

Ivory Coast general strike call portends further foreign intervention

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Alassane Dramane Ouattara has called a general strike in an attempt to oust incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and end the stand-off following the presidential election in the West African country of Ivory Coast.

“We must not accept our victory to be stolen,” opposition leaders said as they appealed to workers to go on indefinite strike until Gbagbo conceded defeat.

Gbagbo has refused to relinquish office since the second round of the election November 28. He claims that Ouattara rigged the result in his northern stronghold. The United States, United Nations, European Union, France and the West African states have all recognised Ouattara as the winner.

The strike call came as violence increased on the streets of the capital Abidjan and West African leaders threatened to use military force to oust Gbagbo. It is thought that some 200 people have already been killed. Refugees are flooding across the border into neighbouring Liberia. The United Nations Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 14,000 Ivorians are already in Liberia and is preparing for as many as twice that number to cross in the coming days.

The presidents of Benin, Sierra Leone and Cap Verde are to fly to Ivory Coast on behalf of the West African regional bloc, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States). They will reiterate the threat of military action. Jean Marie Ehouzou, foreign minister of Benin, told reporters “that he [Gbagbo] must step down as quickly as possible or face legitimate military force.”

It appears that few workers have responded to the strike call. The ports of San Pedro and Abidjan were operating on Monday. Shops and offices in Abidjan's business district were open and road traffic was busy. The BBC reported that the strike was slightly more

effective in the north of the country, but that plans to turn Abidjan into a “dead city” had little impact.

The lack of response is not surprising, since Ouattara has a limited popular base. He is a former International Monetary Fund (IMF) economist. He was deputy managing director of the IMF from 1994 to 1999 and governor of the Bank of Central African States. He was prime minister of Ivory Coast from 1990 to 1993 and is closely identified with the free market policies introduced under an IMF structural adjustment plan that removed price subsidies and deregulated the labour market. State-owned enterprises were privatized and tariff barriers removed.

The economic and social tensions that were ultimately to break out into civil war can be traced in part to the process of economic liberalisation that began in the 1990s. President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who ruled Ivory Coast from its independence in 1960 until his death in 1993, was able to maintain a degree of stability by sharing patronage among rival sections of the country's elite. Under his successors tensions became increasingly acute. Falling commodity prices hit Ivory Coast's chief export of cocoa, and structural adjustment reduced the amount of patronage available.

Ivorian politicians whipped up communalist sentiments as they attempted to win a greater share of the country's wealth for themselves and their supporters. This led to two years of civil war that was only brought to an end by a power-sharing agreement in 2004, which left the country divided.

France and the US are eager to see Ouattara in the presidential palace because they see him as the ideal candidate to push through economic measures that will make Ivory Coast the key to developing the entire region as a supplier of raw materials. Their outright backing for Ouattara represents a shift from their

previous preference for a power-sharing agreement between the northern, mainly Muslim, and the southern, mainly Christian, Ivorian factions.

Ouattara has established himself in an Abidjan hotel under the protection of troops from the UN peacekeeping force and the so-called New Forces who fought against the government of Gbagbo in a two-year-long civil war that ended in 2004. French troops are stationed at the airport, which they seized in 2004 after they destroyed the entire Ivorian air force.

The New Forces are not thought to be a match for the Ivorian army and would need help from foreign troops if Ouattara were to attempt to oust Gbagbo by military means. ECOWAS seems to be readying itself to do that, in the form of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

ECOMOG has previously intervened in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. The operation in Liberia was noted for the extent of the looting and corruption on the part of ECOMOG forces, which earned them the nickname “Every Car or Movable Object Gone”. ECOMOG would need logistical and other technical support from the great powers. Their intervention would in this sense be a cover for an extension of more direct colonial authority over Ivory Coast.

French defence minister Alain Juppé has said that his country’s troops stationed in Ivory Coast are ready to protect French citizens, but would only intervene directly with a UN mandate. But if Ouattara called on their help as president, they could intervene under a French-Ivorian defence treaty that dates back to 1961. The Financial Times has warned that French intervention would be counterproductive, but with French troops already on the ground this must be one of the most likely outcomes of the conflict over the presidency.

Ouattara's call for a general strike has undoubtedly followed consultations with his French and US backers. It is uncannily similar to the mass action discussed between Zimbabwean opposition leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, and the US embassy in Harare which has been revealed in the exposed WikiLeaks cables. Tsvangirai agreed to plan strike action for the Christmas holidays when schools, public buildings and many businesses would be closed anyway.

The strike call in Ivory Coast is a cynical manoeuvre,

intended to give Ouattara some semblance of popular legitimacy, while possibly providing the pretext for a foreign military intervention. If the strikers came under attack from the Ivorian military, which is still loyal to Gbagbo, then an invasion by West African troops with French and US backing could be presented as a humanitarian operation.



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