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Guinea-Bissau:

24 September 1973 and Beyond

Richard Lobban

On 24 September 1973 history was made in Africa. The first sub-Saharan African nation unilaterally declared its sovereignty from European colonialism following a protracted armed struggle. Most African nations gained their independence from colonial powers by negotiation and peaceful transfer of authority. True enough, this transfer was sometimes linked with prolonged periods of demonstrations, strikes, and nationalist propagandizing, but with the exception of Algeria (and perhaps Ethiopia) there were no wars of national liberation which led to a declaration of independence until Guinea-Bissau. The implications of this move are immense.

The emergence of the PAIGC (African Party for Independence in Guinea-Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands) in 1956 was the first necessary step which brought about the great event of 24 September 1973. The declaration on this date by the 120 members of the National Popular Assembly is not an arbitrary event but symbolizes a result of seventeen long and bloody years of struggle. Accordingly we must first look back to see where the PAIGC has come from in order to judge the importance of the declaration and to suggest some of the coming events.

Historical Prelude

The small triangle of former Portuguese territory in West Africa, Guinea-Bissau, is sandwiched between Senegal and Guinea-Conakry, both former French colonies. Today this is the scene of the most advanced political and military struggle against Portuguese colonialism in Africa. From the earliest days of Portuguese contact dating to 1446, the African people sought to maintain their independence. Not until the 19th century did the Portuguese (or any colonial power) make any major effort to penetrate the interior of Africa beyond their coastal trading and slaving centers. Immediately after the partition of Africa

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in the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 the African people of Guinea-Bissau launched an armed struggle against the Portuguese. Fighting sputtered on and off from 1886 to 1936 when military rule was finally brought to the 14,000 square miles of flat and often marshy countryside. Strict repression and control earned the Portuguese about two decades of relative peace. After the second war of the imperialist powers, African nationalists found Europe weak, disorganized, and unable to continue the colonial structure. As early as 1948 young African students such as Amilcar Cabral (then 24 years old), Agostinho Neto, and Mario de Andrade met in Lisbon and began discussing the futures of their respective nations which were still under colonial rule. Within a dozen years of these informal talks several North African countries had already moved to end colonialism. By 1956 a handful of Africans met secretly in Bissau to chart their own future toward independence. A year later Ghana broke away from England. The small group in Bissau felt that they were simply moving along with the tide of world events and that the formation of the PAIGC would subsequently lead them to freedom from colonialism as it had their African brothers and sisters. The basic strategy was to unite the few intellectuals and the progressive workers in a series of strikes and demonstrations that would convince the Portuguese authorities of the futility of their colonial enterprise. Based on reports of this nationalist activity the Portuguese secret police or PIDE (now known as DGS) arrived in Bissau in 1957. On 3 August 1959 in the Pidjiguiti dock area in Bissau a strike of longshoremen was brutally suppressed with at least fifty killed and more wounded. This setback brought the leadership of the PAIGC to two conclusions. First, the Portuguese were not about to grant independence to their African colonies. Second, the tactics of strikes, demonstrations, and petitions would not be sufficient to gain national liberation.

The small party determined that only a protracted armed struggle would ever allow them to reach their goal. For more than three years a clandestine network of PAIGC supporters was built up and many received military training for guerrilla warfare. At the same time a careful analysis of the class and ethnic structure of Guinea-Bissau was formulated in order to determine who could be counted as friend and who should be considered as an enemy of the movement. The successes of the PAIGC can be attributed, in part, to this careful stage of planning and preparation. The concept of the 'foco' had no place in the tactics of the PAIGC. Basic organization preceded rather than followed military activities in contrast to the Debray or Guevara models which rely on 'armed propaganda' for popular mobilization. The armed struggle began in the south across from Guinea-Conakry but the meticulous planning accounted for the opening of the North Front within six months. The initial gains by the PAIGC stunned the Portuguese who were still reeling from the bold attacks of the MPLA in Angola in 1961. By February 1964 the politico-military struggle was

sufficiently advanced to call the first national congress inside liberated zones. The first national elections were held in 1972. Today eighty percent of the country is under PAIGC control; the Portuguese remain only in the major towns and in a number of fortified posts, which have now begun to fall to the PAIGC. No place in the entire country has been immune from attacks.

The Portuguese Fight Back

The Portuguese, with vital support from the NATO countries and particularly the United States have fought to hold every inch of the territory with their 40,000 troops. Some Portuguese have been trained in counter-insurgency tactics in the United States itself where they learned the use of napalm, defoliants, and the strategic hamlet system of population concentration.

In November 1970 the Portuguese launched an attack on the main PAIGC external office in Conakry. They hoped to kill Cabral, crush the PAIGC and to topple the radical government of Sekou Toure. None of these objectives was achieved and the invasion was completely routed with the mobilization of the local militia and regular armed forces.

A little more than three years later the Portuguese tried again. This time, on 20 January 1973, they succeeded in assassinating the founder of the PAIGC and temporarily kidnapped the new Secretary General, Aristides Pereira. The murder was followed by a propaganda campaign saying that the PAIGC had split over regional or political differences. In actuality the PAIGC has emerged even stronger for this sorry experience. In my travels in the liberated zones during June of 1973 I often asked whether the death of Cabral had been a blow to the movement. Everyone agreed that the loss had been tragic and Cabral will always be remembered with great love, but the movement was too well organized and too strong for it to be stopped. In the Fall of 1972 Cabral had promised that independence would be declared before the end of 1973. The PAIGC has kept his promise. Such have been the highlights of the political events from the origin of the PAIGC to 24 September 1973.

On The Military Front

Other events of major significance have taken place. From 1963 to 1973 the Portuguese had almost complete control of the air. The armed militants of the PAIGC and the people in the liberated villages were constantly subject to barbarous air raids of napalm and white phosphorus as well as defoliants and strafing. In fact, as the Por-

tuguese lost more and more on the ground they relied more and more on air power. However, from March 1973 to the present the PAIGC has claimed almost thirty Portuguese G-91 NATO jets, helicopters of French make, and a variety of other support aircraft. On one hand the successes against enemy aircraft have been psychologically devastating. Some Portuguese pilots have refused to fly over areas of PAIGC control, and a commanding officer was put in prison for supporting his men's refusal. On the other hand the erosion of Portuguese air control has permitted bolder ground action by the PAIGC army. Perhaps the most significant example of this is to be seen in the fall of the fortified base at Guilege in the south. This base had been under siege by PAIGC artillery for months but subterranean quarters, trenches, barbed wire, and electronic minefields made it a difficult target. With improved weapons the PAIGC brought down support aircraft and tightened their control until the base was severely demoralized by the PAIGC artillery, harrasing actions, and ambushes. The Portuguese fled from this base leaving much war material and many documents behind on 25 May 1973. The fall of Guilege made a hole in the Portuguese defense network on the South Front where some of the greatest military activity has been. The Portuguese commanding officer of Guilege was put into jail for his tactical retreat.

With the improved PAIGC weaponry the Portuguese are having a harder time holding their fortified posts and a number have come under harsh attack. Posts like Gadamael and the town of Cacine are served by boat now that air support has become unreliable. Mining of the rivers by the guerrillas will try to cut the flow of supplies to these locations. The encirclement continues and will only increase in the coming months.

The PAIGC and National Reconstruction

The war of the PAIGC is not just on the battlefield. Great strides toward national reconstruction have been made. The nation has been shattered by 500 years of colonial contact and has been derailed from the track of history. New institutions and services must be constructed to put the people back on the rails. Education under the Portuguese was extremely limited. The PAIGC now boasts of more than 200 schools in the liberated zones and more than 250 teachers to staff them. Headway is being made to eliminate illiteracy, develop a national culture and literature, and create a written form of Creole as the national language. All three Fronts have dozens of primary schools and there is a nurses training school at the PAIGC Solidarity Hospital at Boke in Guinea-Conakry. Each of the three Fronts has a higher level primary school for boarding students. The more advanced students go to the PAIGC Pilot School in Conakry where there is also a Kindergarten.

In the field of health the PAIGC has increased the number of

doctors and has a network of field hospitals and 'sanitary posts' in the liberated zones. In neighboring Senegal and Guinea there are larger hospitals. For the more remote places in the country the 'sanitary brigades' bring health services and medicines. In the area of health and education the Portuguese lost the war before it even started.

The Declaration of State

Without an understanding of the activities and struggle prior to the proclamation of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau one might fall into the error of assuming that the proclamation was simply a "propaganda stunt" as the Portuguese have said. In fact, the proclamation is based solidly on more than a decade of armed struggle and development of the human and economic resources in the liberated zones.

Since the Fall of 1972 when PAIGC Secretary General Amilcar Cabral visited the United States it was known that a proclamation would be forthcoming in 1973. The plot against Cabral and the PAIGC delayed the date, but, significantly, did not stop it. The date of 19 September, the 17th anniversary of the founding of the Party, was determined to be the proper time. Unfortunately relations between Senegal and Guinea-Conakry were ruptured just before the 19th and the actual declaration was not made until 24 September. The year had not been spent idly, but great effort had been expended to guarantee the maximum amount of support possible toward the diplomatic recognition of the new African nation. At the time of this writing more than 70 nations have extended diplomatic recognition. They include all black African nations except Malawi and most Arab nations. Among major powers the USSR, The Peoples' Republic of China, and India have also extended recognition. In the West, Guinea-Bissau has been recognized by Guyana and Cuba. Several Eastern European nations are on the list, including Yugoslavia and Rumania. Pressure is building for recognition in Sweden, Norway and Holland. Both Norway and Holland are members of NATO and it would be very significant if they made the move. The recent change of government in Australia has also led some to anticipate support from that quarter. At present, more governments recognize Guinea-Bissau, not a U.N. member, than Israel, which is a member of the international body.

Conspicuously absent in this listing are the Western European nations, the United States, Canada, Israel, South Africa and the majority of the Latin American nations. Canada and Ireland say that they are studying the possibility but most others say simply that they will take no action. At the recent 16th annual meeting of the United States based African Studies Association, the then Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, David Newsom, said specifically that the United States would not recognize the new nation because it did not

have a capital and did not actually control the territory it said it controlled. The facts that the United States recognized Taiwan as the government of all of China and the England-based government of France as the only government of wartime France, and that numerous journalists and a team of U.N. representatives have traveled in the liberated zones of Guinea-Bissau do not get noticed in such an argument. The United States and other NATO powers do not yet stand ready to confront their poverty-ridden colonial ally in Europe — Portugal. During the October 1973 Middle East fighting Portugal stood alone among European countries in permitting the transit of American arms and munitions to the Tel Aviv government. The United States State Department is acutely aware of this and seems likely do almost anything in its power to pay the proper “rent” for the Lajes (Azores) base which Portugal allowed the United States to use during this crisis, and the lease is up for renewal in February 1974.

It is already rumored in Washington that Portugal will ask for funds of a similar magnitude to the funding supplied by President Nixon when the lease was renegotiated after a nine year lapse in December 1971. This aid package totalled \$436 million of credits, grants and loans. Moreover the Portuguese will, very likely, be requesting modern military equipment to try to counter the improved weaponry of the PAIGC. If other rumors are proved correct the PAIGC may soon have fighter-bomber aircraft of their own with their own pilots. Such potentialities would be very frightening to the Portuguese. Reports from Bissau indicate that its anti-aircraft defenses may have already been bolstered in anticipation that these rumors may be borne out.

The fate of Guinea-Bissau at the United Nations is therefore a very complicated affair, not unrelated to the events in the Middle East as well as in Washington and Lisbon.

When the declaration of state was first issued some thought there would be an immediate application for United Nations membership. Actually United Nations regulations require that any new nation must submit application for membership some weeks in advance and this could not have been done. Current PAIGC strategy is to mobilize full support before proceeding toward formal United Nations application.

Activities at the United Nations

One of the most significant actions of the 1973 session of the United Nations General assembly was the passage of a resolution which “strongly condemned the illegal occupation by Portuguese military forces of certain sectors of the Republic of Guinea-Bissau and acts of aggression committed by them against the people of the Republic”.

The resolution (Agenda Item 107) was sponsored by 57 nations and passed by a very wide margin; 93 ‘For’, 30 ‘Abstain’, and 7 ‘No’. The nations which voted ‘no’ were Brazil, Greece, Portugal, South Africa

and Spain—all bastions of fascism—and the United Kingdom and the United States. It was considered noteworthy that many members of NATO abstained rather than vote 'No' as many had expected. A dozen Western hemisphere nations voted 'Yes' on this resolution.

While this resolution should not be confused with U.N. membership for the Republic of Guinea-Bissau it is widely acknowledged that it brings it a step closer to reality. Also significant is that it has been proposed to the first United Nations Committee for a Conference on the Law of the Sea that Guinea-Bissau be invited to participate. Representatives of Uganda, Kenya, Egypt, Algeria, Cameroon, Lesotho, Mali, Senegal and the Soviet Union all supported this inclusion. It was challenged by the Portuguese representative but his statement was countered by a point of order by the spokesman for Mauritius.

Within the United States a number of organizations, church groups and Congressmen have called for U.S. recognition of the new nation. Representatives Charles Diggs and Louis Stokes have been leading forces in Washington, and a Committee to Support the Republic of Guinea-Bissau has been formed in New York by the American Committee on Africa. Numerous demonstrations and pickets have brought some pressure on the Portuguese Embassy, Consulates and Missions in the United States.

Within Africa the proclamation has been heralded as a great victory against colonialism and the Republic has been given full status at the Organization of African Unity as the 42nd member nation. The Economic Commission for Africa has also included Guinea-Bissau in its organizational activities.

The current PAIGC strategy is to make the actual application for United Nations membership "when conditions are right". Secretary General Aristides Pereira of the PAIGC said that "It is essential that an overwhelming majority of United Nations member states recognize us beforehand."

Since resolution 107 was passed a subsequent statement was moved which "reaffirmed the legitimacy of the peoples' struggle for liberation from colonial and foreign domination and alien subjugation by all means, including armed struggle". On both votes the United States voted 'No' as it did on the steering committee of the United Nations when it was proposed to start debate on the admission of Guinea-Bissau. The United States or the United Kingdom both have veto power on the Security Council through which Guinea-Bissau must pass in order to gain admission as a full voting member. Either of these governments can stand in the way of progress towards independence in Africa as they have regularly done in the past.

In speculating about the United States vote on the matter at the United Nations we must ask two questions.

First, what will be Portugal's reaction if the State Department decides not to vote against Guinea-Bissau? Officially and publicly Portugal would, of course, be opposed, but let us not forget that Portugal 'lost' Goa with much fussing but no action. Portugal has witnessed an economic disaster in Guinea-Bissau, a sink-hole of military expenditures with no relief in sight. Not only could Portugal live without Guinea-Bissau, but withdrawal would provide the short-range benefit of 30-40,000 extra troops for Angola or Mozambique. Losing mainland Guinea-Bissau would be marginal to NATO strategy if the Cape Verde Islands remain under Portuguese control.

On the other hand, the Portuguese rulers have probably accepted the domino theory in relation to their African colonies and would hesitate to give up Guinea-Bissau considering the psychological effect it would have for the liberation movement elsewhere. But Africa, Asia, and Latin America are graveyards of domino theories. Colonialists and their offspring don't give up land by choice, they give it up when they are forced to give it up and where they must. As the PAIGC grows stronger the element of choice for the Portuguese is reduced. Although they speak of a domino theory they would hardly give up Angola just because they gave up Guinea-Bissau.

The second question is what is to be gained for the United States by supporting United Nations membership for Guinea-Bissau. The United States is presently quite isolated in the Middle East and Asia. State Department officials do not want to erode African support. Standing against Guinea-Bissau would certainly have the effect of alienating the underdeveloped nations even more. If State Department planners decide that Guinea-Bissau has more on the negative side of U.S. foreign policy than on the positive side great pressure can be applied to the Lisbon government. Everything considered, the United States does not need Portugal as much as Portugal needs the United States. The effort that Western European nations made to keep themselves out of the Middle East hostilities has hardly done them much good as they struggle with economic and energy crises. At this point there might be several European nations which would permit transshipment of arms to Israel. Even aerial refueling can be used if the absence of Azores bases made it necessary. The Azores and Portugal are handy but are no longer absolutely vital to American interests.

Thus we can see a number of compelling reasons for the United States not to use its Security Council veto against Guinea-Bissau. Notably absent from the reasons are any moral or ethnical concerns. American priorities are determined primarily by economics, military strategy and international political alliances. However, we must not be too optimistic, judging from the American record at the United Nations in keeping progressive nations from the membership rolls. The present stated position is also opposed to Guinea-Bissau. But I conclude that it is at least possible that the United States will not use its veto. This is not to say that it is likely; nor is to say that Guinea-Bissau

will forever be denied its seat. National liberation and independence are the central themes of the 20th century. The United States veto can do no more than delay the inevitable.

Conclusions

Clearly, much that happens on the international front is predicated upon events inside Guinea-Bissau. We can expect that the PAIGC infrastructure (as set out at the 2nd National Congress) will be further consolidated. The numbers of school children and teachers will continue to increase. Health services will reach more people and will show improvement in treatment capabilities as development aid increases. More and better medicines will reach the people in more regular shipments to the liberated zones. The PAIGC may increase its mechanization and external transport. The small area in the north-east, representing the traditional lands of the Fula people, may show further constriction. PAIGC control on the waterways will be accelerated in order to tighten the noose around the isolated fortified posts. Attacks on the larger towns may increase. It will not be critical that major towns are taken militarily since they may fall of their own inability to function, a common outcome of protracted guerrilla warfare waged from the countryside. These are some of the possible elements of the scenario for the PAIGC in the coming years of struggle against Portuguese colonialism.

Recently a European journalist, Jochen Raffelberg, traveled with the Portuguese in the Boe area, but was asked to wear a bullet-proof vest and was provided with a heavy military escort. When Raffelberg wanted to leave his helicopter and look on the ground a landing zone was secured in advance by Portuguese commandos. His stay on the ground was limited to ten minutes even though an armed Portuguese helicopter hovered above. The new Portuguese Minister of National Defense, Dr. Silva Cunha, says that the PAIGC claims of liberated zones are "lies" and "there are no liberated zones in Guinea-Bissau". This statement was made at the ceremony which retired the Portuguese military governor from Bissau last year and installed a new one with hopes of better luck against the PAIGC.

Plainly the Portuguese have gone a long way in fooling themselves about their invincibility. It seems that it is up to the PAIGC to bring the Portuguese up against the 20th century realities of Guinea-Bissau and the world.

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