Political Pluralism And Electoral Democracy In Guinea-Bissau: What Are The Challenges?

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Date de mise en ligne : Thursday 16 October 2008
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16-17 October, 2008, Bissau, Guinea-Bissau

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) is pleased to announce the advanced research and policy dialogue which it is organising on the theme of "Political Pluralism and Electoral Democracy in Guinea-Bissau: What are the Challenges". The objective of the dialogue is to contribute to the debate on the challenges of building a more open and democratic society in post-conflict Guinea-Bissau. The dialogue is designed to follow up on the debates that took place in Bissau in 2007 during the first advanced research and policy dialogue organised in the country by CODESRIA on the theme of post-conflict economic, social, political and cultural renewal. At the end of that meeting, and as requested during the opening session of the first dialogue by the Head of State of Guinea-Bissau, a "Bissau Declaration" was adopted which called upon the government and civil society to develop initiatives aimed at institutionalising a permanent dialogue and space for mutual consultation among key political, economic and social actors and actresses in the country. The 2008 Bissau dialogue will be devoted to an examination of political pluralism and electoral democracy, topical themes that would be of direct relevance to various groups in the country in the light of the legislative elections scheduled to hold in November 2008. The significance of the elections for the government, political parties, civil society and the nation as a whole cannot be overstated in the light of the recent history of chronic instability, repeated violent conflict, and sustained socio-economic underdevelopment that have characterised the political economy of the country. The dialogue will bring together researchers, politicians, policy makers and representatives of social movements and civil society organisations.

The academic and policy debate on political pluralism and democratic transition is, of course, not a new one. It has, however, been resumed with vigour on account of the limitations that have been in evidence in the recent and on-going quest by various African countries to build systems of democratic governance. The adoption by many African countries of liberal democratic forms of governance in the early 1990s allowed for the establishment of political systems in which politicians organised as parties to compete to obtain a parliamentary majority and form a government on the basis of free and fair elections. In this endeavour, some countries are generally thought to have not only succeeded in organising fair elections but also to consolidate a credible electoral system for themselves. In those countries, elections would seem to have contributed to laying the foundations for a stable democracy. In other cases, despite organising elections, politicians have not been able to lay the foundations for democracy to thrive. Elections have tended to be marred by accusations of fraud, civil society has felt muzzled, the freedom of speech and freedom of the press have not been respected, etc. In a third group of countries, elections have not been held on a regular basis for many reasons (armed conflict, narrow calculation of political advantage by incumbents, lack of financial resources etc.), and when they are organised, they are often rigged with the justice system not able to exercise any independence, civil society repressed, and the political elite not displaying any degree of statesmanship. Besides, in these countries, instead of being the guarantor of democracy, the state rather serves as a tool in the hands of the ruling elite to exploit national wealth in its own interest, with politics becoming a zero-sum game.

The examples of countries where elections have failed to help deepen democratic governance and those where elections are either not held or, if held, turn out to be deeply flawed, illustrate that the relationships existing between political pluralism and electoral democracy are not linear in nature, and that democracy cannot be limited simply to the organisation of elections. In other words, elections are a necessary but not a sufficient condition to describe a regime or country as democratic. Political pluralism is only possible if the political system allows multiple and autonomous political actors to express different interests, views, and options in terms of the political organisation of society, which presupposes that the activities of these actors are legal. Regardless of whether they contribute or not to the consolidation of democracy, pluralistic elections can also be a critical if not a decisive factor in the resolution of severe political crises or armed conflicts as was the case in Angola (1992), Guinea-Bissau (1999), Burundi (2005).
and DRC (2006), to mention only some cases in Africa. This does not, however, necessarily mean that the peace process that emanates out of a pluralistic electoral arrangement is irreversible, especially when structural problems such as social justice, social inclusion and state legitimacy have not been fully addressed to the satisfaction of the generality of the populace. It must also be noted that elections can in some cases allow unpopular leaders to return and/or to be maintained in power. Indeed, the tendency to equate elections with democracy needs to be jettisoned in the context of historical and contemporary experiences where the former actually contribute to the weakening or even erosion of the latter. For a country like Guinea-Bissau, and indeed, for much of the rest of Africa, the challenge that is posed today is how to ensure that elections feed into and reinforce the democratic process.

In Guinea-Bissau, the history of political pluralism is a very recent one. Defined as a system in which multipartyism is recognised by law and political parties can compete periodically to gain control of political power, it became a reality two decades after the country's accession to independence in 1974. As a direct legacy of colonialism, the country had, in the past, experienced a highly centralised political system which, starting from the 1930s with Salazar's accession to power, turned into a fascist regime with all that it implies in terms of restrictions on political and civic freedom both in Portugal and in the colonized territories. Within the context of the nation-building agenda of the national liberation movement, the early years after political independence were also characterised by a concentration of political power in the hands of a single political party, the Parti africain pour l'indépendance de la Guinée et du Cap Vert (PAIGC), which, until the 1991 constitutional reform, was legally and constitutionally established as the single and legitimate representative of the Guinean people.

As in many other African countries during the course of the 1990s, single party rule was abandoned and political life was opened up to other actors in Guinea-Bissau in 1991. Article 4 of the 1984 Constitution which conferred the PAIGC with the status of the leading force in society was abolished. Many factors accounted for the demise of the single party system in Guinea-Bissau, among them deep-rooted domestic political discontents that have also been long-standing, and socio-economic changes that favoured increasingly autonomous actions by some groups of citizens and interests. The trajectory of political reform in Guinea-Bissau was similar to the process that occurred in other African countries: Changes to the constitution, creation of new parties, the adoption of a new electoral code, the establishment of a national electoral commission etc. Nevertheless, the Guinea-Bissau experience also had its own specificities which would be explored during the course of the 2008 dialogue. Pertinent questions to be addressed in this connection include the following: What were the social forces that animated and underwrote the process of political reform? What was the scope of the transition from an increasingly autocratic single-party regime to a pluralistic one? Can one consider that the process has been completed or are there still some remnants of a past marked by the single party system? What are the pillars on which the Guinean political system rests today? These are some of the questions which participants in the dialogue would be encouraged to address.

Liberal democracy and the pluralistic elections associated with it are viewed as the most appropriate way of choosing the representatives of the people. This presupposes that the representatives of the people effectively advocate the interests of those they are supposed to represent. Yet, reality seldom matches this theoretical representation in the majority of countries, including those of Africa. This being the case, it would be legitimate to invite dialogue participants to re-examine the agenda of democratic reform in Africa, taking into account all the historical factors that shape the context. Particular attention will be paid to the national liberation struggle and the ways its impact and legacies contributed to the mushrooming of pressures for democratic political reform. What is the relationship between the concept of revolutionary democracy developed by Amílcar Cabral and current practice of liberal democracy in Guinea-Bissau? To what extent are the two types of democracy (liberal and revolutionary) compatible? Pluralism by definition presupposes a diversity of ideas, projects, associations, etc. However, based strictly on the kinds of programmes which they promote, it does not seem that the political parties that emerged after the abolition of the single party system are different from one another in any fundamental way. This is especially so with regard to questions centring on the nature of the political system and the role of the parties in it, the economic model to be followed for national development, the social policies that might be pursued, the country's positioning on the international arena, the generation and consolidation of state legitimacy, Guinea's membership of regional and international organisations, etc. The dividing line among the political parties is not ideological but derives mostly from
the defence of particular interests. Given this reality, the question is how can one grasp the texts and sub-texts of the political debate in Guinea-Bissau - among the political parties themselves, between the parties and civil society, and among civil society organisations? This is very important in a context where political competition is highly conflictual even in the face of an apparent consensus that a pluralistic political system is in the country's best interest.

Ultimately, one of the issues which the Dialogue will have to address is the way in which, in its basic workings, the political system can turn power over to the people. It is a question that lies at the heart of Guinean politics and which may well determine the country's future. Answering the question will require a complete overhaul of an electoral system which has proved, thus far, incapable of producing governments that are prepared and able to address the roots of the social inequalities that have kept the majority of the populace excluded and in poverty.