

Christmas Eve coup in Côte D'Ivoire

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President Henri Konan Bedie of Côte D'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) was removed from office on Friday, December 24 in a military coup led by General Robert Guei. Soldiers had begun rioting and looting the previous day, seizing luxury cars and racing through the streets of the capital, Abidjan, shooting into the air. There are no reports of casualties.

They were protesting over unpaid salaries, poor living conditions, and what they called the "bad governance" of the country. According to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, after seizing the airport at 2 a.m. mutineering soldiers called on Guei—who is very popular in the army—to lead a delegation in their negotiations with Bedie and the government. The demands of the delegation were broadened to include release of 11 leaders of the opposition party, the Rally of the Republicans (RDR), recently imprisoned by the government.

After a few hours, Guei and the delegation emerged to tell journalists that the negotiations had failed and that Bedie was no longer president. Soldiers went to release political prisoners, including the RDR leaders, from the main prison. As they opened the gates the entire prison population of about 6,500 escaped, with 24 inmates killed in the stampede. Troops supporting the mutiny had set up checkpoints outside key facilities such as the national radio and television stations.

There are several reports of soldiers being cheered and receiving general support from the population. Crowds chanted "No more Bedie", reflecting the growing hatred of Bedie and his ruling clique. Although Côte D'Ivoire had a reputation as the most economically developed and politically stable of the former French colonies in Africa, the imposition of an IMF structural adjustment programme resulted in severe cuts in public spending and growing poverty levels.

Bedie's Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI),

which has ruled since independence in 1960, has been at the centre of corruption scandals. Embezzlement of European Union funds by government officials at the beginning of this year led to IMF-sponsored aid to the country being cut. In May and June, there were widespread student protests and strikes against education cutbacks.

In November the RDR leaders were jailed for taking part in a demonstration over Bedie's refusal to allow their leader—former IMF deputy managing director Alassane Ouattara—to stand in forthcoming presidential elections. Bedie claimed that Ouattara had forged nationality documents.

This year the world price of cocoa—Côte D'Ivoire's main export—collapsed, which has accelerated the country's general economic decline. Cocoa farmers recently boycotted sales for nine days in protest against the hardship caused by the privatised marketing system the government has imposed.

To what extent the coup was planned in advance is not clear, but Bedie was unable to summon any support when he ordered soldiers to repel the coup attempt. On Sunday, December 26 a French air force helicopter took Bedie and his family to neighbouring Togo. Guei had allowed him to leave, but arrested other members of his cabinet to "guarantee their safety". The prime minister, defence minister and security minister apparently escaped by road, also to Togo.

Guei has appointed nine senior military officers to a National Committee of Public Salvation (CNSP), with himself as president. He said the CNSP would rule Côte D'Ivoire for a few days before the formation of a transitional government. He called on political parties to nominate candidates for the government, but stressed that the military junta would retain the defence, foreign affairs, security and interior ministries. This transitional government would create the conditions for "fair and transparent" elections—though no date was set.

The CNSP announced it was taking firm action against looters, parading 50 of them before TV cameras. Any of the looters who were soldiers "can already guess their fate", said Guei, who added that "public safety" would be guaranteed. Soldiers who had requisitioned private vehicles were instructed to return them.

Guei also guaranteed to maintain all economic and political relations with Western governments and to repay all debts. "We are maintaining international agreements and they will be scrupulously respected", he said. He stressed that he would guarantee the "excellent relations" that exist between Côte D'Ivoire and France.

Guei and the CNSP have banned all transfers of money abroad in an attempt to stop the clique around Bedie moving their wealth out of the country. They are conducting a "wide ranging audit" of the economy and claim that there are already indications of misappropriation by former government officials.

Response to the coup from Western governments has been low key. US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker called on the military to "begin immediate preparations for the restoration of a democratic government" and routinely condemned the coup. Similar calls for a "return to democracy" came from Britain and France. But French minister for foreign affairs, Charles Josselin, called for "establishing a dialogue with the new authorities."

Although there are 20,000 French citizens in Côte D'Ivoire, there was no call for them to leave the country. France has some 570 troops stationed in Côte D'Ivoire. An extra 40 troops were flown in from Gabon and 300 troops were said to be on standby in neighbouring Senegal. A French spokesman said the measures were "precautionary" and there was clearly no attempt to involve them against the coup.

Less mooted condemnation of the coup came in a joint statement from Nigeria and South Africa, who called for Bedie's reinstatement. CNN news referred to Nigerian officials worried about "side effects" from the "lukewarm" response to the coup from Western governments, presumably fearing a possible resumption of military rule in Nigeria.

Explaining the reason for the West's response to the Côte D'Ivoire coup, Kayode Fayemi of the UK Centre for Democracy and Development said: "It's a paradox

for them and this was the experience in Pakistan as well. You are in principle opposed to violence but you cannot ignore the fact that it is the cumulative result of bad governance, a failure of leadership and of the alienation of the people simply to keep hold of power."

In other words, the pretence of democracy—and with it the claim of legitimacy regarding the uncontested election that put Bedie in power in 1995—can be quietly dropped if it results in the formation of a government more acceptable to the IMF, the World Bank and the US and European governments. Guei is close to Ouattara, who, as a banker and ex-IMF official who firmly backs the structural adjustment privatisation measures, is preferred by the West to Bedie and his clique. He is likely to be appointed to the transitional government, which will need to claim it has cleaned up financial corruption if aid from the West is to be restored.

Guei's own history shows that he will be prepared to deal ruthlessly with any opposition to IMF measures. He was military chief in Côte D'Ivoire from 1990 to 1995, and was responsible for leading the brutal repression and torture of students in the protest movement of 1990. He was sacked by Bedie in 1995 for refusing to put down anti-government demonstrations, because he supported the main opposition movement, Ouattara's RDR. In 1997 he was dismissed from the army with allegations that he had been plotting a coup against Bedie.



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