



Guinea-Bissau

Area: 13,948 sq. miles

Population: 2.201 (2024 World Bank).

Capital and largest city: Bissau

Ethnic Groups: More than 20 ethnicities: Fulani, Balante, Malinke, Mandyako, Pepel, and others

Languages: Portuguese (official), Guinean Portuguese (Crioulo), and Niger-Congo languages.

Religion: 45 % Islam; 22% Christianity, 33% traditional (animism) and other beliefs.

Life Expectancy: 64.08 years (2023).

Literacy: 53.9%

Economy: small agriculture, fishing (one of the 10 poorest countries in the world).

Gini (Income Inequality) Index: 33.4.

Gender Inequality Index: 0.63 (high).



Under the Guinea-Bissau Sky

“A fist is big enough to hide the sky.” (Oppression is pervasive.)

The West African nation of Guinea-Bissau today is comprised of an island archipelago and mainland situated south of the Senegambia and north and west of Guinea. Early hunting, foraging, gold mining, salt production, farming, and fishing attracted settlers and commerce. Portuguese explorers first came upon the Guinea Coast and Cape Verde islands at least three decades before Columbus sailed to Hispaniola. In Cape Verde, Portugal established settled plantations and imported enslaved Africans from the mainland to work them. The cloth (*panos*) and horses of Cape Verde were traded for slaves from the mainland, including along the Upper Guinea coast, beginning around 1480, when 9-14 horses were traded for a single enslaved African.

From these pivotal points on the Upper Guinea coast between Sierra Leone and Senegal, 17th-century merchant centers administered by the Portuguese through Cape Verde began to thrive. During a period of Mandinka expansion on the mainland, trade also flourished and the state of Kaabu (1537-1867), within Guinea-Bissau's territory, consolidated political and military power. The successful reliance on these interactions provided Guinea-Bissau (itself on low-lying coastal plains subject to tidal flooding and reaching into the hilly hinterland and savanna beyond) with opportunities to negotiate the constantly shifting ecological and cultural landscapes. The fall of Kaabu also marked the boundaries of resistance to Islamic expansion but created a legacy. Once in the shadow of the Mali Empire, a rich and vibrant Creole culture evolved, as the region remained part of the Portuguese Empire for centuries.

Decolonization

“What one hopes for is always better than what one has.”

The Portuguese were among the earliest and harshest colonizers in Africa and among the last to leave. Revolutionary struggles were key to decolonization of their territories. In 1956, a Cape Verdean (born in Guinea-Bissau), Amílcar Cabral (1924-1973) founded the Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) to secure

justice for striking dockworkers and independence through the foment of a grassroots socialist struggle. According to Cabral, his aim was total liberation:

We are not interested in the preservation of any of the structures of the colonial state. It is our opinion that it is necessary to totally destroy, to break, to reduce to ash all aspects of the colonial state in our country, to make everything possible for our people.¹

The Portuguese soon found themselves fighting guerilla movements on multiple fronts, from Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau to Mozambique and Angola. Despite brutal repression, the struggles gained large-scale support, especially in rural areas. Cabral was assassinated in January 1973. The last of Portuguese troops withdrew and independence followed in 1974, with Cabral's half-brother Luís de Almeida Cabral becoming the first president.

Onward

"No one tests the depth of the river with both foot unless he is prepared to swim."

Despite a delayed period of decolonization, Guinea-Bissau successfully transitioned to a multi-party democratic state until a bloodless military coup toppled the government in response to the failures of a repressive regime in the 1990s. Political unrest and economic uncertainty led to years of civil war, political instability, crises, and foreign interventions and negotiations by the African Union and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The restoration of constitutional order finally succeeded by holding parliamentary elections in 2019-2020, but the tense climate has continued. The parliament has been dissolved and a presidential election scheduled for 2024 was postponed to late 2025.

Cultural resistance has been more resilient. Gumbe music fuses about ten different styles. Most genres are sung by villagers in Crioulo, including those that critique current issues. Films about the thriving music industry, feminist movement, and agroecology have been notably recognized on an international level. Hope may yet emerge from the traditions that stretch across generations of resistance and rely on persistent values that stress unity and diversity.

---Written by Candice Goucher, September 2025.

Selected Reading and Viewing

Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source: Selected Texts of Amilcar Cabral* [1973] (New York:

Monthly Review Press, 2023).

Basil Davidson, *No Fist is Big Enough to Hide the Sky: The Liberation of Guinea-Bissau and*

Cape Verde, 1963-74 (London: Zed Books, 1984).

¹ Cabral quoted in Robert O. Collins, *Problems in African History* (1997), 163.

Manuel Loureiro and Roger Mor, directors, *Nteregu* (documentary film, 2024). Hailed as a visual and sound “poem.”