NO. 19 / MARCH 2012

AFRICA SECURITY BRIEF

A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Addressing Côte d'Ivoire's Deeper Crisis

By Thierno Mouctar Bah

- **Côte d'Ivoire will need to overcome its deep social divisions to attain stability.**
- **To reverse the politicization of the military, security sector reform must extend beyond conventional standards and build a force based on the concept of the "Army-Nation" (i.e. the military serving the nation).**
- **Côte d'Ivoire's peace, security, and development are closely linked to its neighbors, necessitating a subregional strategy for overcoming its ongoing crisis.**

HIGHLIGHTS

ONGOING FRAGILITY

The May 2011 inauguration of Alassane Ouattara as President of Côte d'Ivoire culminated a tumultuous 5-month transition of power. The unwillingness of the incumbent candidate, Laurent Gbagbo, to cede power following his electoral defeat eventually led to armed conflict between military forces who supported Ouattara and those loyal to Gbagbo. This resulted in an estimated 3,000 deaths and the involvement of forces from the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI). Thousands of rapes, kidnappings, and fear of retribution compelled over a million people to flee the country's commercial capital, Abidjan.

The Ivorian crisis, moreover, has further significance for Africa. If Laurent Gbagbo had been allowed to steal the election, a dangerous pattern would have been reinforced (building on similar cases in Kenya and Zimbabwe) just as presidential elections in Africa have become increasingly common and competitive. No one holding the highest office would ever agree to leave power and submit to the will of the electorate.

The resolution of Côte d'Ivoire's traumatic post-election standoff did not mean the end to the country's troubles, however. If Côte d'Ivoire is to achieve stability, it must still address a deeper crisis—one that has festered for more than a decade. The roots, consequences, and implications of this crisis are many-sided. They stem from an explosive mix of ethnic, religious, and land rivalries that have led to a de facto division of the country since 2002.

At its core, this crisis is about national identity—what does it mean to be Ivorian in this nation of 22 million inhabitants? Côte d'Ivoire has long welcomed and benefitted from West African immigrants, who have worked the coffee and cocoa plantations in the South, generating billions of dollars in exports for what was once the economic engine of West Africa. Many of these estimated eight million immigrants

and their descendants have lived in the country for decades. Still, they are not recognized as citizens. Nor is a path to citizenship available to them.

This is the key issue that Côte d'Ivoire must come to terms with if it is to move from its current polarized environment to reunification and stability. If national identity is not fully addressed, other efforts taken to stabilize the country will prove futile.

One evident repercussion of the social fragmentation is a fractured security sector. Divisions between the national army and the former rebel forces (and Ouattara supporters) from the North have become entrenched over the years. There is also the need to recover from the disintegration of military professionalism. During the electoral crisis, the Ivorian military became a partisan actor, throwing its support behind losing candidate Laurent Gbagbo.

Now that a new president, whose legitimacy has been validated both at home and abroad, has taken

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office, Côte d'Ivoire requires support in all sectors so that it can address the tremendous challenges it faces. But what can be done to rebuild, reunite, and stabilize this country, including the 47 percent of the population that supported Gbagbo?

The stakes are high. Côte d'Ivoire's stability is vital to all of West Africa, which is struggling to recover from the civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone as well as a legacy of coups across the subregion. The infrastructural damage caused by the post-election violence combined with the economic stagnation of the past decade have had far-reaching economic impacts for all of West Africa.

ROOTS OF TOLERANCE

Côte d'Ivoire's crisis is grounded in its geography and history. The country shares borders with five states—Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, and Liberia. Its name, which translates as Ivory Coast, dates back to the period of initial contact with Europeans. Domination by France extended from 1883 to 1960, during which time it developed in the forest-rich coastal South an economy based on coffee and cocoa, resulting in the concept of a "useful Côte d'Ivoire" that marginalized the North.

While maintaining a one-party political system, President Félix Houphouët-Boigny led Côte d'Ivoire for 33 years with wisdom and prudence, managing to avoid the ethnic conflicts and coups that befell neighboring countries. He effectively integrated the nation's disparate regions into a cohesive economy such that Côte d'Ivoire became a symbol of prosperity and stability. The Ivorian economy doubled in size between 1960 and 1980.

The progressive accumulation of wealth fostered improved communication and urbanization, helping to make Côte d'Ivoire a multi-ethnic melting pot, symbolized by the city of Abidjan and its five million inhabitants. The country welcomed immigrants from all over the subregion, mainly from Burkina Faso, who now account for almost 20 percent of the population. Most immigrants became an integral part of the agricultural sector. Local populations, including landowners, however, considered immigrants non-natives and marginalized them, diminishing their social status.

Houphouët-Boigny's message of peace and social harmony is his most important legacy. Offering land to immigrants in exchange for labor on plantations and ensuring that members of all ethnic groups were represented in positions of power fostered a culture of tolerance that persisted throughout his time in power. He likewise established a Foundation for Peace, and UNESCO named its annual peace prize after him.

Houphouët-Boigny, however, did not endow his country with the institutions needed to ensure stability after he died in 1993. His political party, as in all single-party governments, became ossified.

> **"Houphouët-Boigny's message of peace and social harmony is his most important legacy"**

Côte d'Ivoire thus faced dire straits derived from an undefined process of succession at the end of a reign that lasted too long. This was reflected in growing levels of corruption and an economy that saw a 35 percent contraction in per capita incomes between 1979 and 1999.

This institutional fragility set the stage for a military coup in December 1999 led by General Robert Guéï. Elections in 2000 intended to legitimize Guéï's rule were discredited when two leading candidates, including Alassane Ouattara, were disqualified over questions of their parents' citizenship. Even so, Guéï came in second in the elections, leading him to declare them invalid and himself the victor. Subsequent riots and attacks on the presidential palace forced him to flee.

As the only other major candidate whose name appeared on the ballot, Laurent Gbagbo won the most votes and was eventually declared president. Another coup attempt in 2002 precipitated an aggressive security operation against regions with large immigrant populations, causing widespread displacement. The resulting polarization quickly evolved into a rebellion and a North-South split of the country. A United Nations (UN) peacekeeping operation was deployed to monitor the ceasefire line.

Although Gbagbo began his political career as a democratic reformist, his 10-year reign was fraught with intolerance of political dissent, fomenting of

ethnic division, manipulation of religious and citizenship tensions, and violence. Despite numerous peace agreements to unify the country, Gbagbo's vitriolic rhetoric against immigrants persisted. Citing logistical challenges and voter eligibility disputes, partisan officials continually postponed elections slated for 2005, the end of Gbagbo's legal mandate. The delays enabled Gbagbo to cling to power for 5 more years, setting the backdrop to the 2010 elections.

ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

As in many sub-Saharan African countries, ethnic, regional, and religious divisions have been exploited by certain Ivorian politicians over the past decade to mobilize a stronger base of support. Five main groups dominate. The Sénoufo, Malinké, and Mandé in the North, the majority of whom are Muslim, account for roughly 40 percent of the total population. Meanwhile, the Krous and Akans in the South, who for the most part are Christians, comprise approximately 50 percent of all inhabitants. Some 50 other ethnic groups make up the remaining 10 percent of the population. Immigration on a massive scale has significantly highlighted the division between native groups in the south and nonnative groups in the North, the principal target being the 4 million-strong Burkinabé community.

"a military with no obligation to defend the constitution"

These divisions are not, per se, the catalysts of violence, since no atavistic hatred among the various ethnic and religious components of the population is felt. Rather, certain underlying factors, such as land disputes in the cocoa-producing areas, are parlayed onto an intercommunal level, poisoning relations.

Unfortunately, the social consensus forged by Houphouët-Boigny broke down soon after he died and ambitious political entrepreneurs began to fan identity-related tensions. By the late 1990s, this acrimony became widespread and public resources were increasingly allocated for political favors rather than to address mounting social issues, such as massive unemployment.

It is in this context that the notion of "Ivoirité," distinguishing between "true Ivorians" and nonindigenous immigrants, was theorized. Ivoirité was used to exclude Alassane Ouattara, a former prime minister under Houphouët-Boigny, from the race to succeed the long-time president following his death. More generally, Ivoirité barred legitimate aspirations to citizenship among northern communities and exacerbated intercommunal tensions.

MILITARY FACTOR AND IMPLICATIONS

The army is an institutional pillar of any nation. Houphouët-Boigny, however, distrusted that institution, especially following the coup that overthrew President Kwame Nkrumah in neighboring Ghana in 1966. While Houphouët-Boigny sought to ensure that internal balances were maintained within the Ivorian Army, he was unwilling to provide it with significant assets. He favored the Gendarmerie, established an independently organized Presidential Guard, and placed the country under the security shield of France. This resulted in the formation of a military with no obligation to defend the constitution and state institutions. Indeed, it paved the way for the dominant and negative role the military would play in Ivorian politics after Houphouët-Boigny's death, underscored by the military coup in December 1999 against Houphouët-Boigny's successor, President Henri Bedié. A rebel movement dubbed the New Forces subsequently took control of the entire northern part of the country, with five Zone commanders setting themselves up as veritable proconsuls. Meanwhile, the national army did nothing to show itself as truly republican in nature. It had become ethnicized during the 1990s, especially within the Presidential Guard, to the detriment of the rule of law and national cohesiveness.

The 5-month standoff following the 2010 elections was ultimately resolved when the New Forces defeated the Gbagbo loyalists with support of the UN peacekeeping force that neutralized heavy weapons being used against civilians. In this morass, a number of different armies, including both regular and parallel forces, were involved, including an estimated 5,000 Liberian mercenaries. Motivated by the desire for easy profits, often under the influence

of drugs, and feared for possessing magical powers, these mercenaries committed atrocious crimes. *Dozons*, traditional hunters from the North, were also implicated in several post-election massacres.

THE BREAKDOWN OF STATE STRUCTURES

A central lesson from Côte d'Ivoire is that a failed electoral process almost always has disastrous consequences for a society. It simultaneously elevates the risk of conflict and a new cycle of coups d'état. Such was the case following the flawed 2000 elections in Côte d'Ivoire—and then again in 2010.

As elections are the means through which power in a democratic society is authorized and legitimated, it is during these junctures that the independence of state bodies, such as electoral commissions and constitutional courts, is most critical. A lack of independence of such institutions is a root cause of much political violence and instability.

In Côte d'Ivoire, the politicization of the Commission Électorale Indépendante (CEI), for example, was starkly evident in its unwillingness to address challenges to voter lists, securely distribute electoral material and collect ballots, and announce results of the 2010 elections in a timely manner. The Constitutional Council's immediate rejection of Ouattara's victory, which even the CEI had validated and the UN Security Council endorsed, fostered further uncertainty that led to the violence that soon engulfed the country. The tarnished independence of these electoral bodies, which grew less reliable over Gbagbo's decade in power as he filled them with loyalists, created an environment in which heavy weapons became the inevitable method to settle election-related disputes.

NEW INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

Côte d'Ivoire's electoral crisis was preceded by a long decline perpetuated by strong-willed political leaders who operated with limited checks and balances and therefore could freely exploit ethnic and regional divides. Overcoming this vulnerability in the future will require establishing institutions that can constrain powerful politicians who may wish to pursue radical or extraconstitutional actions. Specifically, a vigorous legislature is needed to serve as a counterweight to the long dominant executive branch. The prevailing status quo in Africa, of a centralized state under the orders of a monarch-like president, must be overcome.

The new parliament must have the authority to create a new constitution, oversee security sector reform, and pursue decentralization policies that promote balanced development and participatory democracy. In fact, a strong, independent parliament could rejuvenate Côte d'Ivoire's political leadership by providing the third postindependence generation with opportunities to focus their talents and ideas for the benefit of the society. This generational renewal will also help deescalate engrained bitterness and political polarization. The decision by the opposition party (largely composed of Gbagbo loyalists) to boycott the parliament is a lost opportunity to reduce this divisiveness.

"the United Nations certification of the results of the presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire is an important precedent"

Closely linked to creating an effective parliament is establishing a credible, capable, and independent CEI. This is imperative in order to assure all parties that they have a viable, legal means through which they can compete for power. The high stakes of elections require independent structures that operate both upstream and downstream in the electoral process.

This matter is so central that if domestic structures are too fragile or politicized to play this role effectively, then the engagement of outside bodies, such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the UN, should be considered. The United Nations certification of the results of the 2010 presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire is an important precedent in that regard. While this approach has obvious drawbacks, these are less costly than the armed intervention that ensued—a point underscored by the violence that surrounded disputed electoral processes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Senegal subsequent to the Ivorian crisis.

BUILDING A UNIFIED AND REPUBLICAN SECURITY FORCE

Security sector reform is key to normalizing Côte d'Ivoire. Even though he achieved victory through the enforcement capacity of the New Forces, Ouattara must find a way to extricate himself from the military spiral. Given that he also received support from the UNOCI and French peacekeeping forces, he must provide reassurance that he is not the candidate parachuted in by the former colonial power. From this perspective, the creation of a unified and republican army must be a priority for his administration.

> **"the plan of quotas . . . to recast the army is doomed to fail"**

Ouattara must focus on restoring professionalism in the army and other security sector bodies while at the same time depoliticizing them. Every president since Houphouët-Boigny has altered the ethnic composition of the military to favor his own ethnic group.[1] By putting an end to this destructive cycle, Ouattara would demonstrate by his actions that he is committed to reunification.

Removing paramilitary threats, particularly in the west of the country, is also among the most pressing challenges. This requires a solution that is more multifaceted than a traditional demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration approach. Vigorous yet flexible training must provide government security personnel with the skills necessary to forcefully stamp out illegal armed groups, most of whom are generally young traditional hunters patrolling their areas of origin but also include militia and foreign mercenaries. Incentivized social rehabilitation projects for ex-combatants and close consultation with relevant local chiefs and leaders are necessary components.

The plan of quotas, using elements from opposing armies to recast the army, is doomed to fail. Rather, objective recruitment, including of youth who have not taken part in past conflicts, and a selection process that is based on intellectual and professional competences, is the ideal formula the government should use to rebuild the Ivorian armed forces. The fight against the culture of impunity is also an imperative.

However, security sector reform must exceed conventional standards. It is important to eliminate the seeds of division in society that contaminated the armed forces. Ultimately a new ethic and a new vision of the security architecture must be promoted, inspired by the concept of the Army-Nation as the guarantor of harmonious civil-military relations. Senegal is a valuable model in this regard. In addition to its mission of defense, the armed forces in Senegal play a key role in natural disaster response and national infrastructure efforts. Replicating these principles in Côte d'Ivoire could help repair civil-military relations and regain sociopolitical stability.

RECONCILIATION AND PEACE

To advance a unifying theme of peace, President Ouattara has established an 11-member Commission of Dialogue, Truth, and Reconciliation inspired by the South African model. While the South Africa experience will doubtless prove helpful, Ivorians will have more to gain by reflecting on their own realities, cultures, and historical background.

The Commission should draw from mechanisms of conflict resolution and restoration of peace used in the traditional kingdoms and communities of Côte d'Ivoire. Adopting many of these time-honored practices, including palavers and *parenté à plaisanterie*, or kinship joking, whose cathartic function is to defuse intercommunity tensions, can give political decisionmakers and mediators modalities to neutralize conflict rhetoric and promote a culture of peace. This was the creed of Houphouët-Boigny.

A central feature of any reconciliation strategy will be to renegotiate the notion of citizenship in a more inclusive way and banish the concept of "Ivoirité." Côte d'Ivoire is a multiethnic society largely shaped by immigration. This must be recognized in the laws governing citizenship. Any other approach is exclusionary and would hinder national reconciliation while sowing the seeds for future instability.

In this process of reconciliation and pacification, women will have a fundamental role. First, by virtue of their sheer numbers—women make

up more than half the population of the country. Beyond this is their natural affinity towards peace. Throughout this crisis, there was not a single report of a woman who took up arms. On the contrary, women were raped, harassed, and killed in great numbers by both sides.

The role of women in transethnic family networks also constitutes a real advantage in mending the torn social fabric. Examples of interethnic marriages among the political elite are numerous and significant. Guillaume Soro, a prime minister under both Gbagbo and Ouattara, is a Sénoufo from the North married to a Bété woman from the Southeast. Gbagbo himself, to expand his political sphere of influence, took a Dioula woman from the North as his second wife. More iconic is the case of Henriette Diabaté, an Agni from the Southwest, whose husband from the North was minister of state under Houphouët-Boigny. A renowned historian, Diabaté was awarded the title Grand Chancellor of the National Order, which sends a strong signal to Ivorian women. Such matrimonial alliances that cross ethnic lines are plentiful in Côte d'Ivoire, and not only among the elite. The children from such marriages cannot be placed in strict ethnic and regional categories.

"Côte d'Ivoire is a multi-ethnic society largely shaped by immigration"

In order for peace and democracy to take root, a proactive strategy that targets the nation's young people is also needed. Côte d'Ivoire has an advantage in this regard in that it can build on a long legacy of tolerance from the Houphouët-Boigny years. The goal must be to educate young people in a way that encourages a harmonious integration of all of the country's communities into national life. This is especially important since people under 15 years of age account for 43 percent of the population. They were also an important playing card for the Gbagbo regime, which relied on detribalized, urban youngsters whom it had indoctrinated and who were prone to violence.

Such tendencies, though, are not irreversible. An educated, responsible class of young people can find its place in the political arena and make sound contributions to the country's reconstruction, particularly if they are afforded education and employment opportunities. However, they need to be given tangible hope for a better tomorrow and supported and encouraged to create social networks that cultivate a civic spirit and tolerance.

SUBREGIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY

Côte d'Ivoire borders five countries and cannot, therefore, conceive of any national security strategy without taking into account the subregional context.

Consider the Mano River Union, established in 1973 between Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea, with Côte d'Ivoire joining in 2008. This union has experienced severe crises and is seen as the "underbelly" of West Africa, with two civil wars in Sierra Leone (1991–2002), a tragic civil war in Liberia (1990–2003), a political-military crisis in Côte d'Ivoire from 1999 to 2011, and violent social upheavals, military repression, and ongoing criminal activity in Guinea.

The Mano River Union, then, is a problematic zone where yesterday's child soldiers, now adults, join together in mercenary groups to continue their transboundary criminal activities, threatening the stability of the subregion. A concerted strategy, bolstered by renewed political will that entails joint action to demilitarize the "infernal triangle," the Liberia-Guinea-Côte d'Ivoire border zone, and coordinated cross-border development, is needed among the countries of the Mano River Union to neutralize mercenaries, implement security sector reform, and impose peace in this subregion of enormous resources.

The Ouagadougou-Abidjan axis is another strategic linchpin to stability given the deep geographic and historical bonds and size of the Burkinabé diaspora in Côte d'Ivoire. The authorities of both capitals are therefore duty-bound to cultivate harmonious relations between their two countries. Ouagadougou should work with Abidjan to help control migratory flows into Côte d'Ivoire, improve border security, and initiate economic and social development programs in remote border areas.

Peace in Côte d'Ivoire will also not take root without close and loyal cooperation with its neighbor to the east, Ghana. Indeed, both countries share a border that arbitrarily divided the sizable Akan community, who are members of what was once one of the most prestigious kingdoms in Africa, the Ashanti. Ghana has welcomed a large number of Ivorian refugees. It is imperative, therefore, that the new authorities in Abidjan work proactively with Accra to reassure these refugees that they are welcome to repatriate and essential to rebuilding the country. In October 2011, President Ouattara made such an appeal when signing a tripartite agreement with Ghana and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to jointly facilitate refugee return to Côte d'Ivoire. In addition, Ghana, a peaceful neighbor that has embarked on a path of sustained economic development and democratization, could provide Abidjan with guidance and expertise on its recovery.

In other words, peace, security, and development in Côte d'Ivoire are inseparable from that of its neighbors.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, it is important to calm souls, to restore trust in Côte d'Ivoire's institutions, and to bring divided communities together around a collective project aimed at achieving shared and united development. As for its tremendous natural riches, and the proven skills of its human resources, Côte d'Ivoire can, with responsible and reassuring leadership, take up the challenge and regain its role as a catalyst for West African development. The task, however, is large and will require patience and self-denial. It is imperative that government leaders avoid conveying any sense of triumph and be proactive in overcoming the inevitable obstacles.

NOTE

[1] Ragnhild Nordås, "Identity Polarization and Conflict: State Building in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana," paper prepared for the 49th International Studies Association Convention, San Francisco, CA, March 26–29, 2008.

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ISSN 2164-4039

NDU Press