

Threat of renewed civil war after Ivory Coast election

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The West African country of Ivory Coast remains without a functioning government, after both contenders in the November elections claimed victory. Incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo, who is backed by the army, has refused to concede power to his rival, Alassane Outtara.

Tensions are increasing in the former French colony, which remains under curfew. Markets and shops are running out of essential supplies of food and fuel. A number of people have already been killed in sporadic outbreaks of violence. There is talk of a “Rwandization” of Ivory Coast if the stand off continues and the country descends into civil war as it did in 2002.

Any deterioration of the situation in Ivory Coast would have serious implications for the region. Sierra Leone and Liberia both recently went through civil wars and Western military intervention. Neighbouring Guinea remains tense despite the recent election. Nigeria, the economic giant of the region, has deep seated problems in the Delta region and the North.

“West Africa is just getting out of this miasma of bloodshed. We don’t want to go back to that situation,” said an aide to Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria’s president.

The *Financial Times* has called for an African solution to an African problem. But in fact France and other Western powers are primarily responsible for the emergence of the present crisis and the threat of further violence.

The United Nations Security Council has recognised Outtara’s claim to the presidency. Russia was reluctant to accede to the Security Council resolution because it is in the process of negotiating off-shore oil deals with Gbagbo. But it has now fallen in line with the United States and France, which have both recognised Outtara. This decision doubtless reflects behind the scenes deals

about the division of Ivory Coast’s considerable natural resources.

France brutally reasserted its colonial control over Ivory Coast in 2004, when it destroyed the entire Ivorian air force and seized the airport at Abidjan. French helicopters attacked crowds of people attempting to cross the bridges that lead from the working class districts of the city to the airport. French gun-boats took up positions under the bridges.

The US and the UN welcomed this naked display of imperialist violence. The Security Council passed a resolution retrospectively allowing France to use “all necessary means” to suppress the Ivorian population.

There are still 10,000 foreign troops in Ivory Coast, under UN mandate, in addition to 900 French troops under separate command who are pledged to back the UN force if necessary. UN troops are currently protecting Outtara and his government, who have based themselves in an Abidjan hotel. Gbagbo retains control of the presidential palace with the support of the Ivorian army.

Under pressure from the US, the African Union has suspended Ivory Coast from membership and refused to recognise Gbagbo. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has done likewise. It is possible that ECOWAS will impose economic sanctions if Gbagbo does not step down. President Obama has written to Gbagbo hinting at sanctions. The International Monetary Fund has recognised Outtara as president and has refused to extend further aid to the country until Gbagbo goes.

Outtara is a former deputy managing director of the International Monetary Fund and studied economics in the US. His identification with the freemarket policies of the IMF makes him the ideal candidate for Western interests. Under an IMF structural adjustment

programme Ivory Coast has privatised utilities and cut welfare subsidies. Telecommunications, transport, electricity and water supplies have all been privatised. By the beginning of 2009 it was estimated that more than half the population lived on less than a euro, or just over a dollar, a day. In the countryside some 60 percent of the population are classified as poor. This represents a rapid increase since the imposition of the IMF measures. Life expectancy is only 56 years.

Gbagbo has played his part in implementing these policies. A former trade union leader, he has close connections with Lionel Jospin and the French Socialist Party. When he excluded Outtara from a previous election, the French government nonetheless recognised his claim to power.

For several decades after independence in 1960, Ivory Coast was relatively prosperous by the standards of the region and had a comparatively well developed infrastructure. With the imposition of IMF measures and the collapse of commodity prices, that all changed. The Ivorian elite began to exploit ethnic and communal divisions as competition for declining revenues became fierce.

These ethnic and communal conflicts are the legacy of French colonialism. France created an independent Ivory Coast out of the larger colony of French West Africa. It was a predominantly Christian country with a thriving cocoa industry. Citizens of poorer Muslim states nearby had little choice but to migrate to Ivory Coast in search of work. There they were subjected to discrimination and second class status.

Gbagbo has whipped up ethnic and religious hostility to Outtara, who is a Muslim from the North of the country. He claims that Outtara is not really an Ivorian and has no right to stand in elections. He has suggested that Outtara's campaign in the latest elections was funded by President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, raising fears of Muslim domination.

Since 2007 the country has been divided along a peace line that separates north and south and is monitored by the UN force. The aim of the election that was funded by the UN and the European Union was to reunify the country, allowing more effective access to Ivory Coast's resources. It is the largest producer of cocoa in the world and the third largest producer of coffee. It has, in addition, supplies of minerals and timber.

Gbagbo is pressing for a power-sharing government that would allow him to remain in power with some ministers from the north in junior positions. But the US and Europe are unwilling to countenance such a scheme because of their experience in Zimbabwe and Kenya, where power-sharing has proved to be unsatisfactory and has not provided a secure environment in which foreign companies can operate profitably.

The situation that exists in Ivory Coast and is increasingly evident across the African continent is evidence of the inability of capitalism to create the conditions for peaceful development in the semi-colonial world. Even when global trade was expanding, Africa was being driven deeper into poverty. In the wake of the world financial crisis the continent is left in an even more vulnerable position as the competition for natural resources sharpens.



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