Threat of civil war and French intervention in Côte d'Ivoire

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As the presidential elections planned for October 22 in Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) approach, the country is being torn apart by escalating ethnic violence and mutiny in the army. Divisions within the ruling elite have reached the point of mobilising sections of the army and threatening civil war.

France, anxious not to be accused of interfering in the politics of its former colony, is nevertheless preparing a military intervention under the cover of rescuing French civilians. This is the same remit employed by Britain to intervene in nearby Sierra Leone, which soon turned into re-colonisation in all but name.

Since a military coup on Christmas eve last year, a military junta headed by General Robert Guei has ruled Côte d'Ivoire. Last week, Guei had talks with the French ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire, questioning the increase of French troops in the country. Foreign Legion troops have reinforced the existing 43rd battalion marines by 170 men to 680. They are based near Abidjan, the capital, with 40 soldiers stationed at the French embassy. The ambassador claimed the troops were “nothing unusual” and were simply to bring numbers up to agreed levels. They were merely designed to protect French citizens in an election period when “there is always a bit of tension,” he said.

A report in the magazine *Jeune Afrique* paints a different picture. It points out that under the direction of a standing committee at the Quai d'Orsay (French Foreign Ministry), a crisis centre has been established at the French embassy in Dakar, Senegal. Up to ten ultra-clandestine Deep Penetration Search and Action Commando Units were sent to Abidjan in July “in order to check out the terrain”. Their objective was to prepare for the evacuation of the remaining French citizens in a matter of “three to five hours at the most”.

The ambassador's claim that no significant intervention was taking place is also refuted by a *Washington Post* report, which says France “recently beefed up its forces here by several hundred” and has stationed a battleship off the coast with “several hundred more soldiers”.

The most recent manifestation of the instability in Côte d'Ivoire was an assassination attempt on General Guei in the early hours of September 18. His home was attacked by rebel soldiers, but repulsed by troops loyal to him after several hours of gunfire. Two of Guei's bodyguards were killed. The political forces behind the rebels are not clear.

Guei took power last year when soldiers protesting low pay ran riot and forced the president, Henri Konan Bedie, to flee the country. As a respected military leader, Guei was expected to diffuse the anger in the army. Instead protests over pay have continued. Soldiers loyal to Guei put down a revolt in March. In July hundreds of rioting soldiers took over the streets of Abidjan and other cities for two days and Guei only just hung on to power.

Bedie was the leader of the Côte d'Ivoire Democratic Party (PDCI), which had ruled the country since independence in 1960 with French support. Côte d'Ivoire is the world's biggest cocoa producer, and was regarded as one of the most stable countries in sub-Sahara Africa.

With a steep decline in cocoa prices from the mid 1980s onwards, and a huge increase in debt resulting in the implementation of an IMF structural adjustment programme, the population has suffered growing poverty and unemployment. Bedie became increasingly unpopular and the PDCI was challenged by the growth of the Republican Assembly (RDR) led by Allasane Ouattara. A former IMF official with Western backing, Ouattara has won support by opposing corruption, although his programme, based on free market economics and calling for more transnational investment, has nothing to offer the impoverished mass of the population.

Bedie's response was to clamp down on the RDR, locking up its leaders, and to whip up Ivoirien nationalism. He claimed that Ouattara, who comes from the predominantly Muslim north, had parents from neighbouring Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), and was therefore ineligible to stand for president. Ethnic attacks on Burkinabes, who moved into Côte d'Ivoire to find work in the 1970s and make up to 40 percent of the population, were encouraged and thousands were forced to flee the country.

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Guei was apparently a supporter of Ouattara. On taking power he released the RDR leaders and co-opted some of them into his cabinet. He claimed he had no political ambitions and promised presidential elections, which appeared to clear the way for Ouattara. However, within months he turned against the RDR, ejected them from his government, and raised once again the issue of Ouattara's nationality.

Although the PDCI refused to adopt Guei as their presidential candidate—he is now standing in the elections as an independent—he apparently has the backing of a section of the same ruling clique that has run Côte d'Ivoire for 40 years. Guei's position is far from assured, with sharp divisions in the army, some of whom are supporting Ouattarra or other candidates.

Guei has also encouraged Ivoirien nationalism. Over the last two weeks recurrent fighting has taken place in rural areas between "Ivoiriens" and immigrant workers, leaving eleven people dead. Local authorities are evacuating Burkinabes from their villages, and around 2,500 who have escaped the fighting are taking refuge in school buildings in towns in the southwest of the country.

Although there are nineteen candidates standing in the presidential elections, their eligibility still has to be vetted. The elections were originally due in September and were delayed whilst investigations into eligibility continued. The president of the Supreme Court, who was appointed by Guei, leads the process.

Ouattara's candidacy is being challenged by state lawyers and may well be rejected because of his parents' nationality. The other main candidate, Emile Constant Bombet of the PDCI, formerly Bedie's minister of the interior, is being investigated on charges of embezzlement. Guei's attempts to stop the main opposition candidates standing are now bound to exacerbate the risk of military conflict as witnessed in the assassination attempt.

French intervention has been kept low key for two reasons. Firstly, to stop Guei using anti-French rhetoric to build up support. In July, Charles Josselin, the French minister responsible for African affairs, criticised Guei for standing as president, saying, "The uniform does not get on well with democracy." He also expressed concern that the constitution voted through in a referendum in July was being used to exclude candidates on grounds of nationality.

Guei immediately organised a demonstration outside the French embassy in Abidjan. The remarks were interpreted as giving French support to Ouattara. Josselin was forced to give a cautiously worded interview in *Le Monde* insisting that France only expected "rightful application [of the constitution] by the responsible authorities" and had no preferred candidates.

Secondly, there are divisions within the French ruling class about who would be their preferred candidate. According to reports in *Africa Confidential* magazine, President Chirac and the Gaullists "backed by super rich businessman Vincent Bollork, a major beneficiary of African privatisation, favoured Bedie and the PDCI. Now that Bedie faces an arrest warrant or political exclusion if he goes home, the Gaullists are likely to line up behind a Guei candidacy." The magazine points out that Guei is close to a number of retired French generals who have gone into business, including General Jeannou Lacaze, chief of staff in the French army in the 1980s and then security adviser to the dictator Mobutu Seso Seki in Zaire.

However, these retired generals and sections of the French ruling class around Chirac were discredited in Africa, particularly after their involvement in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. It now seems that the Quai d'Orsay directs Africa policy rather than the Presidential Palace.

The problem for the Quai d'Orsay and the present Socialist Party government is that whilst many would favour the free market approach of Ouattara, the Ivoirien Popular Front (FPI) party is officially affiliated to the French Socialist Party. This party is also standing a candidate, Laurent Gbagbo, in the presidential elections and some Socialist Party deputies are giving him their support, despite the fact that he is an extreme Ivoirien nationalist.

Côte d'Ivoire is of strategic importance, both for the production of cocoa, coffee and palm oil and also for the possible exploitation of offshore oil. Given this, there is a very real possibility that France will overcome its hesitation and mount a military intervention in an attempt to maintain its domination of the region.

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