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Last Chance for Security Sector Reform in Guinea-Bissau

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A decade has gone by since the Abuja Agreements and the Lomé Ceasefire were signed, putting an end to the civil conflict in Guinea-Bissau and establishing a UN mission in the country. The international community's peacebuilding efforts were aimed, as usual, at implementing functioning state institutions, rule of law, separation of powers and a multi-party democracy, all of which would ensure the country's stability and, arguably, its viability. The United Nations Building Support Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNOGBIS) was to assure the agreement's implementation and coordinate peacebuilding efforts and international funding.

The task was correctly deemed complex and a long-term and holistic approach was defended. Comprehensively, as financial and political will of donors are, by nature, finite resources, priorities had to be established. Security Sector Reform (SSR) was elected as the main task to achieve a successful democratic transition and a capable state. For the last decade, the vast majority of the UN's Secretary-General Reports have evoked the importance of SSR in the Bissau-Guinean state-building process.

However, the efforts in this field have been constantly under-funded and facing local, regional and international obstacles. It is officially acknowledged that little improvements have been achieved both in SSR as in the democratization process.

Nevertheless, the assassinations of both the Chief of Staff of the Army, Gen. Batista Tagmé Na Waié and the President, João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira - which were preceded by several attempts against their lives and rumours of military coups efforts - where initially met with shock and surprise by the international community. The following reaction, as expressed by Luís Amado, the Portuguese Foreign Minister, and João Gomes Cravinho, the Portuguese Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation who led the recent CPLP mission to Guinea-Bissau, elected SSR as the most important urgent matter to address. These officials have also recently recognized that the international community has failed to define a clear path for the development of Guinea-Bissau.

Yet, the choice for SSR had already been made ten years ago. Obviously, the tentative reforms in the security



sector led by the international community have fallen short of success. What aspects can explain this failure? Foremost, the international community considered the country to be at peace - and designed its SSR strategy accordingly - when in fact peace was not yet fully implemented.

Why SSR Failed

The international community believes, in general, in the concept of 'peace dividend'. In short, when a country obtains peace, its economy would inevitably flourish, thus healing the grievances and greed of the conflict. In Guinea-Bissau, the international community considered 'peace' to be established when the agreements were signed. But the situation of this small country proves that peace as a concept is not monolithic and easily definable or identifiable.

In fact, there was no 'peace dividend' for Guinea-Bissau, as it did not noticeably improve its development. This is mainly because the country never surpassed a 'no-war no-peace' situation, continually hampered by political, societal and economic instability, fuelled by a tough regional context, small arms proliferation and, most recently, drug trafficking. This situation remained unchanged because the international community did not fully engage in reforming the state, allowing it to continue weak and un-capacitated.

As such, very few benefited from peace. Instead, the political system remained in the hands of a few, floating in between the spheres of influence of the military and the politicians. Gen. Tagmé Na Waié, like his predecessor Gen. Veríssimo Correia Seabra - who was also assassinated -, always kept a strong influence over politics, even though the former was publically more restrained. Yet, Gen. Tagmé Na Waié was known to be reluctant concerning SSR, contributing to the delays in the implementation of the reforms.

In politics, strong personalities like Nino Vieira have dominated the political scene of the country since the 1980s, managing to hold a grip on power through a complex network of political and ethnic contingent alliances without addressing the needs of the country's population. This balance was always quite fragile and based on the use of violence. Gen. Tagmé Na Waié and Nino Vieira were long-standing rivals, and even the support the former gave to Nino Vieira's return to the presidency was not sufficient to erase personal bitterness and competition, which resulted in the paralysing of reforms in the last years and, finally, in their deaths.

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Guinea-Bissau is thus another clear example that peace does not automatically entail economic development. 'Peace' cannot be declared. Instead, it is the situation in the ground that creates the conditions to receive such dividend. Moreover, the scaling down of military expenditure and its re-allocation to other areas, which does not necessarily reflect better social spending, was perceived as a menace by the most conservative elements of the military. Overall, it seems, with those particular actors dominating the public scene and an electoral façade which did not result in institution-strengthening, that the war-economy and interests were not dislodged with the peace-process.

Why weren't the right incentives to change this in place? Three elements can justify this failure.

The first one is related to the concept of SSR. In fact, there is neither a clear definition nor consensus on its final objectives. From a stricto-sensu negative conception of peace as an absence of violence to a broader conception of security as a positive peace - concerned with people's well-being - a wide spectrum of policies is applicable. On the one hand, one can have downsizing, professionalization and civilian control of the armed forces, which is the current strategy of the international community due to its lower cost; on the other, a holistic Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) program alongside with reconciliation and the strengthening of the judicial system, within a regional framework.



In Guinea-Bissau UNOGBIS, now backed by an EU mission solely focused on SSR, failed to define its objectives and strategies at an early stage. Only last year was the SSR program officially launched. Of the \$184,4 million required funding, donors' pledges only covered 23,4% of that amount. The December 2008 UN report acknowledges that SSR lacks a medium and long term strategic vision. In the last ten years, the role of the military under the new civilian rule was never defined.

Secondly, however important technical expertise may be, political factors should not have been overlooked. It is important to understand the political bargaining processes that preceded SSR implementation. This is particularly important in a country where the Armed Forces have a strong historical legitimacy and claim to power due to the liberation struggle.

The ethnic factor cannot as well be underestimated. This includes the Balanta, the bigger group, but also the Fula, the Manjaca, the Mandica and the Pepel. Ethnicity does play a role in the conflicts and alliances at the political and military level and, most importantly, it is perceived by the population to be a crucial aspect in public affairs. The UN reports hardly mention ethnic cleavages as an issue, but it ought to be addressed if consensus building is to occur. In fact, today's problems are very much rooted in old political and ethnic divisions, a feature that explains the chronic fragility of the state and of the country's elite.

Thirdly, these reforms need to be implemented according to the country's specificities and regional context. The nature of security in Africa is decentralized; many non-state actors – such as small armed vigilante-type groups, criminal networks, or drug and arms traffickers –, play a role as providers of security/insecurity. Importing a formal template of civilian rule and military reform is probably an insufficient approach, as it is solely focused on state security forces. Also, the coups in Mauritania and especially in Guinea-Conakry – where President Lansana Conté was a strong Nino supporter – provided another example for the military in the country.

Furthermore, the presence of narcotrafficking in Guinea-Bissau renders the current situation and actor's motivations increasingly complex, a situation that must inform future reforms.

SSR has failed to alter the overall incentives to abandon the practices of conflict times, both in the military forces as well as in the political sphere, i.e. resorting to violence to settle political disputes. In conjunction with the elements previously stated, the absence of a broader state reform and strengthening policy left SSR as the only relevant intervention in the country. Having failed to implement any serious change in the military's behaviour, the current situation provides nonetheless some

hope – for once, the power stood in civilian hands and the population resumed 'normal' life only days after the assassinations. Yet, peace and stability are far from being rooted in the country. Still, political violence – such as the April beatings of former Prime-Minister and now an Auditing Court President, opposition leader and potential presidential candidate, Francisco Fadul, as well as top-lower Pedro Infanda by military personnel – is recurrent.

SSR Next Steps

Notwithstanding the murders in the beginning of March, the transfer of power followed the constitutional norms, allowing Raimundo Pereira, former Speaker of the House, to be

sworn in as the interim President. The presidential contest will be centre-stage in the country for the next few months, the main question being how the political and social forces will align after the disappearance of two influential characters. In post-conflict or after periods of strident tensions, alliances and legitimacies mutate quickly. The international community must be aware of this reality, as a muddy situation may harm the establishment of the proposed reforms, in particular in the security sector.

As such, it is of the outmost importance to closely monitor the situation and the presidential candidates, engaging all sides from the start to promote a consensus-building

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stance. By constitutional standards, the deadline for the Presidential election was May 1st, 2009. However, the new head of the National Electoral Commission, Desejado Lima da Costa, already said the technical and financial conditions were not in place to meet that target. As such, June 28th, 2009 was now proposed as the date for the elections. Even so, only the international community can provide the funds in such short notice to guarantee its execution. The CPLP meeting in Cape Verde on March 25th agreed to concentrate its efforts on collecting the necessary financial means. Elections, if free and fair, will provide the needed legitimacy and foster confidence in civilian rule, but will not guarantee strong democratic institutions.

Alas, the constitutional norm was not respected and those conditions will difficultly be amassed. Many possible candidates, already known to the Bissau-Guineans, have signalled their intention to run for office. The priority must then be focused on guaranteeing an effective and just election, with clear competition and isolation from military influence. These first steps, which should have been taken during the last decade, must now be enforced. The international community has the responsibility to ensure those conditions alongside with the funding requirements – some €3,8 million are needed. That will be the only way to legitimize its own engagement and presence in the country, which will in turn provide the opportunity to refocus on SSR.

However, with the current financial global context, western donors will hardly provide large amounts of funds for Guinea's peacebuilding process. Yet, their interests are vitally threatened by growing drug-trafficking in the area. If for the last ten years commitment was scarce, it seems the country can now attract stronger attention. Clearly the failure to reform the country's security forces and strengthen its institutions during this last decade has left the country much more exposed to the perils of trafficking. The assassination of Gen. Tagmé Na Waié was carried out with means brought from

abroad, a powerful device never seen in the country and not used in the usual vendettas in Guinea-Bissau.

The current situation is hence all the more challenging – in concert with the SSR advocated for the last decade but not implemented, the international community must address the growing drug smuggling problem in the country. Still, the inherent problems of the country are not explained by this trafficking, but seem rather entrenched in the ambiguous social, ethnic, political and military relations developed since the independence struggle. In every action and reform, especially in SSR, those aspects cannot be overlooked.

Overall, there are reasons to be optimistic – but only if international pledges are implemented on the ground. The current prospects for SSR are positive. The EU mission should be prolonged for one more year as it will struggle to fulfil its mission of modernizing the armed forces and creating the Guarda Nacional Republicana – a gendarmerie force based on its Portuguese counterpart. Financing appears to be the main issue again. The CPLP has agreed to hold a donor's round focused on SSR in Cape Verde in April 2009, which might establish at last a clear strategy and funding.

At the internal level, the interim Army Chief of Staff, José Zamora Induta, is said to be a young and well-educated member of the military with a reform-minded understanding of the forces. As the Bissau-Guinean journalist Lássana Cassamá pointed out, the question will be whether he has the influence to maintain its current post after the presidential election takes place. In the field of SSR, the efforts on DDR will probably be intensified now that Gen. Tagmé Na Waié is gone. However, strong conservative military officials still in the army – such as the vice-Army Chief of Staff António Indjai – remain reluctant to downsize its forces. SSR and DDR will have to overcome those obstacles, creating the right incentives to promote confidence and overcome the established cycle of using violence and power to obtain political or material advantages. The aim set by the UN in 2008 to reduce the armed forces from 19,000

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members (in 2002) to a 3,440-strong body - of which 2,473 will be senior and middle-ranking officials - must be pursued. The fact is that until now, only a census of the armed forces was concluded. The slow rate of reform implementation and the inverted hierarchical pyramid in the force creates a sense of impunity among the older members and huge tensions against reform.

Only with assured funding and a clear set of objectives, as well as credible alternatives to the military life, will the force cease to perceive SSR as a threat. This holistic DDR approach entails a broader vision of SSR. If such a strategy is upheld, as it appears so, not only will the required funding be needed, but reforms in other sectors, which are beyond the scope of this article, must also be set in motion.

Some are vital: reforms in education - where salary arrears still occur, an issue which has caused the state educational system to be paralysed by several teacher's strikes; farming - where the dependence on cashew crops leaves many vulnerable to price fluctuations; fishing - which provides the bulk of the nation's budget thanks to a EU agreement, but is threatened by illegal exploration; and, overall, institution strengthening - virtually all services, from justice and health to financial management, must be improved upon if a positive peace prospect via SSR, which now seems to be defended, is to be implemented.

The alternative, a small footprint in a small country, has been tested over the last ten years but failed. However, even a modest SSR mission and a UN office (set mostly around Churches, NGOs and communal organizations at the village level) focused on taking small steps to empower civil society and promote democratic participation could have worked if the pledged amount of funding was conveyed. Similarly, the political and military elites followed the conventional path of partition, competition and obstruction to the detriment of the country's population.

Those elites, particularly Nino Vieira and Gen. Tagmé Na Waié, could be regarded as 'spoilers' of the peace process, blocking any attempt of reform. However, that

concept conceals the fact they were acting according to a pattern that was recurrent in the country, as well as in view of the incentives they were presented with. With both deaths, it is not clear the political and military elite will change their conduct. At a first glance, the investigation of their assassinations has so far resulted in the imprisonment of only five suspects - a sign of a weak judiciary branch, lacking in funds and means. In the country, the general feeling is that the higher branches of the military have perfect knowledge of who committed the attacks - at least against Nino Vieira. It is also felt that no real conclusion, besides that same small number of inductions, will be reached concerning

this affair, as that is the will of the conservative forces in the army.

How can SSR react to this situation? In the short-term it is clear that the international community will not provide a large increase in the assistance to the country. It is then difficult to demand more immediate and concrete results in this specific case. Rather, the SSR mission should focus on clarifying its goals, engaging in the longer-term with the security forces as a way to build-up trust. Without deepening its engagement, it is wiser to focus and guarantee a successful reform and downsizing of the force rather than insisting on a straightforward functioning judiciary system. Concerning the 'reconciliation' process, as long as the SSR provides security in the country

and frames the military forces under civilian rule, it is expectable that local and organic processes of healing - supported but not replaced by UNOGBIS - can work towards it in an efficient manner.

Conclusion

A discourse by the international community of long-term involvement is not enough. There is a need for continuous and strong commitment, taking into account local politics and views if a successful SSR is to be achieved. Also, greater coordination between missions and do-

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nors is essential to establish a coherent and efficient reform. It is clear that the military are still in part at the origin of many of the country's problems, but the solutions lay beyond them. The current situation offers an opportunity to re-calibrate foreign intervention around the security sector. Another letdown is not tolerable; otherwise there is a risk of losing credibility and legitimacy, giving Bissau-Guineans additional reasons to distrust the democratic system. Furthermore, blame cannot solely rest on Guinea-Bissau's weak social, political, military and economic structures, regardless of them being part of the problem. The international community has been present in the country for ten years

now, and its involvement has been disjointed and unclear. Precise priorities, goals, continuous funding and mechanisms must be established despite the size and scope of its intervention. There must be a sole interlocutor with the military, conveying a clear and structured message.

Finally, it is important to note that SSR can and must continue to be a priority, but is not a panacea for the Guinea-Bissau's problems. The reform will hardly assure political, institutional and socio-economic stability. Instead, both fields are interconnected and depend on each other's transformation to successfully evolve and guarantee success.

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