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AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

A MURDER AND A SHOOTING

WHAT DO TWO RECENT INCIDENTS
REVEAL ABOUT GUINEA-BISSAU'S
COCAINE POLITICS?

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Cover: The Presidential palace in Bissau, where the Bari brothers previously worked as part of the Presidential Guard.

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Please direct inquiries to:

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

Avenue de France 23

Geneva

www.globalinitiative.net

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INTRODUCTION

Guinea-Bissau has long been a central cog in the international cocaine trafficking system. Between 2005 and 2007, consignments of cocaine that had washed up on the country's beaches was used to paint buildings by bemused fishermen who had chanced across the mysterious powder.¹ Colombian traffickers brazenly drove the streets of Bissau in yellow Hummers,² and the country at one point was dubbed 'Africa's first narco state' by the press, reportedly citing the UNODC.³

Today, Bissau's cocaine market is booming once again, and has arguably become more profitable than at any point in the country's history.⁴ Tonnes of cocaine are regularly being trafficked through Guinea-Bissau, Colombians can be spotted at the top hotels in the capital, and retail prices for cocaine and crack are falling.⁵

Yet, in contrast to cocaine capitals in other parts of the world, murders, and violence more generally, linked to the cocaine trade are uncommon in Bissau. And in the handful of cases where the cocaine trade has triggered violence, it has tended to be political in nature – coups, or assassinations of high-level political figures – contained within the small coterie of senior political players who benefit most from the lucrative trade, leaving ordinary Bissau-Guineans untouched.

So when in late July there were rumours that a Spaniard had been shot and killed in Guinea-Bissau's paradisaical Bijagos archipelago, a major offshore cocaine transshipment point for cocaine, it was highly unusual. It was rumoured that the murder was linked to a dispute over cocaine. In the end, the story turned out to be false – there was no murdered Spaniard, and the link to the Bijagos archipelago remains unclear. But the story does appear to have its basis in a more complex and equally disturbing truth. And in one detail it proved accurate: it had a strong whiff of the kind of violence that has been seen in Guinea-Bissau's cocaine trade in the past.

Then, on 23 July, the body of a murdered man was found by fishermen on the shores of the Mansoa River, close to João Landim, a town near Bissau. It is not difficult to hide a body in Bissau's lush, dense tropical forests and islands and make it disappear. The fact that the body was found, just days after the victim had reportedly disappeared, suggests that either this had been the perpetrator's intention – that the murder had been designed to convey a message – or that it had not been committed by professionals.

At a press conference on 26 July, the family of the dead man confirmed that the body was that of Tano Bari, a member of Guinea-Bissau's presidential guard.⁶

At around the same time, a Colombian cocaine trafficker was reportedly shot in the leg by a member of Guinea-Bissau's military in connection to a cocaine consignment stolen from the Colombians by a Bissau-Guinean widely known to be a cocaine trafficker.⁷ The Colombian had been tasked with protecting the consignment. The cocaine thief – reportedly Danilson Fernandes Gomes Lé, known more commonly as 'Nick', is widely considered by sources to be among Guinea-Bissau's most prominent cocaine traffickers.⁸ The shooter was working for him, and had probably gone off-script. The injured Colombian fled to Spain (which may well have fed the rumour mill of a dead Spaniard). In the days after the shooting, the wholesale price of cocaine in Bissau plummeted – from €10 000–16 000 to €7 000 per kilogram – as 'Nick' tried to offload the cocaine for quick cash.⁹

Are these two violent incidents connected? Why the sudden flurry of violence? And what might it foretell?

The clue can be found in the country's politics. The cocaine economy is inextricably linked to the Machiavellian politics of the tiny West African state. In the country's recent history, outbreaks of violence in the former can be closely correlated to moments of instability in the latter.

Guinea-Bissau is on the pathway to elections. Legislative and presidential elections are scheduled for November. Meanwhile, in the weeks following the murder and shooting, there were two reshuffles involving senior government posts – the replacement of the attorney general and the prime minister. At the same time, there have been growing crackdowns on freedom of the press in the country. With a flourishing cocaine market and expensive election campaigns looming in the coming months that need to be financed, Guinea-Bissau appears to be yet again entering a period of significant upheaval.

AN UNPROFESSIONAL MURDER

The circumstances surrounding Bari's death are unclear. According to several sources, Bari had travelled from Portugal to Guinea-Bissau on 19 July, and disappeared shortly afterwards. Two days after the body was found, a leaked recording of a conversation reportedly between Bari and Embaló (which the president confirmed as being authentic in statements to the press)¹⁰ revealed that the guardsman had been afraid before his murder broke on social media.¹¹ He is recorded saying: 'They followed me many times, they even hit my car, and I kept quiet ...'¹²

In the audio, Bari questions the happenings surrounding his older brother, Tchernó Bari,¹³ former head of the presidential guard. Tchernó Bari had – until his dismissal by the president – long been a close ally of the president, Umaro Sissoco Embaló. He had repeatedly been linked to assaults on civil society members perceived to be critical of the Embaló administration.¹⁴ The presidential guard is the security unit pivotal to the president's safety.

There have also been widely reported links between Tchernó Bari and the cocaine trade. Eyewitness reports indicate he was involved in unloading consignments from a private aeroplane at Bissau's airport in December 2023 and transporting them to a central Bissau location. This was an incident involving two aircraft that are believed¹⁵ to have then continued on their journey to Ghana.¹⁶ Shortly afterwards, Tchernó Bari was dismissed, with no official reason given.

In June 2025, Tchernó Bari's house was raided. He was not home at the time, but reportedly gave himself up to the military shortly afterwards, knowing he would be detained imminently. According to media reports, he was arrested in possession of confidential documents implicating the president in a drug trafficking and embezzlement case, as well as alleged plans to stage a *coup d'état*.¹⁷ The veracity of the media report covering the details of Tchernó Bari's detention and the rationale for it is unclear. It is unlikely that Tchernó Bari was seeking to stage a coup. Since then, Tchernó Bari has remained at the offices of the military's chief of staff, Biague Na Ntan. He has not been formally charged or arrested, and the reasons for his ongoing stay there – whether he was forcefully detained or sought self-protection – are shrouded in mystery.

Tano Bari's family and the Human Rights League have called for a thorough investigation and for justice to be done.¹⁸ However, investigations into the murder have been limited, and the likelihood of a transparent conclusion being reached is low. The Judicial Police, the sole institution in Guinea-Bissau with a mandate to investigate organized crime, have, particularly since 2020, been constrained in the operations they can undertake, largely by pressure from the executive.¹⁹ Their ability to work on this case is likely to be significantly shackled.

And there have been efforts to keep the lid tightly closed on the details surrounding the murder: on 27 July, a journalist from Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP), Waldir Araújo, was reportedly assaulted while attempting to cover the murder the day after the family's press conference.²⁰ Shortly after, on 15 August, the government suspended transmission of RTP and Agência Lusa (another Portuguese news outlet), and expelled the journalists of both organizations.²¹ No reasons were given for this move by the government communications department. Despite clampdowns on the media, which have been seen in the country since early 2020,²² expelling international media houses is an unprecedented step. The timing comes close to that of the assault on the journalist in connection to Tano Bari's murder. While the government's motivations remain unclear, the timing would suggest the attempted investigation into the murder may have been a contributing factor.

Regardless, the murder meanwhile is reverberating across the Bissauan political ecosystem.

A COLOMBIAN COCAINE TRAFFICKER IS SHOT

Tonnes of cocaine are imported by sea, and to a lesser extent by air, warehoused and trafficked out of Guinea-Bissau, most if en route to markets in Europe. This high volume of bulk transit trade is in line with broader regional trends, as ever higher cocaine production in Latin America, and ongoing law enforcement pressure on the direct routes from Latin America to Europe mean that large volumes of cocaine are channelled through West Africa.

Colombian cocaine networks have been operating in Guinea-Bissau since the early 2000s,²³ and continue to have a prominent presence in the country. A significant number of them – many mid-ranking members of Colombia's major cartels – regularly travel into and out of the country. Law enforcement officials note that since around 2020, they have once again become more conspicuous in their activities.

For example, 2.63 tonnes of cocaine were seized²⁴ on a private plane in Bissau's Osvaldo Vieira Airport in September 2024. That incident was at least in part coordinated by Colombian networks, and there was one Colombian national on board.²⁵ In September 2019 a seizure of 1.89 tonnes of cocaine, allegedly coordinated by one of Bissau's long-standing traffickers, was tied to the Clan del Golfo, one of Colombia's most powerful cartels, through Colombian police investigations and investigative journalism reporting.²⁶

But Colombian networks cannot operate alone. The logistics and high-level protection they need to enable such a volume of trade to be sustained are coordinated by Bissau-Guineans. The Colombians therefore work closely with a handful of key intermediaries in the small West African state, typically dual European-Bissauan nationals involved in business in Bissau.

Only, in this business, intermediaries are sometimes not to be trusted. One of them is the reported cocaine thief, 'Nick'. Operating in the cocaine trade for over a decade, Nick rose to prominence in the last five years. In March 2020, he was appointed²⁷ to head EP-Petroguin, Guinea-Bissau's national oil company, a controversial appointment that triggered a complaint by the opposition PRS (Party for Social Renewal). No longer a Petroguin postholder, Nick is widely known to finance several political figures. (Ironically, he ran for election as an MP for the PRS political party in the 2023 legislative elections, albeit unsuccessfully.²⁸) It is unclear whether he will put himself forward for the November race.

Colombians linked to the cocaine trade often stay at Nick's spacious residence. And they do not seem particularly concerned about keeping a low profile, as they some also stay at Bissau's most luxurious hotel – the place to see and be seen – the CEIBA. In short, there was nothing particularly unusual about a small group of Colombian nationals travelling to Bissau in late July to oversee a cocaine transshipment, in coordination with Nick.

Neither is it entirely unusual for consignments to be stolen in Bissau. Several significant Latin American groups, including reportedly the Brazilian Primeiro Comando da Capital, have had large consignments go missing in Bissau, and struggled to recover them.²⁹ In one case, a Bissau-Guinean trafficker reportedly stole almost one tonne from another major actor – there appeared to be little fallout.³⁰

However, in July, the theft by Nick of a substantial stash of cocaine from the Colombians – reported by some to be in the region of 600 kilograms – coordinated with support from elements of the Bissau-Guinean military, resulted in a shooting.

This incident has eerie echoes of the situation in Bissau in 2006, when the cocaine trade was also running at full steam and Latin American traffickers were at large, operating with high-level protection from the Bissauan military and government office holders. But evidence³¹ suggests that the military began stealing from the Latin American suppliers around that time, triggering distrust in their Bissauan counterparts. The Colombians decided to shift operations to neighbouring countries.

In just a year, Bissau's bulk transit trade was largely a thing of the past. The drug revenue available to the state suddenly tanked, with the effect of mounting political tensions among senior state figures vying for power. There ensued a number of high-profile assassinations,³² including the murder of military chief of staff Na Waie and the revenge killing of President Vieira in 2009.

The ramifications of the July cocaine theft shooting are uncertain. If Nick loses the trust of some of his largest suppliers, it could have implications for his role in the cocaine trade, and for senior figures that depend on financing from him. In the past in this country, violence has surged when cocaine revenue has dwindled.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS?

Bissau's cocaine market is booming. As the country nears elections in November – which are notoriously expensive to fund – the cocaine trade is well positioned to once again bankroll electoral campaigns.³³ Yet, according to close observers, Nick is broke – leading to the need for quick cash, hence the theft and the subsequent shooting. As elections near, the financial needs of those looking to campaign in the elections are becoming increasingly acute.

There is tension in the system in Bissau. And the cracks are starting to show – in the murder of presidential guardsman Tano Bari, the ongoing stay of his brother, Tchernô Bari, former head of the presidential guard, in military buildings and in the shooting of the Colombian cocaine trafficker. The Baris occupied central roles in the security infrastructure, and their fates are closely tied to political wrangling in the country.

It would appear to be no coincidence that these two incidents occurred three months before the contentious legislative and presidential elections scheduled for November. Although the current incumbent, President Embaló, is firm favourite to win, elections usher in moments of political uncertainty and power structures become less clear.



Politics and cocaine in Guinea-Bissau have gone hand in hand for decades. Upheavals in one cause ripples in the other. Bissau's elite protection network³⁴ – including the state's security, political and criminal justice institutions – provide cover to enable the flow of bulk cocaine through the country, ensuring the risk of interception remains acceptably low. In turn, the lucrative cocaine trafficking market is the glue holding together the constellation of uneasy power alliances in Bissau's elite protection structure. When that glue weakens, like it did in 2006, the structure fractures, equilibrium is ruptured and violence flares. Cocaine thus operates both as a driver of violence and as a fortifier of the political status quo.

The political structure may already be fracturing: Bacari Biai, the attorney general, was abruptly dismissed³⁵ on 30 July, seven days after Bari's death. Some observers suggest that he may have been used as a scapegoat for purportedly conducting a fruitless inquiry into the incident. On 7 August, Rui Landim was replaced³⁶ by the president with Braima Camara as prime minister.

Neither reshuffle can be tied to the cocaine trade with any degree of certainty, but both are driven by strategic positioning ahead of the elections. What is certain is that the cocaine market has a long history of shaping politics and violence in Guinea-Bissau. And as elections near, it would come as no surprise if we see further upheavals in the country's political landscape – and the cocaine market that underwrites it.

Notes

¹ For further details, see Mark Shaw, *West Africa's warning flares?* Issue 23: Rethinking the significance of cocaine seizures. October 2021.

² Mark Shaw, *Drug Trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, 1998–2014: The Evolution of an Elite Protection Network*. Cambridge University Press, 2015.

³ See, for example, *The Guardian*, How a tiny West African country became the world's first narco state, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/mar/09/drugtrade>; BBC, Guinea-Bissau: Africa's 1st narco-state, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vKRkc35D2N0>.

⁴ Although it is difficult to quantify the profitability of cocaine markets, all visible indicators – seizures, prices, real estate investment – suggest the scale of the market is unprecedented. There was a decline in seizures of cocaine in Guinea-Bissau between 2012 and 2019. While the trade may have experienced a lull in the same period, it is very unlikely to have ceased entirely.

⁵ Ongoing monitoring by the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC) in Guinea-Bissau.

⁶ *Família Bari confirma morte de Tano Bari e exige justiça em conferência de imprensa*, Faladepapagaio, 26 July 2025, <https://faladepapagaio.blogspot.com/2025/07/familia-bari-confirma-morte-de-tano.html>.

⁷ Interviews with close observers, July–August 2025.

⁸ Ongoing monitoring of Guinea-Bissau by the GI-TOC, including interviews with reliable sources, 2020–2025.

⁹ Interviews with close observers, July–August 2025.

¹⁰ President Embaló confirms his voice is in the recording here: <https://www.facebook.com/radiobantaba/videos/1261477412107004>.

¹¹ Audio widely circulated on social media.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Also known locally as 'Tcherninho'.

¹⁴ *Ativistas guineenses dizem que foram espancados na Presidência da Guiné-Bissau*, Correio de Manhã, 9 October 2024, <https://www.cmjornal.pt/mundo/detalhe/ativistas-guineenses-dizem-que-foram-espancados-na-presidencia-da-guine-bissau>.

¹⁵ Missing US-flagged plane lands in Ghana with cocaine traces, Whatsup News, 31 January 2024, <https://whatsupnewsghana.com/2024/01/31/missing-us-flagged-plane-lands-in-ghana-with-cocaine-traces/>.

¹⁶ N337LR: Plane that vanished after leaving Canouan resurfaces in Ghana, *St. Vincent Times*, 9 June 2024, <https://www.stvincenttimes.com/gulfstream-n337lr-resurfaces-in-ghana-cocaine-traces/>; interviews with close observers, Bissau, January–August 2025.

¹⁷ *Guinée-Bissau: Arrestation de Tchernô Barri, ex-chef de la sécurité présidentielle*, ThiareGlobalVision, 22 June 2025, <https://thiareglobalvision.net/2025/06/22/guinee-bissau-arrestation-de-tchernô-barri-ex-chef-de-la-securite-presidentielle/>.

¹⁸ LGDH afirma que a execução de Tanu Bari e agressão ao jornalista Waldir Araújo afundam a Guiné-Bissau no clima de terror, *O Democrata*, 28 July 2025, <https://www.odemocratagb.com/?p=52886&utm>.

¹⁹ Lucia Bird, *Cocaine politics in West Africa: Guinea-Bissau's protection networks*, GI-TOC, 22 July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-politics-west-africa-guinea-bissau/>.

²⁰ LGDH – Liga Guineense dos Direitos Humanos Facebook page, *Comunicado de imprensa*, 28 July 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/17Aa559jpf/>.

- ²¹ 'Altamente censurável', RTP, RDP e Lusa com ordem de expulsão da Guiné-Bissau, RTP Notícias, 15 August 2025, https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/mundo/altamente-censuravel-rtp-rdp-e-lusa-com-ordem-de-expulsao-da-guine-bissau_n1676694.
- ²² For more analysis of the crackdown on civil society and the press, see Lucia Bird, Cocaine politics in West Africa: Guinea-Bissau's protection networks, GI-TOC, 22 July 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/cocaine-politics-west-africa-guinea-bissau/>.
- ²³ Mark Shaw, Drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, 1998–2014: The evolution of an elite protection network, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2015, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/3D32B19B009F1C44E69964FEACE7106C/S0022278X15000361a.pdf/drug-trafficking-in-guinea-bissau-1998-2014-the-evolution-of-an-elite-protection-network.pdf>.
- ²⁴ Aircraft seized upon arrival in Guinea-Bissau with 2633 kg of cocaine, MAOC, 11 September 2024, <https://maoc.eu/aircraft-seized-upon-arrival-in-guinea-bissau-with-2633-kg-of-cocaine/>.
- ²⁵ *United States of America vs. Ramon Manriquez Castillo et al*, Southern District of Florida, 27 February 2025.
- ²⁶ *Narco Files: o poderoso Clan del Golfo e a ligação que faltava para explicar a cocaína que atravessa a Guiné-Bissau*, Expresso, November 2023, <https://expresso.pt/internacional/afrika/2023-11-16-Narco-Files-o-poderoso-Clan-del-Golfo-e-a-ligacao-que-faltava-para-explicar-a-cocaina-que-atraversa-a-Guine-Bissau-b376ad4c>.
- ²⁷ *Guiné-Bissau: os traficantes voltaram, mesmo com mandado internacional*, 9 April 2020, Público, <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/09/mundo/noticia/guinebissau-trafficantes-voltaram-mandado-internacional-1911778>.
- ²⁸ Interviews with close observers in Guinea-Bissau.
- ²⁹ Ongoing GI-TOC monitoring of Guinea-Bissau.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Mark Shaw, Drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau, 1998–2014: The evolution of an elite protection network, *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 2015, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/3D32B19B009F1C44E69964FEACE7106C/S0022278X15000361a.pdf/drug-trafficking-in-guinea-bissau-1998-2014-the-evolution-of-an-elite-protection-network.pdf>.
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