
Is Guinea really Non-Aligned?

MARGARET ROBERTS

IN DECEMBER LAST YEAR, Russian Ambassador Semyonovitch Solod left the West African Republic of Guinea 'for personal reasons'; but everyone knew the formula of his going to be a face-saving alternative to expulsion. The departure of Solod—reputedly peerless wizard of Soviet diplomacy—was the culmination of three months of internal disturbances the seriousness of which was not widely known outside Guinea. Even now it's difficult to be sure what was behind the 'conspiracy' uncovered at the time; but this is what seems to have happened.

About August last year there was a difference of opinion between the Government and the Teachers' Trade Union over the functions and pay of different grades of teachers. President Sékou Touré's personal explanations and even modification of the government's plans failed to win the support of the teachers' representatives. Even so the matter might have remained within the framework of a normal trade union dispute had the government not discovered that the director of the Teachers' Union had circulated a memorandum accusing the government of undemocratic practices. The memorandum had been sent out before the executive Bureau of the Guinea T.U.C. had approved it. Worse, it was found to be circulating in foreign Embassies and even in the neighbouring state of Mali.

ABOUT THE SAME TIME, the annual congress of the ruling *Parti Démocratique Guinéen*, faced with a disruptive dispute within the Railwaymen's union, decided in principle that when in doubt the trade unions should see themselves as the instruments of Party policy. Thus armed, President Sékou Touré opened the annual conference of the Guinea T.U.C. with a severe reprimand for the Director of the Teachers' Union and a demand for the suspension of the Teachers' Union for fourteen days.

Less than a week later the High Court relieved seven of the executive of the Teachers' Union of their posts; two of them were sentenced to ten years preventive detention, and three others to five years—all for 'subversive and anti-revolutionary activities and collaboration with alien hostile forces'. The following two days saw apparently well-planned demonstrations and riots among the school-children in the capital, Conakry and in the Fouta Djallon area. Tear-gas had to be used, and

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eventually the young people were loaded into lorries and sent to their homes.

The government was clearly surprised and deeply shocked not only by the extent of support for the condemned teachers (it was officially confirmed that every teacher was involved and the demonstrations were thousands-strong), but also by the apparently organised and co-ordinated nature of the protest. The government concluded, with the help of documents captured and shown to journalists, that a planned conspiracy had been afoot. But who was behind the plan? The government itself gave several answers.

IN DECEMBER THE Russian Ambassador left Conakry, after a flying visit to Moscow on the part of a special Guinea envoy. And a week later, Sékou Touré described the conspiracy as the work of a "Marxist-Leninist group, based in Moscow, Paris and Dakar, whose Machiavellian plan was to unleash a Marxist revolution in Guinea". This seemed clear enough, especially since the protesting students had been widely reported as calling for the end of non-alignment in favour of whole-hearted espousal of the Communist bloc. But the President also linked the French Embassy with the conspiracy, accusing it of having made the diplomatic bag the medium for messages between the plotters. *Grotesque*, commented the French Foreign Ministry!

The truth remains a matter for speculation. Several factors and one or two subsequent events must be taken into account. The first concerns the general policies and attitudes of President Sékou Touré's government. It must not be forgotten that Sékou Touré himself is a political sophisticate, an intellectual who first espoused and then rejected communism in his younger days. He is not an innocent; he understands the objectives of international communism, and while he accepts the general Marxist thesis on the nature of capitalism and imperialism, he rejects the Marxist solution for Guinea and he refuses to align himself with the Soviet bloc. The one-party state which he has built in Guinea is a pragmatic response to what he considers the two overriding needs of the country today: rapid, planned economic development, and the maintenance of strict non-alignment in international affairs. The single inclusive political party, its personnel elected at all levels, is intended to prevent the bad blood and waste of personnel implied in a formal opposition and to guard against the stimulation of local disunity by outside 'cold war' forces.

BUT IT IS NOT ALWAYS easy. Rapid economic development implies dependence for the time being on outside sources of aid; and these must be nicely balanced if one is not to become too dependent upon one side or other in the cold war. No doubt whatever they say, neither side really *likes* a policy of non-alignment—in the sense that both *prefer* reliable and committed allies; but the communists are particularly bothered by a concept which can find no theoretical place in the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. While it is obviously diplomatically unwise to say this in Africa, it would not be surprising if the communists had tried to push their luck in a state whose political structure and recent history seemed to dispose of it to accept the proposition that the world

is divided into 'progressive' and 'imperialist' states. This seems to have been what, in fact, the communists tried to do: Solod's activities along these lines was an important factor in the disturbances.

They miscalculated badly. It is interesting that Mr. Ismael Touré, half-brother of the President, and known to have had rather stronger sympathies with the communists than most other government members, took the leading part in quelling the riots and making arrests. And the President of the High Court which sentenced the accused Teachers' Union officials was M. Abdoulaye Diallo, whose political sympathies had also been linked with the far left. In other words, there was no wavering whatever in the leading circles of the Government. Despite apparent short-term gains in the ranks of the teachers and the students—some of whom have been trained in the East—the attempt to 'step up the Guinea revolution' was a failure for the communists.

THE MISTAKE WAS APPARENTLY recognised at once. Soon after Solod's departure, the Russian Vice-President, Mr. Mikoyan visited Guinea to open the Soviet trade exhibition in Conakry. His speech for the occasion was full of praise for Guinea's platform of non-alignment, and impeccably non-interventionist. The Government's reception of Mikoyan was less than raptuous, but no public reference was made to the Solod affair. In February a new Russian Ambassador was accredited in Conakry.

The immediate effect of the whole episode was to intensify the general prickliness of the Guinea government towards any outsiders, from East or West. Forty-three students were recalled from Moscow University and a few from Paris, on the grounds that they were being subjected to ideological pressures. If the atmosphere cooled between Guinea and the communist governments, especially Russia, it did not warm between Guinea and the West. All visitors and journalists to Guinea during the few months following the disturbances were treated with suspicion.

SINCE THEN A GENERAL relaxation has set in—and again, it applies all round. The emphasis has been on business-like trade and aid arrangements. It is likely that one factor in the upheaval last year was the rice shortage, caused partly by a failure of a rice scheme run by inexperienced Russians, and partly by the previous precipitate adoption of the Guinea franc, which meant that many farmers were smuggling their rice abroad rather than sell it for Guinea currency. There is no doubt that serious economic strains have been experienced since the Guineans were forced by abrupt French withdrawal in 1958 to alter their entire economic structure, mostly by trial and error. Though errors have been quickly and courageously recognised, bottle-necks, dislocation and even minor breakdowns have followed. Guinean inexperience was matched by Russian and Czech ignorance of conditions in the African vacuum which they were quick to offer to fill.

This year major new trade and aid agreements were negotiated with the Americans; and following the Algerian settlements, relations with France led to the start of negotiations for comprehensive agreements with France as well. At the same time the Russian

agreements have been renewed and expanded. Political non-alignment—a proud, guarded refusal to pay, politically, for economic favours—remains the touchstone of Guinea's foreign policy, and is likely to succeed. When Mr. Anton Joujou, Prime Minister of Bulgaria went to Guinea earlier this year, President Sékou Touré signed a joint statement with him on the iniquities of 'imperialism' in the Congo, foreign bases and so on, but added, coolly, "We have the same aims, but our methods of realising them may be different." Internally, the Guinea government has shown itself flexible and undogmatic in the methods it has used for the development of the economy. Some of them have been successful, some less so. The same pragmatic devotion to the particular needs of the particular international situation of Guinea dictates non-commitment in the cold war. So far, that has been achieved, despite every temptation and provocation. ●

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