

Guinea: 1958-present

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

The Republic of Guinea (widely referred to as Guinea-Conakry to differentiate it from its Lusophone neighbor Guinea Bissau) has had a turbulent political history. After rejecting Imperial France's *Loi Cadre*, Guinea declared independence on October 2, 1958, two years earlier than other francophone countries in Africa. *Loi Cadre*, enacted in France in 1956 after tremendous pressure from its colonies, transferred considerable administrative powers to the colonies, but fell far short of the independence most Africans had asked for. For example, under *Loi Cadre* France continued to control foreign affairs, currency and economic matters. Consequently, Guineans held a referendum and decisively voted against any further French colonial rule, feeling that accession to *Loi Cadre* would position Guinea as a "junior partner" to France. The "No" vote was orchestrated by the Guinea branch of the *Rassemblement Democratique Africain* (African Democratic Rally [RDA]), an "inter-territorial movement of political parties and groups in Francophone countries in West and Central Africa". By 1958, the Guinea branch had become radical and driven by pressures from the grassroots, and it defied the position of the RDA in other French West African territories and voted for immediate independence and made Ahmed Sekou Toure (commonly referred to as Sekou Toure) its first president.

Having invited the wrath of France by declaring independence, Guinea had to look elsewhere for support as it embarked on building its nascent economy and infrastructure necessary for nation building. As an avid pan-Africanist, Sekou Toure found immediate support from Ghana, which had become independent a year earlier. Toure and the then-president of Ghana Kwame Nkrumah became personal friends and comrades in the pan-African struggle, agitating for the eventual independence of the remaining African States. Guinea also sought and found support from the former Soviet Union, and soon Guinea became a heated proxy battleground for the Cold War. Although very nationalistic, Sekou Toure's administration was widely regarded as autocratic and did very little in actual infrastructural development for Guinea. He held on to power until his death in 1984.

Thereafter, it was hardly surprising to any keen observer when the military, under Lieutenant Colonel Lansana Conte, staged a coup d'état a week after the demise of Sekou Toure. Conte continued the legacy of Sekou Toure and ruled Guinea for nearly a decade before finally allowing for skewed multiparty political participation in 1993. During his tenure, Guinea became poorer and unstable, with frequent protests and mutinies by soldiers. Conte died in Office in 2008; only for another military coup to usher in another military dictatorship led by Moussa Dadis Camara. After almost a year in office, an attempted counter-coup left Camara injured and he was sent to Morocco for medical treatment. His deputy Sekouba Conate took his place and refused to allow the injured junta leader back as military head. Camara is now in exile in Burkina Faso, after French and some African leaders determined that he was not committed to moving

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the country swiftly towards democratic rule. Guinea remains volatile and tensely stable with elections expected in late-October 2010.

Prior to these recent debacles, Guinea had seen the intractable conflicts of Liberia and Sierra Leone spill into its borders. In all, after five decades of self-rule, poverty, human rights violations, corruption and their resultant political disillusionment remain pervasive in Guinea. However, despite all of these challenges, the reason Guinea still has potential for restoring democracy is because of the unabated defiance by citizens, community and religious leaders, students, churches and mosques; they are in large numbers insisting that good governance and electoral democracy be restored. While these groups are mostly peaceful in their acts of defiance, successive military and civilian administrations have repressed them through torture, abductions and killings. Some of the great examples of nonviolent citizen action included the September 1990 protests by students, civil servants, teachers for reform of wages and conditions of service and of educational facilities; they were dispersed with tear gas and rubber bullets. In May 1991, there were further strikes that took place to protest economic conditions and the slow pace of political transition. President Conte dissolved his military council and promised multi-party democracy but failed to announce a date. Sporadically in 1992 and most of 1993, pro-democracy protests continued, leading up to elections on December 5, 1993, which President Conte won amidst accusations of fraud.

The ensuing years showed relentless prosecution of opposition leaders in kangaroo courts, some of whom were forced to go into exile. These efforts silenced the pro-democracy groups for some time, but as it became clear that President Conte had no intention of relinquishing power, nor any desire to improve governance, discontentment simmered again and more protests were organized, this time by an even broader coalition including religious leaders, labor unions, women 'petty-traders' and NGOs such as the local chapter of Amnesty International. In 2006, unions, students, women groups and opposition parties staged a large-scale protest that lasted more than two weeks forced President Conte to restructure his cabinet and appoint more reform-minded persons at the insistence of Unions and opposition leaders. Conte soon reneged on the deal he struck with the opposition and general strikes resumed intermittently in 2007 and 2008. Desperate, Conte ordered the military to quell the protests and dozens were killed and hundreds arrested as a result. Conte died in December 2008, and the military again seized political power and subverted the constitutional transfer of power.

Political History:

The territory that is now the Republic of Guinea was part of succeeding empires of West Africa, historically referred to as the Empires of the Western Sudan, existing between the 10th and 15th centuries. The first of these empires was the Ghana Empire, which was conquered and annexed by the Songhai Empire; Songhai too was defeated in the second quarter of the 12th century. The

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Mali Empire then thrived, until the advent of the colonialists in the early 19th century. It is from this Mali Empire that so many of the people in present day Guinea—like those in The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Ivory Coast, the Republic of Mali, and others—trace their origins. Guinea's Fulani population, its largest ethnic group, is believed to be descended from Berbers in the Niger plains. Among native Africans, the Mali Empire was called *Manding*, which is why the predominant ethnic group in Guinea, as in The Gambia, are called *Mandinka*, *Mandingo* or *Malinke*, which literally means people from *Manding*.

Ethnic differentiations became highly important in Guinea's political evolution. Parties and administrative regions were patterned along the segregated settlements of the various ethnic groups, and ethnicity influenced or determined how far up a person could climb the ladder of political leadership. This is largely true to date. Political leadership, even prior to independence, was dominated by the broad Mandingo ethnic group.

With the infiltration of the first European explorers and the eventual advent of imperialists, the Mali Empire was splintered into its small chiefdoms, which in some cases were further divided with countries carved out of them along the lines of colonial interests. After the Berlin Conference of 1884 that led to the Scramble for and Partition of Africa, the *Malinke* ruler of Mali, with its inferior military, signed a treaty with the advancing French military. This treaty gave France access to the territory, but left Almamy Samory Toure, Guinea's ruler, adequate autonomy to expand his kingdom by conquest. However, when Samory Toure partnered with the *Toucouleur* and *Sikasso* kingdoms in an attempt to expel the French from the area, he was defeated in 1898 and France gained control of Guinea and the Ivory Coast. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, France negotiated the current boundaries of Guinea with the neighboring British in Sierra Leone and the Portuguese in what is now Guinea Bissau and Liberia.

After intense struggles and militant activities, Guinea finally attained independence on October 2, 1958, after a nationwide referendum rejected French proposals for Guinea to remain a semi-autonomous member of a French West African Community (*Communaute Francaise*). The success of the "No" vote was possible because in 1950, Guinean RDA members in the French Parliament severed ties with the French Communist Party (PCF) at the disapproval of rank and file Guineans. The French Communist Party is socialist in nature and had strong ties with the Soviets, and so their welfare policies and populist tendencies had made them important allies in France of Africans in the French colonies. But as characteristic of the bi-polar world then, RDA officials were pressured into severing ties with PCF. Disillusioned, the people took to mobilizing at the grassroots level with support and leadership from the RDA Secretary General Sekou Toure. In September 1958, when Charles de Gaulle's proposal for a French Community in West Africa was put to a referendum, these impassioned grassroots members pressured the RDA into voting "No" to the proposal; and thus, an independent Guinea was born.

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Sekou Toure, a communist-leaning politician, became Guinea's first president at independence. His Democratic Party of Guinea (PDG) won 56 of the 60 seats in the 1957 territorial elections. After the French angrily withdrew virtually all the resources they had established in Guinea as part of the colonial administration apparatus, Toure sought to forge regional alliances with Ghana and Mali; and this led to the formation of the now-defunct *Ghana-Guinea-Mali Union*. In addition, African scholars and activists flocked into Guinea with pride to help the fledgling country have a robust start. However, by 1960, with their own countries attaining independence, coupled with Sekou Toure's repressive tendencies, these goodwill scholars and professionals left Guinea. Consequently, Guinea turned to the Soviet Union for economic and political support and became a proxy ground for the Cold War.

Under Sekou Toure, Guinea was a one-party dictatorship, hostile to press freedom, human rights and public participation in democratic processes. Some political observers thought that was ironic since it was grassroots support that gave Sekou Toure's PDG its overwhelming victory in both the territorial elections of 1957 and the ensuing referendum of 1958. In addition, Sekou Toure was widely perceived as a nepotistic dictator because of the active way he sought to exclude from government people outside of the *Mandingo* ethnic group. In fact, demographic studies in Guinea since independence suggest that the repression and marginalization of minority ethnic groups led over one-third of the Guinean population to emigrate to other countries in the sub-region.

Sekou Toure's administration was marked by widespread poverty and silencing of political dissent. He died of illness on March 26, 1984, leaving a resource-rich country very poor and underdeveloped. Despite his well-documented despotism, Sekou Toure also was and still is highly regarded as a staunch Pan-African and a doyen of the African independence movement. He also left a legacy as a frugal leader who did not embezzle public resources; and unlike most African leaders, he, like Kwame Nkrumah, did not amass any personal wealth.

In the aftermath of his death, Louis Lansana Beavogui acted as Interim President. However, because President Sekou Toure failed to develop institutions of democracy to guarantee smooth democratic transitions of power, the Interim president was toppled on April 3, 1984 by the military, led by Lieutenant Colonel Lansana Conte.

Guinea's new junta leaders established the Military Committee of National Recovery (CMRN). This military committee abolished the Constitution and ruled by ordinances, decrees and Presidential declarations and orders. The junta then declared commitment to the protection of human rights and soon released all political prisoners. By decree, the junta reorganized the judiciary and decentralized public sector operations and service delivery. It vowed to liberalize the economy and encourage foreign direct investment to help them tap the country's vast natural resources. It further established a transitional parliament called the Transitional Council for

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National Recovery (CTRN), which crafted a new constitution—*Loi Fundamental* (“Fundamental Law”)—and created the Supreme Court of Guinea in 1990. After incessant domestic pressure (including strikes and protests) and international pressure (including ECOWAS and African Union suspensions) the junta organized Guinea’s first multiparty elections on December 19, 1993, with Lansana Conte’s newly formed Party of Unity and Progress (PUP) claiming victory with more than 51% of the votes. His party also claimed 76 of the 114 seats in the National Assembly, in legislative elections held in June, 1995 – a year later than it was first scheduled. The election was generally viewed as neither free nor fair by local and international observers; but at the time it was seen as a great step towards greater democracy and respect for human rights.

Soon this hope that the 1993 election signified progress toward greater democracy was dashed as President Conte abandoned his promise to promote and guarantee human rights for all. Like earlier and most other military regimes in Africa, Conte and his government flouted the very principles that they claim led them to stage a coup d’état. Conte introduced modest economic liberalization policies, but soon reversed course as his oligarch friends began siphoning public resources and corruption became widespread. Conte again was declared winner of the second multi-party election of December 14, 1998 amidst opposition claims of electoral fraud. He soon extended the presidential term from five to seven years, stoking fears that Conte wanted to install himself as president indefinitely. Several protests and attempted military coups were staged against his administration, but he clung to power after another controversial election cycle until his demise in 2008.

The protests that were held in the waning years before the end of the Conte administration were largely led by a conglomeration of civil society groups and political parties. Chief among these were the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG), Union for Progress in Guinea, the Guinean Social Movement (MSG), the New Democratic Forces, and student and religious groups. These people’s movements were comprised of members of opposition parties, former exiled politicians, religious leaders, students, artisans, women and several other unaffiliated citizens, human rights and democracy activists. They emerged from discontent and protests in the 1990s, though at that time these movements were not highly organized, and there was very little coordination among opposition parties and between them and trade unions—in fact there was some rancor between some segments of the opposition movements. During these years, journalists of the private independent media monitored and reported on the human rights violations and other atrocities and this had helped fuel resentment toward the Conte regime, and the military dictators that replaced him.

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As soon as Moussa Dadis Camara staged a coup after Conte's death, civil society groups mobilized and strongly demanded a six-month transition to democracy. They became even more vociferous and adamant in their demands, when signals emerged that the military wanted to renege on their initial promises of greater transparency and a quick democratic transition for the nation. They staged a two-week long protest that halted business in most of Guinea, leading the Junta leader, Camara to order the brutal repression of these protests in September 2009. According to reports, it was the largest opposition protest in Guinea's recent political history, and at least 200 people were killed and women and girls were raped. The persistent protests and these abuses of power by Moussa Dadis Camara led one of his bodyguards to attempt to kill him, but he survived with an injury and was rushed to Morocco for treatment. Camara's deputy, Sekouba Konate, who was in Lebanon at the time, returned to take charge of the country.

In December 2010, Konate, in collaboration with civil society and international partners, crafted a six-month transition period to civilian democratic rule and banned military personnel from contesting the scheduled elections as civilians. During the transition period, the junta agreed to interim power sharing with a civilian Prime Minister to be appointed by the opposition, and Jean-Marie Dore of the opposition Union for Progress in Guinea was selected for this position. After Moussa Dadis Camara was discharged from his treatment in Morocco, at the recommendation of France and local political players he was refused re-entry to Guinea in January 2010 on the pretext that he may dislodge the transition process. He currently resides in exile in Burkina Faso.

In May 2010, the President of Guinea's Supreme Court, Mamadou Sylla announced that 24 candidates met the legal requirements and were certified to contest what was dubbed Guinea's "first free presidential election". Some of the international organizations and entities that helped this transition include RADHO (a French acronym for the African Encounter for the Defense of Human Rights) based in Dakar, and other bilateral and international partner countries who contributed financially to ensure successful elections.¹ As of May 2010, international donor partners had already contributed \$27 million to an election fund.

The Konate administration's six-month transition was on course for elections in June 2010. But before the scheduled date, the elections were postponed amidst claims that logistics for the elections were not completely in place. It was again postponed twice from July to August and then to September. The August and September postponements were made because most of the opposition parties expressed distrust for the head of the electoral commission and there were some violent clashes amongst opposition supporters. The runoff election, after no candidate won 50% of the votes, and again after two postponements of the runoff, is to be held on November 7, 2010.

Strategic Actions:

The importance of trade unions and civil resistance movements in Africa's independence struggles cannot be overemphasized. In each country, the path has been different and particular to that country's realities. To some extent, however, there have been similarities in resistance strategies used in Francophone countries, due mainly to the French policy of "assimilation".² The Lusophone countries had similar colonial experiences and responded to colonialism in similar fashion. Therefore, 19th century trade unionism and civil disobedience in the French and Portuguese colonies had affinity with protest movements in the colonial powers' home countries.

In the case of Guinea-Conakry, the origins of civic movements are varied. Some emerged out of inter-territorial anti-colonial movements like the RDA, or the Rail Workers Union based in Senegal, the seat of French colonial administration in West Africa. The Communist party in France (PCF) also influenced the formation of civic movements in Africa and became especially important in Guinea because of Guinea's left-leaning branch of the RDA. Furthermore, there is a long history of resistance in Guinean culture, and Guineans have fought and protested the travails of enslavement, then colonialism and eventually challenged and ended colonial rule. The earliest resistance movements were formed in the early 18th century when Guineans resisted the advance of colonialism into the hinterland. In the 19th century, these resistance movements had turned militant and had sometimes led to wars with local chieftains who had chosen to collaborate with the French colonial authority.

When the Guinean independence movement began, it drew from Guineans' history of resistance, a passion and a fervor that Sekou Toure and his (PDG) first invoked during the protests of 1955 and in the general elections of 1957. The 1955 protests came as a result of the widespread belief by the RDA that the 1954 elections, in which Guineans elected a representative to the French assembly, were fraudulent due to actions of the French Colonial Authority. It took longer than six months before the election results were certified, at which point the pro-French candidate Barry Diawandou was declared the winner of the vacant seat previously occupied by the late Yacine Diallo. During these protests, Sekou Toure used the symbol of his party—the elephant, which gained national significance—to arouse nationalist feelings. As a strategy, these protest movements were very creative. They used dances to raise funds and they recruited communities to feed the volunteers making protest tours of the provinces. An excerpt from one of their songs that became emblematic of their freedom-loving spirits goes as follows:

...they say the elephant does not exist
But here is the elephant
The elephant no one can beat

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In the song, the people—the protesters—led by Sekou Toure are the elephants and the oppressors and the colonialists can't beat down their spirits. This form of resistance, chanting, is not uncommon in West Africa, a place rich in oral traditions. African oral traditions praise courage and independence. Sekou Toure, introducing his running mate Sayfoulaye Diallo, told the people of Guinea about a particular chief who abandoned his chieftaincy and the power that comes with that, to stand up for freedom. In that regard, he asked Guineans to “choose between servitude and a free sky, your chain and the horizon...”. Such powerful oratory and traditional cultural invocations appealed to and connected the movement with the grassroots.

Unfortunately, Sekou Toure, after becoming president, abandoned the grassroots origin of his ascent to political office. His government became dictatorial in the image of the Soviet Union, his principal funders. He crushed all political dissent and hundreds of thousands and eventually millions of Guineans went into voluntary exile in neighboring countries. The largest protests against Sekou Toure's rule were staged in 1962 and he blamed them on the Soviet Union and turned to the United States for friendship, but then later turned back to the Soviet Union for support. He played the two superpowers that way until his demise in 1984.

After the death of Sekou Toure, the military junta that replaced him was autocratic and refused to allow people to participate in the political process. During this transition period, the old fervor for resistance began to brew again. Exiles sought to return to begin anew and challenge the new dictatorship. By the early 1990s, pressure mounted from mine workers, teachers and students unions, and the military junta organized an election in 1993, and the incumbent military leader was the declared winner. By the turn of the century, the government of Lansana Conte had become so inefficient and corrupt that the unions and opposition parties staged long protests decrying poverty, high prices and inflation. Being a constitutionally powerful president, Conte easily crushed any strikes, usually through police and armed service harassment, mass arrests, detentions, torture, and firing of most or all civil servants who participated in such strikes.

However, civil society groups, opposition parties and unions did not give up and by 2005, their movement grew and soon the National Confederation of Guinean Workers (CNTG) and the Guinean Workers Union (USTG), two formerly rival unions, formed a coalition. The movement's strategy was and remains to expand the coalition while maintaining unity among its current supporters—the Roman Catholic Church, Mosques in the city of Conakry and beyond, and students, NGOs, among an array of citizens' movements. Guineans of various persuasions also began to organize outside their clan and ethnic political cleavages to unite against the dictatorship.

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In 2007, the coalition launched an enduring strike, with included participation from church and mosque leaders and women (mainly small traders and market vendors), that forced president Conte to reduce his presidential powers and appoint a prime minister to be endorsed by the unions, religious leaders and the protesting organizations. The unrelenting spirit of these protesters, as well as the tenacity to which Conte clung to power, is captured in a January 2007 editorial of the *Les Pays* newspaper of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, thus: "After a cloudy sky, the great social storm that broke over Guinea, menacing the established regime, did not succeed in sweeping away the General-President.... A great disillusionment, at the end of the day: the Conté page has not been turned and the recent popular demonstrations riots have not sounded the sunset of the Conté era." That is how stubborn the Conte presidency was. He died after a protracted illness, but this too did not bring stability.

The military launched a coup shortly after the death of Lansana Conte and established a military council. But this coup was not popular, as citizens were hoping that Conte's demise would bring about greater democratic changes. Therefore, citizens led by opposition party leaders such as Cellou Dalein Diallo, Alpha Conde and church leaders mobilized against the new military dictatorship. They formed the Guinea Social Movement (MSG) and the *Forces Vives* ("Active Forces"), a coalition of opposition parties, trade unions and other civil society groups to guarantee democracy in Guinea. This alliance made voices of dissent louder, forceful and more recognized than before. In addition to using cultural outlets such as dances and poetry to vent their ire during protest marches against the new dictatorship, the movement convinced businesses and stores to remain closed as a form of economic noncooperation with the coup. They also demanded that international and bilateral support to the government be curtailed, except for support that goes directly to the people through NGOs. These economic costs imposed upon the junta both domestically and internationally, and its lack of recognition in most parts of the world, cut deep into the dictatorship's nerve center, and the junta had to rely for funding on tariffs and levied daily business excise duties.

In addition, the movement succeeded in dividing the military junta to the extent that the junta leader and self-declared Head of State, Moussa Dadis Camara, was injured when one of his guards attempted to assassinate him. While Camara received medical treatment in Morocco for his injuries, Sekouba Konate—the Interim Head of State—set up a six-month transition to democracy that barred military personnel from participating in elections immediately after retiring. Furthermore, at popular request, Konate refused Camara's re-entry into Guinea from Morocco.

Following these developments, the opposition and civil society reveled in a new sense of victory but also remained alert to any tendency to subvert the promise of democracy. Sekouba Konate vowed to step aside after June 2010 elections, which were delayed and ultimately held in August, and a runoff election has now been scheduled for November 7, although it is questionable

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whether or not the military will try to supplant him before he hands over power to a civilian administration. If so, movement leaders say that civil resistance will continue with greater intensity.

Ensuing Events:

Guinea's current situation remains one of those great contradictions of the natural affluence of most African countries. Although very rich in natural resources, Guinea remains a structurally poor country. Apart from the economy in the city, most of Guinea remains far behind modern market economics with subsistence agriculture, untapped markets and widespread poverty. Most Guineans continue to live in penury, while their leaders wallow in luxury. In addition, a far greater section of Guinea's economic and political infrastructure remain underdeveloped, causing its economy to produce below even its median potential since independence. At present, more than 40 percent of the Guinean population is estimated to have annual incomes of merely \$300 USD.

Yet, despite these dire economic conditions and a history of dictatorship, Guineans have repeatedly mobilized grassroots civil resistance and this, combined with international pressure, overturned the 2008 Camara dictatorship and led to a new plan for multi-party elections to take place in June 2010. After delays, the elections were eventually held in August 2010, but the results were inconclusive and the run-off election between Cellou Dalein Diallo of the Union of Democratic Forces of Guinea (UFDG) and Alpha Conde of the Rally of the Guinean People (RPG) were postponed three times and finally re-scheduled for November 7, 2010. While this is a great achievement, old party rifts are re-emerging and some groups are re-organizing along ethnic lines, stoking fears that the broad Mandingo ethnic coalition (Malinke, Sousou, and other ethnic groups), which has ruled since independence, is again trying to steal the election. On the other hand, some NGOs, mobilized by their umbrella organizations, along with the National Council of Civil Society Organizations, and the newly-established civil society coalition called Civic Alliance, as well as the coalition of Guinea's two largest trade unions—National Confederation of Guinean Workers (CNTG) and the Guinean Workers Union (USTG)—are increasingly putting pressure on opposition parties to challenge the parties that are seen to have sympathy from the military.

The outcome of this critical time for Guinea remains to be seen. While Guinea continues to struggle with poverty, underdevelopment, overwhelming unemployment and military dictatorships, there is hope. Albeit the numerous postponements of elections in the months following June 2010, the current junta may leave power to a civilian administration after the run-off elections. However, even if a successful democratic transition takes place, it is likely there will be even greater organizing and protests among civil society in the future to ensure that Guinea's nascent democracy becomes rooted and secure.

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Endnotes:

1. Information obtained from the internet and it is ascribed to the United Nations office in Guinea.
2. “Assimilation” was one ideological basis of French colonial policy in the 19th and 20th centuries. In contrast with British imperial policy, the French taught their subjects that, by adopting French language and culture, they could eventually become French. The famous ‘[Four Communes](#)’ in [Senegal](#) were seen as proof of this. Here Africans were, in theory, afforded all the rights of French citizens...” See *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* by Raymond F. Betts.

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