



Surface Calm Masks Deep Divides Ahead of Cote d'Ivoire's Election

Ben Shepherd | Wednesday, Sept. 30, 2015

A presidential election on Oct. 25 is likely to bring a second term for Cote d'Ivoire's president, Alassane Ouattara. The economy is booming, with growth rates consistently above 8 percent, and in a region scarred by crises—from the ravages of Ebola to Islamic extremism in the Maghreb and around Lake Chad—Cote d'Ivoire stands out as an attractive proposition for investors. Abidjan has bounced back from the dark days of post-election violence in 2010 and 2011, with life returning even to the poor neighborhoods that saw the worst of the fighting. Ouattara, a smooth, bilingual technocrat, has maintained good external relations. The future seems bright.

It also seems a resounding vindication for Ouattara's allies, chief among them France, which intervened decisively against former President Laurent Gbagbo, the loser in 2010. The precise role played by external forces in the fighting, particularly the destruction of Gbagbo's fortified residence in April 2011, will probably never be known, but is likely to have been pivotal in securing Ouattara's triumph. Gbagbo is now in The Hague, standing trial at the International Criminal Court alongside his key lieutenant, Charles Ble Goude. Earlier this year, a court in Cote d'Ivoire [sentenced Gbagbo's wife, Simone, to 20 years in prison](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/10/ivory-coast-court-sentences-wife-of-ex-president-to-20-years-in-prison) for her role in the crisis. As victories go, this one seems crushingly complete.

Of course, winners get to write the histories. The dominant narrative of the 2010-2011 crisis casts Gbagbo as an aging demagogue, clinging to power through the deployment of increasingly rabid ethno-nationalism, finally unseated by a principled coalition acting in defense of a democratically elected president. West Africa stood firm against Gbagbo, and international allies put their money



Cote d'Ivoire President Alassane Ouattara waves at reporters after a meeting with French President Francois Hollande at the Elysee Palace, Paris, Dec. 4, 2014 (AP photo by Christophe Ena).

—and troops—where their mouth was to support Ouattara. It is not by any means a wholly inaccurate view. Security has largely returned across the country. And the headline Ivorian economy has bounced back strongly, with Ouattara's international allies following up their military support with substantial debt relief and external investors pouring in.

But, as always with victor's narratives, it does not tell the whole story. It airbrushes away the strong strand of opinion, particularly from African observers, that would have preferred power-sharing and compromise between Gbagbo and Ouattara, and the slow rebuilding of trust between communities, rather than the victory of one over another—at the hands of the former colonial power, no less—and the risk of an ethnic bloodbath.

The final toll from the violence that broke out from November 2010 to June 2011 was some 3,000 dead (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/10/06/cote-divoire-impartial-justice-poses-test-ouattara>), not on the scale many feared, but still an appalling number.

And the narrative of Gbagbo as self-interested spoiler elides the fact that he received nearly half the votes in the last election. Deep grievances remain in the huge geographical and ethnic constituencies that voted for him, communities far from the bustle of Abidjan's construction sites that are now at risk of being increasingly marginalized. Allegations of harassment and abuse against Gbagbo supporters continue, and periodic spikes of violence are reported in his western bastions of support.

There have been some efforts to tackle Cote d'Ivoire's postconflict challenges. A disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) program was put in place, and a truth and reconciliation commission set up. Officials agreed on a national plan for the restructuring of the security sector and established a permanent mechanism for political dialogue between the government and opposition.

But these have largely been technical exercises, skating over rather than addressing Cote d'Ivoire's fundamental challenges. The DDR program missed a significant number of those who had fought for Gbagbo during the civil war, many of whom remain in hiding or in exile. Some weapons were handed in and destroyed, but many more remain in circulation. The reconciliation process heard testimony from more than 60,000 individuals, but has not lanced the boil of ethnic grievances, let alone healed it. Military reform has left commanders of the old Forces Nouvelles (FN)—the group that held the North during the country's civil war and fought for Ouattara during the 2010-2011 crisis—outside formal command structures. Some are alleged to be deeply involved in

racketeering, criminality and abuse.

There also remains a widespread perception that, just as with history, justice in Cote d'Ivoire remains the preserve of the victors. Nearly all of those investigated and prosecuted for abuses carried out after the 2010 election have been associated with the Gbagbo regime, including most recently first lady Simone Gbagbo's chief bodyguard, who was convicted of murder and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Yet serious abuses were carried out during the crisis by both sides, including by the very FN commanders now getting fat on the postwar settlement. In fact, those responsible for the single most serious incident—the 2011 massacre of some 700 Gbagbo supporters

(<https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/29/one-year-duekoue-massacre-belies-ouattara-governments-promises-impartial-justice>) at Douekoue, a western market town—have not yet been formally identified, let alone prosecuted. A new Special Investigations Unit is reportedly underfunded and so far ineffective. Two senior FN commanders were put under investigation in July 2015, though it remains to be seen if they will ultimately face trial.

So postconflict Cote d'Ivoire remains fundamentally bipolar, with an outward-looking, confident surface masking deep reservoirs of resentment. It will fall to Ouattara, above all, to reconcile these two personas. His ability to govern is heavily dependent on his external appeal, which is founded on his reputation as a champion of the democratic process. He has promised, for instance, not to stand for a third term. Going back on this promise seems extremely unlikely. So he and his allies have a complex web to untangle and not much time to do it.

To date, his fractious and heterogeneous coalition has left him little room to maneuver. He is succeeding, so far, in holding his power base together, most importantly securing the support of the Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire, or PDCI, of former President Henri Konan Bedie, which commands the pivotal swing vote from the center of the country. The opposition, most importantly Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front, or FPI, is still fractured and incoherent—an FPI faction will stand against Ouattara in next month's election, while others have pledged to boycott. A relatively peaceful victory for Ouattara seems the most likely outcome.

But he will subsequently face significant political turbulence. Many key PDCI figures are unhappy about ceding the presidency for another term. Guillaume Soro, former political leader of the Forces Nouvelles and current head of the National Assembly, remains a key powerbroker and rival, and may resist investigation of FN abuses. Ouattara's electoral legitimacy will be undermined by the

FPI's partial boycott. The outcome of Gbagbo's trial at The Hague is anything but certain.

There have been direct talks with the FPI, which has long resisted involvement in the formal dialogue mechanism. Some important prisoners tied to Gbagbo have been released and, as noted, two FN commanders placed under investigation. But these are tentative steps. Real security sector reform and equitable justice remain absent. Moreover, external investment must be translated into domestic economic diversification and sustainable employment, and the spoils shared out beyond Abidjan.

It is not impossible to reintegrate once-warring factions into Cote d'Ivoire's society, but doing so will require brave leadership from the very top. Ouattara has yet to show that, even if he'll likely win another presidential term next month.

Ben Shepherd is a consulting fellow in the Africa Programme at Chatham House.

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