

Guinea-Bissau: Presidential Election amidst Political Turmoil

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There comes the time in one's country, when the odds of a single event replicating itself through the fabric of the local society and the national decision-making centers becomes simply unpredictable. When this happens, the overall context is suddenly dealt with not only unexpected opportunities but also with looming perils. This is the current state of affairs in Guinea-Bissau. As if instability and unrest had not been enough during 2011, on 9 January 2012, President Malam Bacai Sanhá died of prolonged illness in a military hospital in Paris, triggering a new unpredictable cycle for the country's leadership and subsequently, for the country's own fate. Even though this outcome was foreseeable given his increasingly deteriorating health, its political ramifications are nonetheless meaningful given that Bacai Sanhá was often credited with assuming a consensual posture among a divisive political class while embodying a certain sense of national unity. More importantly, Bacai Sanhá frequently comprised an effective counterweight to the actions of Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior – also a member of African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), like Bacai Sanhá – and never shied away from using his institutional gravitas to deflate tensions with several insubordinate military leaders on a number of occasions over the past few years. As such, the burden currently associated with the office of the Presidency is easily grasped. More than ever, any

future holder will be immediately faced with a number of challenges such as dealing with political-military feuds, supporting the implementation of the long-delayed Security Sector Reform (SSR) process or even embracing the international calls for greater engagement in the fight against drug trafficking.

In this context, presidential elections have already been scheduled for 18 March by interim President Raimundo Pereira and, as expected, potential successors have begun to arise with attentions naturally focused on the PAIGC's internal pick. Unsurprisingly, on 24 January Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior quickly tossed his name into the ring by announcing he was the PAIGC's "natural candidate".¹ For all purposes, he may well assume such favoritism since he clearly has the support of the party's main structures. That was unequivocally confirmed after the PAIGC's Central Committee and Political Bureau meetings on 3 and 4 February, which consecrated his candidacy with 244 votes in favor, 12 against it and ten abstentions.²

This result is even more significant if we consider the embryonic manifestations of opposition within the party to Gomes Júnior's designs. Indeed, proving that the internal

1 Mussá Baldé, "PM diz que é "candidato natural" do PAIGC às presidenciais da Guiné-Bissau" (*Lusa*, 24 January 2012).

2 "Carlos Gomes Júnior é o candidato do PAIGC" (*Lusa*, 4 February 2012).



political rivalry between Bacai Sanhá and Gomes Júnior – who had unsuccessfully backed Raimundo Pereira as the PAIGC's candidate for the 2009 presidential elections – lives on even after Bacai Sanhá's death, other potential candidates appeared to be gearing up for a confrontation with their leader. The first serious opponent emerged on 28 January when interim Speaker of the Popular National Assembly Serifo Nhamadjo announced his intentions to also seek the PAIGC's nomination, claiming to be the "heir of Sanhá's work and values".³ Moreover, former Speaker Francisco Benante, Defense Minister Baciro Djá and President Bacai Sanhá's diplomatic adviser and former Foreign Minister Soares Sambu were also widely expected to present their candidacies at some point but ended up reconsidering after witnessing Gomes Júnior's internal sway.

However, after securing the party's official endorsement in such an overwhelming fashion, it is not yet clear how these inner currents could affect Gomes Júnior's aspirations. Evidently, they still represent a considerable dissonance within the party that obviously feels that Gomes Júnior should remain as Prime Minister until the end of his term but unless an independent candidacy – without the backing of the PAIGC, one should add – arises to represent them all, it is difficult to envision how they could tip the balance in their favor.

As for the opposition, since 2011 it has centered around the Opposition Democratic Collective (COD) platform, which is composed by 15 parties, including the Social Renovation Party (PRS), the Republican Party of Independence for Development (PRID) and other minor political forces without parliamentary representation. However, even this semblance of unity against the PAIGC's dominion will not survive the personal ambitions of its leaders. For example, PRS's President and former Bissau-Guinean President Kumba Ialá, overthrown in the 2003 coup, returned to the country on 5 February and is bound to announce his candidacy. For its part, PRID has already announced that it would back its own militant, Afonso Te. Adding to the list of presidential suitors, businessmen and former interim President Henrique Rosa also expressed his wish of running as an independent.⁴

In that sense, even though it is impossible to predict if all of these initial candidates will actually follow through with their intentions and not endorse one another sometime during the electoral campaign, at first glance it is clear that the road appears to be cut out for Carlos Gomes Júnior. Moreover, his chances of winning might even get a considerable boost if international factors weigh in. Naturally, Angola is the foreign actor with the most vested interests in a smooth transition. Since March

2011, Angola has become the number one central partner for Bissau-Guinean authorities, mostly because of the significant investment made in the Angolan Security Mission in Guinea-Bissau – MISSANG that has centralized every effort towards an effective SSR in the country.⁵ The 200 Angolan military personnel that came with it as well as the expanding interests over Bissau-Guinean bauxite resources thus provide considerable arguments for Angola to remain vigil of developments in Bissau and closely watch the upcoming election. In light of this, it is no wonder that calls have been made for Angola to assist – financially and logistically – in the upcoming electoral process.⁶

On the other hand, there is no question as to Angola's preference. Indeed, Carlos Gomes Júnior is the natural frontrunner for the Angolan authorities as he is clearly seen as a staunch supporter of the MISSANG mission,⁷ in contrast with the remaining opposition parties who have not expressed any similar welcoming overtures in the past.⁸ His regular visits to Luanda in 2011 are symptomatic of the good working relationship he has established with local officials and he has so far achieved sufficient results to continue down this path, not the least of which includes the latest Angolan-backed credit line worth US\$25 million.⁹ Above all, Gomes Júnior represents a guarantee that, if he were to become President, Guinea-Bissau would continue as closely aligned with Angola as in recent times and Angolan authorities, for once, are surely not oblivious to that matter.

Nevertheless, it is not only Angolan support that Gomes Júnior can count on. The renegotiation of most of Guinea-Bissau's international debt at the end of 2010, as well as his efforts to gather multilateral support for the much needed reforms in the country's SSR,¹⁰ have earned Carlos Gomes Júnior a sizeable amount of trust and respect among the international community. And as if soothing any potential external worries that his 'switch' to the Presidency might overshadow the office of the Prime Minister or ignite some sort of institutional instability, well-placed rumours have already started floating the name of Domingos Simões Pereira, the current Executive Secretary of the Community of Portuguese-speaking Countries (CPLP) as Gomes Júnior

3 "Serifo Nhamadjo candidato a Presidente, disputa apoio do PAIGC a PM" (*Angop*, 29 January 2011).

4 "Henrique Rosa é candidato às Presidenciais, PAIGC com quatro nomes nas "primárias"" (*Lusa*, 31 January 2012).

5 See Pedro Seabra, "Guinea Bissau: bringing Angola into the fold" (*IPRIS Viewpoints*, No. 49, April 2011).

6 "Guiné solicita ajuda à Angola para eleições" (*Prensa Latina*, 25 January 2011).

7 Lassana Cassamá, "Carlos Gomes Júnior defende presença angolana na Guiné-Bissau" (*VOA*, 30 December 2011). Júnior had already expressed similar tokens of public support back in April; see Lassana Cassamá, "Bissau: Primeiro-ministro defende presença dos militares angolanos" (*VOA*, 4 April 2011).

8 See for example, "Oposição guineense acusa Angola de ingerência" (*Diário de Notícias*, 29 December 2011).

9 Fonseca Bengui, "Angola concede milhões de dólares" (*Jornal da Angola*, 23 December 2011).

10 For recent developments in this matter, see "Está para breve acordo CEDEAO-CPLP sobre reformas, diz primeiro-ministro" (*Lusa*, 2 February 2012).



and the PAIGC possible pick for the legislative elections expected at the end of the year.¹¹ Unconfirmed as it is, such a potential choice would undoubtedly add further arguments to the solution of stability that Gomes Júnior seeks to embody in this race since it would imply a respectful and competent successor already lined-up for Prime Minister, which, in turn, could mitigate any unsettling effects emanating from this rotation at the top of Guinea-Bissau's leadership.

Be as it may, it should be noted that the matter is far from settled. Although Gomes Júnior won his party official nomination, internal wounds and discordances may still prove hard to heal, with unpredictable consequences in terms of further potential independent candidacies. For its part, opposition hopefuls should not be ignored so easily either as they still might come up with a united front against the PAIGC and thus change the odds at the ballot, especially if a second round of voting becomes necessary. Last but not the least, Gomes Júnior appears to have the country's fluid military leaders under control and on his side for now but as Bissau-Guinean history has shown in the past, the security sector's allegiances are inconsistent and could always switch sides if the

SSR process doesn't meet their personal expectations.¹² From all the possible obstacles standing in his way, the last one surely comprises the most unpredictable as well as the most dangerous. Hence, the reactions and public statements of the military apparatus ought to be more carefully monitored as the Election Day grows near and especially if we take into consideration the destabilizing events of 26 December 2011.¹³

All in all, it is safe to say this particular election will continue to be followed with some concern for now. Even with Carlos Gomes Júnior as the frontrunner, Guinea-Bissau stands once again at an all too familiar crossroad, where the choices made will greatly impact any intended course, which could then bring the country either up to its feet or down to its knees. The challenges ahead are innumerable. In order to tackle them it will be thus required nothing short than a democratic solution fully legitimized by the voters and afterwards, dully backed by the remaining international community. Only with such dual support, will any eventual President be able to finally steer Guinea-Bissau away from the instability of recent years.

11 Rodrigo Nunes, "Guiné-Bissau: novo ciclo político à vista em Bissau" (*Jornal Digital*, 20 January 2012); "Domingos Simões Pereira admite protagonizar alternativa política no país após mandato na CPLP" (*Angop*, 3 February 2012).

12 For a record of military unrest in Guinea-Bissau, see "Guiné-Bissau: Golpes, contra-golpes e assassinatos" (*VOA*, 26 December 2011).

13 Alberto Dabo, "Fações militares rivais entram em confronto na Guiné-Bissau" (*Reuters*, 26 December 2012).

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