

Former IMF deputy to stand in Côte d'Ivoire presidential elections

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The regime of President Henri Konan Bedie has reacted with increasing desperation ever since the August decision by Alassane Ouattara, leader of the main opposition party in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast), to stand in the presidential elections in 2000. It has banned demonstrations for six months, arrested Ouattara's supporters and whipped up an atmosphere of national chauvinism.

Ouattara leads the Rally of the Republicans (RDR) and is seen as a serious threat to Bedie and the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI), which has ruled since independence. In exile in France since September, Ouattara has been given an ultimatum by the Ivorian government: stay in exile or return to be imprisoned, alongside other leading members of his party, on trumped-up fraud and forged document charges.

The charges flow from an earlier effort by the regime to prevent Ouattara from standing in the elections by claiming that he was not an Ivorian citizen and that his father is from the neighbouring country of Burkina Faso. After Ouattara produced documents to prove his citizenship, an investigation was launched into their validity. On September 14 the police arrested 388 RDR supporters who had gathered outside Ouattara's house in anticipation of his arrest. They were later released.

The RDR rallied the support of around 10,000 in a demonstration on September 27, demanding official recognition of Ouattara's Ivorian nationality. Government security forces attacked a further rally and protest demonstration on October 27. The government claimed it had banned the rally at the last moment in order to justify its teargas attack on demonstrators and the arrest of 20 RDR members.

The 20 RDR members were held in prison until a trial on November 10. Eleven of the 20, all leading

members, have been jailed for two years—effectively barring them from standing in parliamentary and local elections in the year 2000. Those barred include Henriette Dagri Diabate, RDR General Secretary and Ouattara's deputy, as well as four sitting members of parliament. Five ordinary members received one-year sentences for committing acts of violence and vandalism.

Ouattara is regarded as a crucial candidate for the RDR. In the 1980s he worked as deputy managing director at the IMF and was responsible for implementing IMF Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility (ESAF) policies in several of the Côte d'Ivoire's neighbours. The programme was responsible for causing the collapse of education, health and welfare measures.

Between 1990-93 Ouattara served as Prime Minister under the dictatorial presidency of Felix Houphouët Boigny, who had ruled Côte d'Ivoire since independence in 1960. Ironically, in 1992 Ouattara himself introduced the law recently used to jail the 11 RDR leaders.

Following Boigny's death in 1993, Ouattara resigned his post, after losing a constitutional dispute that ensured the succession of the current president, Konan Bedie, rather than Ouattara.

The RDR was formed in September 1994 by dissenters from the ruling PDCI in response to the demand of Western governments, the IMF and World Bank to "democratise" political systems in Africa and accelerate free-market privatisation measures. Its founders feared that much-needed aid and development funds were under threat if the one-party state did not accede to IMF demands.

Previous hopes that Ouattara would run in the 1995 presidential elections were thwarted, but he had

announced that he would be prepared to contest the 2000 election when his contract with the IMF ended in July this year.

Even in Côte d'Ivoire, which had one of the best economic growth rates in Africa in the early 1990s, economic restructuring and austerity measures have resulted in growing poverty and unemployment and have provoked social unrest. The application of ESAF measures to education earlier this year resulted in prolonged student protests and strikes, the closure of universities, and the sentencing of student leaders in May to five years hard labour.

Côte d'Ivoire is the largest cocoa producing country in the world. In the last month the Bean Farmers Association carried out a protest against privatisation and low world cocoa prices, which make it impossible for them to cover their own costs. Their nine-day boycott of the newly privatised marketing network cut off bean supplies and temporarily pushed cocoa prices up.

In a further indication of growing social tensions, the opposition paper *Le Patriote* said that Bedie's intervention to support the re-election of Adiko Niamkey as General Secretary of Côte d'Ivoire's main trade union federation, the UGTIC, was carried out "to prevent a general strike". Another opposition paper, *Notre Voie*, went further. The re-election of Niamkey, who has presided over the collapse of his members' living standards over the past 15 years, has been achieved only by fraud, the paper said.

The increasing destabilisation of Côte d'Ivoire, previously regarded as one of the most stable and pro-western of the African countries, is prompting growing concern within both the US and French governments. On November 1, James Rubin of the US State Department expressed anxieties about the situation in Côte d'Ivoire, particularly the arrest of opposition party leaders. The US government might be "compelled to reassess our past excellent relations", Rubin warned.

The Bedie government described Rubin's remarks as "external interference". After critical comments from the Jospin government, Bedie sought to reassure French reporters that "There is nothing to fear because the Ivory Coast is governed by the rule of law". France is by far the largest investor in Côte d'Ivoire and receives much of its exports.

Growing popular opposition to Bedie's ESAF

measures has clearly fuelled support for the RDR, even though Ouattara is for a more rigorous application of the same policies. Ouattara's presidential programme maintains that "Acceleration and deepening of structural reforms remain central in removing impediments to private enterprise and sustaining economic growth".

The PCDI regime, whose leadership is made up of a small group of wealthy families, is being torn apart by internal division. Bedie has reportedly released the imprisoned student leaders, in spite of the fact that they have vowed to continue their campaign, in an attempt to diffuse opposition. In his continuing campaign to keep the presidency he is utilising Ivorian chauvinism. That is why allegations about Ouattara's citizenship have played such a role. A third of the population are originally from countries that now border Côte d'Ivoire, such as Burkina Faso and Mali.

The current borders of all these countries have only been in place since 1960. Prior to that the whole area was French West Africa. Conflicts over land have developed to the point that on November 4 some Burkinabes were physically driven out of Côte d'Ivoire. Initial skirmishes have now led to thousands returning to their "country of origin". Given the sharply deteriorating social conditions and political tensions, several commentators have pointed to the dangers of civil war developing in the country.



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