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## GUINEA AND THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL UNCERTAINTY AND LOOMING SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPLOSION

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### INTRODUCTION

Guinea is facing one of the most difficult moments in its history. A socio-economic implosion looms as the country's political future remains a matter of conjecture due to the deteriorating health of President-General Lansana Conté and uncertain political transition. The recent strikes embarked upon by the country's trade unions coalition (CNTG-USTG) may just be the beginning of an end to a political era. Indeed, Guinea has been grounded in a series of industrial actions since the beginning of 2006 but particularly since February and the government has incessantly blamed the 'manipulative' hands of the opposition and enemies of Guinea.

#### GUINEA: SOME IMPORTANT FACTS

- Estimated population : Nine (9) millions
- Human Development ranking: 156 out of 177

#### Potentials

- Guinea is host to 70 % of world's known bauxite reserves, vast reserves of iron, gold and diamond
- One of the wettest places in West Africa; Guinea is the main water catchments (Futa Jalon highlands) for West Africa's prominent rivers; abundant water resources and fertile soil.

#### Some economic & social indicators

- Current inflation rate: 60 %
- Currency: Guinea Franc (GF)
- Exchange rate: 1Euro = FG 6,188; 1USD (\$) = FG 4,930.
- Main staple: Rice; cost per 50kg = 85,000 FG(official)
- Fuel prices increased 50% since December 2005
- Official rate of poverty: 49 %
- Malnutrition rated at 49 %

The shooting to death of 21 Guinean students during the June 12 and 13, 2006 demonstration in protest of Government's nonchalant posture to the teacher's strike that threatened to compromise the end of course baccalaureate examinations constituted a major trigger that almost plunged Guinea into the abyss of a prolonged violent conflict with attendant consequences. Such a scenario would augur badly for a country that is facing a major political crisis as a result of an uncertain political future in the midst of a fratricidal (yet undeclared, albeit officially) political succession struggle, coupled with a crushing economic and financial crisis as Guinea groans under the burden of economic isolation by Western bilateral and multilateral donors. The poverty is accentuating on a daily basis; prices of basic necessities are soaring as the inflation level today stands at 60 percent;<sup>1</sup> the rest of economic indices for Guinea are in red.

President Olusegun Obasanajo of Nigeria in a recent visit to Paris voiced out what the

<sup>1</sup> Source credited to a World Bank expert cited in a recent Guinée news ([www.guineenews.org](http://www.guineenews.org)) by Oumar Yacine B.

West African sub-region has been reflecting upon for quite some time now; that Guinea is a critical case that must be addressed to avert yet another major crisis<sup>2</sup>. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is aware that Guinea may yet be another opportunity missed in conflict prevention as quiet diplomatic initiatives are on course. The rest of the international community is marking time as no one seems to have the answer to the challenge of uncertainty and looming crisis in Guinea. This policy brief attempts a diagnosis of the present situation in Guinea by:

- ❑ identifying the major accelerators that are driving the country to the threshold of violence explosion-the social, economic and political indicators;
- ❑ Analyzing the critical issue of succession, the behind the scene actors and their undeclared strategies;
- ❑ Windows of opportunity for dialogue, peace and cooperation
- ❑ Possible scenarios that Guinea may go through in the short and medium term (best and worse case scenarios);
- ❑ Options for response with regard to the possible scenarios.

### **KEY SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CONFLICT ACCELERATORS UNDERMINING GUINEA'S STABILITY TODAY**

We would attempt to examine the key issues accelerating Guinea's move towards the threshold of instability, violent conflict and crisis.

#### **Socio-Economic vectors**

The socio economic indicators that seem to be driving Guinea towards an implosion are multiple. However, key amongst them are the following.

*Soaring cost of living:* Life is becoming more and more unbearable for the average Guinean. Poverty is visible and few families can afford a decent meal as almost everything has become expensive. Rice is the main staple in Guinea. A 50 kg bag of rice now cost between 100,000 and 120,000<sup>3</sup> Guinea Francs (FG). Government attempts to regulate the market by decreeing a ceiling price of 85,000 FG (although the trade unions and striking workers proposed 70,000 FG as ceiling price) may end up as another dismal failure. The hike in the price of fuel that has been aggravated by the crises in the Middle East and the Niger Delta of Nigeria has sent fuel prices at pumps soaring. As a consequence, the transportation fare has been increased to a level most working class families cannot afford. The total spending on transportation surpasses the total income of most families.

*Failed food price control and resultant hoarding:* Because of the failed Government attempt to regulate the market prices of basic food necessities, especially rice, the phenomenon of artificial scarcity has aggravated, pushing market prices higher and higher. A previous Government rationing programme wherein the State purchased stocks and tasked the Quarter heads (*chefs de quartiers*) to strictly sell one bag per family and plough back money for more supplies turned out to be a complete disaster

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<sup>2</sup> Nigeria is facing similar challenges but Nigeria's conflict carrying capacity or rather still resilience is stronger and has supported the weight of the burden over the years and may continue to do so. Guinea's resilience that is based on a strong social fabric, a centralized power structure in hands of a no nonsense leader, General Lansana Conté and a repressive security force has thinned out over the past years. It may be already out-stretched to breaking point.

<sup>3</sup> As we were publishing the paper, the price has soared to 160,000 GF.

despite threats of severe sanctions on defaulters. Indeed, the Government in Guinea is losing control.

*Water and electricity crisis:* In the last few years, electricity has become a luxury in Guinea. Attempts to revamp the energy sector have yielded minimal results, partially due to the suspension of multilateral and bilateral cooperation from the part of Western countries as a result of poor (and/or refusal by the Government of Guinea to yield to pressure to comply with) governance and democratization reforms. In the heart of the rainy season, there is water everywhere in Guinea except in the taps. The cholera epidemics of January 2006 that claimed about 133 lives<sup>4</sup> in the *Guinée Forestière* region have been due to poor or absence of potable water supply.

*Trade Union strikes:* The 'successful' strike by the *Inter Centrale CNTG* (Confederation of Guinean Workers) and *USTG* (United Syndicate of Guinean Workers) trade union has a great significance. First, it is the first time in Guinea that the trade unions have successfully put the nation, especially the government at its knee. Secondly, the trade unions succeeded in doing what the opposition has failed to do over the years, that is, forcing the government to dialogue and make concessions. The trade unions would henceforth remain a major player in the unfolding socio-political landscape in Guinea. Third, the violent reaction of the military to the students' protest that in itself was another milestone or outcome of the strike demonstrated the limits (and perhaps the frustration) of the Guinea security forces, not their strength. The shooting of 21 students further exposed the government by flagging the Conté regime to the international radar and irreversible scrutiny, a thing Guinea had 'successfully' managed to avoid until then.

*Youth Crisis:* The violent protest by the students in Guinea and the heavy fisted repression of the security forces is a vivid demonstration of the time bomb that Africa as a whole is sitting on. The Bacca-laureate examination issue was an opportunity for Guinea's students to air their share of the accumulated grievance and mounting discontent vis-à-vis the government for the nonchalant attitude towards the 'youth problem'. The poor educational and training institutions, chronic unemployment, and an uncertain future has forced thousands of Guinean (and other African youths) into adventurous migration across the Sahara desert, the Atlantic and Mediterranean waters<sup>5</sup>. Most of these youths need at least a bacca-laureate certificate to fend for themselves in the green pastures of Europe no matter what it takes to get there.

### **Political and Conflict Generating Factors**

*(In)Security:* Rising criminality and high way banditry remains a major concern in Guinea. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Guinea<sup>6</sup> the capital Conakry and the interior have continued to witness rising insecurity. Humanitarian activities were suspended, including flight deliveries following the paralysis orchestrated by the nine day strike in June that basically crippled the country. Organized and armed bandits known as the *coupeurs de routes* especially along the Kissidougou-Nzérékoré and Kissidougou-Kankan highway have continued to terrorize humanitarian convoys and passengers plying the Forest Region, making relief work risky and travel

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<sup>4</sup> Source: OCHA Sitrep, June 2006.

<sup>5</sup> In Senegal for instance, the youth have come up with a new motivating slogan or vow: either *Barça* (meaning Barcelona in Spain) or *Bah'sa* (the world beyond-death).

<sup>6</sup> OCHA Sitrep, released July, 2006.

dangerous.

*The Military:* Assessing the Guinea military in particular and the security forces in general based on the suppression of the students' demonstration last June may be misleading. It is well known that Guinea has one of the strongest and loyal military forces in West Africa. Guinean soldiers have actively participated in various peacekeeping operations in West Africa and are sufficiently exposed and informed. Cases of mutinies, whether imagined or real, have been reported in the past and culprits severely punished. Though signs of dissention have not surfaced, there is a generational problem as young and exposed officers may sooner than later start to challenge the 'old school' of soldiers of the former Soviet Union training that Guinea embraced during the years of the Cold War. Besides, the ethnic rivalries and loyalties would likely emerge if the current transitional uncertainty persists, and more, if the President were to die, thus creating a power vacuum. Despite these, the Guinean army that has over the years benefited from the US support remains a formidable force in terms of African standards, and has the capacity to make or mar.

*President's Conté worrisome illness:* That President's likely terminal illness and inability to exert his dwindling influence on Guinean politics is (already) becoming a serious fact. The President spends most of his time in his Wawa village in the outskirts of Conakry. Signals of incapacity or fatigue can be seen in the saga of the last cabinet reshuffle of April 2006. Less than 10 hours after a new government under the leadership of Prime Minister Cellou Dalein Dialla was announced, the decree was annulled and a new one signed appointing one of the President's right hand man, Fodé Bangoura leaving former in utter shock<sup>7</sup> and dismay. Infighting between and within the President's entourage and settlement of scores may not only herald anarchy but bitter conflicts and ethnic or clan antagonism. Guinea, in the words of a leading civil society activist in Guinea, has become ungovernable.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the apparent anarchy and power struggle within the administration cannot be disassociated from the President's growing incapacity to rule.

*Sub-regional conflict dynamics:* Guinea's years of stability have been an enormous asset to sub-regional peace especially in the Mano River Basin. The strenuous DDR in Cote d'Ivoire, and the post-conflict reconstruction processes in Liberia and Sierra Leone seriously depend on Guinea's sustained stability. The failed rebel incursion into Guinea from Liberia in 2000 and the resultant relics, particularly the 'volunteer soldiers' hastily recruited and trained but later abandoned left Guinea in a difficult and compromising state. Promises of absorbing the so-called volunteers did not materialize and most of them were left on their own with their arms. Yesterday's saviour may become tomorrow's rebel.

Rumours that conflict may be simmering along the Guinea-Liberia frontier are disturbing. The Liberian Government official, Chris Massaquoi's claim that Guinea has encroached into their land has been refuted by Guinea's ambassador to Liberia, Abdoulaye Doré. Also of importance is the rumour coming from Saclepa Nimba County, Liberia of an alleged planned attack on Ghanta by the Mandingoes (Malinkés) in the last week of July

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<sup>7</sup> This probably goes to record as one of the shortest governments in history. Dismissed PM Cellou learned his sack from the radio. Cellou who was already restoring a modicum of confidence with the international financial and donor community took over from Francois Fall who resigned because of no-cooperation from colleagues who challenged him in a power struggle between 'insiders' that claimed they were answerable only to the President.

<sup>8</sup> Mireille Duteil, « Le naufrages de la Guinée », Le Point, cited in GuinéeNews, Juillet, 2006.



2006 cannot be dismissed or neither can it be confirmed<sup>9</sup>. There are still about one million Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees in Guinea (mostly in the Forest Region) despite an end to war in these countries. Remnants of armed groups (ULIMO-K and LURD) that fought the Liberian war are still in Guinea. The long border with Cote d'Ivoire is a challenge with regards to its porous nature even if a Guinean battalion is on ground to check potential infiltrators. Guinea therefore has a margin of manoeuvre and an external distraction especially as the nation has time immemorial triumphed on the 'external plot' (*complot extérieur*) to canalize nationalism spirit and patriotism. This strategy may not be ruled out but it could also turn out to be disaster.

### **(UNANNOUNCED) SUCCESSION STRUGGLE: KEY ACTORS AND THEIR STRENGTHS AND LIMITS**

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The battle for the succession of the prestigious political seat in Guinea is on. Although this is a normal thing, Guinea's 'succession war' may turn bitter because of the intricacies involved. There are four principal contenders to the Guinean highest office: (a) insiders of the regime (men of the presidential entourage) with each positioning itself to out-smart the others; (b) Officers of the Guinea army who may take advantage of the infighting and claim the seat to 'put order' in the house; (c) the President's joker in the person of his own son; (d) and the opposition and other democratic forces in Guinea. We would attempt a brief analysis.

*a). Insiders of the regime:* Among these are names like the President of the National Assembly, Aboubakar Somparé who is the rightful constitutional successor, and who must organize elections within the stipulated time in case of a constitutional vacuum. However, there is the likelihood that he may be shoved aside (as was the case in Togo). His capacity to mobilize the PUP ruling party dominated National Assembly to respect the Constitution would determine the trend of events were there to be a vacuum at the head of the Executive. Whatever the game to be played, Somparé would enjoy the support of the international community if the forces of legality would triumph.

Nevertheless, other contenders like the increasingly influential Fodé Bangoura who within a few years rose from Deputy Governor of the Central Bank to the Prime Ministry is the visible favourite given his closeness to President Conté. In the case of sudden death of the President, it is uncertain whether Fodé would receive the backing of the 'kingmakers'.

It is difficult to discern who the real king makers in Guinea are. What is certain is that the successor to President Conté must enjoy the support of the army and key business magnets that have so far bailed Guinea during these years of socio-economic stress. Mamadou Sylla, owner of *Futurelec* group of companies is one of the great financiers of the regime and is reported to be nursing ambitions to the seat of the Presidency.

*b). Officers of the Army:* An army takeover is an unconstitutional move that would be condemned at all cost both internally and internationally. There are those who would argue that history has always repeated itself and the fact that Lansana Conté did it in

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<sup>9</sup> The allegation according to a UNMIL source goes that three people from Guinea will be crossing the border from Guinea several days before the attack. The crossing will be done in UNHCR vehicles. The subjects will be crossing the border into Liberia as refugees. It further says machine guns have been smuggled from two camps and are currently stored in Guinea.

1984, someone else would do it again given the opportunity. It is difficult to say who may emerge as the military contender because of the various interest groups. The ethnic, clan and generational divisions notwithstanding, the military remains a potential contender to the Presidency in Guinea, and they may draw their inspiration from Mali (of ATT) and more recently Mauritania. They would argue that given the likely degeneration to chaos or anarchy as a result of egoistic and sectarian tendencies, a centralized and hard-handed regime is needed to pull Guinea back on the rails, even if this would be in the backdrop of sanctions from sub-regional, regional and international community. After all, Guinea had been in a quasi sanction status for many years now, they would conclude.

c). *President Conté's son*: Although this was not unexpected, President Conté is purported to have proposed his son as his heir in typical Togolese style. This certainly is intended to protect the President's interests. This possibility can materialize only if the army and insiders consent to it as was the case in Togo but would certainly be rejected by a majority of the masses.

d). *The Opposition and other forces*: Except fundamental changes in the electoral system are made, it is very unlikely that the opposition can ascend to power when Conté leaves. Weakened by years of intra-opposition rivalry, a fact that has played to the favour of the incumbent, the Guinean opposition has been unable to provide a credible alternative to the Guinea people. The main opposition leaders like Ousman Bah (who succeeded late Siradiou Diallo) of the UPR, Alpha Condé of RPG-RDA, Bah Mamadou and to a lesser degree Jean Doré have in the past fought each other and agreed to disagree. Their weight had hardly gone beyond their ethnic bases and their political strategy has been that of "if it is not me, then let Conté rule". The opportunity for a united front has once more been presented (given the present context) and the common denominator seems to be the fact that change has to come and how that change comes is a matter of conjecture. The recent capacity of trade union to mobilize the country and all its "*forces vives*" is an opportunity and challenge for the opposition, as new and perhaps alternative opposition leaders may emerge from the broader civil society.

## **WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY & GOVERNMENT RESPONSIVENESS**

Despite a high level of a feeling of fatality among Guineans, most of who have resigned to fate, there is a glimpse of hope. The international focus on Guinea has once more put the country on the agenda of international policy makers. The threat posed by eventual instability in Guinea is enormous and the international community seems to agree that something should be done to prevent a major crisis in Guinea. But what is not clear or yet to be defined is how to do it.

That the international community can still embark on a successful preventive strategy in Guinea (to avert a degeneration of the looming crisis) is not impossible though the critical entry points, and issues of coordination amongst donors seems difficult given the 'closed' nature of the administration in Guinea and its resistance to externally orchestrated political initiatives and pressure. Nonetheless, the following developments constitute windows of opportunity for a dialogue, engagement and moves towards compliance to international norms and even change.

□ *Government responsiveness*: The degree of government responsiveness to pressure

seemed to have changed following the incident that led to the killing of the students. For the first time, the Government of Guinea in negotiations in the wake of the violent demonstrations made significant concessions that resulted in the suspension of the indefinite strike by trade unions on June 16. The Government agreed to: Increase salaries of civil servants by 25 percent beginning July 2006; increase the transportation and housing allowance of civil servants; reduce taxes on wages; lower the price of a 50kg bag of rice from 120,000 GF to 85,000 GF; involve trade unions in decision making to determine fuel prices; integrate contract or temporally recruited teachers as permanent civil servants by 2007; pay outstanding salary arrears to civil servants particularly teachers; Increase retirement age from 60 to 65 years; end police brutality by submitting a new police policy to parliament by December 2006. Suffice to say that fixing the price of rice has been resisted by retailers who have resorted to hoarding to force the prices up.

- ❑ *Guineans Forging a Consensus:* The perception that the Guinean opposition and other key actors like civil society cannot agree can now be discarded (at least for now). The recent events in the country have seen the total mobilization of the opposition parties, civil society and human rights activists under the umbrella of a loose structure known as “*Union de Forces Vives*” of Guinea. Joint meetings and joint strategies have resulted into a formidable force. Whether this is just an association of convenience or a new platform for change in Guinea is a matter of conjecture. The significance lies in the closing of ranks for a common cause.
- ❑ *Media Liberalization:* The role of a free media in political transformation in Africa is already a fact. Government monopoly of the media sector, especially the audio-visual constitutes one of the greatest obstacles to change. On the other hand, the presence of a free media, especially rural or community radio stations that reach out to a great majority of the masses in countries like Mali and Senegal have become tools for awareness raising, sensitization and transformation. The long awaited decision by the Guinean Government to liberalise the air waves is significant.<sup>10</sup>
- ❑ *Guinea’s commitment to ECOWAS:* Despite the difficulties, Guinea’s commitment to ECOWAS has remained intact. Guinea is one of the countries that have ratified the ECOWAS Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance. This commitment to ECOWAS and by implication sub-regional peace and security should provide the leeway for an engagement in view of a peaceful transition in Guinea. ECOWAS is already taking initiatives in this direction and the launching of the Peace Fund in Guinea should provide the opportunity for engagement<sup>11</sup>.
- ❑ *European Union Offer:* The doors of EU are not completely shot to Guinea. In fact the sacked Prime Minister Cellou Diallo and his predecessor François Fall had made great strides to resuscitate dialogue with the EU and other Western bilateral and

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<sup>10</sup> Even if this comes at a moment a print media tabloid-*Croisade* was suspended for carrying a story that involved a presidential security and driver in a theft scandal. *L’Indépendant* was warned. New radio stations authorized are: FM Radio Liberté, *Soleil FM* and *Nostalgie Guinée*

<sup>11</sup> The Observation and Monitoring Centre (Early Warning System) of ECOWAS has also planned a major workshop in Guinea in August with the Government of Guinea and civil society to work out preventive strategies.

multi-lateral economic and financial donors. On May 29-30, the visiting French Minister Delegate for Cooperation, Brigitte Garardin disclosed in Conakry that the EU was ready to release 93 million Euros as part of European Funds for Development (FED) to Guinea on condition that genuine political dialogue resumed with the opposition fully engaged in political governance as well.

## **POSSIBLE SCENARIOS**

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Determining socio-economic and political scenarios in Guinea in the immediate and medium term may not be an easy exercise given the magnitude of the challenges and complex issues involved. Moreover, Guinea today is like a time-bomb and what cannot be predicted is the type of trigger and when it may occur. For the sake of convenience and focus, we would limit our scenario building on the transition or succession matter were the President to die suddenly or announce his resignation, even if none of these may be as simplistic.

### *Best Case Scenario*

Respect for Constitutional provisions and roles and functioning institutional structures like the National Assembly and the Judiciary is guaranteed. Through consultation, the Constitutional provisions on succession and organization of fresh elections are respected and a smooth transition ensues.

### *Worst Case Scenario*

A constitutional violation, either through military takeover or palace coup through manipulation of the Constitution by the presidential entourage, is imposed on Guinea. A turbulent political climate is created and violence is unleashed, assuming both ethnic and cross-border ramifications.

## **OPTIONS FOR RESPONSE OR ACTION**

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### **What can be done to arrive at (wishful) Best Case Scenario?**

- ❑ Internal pressure by the political actors, civil society and media should intensify in favour of a respect for the constitutional provisions. The lessons of the current mobilization and emphasis on non-violence should energize the actors and stakeholders.
- ❑ President General Lansana Conté should be personally engaged by those he is prone to listen to in the sub-region and beyond (especially those countries that served as his treatment places such as Morocco, Cuba, and Switzerland).
- ❑ The Presidential entourage that is influencing political decisions for selfish and personal motives should be restrained and/or engaged. Real power brokers in Guinea should be identified and engaged by the international community.
- ❑ ECOWAS, AU and rest of the international community should insist on constitutional transfer of power. Commensurate support should be accorded to Guinea to ensure this is feasible and real.
- ❑ Political carrots should be put in place, including a heavy donor involvement to salvage the nation's economic and social woes.
- ❑ Dividends of peaceful transfer and respect for constitutional provisions should be flagged and instead of isolating Guinea, this is the moment to pro-actively engage



Guinea. Such dividends of democracy must be real and affect the ordinary Guinean. Indeed, socio-economic assistance to Guinea should be a strategy for any meaningful action towards violent conflict prevention in Guinea.

- A political consensus over Guinea should be evolved through the launching of political dialogue that should culminate in a Government of National Unity. This can pave the way for a genuine discussion on the transition.

#### **How can the Worst Case Scenario be prevented or managed?**

- Military should steer clear of the politics of transition. For this to happen, military grievances and concerns should be addressed, while politicians should desist from sending messages of anarchy.
- National and international opinion and attention must be focused on Guinea and sensitization against the dangers of unconstitutionality and descent to chaos intensified.
- The international community should understand the simple adage that prevention is better than cure and act now. Countries like US (that enjoyed privileged relations with Guinea during the war against former President Charles Taylor of Liberia), Russia (with economic interests in Guinea) can use their diplomatic and economic prowess to influence a peaceful transition in Guinea.
- An international conference on Guinea to address the issues should be considered.

#### **CONCLUSION**

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Recent happenings in Guinea have gone a long way to prove that the country's conflict carrying capacity or resilience has been overstretched. Chinu Achebe's classic novel, *Things Fall Apart*, perhaps best describes the dilemma in Guinea today. The centre, it seems, no longer holds. The hitherto strong social knit and the strong centralized governance structure with rigid central control is already a myth. Due to a prolonged period of political uncertainty, and an attitude of resignation to fate (fatality), a new spirit is emerging. That new spirit is seemingly one that is now calling to question the legitimacy of the Government and need for accountability and change. The repressive response to the recent crisis attests to the fact that Guinea's trigger that may plunge the country into a deeper crisis would be sparked or propelled by socio-economic factors rather than political. The government machinery has long been established to deal with political dissent, assuming that solidarity and religion would always mobilize the nation around its leadership no matter the conditions. This false premise and the consequent outcome is what Guinea, ECOWAS and the international community must deal with.