

Illusion of Choice: Guinea's Referendum and Authoritarian Continuity

By: Emmanuel Yeboah

Introduction: Setting the Context



Figure 1 Guinea's Junta Leader, Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya waving at the crowd

On September 21, 2025, Guineans will vote in a constitutional referendum that the ruling junta presents as a decisive step toward restoring constitutional order. The referendum comes four years after the September 5, 2021, coup that ousted former President Alpha Condé, ending his controversial third-term bid but also ushering in a military transition led by Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya.¹

Despite repeated promises of a swift return to democratic rule, the transition process has been characterized by delays, shrinking civic space and growing public distrust. What was initially framed as a two-year roadmap has stretched into a four-year process, with the referendum now positioned as the gateway to legislative and presidential elections planned for December 2025. Yet the context and content of this referendum raise more questions than answers about Guinea's democratic future.

The draft constitution, prepared by the National Council for the Transition (CNT) and recently submitted to Transitional President Doumbouya, introduces several innovations: a seven-year presidential term with a two-term limit, a bicameral parliament (introduction of a senate), authorization of independent candidacies in national elections (previously permitted only at the local level), and the establishment of a Special Court of Justice to try high-ranking officials for crimes committed in office.²

¹ See: <https://cddgh.org/2024/11/30/guineas-stalled-transition-assessing-progress-and-challenges-three-years-after-coup/>

² See: <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/guinea/june-2025?>

On the surface, these reforms appear to resonate with public opinion. Afrobarometer 2024/25 data³ shows that a decisive majority of Guineans support a two-term presidential limit, while 70.8% disapprove of one-party rule and a growing share reject military rule. Supporters hail the project as a historic step toward building a “new Republic.” However, critics, including opposition parties and segments of civil society, argue that the process lacks genuine inclusivity and concentrates excessive power in the presidency.

Road to the Referendum

The National Committee for Reconciliation and Development (CNRD), established by the junta shortly after seizing power, laid out a 10-step transition roadmap.⁴ This included a population census, voter register reform, adoption of a new constitution, and the organization of elections. While some progress has been made, key benchmarks were either delayed or implemented selectively, fueling suspicion that the process was designed more to consolidate power than to restore democracy.

The National Council for the Transition (CNT), which drafted the constitution, is central to this process. Composed of 81 members⁵, including 15 representatives of political parties, all appointed by the junta⁶. The body has faced criticism for being more representative of the regime’s interests than of Guinea’s political or civic diversity. Opposition groups and civil society actors have long demanded a more inclusive process, but these calls were largely ignored.

Contentious Provisions of the Draft Constitution

A closer look at the constitution, though a necessary evil reveal provisions that may undermine, rather than strengthen democratic governance. The draft constitution being

³ See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>

⁴ See: <https://wademosnetwork.org/2024/03/wademos-brief-on-guineas-transition-process-two-years-on/>

⁵ See: <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/GN/GN-LC01/election/GN-LC01-E20220122/>

⁶ See: <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2115525.html>

put to a vote contains several notable provisions that raise fundamental questions about Guinea's democratic trajectory.

Introduction of a seven-year presidential mandate, renewable once: This provision extends the presidential term beyond the five-year renewable mandate that existed in Guinea's previous 2010 constitution. Although presented as a two-term limit, the shift from five to seven years substantially lengthens the tenure of any future president. In practice, if Colonel Mamadi Doumbouya runs in the December 2025 elections and secures victory, he could govern for 14 years, on top of the four years already spent in power since the 2021 coup - amounting to an 18-year rule. The change illustrates how term-limit provisions can be manipulated to prolong incumbency while technically preserving the "two-term" principle. Meanwhile, civil society coalitions such as WADEMOS, WANEP, and Tournons la Page have been at the forefront of regional campaigns to advocate for a standardized presidential two-term limit.



Figure 2 File photo of citizens queuing to vote

But especially in Guinea's case, the move from a 5-year renewable term (10 years total) to a 7-year renewable term (14 years total) represents a subtle but significant recalibration.

Just as Alpha Condé's controversial third term bid (after two 5-year terms) undermined the principle of alternation, Doumbouya's potential 14 years, added to his four unelected years in power - risks hollowing out the spirit of term limits. Comparatively, whether a leader does 15 years through a third-term extension of 5-year mandates or 14-18 years through elongated 7-year mandates, the net effect is the same: a distortion of the principle of periodic leadership renewal.

Taken together, these provisions suggest less a framework for democratic renewal than a blueprint for the entrenchment of military power under constitutional cover. They reveal

how constitutional engineering, even while retaining the formal language of “two terms,” can effectively enable authoritarian continuity.

Eligibility of junta leaders: Despite early promises that transitional leaders would not contest elections, the draft constitution explicitly allows Doumbouya and other military figures to run⁷. This erodes the credibility of the transition process and aligns Guinea with recent precedents in Chad and Gabon, where military rulers organized referenda and subsequently positioned themselves as elected presidents. It also runs counter to Article 23 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, and the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which explicitly prohibits constitutional revisions that entrench power following an unconstitutional change of government.

Expanded presidential powers and immunity clauses: While the draft provides for a bicameral legislature and recognizes independent candidates for national elections, which previously was permitted only at the local level, it also centralizes power in the presidency and grants immunity to transitional actors for actions taken during their rule. This undermines accountability and entrenches impunity for human rights violations committed since the coup.

Patterns of Military Entrenchment: Lessons from Chad and Gabon

As indicated earlier, Guinea’s trajectory mirrors patterns seen in other African countries where military rulers have staged coups only to later rebrand themselves as elected presidents. Although there are many other examples from the past, several contemporary cases stand out.

In Chad, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno widely known in Chad as Kaka, seized power after his father’s death in 2021 and later organized a constitutional referendum that cleared the

⁷ See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/guinea-vote-constitution-that-would-let-coup-leader-run-office-2025-09-17/>

way for him to run in the 2024 elections, potentially extending his rule for multiple seven-year terms with no clear end in sight.⁸

In Gabon, General Brice Oligui Nguema, who seized power in 2023, oversaw a constitutional referendum in 2024, which approved the constitution extending presidential terms to seven years⁹ and subsequently contested and won, effectively consolidating his post-coup authority through the ballot box. Under this arrangement, Gen. Brice could potentially serve up to 14 years if re-elected, further entrenching military rule under the guise of constitutional order.

In Mali, the June 2023 constitutional referendum introduced a five-year presidential term renewable once; however, the transitional parliament has recently granted junta leader, Gen. Assimi Goïta, a five-year mandate renewable “as many times as necessary” until the country is deemed “pacified,” effectively opening the door to indefinite rule. In all three cases, referenda and managed transitions became instruments for military rulers to entrench themselves in power under the veneer of constitutional order. Guinea risks following the same script, with Doumbouya positioned to stretch his rule to nearly 18 years.

Shrinking Civic Space and Opposition Boycott

The credibility of the referendum is further undermined by the repressive environment in which it is unfolding. Over the four years of transition, Guinea has witnessed the steady erosion of civic space: opposition protests have been banned or violently dispersed, critical media outlets suspended, and activists arbitrarily detained¹⁰. Several prominent civic leaders have reportedly been kidnapped and held in undisclosed locations¹¹ for opposing the junta and the new constitution. Internet and social media platforms have

⁸ See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chad-votes-allow-president-run-unlimited-times-2025-09-16/>

⁹ See: <https://www.dabafinance.com/en/news/gabon-new-constitution-extends-presidential-terms-to-seven-years>

¹⁰ See: <https://civicus.contentfiles.net/media/assets/file/Guinea.Watchlist.pdf>

¹¹ See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/06/24/prominent-critic-of-guinean-junta-abducted-tortured>

been intermittently restricted¹², further constraining public debate over the new constitution.



Figure 3 Some supporters en route to a rally

During the official campaign period, several media outlets that sought to give airtime to opposition voices were suspended. In response, nearly all major political parties have called on their supporters to boycott the referendum¹³, framing it as a staged exercise rather than a genuine democratic choice. The

absence of organized opposition campaigning has effectively turned what should have been a national debate into a state-sponsored plebiscite for the ruling junta.

Militarized Referendum Preparations

Alongside repression, the authorities have put in place an extensive security and administrative machinery to manage the referendum. On Friday, September 19, the senior commander of the gendarmerie announced the deployment of nearly 45,000 security personnel, with 1,000 vehicles, to “secure” the referendum. While presented as a precaution against unrest, some analysts say such a massive mobilization risks intimidating voters and highlights the securitized character of the process. Further, the junta has placed the Ministry of Interior, rather than an independent electoral commission, in charge of organizing the yes or no vote. This has raised widespread concerns about impartiality and transparency. In addition, the regime has distributed nearly 400 brand-new 4x4 pickup trucks to sub-prefects across the country, a move widely perceived as a patronage tactic to secure local administrative loyalty. According to an interview with a

¹² See: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/guinea-constitutional-referendum/>

¹³ See: <https://wadr.org/guinea-referendum-campaign-ends-amid-calls-for-boycott/>

Guinean civil society representative and a member of the WADEMOS Network¹⁴ (September 2025), the timing and scale of this distribution point to preparations for an “electoral charade” rather than a genuine democratic exercise.

Conclusion: Referendum Without Choice but Perhaps a Necessary Evil

As Guinea heads to the polls, it is clear that the referendum is less about constitutional renewal and more about legitimizing a military strongman’s hold on power. Opposition exclusion, civic repression, and constitutional engineering have stripped the process of genuine democratic credibility. Beyond Guinea, the stakes are equally high: if ECOWAS and the wider international community, including the African Union, choose to endorse or even quietly accept this referendum, they risk normalizing electoral autocracy across the region and undermining their own commitments to democratic governance.

Yet, in the shadow of the Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) exiting ECOWAS and indefinitely stalling their own transitions, Guinea’s flawed referendum could be viewed by some as a necessary evil. Unlike its Sahelian neighbours, which have abandoned regional commitments and postponed elections indefinitely, Conakry is at least moving, however imperfectly, toward a constitutional framework and an electoral timetable. This does not absolve the process of its authoritarian character, but it underscores the dilemma: faced with regional backsliding and the collapse of transition roadmaps, Guinea’s referendum risks becoming the least bad option in a neighbourhood where coups have become open-ended.

Unless there is a significant shift, one that opens space for genuine political competition, protects civil liberties, and guarantees credible elections in December, Guinea’s transition will mirror the Chad-Gabon path: a coup dressed in constitutional clothing and power entrenchment rather than democratic restoration.

¹⁴ See: <https://wademosnetwork.org/>

About the Author

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