

Guinea Overview

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

Guinea is a state on the Atlantic Coast of West Africa bordered in the north by [Guinea-Bissau](#), [Senegal](#) and [Mali](#), in the south by [Liberia](#) and [Sierra Leone](#), and in the south-east by [Côte d'Ivoire](#). Dense tropical rainforests in the south-east give way to drier Sahel vegetation in the north. The highlands receive heavy rainfall, and Guinea is home to the headwaters of the [Niger](#) and Konkouré Rivers. The country has immense deposits of minerals, including gold, diamonds, iron ore and uranium. But its largest export is bauxite, and Guinea is thought to hold perhaps half of the world's entire reserve of the aluminium ore.

Peoples

Main languages: French (official), Pulaar (Fulani) and other indigenous languages.

Main religions: Islam 85%, Christianity 10%, traditional beliefs 5%.

Main minority groups: Peuhl 4 million (40%), Malinké 3 million (30%), Soussou 2 million (20%), Kpelle 308,000 (3.1%), Kissi 286,500 (2.9%) .

[Note: Data on religion come from US CIRF, 2007. Percentages for Peuhl, Malinke and Soussou come from the CIA World Factbook, 2007. Taken from Ethnologue are numbers for Kissi and Kpelle (1991). Numbers are converted to percentages and vice-versa using the CIA's 2007 estimate of total population: 9.9 million.]

Guinea's four major geographical regions largely correspond to four major ethno-linguistic groups.

Peuhl, who make up 40 per cent of the population, are cattle herders and are the predominant population in the Fouta Djallon mountain plateau of the western interior. There is some tension between Peuhl and smaller groups historically oppressed by them, including Conagui, Bassari, Badiaranké, and Diakhanké. Conagui share the area around Koundara in the northern part of Middle Guinea and into Guinea-Bissau with a host of other small ethnic groups. Together with Bassari they were once fairly widespread. Having been subject to slave raids by the dominant Malinké and Peuhl, they took refuge in the hills of north-central Guinea as their numbers dwindled. Bassari are one of the least Europeanized or Islamicized ethnic groups in Guinea (see also Senegal). Historically among the oldest inhabitants of Guinea, Bassari preserve their matrilineal organization, religion and way of life in the rugged areas of the Fouta Djallon close to the Guinea-Bissau and Senegal borders. Badiaranké are an ethnic group

closely related to the Conagui and Bassari living on the Senegal-Guinea border. Beekeepers and farmers, they were once also renowned for cotton weaving. Only assimilated into national life relatively recently, they have maintained a larger degree of cultural and religious autonomy than most of Guinea's ethnic groups. The Diakhanké Mandé population of the south and central part of the Fouta Djallon inhabited the Fouta before the Peuhl state was established in the eighteenth century. Some accepted Islam and stayed on as allies of the Peuhl while others fled to the south and east.

Malinké, a Mandé people, make up around 30 per cent of the population. They are concentrated on the Niger plains of the north-east, towards the border with Mali.

Soussou, another Mandé people, make up 20 per cent of the population but have played the leading role in Guinean politics since 1984. They live predominantly along the coast, including the capital city, Conakry, and on the nearby plain. Other groups in this region include Peuhl, Dialonké, Conagui, Koranko and Valunka.

The fourth major geographical region is the forest highlands of the south-east. This is home to numerous smaller groups who initially fled here to escape domination by the Malinké. These groups include the Kissi, Kpelle (Guerze), Loma, Kono, Manon and Conagui. Kissi are a rice growing ethnic group in the Guékédou and Kissidougou areas of the Forest region. Other Kissi live just inside the borders of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Culturally and linguistically, Kissi are unrelated to the dominant Mandé speaking population in the north, and have therefore been neglected in the political and economic life of present-day Guinea. Kpelle is the term used by another ethnic group of the Forest region to designate themselves. In French, they are referred to as Guerze. In Guinea this group is mainly concentrated in the Nzérékore administrative district. They are linguistically most closely related to the Mende of Sierra Leone and thus represent an ancient intrusion of more northern people into the rainforest area of the south-west. Loma are concentrated to the east of the Kissi in the Macenta administrative region. Unrelated to their Kissi neighbours, they represent an early incursion of savanna peoples into the forest zone about 500 years ago. In Guinea, they are gradually being assimilated into the larger Malinké populations.

[^top](#)

History

The name Guinea possibly originates from a Portuguese corruption of the Berber Akal n Iguinawen, 'land of the black people'. It has been inhabited for tens of thousands of years. The great medieval kingdoms to the north, Ghana and Mali, incorporated parts or all of today's Guinea.

Portuguese explorers arrived in the 15th century, marking the beginning of trade with Europe along Guinea's coast. Gold, ivory and slaves were traded for guns and other European goods. However, slavery in Guinea was less intense than in other areas of West Africa.

France established a protectorate in Guinea in 1849, but faced fierce resistance from the Malinké under the leadership of Samory Touré, who fought French control until his capture in 1898. As a component of French West Africa, the Territory of Guinea was exploited to produce such cash crops as bananas and rubber. As Guinea's vast mineral wealth was being discovered after World War II, Guinea was moving toward independence.

Guinea was the first of the French colonies to claim independence, rejecting continued colonial

association with France in a referendum in 1958 under the leadership of Ahmed Sékou Touré, a trade union leader and ardent nationalist. Initially isolated by a vengeful France, Guinea pressed for the independence of all African states and for radical socio-economic change in Guinea. Many of the earliest political groups in Guinea were ethnically- or regionally-based. Touré, a Malinké, at first succeeded in overcoming the dominance of this trend, creating a strong sense of Guinean identity.

Sekou Touré turned to the former Soviet Union for support. One-party domination, that of Touré's Democratic Party of Guinea, quickly became one-man rule, as an oligarchy of the political elite struggled for power within the confines of an increasingly autocratic and brutal state. Touré did not spare his own government, ordering the executions of several ministers in the 1960s. He grew increasingly fearful of plots to kill him, some real and some imagined. He increasingly stocked his government with fellow Malinkés, and sent thousands to prison. Under terrible conditions in prison, many were tortured and killed. Touré was particularly distrustful of the Peuhl, and they suffered disproportionately. Hundreds of thousands of Guineans fled the country to escape Touré's erratic rule.

Touré died in April 1984 and a military junta led by Lt Col Lansana Conté, a Soussou, quickly toppled the prime minister who had legally succeeded Touré. The junta abolished the constitution and Touré's party. Ruling by decree, it released political prisoners and opened its markets. Guinea developed a close political relationship with France, and expanded joint development of its mineral resources with many western countries, including the United States and Canada.

Under Conté the Soussou gained favour much as the Malinké had under Touré. Under international pressure, Conté announced a transition to multiparty democracy under a new constitution, but many of the opposition leaders who returned to Guinea for the campaign were arrested. Conté won a flawed election in 1993 and continued to run Guinea as an authoritarian. He narrowly missed falling to a coup attempt in 1996, and won another round of fraudulent elections in 1998. Following the vote, hundreds of opposition supporters, including the candidate from the predominantly Malinké party, were arrested. Conté added more of his fellow Soussou to his government.

From 2000, Guinea became increasingly involved in the wars in neighbouring Sierra Leone and Liberia. Conté had already provided support to a predominantly Mandé (called Mandingo in Liberia) faction fighting the government of Liberian President Charles Taylor. In response, Taylor directed Sierra Leone's notorious Revolutionary United Front (RUF) to assist his forces in attacking Guinea. Tens of thousands of Guineans in the forest region were displaced, as were Sierra Leonean and Liberian refugees staying in camps there.

The fighting led Conté to order Guinean army attacks on the RUF's bases in Sierra Leone and increase his support for anti-Taylor rebels in Liberia.

By means of a dubious referendum in November 2001, Conté amended the constitution to extend presidential terms from five to seven years and abolish the limit on the number of terms that could be served. Amidst an opposition boycott, he won a third term in fraudulent December 2003 voting.

Guinea showed worsening signs of the political destabilization that began in 2006. As rampant corruption drove the economy into the ground, the government itself ran short of money to maintain its patronage network, including elements of the armed forces.

Guinea's labour unions launched a general strike in February 2006 to demand a voice in government. Conté reshuffled his government in response, but did not meet the demands. The unions launched a second national strike in June 2006, given added impetus by sharp rises in the price of rice and fuel. Security forces put down the protests, killing several protesters, and raping and beating others.

In December 2006 Conté personally released from prison two ministers who had been accused of large-scale embezzlement. The unions again called for a national strike, and in January 2007 tens of thousands of average Guineans marched, calling for Conté's resignation. Conté replied by broadcasting a message from national radio: 'Those who want power must wait their turn. It is God who gives power and when he gives it to someone, everyone must stand behind him'. Security forces including the presidential guard opened fire on protesters, killing dozens. In stark contrast to western reaction to pro-democracy demonstrations in such places as Ukraine and Serbia, the international community did not provide support to civil society organizations in Guinea. The unions eventually agreed to a compromise with Conté: a consensus candidate for prime minister was appointed, who for the first time was supposed to have the powers of a head of government. But Conté reneged on the deal and instead appointed a loyalist, sparking another round of violence between protesters and state security in February 2007. However, his own National Assembly – hitherto a rubber stamp for his decisions – refused to prolong a 'state of siege', and with West African mediation, Conté eventually appointed compromise candidate Lansana Kouyaté as prime minister later that month, but sacked him again in May 2008. At that same time, an army mutiny over back pay made clear just how tenuous the civilian hold on power was.

Indeed, when Lansana Conté died in December 2008 after a long struggle with diabetes, a group of predominantly Malinké junior officers launched a successful bloodless coup within 24 hours. The plotters, under the leadership of self-declared 'President' Moussa Dadis Camara, quickly rounded up many members of Conté's Soussou-dominated inner circle.

[^top](#)

Governance

Guinea went from colonialism straight into dictatorship that has persisted ever since. Formally, there is a 114-seat unicameral People's National Assembly. While under Conté opposition parties were allowed some representation in parliament, the president controlled all the levers of power. These included the judiciary and the election commission. Beyond his substantial formal powers and control through his party apparatus, Conté used an extensive patronage network to steer the unwieldy military and civil service. Although Soussous were disproportionately represented in his government, Conté kept members of other ethnic groups in positions of power. He was ill for several years before his death in December 2008, and was rarely seen in public. Behind the scenes, factions representing different power centres and ethnic groups jockeyed for position in anticipation of a succession struggle.

A predominantly Malinké group of coup plotters led by Captain Moussa Dadis Camara seized power immediately following Conté's death, announcing the dissolution of government and suspension of the constitution. Camara insisted that the putschists were bent only on stamping out corruption and paving the way for democratic elections in 2010. While many Guineans welcomed the coup as a promised break from Conté's corrupt police state, others were more apprehensive, remembering that Conté had made very similar pledges when he seized power in 1984.

Guinea has tremendous natural wealth, but in 2007 Transparency International ranked it as the fourth-most corrupt country in Africa. Criticism from abroad is muted, as major western aluminium and other companies rely on Guinea's mines to fill their needs for raw materials. Following the December 2008 coup, new President Camara promised he would review mining contracts and renegotiate those that rewarded Conté cronies. It remained to be seen whether renegotiated contracts would aim to serve the public good, or merely be redirected to benefit coup leaders and their supporters.

[^top](#)

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Towards the end of his rule, President Conté struggled to cover the financial demands of the extensive patronage network upon which he relied. This came despite the near-wholesale theft of the country's income from lucrative mineral exploitation. Conté's difficulty in keeping up with the greed of his inner circle eventually led to deepening instability. In May 2007 and May 2008, soldiers protested violently in demand of increased pay and pay in arrears. Meanwhile, impoverished average Guineans of all stripes were fed up with state corruption and increasingly ready to take to the streets to demand better governance. The clique of soldiers that took power at the end of 2008 faced high expectations from their army comrades and the civilian population. Looming in the background as a potential accelerant of unrest should the coup-plotters disappoint the military or the civilian population was the factor of ethnicity.

The group of junior officers led by Captain Moussa Dadis Diarra was predominantly ethnic Malinké. During Lansana Conté's drawn-out decline in health, the question of who would succeed him turned into a question of which ethnic groups would be favoured. Soussou elites feared losing their favoured status; Malinké elites wanted to recover the favoured status they held under Guinea's first president, Sekou Touré; the Peuhl, who form the country's largest ethnic group, sought to end the broad exclusion from power persisting from colonial times to the present; and the minorities of the forest region in the south-east sought an end to decades of near complete government neglect.

Among the first actions of the ruling military council was the arrest of top Conté loyalists, a group that by definition was largely of Soussou ethnicity. It remained to be seen whether Guinea's new leadership would reach beyond its Malinké base and fulfil the promise of transition to democratic, civilian rule, or whether ethnic cronyism would further erode the foundation of Guinea's stability.

[^top](#)