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Who wants to play the Russian roulette in Guinea-Bissau?

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If there is one thing states wish to avoid, it is political instability. Invariably, because it is unpredictable, political instability creates uncertainty about the future. Instability, uncertainty, and unpredictability are the kind of attributes that do not contribute to good governance and economic prosperity. However, not all the political actors have the same interest in safeguarding stability, since the incentive structure varies according to the position that each player occupies – or aspires to occupy – in the political system. Thus, ironically it seems that the states that most need political stability to overcome their downward spiral are those that, if they do not receive external input towards their stabilization, are doomed to chronic political instability.

Guinea-Bissau is a good example. At a time when the wounds opened by the political and military crisis of April 2010 have yet to heal, Guinea-Bissau once again lives days of unrest and political instability.¹ Last month, on July 14th and 19th, thousands of protesters came to the streets demanding the resignation the Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior, accused in the public square of having been involved in the death of the President João

Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira in March 2009, as well as in the assassinations of Nino's political allies Hélder Proença and Baciro Dabó in June 2009. Reacting to the accusations, on July 20th the Prime Minister urged the Attorney General's Office to open an enquiry to investigate the serious allegations that were made against him by the opposition parties involved in the protests.² Instead, the President accepted the Attorney General's resignation on August 2nd. Amine Saad submitted his resignation to President Malam Bacai Sanhá, following the pressure that was being put on the Attorney General's office, stemming from the current impasse in the investigations into the deaths of Nino Vieira, Dabó and Proença, as well as that of Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Tagmé Na Waié, which also occurred in March 2009.³ Unsurprisingly, Saad's resignation did not appease the opposition, and a new protest, once again calling for justice and demanding the Prime Minister's resignation, took place on August 5th.⁴ With no

1 For an overview of the events in April 2010, see Paulo Gorjão, "Guinea-Bissau: The Inescapable Feeling of *Dejá-Vu*" (*IPRIS Policy Brief*, No 2, April 2010).

2 "Primeiro-ministro quer inquérito que apure graves acusações" (*Lusa*, 20 July 2011).

3 See "President of Guinea Bissau accepts Attorney General's resignation" (*Portuguese News Network*, 3 August 2011).

4 Mussá Baldé, "Cerca de mil pessoas em marcha pedindo a demissão do PM da Guiné-Bissau" (*Lusa*, 5 August 2011).



end in sight as far as the political crisis was concerned, starting on July 28th the President had meetings with the President of the Supreme Court, representatives of the African Union, the European Union, and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS),⁵ as well as with the Prime Minister, civil society, opposition parties, and resident diplomats. Moreover, on August 2nd Malam Bacai Sanhá also convened the Council of State. Having assessed the current political situation, on August 9th the President declared that there was no political crisis threatening the normal functioning of the institutions,⁶ while Prime Minister Gomes Júnior seized the opportunity to emphasize that he had “the confidence of the President”.⁷ Even though one could admit that the President is right, it is not possible to ignore the troubling fact that the Party for Social Renewal (PRS) – the largest opposition political party, with 28 seats in Parliament – decided to transfer the political struggle to the streets instead of presenting a motion of no confidence. Equally important, ignoring the legal procedures through the Attorney General’s Office and the judicial system, the PRS has assigned responsibility to the Prime Minister for crimes that he was never formally charged with. Interim president of the PRS Braima Sori Djaló was quite clear: “we hold the Prime Minister responsible for the assassination of Baciro [Dabó] and Hélder Proen[ça]. He must resign or the President must make him leave”.⁸ According to the leader of PRS, the Prime Minister “knows about all the political assassinations, he is even the main suspect and

Unlike what has happened in the last few years, Portugal does not have the political strength to once again support Guinea-Bissau in the EU, in the United Nations, and elsewhere. The Portuguese government could not afford it and, quite possibly, also would not want to do it again. Thus, Portugal should send a discreet but clear message to the local political players: if anyone wants to play Russian roulette, then they shall do it at their own risk, and must be prepared to accept the consequences.

must thus face justice”.⁹ Having assumed this stance, the challenge is to square the circle and to transfer the political dispute back into Parliament without having the PRS lose its credibility.

Still, not everything is bad news. A positive fact, so far, is that the protests have been largely peaceful. Equally important, the Armed Forces remained neutral and uninvolved in the political dispute. The current Chief of Staff

of the Armed Forces, Lieutenant General António Indjai, appears to be playing the role of institutional buffer, preserving the military from the political instability. Yet, it is important to remember that in April 2010, Indjai threatened to kill Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior, and at the time unsuccessfully tried to remove him from the government leadership. Thus, in the best-case scenario, Carlos Gomes Júnior has no more than a circumstantial ally in the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the Armed Forces are predominantly composed of members of the Balanta ethnic group – to which Indjai and the other perpetrator of the events of April 2010, Navy Chief of Staff Rear Admiral José Américo Bubo Na Tchuto, also belong. Keeping in mind that the PRS – the leading political party in the protests – retains a

strong following among the Balanta, then the truth is that – even if it is unlikely – the involvement of the Armed Forces in the political instability cannot be ruled out entirely.

Will Carlos Gomes Júnior be able to weather another wave of political instability?

Although the African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC), presided by Carlos Gomes Júnior since the fourth Extraordinary Congress held in January/February 2002, has absolute majority in Parliament with 67 seats out of 100, the Prime Minister knows that, owing to the divisions within PAIGC, it is not guaranteed that a motion of confidence will achieve

5 “Gomes ‘open’ to debate on his future” (*Agence France-Presse*, 29 July 2011).

6 “Presidente rejeita crise política e apela à moderação” (*Lusa*, 9 August 2011).

7 “Primeiro-ministro diz ter a confiança do Presidente e do povo guineense” (*Lusa*, 9 August 2011).

8 “Thousands protest against Guinea Bissau government” (*Agence France-Presse*, 14 July 2011).

9 “Thousands demand Guinea Bissau PM resign” (*Agence France-Presse*, 5 August 2011).



the required absolute majority of the votes. Still, Carlos Gomes Júnior seems prepared to take the risk, since he has already announced that he will present a motion of confidence.¹⁰ Will he match his words with deeds?

On the other hand, even though Malam Bacai Sanhá is also from PAIGC, Carlos Gomes Júnior knows that he cannot count on the President as an ally. If political circumstances allow it, Malam Bacai Sanhá will certainly be glad to get rid of Carlos Gomes Júnior.

Last but not the least, the political calculations that the main players are already making, bearing in mind the forthcoming legislative elections which should probably take place in the second semester of 2012, make it safe to assume that the next few months may not be easy for Carlos Gomes Júnior.

Ironically, this new wave of political instability occurs at a time when, at last, the European Union (EU) "set out a roadmap to gradually resume development cooperation" with Guinea-Bissau.¹¹ The EU was quite clear: "the roadmap foresees that advances made by Guinea-Bissau in the reform process will be reflected in a gradual resumption of EU development assistance". Thus, at the current juncture, it would be a nightmare, with unpredictable consequences, if a new political crisis affected the normal functioning of the institutions in Guinea-Bissau.

Moreover, unlike what has happened in the last few years, Portugal does not have the political strength to once again support Guinea-Bissau in the EU, in the United

Nations, and elsewhere. The Portuguese government could not afford it and, quite possibly, also would not want to do it again. Thus, like other countries and international institutions supporting Guinea-Bissau, Portugal should send a discreet but clear message to the local main political players: if anyone wants to play Russian roulette in Bissau, then they shall do it at their own risk, and must be prepared to accept the consequences.

10 "Guiné-Bissau: Oposição regressou hoje às ruas de Bissau" (*Portuguese News Network*, 5 August 2011).

11 "EU sets out roadmap for the gradual resumption of development cooperation with Guinea-Bissau" (Council of the European Union, 18 July 2011). See also Pedro Seabra, "The EU and Guinea-Bissau: always one step behind?" (*IPRIS Lusophone Countries Bulletin*, No. 21, July 2011), pp. 4-7.

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