



D jibouti, a small but strategically located nation in the Horn of Africa, is facing a developing political crisis due to the declining health of President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh. The president, now in his mid-70s, has reportedly returned home after spending time in critical care in Paris. Still, his deteriorating health has produced a power vacuum, aggravating an ugly fight for succession.

This is not the first time Guelleh has been said to have been no more. These past developments have set off a power struggle between the various factions vying to control the imminent transition of power, disregarding constitutional stipulations regarding presidential succession.

The situation exposes the less explored deep-seated political tensions within Djibouti, a country whose stability has historically been underpinned by the continued dominance of Guelleh's regime.

Constitutional Guidelines for Succession

The 1992 Constitution of Djibouti provides clear guidelines on the transfer of power in the event of the president's death or incapacitation. According to Article 40 (Article 29 of the Revised Constitution of 2010), in case of such vacancy—whether through death, illness, or other incapacitating circumstances—the President of the Supreme Court must assume temporary power for 60 days. During this time, preparations must be made for a new presidential election to ensure a peaceful and democratic transition.

However, despite this constitutional safeguard, Djibouti faces a significant obstacle: since the sudden death of Mr. Abdourahman Cheikh Mohamed, senior magistrate and President of the Supreme Court, on May 16, 2023, in Paris, no successor has been appointed to fill this critical role.

The absence of a Supreme Court President has created a consequential power vacuum at the top of Djibouti's judiciary, further complicating the political situation. Both factions within the country's elite—one camp centered around President Guelleh's wife and the other around his extended family—are reportedly blocking the nomination of a new President of the Supreme Court, each seeking to impose their candidate.

Factional Struggles: Family vs. Inner Circle

The delay in appointing a new Supreme Court President has intensified the power struggle between two key factions.

On one side, President Guelleh's wife with considerable power is believed to be rallying support from loyalists within the ruling party and key government officials to appoint a caretaker of her choosing.

On the other side, Guelleh's extended family, including close relatives and longtime allies within the military and political apparatus, is seeking to assert control over the succession process.

Both factions are strategically positioning themselves to influence any interim leadership, aiming to bypass the Constitution's provisions for a smooth and legal transition.

This conniving power struggle reveals the deep-rooted system of political patronage in Djibouti, where personal alliances often outweigh institutional governance. President Guelleh, who has ruled Djibouti since 1999, has maintained a tight grip on power through a combination of loyalty from security forces, economic patronage, and suppressed democratic opposition.

Now that his iron grip on power is loosening because of his health condition, this creates a precarious political situation where informal power grabs, conflict of personal interests, and factional infighting take precedence over the rule of law.

Sidelining the Political Opposition

While the ruling elite struggles for power, Djibouti's opposition has been methodically destroyed and sidelined. Despite the hurdles, a new coalition within the opposition called BSN (Bloc for National Salvation) was founded this year, bringing together three major political groups and galvanizing the Djiboutians. However, Guelleh's dictatorship continues to undermine the opposition's ability to organize effectively, reducing its impact on the country's political discourse.

And the current situation reflects this pattern, with the opposition generally sidelined from debates about succession and governance. This marginalization not only silences people's expression but also inhibits any potential threat to the ruling elite's power.

Opposition leaders, often critical of the regime's corruption and authoritarian tendencies, find themselves eliminated, imprisoned, exiled, or without a meaningful platform in a political landscape dominated by factional competition. The sidelining of the opposition further erodes public confidence in the country's institutions, deepening the sense of disillusionment among Djiboutians who feel alienated from their government.

Djibouti: A Garrison State with Geopolitical Stakes

Djibouti's strategic location at the crossroads of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden makes its internal stability a matter of global concern.

With the world's highest concentration of foreign military bases, the country has emerged as a focus point for global powers. The United States, France, China, Japan, and other countries have military bases in Djibouti, making it one of the world's most militarized countries.

This large foreign military footprint has transformed the country into what some analysts refer to as a "garrison state," with the presence of these bases overshadowing internal politics.

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ANTICIPATING CHANGE IN DJIBOUTI: PRESIDENT GUELLEH'S HEALTH AND POSSIBLE POWER VACUUM

The competing interests of these foreign powers add complexity to Djibouti's political situation. Any internal instability could have far-reaching consequences.

Foreign stakeholders will likely be closely monitoring the unfolding power struggle, potentially influencing the outcome in subtle ways to protect their strategic interests.

Djibouti's Role in Isolating Eritrea, and the Surprising UNGA U-Turn to Peace

For much of his rule, President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh intentionally positioned Djibouti as a significant ally of Western powers, leveraging the country's geopolitical positioning to support their goals in the region.

In exchange for economic and military support, Guelleh leads the global isolation and sanctions of Eritrea. Guelleh's belligerent attitude towards Eritrea persisted, and in exchange, Western governments ignored his authoritarian rule, allowing him to maintain power without addressing internal dissent.

However, in a surprise move before the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on Tuesday, October 1, 2024, the Permanent Representative of Djibouti to the UN announced a renewed desire to make peace with Eritrea. The announcement marks a stark departure from the regime's previous stance, leading many to question what could have prompted this dramatic change in approach.

Signs of Panic in the Ruling Class and the Decline of Guelleh's Influence

For decades, Guelleh maintained tight control over Djibouti's foreign and domestic policies, relying on strategic ties with Western countries to preserve an unassailable hold on power. But, as President Guelleh's health deteriorates and factional power battles escalate inside the regime, it appears that key players are striving to distance themselves from Guelleh's legacy of conflict and isolation.

The shift in Djibouti's stance toward Eritrea could also be interpreted as additional evidence that President Guelleh is no longer in complete control of the country's destiny and that the power vacuum created by his frailty has resulted in a breakdown in decision-making coherence, with various factions vying for control over key decisions, including foreign policy.

The ruling elite, previously confident in Guelleh's ability to handle Djibouti's complex geopolitical situation, now appears to be struggling with a crisis of direction.

Risk of Civil War

The struggle for control between these factions not only threatens to undermine the constitutional process but also poses a serious risk of escalating into all-out armed conflict. Djibouti's political elites have long relied on the loyalty of the country's military and security forces, which have played a crucial role in maintaining the thin stability of the regime.

If the competing factions mobilize sections of the security apparatus to back their claims to power, it could lead to violent confrontations, raising the possibility of a broader conflict.

Given Djibouti's ethnically diverse population, there is also a risk that political competition could inflame ethnic tensions. If political elites exploit ethnic loyalties to bolster their factions, the situation could spiral out of control, leading to widespread unrest or even civil war.

The lack of a clear legal path forward, compounded by the absence of a Supreme Court President, is creating a volatile environment. If neither faction steps back to allow for a constitutional resolution, Djibouti could face a destabilizing internal conflict that threatens to unravel the fragile peace that has characterized the country in recent years.

Consequences of Not Respecting the Constitution

The failure to nominate a new Supreme Court President and the decision to sideline the Constitution's provisions for presidential succession has far-reaching implications for Djibouti's stability.

Should a caretaker be appointed through informal channels without respect for legal procedures, this could risk triggering a constitutional crisis that could delegitimize its political system. The involvement of armed factions or the security forces in the power struggle could further exacerbate this crisis, leading to open conflict and the possible collapse of central authority.

Additionally, the risk of civil war threatens to alienate Djiboutian citizens and opposition groups, many of whom are already dissatisfied with the concentration of power within Guelleh's regime.

Conclusion: A Country at a Crossroads

As Djibouti navigates this critical moment, adherence to its Constitution is essential to preserving both internal stability and international credibility. As stipulated by law, the temporary transfer of power to the President of the Supreme Court would not only ensure a lawful and peaceful transition but also help avoid the perception of a power grab by either faction.

The ongoing factional power struggle, exacerbated by the unresolved appointment of a new Supreme Court President, underscores the fragility of governance structures in Djibouti.

Without immediate action to respect constitutional norms and resolve the issue of judicial leadership, Djibouti risks entering a period of political instability that could escalate into civil war, with devastating consequences for the country and the broader region.

The concentration of foreign military bases in Djibouti adds another layer of complexity to the situation, making it a matter of international concern.

The coming weeks will be crucial in determining whether Djibouti can overcome this challenge through constitutional means or whether factional interests and the potential for violence will prevail, setting a dangerous precedent for future political transitions.

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