

State of emergency declared in Guinea after elections

By Trevor Johnson
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Three days after the announcement of the results of the November 7 presidential elections, a state of emergency was declared in Guinea. News sources report between 7 and 10 people killed and over 200 wounded when security forces clashed with angry demonstrators.

In areas on the outskirts of the capital, Conakry, where the losing candidate Cellou Dalein Diallo drew his support, security forces were reported to have been firing shots while youths were throwing rocks at them. Diallo told reporters that at least 18 of his supporters had been killed by the security forces in Conakry and in the northern towns of Labe, Dalaba and Pita since the election announcement.

The election has been called the first democratic election since 1958. The presidential elections in Guinea have been plagued by repeated delays and violence between rival factions. Reflecting divisions fostered under French colonial rule, Diallo is of the majority Peul ethnic group, while Condé is of the other main ethnic group, the Malinke.

International observers have denounced Guinea's security forces. The International Criminal Court in the Hague has issued a statement urging security forces to refrain from "excessive violence." The human rights office of the UN has not only used excessive force, but has collaborated with attackers in carrying out ethnically-motivated violence.

On the evening of November 15, Guinea's election commission named opposition leader Alpha Condé of the Rally of the People of Guinea (RPG) the winner of the election that took place the previous week, with 52.5 percent of the vote. Earlier in the day, both candidates had declared themselves to be the winner. Condé told journalists, "I know I have won." Diallo said that if results had been "purged" of fraud, then he

would have been the winner.

Even before the election, some of the ethnic Malinke had carried out attacks on Peul people in Upper Guinea. Some of those fleeing the attack spoke of men looting and burning Peul-owned businesses and demolishing homes. Tens of thousands of the Peul population have been displaced around the country.

Underlying the conflict are the relations between the candidates, who represent competing factions of Guinea's wealthy elite, and international mining interests. Guinea is the world's major source of bauxite from which aluminium is extracted, with up to half the world's total reserves. It is also a major source of iron ore (with over 4 billion metric tons of high-grade iron ore) gold, diamonds, oil and other mineral resources.

Huge reserves of iron ore in the Simandou Mountains in southeast Guinea are being fought over by some of the biggest transnational mining corporations. They have promised enormous investments in order to win contracts—\$2.9 billion from Anglo-Australian Rio Tinto group in association with the Chinese company Chinalco, while Brazilian-based Vale, in collaboration with a subsidiary of Israel-based Beny Steinmetz Group (BSG-Resources) have offered \$2.5 billion in investments on infrastructure.

The acting Mines Minister Mahmoud Thiam is a former UBS banker, who was recruited by the Guinean military regime to cement its relationship with western big business. Thiam has decreed that half of a concession previously given to Rio Tinto is to be transferred to a rival consortium of BSG and Vale. The UK and Australian governments have protested and warned Guinea not to go any further with opposition to Rio Tinto.

Condé had won only 18 percent of votes in the first round of the election, against Diallo's 43 percent. The

second round was postponed several times, often due to clashes between the supporters of the rival candidates. General Konate, leader of the military regime that held power before the elections, told French radio that he would install a new “civilian ruler” by force if necessary.

Condé’s RPG formed a bloc with 16 other parties to form a “Rainbow Alliance” after losing in the first round, enabling him to win in three of the four regions in the country and in four of the five communes in Conakry.

In December 2008 the military seized power in Guinea, hours after the death of Lansana Conté, dictatorial ruler of Guinea for 24 years. Conté in turn had seized power after the death of Ahmed Sékou Touré. Guinea’s first president since it became independent from France in 1958, Touré had broken off relations with the former colonial power and leaned heavily on Soviet support.

The Conté regime received support from the Western powers. Conté imposed austerity measures and “reforms” dictated by the International Monetary Fund, designed to open up the economy to Western corporations and give them access to mineral reserves. Under Conté, Guinea became rated as the second most corrupt country in the world after Haiti and is also dubbed a “narco-state”.

Deepening poverty led to a growing opposition to Conté, with demonstrations and general strikes against the regime in 2007 and 2008. While the military leaders who took power after Conté were condemned by the western powers, demanding presidential elections, there were some illusions in the population that conditions would improve. During 2009 it became clear that the military elite were intent on negotiating deals with transnational mining corporations at the expense of the masses, as well as refusing to hold new elections. The regime carried out a massacre of 157 opposition protestors at a rally in Conakry in September 2009.

Alpha Condé was a long-standing opposition politician, former assistant professor at the Sorbonne in Paris and jailed for a period under Conté. His campaign was based on channelling the anger against the military regime and the clique around Conté. His rival Diallo was prime minister under Conté from 2004 to 2006.

International observers have declared that the vote was “largely free and fair”, and the United Nations has called on all parties to accept the results. Western governments and mining investors are desperate to bring some stability to the region.

The UN deputy special representative for neighboring Sierra Leone, Berhanemeskel Nega, said last month, “Sierra Leone, as you may know, has a long border with Guinea, and the people of both countries share cultural, ethnic, and various commonalities. Anything which happens in Guinea, affects directly Sierra Leone positively or negatively.”

The region including Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Liberia is one of the most mineral-rich in Africa, but also one of the most unstable. There were long civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which were supposed to be brought to an end by 2003 although incursions and mass flights to escape violence continued.

Tense elections are now taking place in the Ivory Coast after a period of civil war that was concluded with a fragile peace deal in 2008. Liberia and Sierra Leone hold presidential elections next year and the year after. The main country in West Africa, Nigeria, is rent by conflict and also has elections next year. While all the big mining companies are vying for contracts, there is a nervousness that Guinea could now become the trigger for wider instability in the region.

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