

The Collapse of Gbagbo's Regime and Ouattara's Ascension

Prospects and Challenges Ahead for Côte d'Ivoire

Justice Mkhabela

Since December 2010, Côte d'Ivoire has witnessed the recurrence of a political crisis which was triggered by disputed presidential elections. This political crisis was a brutal assault on the country's hopes and aspirations for peace. It also challenged its governance institutions in terms of their efficacy and adherence to the rule of law. In addition, it created two centres of power, as the country's two most highly placed politicians, Laurent Gbagbo and Allasane Ouattara, each declared electoral victory. In fact, the electoral quagmire resulted in the swearing in of both candidates as president in separate ceremonies. This policy brief aims to critically analyse the 2011 Côte d'Ivoire presidential elections in line with the research thrust of the Africa Institute of South Africa and one of the mandates of the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO): to find peaceful and lasting solutions to Africa's political and economic problems. Owing to time and space restrictions, the focus will be on the 2010 elections and the post-elections landscape in terms of lessons for Africa and South Africa.

Introduction

Côte d'Ivoire's presidential polls have been in the international spotlight since the early stages of the voter canvassing period of October 2010. Had the elections been successful, they could have served as a foundation to stabilise the country, which is situated in a region plagued by civil wars and political unrest during its post-colonial history. The country was once an economic powerhouse and a haven for political stability in West Africa, owing to its endowment with cocoa as an export

product. For a long time Côte d'Ivoire was the most prosperous French-speaking country in Africa. The 2010 elections served as a test to establish the nature of democracy and the theoretical debates about democracy in Africa. For instance, structural theorists argue that democratisation entails the inclusion of formerly rejected groups in governing establishments.¹ Given the history of discrimination against and exclusion of Ivoirians residing in the north of the country, the electoral process rekindled their aspirations for inclusion and participation.

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This policy brief seeks to examine the impact of the electoral crisis on Côte d'Ivoire's political and economic stability and the lessons that could be drawn from the crisis and its resolution. Furthermore, it explores links between the violence and the challenges lying ahead after the fall of Gbagbo's regime. Included in the analysis is a background to the country's recent crisis, relating to the 2003 Accords which paved the way for the Government of National Unity.

The Historical Background of Ivorian Politics

Upon the attainment of independence in 1960, the then Ivorian President Boigny instituted a system of a one-party state, suppressing ethnic tensions and divisions.² One observable fact was that power and politics in Côte d'Ivoire were personalised; the president regarded the nation as his 'kingdom', claiming the status of being the paramount chief over all Ivorian ethnic groups. This, however, drew much criticism from the opposition, with Laurent Gbagbo at the forefront. Gbagbo was critical of Boigny's banning of labour and 'multi-ethnic movements'.³ It is true that the president succeeded in dashing ethnic politics in the country. In fact, however, Boigny championed peace and reconciliation among the country's ethnic groups, and many migrants from neighbouring countries flooded the country seeking jobs in the then prosperous cocoa farms. In its first twenty years after independence, the country successfully retained considerable economic and political stability, as shown by Boigny's ability to curb military coups.⁴

Yet the legacy of Boigny's one-party system was partly accountable for the country's decline in the long run.⁵ All the way through the 1980s, the president's ailing health and stubborn refusal to hand over power had serious negative consequences for government administration. Since cocoa and coffee exports dominate the Ivorian economy, the collapse of their prices from the 1980s marked the beginning of an uncertain and volatile economic and political life in the country. Combined with acute public debt, unemployment in the country soared to unprecedented levels. This triggered public discontent and sparked xenophobic tendencies, as foreigners were begrudged and made the scapegoats.⁶ It was against this background that, when Boigny died in 1993, his successors Beddie and later Gbagbo inherited unfavourable economic conditions and falling standards of

living.⁷ Since then ethnic conflicts have gained momentum, with escalating attacks on foreigners, and growing divisions between the northern and southern parts of the country.⁸

It was thus not surprising that the 1995 elections were marred by one of the most violent clashes in the country's history. This electoral violence was stirred by protests following accusations that the then President Konan Beddie had rigged electoral rules in favour of the government.⁹ The 1995 protests led to the ousting of Beddie after heavy gunfire and looting in the capital. The coup was accompanied by the installation of General Guei, the military chief, who dissolved important government institutions such as parliament and the Supreme Court. Since then Côte d'Ivoire has battled to curb erratic political situations, and nearly all elections that have followed have turned violent¹⁰. In 2000 the country's peaceful reputation was marred by massive political protests challenging the planned disqualification of Allasane Ouattara's presidential candidacy, based on accusations that he was not an Ivorian national.¹¹ As a consequence, political tensions rose when several supporters of Ouattara were jailed.

In the year 2000 elections were held, with disappointing results that hindered the Côte d'Ivoire's peace advancement rather than building strong foundations for stability. All the opposition parties except Laurent Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front were banned from participating in the elections; Gbagbo's campaign was primarily anti-foreigner in nature. Boigny had allowed immigrants from Burkina Faso to vote, yet Gbagbo campaigned heavily for their exclusion from the ballot, especially once Boigny, the nation's founding father, was dead.¹² Ouattara's mixed nationality of Burkinabe and Ivorian descent worked against him, as his candidacy was banned on the grounds that he was not a 'true' Ivorian.

Gbagbo's victory in the polls heralded a new political era, as it marked an end to General Guei's military rule. However, the Ivorian Popular Front continually played on ethnic differences, favouring Gbagbo over Ouattara, who had been accused of being an unpatriotic puppet of the west.¹³ This resulted in bitterness and rivalry between the two leaders, which became harmful and irreconcilable as they further divided the nation along religious and ethnic lines.¹⁴

In view of this, it was hardly shocking that a civil war then broke out in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002. The exclusion of Allasane Ouattara from the 2000 presidential polls had sparked yet another outbreak of violence and resentment among

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northerners, leading to more civil strife. By September 2002 discontented northerners took up arms, seeking to overthrow Gbagbo's regime. In terms of reconciliation and nation building, the country's ruling Ivorian Popular Front failed dismally after assuming office. Northerners perpetually suffered exclusion from the country's political and economic life. Given this, military confrontation between the northern rebels (FN or '*Forces Nouvelles*') and the Ivorian government troops' 'National Army' became inevitable.¹⁵

Eventually a ceasefire agreement was reached in Pretoria in 2005, under the mediation of the then South African President Thabo Mbeki. The signing of a peace accord between the Ivorian government, rebels and opposition leaders provided fresh optimism for peace and stability in the war-torn West African nation. Former President Mbeki encouraged both sides to cease hostilities and use of armaments. Nevertheless, in spite of this much-celebrated commitment to peace and power-sharing, Côte d'Ivoire continues to be marred by violence and hostilities as the country remains split into two, with so-called rebels controlling the north. In fact sporadic fighting and violence keep on spreading, thus undermining the peace process.¹⁶

Events Leading to the 2010 Elections

The 2010 presidential elections held the promise of producing Côte d'Ivoire's first democratically elected leader since the signing of a peace agreement in 2005. Since the Pretoria ceasefire agreement, the country had experienced challenges in organising elections, and the 2010 polling process was greeted with jubilation.¹⁷ However, the country's history of north-south division and ethnic tensions pitted Gbagbo against long-time opposition leader Ouattara. What ensued was a situation of panic and disorder. Both Gbagbo and Ouattara adamantly claimed victory, thus effectively creating two centres of power. This political deadlock drastically interrupted the functioning of the public service, as both leaders scrambled to control the public coffers. For instance, the former president (Gbagbo) grabbed control of the country's central bank in order to pay salaries to forces loyal to him, at the expense of opponents, despite the decision by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to recognise Ouattara as the legitimately elected leader.¹⁸

The move also reduced the functioning of Côte d'Ivoire's banking system, as banks were compelled to temporarily suspend their operations. In a retaliatory move, Ouattara ordered the banning of the cocoa exports that constitute the backbone of the country's economy. Consequently, the Côte d'Ivoire ended up running a dual economy. The conduct of both leaders exacerbated the country's political stalemate and the banning of cocoa exports denied Côte d'Ivoire much-needed hard currency. In view of the fragile nature of the Ivorian economy, both leaders could not weather the financial storm, as cocoa exports were heavily destabilised.¹⁹

The 2010 Election Results

Apart from the struggle by both candidates for recognition as legitimate electoral victors, there have been several irregularities, proving that the polling processes could not have been free and or fair. The elections were marked by the use of physical force with intention to undermine human security. Furthermore, there were incidents of coercion and kidnapping of political opponents. In some polling stations voters had to be delayed as officials did not arrive on time. For instance, in the Korhogo District, supporters of the Liberation for Presidential Majority (LMP) were killed, tortured and abused by activists campaigning for the Rally of the Republicans (RDR) and the New Forces (ex-rebels). In numerous voting stations the presence of government forces to protect civilians was undeniably inadequate, leaving voters at the mercy of criminal groups. The African Union (AU) and European Union (EU) election observers also decried the use of violence to frighten civilians and voters.²⁰

Analysing the Post-Election Ivorian Conflict

The electoral dispute between internationally recognised winner Allasane Ouattara and embattled Gbagbo plunged the country into conflict and human misery. Gbagbo's associates made allegations of vote rigging, especially, in the north.²¹ The standoff produced bitterness and mistrust, testified to by Gbagbo's refusal to step down in spite of pressure by the AU, the United Nations (UN) and the EU. Gbagbo's defiance sparked condemnation by international mediators, who believed it to be 'theft of office'. His perpetual

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stubbornness was perceived as evidence that he had stolen the electoral outcome and would not concede defeat.²² This went against the IEC's declaration of Ouattara as a victor and the UN's certification of the outcome in his favour.²³

The 2011 Civil War

In most cases since the electoral disputes erupted, Ivorian troops have opened fire and killed protesters demanding Gbagbo's removal – witness the murder of at least six protesters on 21 February 2011.²⁴ The period from the announcement of results on December 2010 to April 2011 saw the return of gun battles between forces loyal to the incumbent Ouattara and his opponent, Gbagbo.

Probably what is most relevant is that this conflict has exposed the limitations of peace agreements or the creation of 'unity' governments, as is also being observed in Zimbabwe where the 'Government of National Unity' has failed to resolve political disputes. For instance, despite the presence of the UN peacekeeping force, more than a million civilians of Côte d'Ivoire have been displaced and thousands of people have fled to neighbouring countries seeking refuge. It is also worth noting that Gbagbo's departure, after his arrest by opposition forces in April 2011, also came at a huge economic cost. The confrontation temporarily reduced the country's status as the world's largest cocoa producer, and the supply of this precious product was destabilised in international markets.²⁵

The United Nations and the Role of France

The conflict also attracted the intervention of international players, with the UN and France at the forefront. Despite their announcement that the intervention on Ivorian internal affairs was purely for humanitarian reasons, aimed at defending civilians and UN peacekeepers, the scars inflicted will not be easily healed in the long run. In fact, Ouattara may not claim to be entirely innocent; there have been reports of incidents where forces loyal to him also killed; raped and robbed civilians suspected to be Gbagbo's supporters. As a result of such conduct, the credibility of the UN, the United States (US) and the EU – all of whom approved Ouattara – has been questioned. In particular, the intervention of France was questioned when its forces bombed Gbagbo's residence.²⁶ Although there is now relative calm since the removal of

Gbagbo, the military confrontation between the UN and France and Gbagbo's supporters did attract undesired international criticism and suspicion of their motive, as it temporarily perpetuated fighting and instability in Côte d'Ivoire.²⁷ There is no doubt that France was biased in favour of Ouattara: the French turned a blind eye to massacres of a thousand Gbagbo supporters in a single village in the town of Duekoue.²⁸

France and Nigeria had 'drafted' the 1975 UN resolution, the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), claiming the mandate to protect civilians. It should, however, be noted that the UN resolution did not authorise France to attack, but requested the French to help. It had in actual fact been surprising that France recognised Gbagbo's 2000 electoral victory even when he had excluded Ouattara from the race.²⁹

Implications for South Africa's Peace Efforts

The collapse of democracy in the Côte d'Ivoire amidst ongoing peace efforts by the South African authorities conveys the lesson that power sharing was not the best tool for stability in the country. In this sense the resurgence of the Ivorian violence serves as a lesson that not enough was done to build a stable level of trust among conflicting parties. South Africa and the AU neglected the issues of mistrust and resentment among Côte d'Ivoire's political leadership prior to the signing of the Pretoria Agreement.³⁰

It is submitted that South Africa's foreign policy makers should be careful about fragile peace agreements that tend to fail, and rather attempt to address the root causes of conflicts. In this case it could be said that ethnicity is the root cause. South Africa could have paid more attention to creating an environment where Ivoirians of multiple ethnic backgrounds could equally play a role in the country's politics. Nevertheless, given the country's long history of ethnic and religious rivalry, such an attempt could possibly have been doomed from the start. It should therefore be noted that the notion of a South African type of 'Government of National Unity' is not entirely feasible in cases of political contestation in Africa.³¹ While the AU and ECOWAS supported Allasane Ouattara as victor in the elections, South Africa's approach seemed more reconciliatory towards Gbagbo, thus contradicting the recommendations of the continental institutions. The ambiguity of South Africa's stance on the crisis was primarily influenced by notions of

honouring the sovereignty of another state. This could, however, be interpreted as renunciation of its leadership role in the African continent.³²

Future Outlook

The fall of Gbagbo's rule did to a certain extent mark the end of fierce battles and political uncertainty in Côte d'Ivoire, but the scars inflicted by ethnicity and nationalism will not easily heal. Indeed, the use of military strength to forcefully install Ouattara is itself contradictory.³³ Not long ago, Gbagbo himself was an opposition candidate against Felix Houphouët Boigny's dictatorship. When he took office Ivorians expected him to spearhead democratic reforms, but to their disappointment the country did not adhere to democratic principles of free and fair elections. This could trigger arguments that there is no guarantee of a stable prosperous Côte d'Ivoire under Ouattara, given the fact that France might now have an upper hand in interfering in Ivorian affairs.

Moreover, Côte d'Ivoire's socio-economic prospects currently cast a dark shadow about the future. Unemployment, poverty and sexual abuse are still rife.³⁴ The country's new president is in this regard facing a daunting task of once again turning Côte d'Ivoire into one of West Africa's most prosperous nations. In an attempt to unify the country, Ouattara has instituted a National Commission, aiming to investigate atrocities committed during the civil war – yet there is fear that the commission is only investigating misdeeds committed by Gbagbo's supporters. This reconciliation process may thus be flawed and challenged from the very outset.³⁵

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 2010 Ivorian electoral dispute has caused very serious setbacks to previous peace mediation efforts that had been meant to bring about a lasting solution to the country's political woes. It has aggravated ethnic and regional tensions instead of peacefully producing a democratically elected leader with an intention of helping the country break its ugly history of dictatorships. Since the announcement of the electoral outcome, Ivorians have experienced a deterioration of peace and a return to past years of insecurity and bloodshed. The conflict serves as a lesson in that both contenders put their selfish personal interests ahead of the good of the country and the

sovereignty of the people. It can be argued that if they had prioritised the well-being of their citizens and the country, the Côte d'Ivoire would have been a model for conflict-torn West African countries to emulate. Yet dialogue between them did not succeed.

For the Côte d'Ivoire to successfully overcome its past failures and mistakes, there is a need to groom democratically-minded leaders, especially for the benefit of future generations. However, it is an open secret that in practice the country will struggle to produce de-tribalised leaders because of inherited regional rivalries. Since the death of Felix Houphët Boigny, ethnic politics and regional conflict have spiralled out of control.

There is no denying that much needs to be done to support a pro-democracy transformation in the Côte d'Ivoire. This process must be internally and continentally driven, but it also cannot be denied that the international community does have a role to play in supporting the country's governance and financial institutions. The country's economy still confronts enormous challenges in the form of unemployment, poverty and declining trade terms. It is to be hoped that the new president and his government will find ways to meet them.

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The country's new president is in this regard facing a daunting task of once again turning Côte d'Ivoire into one of West Africa's most prosperous nations.

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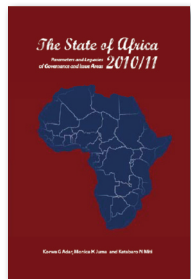
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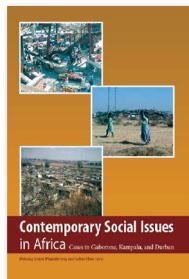


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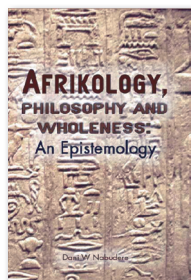


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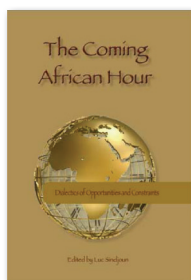
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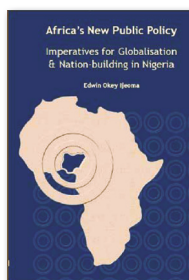
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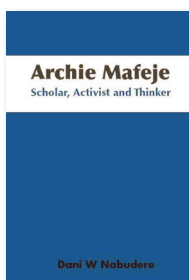
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