

Ivory Coast: Two oligarchic factions tear the country apart

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Two “presidents of the Republic”, the outgoing Laurent Koudou Gbagbo and his rival Alassane Dramane Ouattara, are tearing Ivory Coast apart. Each of the “presidents” relies on real support at the national level. This internal virtually balanced “legitimacy”, is combined with an external legitimation — characteristic of the limited sovereignty of the African post-colonial states — by the “international community”, which is unbalanced.

Alassane Ouattara benefits from the quasi unanimous support of the “international community”, that is the USA, France, the European Union, the UN Security Council, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and so on. If initially Laurent Gbagbo benefited from the support of Russia or Mexico, for example, this was quickly lost. Some African head of states like Jacob Zuma (South Africa) or the acting president of the African Union, the Malawian Bingu wa Mutharika, indeed one of the mediators, Yayi Boni (Benin) have distanced themselves from the intransigence of their peers in the African Union, without however sharing the unconditional support for Gbagbo manifested by the Angolan Eduardo Dos Santos. Inside the political establishment of the former colonial metropolis, Gbagbo benefits only from the support of some dignitaries of the French Socialist Party, opposed to the official position of the latter, a member of the Socialist International like the Front Patriotique Ivoirien (FPI) of Gbagbo. African political parties and intellectuals — inside and outside the continent — are seriously divided.

The post-electoral crisis has seen hundreds of deaths added to the victims of the Ivorian crisis which has been ongoing since the attempted putsch of September 2002. The elections of 2010, supposed to put an end to this crisis, have instead led to this tragic imbroglio, where the interpretations and positions taken reflect unilateralism and confusion: “anti-imperialism”, “democracy”, “pan-Africanism”, indeed “socialism”... these are the standards deployed and counterposed by the different participants in the debate.

Origins of the Ivorian crisis

Since the death in 1994 of the autocrat Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the Ivory Coast has experienced a war of succession inside the single party, the Parti Démocratique de Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI). This has mainly opposed Alassane Ouattara, the neoliberal prime minister of the dead president, and Henri Konan Bédié, president of the National Assembly. Bédié came out winner, relying, amongst other

factors, on “ivoirité” [“Ivoryness” - the state of being a true Ivorian] — evoking the supposedly doubtful nationality of his rival, stressing his Dioula ethnic origin (an ethnic group from the north of the country, classified as “Voltaïque”) and the fact that he also had an Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) passport. The concept of “ivoirité” as ethnic-confessional sectarianism with respect to the Dioula Muslims would become a major discriminator in the struggle for power.

Bédié was overthrown at Christmas 1999 by a military mutiny. The mutineers sought to justify themselves by speaking of the instrumentalisation of “ivoirité” and “baoulisation” [the privileging of the Baoulé ethnic grouping] at the summits of the state. They promoted as head of state a general, Robert Guéi, the former chief of staff of the Ivorian army and manager of the support for Houphouët-Boigny in the rebellion of the 1980s and 1990s, a victim of the “baoulisation” encouraged by Bédié. This so called transitional government had among its main tasks the eradication of “ivoirité” and the organisation of democratic elections.

But Alassane Ouattara, leader of the Rassemblement des Démocrates Républicains (RDR), like several other potential candidates, including the overthrown president Bédié, was not allowed to be a candidate at the presidential election of 2000, organised so as to allow the confiscation of power by Guéi. And it was Laurent Gbagbo, a former trades union activist in the teaching sector, exiled in France from 1985 to 1988 and founder of the Front Populaire Ivoirien, imprisoned by Ouattara during the student demonstrations in 1992, who won with a low rate of participation.

In September 2002, an armed putsch against Gbagbo, then visiting Italy, was defeated. Aborted, this putsch was transformed into a military political rebellion in the north of the country. In his turn, Gbagbo was accused of having amplified the phenomenon of “Ivoryness”. Ivory Coast has been cut in two. On the one hand, the northern part and a part of the centre are under the control of the political military rebellion (currently the Forces Armées des Forces Nouvelles - FAFN) led by Guillaume Soro, originally from the north and a former leader of the student movement (Fédération des étudiants et scolaires de Côte d'Ivoire, FESCI, then seen as on the left), who went from struggling alongside Gbagbo and the FPI, against the regime of the PDCI, to support — during the Gbagbo phase of “ivoirité” — for Alassane Ouattara, a neoliberal. The FAFN have made Bouaké, the third biggest town in the country, the capital of their zone. On the other hand the coastal area— which includes the economic capital Abidjan and the port town of San Pedro — and a part of the centre, remain under the governmental control of Gbagbo. Between the two there is a French interposition force, subsequently strengthened by a UN mission.

For five years we have seen agreements signed under the aegis of the “international community”, only partially respected, racketeering by traders and shippers on the roads, popular demonstrations violently and bloodily repressed, including by the political private militias, armed confrontations between loyalist and rebel armies, and bombardments between the loyalist army and the French army (November 2004 in Bouaké and Abidjan). A peace agreement was finally signed in March 2007, at Ouagadougou, between the government of Gbagbo and the Forces Nouvelles (FN) and Guillaume Soro, facilitated by the Burkina Faso president Blaise Compaoré, until then presumed complicit in, indeed the inspirer of, the rebellion.

With the Accord Politique de Ouagadougou (APO - Ouagadougou Political Agreement), the road was considered opened to presidential elections which would put an end to the crisis. After several delays the election finally took place in October and November 2010. Instead of bringing the hoped for end to the crisis, it plunged the Ivory Coast into a highly embroiled situation seen as the most threatening since September 2002.

Elections: neither free nor fair

With regard to the promise of fair play made by the two candidates during the debate broadcast on the eve of the second round, presented as a lesson in democracy for other African presidential elections, this crisis seems surprising. The results of the first round were not subject to any dispute, despite some irregularities. But after the second round the Independent Electoral Commission (CEI), responsible for the proclamation of the provisional results, announced a victory for Ouattara while the Constitutional Council (CC), responsible for the proclamation of the definitive results to be certified by the UN Mission, attributed victory to Gbagbo - with the UN Mission ultimately supporting the verdict of the CEI!.

In the cleavage produced by the Ivorian electoral crisis, Gbagbo has been presented as having a societal project opposed to that of Ouattara. For Pierre Sané : "There is a struggle for power in Africa today (...) above all between two projects of society which, to put it simply, involve leaders who are supporters of globalised neoliberalism as against others who adhere to a sovereign and socialising Pan-Africanism" [1]. Thus, given the unrestrained neoliberalism of the former deputy director of the IMF, the camp of "sovereign and socialising Pan-Africanism" would apparently be represented in the Ivorian crisis by Gbagbo.

Gbagbo, a socialist?

A socialist Pan-Africanist Gbagbo undoubtedly was in his opposition to the neo-colonial capitalist regime of F. Houphouët-Boigny. But should we project this past on the present? Can we adduce anything from his membership of the Socialist International, like Abdou Diouf, Thabo Mbeki, Ben Ali, whose adherence to neoliberalism has been undeniable? Would it not be necessary rather to characterise him according to the policies he has followed for the past decade?

Certainly the Gbagbo regime was confronted with the neocolonial state culture of French capital, led by Jacques Chirac, whose involvement in the attempted putsch of September 2002 seems fairly obvious. He had to lead a battle against the attempts at destabilisation orchestrated by certain French imperialist interests and their allies in the Ivory Coast and Francophone Africa, in a situation of quasi-marginalisation by his peers, conservatives in the "Françafrique" tradition. Ivorian national sovereignty, ridiculed during the four first neo-colonial decades, was undeniably at stake and he tried to defend it. Should it be forgotten all the same that this "Pan-Africanist" in turn used "ivoirité" even if we should recognise his decision much later (in 2007) to suppress the residency card for residents from neighbouring countries? The Gbagbo regime also established a lobby - the Cercle d'amitié et de soutien au Renouveau franco-ivoirien, (CARFI) - in France, through which crony contracts were attributed? Some of the beneficiaries of these contracts had already profited under the regime of Houphouët-Boigny.

The Gbagbo regime strengthened the grip of US transnationals on Ivorian cocoa and won approval from the World Bank and IMF for application of their principles. Certainly Gbagbo initiated, for example, a policy of free supplies for primary schools and the elimination of school fees, but his regime was also active in the area of oligarchic accumulation of capital, in a climate of growing poverty. Should we close our eyes to this indecent enrichment, at the expense of the public treasury and the people, or the scandals of underhand dealings in the coffee-cocoa sector? Acts which even exasperated the regime's number two, the president of the National Assembly, Mamadou Koulibaly — an unconditional supporter of economic neoliberalism who had been Gbagbo's economic advisor and represented his Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) in the transitional government led by Robert Guéi.

Africa had, in the first phase of neo-colonialism, its batch of “socialist” imposters – as was also the case elsewhere. It is pointless to add to them at a time when the socialist ideal could gain a new beauty and youth given capitalism’s proven objective incapacity, whether in its neoliberal version or any other, to produce anything other than the development of social injustice or democracies in which some are more equal than others.

Ouattara the democrat?

The support for Ouattara is justified by the necessity of respecting the democratic game or alternation in Africa. Which is perfectly legitimate. In other words if it was established that Ouattara was undeniably the victor of an unproblematic election, it would be legitimate that he fulfil the mandate given to him by the majority of the Ivorian electorate. However, contrary to what some claim, it would be wrong to attribute to Ouattara the status of eternal victim of chauvinism from the tenants of “ivoirité” or the adversaries of democracy. He is not a knight of democracy in the Ivory Coast.

Should we forget the years in which he was prime minister in charge of the application of structural adjustment measures and the management of the early years of multipartyism? Did he not lead the government which repressed with especial brutality social and political opposition to the anti-social measures of the structural adjustment programme? Didn’t Gbagbo introduce the project of installation of the residency card to distinguish foreign residents from Ivorians, well before his competitors? We stress that this was not out of personal xenophobia, but through economic motivation: with at least 20% of the Ivorian population being foreign residents, this represented a significant source of public income in a period of structural adjustment. This was not an Ivorian invention, but a suggestion of the IMF to the over indebted states. It is a stroke of luck for the neoliberal international to see its dear candidate supported thus, beyond the right and in the name of democracy, including in circles which claim to be anti-imperialist.

False choice

In the Ivory Coast, as elsewhere, the false choices imposed on us by hegemonic capitalism, above all at the ideological level, should be rejected. Who can distinguish in the Ivory Coast between the basics of the economic and social programmes of Gbagbo (a good pupil of the IMF and World Bank) and Ouattara (an IMF technocrat)? Have the capitalists changed their nature through being African relative sovereignists? Will the Ouattara regime invent social neoliberalism? Has the Ouattara faction less oligarchic intentions than the Gbagbo faction?

What matters is to work for the emergence or development of alternative popular forces which do not understand democracy as the combination of multipartyism with the so-called market economy, forces which do not reduce democracy to the fact of putting ballot papers in a box regularly, in an atmosphere of demagoguery and disinformation, which deprive peoples of their permanent sovereignty. It is up to the people of the Ivory Coast to free themselves from the fascination with these two factions currently competing and to bid them as well as the pyromaniac “international community” of Sarkozy, Obama. Goodluck, wave a fond farewell as has already been done, in a different context, by the Tunisian people who resist the diversion of their dearly won victory by factions who wish to limit their sovereignty to the democracy of the model promised by the “international community”.

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P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint.

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Footnotes

[1] Pierre Sané, on ESSF: "[Les élections de Côte d'Ivoire : chronique d'un échec annoncé](#)"
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