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THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE CONFLICT IN IVORY COAST

BY TOM OGWANG

SUMMARY

- The conflict in Ivory Coast is a by-product of deep-seated cleavages revolving around ethnicity, nationality and religion. Politicians tapped into these differences to consolidate their monopoly on power, and in the process, pushed the country toward civil war.
- Alassane Ouattara has inherited a deeply divided country and peace in Ivory Coast will largely depend on how he approaches the process of bridging the differences in Ivorian society. Ouattara also owes his rise to power to a loose coalition of rebel groups from the north, who might demand a role in government. Meeting their demands is also a key ingredient to peace in Ivory Coast.

In December 2010, Ivory Coast made headlines following an election dispute that sparked violence between supporters of incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and opposition leader Alassane Ouattara. The dispute revolved around results announced by the electoral commission, which crowned Ouattara the winner in a second round of voting for the presidency. Gbagbo, whose stronghold is in the south of the country, rejected the results and refused to step down alleging that rigging in the opposition home base in northern Ivory Coast inflated votes for Ouattara.¹

Subsequently, Ivory Coast was thrown into political deadlock. Both politicians were “sworn-in” as presidents and each appointed a cabinet. The international community endorsed Ouattara as president and called on Gbagbo to step down.² Clashes between supporters of both politicians resulted in the loss of lives,

1 Reuters, “Ivory Coast’s Gbagbo Rejects Results in 3 Regions.” <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/29/ivorycoast-election-challenge-idUSLDE6AS1RT20101129>

2 AllAfrica.com, “Ban Again Calls on Gbagbo to Step Down To Avoid Further Turmoil.” January 28, 2010. <http://allafrica.com/stories/201101280984.html>

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destruction of property, and massive displacement of people. The violence effectively divided the country into two: the north largely controlled by rebels backing Ouattara; while the army under Gbagbo, controlled the south.

In April 2011, forces loyal to Ouattara seized control of Abidjan and Gbagbo was besieged in his residence, defiant and refusing to cede power. He was finally removed from power when French and United Nations troops stormed the residence, arrested him and handed him over to forces loyal to Ouattara.

Ouattara subsequently assumed the role of president of Ivory Coast.

On the surface, the conflict appears to be a squabble over election results. In reality, the election dispute is a manifestation of deep divisions that are underlined by ethnicity, nationality, religion and fragmentation among Ivorian society along geographical lines.³ This backgrounder highlights these cleavages, assessing their historical origins and examines the context under which they have contributed to fuelling civil strife in Ivory Coast.

DESCENT TO CONFLICT: THE TWIN EVILS OF ECONOMIC STAGNATION AND IMMIGRATION

Ivory Coast gained independence from France in 1960 under the leadership of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who ruled until 1993. During the first 20 years of his administration, Ivory Coast witnessed remarkable economic growth, recording consistent annual GDPs of more than seven percent. Economic growth arose mainly from the sale of cocoa and coffee, two of Ivory Coast's major export crops. Houphouët-Boigny combined economic policies with shrewd politics that emphasized dialogue and compromise among Ivory Coast's various ethnic groups. To alleviate fears of political domination by one ethnic group, he introduced a system of ethnic quotas within government institutions. As a result, Ivory Coast maintained a relatively stable political and civil profile by most African standards.

Ivory Coast's cocoa and coffee plantations relied on immigrant labourers, who were first brought into the country by French colonialists. To ensure that these labourers remained in Ivory Coast following independence, Houphouët-Boigny extended their right to live and work in the country. He also

³ Nkrumah M. Mulmi, "Ivorian Crisis: The Intrigues Part I." *The African Executive*. 2011 <http://www.africanexecutive.com/modules/magazine/articles.php?article=5675&magazine=319#>

initiated policies that encouraged immigration from neighbouring countries, such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea and Ghana, to ensure a constant supply of cheap labour. Furthermore, he introduced liberal land ownership laws that were favourable to immigrants, resulting in large immigrant settlements in the country. By 1998, immigrants and their descendants numbered four million—about 25 percent of Ivory Coast’s population.

Despite Houphouët-Boigny’s progressive policies, inequalities between north and south persisted mainly because most of the country’s cocoa and coffee plantations, as well as other natural resources were located in the south. To address this disparity, he introduced commercial food production in the north. Between 1965 and 1975, the Ivory Coast government was fully engaged in efforts to bridge the north-south development gap, but was unable to completely eradicate regional inequalities.

By the 1980s, cocoa and coffee prices fell on the world markets with serious consequences for the Ivorian economy. Living standards plummeted and petroleum prices skyrocketed, resulting in civil unrest and student riots. As world cocoa prices fell, the government replaced taxation with subsidies for the immigrants working in the cocoa sector, a move that was unpopular with most Ivorians. By the early 1990s, three in four Ivorians were struggling to make ends meet in the informal sector. As jobs became scarce and incomes fell, young people sought employment in the informal sector, but by this time the best land had been occupied by immigrant workers, which sparked strong anti-immigrant sentiments in the country (Collier 2009).

The resulting economic difficulties unfastened and aggravated differences between indigenous Ivorians and immigrants on the one hand, and between northerners and locals in the prosperous south on the other (Langer 2010). Because a large number of indigenous Ivorians from the north, including immigrants had settled in the south, the ensuing conflict between the two groups began to be described as a “north versus south” conflict.

THE POLITICS OF ETHNIC IDENTITY, NATIONALITY AND RELIGION

Ethnicity became a major political factor during the country’s first multi-party election in 1990, which pitted incumbent President Houphouët-Boigny’s Democratic Party of Côte d’Ivoire against the opposition Ivorian

Popular Front led by Gbagbo. In the run-up to the elections, the Ivorian Popular Front accused the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire of favouring the interests of the Baoulé, Houphouët-Boigny's tribe and one of Ivory Coast's largest ethnic groups. The Ivorian Popular Front also accused the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire of representing the interests of foreigners and ethnic groups from the north (Crook 1997)⁴.

The Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire won the 1990 elections, but Houphouët-Boigny did not live for long after the advent of multi-party politics in Ivory Coast. He died in 1993 after 33 years in power and was succeeded by Henri Konan Bédié.

In preparation for Ivory Coast's second multi-party elections scheduled for 1995, a new opposition party called the Rally for Republicans was formed in 1994. The creation of the party, which drew support from people with a northern or Muslim background, reflected a further split among Ivory Coast's political elite and heightened the advent of identity politics in the country by reinforcing ethno-religious differences. The party, led by Alassane Ouattara—a Muslim from the north—posed a serious threat to the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire's electoral support in the north.

Upon becoming president⁵, Bédié initiated steps to block Ouattara from contesting in the 1995 elections. Ivory Coast's parliament—dominated by Bédié's party—passed a law barring anyone whose parents were not born in Ivory Coast from running for the presidency. The law was clearly aimed at Ouattara, one of whose parents, it was claimed, was from Burkina Faso⁶.

Bédié also adopted a policy of Ivorian nationalism, dubbed "Ivoirité" or Ivoriannes (Crook, 1997 quoted in Langer 2010)⁷. Under the tenets of "Ivorite," anyone who had a non-Ivorian parent was ineligible to contest for high political office. While Bédié claimed the concept of "Ivoirité" was solely aimed at creating a sense of cultural unity among the people of Ivory Coast,

4 See Crook Richard C, *Winning Coalitions and Ethno-Regional Politics: The Failure of the Opposition in the 1990 and 1995 elections in Cote d'Ivoire*, *African Affairs* (1997), 96, 215-242.

5 See Mwenda M Andrew 2011, *Let Ivoirians solve their problems themselves*. <http://independent.co.ug/the-last-word/the-last-word/3838?task=view>

6 Ibid Pg 2

7 For details see Langer, Arnim, 2010: Côte d'Ivoire's Elusive Quest for Peace: IBIS Discussion Paper No.4 in the Discussion Series: Patterns of Conflict Resolution available on line <http://www.ucd.ie/ibis/publications/discussionpapers/cotedivoireselusivequestforpeace/#d.en.75028>

in reality the concept was introduced for the purpose of preventing Ouattara from participating in the 1995 presidential elections on the basis that his Ivorian citizenship was questionable because one of his parents was not Ivorian (Langer 2010).

As the 1995 elections approached, it became evident that no opposition politician other than Ouattara could command a significant share of the votes. Gbagbo, who was one of the opposition candidates, declined to participate in the elections because of unfair electoral policies. He formed an alliance with Ouattara to boycott the elections and both men's parties formed militias to enforce the boycott. Bédié won the elections—perceived by many to be unfair—and proceeded with removing many northerners from government positions.

THE POLITICS OF EXCLUSION AND THE ADVENT OF CIVIL WAR

Economic stagnation and Bédié's pursuit of identity politics, resulted in a coup in 1999 led by General Robert Gueï who promised fresh elections within six months. Initially, Gueï denounced the concept of "Ivorite," but nevertheless, used it to consolidate his ambitions after expressing an interest in running for the presidency. For instance, he declared Ouattara ineligible to contest the elections on the grounds that the latter was not Ivorian, but allowed Gbagbo to register as a presidential candidate (Collier 2009).

Although he was defeated by Gbagbo in the elections, Gueï declared himself winner and disbanded the electoral commission, igniting a popular revolt which forced him to flee the country, while Gbagbo assumed the reins of power (Collier 2009). In office, Gbagbo took a hard-line stance against northerners by excluding them from his government, a move which further aggravated the north-south divisions in the country. This prompted disgruntled elements of the army, predominantly of northern composition, to attempt an unsuccessful coup in 2001.

Following this, in September 2002, Gbagbo attempted to demobilize two contingents of the Ivorian army that were recruited during Gueï's short stay in office, with the aim of replacing them with new recruits loyal to him. In response, the soldiers mutinied, with the rebellious soldiers—mostly of northern origin—retreating north to the towns of Bouaké and Karhogo.

Within weeks they were joined by an array of excluded and disgruntled politicians from other parts of Ivory Coast. By the end of September 2002, Ivory Coast was in a full-fledged civil war, with the northern part of the country under the control of the rebels. In areas under their control, the rebels created an 'economic police force' to patrol diamond areas and imposed taxes to fund the war⁸.

Calling themselves the Forces Nouvelles or New Forces, the rebels advanced rapidly on Abidjan, Ivory Coast's largest city and main commercial centre. In response, Gbagbo sought protection from France, which sent troops to reinforce government forces. The French military imposed a ceasefire and forced the rebels to withdraw from positions they had captured in southern Ivory Coast.⁹

DESCENT TO CONFLICT

A series of peace initiatives were adopted over a period of five years, but failed to resolve the conflict. However, in 2007, a successful peace agreement was signed in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Under the peace agreement, Guillaume Soro, a northerner and leader of the Forces Nouvelles, was appointed prime minister, while Gbagbo retained the presidency. The Ouagadougou Accord stipulated the reform of the contentious nationality identification system, considered discriminatory against northerners who were deemed as immigrants and not Ivorians. The agreement also called for the disarmament of militias and rebels, integration of rebels into the national army, fresh elections and power-sharing.

In the run-up to the 2010 elections, progress was made on the identification of nationals, voter registration and elections. However, little progress was achieved on creating a central army command, disarming militias and rebel forces. As well, hurdles existed on allowing the government to take over areas controlled by the rebels in the north of Ivory Coast.

In 2009, Gbagbo accused the electoral commission of inflating the voter registration list with names of non-Ivorians. In February 2010, he dissolved the electoral commission, which in turn forced the opposition parties to

8 Ibid Pg 165

9 Ibid Pg 163

threaten to boycott the elections. To break the ensuing stalemate, the opposition parties agreed to a process to verify the nationality of the approximately 850,000 disputed voters, but by the time the process ended on August 2, 2010, no major changes had been made to the electoral register.

The first round of voting occurred in late October, but did not produce an outright winner because none of the candidates reached the required 50 percent threshold: Gbagbo, Ouattara and Bédié garnered 38 percent, 32 percent and 25 percent respectively. In the second round of voting, the electoral commission declared that Ouattara had won 54 percent of the vote while Gbagbo garnered 46 percent.

SEARCHING FOR AN ELUSIVE PEACE

For several months after the elections, Ivory Coast was locked in a political stalemate marked by violence and displacement of thousands of Ivorians to neighbouring countries.¹⁰ Several mediation efforts by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union failed to yield positive results. ECOWAS dispatched the presidents of Benin, Cape Verde and Sierra Leone to Ivory Coast to urge Gbagbo to step down. The African Union sent the prime minister of Kenya in early January 2011, but the visit was inconclusive. Another mediation attempt involving former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo in January was also unsuccessful.¹¹ At its emergency summit on Ivory Coast in December 2010, ECOWAS endorsed the use of force if Gbagbo declined to cede power and also agreed to the international prosecution of those responsible for post-election deaths. As the conflict dragged on, regional non-state actors, mainly mercenaries from Liberia, became active in the conflict. Media reports indicated that “hundreds of Liberian mercenaries” entered western Ivory Coast and engaged in looting, raping and robbing citizens.¹²

Ouattara’s ascent to power, however, may not necessarily spell an end to

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Parayre, Christophe. Mercenaries ‘Loot, Rape, Kill’ in I.Coast. Sydney Morning Herald. March 26, 2011. <http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-world/mercenaries-loot-rape-kill-in-icoast-20110326-1cadj.html>

the Ivory Coast conflict. Ouattara has inherited a deeply divided country. Whether the divisions he inherited become a source of conflict or not, may depend on how his administration handles matters in Ivorian society.

On a separate note, the former opposition leader owes his ascent to power to a coalition of several rebel groups in the north, who may expect to play a key role in the new government. The real challenge ahead also rests on whether Ouattara can meet their demands.¹³

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