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SUBJECT: POWER BROKERING AND INFLUENCE PEDDLING - A LOOK AT
 THE PRESIDENCY

REF: A. CONAKRY 0036

¶B. CONAKRY 0213

Classified By: A/DCM SHANNON CAZEAU FOR REASON 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (S) SUMMARY. President Conte's wives appear to be at the center of influence within the presidential palace, with a number of other powerful players circling in the wings. There are a few individuals who may be looking to take over the presidency, but most seem to be trying to stuff their pockets as fast as they can while they still have access to state funds. With the president's continued poor health, people seem to be anticipating an imminent end to Conte's regime. A look at some of the key power brokers within the presidency helps explain some of the president's recent decisions. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S) Even before former Prime Minister Kouyate's dismissal in May, Guineans were speculating on the power games playing out behind closed doors at the presidential palace. That speculation has only increased in the face of a rash of presidential appointments and firings. The return of controversial political figures such as former Finance Minister Kassory Fofana and the new Minister Secretary General of the Presidency, Ibrahmia Keira, is widely viewed as a slow but strategic restoration of presidential loyalists to positions of power. Firings of prominent Conte cronies such as Idrissa Thiam and Sam Soumah have observers guessing as to who is wielding power and influence. The following analysis is based on A/DCM conversations in recent weeks with a number of political actors and observers.

THE FIRST WIFE - THE LOYALIST

¶3. (S) Contacts seem to agree that Conte's four wives are at the heart of presidential power games, with wives number one and two playing the principal roles.

¶4. (S) First Lady Henriette Conte, a Soussou, is widely revered by the population. She is renowned for her loyalty to her husband, her generosity, and her commitment to peace. A shy woman, Henriette tends to steer away from the spotlight, and is considered to be conflict averse. She does

not have any children. The former Secretary General of the Presidency, Sam Soumah, was seen as one of her close political associates. Henriette may have played a key role behind the scenes in the later months of Kouyate's administration by blocking efforts to appoint controversial personalities such as the former Minister Secretary General of the Presidency Fode Bangorah (ref tel A). Some contacts have said in the past that she supported Kouyate, at least initially, and may have put his name at the top of the list to head up the consensus government in early 2007.

THE SECOND WIFE - THE BEAUTY QUEEN

¶5. (S) Kaiatou Seth, Conte's second wife, is a former beauty queen. She has eight children, the eldest of which is in his late teens. A Soussou, Kadiatou has been described as uneducated, greedy, assertive a "fighter," and possibly mentally unbalanced. Kadiatou is not popular with the general population since she has a reputation for quickly abandoning her husband and the country with her children in tow at the first sign of political trouble. Kaiatou left Guinea for Morocco in early 2007 as the nationwide strike got underway, and did not return until April 2008. She is believed to have been instrumental in pushing for firing former Prime Minister Kouyate (ref tel B).

¶6. (S) Kadiatou is perceived to be close to former Finance Minister Kassory Fofana, and the current Minister Secretary General of the Presidency, Alpha Ibrahima Keira. With Keira's wife being her sister, Kadiatou may have been responsible for Keira's appointment. Contacts report that she refused to allow President Conte to see his children until he appointed Keira.

THREE AND FOUR - THE FORTUNE TELLER AND THE NURSEMAID

¶7. (S) The third wife is a Peuhl fortune-teller from Labe, Asmaou Conte. She resides in Conakry, but is generally perceived to be on the fringes of presidential politics. However, her name has been linked to the former Chief of

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Protocol at the Presidency, Idrissa Thiam. Mamandi Conte, the fourth wife, is a young Soussou woman (under the age of 30) who stays in the president's village retreat. She was "given" to Conte by a Council of Elders a few years ago and is considered to be more of a nursemaid. She is not perceived to have any real political influence.

¶8. (S) According to observers, Henriette's influence wanes when Kadiatou is on the scene because Kadiatou is much more aggressive and ruthless in her tactics. None of the wives are considered to have political ambitions, or to be propping up someone else who may be looking to fill the power vacuum when Conte dies. Instead, they appear to be used by others for their influence, for which they are believed to collect large sums of money. Even Henriette, whose reputation is relatively untainted, is seen as likely benefiting from cash "gifts."

THE CIRCLING VULTURES

¶9. (S) Although there are plenty of actors circling the presidency, most of them are not perceived as aspiring to take over as president when Conte dies. Instead, many look to be trying to stuff their pockets as fast as they can while they still have access to funds. Most contacts agree that players such as Idrissa Thiam, Sam Soumah, and Chantal Colle,

as well as a number of PM Souare's ministers, belong to this group. Players who may be harboring grander political aspirations include Kassory Fofana, Cellou Diallo, and Mamadou Syllah. The Minister Secretary General of the Presidency, Alpha Ibrahima Keira has only just come back into Guinea's political scene, and while his reputation suggests that he is looking for money, he could also be thinking strategically about the presidency.

¶10. (S) A recent returnee to Guinea's political scene, Kassory Fofana is now seen as one of the most influential people behind the president. Contacts have called him the "true face of the president" and expect that he is angling to become prime minister, and that Conte may be grooming him as his personal successor. Kassory left the country in a hurry after being fired as finance minister amid accusations of corruption in 2000. He went to the United States where he studied at American University. He is rumored to have bought a \$200,000 car almost immediately upon arriving in the U.S., which was followed by expensive real estate. Some observers believe that he only returned to Guinea in 2008 because he had run out of cash. Although he does not currently hold an official government position, he is a permanent fixture at the presidential palace, and has been seen driving around in a ministerial vehicle.

¶11. (S) There are mixed opinions about the role of controversial millionaire Mamadou Syllah. Many observers see him as a wealthy thug who uses his money and relationship with Conte to bully others. He has been described as cunning and a "master manipulator." One contact said that although Syllah may recognize that the Guinean population would never accept him as president, he has joked "I am the only one that can succeed President Conte."

¶12. (S) Former prime minister Cellou Diallo is considered to be outside the presidential palace since he is now heading one of the leading opposition political parties, the UFDG. However, he is also considered close to Prime Minister Souare, as well as many members of the current cabinet. As a politician, it is likely that Cellou is hoping to run for president in 2010, and he may be trying to build up an informal support network within the current government, through Souare, who served as the minister of mines when Diallo was PM. One observer commented that Diallo may end up being the "big loser" since he abandoned the ruling Party for Unity and Progress (PUP), which now appears to be making a comeback.

THE BLACK SHEEP DRUG KINGPIN

¶13. (S) The president's eldest son Ousmane Conte, continues to be the subject of much speculation when it comes to presidential politics. President Conte divorced Ousmane's mother who is rumored to have bitten off two of the president's fingers during an argument. The president is generally considered to be estranged from his son, but Ousmane continues to wield substantial power and influence because of his relationship to the president. A captain in

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the Guinean army, Ousmane is thought to be at the center of Guinea's growing drug trafficking network. He is believed to control about 700 presidential guards (Red Berets), from whom he routinely buys loyalty.

¶14. (S) Ousmane may not have any interest in becoming president himself, but he may be trying to influence events from outside the presidency in order to preserve a regime that facilitates his lucrative drug trafficking business. During the military mutiny of May 2008, there were widespread rumors of Ousmane's involvement, and his personal links to

the leader of the mutiny, Claude Pivi. It is unclear whether Ousmane has any direct links to powerful players within the presidency at this time. If he's dabbling in presidential politics, he may be doing it almost exclusively from outside the presidential palace.

THE PEOPLE IN THE SHADOWS

¶15. (S) Contacts identified a few other players with perceived influence who tend to avoid the spotlight. Aisha Kone is sometimes referred to as Conte's "fourth wife," but describes herself as Conte's "daughter." In her late thirties to early forties, Aisha is the president's traditional healer. She is believed to be a practitioner of voodoo, which for some observers, helps explain her "unnatural" influence over the president. Aisha, who is a Liberian national, is also linked to the conflict in Liberia since a number of Guineans believe that she brought Liberian mercenaries into the country to fire on civilians during the period of civil unrest in 2007. One contact pointed out that the President of Liberia personally visited with Aisha just a few weeks ago and questioned the motivations of the visit.

¶16. (S) Conte's nephew, Issiagha, has been his personal bodyguard and chauffeur for many years. He is described as the only person who can take Conte out alone without anyone else present. He is believed to be using marijuana, and possibly cocaine. Issiagha has been described as unpredictable due to drug use, but is considered influential because Conte trusts him and relies on him so much.

¶17. (S) Another player may be Elhadj Sekouna Soumah, who is a former president of a CRD (local government unit - Rural Commune for Development). Of Conte's generation, Soumah is described as old and uneducated. He is seen as having easy access to the president, and as being someone that the president trusts and respects. Soumah is also considered close to former prime minister Cellou Diallo who is believed to have given Soumah an SUV as a personal gift.

COMMENT

¶18. (S) A person's perceived influence with the president likely comes with a high price tag these days for those looking to advance their individual political interests. The Guinean power play is complex and as foreign observers, we may never be able to do much more than just scratch the surface. The fact is that most of Guinea's political actors are part of a twenty-five year old network of influence based on cronyism, with deep rooted connections founded on familial loyalties and perceived enemies. Ethnic identity also plays an important role, although the linkages are less clear. Conte is seen as having manipulated ethnic sensitivities in the past in order to maintain order, and to advance his own agenda.

¶19. (S) There is still much speculation as to what role Conte himself plays. Many observers believe that Conte is almost completely incapacitated, both mentally and physically, and therefore subject to the manipulation of whoever happens to be whispering in his ear at a given moment. Other contacts say that Conte may have random periods of lucidity, but his capacity to govern is seriously challenged. Still others say that Conte may be physically unwell, but is still in the game mentally, possibly "faking" incompetence in order to manipulate those around him. All three possibilities may be true at any given time. END COMMENT.