

Introduction

IN SEPTEMBER 1958, the French territory of Guinea claimed its independence. In a defiant “No” to France, the Guinean people, through a popular referendum, decisively rejected a constitution that would have relegated their country to junior partnership in a new French Community. Orchestrating the “No” vote was the Guinean branch of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), an interterritorial alliance of political parties with affiliates in most of the fourteen territories of French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa, and the United Nations trusts of Togo and Cameroon. In the whole of the French Empire, Guinea was the only territory to reject the constitution in favor of immediate independence.

Although Guinea’s stance vis-à-vis the 1958 constitution has been recognized as unique, the historical roots of this phenomenon have not been adequately explained. Guinea’s postwar political development can be understood only in the context of the Cold War, in which France was a key battleground. Deeply divided internally between communist and anticommunist forces, France was courted and pressured both by the United States and the Soviet Union.¹ Although neither superpower was involved in Guinea until the postindependence period, the “communist threat” was a major determinant of French colonial policy. In dire need of postwar economic aid, France was under enormous pressure from the United States to purge communists from its government, industry, and labor movement. France also was pushed to pursue domestic and foreign policies congruent with those of the United States—and in opposition to those of the Soviet Union.² France’s choice of the West, and the ensuing crackdown on communists at home and their allies abroad, was the backdrop for the decolonization of Guinea and other territories throughout the French empire.

Guinea’s vote for independence, and its break with the interterritorial RDA in this regard, were the culmination of a decade-long struggle between grassroots

activists and the party's territorial and interterritorial leadership for control of the political agenda. Since 1950, when RDA representatives in the French parliament severed their ties to the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), conservative elements had dominated the RDA. In Guinea, local cadres had opposed the break. Victimized by the administration and sidelined by their own leaders, they quietly rebuilt the party from the base. Their voices muted throughout most of the decade, leftist militants gained preeminence in 1958, when trade unionists, students, the party's women's and youth wings, and other grassroots actors pushed the Guinean RDA to endorse a "No" vote. Thus, Guinea's rejection of the proposed constitution in favor of immediate independence was not an isolated aberration. Rather, it was the outcome of years of political mobilization by grassroots militants who, despite Cold War repression, ultimately pushed the Guinean RDA to the Left.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

As dozens of African colonies gained independence in the late 1950s and 1960s, scholars of Africa increasingly focused on the nationalist struggles that had led to this result. Most of the early studies paid little attention to the involvement of peasants, traders, and workers in the nationalist movements. Their subjects were primarily the Western-educated male elites who spearheaded the nationalist movements and assumed power after independence.³ In the late 1960s, as social history gained prominence in the discipline, scholars of African nationalism began to shift their focus to "the role of ordinary . . . Africans."⁴ They began to recognize that the success of the nationalist movements depended upon the ability of Western-educated elites to generate mass support, which they did by mobilizing around preexisting grievances and promising their resolution through the attainment of national independence.⁵

Most works on nationalism in French West Africa have focused on elite politics, with some reference to the key role played by the mass base.⁶ Implicit in the majority of assessments is the erroneous assumption that the leaders called the shots and that the political positions taken by high-level nationalist leaders were mirrored in the views of their constituents. In the case of the RDA, many scholars have presumed that the accommodationist line promoted by Ivory Coast parliamentarian and interterritorial RDA president Félix Houphouët-Boigny was embraced by territorial branches and local sections, with the notable exception of Guinea in 1958.⁷ These scholars generally have not recognized that the party

line was the product of struggle, representing the domination of one point of view over others, accompanied by the silencing of opposing voices. An exception to this generalization are scholars who have noted the 1955 rift, when the Union Démocratique Nigérienne, Union Démocratique Sénégalaise, and Union des Populations du Cameroun were expelled from the RDA for refusing to sanction its break with the PCF.⁸ While these scholars comment on disagreements within the highest echelons of the party, they fail to carry the discussion down to the grassroots, where the positions taken by territorial and interterritorial leaders were in dispute. Nor do they elaborate upon the long-term implications of the purge: By the time the 1958 constitutional referendum occurred, many of the RDA's most radical constituents already had been expunged.

In the case of Guinea, many scholars have assumed that the territorial RDA was radical from the outset, shaped by its charismatic secretary-general, Sékou Touré, who was supposed to have wielded absolute power over the party. For the most part, they have not understood that Sékou Touré was pushed to the Left by grassroots militants, particularly trade unionists, students, women, and youth—not the other way around. Deeply influenced by postindependence developments, Yves Person, Victor Du Bois, and Claude Rivière, for instance, conflate the Guinean RDA with the person of Sékou Touré, wrongly presupposing that he had autocratic power in the preindependence period and that he imposed his will on the party. They view Sékou Touré as a long-standing and unwavering leftist, rather than a pragmatic politician who responded to a progressive groundswell from the base.⁹

Other scholars, such as Ruth Schachter Morgenthau, Georges Chaffard, L. Gray Cowan, and Sylvain Soriba Camara, acknowledge that there was strife between rival RDA leaders, most notably Sékou Touré and Félix Houphouët-Boigny. However, they do not explore tensions between Guinean party leaders and the rank and file.¹⁰ Ernest Milcent, Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, Thomas Hodgkin, and Tony Chafer allude to strains between the party base and leadership in Guinea, but they do not explore them in detail.¹¹ Although dedicated exclusively to Guinea, Sidiki Kobélé Kéïta's two-volume study and books by Jean Suret-Canale and 'Ladipo Adamolekun also fail to examine political fissures within the nationalist movement.¹² Most of my earlier work has considered gender, ethnic, and class divisions within the Guinean RDA, but not cleavages along the Left-Right political divide.¹³ As a result of these omissions, none of the previously published work on Guinea permits us to assess adequately the implications of preindependence political divisions for postindependence nation-building.

This book stands received wisdom on its head and brings complexity to the often oversimplified Guinean case. Distinguishing between grassroots sentiments and leaders' pronouncements, it regards party positions as the product of struggle. The party's orientation was constantly challenged—from above, below, and outside. Rejecting the top-down approach inherent in the works cited above, I argue, first, that the positions taken by political leaders in Guinea were the result of pressure from the grassroots—not vice versa. Guinea's progressive politics emanated from the bottom, rather than the top. Second, although Sékou Touré had accumulated significant powers before independence, he did not monopolize decision-making. Local activists pushed Sékou Touré to the Left, even as he sought accommodation with both the interterritorial RDA and the colonial administration. Third, the Guinean RDA was not uniformly and consistently radical. Rather, its leftist tendency was the result of a protracted struggle. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, government repression—under the banner of anticommunism—wreaked havoc in the RDA. Claiming that moderation and accommodation were essential if the movement were to survive, conservative elements gained control of the party leadership. In most French West African territories, elite-run parties with shallow roots made peace with the colonial power. In Guinea, however, the RDA had built a solid grassroots organization. For nearly a decade, left-wing agitation continued at the local level. In September 1958, progressive activists finally won control of the political agenda.

In illuminating the Guinean case, this book will make a significant contribution to our understanding of both historical and contemporary Africa. It will help us to understand the difficulties encountered in postindependence nation-building, not only in Guinea, but in many parts of the developing world. If we are to understand contemporary Africa, with its strong antidemocratic tendencies and leadership crises, we must understand the dynamics of the independence process. We must reckon with the negative impact of the Cold War on democratic movements in Africa and elsewhere in the non-Western world. In many African territories, where local party structures were weak, party leaders invariably took matters into their own hands, unilaterally imposing their own agendas. Under severe pressure from colonial regimes, often sweetened by promises of privilege, many of these leaders collaborated in repressing the Left. Rewarded by colonial governments for their cooperation, these antidemocratic leaders frequently assumed the reins of power after independence.¹⁴ In Guinea, where local party structures were strong, the antidemocratic actions of party leaders were effectively countered by mobilization at the grassroots. Although Guinea's democratic experiment failed after inde-

pendence, it failed in spite of, not because of, the democratic character of the nationalist movement. Punitive policies by other nations, including coup attempts and an invasion, were part of the Cold War arsenal employed against the new Guinean government. Their impact on Sékou Touré's growing dictatorial tendencies is a subject that demands further scholarly investigation.¹⁵

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Viewing Guinea's postwar political scene through the Cold War lens, this book focuses on the period 1946–58. It assesses the local influence of the PCF, the impact of anti-RDA repression, the consequences of dissension within RDA ranks following the divorce from the PCF, and the phenomenon of grassroots party building as a prelude to the reemergence of the Left, which, by 1958, had become the dominant force in Guinean politics.

Focusing on the period 1946–50, with some reference to 1945, chapter 1 argues that France, humiliated and defeated during World War II, was determined to reassert its position as a great power in the war's aftermath. The maintenance of its empire was critical to the achievement of this status. However, French plans for greatness were threatened by African and Asian nationalist movements and by the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as the new world powers. The onset of the Cold War and the support of French communists and the Soviet Union for the anticolonial cause magnified French concerns. Under pressure in the colonies and in the international arena, France hoped to deter more radical solutions by reforming its empire. Examining Guinean politics in the Cold War context, this chapter considers the RDA-PCF alliance and the RDA's virtual destruction as a result of the government's "anti-communist" crackdown.

Covering the years 1950–53, chapter 2 explores the ways in which government persecution resulted in two contradictory reactions within the RDA. On the one hand, the repression of French communists and African RDA members seemed to underscore their common interests and substantiate the claim that only a communist government in France could lead to African emancipation. On the other hand, because the PCF was considered by the French government to be both dangerous and disloyal, the RDA was hurt rather than helped by its parliamentary alliance with the communists. Under duress, RDA parliamentarians severed their ties to the PCF and ordered their territorial branches to cut all remaining links to communist organizations. While the Guinean RDA ultimately

complied with the parliamentarians' directive, its disavowal of the PCF alliance resulted in a rift between party leaders and more radical militants at the grassroots.¹⁶ The schism threatened to destroy the party. Doubtful of the RDA's sincerity, the government continued its campaign of repression.

Focusing on the years 1954–55, chapter 3 investigates the Guinean RDA's unsuccessful bid for a French National Assembly seat in June 1954 and the election's volatile aftermath. The legislative elections were widely believed to have been rigged. Chiefs, traditional elites, regional and ethnic associations, and government-supported parties benefitted from the electoral fraud. The years 1954–55 were marked by an upsurge in unrest as RDA supporters challenged chiefs, notables, and rival party members. Meanwhile, the government undertook a dual strategy of co-optation and repression, attempting to push the Guinean leadership to the Right while cracking down on local activists. The interterritorial RDA collaborated in the government's efforts, resulting in further disenchantment at the grassroots. Nonetheless, by 1955 it was evident that, despite repression and fraud, the Guinean RDA was far and away the most popular party in the territory. Even the governor was forced to conclude that the collaborationist parties had failed.

Chapter 4 examines the years 1956–57, when the French empire was under increasing pressure in both Africa and Asia. Once again, France hoped to salvage its empire by launching a program of imperial reform. In sub-Saharan Africa, France eased repression against nationalist movements and established a system of local self-government, according to the terms of *loi-cadre*. The Guinean RDA benefitted from the new policy of constructive collaboration, at least at the leadership level. In a wave of electoral victories, the RDA won two National Assembly seats, gained control of nearly all Guinea's major municipalities, and captured the vast majority of seats in the Territorial Assembly. The RDA dominated the local government established in 1957 under the reformed imperial system. However, accommodation with the administration and the assumption of power at the local level led to a rightward political shift. Bowing to pressures from an increasingly conservative RDA, most Guinean trade unions severed their ties to the French communist labor movement. A rift within the party again became evident as leftist militants openly expressed their discontent, denouncing the compromises of their leaders.

Chapter 5 examines the march toward independence in 1956–58, as grassroots militants, especially trade unionists, students, and other youths, condemned party leaders for accepting local self-government in lieu of complete independence. They criticized *loi-cadre* for undermining the French West and Equatorial

African federations, which in turn damaged Africans' prospects for meaningful independence. As rival parties attempted to win this disgruntled constituency by outflanking the RDA on the Left, the Guinean RDA leadership was forced to adopt an increasingly radical stance. In France, meanwhile, General de Gaulle returned to power and proposed a new constitution that further reduced federal powers and relegated overseas territories to perpetually inferior status in a new French Community. The Guinean Left pressed its leaders to reject this proposition and to champion immediate independence instead.

Chapter 6 explores the September 1958 constitutional referendum and its aftermath. Under tremendous pressure from the grassroots, Guinean RDA leaders adopted a proindependence position—but only in the eleventh hour. Of all the French territories participating in the referendum, Guinea alone rejected the 1958 constitution, opting instead for immediate independence. France quickly retaliated against the newly independent nation, sabotaging its economy and isolating it diplomatically. Although the Guinean government appealed to France and its NATO allies for aid and trade agreements, it was rebuffed by the West as a dangerous communist state. French warnings of Guinea's communist predilections became a reality when the new nation, in desperation, turned to the Eastern Bloc. Ironically, despite its overall success in the 1958 referendum, France proved unable to hold on to its empire. Most of its African territories had become independent by 1960. Guinea had led the way.