

## Guinea must make it a priority to understand why and how ethnicity affects its political, security and developments prospects

*LSE alumnus Olivier Bucyana examines how Guinea can heal ethnic divisions in its political sphere.*

As many countries continue to face difficulties on their path towards democracy, the question of ethnicity, religion or other social and cultural differences seem to arise often around election time. Those who define themselves or are viewed by others as a group – whether it be religious, ethnic, regional and/or linguistic – are rarely 100% homogenous, and divisions of a political or any other nature within the group themselves often exist. However, when it comes to competing for state resources, these divisions tend to be more accentuated among groups. While there are many explanations why this is the case, it is clear that ethnicity, in itself, is not the cause of electoral conflict.



Guinea's four administrative regions reflect the ethnic divisions in the country

An interesting study by Daniel Posner, Professor of Political Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), looks into the reasons why “cultural cleavages become politically salient”. The study, entitled *The Political Salience of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi*, concludes that the divisions between the Chewas and Tumbukas, in Malawi, are politically salient because they are large groups, whose mobilisation is highly beneficial for the competition of state resources. On the other hand, in neighbouring Zambia – where both groups are small – they tend to be mobilised together as part of a larger coalition, which ultimately “reduces the salience of the cleavage that exists between them”. At the centre of this study are political actors who use ethnic demography as a way to mobilise and advance their agenda. Although this study limits itself to Malawi and Zambia, it is one that deserves more attention in trying to understand some of the problems many other countries face today.

Guinea provides a useful example, as it is a country that Guineans themselves describe as “divided” often relying on the four natural regions to demonstrate this division. These regions are associated with the following ethnic groups: the Soussou, the Peulh, the Malinké and the Forestier. Looking at the recent political crisis, many mention the long-standing tensions between the Peulh and Malinké, believed to be the two largest groups in the country. These flared up again after disagreements between the ruling coalition and opposition over the equipment used during

the voter registration process and the right of the Guinean diaspora to vote in the legislative elections.

These divisions cut across all spheres of Guinean society today, as much in the political arena as within civil society and government institutions themselves.

The immediate question of the technical problems mentioned above is important because it has an impact on organising free and fair legislative elections. In the long term, however, understanding and addressing both *why* and *how* “ethnicity” and its politicisation affect the country’s political, security and development prospects must be a priority. The presidential elections of 2010 marked the country’s first true attempt at a structured and plural political confrontation at the ballot box. It is still a very new process and one being shaped against a backdrop of economic stagnation in what is already one of the poorest countries in the world with a burgeoning youth population. These political, economic and social factors, compounded by poor governance – including party financing and ethics – incentivise politicians to mobilise along ethnic lines, rather than around issues of importance to the country’s future.

To sum up, the country needs to re-invent its political system – to engender a democratic system in which the winner does not take all and one where the loser does not feel under threat of being relegated to the political sidelines. A political system in which competition to represent the people in state institutions does not lead to ethnic confrontation and one in which the survival of a group does not solely depend on total victory or total marginalisation of another. In other words, a system in which majority rule does not lead to the “tyranny of the majority”, but rather where “rights for all” are preserved and where the interest of the country supersedes politically-motivated divisions. Such a system, however, should not be paralysed by a complex repartition of power.

Although political leaders from the governing coalition and opposition parties were able to reach an agreement to end the political crisis, Guineans, in general, need to have a sincere dialogue to address the heightening tension between its two largest communities. This is particularly key given that in general they inter-marry and live peacefully side-by-side outside the political sphere. Such dialogue will help prevent the emergence of a crisis, and even conflict, at the approach of every future election.

## References

Posner, Daniel N. “The Political Saliency of Cultural Difference: Why Chewas and Tumbukas Are Allies in Zambia and Adversaries in Malawi”. [American Political Science Review](#) 98, no.4 (2004).

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