

CONAKRY



2 Conakry

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Founded in colonial times, Conakry, the capital of Guinea, with a population today of over 1 million, extends more than 30 km from east to west. Conakry is an urban area that was characterised by rapidly accelerating growth in the second half of the 20th century, which had implications for the city's infrastructure and changing ways of life. From the outset, Conakry's development was the product of several superimposed historical strata: firstly, the planning and creation of facilities for the benefit of Europeans during the colonial phase (1880–1958); secondly, minimal state intervention associated with limitations on private initiatives during the regime of President Ahmed Sékou Touré (1958–1984); and, thirdly, the central role of private investment (both local and foreign) accompanied by the beginning of a development policy for the metropolitan area under President Lansana Conté (1984–2008) in partnership with international actors and organisations.

To examine the development of Conakry, which remained quite a small town for a long time, offers an opportunity to analyse how a historically recent urban presence can become firmly rooted in local structures and practices.

For many years, Conakry remained a kind of museum of colonial architecture and urbanism. The influence of Touré's regime on the city was relatively limited. There are some symbolic buildings that are his legacy, such as the vast People's Palace, an urban freeway and a stadium. However, it is since the 1980s that the city experienced accelerated change – for better and for worse. Conakry is now endowed with elements seen as characteristic of 'modernity'. The state and its strategic partners, and especially private investors, have constructed an increasing number of high-rise buildings, widened the main arteries and installed crossroads.

This chapter describes Conakry's development over more than a century, and demonstrates how a city founded from nothing progressively acquired, from the era of colonisation to the present, the symbols of a metropolis in a context of rigid economic constraints and political autocracy.

From colonial urban planning to recent developments

'White city', 'black villages' during colonial times

Travellers to Conakry, the capital of what was formerly known as French Guinea, and the first port of call along the coast after Dakar, inevitably struck a note of admiration describing the town:

As much as Dakar is disappointing,...Conakry, brand new, with its geometric arterial streets lined with tall and thick mango trees that

submerge the city with their green foliage, with its corniche facing the ocean, its leaden sun typical of tropical climates, is generally thought of as a luxurious, well-to-do and very attractive little capital.

(Richard-Molard 1961: 11)¹

How exactly did Conakry develop into a dynamic and sprawling city since its colonial establishment in 1885? How is it lived in and perceived by its inhabitants? Which elements have been preserved as legacies and how has it developed in the course of the past decades?

Conakry is situated in a region with little early experience of urbanisation, where large rural villages coexisted with coastal ports of call, the vestiges of slavery along the '*rivières du Sud*' (coasts of the south). Although urban traditions were limited in the area of Conakry, other models existed in the hinterland. There were the political and religious capitals of the theocratic state of Fouta-Djalón, Timbo and Fougoumba, both with small populations, and especially the prestigious city of Kankan, situated further away and for a long time known as the largest city of Guinea (Humblot 1921). It is difficult to determine what role earlier urban experiences played for the newcomers to Conakry. These may have determined a certain relationship in terms of space, or moulded their expectations of the regulatory authorities in charge of the city and especially the types of social and political organisations within the community (e.g. those in charge of conflict management and other civic services). For new city dwellers either arriving alone or in a group, figures of authority long remained the kinship group, regional structures and neighbourhood notables, rather than the coloniser. As a result, former migrants from Sierra Leone, some of whom arrived in Conakry as early as the 1880s, continued to consult community figures in order to manage their conflicts.

The city was built in a defensive geographic setting which allowed for the construction of a harbour. The initial site was the Tumbo Peninsula (about 5 by 3 km), stretching into the interior. Urban development of the site was restricted, as it could only go in one direction.

The period of colonial conquest and the implementation of the first town-planning project were decisive for Conakry. Planning decisions made at the time of its foundation remain visible in the old city centre and have influenced subsequent developments. They have given concrete expression to various aspects of French colonial urban policy: the spatial distribution of populations, the hierarchical organisation of neighbourhoods, the role assigned to nature, the architectural styles and even the service infrastructures and policy concerning monuments.

This form of urban planning, combining colonial dominance and Western urban conceptions, is well known today. Conakry constitutes a kind of archetype. The colonisers considered the city, created from nothing, as a *tabula rasa* on which they could imprint their mark. The separation of populations, which became widespread in the colonies at the beginning of the 20th century, occurred in Conakry through the division of its urban space, first into two zones (in 1901) and then three (1905).

These zones were delineated according to the purchasing power of the inhabitants, measured mainly in terms of real-estate investment capacity (Goerg 1997: Chapters 19 and 20). The use of land ownership as a criterion to distinguish urban dwellers was characteristic of the French system. It emphasised the disparity between ‘individual property’ on the one hand (i.e. land titles and registration) and a ‘licence to reside’ (*‘permis d’habiter’*) on the other, or in other words, an ambiguous right to property ownership. This French land-ownership policy underlay the spatial dualism present in Conakry, as in many colonial cities. It also translated into administrative duality, with the municipality assuming administrative responsibility for the whole city, but the chieftainships concerned only with the neighbourhoods inhabited by the colonised.

The colonisers’ definition of the ‘city’ was the European administrative, commercial and residential sections (i.e. the ‘white city’); the African villages and neighbourhoods were excluded from that mental representation. This dualism encompassed all aspects of urban life: a privileged few had access to private urban installations and services (water supply, sewers, the electrical network, refuse collection), while the large majority made do with collective installations (public drinking fountains, public latrines). This disparity also applied to the streets – tarred roads on the one hand, dirt roads on the other. Given the peninsular location of Conakry, urban development progressed from the west (the coastline) to the east, whereas the northern and southern areas were used for the construction of sewers. The wastewater drainage network discharged directly into the sea and was progressively completed as the city grew, thereby benefiting the European zone. Aesthetic initiatives, such as parks and monuments, were also concentrated in the European area (Goerg 1996).

For the entire period between the two World Wars, the city’s expansion was restricted to the peninsula, and it formed a municipal area of about 3 km². Granted official status in 1901, the suburbs consisted of a few villages. A 1943 census indicated the following, underestimated, figures: 21 217 inhabitants for the city, 5 586 for the suburbs (ANG, 2D 321: 1943).

Two contrasting testimonies about Conakry from the beginning of the 1950s evoke the city in the post-war period. The first proved far from being an accurate prediction of how Conakry would develop:

Konakry...has kept and will no doubt for a long time keep its character of an old colonial city: small villas with wide verandas in the middle of thick groves of exotic vegetation, set out along avenues that are planted with mango and coconut trees. The whole conjures up an image of a distant island redolent of the ambiance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The bush starts at a distance of 15 km from the city. (Houis 1953: 89)²

A view that contrasted with this nostalgic image was given by Governor Roland Pré, whose prospective vision for the city was sceptical of the official census figures:

The built-up area encroaches increasingly upon the peninsula of Kaloum where villages increasingly form one with the Municipality (*‘Commune Mixte’*)...New huts are being built everywhere in the immediate vicinity

of Conakry...The city of Conakry is currently spreading its tentacles into the peninsula of Kaloum around three main roads on which the new suburbs and villages have naturally converged: the road to the north, the road to the south and the railway line of the *Chemin de Fer Conakry-Niger*. (Pré 1951: 30, 245)³

The situation in Conakry changed from 1946 onwards because of accelerated population growth and the construction of new facilities (e.g. schools and hospitals) undertaken under the aegis of the Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development. Architect Rémy Le Caisne's ambitious urban planning project in 1948 incorporated the city's hinterland and envisioned the reorganisation of basic facilities over a large area of the city.⁴ It involved moving the railway station, whose size obstructed buildings in the city centre and whose activities created a variety of problems. The construction of new railway lines to enable the export of bauxite in the late 1950s accentuated these problems. The project also involved the creation of a new administrative area named Taïnakry. Cost, practical difficulties and Guinea's independence in 1958 prevented the plan from being carried out, despite the city council's wish, expressed in 1949, urgently to pursue the development and creation of the City of Taïnakry, the indispensable first stage for any urban planning within Conakry.

Administrators in the post-war years also took into account the need for housing among a specific category of Africans, the 'educated natives' (known as the *'évolués'*), who were generally civil servants. In the 1950s, the *Société Immobilière de Guinée* built for them a few housing estates, such as the houses at Coléah. Houses appeared everywhere, testimony to the capital's pull among the rural population. Uncertainties over the status of land – namely, collective property as opposed to individual ownership – created the ingredients for the current imbroglio: unscrupulous persons sold the same plots to several buyers; local authorities misused public funds; and numerous individuals claimed possession of the same properties. In the context of the struggle for independence, the colonisers chose to remain vague and maintained the juxtaposition of various land-tenure systems. Administrative or former village leaders, notables and those with a command of legal mechanisms took advantage of this confusion to assert their power as purveyors of land titles or redistributors of plots in order to claim land taxes and build up their own private land estates. Land in the suburbs became a precious resource with political and economic stakes. These malpractices were initially restricted to the areas closest to the centre, but progressively spread to all of the outlying areas.

In addition, construction developed and made use of new building materials (concrete) and techniques (air conditioning). Architects took advantage of the freedom offered by the colonial city to redesign public buildings and public spaces. Marcel Lods, Le Caisne's partner, and consulting engineer Vladimir Bodiatsky were responsible for the new marketplace in Conakry's Niger Square. In-depth preliminary work on both a technical and sociological level preceded its construction.⁵ The new buildings celebrated verticality as a marker of modernity, unlike earlier constructions, which

used this symbol of power more discreetly (the relatively unpretentious governor's palace stood raised by only a few steps, for example). *La Paternelle*, a 10-storey building, and the *Jumelles*, two towers intended to house civil servants in the city centre at Boulbinet, attest to the new taste for the vertical. Nonetheless, when Guinea acquired independence, modernist constructions remained few and far between in an urban space that was still marked by one-storey houses.

The city also expanded beyond the old centre. Although the bridge connecting the peninsula of Tumbo to the continent was replaced by an embankment in the mid-1950s, the roads remained poorly developed except for the north and south corniches and the Leprince Road, the main east-west road stretching from the far end of Tumbo into the interior (see Figure 2.1).

Urban policy after independence

Anyone visiting Conakry today encounters a city characterised both by large construction sites, private ones in particular, and a monotonous urban landscape.

The 50 years since Guinea voted 'no' in the September 1958 referendum on its membership of the French Community can be divided – both on a politico-economic and an urban level – into two roughly equal periods: Sékou Touré's dictatorship (1958–1984) and Lansana's autocratic regime (1984–2008). After limited governmental intervention and restricted private initiative under Touré (the period called the First Republic), whose regime was characterised by the absence of an urban policy, came an explosion of economic liberalism and extensive private, local and international investment. New urbanisation plans in 1963, 1989 and 1997, which were to have a significant impact on the city, were supposed to accompany urban growth. In the past 10 years, however, major development works have addressed the needs of an expanding metropolis that is inhabited today by 1.5 million people and stretches over more than 30 km. These have included the building of transversal roads linking the two corniches (T1 and T4), the creation of a main freeway leaving the city centre, the extension and widening of old roads and the construction of intersections.⁶

Touré, who initially followed an anti-urban agenda, was generally non-interventionist. He destroyed little and constructed on a modest scale. For example, he kept the old governor's palace (renamed the presidential palace) as his residence and scarcely modified its appearance. Nevertheless, he endowed the city with some emblematic buildings, notably the People's Palace, constructed by the Chinese and completed in 1965, which emerged as a symbol of the new regime (Figure 2.2). This monumental edifice was built at the far end of the old city centre in an area that was built up in the 1950s but which remained unoccupied. The People's Palace was situated in a vast open space that served as a gathering place. Later the *Jardins du 2 Octobre* were laid out in this space – the name commemorates the date of proclamation of independence. In the same location, the authorities placed a stela glorifying the people's resistance to the Portuguese aggression of November 1970 (Figure 2.3). The People's Palace remains today a gathering place for the city and the country. It is used for cultural events – Miriam Makeba performed there during Touré's rule – and,

more recently, for political demonstrations and conferences. The palace, built as a testimony to Touré's authoritarian regime and the citizens' participation in it, now houses the National Assembly, created under the 1990 constitution. Negotiations between trade unionists and the state took place there during the 2006 and 2007 demonstrations. The Chinese renovated the palace and its gardens in 2008 for the 50th anniversary celebrations of independence.

Other emblematic buildings of Touré's presidency include the former Polytechnic Institute, later the university, constructed by the Soviets⁷ in 1962, and the nearby stadium at Donka (the *Stade du 28 Septembre*⁸ – the date of the referendum).

Yet another noteworthy construction was the Palace of Nations and villas constructed in anticipation of an Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit that never took place owing to Touré's death. Badly damaged during a mutiny in 1996, the Palace of Nations long constituted a visible eyesore within the city. It was reconstructed in 2008 as an administrative building. Funded and designed by Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the large Fayçal Mosque in the suburb of Donka is another example of a building that dates from the First Republic, although the first stone was laid only in 1983.

After 1984, private construction flourished, testified by, for example, the buildings of businessman and former Prime Minister Sydia Touré. However, the government invested little in public properties except for military barracks. In place of public investment in construction, President Lansana Conté established procedures that facilitated property investments on his own behalf and on those of his entourage. The state authorised the construction of large complexes, often on state land, which were let to international companies for offices and to expatriates for housing. The best example is the complex belonging to the head of state built on the site of the former railway compound demolished around 1989. It consists of five- and six-storey buildings bearing the names of Guinean cities (Mamou, Labé, etc.). Situated in the old city centre, these properties partly explain why the administrative centre has remained in Kaloum (the current name of the former city centre, previously called Tumbo), obstructing administrative relocation towards the plateau of Koloma (a geographically central area made up of state land reserves).

Regimes also make their mark, or not, as the case may be, on urban space through toponymy and cultural politics with respect to monuments. Under Conté's dictatorship, the ostentatious expression of power remained limited in Conakry in everyday life.⁹ An exception is the colonial stela dedicated to the soldiers of both World Wars, which Conté replaced with a very sober nationalist monument bearing the laconic inscription 'The Republic of Guinea to all its martyrs'. Recently, in the context of urban development and in preparation for the 50th year of independence, Prime Minister Lansana Kouyaté (in office March 2007–May 2008) instigated a controversial sculpture programme. This cannot, however, be regarded as a political project, but instead an initiative on the part of an isolated group. It bears little relation to the initiatives carried out in Bamako, for example, under the aegis of the president and historian, Alpha Konaré (Arnoldi 2007).

Similarly, the state made little use of toponymy. The colonisers adopted the American system of designating streets by numbers. The city was constructed on a grid of 14 avenues that were numbered starting from the western end of the peninsula, and 12 boulevards that ran roughly north-south. Certain main roads only, such as the *Boulevard du Commerce* (3rd Boulevard) and the *Avenue du Gouvernement* (6th Avenue), were given specific names. Efforts by the colonisers to impose street names of French ‘heroes’ failed. Instead, inhabitants commonly located a home according to a landmark building or the area of a well-known figure, and still do so today. Other colonial names included the corniches, the *Route du Niger* (the main road from the city centre to the interior of the country used by caravans from Upper Guinea) and the *Route Leprince* (named after a colonial engineer).

After independence, the *Avenue du Gouvernement* became *Avenue de la République*, 4th Avenue became *Avenue William Tubman* (president of Liberia, 1944–1971) and the only freeway was named after Fidel Castro. The *Hôtel de France* became the *Hôtel de l’Indépendance* and the Mangin Camp, named after the inventor of the *Force Noire* (black African troops employed in the French army), became Almamy Samory Camp. Later, the Camayenne police camp was called Boiro Camp, synonymous with imprisonment and death for Guineans. Some educational institutions also acquired names. For example, the Polytechnic Institute was named in honour of Abdel Gamel Nasser and a school was baptised Kwame Nkrumah, after Ghana’s prime minister/president, and a well-known supporter of Guinea, who sought refuge there after the *coup d’état* in 1966.

The World Bank instigated a naming operation for the city between 1995 and 1997 in the five *communes* (municipalities) of Conakry, expecting that the authorities would later choose names (Figure 2.4). This bureaucratic procedure was rather impractical: each *commune* was given an abbreviation (KA = Kaloum; DI = Dixinn, etc.) and each street was allocated a number according to geographical orientation (e.g. KA.024).¹⁰ The inhabitants were clearly unable to use such a system. As a result, following past tradition, only a few main roads were given names, most significantly the *Boulevard Diallo Telli* (formerly 8th Boulevard), named after the former representative of Guinea to the UN and a minister of Sékou Touré, who was sentenced to the ‘black diet’ (death by deprivation of water and food) in 1977.

New buildings and new forms of social hierarchy

The history of Guinea, both during and after the dictatorship of Sékou Touré, left little opportunity for ‘donors’ to have an influence. Only a few international institutions are present – the United Nations Development Programme, the Islamic Bank and some embassies. Constructed in a so-called international style without much originality, their buildings hardly make a mark on the urban landscape.

Through segregation and secession, minorities privileged by status or money have always maintained a separate place in Conakry’s urban space. The parameters that govern their relationship to the city have changed over the decades, but their concerns have remained the same: to ensure mental comfort by seeking to live with

those of similar origins or those sharing the same standard of living, and to live in an environment offering the best facilities available. Today, their elite housing estates originate from local and foreign government initiatives, as Guinea does not have a sufficiently large group of affluent people to justify financially the building of a 'gated community'. In this context, the affluent construct their own protected space within their own compounds, which take the shape of small forts behind high walls covered by barbed wire and protected by metal gates. Guards are the norm, and are now armed. Dogs, previously emblematic of efforts by the Europeans to keep intruders at bay, watch over the homes of the rich, irrespective of their identity.

Over time, the imperative of security has played an increasingly significant role. Collective buildings have taken the place of isolated villas; estates surrounded by high walls have replaced open neighbourhoods. The detached houses built for colonial civil servants, now destroyed, have given way to the Bellevue Ministerial Villas of Independent Guinea (a housing estate designed in the 1950s). The buildings constructed by Moroccan workers for the envisaged 1984 OAU summit have been superseded by the Moussoudougou residential estate (in Lansébounyi), reserved for the French, but let to the Guinean state. Lastly, the huge compound belonging to the American Embassy was completed in 2008.

Each of these forms generate islands of urban facilities, with generators, water tanks and exclusive leisure facilities (pools, tennis courts, etc.). They also represent secure enclaves in the event of political uncertainty. The security motive is heightened by fear of unrest and urban demonstrations. These enclosed units reflect a siege mentality and provide measures for rapid evacuation.

The huge contrasts in living standards, the presence of all kinds of drug trafficking networks, together with the limited prospects for most young people, are major factors contributing to increased crime rates, and particularly armed criminal activities in the capital. Other causal factors of crime seem rather secondary, despite efforts of the city authorities to highlight them as the primary causes. The authorities thus decided in August 2008 to do a survey of all the drinking establishments and nightclubs in Conakry, with the aim of fighting insecurity, which has become a growing scourge in this city of about 1.5 to 2 million inhabitants.

Housing policies and living standards

The colonisers made little effort to provide housing for Africans, except for specific categories, such as policemen, railwaymen and, in the 1950s, employees of the administration. The independent state adopted the same housing policy and merely responded to the needs of some civil servants, particularly teachers. Consequently, housing is dominated by individual construction and by the private sector, which uses housing as an investment.

This variety of housing initiatives, in conjunction with increasingly difficult access to land and the absence of effective urban planning, apart from a small number of well-planned housing operations, largely explains the heterogeneous nature of Conakry's

neighbourhoods. The inhabitants, old and new city-dwellers alike, settle where cheaper space is available, contributing to the city's expansion. As a result, aside from the wealthy enclaves, socially homogeneous neighbourhoods are rare. The multiform juxtaposition of houses, many of them built piecemeal, reflects both the different levels of prosperity and the changing prosperity of individual owners. Dilapidated houses stand adjacent to walled villas constructed in the most diverse styles – neoclassical with colonnades and porticos, Italianate and Arabic. These villas, equipped with their own generators and drinking wells, emerge in an environment that often lacks collective urban facilities and appear to be in a world unto their own. They can be seen as a form of secession, yet they represent a tiny portion of the constructions in the city. Most houses are modest and often lack basic facilities. Collective modes of organisation sometimes make it possible to deal with shortages in the neighbourhood (e.g. through voluntary and self-financed connection to water or electricity networks, types of surveillance, refuse collection and even road maintenance).

Unlike in the countryside, where 93.5% of Guineans are estimated to be home owners, the urban population is principally made up of tenants, even if the goal of every adult is to be the owner of a house (see Table 2.1).

The data shown in Table 2.1 has not been updated. Nonetheless, it shows the type of housing that urban Guineans enjoy. Renting varies from a single room in the courtyard of a family concession with communal use of the bathrooms, to a small flat with individual facilities, or an apartment of varying social standing in residential buildings that have flourished since the 1990s.

The diversity of housing in terms of comfort and standards of living is also reflected in the different levels of access to facilities. As is commonly seen elsewhere, the Guinean cities in general and Conakry in particular enjoy higher living standards than the countryside. These include access to electricity, drinking water and bathroom facilities. Surveys on sanitary conditions provide general information about facilities, but often do not specify the situation in the capital. Such surveys reveal that cities have greater access to drinking water (68% of urban-dwellers have access to a tap, as opposed to 3% of the rural population); 64% are connected to electricity, as opposed to 3% of the rural population. However, there are frequent power cuts and high connection and rental prices for such facilities (EDSG III 2005).

Like all large cities, Conakry produces a considerable amount of waste, the collection and disposal of which are increasingly problematic. There is no central collection

Table 2.1 Home ownership in Conakry and other Guinean cities

	Conakry (%)	Cities in general (%)
Private owners	23.0	39.3
Tenants	54.3	41.9
State-owned (civil servants)	3.6	5.2
Other	19.1	13.6

Source: RGPH 1983: 171

system in place, despite international incentives. NGOs have been created to deal with these issues and small groups of city inhabitants help keep their neighbourhoods clean. The government initiates regular clean-up campaigns and encourages inhabitants to act, but according to an official report, 'almost all households refuse to pay [companies] for refuse collection and tip their bins out into the gutters or the street as soon as it starts to rain.'¹¹

The Public Waste Transport Department that falls under the Governorate (the body which supervises the five *communes*) estimates that Conakry produces 800 tonnes of waste per day. Existing installations are inadequate and incapable of dealing with this. Therefore, hygienic conditions in the city leave much to be desired and heaps of waste accumulate at intersections for the greater pleasure of chickens and sheep.

In short, even though the general living standards in Conakry are higher than those in the Guinean countryside, the inhabitants of the capital still suffer from difficult conditions, in addition to the fatigue associated with commuting to work. The capital represents a place of opportunities, but also one of striking contrasts.

Conakry, an ethnically diverse city

Indigenous inhabitants and migrants

The population of Conakry is heterogeneous, although certain large groups dominate. When the French settled there in 1885, the Peninsula of Tumbo consisted of two sparsely populated villages, Conakry and Boulbinet, in the far west; Tumbo, on the eastern tip, appeared later.¹²

The Baga, considered to constitute the demographic foundation of the city, and the Susu were allied peoples that made up the city's initial population. The product of successive migrations themselves, these populations came from the interior under pressure from political unrest in Fouta-Djalon involving Peul movements and the establishment of a theocratic state at the beginning of the 18th century. According to oral traditions and toponymy, the first villages on the coastal region are said to be of the Baga, who lived increasingly under the political and cultural control of the Susu, who are related to the Mande. The villages of Conakry and Boulbinet are said to have been founded in the 18th century and in the 1860s, respectively, by the Soumah and Bangoura lineages.

Peul migrants joined these peoples. The Peul were present in the village of Tumbo from the 19th century onwards and mostly settled in the mainland (and not the peninsula), where they herded their flocks. This initial nucleus was reinforced in 1896 after France subjected the theocratic State of Fouta-Djalon and compelled the dignitaries, with their servants and family members, to reside in the suburbs of Conakry. Other migrants from Fouta-Djalon progressively followed in search of work and brought about considerable internal diversification.¹³

In quantitative terms, the Susu and Baga formed the main demographic basis. During the colonial period, certain estimates based on 'race', as it was understood

then, provide approximate information. One source in 1929 indicates that there were 3 613 Susu and Baga (62%) and 1 383 Peul (24%) out of a total population of 5 811 inhabitants (ANG, 1D 62: 1929). However, in 1936, out of 12 492 inhabitants, it is said that there were 3 576 Baga (32%), 4 693 Susu (42%) and only 799 Peul (7%).¹⁴ Despite the uncertain figures and ethnic categorisation procedures, the last figure tends to confirm that the Peul were more present in the suburbs, particularly in Dixinn-Foulah, a Peul village. At the beginning of the 1950s, the proportions are said to have been generally the same as in 1929, that is, 62% Susu and Baga and 18% Peul. The rest of the population was made up of groups that came from more distant areas (Dollfus 1952: 16).

In the context of the ethnicisation of politics in Guinea, initiated by the French before independence but subsequently pursued – the paroxysm being the so-called Peul plot in 1976 – evaluating the population per group became contentious. The data no longer appear in official statistics, but the ethnic dimension plays a fundamental role not only in Guinean politics, but also in urban topography with populations of the same origin concentrated in specific neighbourhoods.

The colonisers recruited local intermediaries (canton, village and area chiefs) from the Baga/Susu and Peul groups in order to manage and control urban inhabitants (Goerg 2007). From the 1880s onwards, the economic dynamism and central position of Conakry within the colonial system attracted migrants who came to offer their skills. They joined the population of Conakry and reinforced its cosmopolitan image. The Senegalese worked as office clerks in the administration or as artisans (blacksmiths and masons) and were accompanied by Lebu or Wolof fishermen (Goerg 1990). Sierra Leoneans with the same socio-professional traits also settled in Conakry (Goerg 2001, 2009). According to one source: ‘Their huts are emerging everywhere as if by magic. They are tailors, cobblers, blacksmiths, carpenters, painters, masons, shop employees, fishermen and cooks. The women are retailers and laundresses’ (Raimbault 1891: 139).¹⁵

These migrant people were mainly Creoles (‘Krio’), but also Temne, Mende or Kru, who were known for their skills as sailors and dockers.¹⁶ These demographic and sociological minorities played an important role in the identity of early Conakry, but were subsequently increasingly marginalised. Some of these early migrants settled in Conakry, preserving their own particular cultural characteristics, especially those concerning religion. The Temple of the Sierra Leoneans and the so-called Senegalese Mosque are examples of elements that marked Conakry’s urban landscape.

At the same time, migrants from distant regions of Guinea came to look for work in the colonial capital. Initially this was a temporary migration of men, very often the by-product of forced labour on rail and roadwork construction and, from the 1930s onwards, in banana plantations. A colonial expression, the *forestiers*, described migrants who originally came from the forest regions (Kpelle, Kissi, Loma, etc.). The city also attracted Malinke from Upper Guinea.

The increasing diversity of Conakry’s population gradually disrupted the initial division of the city into roughly two types of neighbourhoods, distinctive in terms of

population and history. In the administrative quadripartition of the African areas of the city, the neighbourhoods of the Centre (formerly Almamy, the heart of the pre-colonial village of Conakry) and Boulbinet, both close to the white city, had initially been populated by the Susu, whereas Hôpital and Timénétaye became the home for recent migrants, like the eponymous Temne. Other neighbourhoods existed on a smaller scale alongside these colonial divisions and denominations. They included the Manquepas, Sandervalia and Coronthie neighbourhoods, whose place names provide information about the city's history.

Since independence, heterogeneity has characterised the population of Conakry, particularly given its attraction for all of West Africa. Contemporary migratory movements have not modified the general composition. The national political context has, however, exacerbated rivalries. Without wishing to oversimplify, one can note that under Sékou Touré (of Malinke origin) and Lansana Conté (of Susu origin) the Peul have often been singled out for discrimination.¹⁷ The national authorities increasingly exploit the ethnic dimension of Guinean politics in their refusal to allow any real democratisation. This often translates into specific repressive actions in Conakry against members of the opposition, who are often of Fouta-Djalón origins. In this context, urban decisions at times have concealed forms of political repression. For instance, the construction of a new administrative quarter in the geographical centre of the town on the Koloma plateau (based on the 1948 colonial plan of Taïnakry) served as a pretext to counter political opposition in a neighbourhood primarily inhabited by Peul. And the government razed the suburban neighbourhood of Kaporo-Rail to the ground in March 1998, leading to the expulsion without warning of more than 100 000 people. A number of people held legal title to land there, on which constructions ranged from grand brick-built villas to shanty towns. Ten years later, this land is still empty except for a few, such as the head office of Guinean Radio and Television and the American Embassy, which occupies a vast, enclosed, secured space. Similarly, in February to April 2006, during the first large-scale strikes since independence, the most serious unrest took place in Peul-populated areas. In everyday parlance, these areas – Hamdallaye, Bambeto and Koloma – were considered an 'axis of evil'. Kaloum, however, an area mostly inhabited by the Susu (supporters of the ruling Party for Unity and Progress) remained calmer. The calm is easy to enforce, however, by blocking the isthmus with tanks to prevent demonstrators from gaining access to the old centre of Kaloum. Therefore, the main areas of demonstration are restricted to the suburbs along the main roads, particularly along the freeway.

Dynamics of population growth

Like other cities founded during the 19th-century colonial period, Conakry initially experienced rapid growth, which then slowed between the two World Wars, only to be followed by an upsurge at the end of the 1930s and a further acceleration after World War II. From only a few hundred in the 1880s, the population grew to 10 000 towards the end of World War I and 50 000 by the end of World War II. According to the 1983 census, the population exceeded 700 000¹⁸ and was 1.1 million

according to the 1996 census. According to controversial estimates, the current total is said to be between 1.5 and 2 million inhabitants. Guinea is one of those African countries characterised by moderate urbanisation of 30–40%. However, Conakry alone accounts for about 50% of the country's city dwellers and about 18% of the total population. This 'macrocephaly' is a frequent legacy of French colonisation, a trend that was not rectified after independence. Kankan, the second largest city of Guinea, no longer represents a rival to the capital, with its estimated population of just 250 000 (up from 55 000 in 1983 and 100 000 in 1996). Kankan is characterised by a notorious lack of services, in particular electricity (EDSG 1992, 1999, 2005; RGPB 1983, 1996; Bidou & Toure 2002).

Conakry's population growth can be explained by classic factors – the accumulation of administrative, economic and cultural functions. As the country's capital and only sizeable international harbour (an outlet for bauxite exports), Conakry remains the location of rare substitution industries, and has the country's main educational institutions, despite long-standing efforts at decentralisation. As is the case in other countries, Guinea's medium-sized cities are currently experiencing accelerated growth, although a significant percentage of the rural exodus still benefits Conakry.

Rapid population growth from the 1950s onwards went hand in hand with considerable urban expansion, which has modified the distribution of the city's population. At independence, the city and its suburbs had about 70 000 inhabitants,¹⁹ two-thirds of whom lived within the city limits. In 1996, however, out of a total urban population of 1.1 million, the old city centre, now called the Commune of Kaloum, had only 74 327 inhabitants (7%), with the rest of the population divided among the four other communes, namely Dixinn (147 500), Matam (157 177), Ratoma (325 379) and Matoto (389 692). Therefore, although Kaloum has retained the city's main functions of 'command' (i.e. ministries, embassies, the head offices of international companies), its restricted location is undergoing rapid changes.

Health facilities and schools in Conakry

Like the demographic figures mentioned above, socio-economic statistics on Guinea are uncertain and must be considered as rough estimates. The same uncertainty applies to statistics relating to the colonial period and the sociological research conducted in the 1950s on consumption, budgets and nutrition. In collaboration with Guinean ministries, international institutions regularly conduct surveys, which constitute sources of information. The most recent census was in 1996²⁰ and there are partial thematic data, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (EDSG) of 1992, 1999 and 2005. However, most of the available statistical data do not provide details about the specific situation in Conakry. Undoubtedly, however, the capital enjoys the most favourable indicators in the country, since it benefits from the most developed hospital, educational and cultural infrastructures, as well as a concentration of monetary revenue.

Social disparities are nevertheless marked and define Conakry's urban space, as in all African cities. SUVs and Hollywood-style villas (in the words of one

Guinean commentator) on the outskirts of Lambanyi and Sonfonia testify to the ostentatious opulence of a minority with close connections to the state (political and administrative officials, diamond dealers and drug traffickers). At the other end of the scale, much of the capital is characterised by shacks lacking in comfort and suburbs without infrastructure.

Despite Conakry's status as a large, modern capital benefiting from a considerable portion of Guinea's infrastructure investment, some of its public facilities are in a lamentable condition. A case in point is the Donka University Hospital, whose services are the target of severe criticisms (Kourouma 2005).²¹

In terms of demographic indicators, a gap exists between Conakry and the rest of the country. Fertility rates (number of children per woman) at the beginning of the 21st century are as follows:

- 5.7 (Guinea)
- 4.4 (cities)
- 6.3 (countryside)
- 4.1 (Conakry)
- 7.4 (Kankan)

The low urban indicator reflects the capital's weight in the urban population: 4.1 children per woman in Conakry, which is a low fertility rate for Africa, as opposed to 7.4 in Kankan (EDSG II 1999; EDSG III 2005). This can be explained by very young women's lower fertility rate: 16% of women in Conakry aged between 15 and 19 have been pregnant, as opposed to 41% in Kankan and 26% in Guinea as a whole. This rate is linked to the increased median age of the first union (25–49-year-olds): 17.9 years of age in Conakry in 1999 and 19.9 in 2005 (as opposed to 16.4 and 16.2, respectively, for Guinea). Higher living standards and better education for women also explain decreasing fertility rates in the capital.²² This downward trend in the number of children per woman is not recent and the gap between rural and urban behaviour is widening, even if family-planning practices in fact only concern a tiny minority of Conakry's population – essentially the educated (Keita 1999).²³ Large households nonetheless exist in the capital as families often lodge relatives and friends.

Some health-related indicators also confirm the gap between Conakry and the rest of Guinea. The infant mortality rate is lower in Conakry than elsewhere: 60 per 1 000, as opposed to 82 per 1 000 in the cities and 118 per 1 000 in the countryside (Guinean average rate: 91 per 1 000). Children's chance of survival to the age of five is also far better in the capital: the infant-juvenile mortality rate is 92 per 1 000 in the capital as opposed to 133 per 1 000 in the cities and 204 per 1 000 in the countryside (Guinean average rate: 163 per 1 000). This may seem surprising, since vaccination coverage among children in Conakry is not markedly better than in other regions of Guinea. Compared with an average of 37% in the country, extended vaccination programme coverage rate of 40% applies to Conakry and the other cities. Access to dispensaries, the quality of water and nutritional diversity also play a significant role. With the exception of AIDS, no figures for other pathologies are available for Conakry. The

prevalence of AIDS, however, is generally higher in the cities and particularly in the capital. Compared with the national average of 2.8%, Conakry's AIDS prevalence rate rises to 5%, with the military worst affected at 9.4% (USAID 2007).

The above data demonstrate that although Conakry is generally a place of better opportunities and longer life expectancy, the capital is also a refuge for a so-called high-risk population.

Against a backdrop of generally low indicators, schooling data are also testimony to the fact that the capital enjoys higher standards. Whereas the gross intake ratio (GIR)²⁴ was 40% for Guinea, it was 71% in Conakry (1998 figures). The net intake rate (NIR)²⁵ was, however, significantly lower: 17.4% for the whole country compared to 35% in Conakry for boys and girls. This is due to the fact that children are often sent at a late age to overcrowded schools. Therefore, even from the beginning of junior school, the large majority of children in Conakry do not have access to education. A variety of difficulties plague the educational system: the high number of pupils per class (the ratio in Conakry is 70 pupils to one teacher in public education and 31 per teacher in private education); shortcomings in teacher training in a country where the teaching profession is not held in high esteem; and high numbers of students who repeat grades. Few pupils, and in particular very few girls, reach secondary education and even fewer enter higher education. Progress in schooling is not necessarily linear. Recent studies reveal a de-schooling phenomenon linked to an increase in transport costs (which are a deterrent for parents), a reduction of adults' resources and the poor quality of public education. The result is a high illiteracy rate in Guinea, which is higher among women and increases with age. The illiteracy rate ranges from 53.4% (age group 10–14) to 91.4% (65-year-olds and above). However, no figures are available for the capital.

The low literacy rate is a fundamental factor for understanding how politics functions in Guinea. Although the press is relatively free, it is only accessible to a tiny minority. Airways have only been open to private radio stations since 2006 and the state still monopolises television. Newspaper circulation is limited to the cities, but even in Conakry, newspapers are only available in Kaloum and a few other places. Modern media are not widely accessible, as internet cafés are poorly distributed and expensive, and cable networks only accessible to the most affluent.

Sites of power and counter-power: Changes in the political geography

During the period of colonisation, Conakry had a municipality, which was introduced in 1904 and controlled by the administration until 1956. Its function was to run the city with an autonomous budget financed by local taxes. The municipality made decisions regarding the city's healthcare, urban facilities and road maintenance, oversaw economic activities and was responsible for the police.

Since the struggle for independence, the capital city has been at the centre of the country's political stakes. Whoever controls the city has power over the whole

country. Consequently, the first mayor, elected by direct suffrage in autumn 1956, was Sékou Touré, later to become president. Running the capital administratively and symbolically guarantees access to the control of the country. After independence in 1958, the government redefined administratively the municipality of Conakry to encompass the former suburbs, whose villages became urban neighbourhoods. The municipality's existence quickly became theoretical as the function of mayor fell away at the end of 1959 to the benefit of the governor of the Administrative Region of Conakry, a non-elected office. The overlap between administrative and partisan divisions increasingly marked the city's political structure. In 1963, the administrative circumscriptions of Conakry 1 and 2 were joined to two federations of the ruling Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG). In 1979, three *communes populaires de plein exercice* (CPPE) were created to correspond to three federations of the PDG. With the military's assumption of power in 1984 and the advent of the Second Republic, the terms gradually changed, recalibrated to reflect changing international catchwords. The three CPPE were turned into three 'prefectures'. Then, under the guise of decentralisation and a discourse on good governance, the state created in 1991 five *communes de plein exercice* (an expression borrowed from the colonial era). These communes were henceforth called Kaloum (the former city centre) and Dixinn, Matam, Ratoma and Matoto in the suburbs. The mayors of these five communes were elected in the context of a highly monitored process of democratisation and state clientelism. Notables or former authorities outside of partisan structures played a role locally, particularly the chiefs of those villages that were increasingly included in the urban perimeter because of Conakry's expanding boundaries. These local authorities supported the mayors, were able to give advice and played a role in distributing land for development. With respect to housing estates, the former local communities received certain plots, while the state, its agents and buyers shared other plots (Diallo 2006).

The city has maintained the exceptional status of a decentralised local authority and forms one of Guinea's eight administrative regions, with a governor at its head. More than the various mayors, it is the governor who holds power.

Colonial and post-independence authorities have long restricted or controlled the expression of political opinion, both in the context of support (organised by the government in place) and of contest. The colonial powers imposed a symbolic topography of power gravitating typically around the governor's palace, the esplanade in front of it and the avenue leading up to it. These places were sites of colonial celebrations, in particular to commemorate 14 July and 11 November. At times, the harbour area was also used, notably to welcome visiting dignitaries. Christian authorities established their own ceremonial map between the cathedral, close to the palace, and the archdiocese on the opposite side of the city. Most of the population were Muslims and remained excluded from these ceremonies, and organised their own festivities around the mosques.

After independence, Sékou Touré settled into the former governor's palace and did nothing to change its appearance. This continuity stood in contrast to the political

change at independence. Touré seems to have opted for the symbolic significance associated with the appropriation of the colonial centre of power, rather than seek a new location to represent the outcome of the 1958 referendum. Under the dictatorship, many processions and ceremonies were organised and skilfully orchestrated either along the main roads of the city centre and the freeway, in the *Stade du 28 Septembre*, or at the People's Palace – either national PDG conferences or welcoming events for foreign politicians. The pattern was broken in 1977 when women organised a protest demonstration over the food crisis. They walked towards the presidential palace, broke through the garden gates and demanded to see Touré on the balcony. The site was seen as the centre of power, as it had been in colonial times, but it was in the People's Palace that a political meeting took place to regain control of the situation (Pauthier 2007).

Should the location of Boiro Camp at Camayenne in the city centre, where alleged or real members of the opposition were imprisoned and exterminated, be considered a sign of power? Undoubtedly, yes, since the inhabitants of Conakry perceived its presence as a sword of Damocles suspended above their heads. This threat was indeed frequently carried out by the authoritarian regimes.

The military and its entourage have concentrated power in their hands – directly from 1984 until 1993 (the date of the first presidential elections) and then indirectly. Under military rule, the presidential palace occupied by Sékou Touré disappeared and the cleared land long remained undeveloped. Then, in 1998, a new presidential palace emerged in the same location, built by the South Koreans. It proudly bears the name Sékoutouréya, suggested by Lansana Conté, who officially accepted the political legacy. However, since it is on the outskirts of town in relation to urban expansion, well guarded and generally deserted because the president has not taken up his residence there, it does not attract crowds.

Following the PDG and its networks' central mobilising role under Sékou Touré in support of the regime and certain forms of political repression after 1984, the first demonstrations did not take place until 2006–2007. The trade unions, rather than the much-divided political parties, played a major role in these demonstrations, which led to a new political geography (McGovern 2007; Pauthier 2007).

Since the entrance to Kaloum can be easily blockaded, the main places left for demonstrations are the main roads, especially the freeway, which leave the suburbs in the direction of the forbidden centre. The People's Palace, where the National Assembly (rarely) sits, remains the meeting place of the government, demonstrators and their representatives, especially trade unionists.

With a visible presence in the city, the military camps are also significant power centres (e.g. Samory Camp in Kaloum and Alpha Yaya Camp in the suburbs), but are targets of mutinies rather than civil demonstrations. And, as mentioned above, the Palace of Nations was badly damaged during a mutiny in 1996.

Conclusion

Conakry's phases of development have shown how political regimes have made their mark on the urban space, as much by inertia as by action or destruction. The will to make certain elements from the past disappear is an intrinsic part of urban policy, whether it relates to the colonial past or to more recent periods, such as the repressive regime of Sékou Touré. How can one memory be erased and another created? How can one move from state-directed development to economic liberalism? The gigantic statue of the 'unchained' man erected in 2007 in front of Conakry's 'bridge of the hanged men'²⁶ would indeed be a symbol of the transition.

Even if the notion of 'heritage' is not self-evident to all Guineans (but rather finds its origins in state, partisan or corporatist UNESCO strategies), certain buildings or places are lasting elements across regimes and make their mark while changing their meaning and symbolism. The People's Palace is the most striking case due to its status as a multifunctional space – political (meeting place of the government, negotiating place); cultural (concerts, ballets); and economic (trade fairs). The *Stade du 28 Septembre* plays a similar role.

Although Guinea's population growth and rural exodus tend to be partly associated with medium-sized cities that are experiencing strong expansion, Conakry attracts individuals who come to seek refuge there. It remains the place where everything is possible. As the capital of Guinea, it is by far the most populous city, with social indicators that are favourable in relation to the rest of the country. However, although a very rich minority struts about, most inhabitants have low disposable income, facilities are blatantly lacking and life in Conakry relies on daily ingenuity.

Post-scriptum

This chapter was written before the death of Guinea's president, Lansana Conté, on 22 December 2008, after a long illness. Conté's death had been predicted for many years, but it caught the Guinean population by surprise, and the government unprepared, as various potential successors had been eliminated. According to the constitution, the president of the National Assembly, Aboubacar Somparé, should have taken charge, in order to organise elections within 60 days, but a junior army officer, Captain Dadis Camara, took over without opposition from the population, Conté's ministers and most of the army. Camara, from the Forest region, had played a role during the 2007–2008 mutinies. He suspended the constitution and formed a *Conseil National de la Démocratie et du Développement* (CNDD) (National Council for Democracy and Development), which launched campaigns against corruption and drug trafficking. The CNDD said it would organise elections within two years, but it quickly became obvious that Camara and other military leaders were reluctant to renounce their positions of power. Under various pretexts, the elections were postponed and Camara's promise not to be a candidate was put into question, which led to growing opposition. On 28 October 2009, the army fired on protesters during a meeting in Donka Stadium, leaving about 150 people dead and many injured. This resulted in an international outcry. In December 2009, Camara was badly injured

when he was shot by another officer. Another military leader, Sékouba Konaté, former minister of defence, took power, ostensibly until Camara's return. The future of Guinea is still uncertain.

Notes

- 1 *'Autant Dakar est décevante...autant Conakry, toute neuve, avec ses artères géométriques bordées d'énormes et épais manguiers qui noient la ville de leur verdure, avec sa corniche sur l'océan, son soleil plombé caractéristique des climats tropicaux, fait figure de petite capitale, luxueuse, aisée, pleine d'attrait.'*
- 2 *'Konakry...a gardé et gardera sans doute longtemps encore son cachet de vieille cité coloniale: petites villas aux larges vérandas au milieu des bosquets touffus de la végétation exotique, s'espacant le long d'avenues plantées de manguiers et de cocotiers. L'ensemble répond à l'image des îles lointaines et respire un air de La Case de l'Oncle Tom. A 15 km de la ville commence la brousse.'*
- 3 *'L'agglomération déborde de plus en plus sur la presqu'île de Kaloum dont les villages font de plus en plus corps avec la Commune Mixte...De nouvelles cases s'élèvent un peu partout dans les environs immédiats de Conakry...La ville de Conakry développe actuellement ses tentacules dans la presqu'île du Kaloum, à l'entour des trois grands axes de communication sur lesquels s'articulent naturellement ses nouveaux quartiers et villages: la route nord, la route sud et la ligne de chemin de fer du Chemin de Fer Conakry-Niger.'*
- 4 Established in 1948, the project was modified a number of times before being approved in 1953. See ANS, 4: 219.
- 5 See *Le marché de Conakry (1952) Techniques et Architecture* 5–6: 65.
- 6 Prime Minister Sydia Touré (1996–1999) inaugurated the extensive urban development works that were subsequently continued. Under Prime Minister Kouyaté (2007–2008), the freeway was then separated from the city by walls and split in the middle by a fence. It was equipped with solar lighting that can also be found at some intersections.
- 7 It is interesting to note the consistency and kinds of specialisation of the foreign contractors: the Russians (*Rusal Alumina* company) constructed two stadiums in 2007/2008, one on the coast in Kaloum close to the Samory Camp and the other at the University of Sonfonia. The Chinese and Koreans erected official buildings (People's Palace, Palace of Nations, Presidential Palace). The Chinese were also responsible for the renovation of the *Stade du 28 Septembre* in 2005/2006.
- 8 In addition to large political meetings and memorable matches of the 'Syli National', the stadium is used for concerts. The Ivorian reggae musician Tiken Jah Faloly performed there in June 2007.
- 9 Although this was not the case during official visits or commemorative ceremonies, for which the people were mobilised to attend.
- 10 See *Ministère de l'Urbanisme et de l'Habitat (1997)*.
- 11 APANEWS Guinée (17 August 2008) *Conakry mène une campagne pour évacuer plusieurs tonnes d'ordures*. Accessed August 2008, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com>
- 12 The name Tumbo referred both to the peninsula and one of the villages.
- 13 In addition to differences in status (between former prisoners, free African and coloured

- people and ruling families), it is possible to note rivalries between competing lineages and between lineages from the region of Fouta-Djalou and Conakry.
- 14 CAOM, Aff. polit. 630 d.4 (Huet inspection 1936/37), report on the *Commune mixte* of Conakry.
 - 15 ‘*De tous côtés leurs cases surgissent comme par enchantement. Ils sont tailleurs, cordonniers, forgerons, charpentiers, peintres, maçons, employés de commerce, pêcheurs et cuisiniers. Les femmes, elles, vendent au détail et lavent le linge.*’
 - 16 It is impossible to discuss here in detail the complex history of Sierra Leone and its migrants, who are characterised by great religious (Christianity, Islam), professional, social and cultural diversity.
 - 17 The repression has, however, affected all layers of the population and representatives of all regions.
 - 18 This figure may be an overestimate because civil servants who were heads of households benefiting from subsidised supplies acted out of self-interest by increasing the size of their households. Some authors argue that the population figure was only 500 000.
 19. These estimates include temporary residents; the figure of 115 000 is suggested for 1960.
 - 20 Intended to be carried out every ten years, the census (initially scheduled for 2006) was postponed due to social unrest, frequent changes of government and funding problems.
 - 21 The hospital at Fria, however, performs particularly well.
 - 22 The level of education plays a major role: the fertility rate is 6.2 for uneducated women and 3.3 for women who have reached or gone beyond secondary education. Similarly, in better-off households, the rate is 4.2, as opposed to 6.5 for poorer households.
 - 23 See ESDG III: 14% of women in Conakry use a modern contraception method, as opposed to 6% in Guinea.
 - 24 The GIR is the ratio between new entrants in the first grade of primary education, regardless of age, and the total population at the official entrance age to primary education (i.e. seven) (Diallo, AM 1999).
 - 25 The NIR is the ratio between new entrants in the first grade of primary education, aged seven, and the class of seven-year-olds.
 - 26 Built in memory of those hanged in January 1971. The official name is *Pont de Tumbo* or *Pont du 8 Novembre*, with reference to the date of the 1964 political meeting that marked the ‘break with the way of capitalist development’.

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