the people I spoke with are not theoreticians who could explain it to me in response to the questions a gringo would ask. And they're still faced with the same situation of economic dependency and a growing bureaucracy."

The challenge is definitely there—an anticipated shortfall of 70,000 tons of rice, dependence on foreign aid for 75 percent of the budget, the withering effects of the Sahelian drought, and the political and diplomatic repercussions of the coup. A final verdict on the coup will have come from the people themselves, through their response to the call to rise and meet that challenge.

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