

## **Guinea – 2010 – Presidential Election**

Thanks so much for giving me this opportunity to tell the story of the Guinea elections in 2010. I had the great pleasure of being there with the Carter Centre, organizing the first electoral observation mission there for those elections in 2010, and it was a really, really special experience. My name is Therese Pearce Laanela. I'm now with International IDEA, but at the time I was with the Carter Centre based in Atlanta.

To begin, I'd just like say a few words about why those elections in 2010 were so important. And also why I've chosen that from the many elections that I've worked for, I think that this case I've picked because it shows the danger of a gap between an election that is very historically significant and where stakeholder expectations are really high. But when, on the other hand, the ability of the electoral management body to deliver on those expectations is very weak. So I think this story is a good story about the importance of building capacity and electoral management bodies. And it also exemplifies the role of the leadership of. Who are working for electoral management bodies or EMBs as we call them and their relational abilities to manage stakeholder expectations and to navigate this gap between historical significance and the difficulties of actually organizing an election.

So back to 2010 and let's just set the scene of what was happening in Guinea. Guinea was a closed country for many years. In fact, some called it the North Korea of Africa or West Africa. And February 2010 marked a historical agreement that really brought hope to change that trajectory. And there was some very traumatic and dramatic incidents that preceded this historic agreement. And one was the assassination of the president. He was shot in the head in a very dramatic way. But also there was an open air massacre in a stadium of opposition personalities who had collected their followers demonstrate against the regime, trade unions and so forth. And they were basically tricked into that stadium and killed en masse there. And that was followed by gang rapes on the street in such a shocking way that it woke up the international community and also just like this, this isn't OK, something has to happen in Guinea, so there was an extraordinary focus suddenly on this largely forgotten country. And remember that this is a period that just follows its neighbours, says Sierra Leone and Liberia, emerging from civil war in a very orderly way under the auspices of the United Nations.

So in some ways it is the spotlight then moved to Guinea as being the next place where there was some hope. I noticed this hope myself, because the first time that I arrived and, I mean this, this, it was these events that put it on the agenda for the Carter Centre, the Carter Centre chooses very carefully where it puts its resources and also I think this was the USA to fund it. The Attention was focused there. The fact that I was

going there meant that attention was focused there, but I was also in the aeroplane with, for example, the EU delegation who were there to decide if these sanctions against and that being able to again qualify for very expensive overseas development assistance from the EU. So it was a very important, it was a moment of historical significance and the elections that were planned were really a marking. Of that of this trajectory being changed.

So I'm saying all of this background to say that the expectations of the international community, that it was time for Guinea to open up and to move on to a democratic trajectory, the European Union, United States, as demonstrated by those of us who are on the airplane, we're there to support. But also domestically, there was suddenly an expectation, a hope. You know, when you, when you feel it in the air, this feeling of the early days of the better nation and Guinea had once been. A beacon of freedom in Africa, there are many. In Georgia, for example, there are many activists from the American Civil rights movement who remember going to Kenya in the 1960s and the 1970s. And meeting with the freedom fighters from all over Africa. So there was a historical legacy of optimism, and which was somehow renewed during this. After these many years of being very very closed.

That, unfortunately, expectations and hopes aren't everything to organise an election properly you actually need. A really robust infrastructure both, you know, telecommunications infrastructure, a regional infrastructure, a public administration infrastructure, and here Guinea was really lacking. After many years of being underdeveloped, in terms of public investment and the the investment that had been made was largely, for example. Foreign mining companies and so forth, who put excellent roads to where there was a mine, but not roads that connect the country well. So when it came to organizing the elections, this was the basic infrastructure that you needed. Remember that an election is reaching out to voters over an entire country in one day and getting the election results back. And to do this, you need an excellent voter's register and all of the voters need to understand what's going on. So you actually need both a physical infrastructure and also a communications infrastructure to make sure that all of this works. And you need an authority and its delegates regionally and locally to be able to administer this properly. And remember that Guinea hadn't organised elections before, so this experience was lacking. And that's what I meant when I began, which is this disconnect that Guinea had between the extraordinary expectations that were put on these elections, that this would be the beginning of this democratic opening. And a new era of prosperity. And those expectations being put on it, both by its own people, the people of Guinea and the neighbours who did not want instability in the region after their own experiences as Liberia, Sierra Leone, for example, and the international community, so those expectations. But when you on the

ground, seeing how's this going to work, when we noticed, for example, the very poor infrastructure and that the capacity was really missing inside the election management body.

So what this meant practically for those who are interested in elections, I'll just give a few examples. It meant that the closer you got to elections, there was still no electoral law in place. There were no procedure manuals for the election workers and remember procedures manuals is how you know what's going to actually roll out on the Election Day and that's how you train your people so procedures Manual is an indicator that something's wrong with the preparations the voters lists and the voters cards that we're going to be handed out. This process was chaotic. And the lack of infrastructure, as I mentioned, was compounded by the inexperience of those who were organizing. And this manifested unfortunately in a really flawed first round of the presidential election and the public disaffection and distrust that the chaotic handling of the vote counts. It really threatened to sink any hope for the peaceful transition to some civilian rule. And I really must stress here that it was a capacity in an infrastructure problem. It was not any deliberate undermining, but for the people who are watching it, what they saw was chaos. And so there was this general discontent. And unfortunately the hope that we that I spoke about. Earlier, this discontent fueled another set of dynamics, which was that in fact had deep ethnic tensions, which during the authoritarian rule were suppressed or repressed. But now things were opening up. Those ethnic divisions were starting to bubble up again, and you also had emerged from this authoritarian rule. Security forces who were undisciplined. So if there was a sense of chaos and then you had the security forces who were undisciplined. This compounded a sense that the democratic transition wasn't going as it should be. And finally, a third part of this was youth unemployment and just disgruntled youth who were ready to be, you know, engaged or upset on the streets. Laws came their way and all these presented security risks to a potential peaceful electoral outcome.

Meanwhile, inside the electoral authority, of course, the stresses of organizing, something that didn't go well and handling, you know, putting things back on track for the second round of presidential elections. Remember when you had the first round, you get to a point where you have two candidates. So suddenly the stakes are very, very, very high for those two candidates, you have to organise a second round to make sure that things go well and that those results aren't contested, or that they're absolutely clear. Stresses were such that the Election Commission chairman died on the job. This is actually something I've seen before in other countries that you know, it may be that they died ostensibly of some pre-existing condition. But there can be no doubt that the stresses of organizing an election can compound whatever pre-existing conditions that. And there were also rumours about his death, of course, which didn't help.

Following the death of the chairperson, the Commission, who initially had been very positive to the elections, descended into deep partisanship and could not agree on a new election Commission. So you've got the second round coming up and then you have this deeply partisan Commission who can't make any decisions and who couldn't put together a second put together, an election Commissioner that they could all agree on. So in the midst of this, a very strange agreement but it turned out to be very fortuitous came about. So at the time, there was an external advisor who was provided by the international community, if I recollect well, it was ECOWAS who had the Malian General Sangaré to be a senior advisor to the electoral processes, so he was put at the disposal of the Electoral Commission of the electoral management body to to give advice on how these elections should be done. And it so happens that his personality, his gravitas, his gentle touch, made him a person that was trusted on all sides, even though he wasn't a Guinean himself, he was somehow that came up as the solution that he would step in this role, which which in fact is not so unusual. This has happened before in, in Bosnia, in Timor Leste in South Africa. But at very special moments in time, it can be better to take in a trusted outsider to just break the partisan deadlocks.

So that's what happened in this case. And he had, of course, he had no silver bullet to fix the infrastructure of Guinea like this. And he couldn't, you know, in one moment make an inexperienced group of officials into an experienced group of commissions. But what he did do was that he brought all the stakeholders together very regularly. In fact, every day at 2:00, he had a public meeting for the press, for observers, for diplomats, anybody who was interested. And it is a very gentle way and a very authoritative way. He would explain what was going on very openly. So for example he would say, we have a problem. The distribution of our voters cards. And we understand that this is giving an impression to people that this is chaotic and so forth. This is not okay. I will find out what is happening with those voter cards and I will report back tomorrow. And then the next day at 2:00. Would say. Over the past 24 hours I have checked in and as it turns out, you know the trucks that were going out have had a problem with the fuel and so forth and then the system which they were using. Just giving this as an example, but he would explain what he had learned. And so people would get an insight into all of those things that can be perceived as chaotic. But once you, once you understand them, aha OK, the trucks didn't make it out there or the person who was sent out got sick. And so it gave an insight into the dynamics that you were dealing with as an Electoral Commission and suddenly things, the tensions, just dissipated because there was someone who was open about mistakes and yet gave a confidence that those mistakes would be resolved.

The point that I'd like to make with this small vignette about those 2:00 press conferences is the importance of those taking Election management that it is not only a matter of, you know, transactional delivery of an election, but there is a really strong socio-relational dimension to it. That is it is. Those relational skills are also really important for electoral authorities to carry with them, and that's not only at the most senior level, as in the case of General Sangaré, but these kinds of transactions are happening also at the polling station. Even in the United States elections or Canadian elections or Swedish elections, there are tensions that can happen even at the polling station level. So the ability to handle those who are upset. By saying, I hear what you're saying, here's how it is and just noting the concerns that people have. And saying that you'll find out or saying that you'll do something about it and then getting back to people, sometimes it's as simple as that and that has to be something that we bring into electoral management as we move forward, because in this world, the kinds of tensions that we saw in Guinea in 2010. They exist also elsewhere, and they increase rather than decrease. So that's my story of the 2010 Guinea elections. The second round of elections were held without the confusion of the first round.