



# Africa Spectrum

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Barry, Boubakar (2009),  
“We must move towards a conference of national reconciliation ...” – Professor  
Boubakar Barry on the Guinean crisis, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 44, 2, 149-159.

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:  
[www.africa-spectrum.org](http://www.africa-spectrum.org)

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Published by  
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs  
in co-operation with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation Uppsala and Hamburg  
University Press.

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## Interview

# “We must move towards a conference of national reconciliation ...” – Professor Boubacar Barry on the Guinean crisis

**Abstract:** This text is a combination of an authorised interview with and text fragments by historian Boubacar Barry on the roots of the Guinean crisis. Barry traces the origins of the crisis back to the Sékou Touré dictatorship and even beyond. He considers ECOWAS involvement in the crucial crisis management and major reforms of the state’s structure to accommodate for the diversity of the cultural background of Guinea’s population.

**Keywords:** Guinea; State; Society; Military

**Boubacar Barry** is Professor (em.) of History at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal; he has taught and conducted research from his Dakar base since the 1960s and is one of the leading figures in West African historiography. He is West Africa coordinator of UNESCO’s Management of Social Transformations (MOST) Programme on regional integration, see: <<http://unesco.internetron.net/most/public/?action=search&lng=en&app=5>>

Long-time president Lansana Conté was announced dead on 23 December 2008. Immediately, a military junta led by Moussa Dadis Camara took power and vowed to fight corruption, which guaranteed them high popularity for a couple of months. Originally Dadis had declared that he would not stand for upcoming elections, but later he changed plans and announced his candidacy. A peaceful demonstration by civil society groups was disbanded brutally by soldiers on 28 September 2009, leading to the massacre of an estimated 157 people and the raping of scores of women and girls. While UN officials were in the country to investigate the events of 28 September an assassination attempt on the junta leader was perpetrated on 3 December. This is the turbulent context of the following text which is composed of an interview with and some reflections of the internationally renowned historian Boubacar Barry.

The interview was given to the Dakarian Soleil journalist Abdoulaye Diallo. It appeared in the 24th and 25th of October 2009 editions. The *preface* and the *post-script* are extracted from *J'ai mal à la Guinée* (Guinea is a source of pain to me) written for the ONUA conference on the 17th of October, partly published in editions of the Dakar newspaper Walfadjiri on the third and fourth of November 2009.

#### Preface:

I was privileged enough to experience the euphoria of September 28th 1958, the day that the people of Guinea voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence. I am saddened and dismayed to have lived through this massacre of peaceful demonstrators for democracy in Guinea on September 28th 2009, a situation that degenerated because the CNDD<sup>1</sup> did not allow, and does not allow, the *Forces Vives*<sup>2</sup> to express their anger, even in a peaceful fashion. It's intolerable and nothing can justify the atrocity of the actions taken against the citizens, and especially not the public raping of women. These barbaric acts make getting out of the crisis even harder – a crisis that isn't about the candidacy of Dadis any more, but rather, his ability to ensure a peaceful transition in the future.

It is difficult for us to personally recount this last half century of hope, as we have often been disappointed, not having been able to see an end to this diabolical machinery of repression of the country's fundamental freedoms, or the utter indifference of the international community.

In 2008, during a conference organised by CODESRIA<sup>3</sup> on academic freedoms in Guinea, I found myself in Conakry, in the same room as two fellow Guinean-born historians, professors Lansiné Kaba from the Univer-

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1 CNDD, *Conseil National de la Démocratie et du Développement*, National Council for Democracy and Development.

2 The *Forces Vives* are the opposition coalition supported by the civil society.

3 CODESRIA, *Conseil pour le développement de la recherche en sciences sociales en Afrique*, Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.

sity of Chicago and Thierno Mouctar Bah from the University of Yaoundé, for the first time in almost fifty years. All three of us are now retired, after having spent our entire high-level teaching careers outside of Guinea.

This paradox can be explained by the fracture between the party in power, the PDG<sup>4</sup> (Democratic Party of Guinea), and the intelligentsia (based around the teachers union), that Guinea has experienced since 1961. For having demanded the respect of their union rights in a memorandum sent to the government, the members of the board were all sentenced to ten or more years in jail during a hastily staged trial. Students and teachers in all Guinean institutions, in addition to some outside of the country organised a general strike that was heavily repressed by both the army and the JRDA (Youth of the African Democratic Revolution) militia. We were then imprisoned in the Alfa Yaya camp and, handcuffed, were threatened with death by firing squad on a wasteland of Sonfonia twenty kilometres outside of Conakry. We were barely seventeen years old. I am still haunted by the memories of these horrible acts of blind repression, supported by the State's lies of conspiracy that still continue to mark the history of Guinea to this day. It is this continued repression and the fear engraved in the hearts of several generations of Guineans that demonstrators intended to challenge on the 28th of September 2009, trying to put an end to the State's impunity and arbitrary ways that have led the entire people of Guinea into its trap.

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Was the bloody repression that we witnessed in Guinea on September 28th foreseeable?

Before going on, I must first pay my respects to the memory of all the departed. They were innocent people who were slaughtered with unparalleled barbarism. Yes – I believe the events could have been foreseen, especially considering the tradition of violence, brutality and impunity that Guinea has experienced for almost half a century. All of the ingredients for this tragedy were present. The current authorities had the responsibility to prevent this, and unfortunately, failed to do so. The massacre of September 28th further complicates the political dead end in which Guinea has entrenched itself since its independence in 1958.

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4 PDG, *Parti Démocratique de Guinée*, Democratic Party of Guinea.

How can you expect Dadis Camara and the CNDD to prevent events from taking place if they themselves are a product of the tradition of violence you've just criticised?

In reality, Guinea in its entirety is in itself struck with an illness. It is an illness caused by the twenty-six years that the Sékou Touré regime (a one-party State dictatorship) was in place, that set up all the ingredients that led to the military regime of General Lansana Conté. Naturally, Dadis is the product of this system and his regime is simply a continuation of the military regime of Conté, of whom, moreover, he himself claims to be the heir. It's all intertwined. Guinea has just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary of independence, and has yet to learn the lessons of the tragedies that punctuate its history. I don't believe, however, that it is necessary to focus on Captain Dadis Camara himself.

Almost no institutions adequately function in Guinea. Under these conditions, can one even talk of a State in this country?

Of course. As is the case with all its neighbours, the State of Guinea exists *de facto* because of the attainment of national sovereignty upon independence, its borders remaining as inherited from colonialism. Now, what have we done with this State? Therein lies the real question, and given the complexity of Guinea's historical evolution, no solution can be found in a short time. Much more research would be necessary to determine what stages led the State to its current situation.

Many believe that the father of the nation, Sékou Touré, is largely responsible for the current situation in Guinea. Are you of the same opinion?

Sékou Touré played a major role in the current situation, in so far as he was the leader of the country for twenty-six years. Under his reign, the country went through different phases on its way to the founding of a State party: a political dictatorship based on a variety of social, Marxist, and finally religious ideologies, with Islam at the forefront. Sékou Touré is the one who instigated the political and ideological terror in Guinea. Yet, the unanimous vote of the Guinean people in 1958 created a lot of hope in the country, as well as internationally. This explains why many African patriots, such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo from Burkina Faso and David Diop from Senegal, flew to Guinea's aid in 1958, because it was the only country to have voted against General De Gaulle's referendum. The fact that it took this stand placed it, alongside Ghana, in the group of so-called revolutionary countries. Later joined by Mali, these countries became the spearhead of the emancipation movement of Africa. Consequently, Guinea took on a leading role. But the first internal rupture was the 1961 strike. The entire body of students and

teachers protested against the arrest of the members of teachers' unions. At the time, they were requesting certain benefits that they had been deprived of. The strikers demanded better working conditions, especially material and pedagogical benefits. In the eyes of the authorities, this was considered a conspiracy.

So it was the repression of intellectuals, many of whom chose exile that ...

The 1961 strike, which saw all Guinean colleges and secondary schools close, following the imprisonment of the union members, marks the first break between the PDG and the left wing, especially the intellectuals. There was a progression towards political violence from that moment on, where the dictatorship of the single political party was justified by a revolutionary ideology against imperialism, and also the fact that Guinea was more or less under foreign threat. All of this combined led to the policy of indoctrination of the people that we then witnessed. This policy was based on very ambiguous foundations, such as patriotism, which was then exacerbated to obtain high positions in the State, the army and all other major institutions. We progressively got to the primacy of party over proficiency. The politics of successive conspiracy claims served as a sword of Damocles over the head of Guineans, obliging them either to accept things as they were or to leave. The exodus of Guineans, and intellectuals in particular, dates from that period, when most of our generation left. Up until the seventies, two million Guineans resided outside of the country. This situation worsened insofar as on a political level, no internal democratic evolution took place. Attempts to enter Guinea from the outside led to the 1970 incidents.<sup>5</sup> This reinforced the capacity of internally maintaining the power of the dictatorship. All of this has generated a series of manipulations of popular opinion, and a very systematic bottom to top organisation of the entire Guinean territory, based on party committees. This is how the party has achieved primacy over the State. We have witnessed a series of conspiracies during which members of different social groups, including some members of the PDG or former leaders of the party, were sent to the Boiro<sup>6</sup> Camp. This political terror, followed by the imprisonments and public hangings in reaction to the 1970 incidents gave Sékou Touré the possibility of orchestrating internal violence, causing the death of hundreds of political figures.

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5 Editor's note (*Le Soleil*): A seaborne attack by so-called Portuguese in collusion with Guinean dissident forces, making the Guineans victims of Portuguese imperialism, was quickly repulsed.

6 Camp situated in the center of Conakry where political prisoners who were to be submitted to torture were kept, and in which many were killed.

Considering all that has happened in Guinea, could one speak of a victory of the army over the intelligentsia in the country?

No, it is not a victory for the army, because, at some point, there was a conspiracy against it. Numerous officers of the Guinean army, together with defense minister Fodéba Keita, were sent to prison by Sékou Touré. So, all of the sectors of society have been affected by these conspiracies, most often fictive, that have permitted the regime to spread terror and send whoever they want to prison. This created an atmosphere of political and physical violence. It is true that different army corps played a fairly important role in the repression. However they too were divided. Sékou Touré's militia had more power than any of the army officers did. The entire military hierarchy had been disrupted. A corporal could have more political primacy than an army general. It is this decomposition of the State and Guinean society that allowed Sékou Touré to stay in power until his death in 1984. In other words, the State's entire structure had been dismantled. In this context, the high-level professionals and intellectuals from Guinea that had not fled were submitted to the logic of a single party that was making decisions, at every level, on all of the problems of the country.

Everything leads us to believe that the majority of the victims on Monday the 28th of September are Fula. Are fears of an ethnic conflict in Guinea justified?

It is very difficult to speak of ethnic problems in Guinea. That is because it's a poisoned gift, a double edged sword. Guinea's problem is not in itself an ethnic problem. It is rather a problem of democracy. The main question is to know whether or not Guineans today can be citizens, and enjoy their rights: the right of assembly, of expression, the right to vote for their leaders, to control their leaders ... That is Guinea's major issue. Now, when there is no democratic life, there is danger, and ethnicity is ever present to be manipulated this way and that to justify the actions of those who are in power as well as the opposition. Therefore, the absence of political life is Guinea's major problem. As a historian, I do not have any trouble understanding the evolution of these peoples within the territory of Guinea. For me, Guinea is a kind of prison because all of these ethnic groups who are in Guinea today also belong to Senegalese, Bissau-Guinean, Malian, Ivorian, Sierra Leonean, and Liberian territorial spaces. Therefore, the ethnic problem is a poison for which Nation States have not found a cure. They have not dared to confront the issue and differentiate between the cultures of these peoples and their geographic belonging at a given moment in history. In Guinea, there is a long tradition of ethnic intermingling that has even amplified over the years. Conakry has become a cosmopolitan capital that contains all of the populations of Guinea. The fact that a centralised power

structure has been put into place, with the capital city as the centre of gravity for all political, economic and social life, has caused the dislocation of many Guineans toward Conakry, in a similar fashion to what has happened in Dakar, Freetown, and Abidjan. Guinea, as all of the other countries, is effectively composed of, I wouldn't say ethnic groups, but peoples who were there before colonisation. These peoples have a history in state, political and social structures. Better still, they have a history of migration within this space that dates back for centuries. All of this must be considered in order to understand the situation and the evolution of each of the sections of this social body.

What solution would you recommend to help Guinea get out of this cyclic crisis?

The tragic events of September 28th have made getting out of the crisis a very complex matter. Guinea and Guineans have had three opportunities to do so in their lifetime. The first one occurred in 1958 when Guinea attained independence without shedding a drop of blood. All the political forces in the country, in collective fervour, had said no to General De Gaulle and voted in favour of independence. Guinea's future, however, has been forfeited by Sékou Touré's regime. By installing an obscure ideology that asserts that some Guineans are more patriotic than others, he undermined the foundations of democracy. With Sékou Touré we have also witnessed a depreciation of academic merit. The holders of power applied an ideology whereby going to school was not deemed necessary in order to govern. All of this led to a *coup d'état* in 1984<sup>7</sup>, that was also carried out without any loss of blood. This time too (second opportunity) instead of putting democratic structures in place, the regime just instituted a military dictatorship. Lansana Conté also died whilst in power. Conté had won all of the elections because he had control of the State apparatus, but most of all because he controlled the army. His reign was marked by the exacerbation of corruption that undermined the entirety of the State structures. Today, despite its vast mineral resources, Guinea has neither water nor electricity. However the population is not the only victim of the Conté regime. The army was also impoverished despite the control it exercised over the country. It was that same impoverished and destructured army that seized power after the death of General Conté. As in 1958 and 1984, 2009 (the third opportunity) was an exceptional chance for the country. The hope brought about by the arrival of the CNDD and Dadis Camara seemed doubly well-founded. First, because he had vowed to put Guinea back on track by fighting against corruption, and second – most importantly – he had promised he would give power back to

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7 Editor's note (Le Soleil): After the death of Sékou Touré.



the civilians after the transition. However, in the same way as Sékou Touré and Lansana Conté had done, Dadis Camara failed to meet expectations. Much equivocation surrounded the length of the transition, and the suspicion around his potential candidacy led to the events of September 28th. Today we find ourselves back at square one.

Do you mean to say that Guinea is condemned to live through this political violence?

Indeed, that is precisely the question. Does Guinea have the capacity to escape from this dead end, truly a very serious deadlock? Is another military coup necessary? No. Must international forces intervene and place the country under supervision? This option also has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. Must the people rise, bring down the army and clean it up? That would undoubtedly create other problems. It shows how difficult it is for Guinea to get out of this dead end. The fact remains that the political class grouped within the *Forces Vives* and the military regime must think of the people of Guinea and find a solution to this situation. This solution can only be a political one.

If I understand you correctly, the political class should accept CNDD's helping hand?

Well, I cannot say in what form. But I do believe that it is urgent to deal with the problem of Guinea's future in a fair way, with the aid of the international community, and in particular ECOWAS<sup>8</sup>, who have for that matter already got involved. There are, however, a number of conditions. In my opinion, light must be shed on the circumstances in which these massacres took place and we must move towards a conference of national reconciliation based on the facts of the matter. The people of Guinea cannot afford to lie about these facts any more. We must no longer accept impunity. In addition, we absolutely need a transitional period during which a government of national unity should be put in place with the aim of reinstating all of the major institutions.

The *Forces Vives* would like to establish a government of national unity that excludes the military. Is this at all conceivable in the current context of Guinea?

It is natural for the *Forces Vives* to set the bar very high. But compromises are necessary for any nation to live. Guinea can't solve its problems in a day or even in a week. Getting out of the current crisis will require a long process because the illness runs deep. Democratic life is a state of mind and the

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8 Economic Community of West African States.

equation of the 28th of September was simple: the right to demonstrate peacefully was at stake. If that right had been accepted by the Guinean authorities, these killings would not have taken place. Hence, it is the citizens' fundamental right of expression that has been flouted. Guinea is still a country with a single radio and television channel that expresses the State's point of view regardless of the political tyranny in place. I live with that thorn in my side. That is surely why the most important thing today is to find a compromise between the *Forces Vives* and the Guinean army who are definitely involved in any solution, with or without Dadis Camara. I believe it is urgent to ensure the security of the populations and a certain amount of democratic life. But it is also urgent to develop a detailed plan for the project. Today, Guinea has neither an assembly nor local representatives. That is why a return to constitutional order will necessarily entail long term cooperation between all of Guinea's social classes. No one wishes Guinea to fall into anarchy. That's why Guineans must be guaranteed safety in order to calmly discuss their future.

In your opinion, what must the profile of the president of a country in ruins such as Guinea be?

To begin with, one must avoid the pitfall of thinking that someone can be a messiah and solve all the problems with a magic wand. The notion of a nation state embodied by the personality of a president who has power over everything, power over life and death, and is permitted to appoint all his functionaries must be banned. The excessive centralisation that we have gone through since independence is responsible for destroying and undermining nations. In our countries, everything is concentrated in the capital cities. I feel we need to revert back to restructuring the territory, assigning a high level of autonomy to each region. Our relation to power, be it civil or military, must change. This is valid for Guinea as well as for the rest of the ECOWAS countries.

You introduce an old debate on the viability of the micro states that have resulted from colonisation ...

I think that the nation state as conceived and consolidated in the setting of the borders inherited from colonisation poses a problem. We urgently need to question the colonial State, which was a violent one and has led us to the current situation: a State and its subjects, but not its citizens. We need to re-establish the relationship of the State and its citizens. What is the citizen's position in this definition of the State? What ability do the citizens have to elect and control their leaders at all times? That is the fundamental issue concerning our countries. The Guinean crisis is a cyclic crisis that has al-

ready been experienced in other ECOWAS countries. Unfortunately, Guinea has not learnt its lesson from observing what has happened to its neighbours. Today, in Guinea as in most African countries, powers are not separated. This syndrome is contagious and may affect many countries in the sub-region. In Guinea, as is the case in most African countries, the conditions for a true democracy where people can choose their leader are not in place.

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#### Postscript:

The army is ill and the population has lost all trust in its ability to ensure its security as long as the people responsible for the atrocities committed in January and February 2007, and on September 28th 2009 are not found and punished. However, to organise a conference of national reconciliation preliminary to free and transparent elections, we need a transitional period of at least one year with the introduction of a government of national unity, whose members are not candidates for any elective position. This implies that the *Forces Vives* must pay particular attention to the modalities of this transition, in relation to the army that will necessarily be involved in the process.

It is obvious that the events of September 28th 2009 have created a new situation that calls for new solutions, necessarily entailing a political dialogue with the army that will define a plan for the period beyond the transition. Serious thought must be oriented towards the conditions that will allow us to reconstruct the Republic on a new basis.

Why not have a Federation of the four great natural regions of Guinea, with a Federal Parliament as well as a Federal Government? No possibilities should be ruled out, because the old system – a centralised Republic organised around the capital city of Conakry – has demonstrated its inability to ensure the balance between regions and especially their development.

We must also make our way towards a parliamentary regime, as the presidential regime has so far led us to despotism in the absence of a mechanism of controlling that power.

The problem today lies in determining whether ECOWAS should place Guinea under its supervision to accompany it through this transitional period, or in a moral leap, the president of the CNDD will set up a process of national introspection by giving the power back to a government of national unity, with the participation of the army, whilst giving up all his personal claims to power.

## **“Wir brauchen eine nationale Versöhnungskonferenz ...” – Professor Boubacar Barry zur Krise in Guinea**

**Zusammenfassung:** Der vorliegende Text kombiniert ein autorisiertes Interview mit dem Historiker Boubacar Barry sowie Fragmente eines von ihm veröffentlichten Textes zu den Hintergründen der Krise in Guinea. Barry verfolgt die Spuren der Krise zurück bis zur Diktatur Sékou Tourés, geht aber auch noch weiter zurück in die Geschichte des Landes. Er plädiert für die Einbeziehung von ECOWAS in das Krisenmanagement und für eine grundlegende Reform der Staatsstrukturen, um der kulturellen Divergenz der Bevölkerung Guineas gerecht zu werden.

**Schlagwörter:** Guinea; Staat; Gesellschaft; Armee