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Guinea-Bissau: Can a Failed Military Coup be Successful?

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The international community's immediate condemnation of the military coup that took place in Guinea-Bissau on April 12 seemed to suggest that it was doomed to fail. Formally speaking, subsequent events appear to confirm this initial assessment. However, the same cannot be said with complete certainty if we look at the consequences of the military coup from a substantive point of view.

The announcement on April 11 by the president of the National Electoral Commission, Desejado Lima da Costa, that the second round of presidential elections would take place on April 29 basically triggered the military coup. Since there was little doubt that the leader of PAIGC and former Prime Minister, Carlos Gomes Júnior, would be the winner of the electoral contest, given the results of the first round, then there was no other way to block his ascension to the presidency of Guinea-Bissau.

Demands by the coup leaders that Angola withdraw its technical-military cooperation mission in Guinea-Bissau (MISSANG) were merely a means to an end. Days before the coup the Angolan government had already announced the end of MISSANG, even though no date for the departure was stated. However, Angola's political support to Carlos Gomes Júnior would continue in the future and his efforts to promote and support the Security Sector Reform (SSR) would continue as well.

Herein lays the true source of the coup. Carlos Gomes Júnior had to be removed from power, even if it meant a resort to force. Indeed, this was not the first time that the military attempted to oust him. Two years ago to this month, in a similarly half-successful coup, then Armed Forces Deputy Chief of General Staff António Indjai (now the Chief of General Staff, and probably the current coup leader) publicly threatened to kill Carlos Gomes Júnior.¹

Looking at the political developments since April 12, it is not clear that the military coup has failed to stop the presidential elections. At a minimum, the coup leaders appear to have won some more time, by guaranteeing the postponing of the second round of the presidential elections for several months, even though it remains to be seen for how long that will hold.

Ensuring the safety and security of those arrested, among them Carlos Gomes Júnior and the interim President, Raimundo Pereira, was only one of demands of the international community. Their release on April 27 was welcome, but it's not enough. Among other things, Guinea-Bissau still needs to return to constitutional order and move ahead with the second round of the presidential elections.

¹ See Paulo Gorjão, "Guinea-Bissau: The Inescapable Feeling of Déjà Vu" (*IPRIS Policy Brief*, No. 2, April 2010).



The final communiqué of the Council of Ministers of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), the presidential statement of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and the conclusions of the Council of the European Union (EU), are unanimous in demanding the conclusion of the electoral process in Guinea-Bissau.² Conclusion, however, does not mean beginning all over again and the final communiqué of the Extraordinary Summit of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Heads of State and Government might have just made that misinterpretation. Even though it demands the completion of the electoral process, it also opens the door to a process of “mediation efforts (...) with a view to agreeing the modalities for a consensual transition through the holding of elections within twelve months”.³ In that formulation, there is very little in the way of a “conclusion”. Worse, it appears to favor starting the electoral process from scratch.

On the other hand, the CPLP final communiqué, UNSC presidential statement and EU Council conclusions also demanded “the immediate restoration of constitutional order”. The latter two even required the “reinstatement” or “reestablishment” of the “legitimate government” of Guinea-Bissau.

Surprisingly, this reinstatement demand is absent from the ECOWAS final communiqué. Instead, it makes reference to a “transitional process” that will lead the way to an interim government after political negotiations already underway. This begs the question: Has the military coup really failed? From a formal point of view, the answer is yes. There will

be no Prime Minister or President chosen by the leaders of the coup, and the coup-appointed Transitional National Council will not see the light of the day. Thus, ECOWAS may continue to proudly reaffirm their fundamental principle of “Zero Tolerance” for unconstitutional power grabs.

However, from a substantive point of view, the answer is less clear. Therefore, it is important to know with absolute clarity if Raimundo Pereira and Carlos Gomes

Júnior are willing to accept any solution short of reinstatement of the government elected in 2008 and the completion of the electoral cycle in Guinea-Bissau, which should have taken place on April 29.

The acceptance of an interim government will already comprise a concrete result of the military interference regarding the normal functioning of democratic institutions in Guinea-Bissau, thus handing the coup plotters a partial victory. Such a temporary pragmatic resolution might, however, be tolerated in order to manage the country for the next couple of months. Still, the results of the parliamentary elections in November 2008 should not be simply ignored in any eventual scenario.

On the other hand, any outcome other than the resumption of the second round of the ongoing presidential elections will also be seen as a reward

to the coup leaders. Unlike the possibility of an interim government, here there is no justification to be pragmatic. All international observers present in the country – ECOWAS, African Union, and CPLP – agreed that the first round of presidential elections in Guinea-Bissau on March 18 had been largely free, fair and transparent. Therefore, there is no reason to go back to square one.

Granted, a return to the previous status quo is hard to envision. But that’s not the real issue here. Rather, such kind of solution basically sends the message that military coups are in fact an effective instrument for achieving political goals in Guinea-Bissau. In that sense, the regional thirst for compromise might equal to, yet again,

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2 See “Resolução sobre a Situação na Guiné-Bissau” (Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, 14 April 2012); “Statement by the President of the Security Council” (United Nations, S/PRST/2012/15, 21 April 2012); and, “Council conclusions on Guinea-Bissau” (Council of the European Union, 23 April 2012).

3 See “Extraordinary Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government – Final Communiqué” (ECOWAS, 26 April 2012).



unstable foundations for any kind of stable and lasting solution, because it will be built under the presumption that the prior government and electoral process had somehow instantly lost all kind of legitimacy along the way. Moreover, the “Zero Tolerance” approach proposed by ECOWAS runs the risk of becoming more tolerant and lenient than what it was meant to be in the first place. The position taken by Raimundo Pereira, Carlos Gomes Júnior, and by the Parliament of Guinea-Bissau will

then be crucial to determine how the international community reacts to the ongoing mediation efforts led by ECOWAS. For obvious reasons, their political positioning or effective participation (unknown at this point) during the negotiations will be crucial to define if the military coup has indeed failed or if it succeeded in some of its objectives by substantially disrupting Guinea-Bissau’s constitutional order, as well as the ongoing SSR process.

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