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Guinea-Bissau

“We need to consolidate the path of democratization”

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In what political, social and economic context did the parliamentary elections in Guinea-Bissau last June take place?

Last June's elections took place in an exceedingly difficult context of deeply violent authoritarianism. A dictatorship has been in place since 27 February 2020, entering its fourth year. The unilateral accession of the current President Umaro Sissoco Embaló to the presidency took place before the electoral dispute had been settled by the Supreme Court. Since then, and especially until the June elections, Guinea-Bissau has experienced a climate of political persecution of opponents of the president and his political sensibilities, with kidnappings and beatings of citizens who do not align with his authoritarianism or who oppose his dictatorship and that of his political family, as well as the total dysfunction of the public administration. The clearest example is that from 2019 (this is a legacy of the previous government) until 2022, public schools simply did not work in Guinea-Bissau. In other words, we had three years of invalid schooling. And our health system, which was already profoundly weak, became chaotic under the regime of Umaro Sissoco Embaló.

To give you an idea, during the pandemic, from 2020, when more cases of Covid-19 infection began to appear in Guinea-Bissau, and until the end of 2022, instead of using health centres, hospitals, and the health system to mitigate the spread of the pandemic and protect the population, the security forces were used to repress citizens, especially women – who are the basis of the national economy through their informal activities in the various markets of our country – by denying them access to the places where they carry out their activity for the sustenance of their families. The police were everywhere, especially in the cities, in the most urban areas, chasing people, denying them activities essential to their survival. This persecution generated a wave of famine, which also ended up accentuating the spread of the pandemic itself throughout the country, and aggravating other forms of disease that the very weak health system was already fighting with few resources.

In the wake of the pandemic, attempts have been made to excuse the regime's inability to resolve the demands of state schoolteachers who, since 2019, have been demanding unpaid salaries. Hundreds of teachers were removed from the education system on the grounds that the government could no longer afford to hire them and pay their salaries. We are talking about a context where there are localities in the interior of the country where schools are simply not functioning, due to a lack of teachers. In other words, even if those hundreds of teachers had stayed in the system, we would still have localities without teachers and schools with closed doors because there is a shortage of professionals. It is in these circumstances that the state withdraws teachers from the system, on the pretext that there are not enough funds to pay their salaries. At the same time, the state itself continues to train teachers, so that they find themselves unemployed and in a situation of precariousness, unemployment and total abandonment.

It was in this situation, with all these difficulties and while the country was ruled by a violent dictatorial regime, that the last elections were held in June.

But it is necessary to make a parenthesis and say that the electoral system in Guinea-Bissau, despite all the difficulties faced by the country, is a relatively secure system, and the elections are monitored by electoral observers

such as the European Union, the African Union, the CPLP and other international observers. Although the latter have a habit of shirking their responsibility to take clear positions on the various attempts that may be made to jeopardize the electoral truth, the fact remains that they have a significant role to play in the electoral process. If this check is done correctly, it is difficult to falsify the results of the popular vote, as the system is designed in such a way that the process is monitored from start to finish.

It was in this context that we participated in the elections, in which the people gave a strong response against the parties that supported the government of Umaro Sissoco Embaló.

Before I talk about the elections themselves, I would like to address a point. Along with the impoverishment of the population, there is an elite that is concentrated around Umaro Sissoco Embaló and feeds on corruption networks. Is the institutionalization of corruption also a feature of this regime?

In Guinea-Bissau, corruption has not been institutionalized by this president or this regime. It is the whole political system that is rotten. It is the entire political system that is riddled with clientelism, corruption and other evils that prevent public resources from being channelled towards building opportunities for a more dignified life for the Guinean population.

The coming to power of the current president and his political family has exacerbated corruption. At his side are Guinea-Bissau's most perverse politicians and businesspeople. People accused of other forms of crime, such as drug trafficking, participation in coups d'état that have already taken place in the country and the looting of the public treasury itself, because these are people who have always had access to public positions that also allow them to have the means to draw on the public treasury to feed their dividends.

This political family, which is particularly perverse, supports the president and does not hesitate to use all repressive mechanisms to stay in power and ensure the continuity of the harmful practices of the political system. These impede the country's progress and political transformations that have a real impact on the structures of the state and on people's lives.

You talk about national interests. But are there also foreign interests involved today?

Yes, there are also foreign interests. Guinea-Bissau is part of a community dominated by the former French colonies. And this community is the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), where France has a free hand by imposing a currency, the CFA franc, whose exchange value is controlled by France. In other words, the West African subregion uses a currency that is French and whose dividends serve France's finances and interests more than those of the countries of the subregion. We are fighting to change this, and it is not yet clear to what extent we have managed to take this domination away from France.

But there are other interests as well. Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde are two West African countries that belong to the community of Portuguese-speaking countries. I am speaking of official Portuguese, because this language is not spoken in Guinea-Bissau, let alone in Cape Verde. This community is dominated by Portugal, a country that has used this space for its geopolitical and diplomatic interests, and which takes refuge in the use of the official Portuguese language in these structures to impose Portuguese domination in a subjective but very marked and present way, even influencing the orientations of power. For example, the consolidation of Umaro Sissoco Embaló's regime was only possible with the participation of the Portuguese state. Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and António Costa [the Portuguese president and prime minister] made it possible for Umaro Sissoco Embaló to make several trips, even though the electoral dispute was pending before the Supreme Court of Justice. Umaro Sissoco Embaló's trips to Portugal, official visits to Portugal and the visits of the prime minister and president of Portugal to Guinea-Bissau,

between 2021 and 2022, have contributed to restoring the image of this dictator at the international level and legitimizing him in the eyes of international bodies that were hesitant to position themselves in the face of Umaro Sissoco Embaló's unilateral accession to the presidency.

So, this dictator doesn't seem to be bothering French or Portuguese interests. Can we put it this way?

It is precisely because its presence and permanence in power gives these countries greater access to the instrumentalization of Guinea-Bissau for their interests, not only economic, especially on the part of France, but also geopolitical, in the case of Portugal.

What were the repercussions of the Guinean people's dissatisfaction with the current situation on the last parliamentary elections, and what was the role of youth in particular?

Since 2012, Guinea-Bissau has undergone interesting social transformations in the field of youth political engagement, through social movements of various kinds. I am talking, for example, of artistic movements including rap musicians who in their songs denounce the situation of poverty and precariousness in which the people live, directly and objectively blaming the corrupt political class that through all these years has taken power to oppress the people. Or movements related to the visual arts, with murals that not only connect the present to the past, through a dialogue established with the heroes of the struggle for the independence of Guinea-Bissau, but also highlight examples of the struggle for social transformations that have an impact on the lives of the population.

But I am also talking about politically organized social movements, unrelated to political parties, because they do not recognize themselves in the programs of the parties that make up the national political system. Through street demonstrations, social networks and protests in the media, in the Guinean diasporas and in Guinea-Bissau itself, especially in the city of Bissau where most of the political and public protests are concentrated – these movements denounce the system and offer a new way to take action for power to be truly popular, and for this popular power to be exercised for the benefit of the people. Among these social movements, three of them, which are very much present, are student movements, not in higher education, but in primary and secondary education.

There are also women's and feminist initiatives. Women's movements that, starting with the National People's Congress, fight for women's space in politics and have even obtained a parity law that allows political parties to require that at least 36% of their candidates for the position of deputy be women. Although the latent patriarchy in the political system has prevented the adoption of measures to make this requirement mandatory and has deprived the parity law of its most transformative part (which could have had a greater impact on women's presence in politics), it is an important step towards a greater presence of women in politics and in decision-making that changes their status as subaltern persons.

Another priority for women, more prevalent among 20–30-year-olds, concerns issues such as domestic violence, harassment in public spaces, the freedom for women to participate in public life on an equal footing with men, and for men to assume the same parenting tasks, social duties and responsibilities as women, including within the family space. It is a struggle in several directions that has gradually led to deconstructions and new constructions in the direction of a more just and egalitarian society.

All this is relayed by social movements and by people who, on the basis of these social movements, express themselves in the direction of a new political and social configuration in Guinea-Bissau. It is an ongoing struggle that, if it continues, could bring positive and profoundly progressive changes in Guinea-Bissau towards what Amílcar Cabral and his comrades dreamed of, and which was the basis of their mobilizations for the struggle for independence. I mention Cabral to say that this is not something new, we did not invent it today, it is a continuation of

a struggle knowing its ideological basis and knowing the complexity of the national context, which is also part of a difficult international context.

What do we expect from the election results and what is the risk of a political and constitutional crisis, given that the president does not seem willing to accept regime change?

The state of Guinea-Bissau is not democratic. If we analyse it in all its social, political, cultural and other aspects, it is not a democratic state. But what is at stake is whether we choose the path of democratization, a process we began in 1991 and which still has a long way to go, or whether we choose the path of stagnation, of institutionalizing fear and deeply retrograde ideas – which would prevent this process of democratization.

The two political camps do not offer any real guarantees. Within the political elite vying for power, there is a less reactionary sensibility with which democratization can be discussed. It was more or less this sensibility that won the parliamentary elections in June. But as long as the other, more reactionary sensibility with more retrograde ideals continues to occupy the presidency of the Republic, we run the risk that the possibility of a struggle for democratization, alongside the less reactionary sensibility, will be interrupted and that we will return to the situation of the last three years, from which we have not quite emerged. That is why the next presidential election will be crucial.

Beyond a less reactionary version of the current government, beyond this version that allows for another form of public debate on the country's priorities in social, cultural and political terms, and on agendas for major transformations in the lives of Guineans, there is a primordial issue, and that is the next presidential election.

This election will be fundamental to consolidate the return to the path of democratization. If we emerge from this election with a president from the least reactionary faction, we will return to the path of healthy debates and confrontations within a framework of democratization with a lesser degree of state violence against those who disagree, those who oppose, those who indicate other paths in a democratic and peaceful way. If we continue with the most reactionary version in the presidency, we are jeopardizing the framework of government that began in June with the victory of the coalition of the least reactionary faction in the legislative elections.

That is why the upcoming presidential elections are crucial. Everything we do, all the conquests, big or small, accumulated up to the presidential election will be jeopardized if we continue with the current president after the elections, which will take place next year.

You emphasize that the electoral framework is fundamental in this conflict. But isn't social mobilization, the struggle taking place in the streets of the country, essential for this political change?

It's fundamental. And these movements are becoming increasingly politicized. These are movements that came into being with the aim of responding to the demands of the moment. And as they progress, they discover that there is a bigger problem, that there is an outdated political system that needs to be confronted. Some of these movements are already moving towards this increasing politicization, which involves understanding that women's demands will not be resolved if the political space is dominated by patriarchal and sexist sensitivities. And also, that changes in the education sector will not happen if the most reactionary version of the political system remains in power.

There is also the question of consolidating Guinean identity itself, which is particularly important in a context where several identities exist in the public space. Amílcar Cabral and his companions did not imagine the dynamics of identity construction by chance. They did not propose the unity of Guineans as a formula to then legitimize unity with Cape Verde, as many tend to say. It is a unity between different ethnic identities which, if they do not unify, jeopardize the Guinea-Bissau project. In fact, the current president is openly doing everything he can to undermine

this project, adopting discourses of identity division in the political arena and assuming that a part of the population can keep him in power and guarantee that he will remain there, according to his religious and ethnic sympathies. This opens the door to a problem that Guinea-Bissau did not have before: conflicts between these identities that then lead to the kind of radicalism that occurs especially in Guinea-Bissau's neighbouring sub-region countries: Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Mali and so on.

Therefore, these social movements, I would say, face the challenge of becoming increasingly politicized. But at the moment, this politicization must not be done through partisanship. Partisanship is not a crime, and it would be a way forward if there were a party with the same program, with the same progressive ideals and with the goal of transforming society towards more justice and equality. As long as such a party does not exist, politicization must take place within these movements and in the dynamics of the struggle.

We will soon see what happens in political terms, but the assumption of this political bias is fundamental. The transformations that we are demanding, all the women's transformations, the social transformations, in terms of education and health, employability and employment of a predominantly young population, social justice and equality in Guinea-Bissau will never happen if we do not have people and institutions at the head of state that give priority to these goals.

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