



In brief: Guinea-Bissau – has the 12 April coup been overturned or rewarded?

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A 12 April coup has provoked renewed political crisis in the West African state of Guinea Bissau. On 20 May there was an ECOWAS-backed deal under which power was ostensibly returned to civilians, but there is concern about its credibility and legitimacy. The crisis is likely to set-back recent efforts to strengthen Guinea-Bissau's capacity to combat drug-trafficking and thereby shed its reputation as a 'narco-state'. In a country where there are regular military coups, no president has completed a full term in office since the mid 1990s.



Source: [US State Department](#)

President Malam Bacai Sanha's death in January 2012 triggered new presidential elections. The first round was scheduled for 18 March. Political violence again flared up. Prime minister Carlos Gomes Junior and ex-president Kumba Yala emerged as the main candidates for the ruling African Party for the Independence of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) and the Social Renovation Party (PRS) – the main opposition party – respectively. Gomes, who gained an international reputation as a reformer, promised to further limit the power of the armed forces and their involvement in drug-trafficking. There was a 200-strong Angolan Mission for Military Reform (MISSANG) in the country assisting with security reform, which the opposition accused of being a “glorified bodyguard” for Gomes. It replaced a discontinued [EU security sector reform mission](#) in early 2011.

Gomes won 49% to Yala's 23% in the first round. Yala alleged fraud. The Electoral

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Commission dismissed the allegations. Then, before the second round could take place on 29 April, an alliance of ex-president Yala and officers opposed to his plans, in particular Chief of Staff Antonio Injai, a man who is allegedly heavily involved in the drugs trade, carried out the 12 April coup. Gomes was detained. The coup leaders claim that they intervened to prevent a military intervention by MISSANG, backed by the AU, Ghana and Brazil. Few take this claim seriously. The Military Command announced that new presidential elections would be held in 2014. Former parliamentary speaker Manuel Serifo Nhamadjo, a PAIGC dissident who came third in the 18 March election, was proposed as interim president.

There was forceful international condemnation of the coup. The UN, AU, ECOWAS, EU, US and the rest of the Lusophone commonwealth (CPLP) called for the military regime to stand down immediately and restore 'constitutional order'. The AU suspended Guinea-Bissau. This prompted Yala and part of the PRS to reverse course and disavow the coup, leaving the rest of the plotters unexpectedly isolated. This encouraged negotiations with ECOWAS. On 27 April, Gomes was released and subsequently left the country for Portugal.

To increase the pressure as negotiations continued, on 3 May the EU introduced an asset freeze and travel ban on key coup leaders. On 18 May the UN Security Council ([Resolution 2048](#)) mandated a travel ban against five coup leaders and called for an immediate return to 'constitutional order'. On 20 May the military regime agreed to hand over power with immediate effect to a new transitional government headed by Rui Duarte Barros, although the army has retained control over the defence ministry. The new administration took office on 22 May. It was also reportedly agreed that new presidential elections would be held within a year, rather than two. Nhamadjo has been sworn in as interim president. Last, but not least, it was also agreed to replace the controversial MISSANG with a 629-strong ECOWAS military force. This process is currently under way and should soon be completed.

Despite the fact that the 20 May deal was reached as a result of ECOWAS mediation, there seems to be a certain reticence internationally about welcoming it. Some undoubtedly worry that too much ground has been given to the coup leaders. The deal does not sit comfortably with the AU's self declared embargo on military coup-making. Greater attention may perhaps also be paid to developments in Mali, where a thinly-stretched ECOWAS has taken a similar approach to the March coup there. Gomes, who was the overwhelming favourite to win the second round of the aborted presidential election, continues to insist from abroad that it should be held without delay. PAIGC hostility to the deal could be a recipe for renewed instability down the line. Meanwhile, several street demonstrations since the coup have been met by violent repression, according to the [UN High Commissioner on Human Rights](#), Navi Pillay. There have been other human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions.

Guinea-Bissau has often been called a 'narco-state'. According to [Europa World Plus](#):

Essentially, Guinea-Bissau serves as the bulk-breaking point for most drugs in West Africa. The smaller packets of drugs are then transported to 'mules' located within the sub-region prior to onward delivery to Europe and the USA.

Between 2009 and 2011, some progress does seem to have been made in [tackling the drugs trade](#). The current political crisis threatens to undo that progress.

Further reading

UNODC, "[Guinea-Bissau: new hub for cocaine trading](#)", *Perspectives*, Issue 5, 2008; M. Keating, "[Guinea-Bissau's narco-state](#)", *World Politics Review*, 26 June 2009; M. Gibert, "[Guinea-Bissau: a narco-developmental state?](#)", *African Arguments*, 24 May 2011