

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	84
Land:	Elfenbenskysten
Kilde:	Freedom House.
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2009 – Côte d'Ivoire
Udgivet:	16. juli 2009
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	9. oktober 2009

Title	Freedom in the World 2009 - Cote d'Ivoire
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Côte d'Ivoire
Publication Date	16 July 2009
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2009 - Cote d'Ivoire</i> , 16 July 2009, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a6452c11e.html [accessed 6 October 2009]

Freedom in the World 2009 - Cote d'Ivoire

Capital: Yamoussoukro (official), Abidjan (de facto)

Population: 20,700,000

Political Rights Score: 6

Civil Liberties Score: 5

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change

Cote d'Ivoire's political rights rating improved from 7 to 6 due to progress in the distribution of identity cards and voter registration, particularly among religious and ethnic minorities, in advance of the upcoming presidential election.

Overview

Preparations for the long-delayed presidential election proceeded in 2008 following the signing of a peace accord between President Laurent Gbagbo and rebel leader Guillaume Soro in 2007. There was some progress in identifying and registering voters during the year, as well as distributing identity cards, particularly among religious and ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, efforts to disarm militias and rebel forces met with resistance from both sides, and the elections were postponed until 2009.

Cote d'Ivoire gained independence from France in 1960, and President Felix Houphouet-Boigny ruled until his death in 1993. Henri Konan Bedie, then the speaker of the National Assembly, assumed power and won a fraudulent election in 1995. Opposition candidate Alassane Ouattara was disqualified on the grounds of his alleged Burkinabe origins.

General Robert Guei seized power in 1999 and declared himself the winner of a 2000 presidential election when initial results showed that he was losing to Laurent Gbagbo. He was soon toppled by a popular uprising, and Gbagbo, supported by security forces, refused to call new polls. The postelection violence cost hundreds of civilian lives and deepened the divisions between north and south as well as between Muslims and Christians. In the 2000 legislative elections, Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) won 96 seats, while Ouattara's Rally of Republicans (RDR) took only five.

Civil war erupted in September 2002, when some 700 soldiers mounted a coup attempt. Under unclear circumstances, government forces killed Guei in Abidjan on the first day of fighting. Clashes intensified between loyalist troops and the rebels, who quickly

seized the north and called for Gbagbo to step down. This call was echoed by similar forces in the west. By December 2002, the rebel factions had united to form the New Forces (NF), led by Guillaume Soro.

In 2003, Gbagbo's government and the NF signed a ceasefire brokered by France, but it soon broke down. In 2004, following the deaths of nine French peacekeepers in a government bombing campaign against the NF, France destroyed the Ivorian Air Force and – with the backing of the African Union (AU) – persuaded the UN Security Council to impose a strict arms embargo on the country. In April 2005, South African president Thabo Mbeki brokered a new peace accord that set general elections for the end of that year. However, because the requisite disarmament and poll preparations were not completed in time, the AU postponed the elections, extended Gbagbo's term, and appointed an interim prime minister, economist Charles Konan Banny.

Similar disarmament and voter-identification delays prevented elections from taking place in 2006, and Gbagbo ended the identification process after the progovernment Young Patriot militia violently intimidated those going to register in the south, resulting in a number of fatalities. The disarmament process was halted when it became obvious that fighters were attempting to sign up without handing over weapons. With the expiration of Gbagbo's extended mandate in October 2006, the UN Security Council passed a resolution transferring all political and military power to the prime minister until the next elections. But Gbagbo refused to accept it and instead called for the removal of all foreign troops.

Gbagbo and Soro met in Burkina Faso in March 2007 and signed a bilateral peace accord in which the UN plan was discarded and Soro was appointed interim prime minister until elections could be held in 2008. Although opposition political parties were essentially left out of the talks, the accord was widely accepted due to its greater chance of success than any of the prior agreements reached. Also during 2007, Gbagbo visited the north for the first time since 2002, the last remaining NF troops being held in the south were released, and the "confidence zone" separating the north from the south was officially dismantled.

The elections, initially expected in early 2008, were postponed until November when they were again postponed without agreement about a new date. Several conditions must be met in order for elections to take place, including the distribution of identity cards, the creation of an electoral registry, the reintegration of rebel forces into the army, the disarming of other rebel groups, and the restoration of political administration in the north. There was more progress on some of these measures in 2008 than in any previous year, particularly the reestablishment of a civil administration in the north and the identification of voters. The Justice Ministry claimed to have issued 586,755 new birth certificates (a requirement in order to be eligible to vote) as of April, including many in the north, though some remote regions were not reached. The government also hired a French company, SAGEM, to conduct voter registration. However, the firm judged the November deadline to be unrealistic, and overall the year's preparations were not sufficient for elections to be held fairly. Nevertheless, the successful identification of voters was a significant step forward in a process that has been marked by more failure than progress.

Ongoing efforts to disarm all militias and reintegrate rebel troops into the military were markedly less successful than the voter identification drive. By June, 2,600 combatants had been regrouped, including 1,200 who joined the national army. Nonetheless, there was vocal opposition to the process from both sides. A UN report in April noted with some alarm that military forces from both sides had been training outside of Cote d'Ivoire during the year. Moreover, no agreement was reached on the salary and rank of former NF officers in the new army, and the government's inability to pay demobilization allowances as promised led to a number of violent protests. The United Nations launched a \$5 million project to help accelerate the process and provide technical and vocational training to former combatants and young Ivoirians at risk of falling into crime.

In April, during a visit by the UN secretary-general, all sides signed a preelection code of conduct in which they promised, among other things, to provide equal access to the state media and refrain from voter intimidation. It remained to be seen whether these promises would be respected, but the electoral environment was better in 2008 than it had been for many years.

Also in 2008, revenues from the crucial cocoa and petroleum sectors began to deteriorate, and the government took steps to root out corruption in the cocoa industry. Efforts to obtain sufficient funds to finance the elections dominated the government's economic agenda during the year. Eventually officials were able to secure the necessary \$86 million from the European Union, the UN Development Programme, and the government's own resources.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Cote d'Ivoire is not an electoral democracy. The constitution provides for the popular election of a president and a 225-seat unicameral National Assembly for five-year terms. However, legislative and presidential elections have been repeatedly postponed as the peace process has stalled, and both branches are essentially governing without a mandate. Elections cannot be held until identification cards are distributed and both the NF and progovernment militias are disarmed. There was some progress on these fronts in 2008, but it was not sufficient to hold fair elections during the year. The president traditionally appoints the prime minister; in 2007, President Laurent Gbagbo replaced UN-backed prime minister Charles Konan Banny with NF leader Guillaume Soro in keeping with that year's bilateral accord. Gbagbo's FPI won an overwhelming number of seats in the most recent legislative elections, in December 2000. Other major parties include the Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire-African Democratic Rally and the RDR.

Corruption is a serious problem in Cote d'Ivoire. Profits from cocoa, cotton, and weapons, as well as informal taxes, have given many of those in power – including members of the military and rebel forces – an incentive to obstruct peace and political normalization. The government made some moves to combat corruption in the cocoa sector in 2008 in response to widespread corruption and mismanagement allegations. During the year, it established a cocoa management committee intended to oversee operations of the sector and began conducting a court investigation into high-level corruption. As a result, several leading industry officials were temporarily detained and questioned, including the former agriculture minister. Cote d'Ivoire ranked 151 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional protections for press freedom, it is generally not respected in practice, though the situation seems to have improved slightly from 2007 due to a reduction in the number of defamation suits and reports of violence against journalists. In April 2008, all political parties accepted the United Nations' recommended preconditions for successful elections, including equal access to the state media for all parties and a moratorium on inflammatory language and hate speech during the campaign. However, soon after this was agreed upon, a number of local media outlets – many of which are regarded as highly partisan – accused various politicians of violating the hate-speech provision. Separately, in February, the government indefinitely suspended FM broadcasts of Radio France Internationale, allegedly because the service failed to appoint a permanent correspondent for Cote d'Ivoire.

Legal guarantees of religious freedom were generally respected in practice in 2008. In the past, the government has shown a preference for Christians, particularly as the north-south divide corresponds roughly with the Muslim and Christian populations. In 2006, local Abidjan officials unsuccessfully attempted to destroy a mosque to make space for a shopping center, but direct attacks on Muslims have noticeably decreased in recent years. The marginal success of the voter identification and registration process in the north in 2008 eased Muslim complaints about discrimination to some degree.

The government, which owns most educational facilities, inhibits academic freedom by

requiring authorization for all political meetings held on college campuses. However, the greatest restriction on academic freedom is the impunity enjoyed by the progovernment Student Federation of Cote d'Ivoire (FESCI), which engages in systematic violent intimidation of students, particularly those at the University of Abidjan, or those believed to harbor sympathies for the NF. In a 2008 report on the state of Cote d'Ivoire's schools, Human Rights Watch found that FESCI was responsible for "politically and criminally motivated violence, including murder, assault, extortion, and rape."

The constitution protects the right to free assembly, but it is often denied in practice. In recent years, opposition demonstrations have been violently dispersed by progovernment forces like FESCI and the Young Patriots, leaving many dead. There have been a number of peaceful antigovernment demonstrations, but a two-day protest in March 2008 over rising food prices in Abidjan turned violent, and a July protest over the government's decision to end fuel subsidies crippled the country. The government responded to the latter protest by reinstating subsidies for diesel and kerosene, increasing the transportation allowance, and decreasing ministers' salaries by 10 percent to compensate.

Human rights groups generally operate freely, although some face death threats and harassment. Labor unions are legally protected, and workers have the right to bargain collectively. In January 2008, the influential farmers' union in the cocoa sector split into two factions, causing more chaos in an already disorganized industry. Separately, the second phase of public hearings on voter identification, set to begin in August, was temporarily put on hold after the union of registration clerks went on strike to demand better security details and payment of their allowances in full.

The judiciary is not independent. Judges are political appointees without tenure and are highly susceptible to external interference and bribes. A June 2007 report by the UN Mission in Cote d'Ivoire found that corruption was endemic to the judicial system. In 2008, judges and clerks began to redeploy to the north, but they often encountered resistance from NF soldiers who were unwilling to relinquish authority.

Cote d'Ivoire's cocoa and other industries have historically attracted and depended on workers from neighboring countries, but conflicts between immigrant populations and longer-term residents, coupled with the xenophobic concept of *Ivoirite*, have contributed to the current political crisis. The disenfranchisement of many in the north who were born in Cote d'Ivoire but whose families originated in countries like Burkina Faso and Guinea is one of the primary concerns of the NF. The preliminary success of the voter identification process in 2008 has begun to ease these tensions. Nonetheless, the fact that a strong and inclusive national identity has failed to emerge despite the success of the peace process is cause for caution ahead of the elections, as political parties typically form along ethnic and religious lines.

The United Nations began to dismantle the internal border between the government-controlled south and rebel-held north after the 2007 peace accord, and the last of the international checkpoints was removed in September of that year. Nonetheless, vigilante roadblocks continue to serve as platforms for criminal activity and have stoked human rights groups' concerns about an increase in cases of rape. A July report by the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) news service found that rape increased across the country between April and July 2008.

Child labor and child trafficking are problems throughout West Africa, but Cote d'Ivoire has made a number of symbolic efforts to combat them. Even so, tens of thousands of children from all over the region are believed to be working on Ivorian plantations. Many of the female children who are trafficked end up in prostitution; a 2007 German study found that 85 percent of females in prostitution in Cote d'Ivoire were juveniles.

Despite official encouragement of their constitutional rights, women suffer widespread discrimination. Equal pay is offered in the small formal business sector, but women have few chances of obtaining formal employment. In 2007, both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International released studies on the widespread instances of sexual abuse

perpetrated by both government and rebel forces during the civil war. Although the government has officially recognized the problem, none of the culprits have been prosecuted.

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