

Question en Direct. Interview with Alpha Conde on 4 November 2013

Commentator:

Welcome to "Question en Direct" which today welcomes His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea, President Alpha Conde.

Mr President, thank you for agreeing to see us, and to discuss the issues pertaining to the African continent.

You are in Senegal in order to participate in the ECOWAS summit. Many issues were discussed such as the EPAs and foreign trade. What are your feelings on this summit?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

Thank you for inviting me. I believe this summit has been very successful. Many key issues were discussed concerning the future of our people.

First, our relationship with the European Union. As you already know, we have been discussing the EPA question for over 10 years, and have not been able come to an agreement. Ibaka made a very accurate point by quoting an article from the "Monde Diplomatique" who stated that "free men need slaves". And he pointed out that we had no desire to be the slaves of these free men.

We need to understand if our relations with the European Union will allow us to expand or rather confine us in our role as a provider of raw materials.

This is the main reason why the negotiations have been ongoing for so long.

We made new proposals, and we believe that we reached our limit. We will not be able to make any better offers.

It important to develop relations with the European Union, but it is also vital to protect our nascent industry for the industrialization of Africa.

Therefore, we need to reach a consensus of all the ECOWAS heads of states on the proposals we agree to submit. Proposals which will serve as negotiation basis for the Commission.

We made a first suggestion, and they proposed 80%. We asked for 70% and now want 75%.

But we also required that the negotiation not only covers property, but also services and men.

Because we no longer want to witness what we have seen lately at Lampedusa.

This is therefore the first point.

The second point is the common external rate. As know that there are currently two systems. The WAEMU countries which are currently at 1.5 and the ECOWAS countries which are at 0.5. The objective is to align everyone at 1.5.

For the moment this seems difficult, and therefore agreed to allow for a 5-year time frame to pass those still at 0.5 to 1.5.

This is obviously problematic for countries like Cape Verde. But if we want integration, we all must accept the necessary personal sacrifices.

And the third point is the single currency. As you know, currently there are those who are in the Fram zone and those who are not. It is true there is the Ximao zone, but there also we have been failing for various years. We thus agreed upon a 5-year period to have the Ximao zone established, and to have in 2020 a single currency for the entire ECOWAS. We agreed on all these issues, which all are extremely important for the future, and namely for the integration and industrialization of our country.

Commentator:

There is a voiced concern by African civil society stating that Europeans put pressure on African countries by protecting their own agriculture, asking Africa to open its markets to subsidized products.

Is there a strategy in relation to these pressures in order to avoid that African agriculture, Guinea, Senegal and WAEMU countries suffer from the abundance of European agriculture?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

We have discussed this issue and also debated on the problem of consumer goods and food supply. Aids that prevent our agriculture from developing. And subsidies that countries offer to their farmers, such as for cotton. We were all on the same page concerning these issues.

Today we need that we become self-sufficient and exporters. We believe that in the coming years, food will be more important than oil.

Population increases, but food supply and agriculture do not evolve at the same pace.

Africa has a very large agricultural potential, and can become an important exporter. In the coming years, rice and cereals will be more important than oil.

It is therefore vitally important that we not only become self-sufficient, but that we also become exporters. The civil society can trust us; there is no way that we let our agriculture decline. On the contrary, our aim is become exporters of cereals, rice, etc...

Commentator:

What is your input, Mr. President, concerning the fact that so many young Africans die trying to reach Lampedusa in boats?

Is this a failure of the African regime that seems to be unable to offer employment to the African youth?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

You know, the biggest problem we have in Africa is poverty. All the people reaching out to terrorism, Islamism, etc. ... are doing so because there is poverty.

You know, I was once invited to a debate on "Rideau Rouge" with Bernard Kouchner, and we had to debate on Middle Eastern relationships.

I pointed out that if you tell Bernard Kouchner to blow himself up because he will enjoy the most beautiful women once in paradise, he will not do it.

But when you say to a young 10 years old Arab, living in extreme poverty, to blow himself up and that he will go straight to paradise and enjoy the most beautiful women, he will do it.

The government needs to start concentrating in finding solutions to meet the basic needs of our people.

Above all, the biggest problem is that 70% of Africa's population is under 25 years old.

Quite recently, in Durban, I told my peers that we were sitting on a bomb.

I told them that 70% of the population is under 25, and that these young people, through the Internet and new technologies, are informed at the same time as everyone else.

So if we fail to solve the employment problem of our youth, the bomb will blow.

So, our main problem today is for the government to be able to fight against poverty. To reserve the bulk of its resources to transform the living conditions of our own population.

And the more we will fight against poverty, the less our youth will be tempted by immigration, by terrorism, by Islamism.

Commentator:

But do you really carry out that fight against in your country, Guinea?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

You know, I said that in Guinea I inherited a country, not a state. I inherited a catastrophic situation. Senegal has been awarded its HIPC, and other countries have had theirs for years. We have been unable to receive the HIPC.

You came in Guinea, we build two-lane roads in a country where it rains a lot, and so all these roads are destroyed after only two years.

You have seen that there are no hotels, there is no electricity.

But when I came, I made my agriculture priority. We organized the "Farmer days". And today we're helping farmers. We buy fertilizers and herbicides and sell half price to farmers on their fields.

We do so because our goal is to quickly become self-sufficient and then exporter.

Guinea has a vast agricultural potential. The French had already planned to make Guinea the "attic of the French union".

When they understood they were losing the Indochina war, and the Tonkin was no longer going to provide rice to the French union, they believed that Guinea would replace the Tonkin.

So as early as 1952 and 1953, Guinea was already destined to be a major exporter.

And today, we import up to 300,000 tons of rice.

When we talk about Guinea, they say it is a geological scandal, but people seem to forget that Guinea was also an agricultural scandal.

Commentator:

Today the Guineans youth is waiting for answers on the employment issue. Despite what you are already doing, and the already implemented efforts, the Guinean youth is impatient.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

One needs to understand the origin of this impatience. Youth as you know have no memory. Guinea did not find itself in this situation by magic. If Guinea is in this situation, it is because of those who have ruled this country.

But the youth are too young to understand. And people are very eager.

When I came, before being sworn in, I asked the Monetary Fund to give me a precise overview of the situation.

They imposed a program. For example, the first year, they asked me to bring the budget deficit from -12% to -2%.

Nobody believed we would succeed, but we did. We also managed to get the HIPC.

And we managed to block the army reform that was aiming to put 4,000 soldiers on a wage system.

If you came to Guinea, you could see military in taxis or buses with their guns.

Today no soldier leaves the camp with his gun, and the army now brings security the people.

The youth is impatient because Guinea is a very rich country. Unfortunately we are only potentially rich, but we are really poor.

And then, when we had finished solving the HIPC problem, and started to solve the problems of the people, the others put the children in the streets.

And as soon as you put the children in the streets, and disruption occurs, investors step out.

This is why it is extremely important for us to have legislative elections, in order to have the debate carried over to parliament.

We no longer accept that people take the streets. It is now time that people understand they can no longer take Guinea as hostage.

We will from now on concentrate on transforming the living conditions of the Guineans and the youth employment problem.

Commentator:

Let's talk about the elections. In Guinea today, your party won with a slight majority in the National Assembly. The opposition contested these elections, saying they were not properly done.

The opposition wants to come back and ask for the cancellation of these elections.

How do you analyze the situation?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

You know, I'm not concerned by the legislative elections. I only remember that at each election, the President always said the elections needed to be cancelled. Nobody said anything.

The problem of Guinea, because we are entering in a transition phase, is that we were not able to organize the elections from the national budget.

If we had been able to organize the elections from the national budget, the country's problems would be Guinean to manage. But as soon as outsiders invest money, they feel that we are accountable to them.

The Supreme Court will demonstrate who bended the regulation. You will see that those who yelled the most were the biggest thieves themselves.

It doesn't concern me, I was very proud of the elections, the people of Guinea has been very patriotic. The elections were executed in the entire territory, and there has not been a single incident with a total of 80% participation.

The people really showed its willingness to go to the polls and I'm here to ensure that the votes cast by the Guinean people will be respected.

Commentator:

What will your position be if the opposition insists that the vote should be retaken, because despite the decision of the Supreme Court, they will not trust you?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

The Supreme Court supervised the elections when I was an opponent. The Supreme Court supervised the elections during the presidential elections. I see no reason not to trust the Supreme Court.

But what I do know is that we will not accept disrespected of the law. We will respect all freedom rights, but from now on everyone will know that there is a State in Guinea.

There has been an election, and now the debate in parliament. And this is true for everyone. This is what I can give you as answer.

Commentator:

But you, as an opponent, have always challenged the results given by the Supreme Court, because you said there were at fault.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

No, no, no. I was an opponent for years. The elections were held in fraudulent ways, the prefects and sub-prefects chased our representatives away, which is not the case this time. In most countries, when the government organizes the elections, they win by two-thirds.

Elections were held in many countries, and the results are known. I'm not worried at all. I know that the people of Guinea expressed its wish, and that today the people have decided that Guinea needed to move forward and that the country could no longer be taken as hostage. I do not care what people say, I believe in the republican institution and request that the republican institutions do their job.

Commentator:

Guinea aspires to peace. Are you ready to form a national government with the opposition, to work hand in hand with her, in order for Guinea to move on and evolve? This is a key issue.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

Before the elections, when we found that there might be a take-over attempt by the military, I was the one that proposed a global unity, and I proposed a bi-party government during two legislatures.

I believe our country is so weak that we need to join forces. But after my victory, the opposition said they could not rule with me.

So for the moment I'm waiting for the results.

You know, Guinea is a very strong presidential regime. I have been elected by the people on the ideas of a specific program. All those who agree to work with me on this program, I will work with. I presented a program, and I'm fighting for this program.

I exclude nobody, but I want to work with people who agree with me, who believe that the wealth of Guinea should serve the people of Guinea.

This is very symbolic. We are currently engaged in an extremely difficult battle, which you are following, since the international press has been publishing it.

This is our battle to retrieve our wealth. And I have not heard a single Guinean politician offering his support.

I'm not fighting to retrieve this wealth for me; I'm fighting to retrieve this wealth for Guinea.

Every Guinean patriot should make this his own fight.

All people who are willing to fight with me to ensure that the riches of Guinea serve the people of Guinea, are people I'm ready to work with.

Commentator:

This question was raised, international newspapers have spoken of the Simandou mine and of the Israeli businessman Beny Steinmetz, what is the status on this?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

I have no comment for the moment. The case will stand trial on December 2.

We implemented a contract review process handle by the Technical Committee.

This Technical Committee is responsible for the review of the contract and makes proposals.

We expect the Technical Commission to make proposals to the committee that I chair.

We will make a decision based on the proposition that will be made by the Commission concerning the modules 1 and 2.

It is very important is that the world realizes that it is a scandal that someone may supposedly pay a few hundred million, and can make up to 5 billion on the back of the Guinean people.

I believe that this is now something known worldwide.

Commentator:

When this question was raised, many spoke of attempted destabilization. Are you sure they are not aiming at destabilizing your area?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

I know that there is a desire to destabilize Guinea. I will not make any further comment. I already said that Guinea is not destabilized. We will ensure that all those who want to destabilize Guinea will fail.

Commentator:

Mr President, if you are so certain that you will not be destabilized, is it because you have the support of the Americans in this battle?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

In this battle, I have the support of all those who today want transparency. I was invited to London before the G8 meeting. The theme was "transparency, trade and taxes." We all come to the agreement that today we must fight against tax havens. We must fight to ensure that our products are paid at their rightful prices. I said that Africa wouldn't need any aid if our raw materials were paid at a fair price. And the support we receive by major countries such as the U.S., England or France in our battle for transparency enforces my conviction that this is a fact. Everyone rallies because everyone is outraged that in a country as poor as Guinea, with only 100 million dollars of investment, anyone can make up to 4 billion. Today we are serene because we have strong support from those who matter in the world.

Commentator:

You challenged President Francois Hollande over the fact that you did not receive any support from France in this battle.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

You know, France is no longer into mines, with interests in Bauxite and Iron Ore ever since Péchiné. The problem was namely for concerned countries such as the U.S.A, Australia and Canada. The French newspapers showed very discreet interest in all this. We asked for legal cooperation between France, the U.S.A and Guinea, and we received. A search warrant was issued for the offices of the company in France, Geneva and Guernsey. I believe that due to the fact that France is no longer active in the mining sector, apart for Uranium, it didn't quickly understand the issues at stake.

But today, the French government, as well as the French opinion really understood the issues at stake.

Commentator:

You believe François Hollande supports you. You will soon go to France to meet and discuss various issues with François Hollande. Will this issue will be addressed?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

I have very high confidence in François Hollande which I have known for a long time. And I know how committed he is towards democracy, and especially towards the development of Africa and the African people. I have no doubt on the support of the French President regarding the fight to have our resources paid for at a fair price, and ensure that our resources are used for the transformation of the population's living conditions.

Commentator:

Coming back to the issues of Guinea, in 2015, your mandate will be over and you will face new elections. Do you feel you achieved the various goals you set for yourself as President of the Republic of Guinea? Do you believe that based on these results the people of Guinea will renew its trust in you?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

Guineans expect a lot from me. We achieved a lot of things. And there are still many things that need to be achieved.

It was not an easy task, for when we started actually manage to have our head out of the water, the people intentionally placed the children in the streets.

You know that money is afraid of the noise, but I am convinced that after the legislative elections, Guinea will evolve very quickly.

What interests me most are not the 2015 elections, but rather how to change the living conditions of the people, how to give hope to the youth, how to change women's living conditions, how to transform Guinea. This is my problem.

Commentator:

Concerning Justice, many people believe that Guinea favors impunity in Guinea. The police often fires on the population, there are very few trials, opponents are thrown in jail, and the system is unfair.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

Ever since I was elected, no opponent has been jailed. No journalist has been prosecuted, and yet even in Senegal journalists are prosecuted.

You are a journalist; you know what is happening in Guinea.

Justice in Guinea is a problem. There was a problem with the army, and we solved it. We know have a problem with Justice. But you know, Guinea does not even have a School of Public Administration, much less a National School for Magistrates. So we have had a lack of trained young judges. And it is difficult for people who have had a certain type of behavior for over twenty years to change rapidly. But with the biometric census of the civil service, we will be able rejuvenate and feminize the public services. And I strongly believe that this new generation will allow for a better Guinea, a better judicial system, and that investors will once again have confidence in the country. We know that we currently have a lot of flaws in our legal system. Those flaws are the main reason behind that motivated our decision to have a judicial reform, in the same way as we performed a reform of our security forces.

Commentator:

Your reactions are also expected concerning the September 28th massacre. As well as in regards of other massacres for which those responsible are still running free.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

We talk about September 28th, but in Guinea there were numerous others such instances, such as in 2006 and 2007. Each of those instances also included massacres.

Guinea must assume its, including its darkest hours.

One needs to achieve justice for Guinea. Those who lost their parents in these massacres have the same rights as those who lost their parents in 2008 or any other such date.

What is special in Guinea is that people have been both victims and executioner.

Those who suffered under the first republic, were executioner in the second republic.

But what is important today, is to do justice to all the victims. I do not want to be perceived as reacting only to events of September 28th. You have to see Guinea in global way.

We have to act like South Africa, and refuse to eclipse part of the story.

We need to assume all committed crimes to acknowledge the wrongs and allow for Guinea to forgive itself.

The International Court only acts in second position. We implemented a Court tribunal to study these issues, and we have given them all the necessary means.

But as we are looking at all the events that Guinea has been a victim to.

Many people talk about September 28th, but these same people have witnessed the 1985 massacres as well as those of 2006 and 2007; and not much has been heard about these.

Children were shot in 2006 and 2007. Unionists were shot, there were many deaths.

And some who claim to be victims today, were part of the government who shot unionists in 2006 and murdered our youth.

I think we should look at the Guinean problem very carefully, because if we aim for a reconciliation of the Guinean people, we must first accept to look at ourselves in a mirror and face all the crimes that have been committed. This is the only way to ensure that victims can be rehabilitated and have their parents open to pardon.

Commentator:

You are a president that has been democratically elected in Guinea. Justice for all, many are expecting great things from you on the issue of justice. You bring hope to the people because they claim that you are the only president that has been democratically elected.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea

Not. I have been sentenced to death in absentia by the first Republic, I did two and a half years of imprisonment, and I have not changed. I came in order to make sure such events no longer occur in Guinea.

But you know, changing a difficult economic situation is relatively easy compared to actually changing people's mentality. This is why I rely heavily on our youth and an executive turnover. This will allow for a new mentality to install itself in Guinea.

Commentator:

You stated that the issue of training in Guinea is important. What about the press in Guinea. What are you doing to make sure the Guinean media is up to standards?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

I met with newspaper editors, and we discussed. We agreed on the fact that the State is ready to support them, but that they also need to bring order into their own systems. We started a debate, that will be ongoing, to make our press a really a responsible press. Which as you know is not currently the case. We will work with journalists to ensure that black sheep does not rub off on our real journalists.

Commentator:

This involves the training of journalists. Today there are training courses in Guinea. But in order to train good journalists, are we sure these training courses are at international standards? To have a good democracy, we must have a good press.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

You know in Guinea, there are very few trained journalists. We take people out of college because they have no employment. But our only problem today is to strengthen our School of Journalism and to send journalists here at the CESTI, and send Magistrates to the Senegalese Judicial schools because we need to train our executives.

This is not only valid for our youth, because of course it is important for the press. But it is also required for the regional administrations, and especially for Justice.

So we will work with the media to improve the functioning of the press because there are good journalists in Guinea. Unfortunately there are also a lot of journalists who are a disgrace to the profession. But I think that working hand in hand; we will gradually be able to reach the level of the Senegalese press.

Commentator:

But the task seems huge in Guinea; you have economic problems, social problems, and cultural problems. In Guinea today, everyone wonders how will you be able to cope with this daunting task without a real dialogue with the opposition?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

You know, I rely on the people of Guinea to transform this situation. Because what you call the opposition today, are those who ruled the country during the past 25 years. This is not an objection as might be the case in other countries, people who fought in the opposition; they are all former prime ministers.

Commentator:

And that is the reality

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

Yes, but my problem, lies with the people, that is to say, how am I going to change the living conditions of the people, bring change to Guinea.

To ensure that the Guinean resources, which are huge, serve the Guinean people. If you look at the Guinean GDP, you will notice that it is 10 to 20 times lower than that of Senegal, despite our wealth. This is a debate between me and the people. And my problem is to make sure I don't disappoint the hopes the people placed in me.

Despite all the difficulties we had, due to the fact that we inherited a country in a catastrophic situation.

Commentator:

The people want food to eat, want to have electricity and water. So far, there are certain areas in Guinea where electricity simply doesn't exist.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

You know that the energy problem exists in all African countries. The energy problem cannot be solved with a magic stick. In Guinea, we have to start all over again. It is not enough to produce energy; you also have to deliver it. Cables dating from the colonial period have never been changed. We are in the process of changing them, and already did 50% of them.

Distribution is a problem. There are a lot of illegal connections and the company loses a lot of money because many people simply do not pay their energy usage, with the complicity of company employees. This is why we are working to have a partner in strategy that will help us better manage our energy sector so that Guineans could ...

Remember that I'm in the first year of my mandate. I started to build the Kaleta dam, who will deliver 250 megawatts and at the same time we begin a study at Souapiti in order to ensure that Kaleta and Garafiri can give full throttle. Today Thermal power is expensive, because we have to buy fuel. With dams, we no longer have this problem. So the future of Guinea is in dams.

Commentator:

You have to buy fuel. Many say that Guinea is a country that has a lot of oil, that has gold, diamonds. People do not understand why Guinea cannot exploit all this potential for its own country.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

But ask the question to those who ruled Guinea during the last 50 years. How can we have the richest iron mines in the world at Simandou and not have extracted a single ton of iron. I came only there three years ago. Why hasn't the potential of Guinea been turned into a reality? Just ask those who used to govern. What did they do?

Commentator:

You promised to address the issue of Guinea, by asking for our votes.

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

But that's what I'm doing.

I took a lot of risks; I applied a reform of the security sector. We received the HIPC. We totally changed the functioning process of the state. We reduced inflation by more than half. Today we are no longer printing money; we operate on cash management basis with single accounts. We fight against corruption, which has diminished, but still continues to be an issue.

We will also, through a primitive census of the civil service, change all that. But you know, I told the Guineans, you gave me a sick child. First I have to mend the child before hoping to help it grow in good conditions.

Commentator:

Mr. President, before you, others have ruled the country, as you just said, and their management of the country was chaotic. There is the issue of Dadis Camara, who is now in Ouagadougou, and who sooner or later, will have to return to Guinea. How you handle this issue?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

No, you know, I believe the Guinean justice does its job. I myself am in contact with President Dadis. We must let justice do its work.

Charges are one thing, but I trust the Guinean justice to do its job properly. Soas long as we have an independent Guinean Judicial system, I do not have to comment on matters under their responsibility.

Commentator:

You stated that at the time the military were in a position of power, more money came out of the treasury than during the equivalent of 25 or 15 years worth. How should we understand this?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

Yes, it is a fact. And these figures can be found at the central bank. My problem today is to understand, despite all this, how to change Guinea.

Despite the abuse and mismanagement that the country endured for years and that has worsened in recent years. You know the regime of Sekou Toure, our late president, left 130 plants in this country; none of these plants no longer exist. And other plants were created to replace them.

We now want to recreate all these factories, as shown by the Dabola rice plant that started its operations. Other plants are being created, such as sugar factories, etc...

Guinea's really means to transform, because it has the necessary potential both in its subsoil as in its soil.

We are the water tower of Africa. We have rich land, everything is green. So being able to develop Guinea is not even a feat.

Developing a country like Burkina Faso or the Sahelian countries is a feat.

A successful development of Guinea is not a feat for a politician, it's a duty.

Commentator:

Mr President, you have been an opponent and now you are in power. What has changed in your life?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

I had less trouble when I was an opponent. Today I have more worries because the people expect a lot from me, and I do not want to disappoint my people.

But people do not always understand the economic realities that we inherited, notwithstanding the fact that there is today a global economic crisis that also impacts us. For example, the price of iron has significantly declined; the price of bauxite has dropped; and during that time the price of oil rises.

But I have high hopes for Guinea.

Commentator:

And personally? What has changed in you as President between yesterday and today?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

Ask my friends who knew me when I was an opponent. Ask them if something has changed. The fact of being president does not mean that when you cut me milk will run from me. It is blood that comes out.

The only thing is that I have more responsibilities, and less freedom.

Before, I could come to Sandaga and have a stroll. Such liberties I do not have today.

What I see is that I have less freedom, and I became a prisoner of protocol.

Before when I came to Dakkar, I walked freely around. Today, even if I wanted to, I could not do so. The authorities would not accept it.

Commentator:

Do you have more friends today compared to yesterday?

His Excellency the President of the Republic of Guinea:

I was fortunate to have many friends when I was an opponent, but the difficulties of Guinea made that I could not always be beside my friends.

Now my problem is to be next to all those friends who have accompanied me during these difficult periods, who sometimes did not understand me because they were not aware of the problems I was facing.

I only know that I kept the friends I had.

Commentator:

President Alpha Conde, I know that your available time is limited. You have to leave.

Thank you for being with us on this set of "Questions Directes" of the TFM which was shorter than usual.

We were with His Excellency the President Alpha Condé, the Head of State of Guinea.

Thank you very much Mr. President, for accepting our invitation.