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WEST AFRICA: THE SILENT REVOLUTION

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INTRODUCTION

West Africa is one part of the world which outside observers have long found difficult and frustrating to understand. Confusion reigns even over how to demarcate the region. For the purposes of this analysis, West Africa is held to be the sixteen member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as indicated on the enclosed map.

The region has a population of more than two hundred million. Nigeria alone has a domestic market estimated at some 110 million and is a significant oil exporter and key non-Arab member of OPEC. Guinea is the world's largest producer of Bauxite, and the region provides much of the world's cocoa and coffee. Gold and other precious metals have yet to be exploited to their full capacity.

West Africa has been plagued by political instability and economic mismanagement, and is seriously lacking in hard currency. Some countries in the region, having defaulted on loan repayments, no longer have access even to the World Bank or International Monetary Fund.

But events over the last few years, particularly those of 1990, indicate that the region is undergoing a transition potentially as profound as that recently witnessed in Eastern Europe, with all the opportunities and challenges for foreign business that such a transition implies. However, the process of transition has not been uniform, and requires careful examination.

REFORM FROM WITHIN

The military governments of Nigeria, Guinea and Ghana each claim to be undertaking a process of political liberalisation which will lead to a return to civilian democracy, although all three are aware of the acute failings of civilian politicians in the past: the naked theft which characterised the behaviour of several members of Nigeria's short lived Second Republic administration of Shehu Shagari (1979-1983), the political

paralysis of the Limann regime in Ghana (1979-1981), and the brutal post-independence autocracy of Sekou Toure in Guinea (1957-1984). They are thus moving cautiously, and in all three the prospects for civilian governments entirely free from the political influence of the military in the near future are uncertain.

The government of General Ibrahim Babangida in Nigeria is committed to return to the barracks by 1992. Insisting that the people demand a 'new breed' of politicians untainted by the corruption of their predecessors, in October 1989 Babangida authorised the creation of only two political parties, both to be set up by his government, one 'a little to the left', the other 'a little to the right'. However, cynics (and there are many in Nigeria) claim that both the new parties will merely be proxies for the military, who, having ruled the country for much of the post-independence period, are now too accustomed to power to relinquish their authority completely.

Nevertheless, the riots of May 1989 in Lagos and other cities in the south and the failed coup of April 1990, may encourage the ruling Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) to inject more legitimacy into the transition process by adopting a less interventionist approach. It is therefore not unreasonable to suggest that in the near future Nigeria will institute a relatively autonomous civilian government under the aegis of the Third Republic, although the repressive measures taken against the media and certain businessmen and opposition figures in the aftermath of the attempted coup seem set to continue, at least in the short term.

It remains to be seen whether such a government will have the political will to succeed where all others have failed in halting the precipitous decline of the Nigerian economy of the 1980s or heal the country's widening religious divide between the Muslim north and the predominantly Christian south.

Flight-Lieutenant Rawlings of Ghana and President Lansana Conte of Guinea argue that the political and socio-economic dislocation in their countries has progressed so far that it would be foolish and unrealistic to contemplate a swift return to constitutional rule. At the same time, in 1988 the Ghanaian government instituted non-party elections at the local and regional level, and the following year President Conte announced plans for the drawing up of a new constitution and a return to civilian rule within five years. These plans now appear to have become bogged down, but, although there is significant opposition to the military in both countries - especially in Ghana where Rawlings is often accused of favouring his own Ewe people - both enjoy the confidence of the international community. Ghana is something of a World Bank showcase of economic reconstruction, and the Bank seems keen to preserve stability there at any cost.

Thus the prospects for a return to civilian rule in either country in the short or medium term seem bleak, and while their economies remain so depressed, it would be unwise to rule out the possibility either of civilian disturbances or the overthrow of the regimes from within; of the two, Ghana appears the more unstable.

EXTERNALLY INDUCED REFORM

The French speaking nations of Benin and Ivory Coast are the two countries in the region which have undergone the most profound and unexpected change in recent months.

The octogenarian President of Ivory Coast, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, has dominated Ivorian politics for the past forty-five years. His rule has been characterised as a benign autocracy in which political freedoms had been sacrificed for the good of economic development. But Houphouet's success was based almost entirely on the expansion of the local cocoa industry; when the cocoa price collapsed in the late 1980s, the economy crashed, as did the popularity of the President who seemed to have no answer as to how to rescue the economy. After more than thirty-five years of unrivalled political stability, Ivory Coast has, since 1988, descended rapidly into crisis.

Abandoned politically by the former colonial power France, and under extreme pressure from international lending agencies to meet debt repayments, Houphouet's government has found the unprecedented political agitation, strikes and opposition of students, the military (in June 1990, units of the army took control of the international airport and demanded the resignation of the Defence Minister), police and other civil servants irresistible. In May 1990, opposition political parties were allowed to register for the first time since independence in 1960, and it now seems certain that the President will stand down on or before the completion of his sixth five year term in office later this year.

Any post-Houphouet government is certain to face enormous problems in diversifying the economy, servicing the largest per capita debt burden in Africa and meeting popular aspirations. It is unlikely to receive much in the way of external assistance in tackling these problems, particularly from France, which is reassessing policy in relation to the region.

In Benin recent changes have been no less dramatic and current problems no less serious. President Matthieu Kerekou, a former military officer, came to power in 1972 following an intense period of political instability which saw the government change hands six times in as many years. Kerekou's political acumen ushered in a degree of stability unprecedented in Benin's post-colonial history, but his economic policies were less successful, and as Benin sank into virtual bankruptcy, popular

opposition made the country virtually ungovernable. After escalating tension throughout 1989 and 1990, Kerekou was forced to sack his government and an interim administration was set up to guide Benin to multi-party elections, scheduled to be held in early 1991.

But in spite of the high regard with which the new executive Prime Minister Soglo - formerly a senior official at the World Bank - is held in financial circles, the country's precipitous economic situation makes it difficult to be optimistic about the prospects for political stability or economic growth in the medium-term. Benin's fundamental problem, as with several of its neighbours, is that it has for a long time been a producer of primary commodities which the rest of the world no longer needs. Furthermore, because of bureaucratic incompetence and corruption, the state has now virtually withdrawn from the nation, and most economic activity now takes place in what may be termed the parallel economy.

This reality, along with the collapse of the local banking system and loss-making parastatals, is also a feature of several neighbouring countries, most notably Ivory Coast, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. In Benin, it would seem as if the interim regime has the necessary domestic legitimacy and international confidence to attempt a radical restructuring of the economy, although the critical component of economic recovery - access to foreign capital - is lacking.

The former Portuguese colonies, the tiny nations of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, are also experimenting cautiously with democratic liberalisation after the economic failures of one party rule and popular discontent over lack of access to the state.

THE DEMOCRACIES

At present, there are only three formal democracies in West Africa: Senegal, the Gambia and Liberia. Liberia is currently in the process of a bloody civil war, in which it looks increasingly likely that the entirely undemocratic President Samuel K. Doe will be overthrown. Yet the prospects for the re-emergence of a true democracy in Liberia are uncertain.

Senegal, on the other hand, is frequently held up as one of the success stories of Africa - a stable multi-party democracy since independence. However, the ruling party has effectively engineered the political system to ensure that its hold on power has never seriously been challenged. Nevertheless, the economy, although ailing, is healthier than any of its neighbours, and the capital, Dakar, is an efficient, if dangerous, place.

The Gambia, with Ivory Coast the only state in the region still to have the same leader as at independence, now appears to have

abandoned the idea of a confederation with Senegal, by which it is surrounded on all sides. In spite of a powerful bid to unseat his regime in 1981, Sir Dawda Jawara remains pretty firmly in power, although the depressed tourism industry could spell trouble for his government.

THE ONE PARTY STATES

Four countries in the region - Sierra Leone, Mali, Niger and Togo - appear keen to resist the trend towards a more plural democratic system.

The former military governments of Mali and Niger formally instituted one party rule at the end of 1989, modelling their constitutions on that which has enabled former army chief Gnassingbe Eyadema to rule Togo for more than twenty years. Both these predominantly desert countries have narrow resource bases, and have had long traditions of military rule. Since the implementation of one party rule, both Mali and Niger have experienced urban discontent and tribal rebellions.

If Togo's one party state remains stable - and given the loyalty of the army and the extensive intelligence network this would seem likely - Presidents Traore of Mali and Saibou of Niger should survive, at least in the short term. But the consequences of the movement towards multi-partyism in nearby Gabon, Cameroon and Zaire also should not be underestimated.

By contrast, the All Peoples Congress government of Major-General Joseph Momoh in Sierra Leone looks distinctly vulnerable. The formal economy has virtually disintegrated after years of abuse, the party structure is weak, and during 1989 organised labour and the press have made increasingly daring calls for political reform.

THE MILITARY REGIMES

West Africa's unreconstructed military governments rule the two poorest countries in the region. Colonel Ould Taya in the mainly desert nation of Mauritania has given no indication that he is prepared to relinquish power, or even set up a one party state, and he has attempted to distract domestic discontent by escalating tensions with neighbouring Senegal with whom Mauritania nearly went to war in 1989.

In Burkina Faso, Captain Blaise Compaore has yet to overcome the legacy of the bloody coup which brought him to power in 1987, in which his former friend, the charismatic and popular Thomas Sankara, was assassinated. Compaore rules through a Revolutionary Front, and if only half the plots which he claims to have uncovered since his accession to power are genuine, his regime must be regarded as unstable.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear from the above that West Africa is presently in ferment. To a large degree, the chances of the region being able to turn its back on its unhappy past depend on what comes to pass principally in Nigeria, and, to a lesser extent, Togo. If the transition to democracy in Nigeria - the most powerful country in the region - can succeed, pressure on neighbouring states to follow suit will be immense.

At the same time, if the many doubts presently held about the Nigerian process are vindicated, and Eyadema continues to keep one party ruled Togo stable, the temptation for the military in the region to continue to intervene in politics will remain strong.

Examining the region as a whole, it appears unlikely that the present wave of unrest will subside until the conditions which have created it - unaccountable, alienated regimes presiding over dilapidating economies - are overcome. Economic recovery will have to be largely self-generated as few countries or multinational corporations appear willing to commit resources to the region, despite the fact that in specific instances investment prospects seem encouraging.

One measure that the international community will soon have to face up to will be to write off the debts of these countries, all of which are unbearably over-borrowed. Such a reward is unlikely to be forthcoming to anything but a fully democratic regime.

Another measure which might substantially assist economic progress in the region might be closer economic integration, possibly through ECOWAS, although most countries in the region have in the past showed remarkably little interest in such an abdication of the little sovereignty that they still possess.

But the regional economy has traditionally been based on the production of commodity and mineral exports to the industrialised world. Such markets are inherently unstable, and most governments recognise that restructuring must take place as a priority if real growth and stability are ever to be firmly rooted.

On balance, then, the prospects for the region seem bleak although not entirely hopeless. In several countries, new people are reaching positions of responsibility, people who are on the whole far better qualified than their predecessors.

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