

THE PERSONALIZATION OF POLITICAL POWER IN NIGERIA AND SOUTH AFRICA: STYLE OVER SUBSTANCE

By Dr. Stephanie M. Burchard

Two of the continent's most significant countries have upcoming elections of importance. In South Africa, elections will be held in April 2014, and in Nigeria, elections are scheduled for April 2015. Although the latter are more than a year away, political parties, political aspirants, and even [former presidents](#) are already wrangling to influence Nigeria's next election. Recent events in both countries reveal one striking similarity: the absence of distinctions based on policies, issues, or ideologies tends to produce weak political parties and to exaggerate the importance of individual politicians. In this climate, political accountability is difficult to achieve. [more...](#)



Voters from Lagos Island, Nigeria, in 1998. To date, thousands have died as a result of election-related violence in Nigeria. (Source: AP.)

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ELECTIONS IN BISSAU: HOPE FOR THE BEST, BUT EXPECT THE WORST

By Dr. Ashley Neese Bybee

Presidential and legislative elections have been scheduled for March 16, 2014, in Guinea-Bissau, Africa's first so-called [narco-state](#). Voting in Guinea-Bissau rarely occurs without some major disruption, as political assassinations and military coups have come to characterize the political system in the country. No elected president has ever completed a term in office, and all but one have been ousted by the military. In recent years, cocaine transiting the country en route to Europe has raised the stakes even higher, creating lucrative opportunities for those with access to the state's resources. With no end to this illicit trade in sight, it is possible that the upcoming elections will be marred by irregularities and probable that the elected president will govern at the behest of the military. A more positive result would be a first for Guinea-Bissau. [more...](#)



Guinea Bissau troops sit in front of the electoral commission offices as they guard ballot boxes in Bissau, Guinea Bissau. (AP Photo/Shaikh van Zuydam.)

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A brief attempt at an [opposition alliance](#) in South Africa ahead of April's elections fell apart almost as quickly as it was announced. The Democratic Alliance (DA), South Africa's largest opposition party, which received approximately 17 percent of the vote in 2009, announced a merger with Agang SA on January 28, 2014. Agang SA was formed in February 2013 by Mamphele Ramphele, an anti-apartheid activist and former partner of the late Black Consciousness leader, Steve Biko. Ramphele was announced as the DA's presidential candidate. Almost immediately there were accusations by the ruling African National Congress (ANC) that the merger was merely [window dressing](#) and that the DA, whose supporters typically tend to not be black, was seeking to "rent a leader" and "rent a black." Lending credence to this charge, there was little substantial discussion of policy associated with the merger. Just five days later, after an uproar within Agang SA, in which members complained they were not consulted about the merger, the DA announced that Mamphele had reneged on their agreement to [stand for election](#) and the merger would not go forward. This episode compounds the DA's existing difficulties, including its lack of success in articulating its policies. More than 50 percent of young adults in South Africa think the DA, if elected, would [reinstate apartheid](#).

In Nigeria, the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) has been slowly hemorrhaging members. The PDP has won every electoral contest since the return to civilian multiparty rule in 1999, but a leadership crisis is threatening to tear the party apart from within. Despite the absence of an official announcement, it is widely believed that the current president, Goodluck Jonathan, a southern Christian, will seek re-election in 2015. In 2010, Jonathan, who was vice president at the time, assumed the presidency on an interim basis after the death of President Umaru Yar'Adua, a Muslim. Because of the strong and overlapping social cleavages in Nigeria (mostly Muslim Hausa-Fulani north and a mostly Christian Igbo and Yoruba south), PDP leadership had made a gentleman's agreement that the presidency would alternate between the south and the north. Jonathan's insistence on running in 2011 angered many Muslim northerners who felt their "turn" in the Presidency had been unfairly cut short because Yar'Adua had only served for three years. Ensuing violence led to the deaths of at least 800 in post-election riots. There are significant concerns that [another Jonathan campaign](#) will lead to more death and division.

In November 2013, an [opposition faction](#) within the PDP broke ranks with the party and joined the newly formed All Progressives Congress (APC). The APC insists that [more senators and governors](#) will defect to it from the PDP in March, and at this point, it is unclear who will run for president under the APC banner. There is speculation that [Muhammadu Bahari](#), a northerner who has run unsuccessfully against three previous PDP candidates, is on the short list.

In what was seen as a PDP attempt to bring the defectors back into the fold, the national chairman of the PDP, [Bamanga Tukur](#), resigned in January. So far, there has been no indication of reconciliation. In another development, former vice president

[Atiku Abubakar resigned](#) from the party in early February. Abubakar is a serial party-switcher, having previously quit the PDP in 2006 after a dispute with former president Olusegun Obasanjo and rejoined after Obasanjo's retirement in 2007. The PDP has again reached out to Abubakar and urged [him to return](#).

The ongoing defections may cause Jonathan to reconsider his candidacy. Alternatively, they may provide PDP members, whose main interest is retaining political power, with reasons to oppose Jonathan in the party's primary later this year.

These developments illustrate the fluidity of political party attachments, especially at the elite level. Party switching is nothing new in Nigeria. Political aspirants routinely [party hop](#) prior to elections in an attempt to secure office.

The situation is slightly different in South Africa, where the ANC has dominated every post-apartheid election. The opposition's miscalculation in prematurely announcing an alliance projected an image of disorganization and lack of professionalism. This stumble will help the ANC retain its dominant majority in the next election.

What can we conclude about the state of democracy in these countries? First, weak parties are associated with personalization of political power. Individuals reign supreme over issues and policies. In Nigeria, this may also lead to electoral violence. There has been a steady increase in [fatalities](#) associated with Nigerian elections since 1999. Second, in both cases the representational ties and accountability mechanisms believed to be produced by democratic elections are undermined by voters having no real choice among alternative policies advocated by the different political parties. Voters are left to base their choices on the popularity of a candidate, patronage, gratitude for liberation, or the fundamental desire for peace.

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Guinea Bissau troops sit in front of the electoral commission offices as they guard ballot boxes in Bissau, Guinea Bissau. (AP Photo/Schalk van Zuydam.)

Interim Prime Minister Rui Duarte Barros recently confirmed that general elections will be held on March 16, marking the end of transitional rule. The elections were originally scheduled for April 2012, but a military coup forced their postponement. November 24, 2013, was designated as the make-up date, but logistical problems and funding shortfalls prevented the elections from occurring. The gap in funding appears to have been rectified by donations from [East Timor and Nigeria](#), with about [half of the \\$30 million](#) needed for electoral support received to date. (East Timor, like Guinea-Bissau a former Portuguese colony, has historically had a strong relationship with the country, and former East Timorese President Jose Ramos-Horta is the UN's special representative to Guinea-Bissau.) Progress in the registration process is also encouraging, with approximately 400,000 of the targeted 800,000 voters now registered. Guinea-Bissauan authorities have even begun the biometric voter registration process of its [35,000 nationals in The Gambia](#). All told, many observers, [including the African Union](#), are optimistic that the country will be prepared to hold elections in March.

Elections, however, do not always equate to democratic development, especially in Guinea-Bissau. The dominance of the military in all aspects of government has resulted in a system in which senior military officers effectively rule the country through civilian surrogates. For example, following the April 2012 coup military leaders, [claiming they had no political ambitions](#), appointed [Manuel Serifo Nhamadjo](#) to lead the Transitional National Council.

Although the president is the face of the nation, he is obliged to provide the appearance of civilian rule while hewing to the wishes of the country's military masters.¹ He must also contend with tribal politics that, while not particularly divisive in Guinea-Bissauan society, do play out at the highest political levels. Civil-military relations are especially affected by ethnicity, since one ethnic group, the Balanta, is disproportionately represented in the military. Given that political parties are loosely associated with different ethnic groups, the president must at times work across institutional, political, and ethnic lines. Yet if the president fails to protect the interests of the generals—such as in safeguarding their role in facilitating [cocaine trafficking](#) through Guinea-Bissau—he runs the risk of being ousted and replaced by someone who will². Similarly, if a front-runner in a presidential election is not allied with, or at least willing to concede some influence to, the military leadership, recent history has shown that the entire election may be compromised.³

An optimistic assessment is that the March elections will proceed without major disruption. Even if that proves to be the case, future political instability is likely. No president in the history of the country has completed his term in office (three have been deposed, one assassinated and one died of natural causes). A change in that pattern seems unlikely at a time when competition for the spoils of the drug trade has raised the stakes higher than ever.

- ¹ This assertion is based on the author's dissertation research, which found that the military's unique role in Guinea-Bissau is due to its role in the country's struggle for independence from Portugal. The Bissauan military was one of a handful of African militaries that fought (and won) independence from its colonial master. Since that time, the military has been viewed by citizens as the most prestigious and capable institution in the country. In the years that followed, the generals adopted an entitlement mentality, reminding citizens that they sacrificed life and limb for the country's independence and were therefore entitled to their fair share of resources. They even coined the phrase "En esc e lute" meaning "It was us who fought." This entitlement mentality explains why the military constantly intervenes in politics, or why its members are the first to be paid when donor funding is received.
- ² Most analysts agree that the rivalry and ultimately assassinations of former President João Bernardo "Nino" Vieira and General Batista Tagme Na Waie were due in some part to competition for control of the drug trade. This example, plus the military's record of interfering in politics, lends credence to this assertion.
- ³ This occurred most recently in the 2012 elections when the frontrunner, Carlos Gomes Júnior, was arrested following a military coup in the days leading up to the election. Gomes had a tense relationship with the military and had indicated during his campaign his plans to reform the armed forces, which would have significantly reduced their numbers and influence.

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