

Navigating Ethnic Conflict: Implications for National Identity and Trust in Central Government in Guinea-Bissau

Group constitution:

Student Name	Program	Individual Title
Rodrigo Simões (53286)	Master's in International Development and Public Policy	Navigating Ethnic Conflict: Implications for National Identity and Trust in Central Government in Guinea- Bissau

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Advisor: Nikita Melnikov

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Central Government in Guinea-Bissau**

Rodrigo Simões

Work Project carried out under the supervision of:

Professor Nikita Melnikov, Nova School of Business and Economics

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Abstract

This report aims to shed light on the social and political cohesion effects caused by inter-ethnic rivalry in Guinea-Bissau. Its methodology was based on a statistical analysis of a public opinion survey conducted in the country in 2018, using multivariable linear regressions to study the relationship between conflict, national identity and trust, both among ethnic groups and towards political institutions. The study found that conflict establishes a negative correlation with these factors, highlighting the adverse effects of a weak capability of the central state in mediating and solving these issues.

Keywords: Guinea-Bissau; Ethnicity; Conflict; Institutions; Politics; Trust

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1. Introduction

The history of Africa has been stained by an intense manipulation of its geopolitics by foreign forces in the past centuries. The fixation of artificial borders along its territory has caused the separation of ethnic groups and the abbey of different ethnicities in the same limited amount of settlement, making African states highly heterogeneous in demographic terms. This melting pot of practices, cultures, and habits has often been one reason for disputes ranging from regional conflict to civil wars that see global powers as interacting actors.

These events also occur in countries that have mostly not completed eighty years of independence and have tremendous implications for national identity and welfare. Among the nations that in the last decades have presented the worst macro and microeconomic indicators globally and a generalised feeling of incommmodity stands Guinea-Bissau. This state comprises a highly diverse population of a little over 2 million despite being the second smallest country in continental western Africa by total area.

This conglomeration among the Bissau-Guinean people includes a variety of ethnic groups and different religious practices that have occasionally originated internal political challenges and struggles for power. These tensions, primarily caused by competition for land and disputes concerning the distribution of resources or access to economic opportunity, have induced an almost persistent political instability in the country that since after the war for independence sparked several coups and coup attempts, reaching the peak with the Civil War between 1998 and 1999.

Even though interethnic conflict has become less frequent in the 21st century, its effect on the country's cohesion and trust in central government institutions must be understood and analysed. Subsequently, I propose to investigate the repercussions of conflict among ethnic groups in the perception of national identity among the people of Guinea-Bissau and how they perceive the bodies that govern the country, focusing on the following questions: How does

conflict affect the sense of national identity? Do ethnicities with conflicting backgrounds trust each other? And do they trust government institutions?

1.1. Research Objectives

This work project aims to evaluate the consequences of regional interethnic conflict on the fragility of Guinea-Bissau. For this evaluation, I will address two main themes: identity and trust.

For the first one, I aim to establish a relationship between the rivalry between ethnicities and whether their identification falls more to their ethnic identity or the national one. Concerning trust, I intend to explore how this rivalry can affect confidence not only among different ethnic groups but also in central government institutions, namely the President and the Parliament of the country.

1.2. Methodology

For this research, I used a wide range of literature, ranging from reports on the ethnic background of West Africa to academic papers that covered the subject of conflict and its implications. The Vozes do Povo initiative provided the dataset required for the analysis, and it consists of a public opinion survey undertaken in 2018. This poll adopts international scientific standards based upon Afrobarometer's methodology and questionnaire, focusing on issues related to the country's social practices and political institutions, including government performance.

Complementing this poll, Miguel Carter and Carlos Cardoso from the DEMOS organisation elaborated a report that contemplates a complete descriptive analysis of the results, which was also extensively consulted.

1.3. Limitations

This examination aims to shed light on the complex dating among ethnic conflict, national identity, and belief in political establishments in Guinea-Bissau. While the studies have yielded valuable insights, it's important to acknowledge their limitations. In this segment, numerous vital barriers must be considered while decoding the findings and implications of this analysis.

This study's main limitation is the dataset's narrow sample size. Not only is the dataset limited, but Guinea-Bissau is also a country marked by ethnic diversity and complex sociopolitical dynamics, which can be challenging to represent in a robust statistical analysis. Although every effort is made to ensure the data set is representative, the sample size may only capture the state of some species and trace elements. Additionally, being the data collected through a household survey, there is always the possibility of measurement error and response bias. Consequently, one needs to be cautious when evaluating the external validity of the report and extrapolating these results to different contexts.

This study focuses on complex topics such as identity and trust in government bodies. Even though efforts have been made to control for other variables, establishing causality in this convoluted analysis may be sensitive. These findings should be taken as suggestive of potential relationships rather than a clear-cut proof of causation.

The dataset used in this study is limited to a specific year (e.g., data from 2018), which fails to capture the dynamics of ethnic conflict, national identity, political beliefs, and their evolution over time. These factors can fluctuate along a country's history, influenced by changes in the political, economic, and social spectrum. Thereupon, the study findings may not adequately reflect the long-term implications of these developments.

1.4. Background

To understand Guinea-Bissau's contemporary interethnic conflicts, one must first understand its historical roots and context. The nation's main ethnic groups include the Fula (28.5% of the population), the Balanta (22.5%), the Mandinka (14.7%), the Papel (9.1%), the Manjaca (8.3%), and other minorities, from which the Bijagós and the Nalu I should also mention. Each ethnicity presents its language, traditions, and unique culture. Besides, most of these groups identify with one specific religion: the Fula are predominantly Sunni Muslims, and the Balanta adhere to African folk religions, for instance (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2008). Throughout its pre-colonial history, Guinea-Bissau oversaw a primarily peaceful coexistence of its inhabitants. However, this diversity eventually became a source of tension and conflict, especially after the nation's independence was declared in 1973.

Portugal's colonial rule in Guinea-Bissau from the late 19th century to the mid-20th century was pivotal in shaping interethnic dynamics. The colonial authorities employed a policy of divide and rule, exacerbating ethnic divisions to maintain control. Ethnic groups were often turned against each other, leading to distrust and conflict. The struggle for independence from colonial rule led by the Marxist-Leninist PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde) in the 1960s and 1970s was another important chapter in Guinea-Bissau history that created significant crises underneath it. While the movement was primarily united in its goal of liberation, tensions rose as different ethnic groups vied for influence.

In the years following the independence of most African nations, the western part of the continent experienced an exceptionally stable and peaceful postcolonial governance transition (Alexandre Marc, 2015). Guinea-Bissau followed this trend until the 1980s, when it suffered many obstacles, such as political unrest, military takeovers, and economic hardships. Political leaders continued to use ethnic divisions as a means of power consolidation, which resulted in instability cycles.

Interethnic conflict continues to occur in modern-day Guinea-Bissau and frequently takes the form of social instability at the regional level. Conflicts and mistrust between ethnic groups have occasionally broken out due to competition for resources, land, and political representation. The identified situations remain mainly in the northern part of the country and in the Bijagó islands, where the presence of the state has been reported to be nearly null. In the Cacheu region, the Balanta are accused by the Fula, the Manjaca and the Mandinka of cattle raiding. Cattle are prized as important possessions, representations of riches and high social position, and they are frequently used as the focal point of events that express social status. Bissau-Guineans are fully aware of the cultural origins of this phenomenon: cattle rustling is a Balanta tradition. This practice did not historically cause genuine animosity with other social groupings. With the deepening of this situation during the previous decade and the shift from a marginal approach to an organised and established effort against cattle producers from all areas, these thefts have become a source of inter-ethnic violence (Voz di Paz, 2010). In the Bijagó islands, the occupation of land traditionally owned by the Bijagós by the Nalu has also created some hostilities.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ethnic and Identity-Based Networks

The relationship between trust and conflict is widely explored in the literature. "Trust, Ethnicity, and Identity: Beyond the New Institutional Economics of Ethnic Trading Networks, Contract Law, and Gift-Exchange," by Janet Tai Landa, is a valuable investigation of the complex interaction between trust, ethnicity, and identity within the context of ethnic trading networks. Landa investigates the complex relationship between these factors on social and political levels, which goes beyond simple economic exchange. Her work offers insights into how trust functions in particular ethnic contexts and how it can both be a unifying factor and cause friction.

There are several ethnic communities where trust acts as a unifying factor. Trust among community members is facilitated by shared ethnic identities and cultural norms. Individuals can cooperate and engage in economic activities with a sense of security and mutual understanding when there is trust between them. Conversely, Landa's work highlights moments where trust can also be a source of tension between ethnicities. She explores situations where trust may not extend beyond one's ethnic group, leading to mistrust or scepticism when dealing with members of other ethnicities. These tensions can arise from historical conflicts, resource competition, or differing cultural norms.

Additionally, Landa's work emphasises that trust is intimately linked to ethnic identity. Ethnic identity plays a significant role in determining whom individuals trust and how much confidence they extend. Trust can be influenced by shared ethnicity and belonging to a particular ethnic group. (Landa, 1994)

2.2. The formation of a national identity

To understand how a generalised sense of national identity can be constructed in new states, in his work "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism", Benedict Anderson introduces the idea of "imagined communities," suggesting that nations are not inherent or pre-existing but instead socially constructed. This construction is based on a shared sense of identity among individuals who may never meet but are connected through common symbols, languages, and narratives. Anderson widely attributes this task to the press and the media, which are vital in creating and maintaining a common identity among a heterogeneous population.

The book also explores how nationalism was impacted by colonialism. While in my analysis I intend to find results that prove that national identity grows weaker in regions with internal conflict, Anderson contends that colonial rule frequently fostered national identity by establishing a contrast between the colonised and the colonisers—this dynamic supported self-

determination-focused nationalist movements. Conflict may indeed strongly affect the sense of national identity.

In Anderson's work, "ideological state apparatuses" are crucial for how governments spread their official narratives and encourage a sense of community among their people. This can explain why communities living in regions with a weak presence of the state also demonstrate lower levels of national identity. (Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983)

3. Data Collection

The data provided by the Vozes do Povo initiative consists of the results of a public opinion survey conducted in 2018 across most of the territory of Guinea-Bissau in numerous rounds of interviews. The participants came from every social strata, and the author was able to collect data on how comfortable they were with the discussion. He states that surprisingly, 91% of the respondents were satisfied during the talk, 8% revealed not to be very comfortable, and 1% expressed distrust. These numbers already acknowledge that response bias might not be a substantial concern about the dataset. Every variable identifying the respondent was removed to ensure privacy and anonymity.

The dataset contemplates 1184 respondents, from which 555 (46.88%) identified as women and 629 (53.12%) as men. The geographical range of the participants is evenly distributed, with 24.32% living in the East province, 27.70% in the North, 28.38% in the capital city of Bissau and 19.59% in the South.

4. Empirical Approach

For the empirical approach of the analysis, and given that the survey's participation was randomised, I used multivariable linear regressions to establish a relationship between the independent variable *conflict* and four other outcome variables, with the same set of control variables for each regression.

To obtain a satisfactory representation of conflict, I computed a continuous variable that consisted of the ratio between the number of people living in the same region (as a particular participant) that belonged to an ethnic group with a background of conflict with his ethnicity and the whole population of the area. To do this, I identified four pairs of ethnic groups that have lived through a context of rivalry in the past few years: the Balanta and the Mandinka, the Balanta and the Fula, the Balanda and the Manjako, and the Bijagós and the Nalu.

The regressions were applied as follows:

$$Y_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Conf + \beta_2 Gender + \beta_3 Age + \beta_4 Ethnic + \beta_5 Edu + \beta_6 Occu + \beta_7 Urban + \varepsilon$$

In this model, Y_t represents the outcome variable being studied; *Conf* is the variable for conflict, *Gender* is a dummy variable, *Age* stands for the age of the participant, *Ethnic*, *Edu* and *Occu* are sets of dummy variables that represent all the ethnic groups, education levels and type of occupation, respectively.

The outcome variables were generated as dummies, given the subjectivity that their original scale in the dataset could take. They are *Identity*, which takes the value of 1 if the respondent identifies more with Bissau-Guinean than with their ethnic group or if this identity is equally perceived, and 0 otherwise, and three trust-related variables that assume the value of 1 if the respondent has any level of trust regards the respective institution and 0 otherwise. These

variables include *Trust in people from other ethnicities*, *Trust in the President*, and *Trust in the Parliament*.

5. Results

The obtained results are shown in the following table:¹

Analysis Results				
Variables	Identity	Trust in other Ethnicities	Trust in President	Trust in Parliament
Conflict	−0.181** (0.087)	−0.152*** (0.090)	−0.192** (0.094)	−0.162** (0.082)
Gender	−0.161* (0.030)	−0.168* (0.028)	−0.096** (0.032)	— —
Age	0.000* (0.000)	— —	— —	— —
Urban	−0.22* (0.031)	— —	−0.072** (0.034)	— —

As expected from the literature review, the study found significant negative correlations between interethnic conflict and several aspects of social cohesion in Guinea-Bissau, including national identity, trust between ethnic groups, trust in political institutions, particularly the president, and trust in the legislature. These results provide light on the complex relationships between racial tensions and the national fabric of trust and unity in Guinea-Bissau.

Inter-ethnic conflict and national identity were found to be negatively correlated, which highlights a significant feature of Guinea-Bissau's social landscape. It implies that as ethnic conflicts worsen, so does the general sense of national identity. This effect is widespread; as

¹ Standard errors reported in parenthesis. *significant at 1%; **significant at 5%; ***significant at 10%. These results were controlled for other demographic and socioeconomic dummies, including ethnicity, education level, and occupation.

ethnic tensions rise, people frequently revert to more restricted ethnic identities, which weakens their sense of overall national identity.

The inverse relationship between interethnic conflict and ethnic group trust demonstrates the long-lasting effects of ethnic conflicts. When such confrontations are frequent, it is only natural for trust between various ethnic populations to erode. Fear and suspicion can damage intergroup relations and cooperation, further escalating differences.

Additionally, the study's findings show a negative relationship between interethnic conflict and confidence in political institutions, particularly the president and the legislature. These connections point to a crisis of confidence in Guinea-Bissau's political system, as ethnic tensions fuel populace cynicism. As interethnic disputes continue, people may have a negative opinion of political figures and institutions because they think they aggravate rather than ease ethnic tensions.

6. Conclusion

In the complex landscape of Guinea-Bissau, the results of this report provide light on the deep effects of inter-ethnic violence on national identity, dynamics of ethnic group trust, and trust in political institutions in the complex environment of Guinea-Bissau. These insights highlight the urgent need for comprehensive steps to address these issues and map a route towards a more unified and peaceful nation as Guinea-Bissau struggles with long-standing ethnic conflicts and fragile institutions.

The negative correlations observed between inter-ethnic conflict and national identity highlight the pressing urgency to promote a sense of shared belonging among citizens. To achieve this, the following recommendations emerge as essential:

Promoting National Identity: Initiatives that focus on strengthening national identity should be prioritized. These efforts should emphasize the common cultural heritage, history, and values

that unite Guinea-Bissau's diverse ethnic groups. Educational programs, cultural exchanges, and commemorations of shared historical events can serve as powerful tools in fostering a strong national identity.

Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution: Effective national and local-level reconciliation initiatives should be created and implemented. These initiatives must involve the communities directly impacted by previous conflicts, promote communication, and address complaints.

Strengthening Political Institutions: Restoring public confidence in political institutions is critical. Institutional reforms promoting transparency, accountability, and inclusivity must be prioritised in Guinea-Bissau. The country has been showing advances in democratization along the 2010s and therefore, political leaders should embrace this positive evolution and show a dedication to listening to the issues of other ethnic groups and collaborating to overcome them.

Conflict resolution: Preventing conflicts requires being proactive and present. Early warning systems and conflict resolution processes should be implemented to recognize and handle possible sources of tension before they become violent. This requires the central state to ensure that remote areas are still safe and monitored, leaving no space to let interethnic conflict not be mediated.

These recommendations are interrelated and call for a concerted effort from the public sector, nongovernmental organisations, international organisations, and the general public. Although the road to a more peaceful Guinea-Bissau is difficult, it is possible with a persistent dedication to promoting unity and tackling the underlying causes of interethnic conflict.

In conclusion, Guinea-Bissau is at a pivotal point in its history where the consequences of past ethnic hostilities can either exacerbate divisions or become a source of strength and resiliency. By implementing these suggestions and cooperating with others, Guinea-Bissau may create a

future marked by inter-ethnic harmony, mutual trust, and economic success. It is a journey that calls for devotion and unshakable adherence to the country's common ideas and aspirations.

7. References

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