

# Côte d'Ivoire coup leader seeks to consolidate power

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17 June 2000

General Robert Guei, who seized power in a military coup in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) on December 24 1999, is now preparing to assume the presidency. Commentators initially thought that the coup, which removed the corrupt regime of President Henri Konan Bedie, was intended to bring Alassane Ouattara's Rally of the Republicans party (RDR) to power.

Ouattara had been prime minister under Houphouët Boigny between 1990 and 1993, and until last year he held the post of deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund. He is widely regarded as the West's preferred candidate. In the event, Guei has sidelined Ouattara and is seeking to consolidate power in his own hands.

One week before the coup, the Bedie government passed a budget for the year 2000 which committed 39 percent to debt repayment—\$1.1 billion out of a \$3 billion total. A further crisis then emerged, as payments on the government's Brady bonds (a scheme for paying off debt) were due in April. The bondholders were adamant the payments had not been made while the Côte d'Ivoire government insisted they had.

Guei's coup was aimed at ending the deadlock and stabilising the economy in line with the IMF restructuring program. To this end, Guei established a National Public Salvation Committee (CNPS), a coalition of the main parties led by the four most prominent military men. On January 17 this year, the minister of finance stated that Côte d'Ivoire would meet its financial commitments to creditors and repay the \$11 billion external debt built up under Bedie.

But efforts to maintain such crippling debt repayments are faltering in the face of continued social unrest. Immediately after the coup, Guei was confronted with rebellions in the army over pay and conditions. The junta had to postpone debt repayments

to avoid an immediate crisis, and the new government had to perform “a thousand gymnastics”, as Guei put it, to pay the soldiers' salaries.

On March 28, a new rebellion among soldiers in the western town of Daloa resulted in one of Guei's officers being shot dead while attempting to persuade the mutineers to give up the armoury they had seized in demand for more pay.

Meanwhile, a local human rights group has rejected Guei's claim to be restoring democracy, pointing to a number of summary executions carried out by the military. The Ivorean Human Rights League also cited examples of abuses, including several by members of a special crime fighting unit set up after the military coup. “Daily, people presented as criminals are shot dead by members of the *PC-Crises* and their corpses are presented on television,” it said. “These so-called operations against banditry are often carried out on the basis of mere denunciations, even anonymous phone calls,” the organisation charged.

The military authorities have now announced that presidential, legislative and municipal elections will take place by October 31. A referendum is to take place on July 24 on the adoption of a new constitution.

It was the attempt to bar Alassane Ouattara from standing in presidential elections by the previous government that stoked up conflict prior to last year's coup. Bedie said Ouattara was not eligible to stand because he was not a citizen of Côte d'Ivoire, being a Burkinabe from neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Guei then established a constitutional commission to review “contentious” sections of the existing constitution, which stipulates that a presidential candidate must be born of parents and grandparents who are Ivoreans by origin. It also states that a prospective candidate must have lived in the country

for at least 10 years prior to the elections.

The constitutional commission promised to make amendments that would reduce political tensions in the country. In the event, it has come up with virtually the same clauses—apart from reducing the number of years that a candidate must live in the country from 10 to 5. The new constitution would still rule out Ouattara, the main contender, from the presidential elections.

Guei went further in strengthening his position against the RDR leader in a government reshuffle announced May 18, expanding the ruling committee to include 24 ministers. RDR representation has been completely eliminated. Guei accused the RDR of opposing the “will of the people” in objecting to the new constitution, which has been supported by all the other parties. In addition, a further six ministries were given to the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI), the party which was led by Bedie, and six more to the Ivorean Popular Party. The army was given nine ministries, up from the four it held previously.

The French minister for international cooperation, Charles Josselin, said that France and its partners in the European Union (EU) are closely following the evolution of the “fragile” and “preoccupying” question of public order in Côte d'Ivoire. France, the country's main trading partner and former colonial ruler, wants to avoid the appearance of being too openly involved in Côte d'Ivoire's internal politics.

However, Socialist Party deputy Henri Emmanuelli has raised questions on the constitutional referendum in the French National Assembly. Emphasising France's strong interests within Côte d'Ivoire, Emmanuelli said, “Some 20,000 French citizens live in that country and I would therefore like to know the government's position on the eligibility disposition, given the risk of instability that the issue might bring about.” In reply, Josselin said the EU expected a “transparent” referendum process and claimed that Guei had resolved the nationality question after consulting with the other main parties.

Ouattara's opponents claim that he is a Burkinabe because his father did not declare himself Ivorean at the time of independence in 1960, when France divided up French West Africa into several countries, including Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

Many people came to the Côte d'Ivoire from Burkina Faso in the mid-1960s to work in the country's

expanding cocoa industry. But collapsing cocoa prices and a slump in production over the last decade have led to sharp tensions in the northern areas between “Burkinabes” and “Ivoreans,” with killings taking place on both sides. Bedie whipped up this conflict last year in his chauvinistic campaign to exclude Ouattara.

Whether Guei, by continuing to play off these divisions, can keep Ouattara out of the presidential elections remains to be seen. Since Ouattara is even more dedicated to IMF policies than the clique around Guei, whoever comes out on top, genuine democracy will continue to be illusory for the working people and poor of Côte d'Ivoire.



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