

Côte d'Ivoire: President Gbagbo stokes up ethnic conflict

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Laurent Gbagbo, who became President of Côte d'Ivoire in October with French support after the ousting of military dictator General Guei, went ahead with controversial parliamentary elections on December 10.

This was despite having declared a state of emergency and a nationwide curfew, following clashes between the police and demonstrators from the main opposition party, the Rally of the Republicans (RDR). Over 20 were killed in the clashes. The RDR members were protesting over the decision of the Supreme Court to ban their leader, Alassane Ouattara, from standing in the elections, because it is claimed he is not an Ivorian national. The United Nations and the European Union withdrew their observers and condemned the elections.

Speaking in France, Ouattara called for an election rerun. A former IMF official, he had also been prevented from standing in the October presidential elections by the same court. Ouattara, a Muslim from the north of the country—the south is predominantly Christian—is accused of not originating from Côte d'Ivoire but from neighbouring Burkina Faso.

The issue of Ivorian nationality has been whipped up by Gbagbo, and before him by Guei, against the large number of immigrants in the country. There are reports of machete-wielding mobs attacking RDR demonstrators in the capital Abidjan with the tacit support of the police. These clashes follow a report that paramilitary police had beaten Ouattara's personal secretary to death the previous week. The RDR has protested that several of its leaders were badly beaten whilst held in police custody. In the period after the presidential elections, 171 people were killed, largely as a result of police attacks on RDR supporters.

After Ouattara was prevented from standing, the RDR boycotted the parliamentary elections. In 29 of the 32

constituencies in the northern part of Côte d'Ivoire—the RDR's stronghold—no voting took place because RDR supporters destroyed election material or chased away officials. Regional leaders have threatened that the north will secede, and in the northern town of Kong, Ouattara's home, state officials and police were forced to leave after local youths took up arms and burnt down their houses. *Le Patriote*, a pro-RDR newspaper, carried a front page showing a map of Côte d'Ivoire with the north separated under the headline “Côte d'Ivoire on the brink of secession.”

The danger is not just of a breakaway of the Muslim north, however. The issue of nationality now threatens to plunge the country into civil war. Up to 50 percent of the population in Côte d'Ivoire are immigrants, having arrived from Burkina Faso and other neighbouring countries over several decades, attracted by the prospect of jobs and greater economic development.

As cocoa prices continue to fall—Côte d'Ivoire is the world's main producer of this cash crop—poverty and unemployment has soared under IMF structural adjustment programmes. The southern ruling elite in Abidjan has turned increasingly to promoting ethnic and religious divisions. Gbagbo's party, the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), won 91 out of the total of 225 parliamentary seats, with the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) winning 70. The PDCI, headed by Konan Bedie, was in power over several decades until the military coup of General Guei at the end of last year. It is also committed to the agenda of Ivorian nationalism.

Gbagbo appears determined to hang on to power, despite having now incurred the wrath of Western governments, including both France and the United States, for having excluded Ouattara from the elections. The United States and Western banks back Ouattara as

a free market economist, and it was planned to bring him into Gbagbo's government.

Unlike the United States, France did not call for a re-run of the presidential elections. Gbagbo's FPI has connections with the *Partie Socialiste* of French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin. France has also lobbied for emergency credit for Côte d'Ivoire from the European Union. As the magazine *Africa Confidential* explained, "If Gbagbo moves convincingly to stabilise the country and promote reconciliation with Ouattara's RDR, he can rely on important diplomatic and economic support from Paris."

According to the *Washington Post*, Gbagbo had agreed with the RDR to postpone the parliamentary elections for one week. This would have allowed them to appeal to the Supreme Court to have the ban on Ouattara lifted, as documents showing his Ivorian nationality could have been produced. Instead of announcing the deal on television as planned, Gbagbo sent his Interior Minister to announce that the elections would proceed as originally planned.

Diplomats from France who had negotiated the deal between Gbagbo and the RDR were said to be "furious" and "moving to cut off most aid". US diplomats were also angry and "the United States was putting on hold plans to renew aid." The result may well be not only to drag the country into civil war but also destabilise the whole of West Africa, of which Côte D'Ivoire was once the economic centre.



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