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Freedom in the World - Cote d'Ivoire (2008)

Capital:

Yamoussoukro
(official), Abidjan
(de facto)

Political Rights Score: 7

Civil Liberties Score: 5

Status: Not Free

Population:

20,200,000

Ratings Change

Cote d'Ivoire's civil liberties rating improved from 6 to 5 due to the signing of the Ouagadougou Peace Accords, which included the peaceful, albeit delayed, initiation of the citizen identification process and the opening of the internal border between north and south.

Overview

In March 2007, President Laurent Gbagbo and New Forces rebel leader Guillaume Soro met in Burkina Faso and signed the Ouagadougou Accords, in which Soro was temporarily appointed prime minister and plans were made to hold elections in early 2008. The voting schedule seemed overly optimistic by year's end, but some progress had been made. The voter identification process got under way in September, and the deconstruction of the "confidence zone" that had separated the two halves of the country was finally completed.

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. Alassane Ouattara, the opposition's most formidable candidate, was barred from the contest on the grounds of his alleged Burkinabe origins, demonstrations were banned, and the media were intimidated.

General Robert Guei seized power in 1999 and stood for a presidential election in 2000. When initial results showed that he was losing to Laurent Gbagbo, Guei sacked the electoral commission, detained its officers, and declared himself the winner. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in a popular uprising that toppled Guei from power. Clashes followed between supporters of Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), who claimed electoral victory, and Ouattara's Rally of Republicans (RDR), who called for new elections. Supported by security forces, Gbagbo refused to call new polls and was eventually declared the winner. The surrounding political violence, in which hundreds of civilians died, led to a deepening division between the largely Muslim north and mainly Christian south, although the conflict was not strictly rooted in a north-south, Muslim-Christian divide. The FPI dominated the 2000 legislative elections, winning 96 seats, while its closest rival, the RDR, took only 5.

Civil war erupted in September 2002, when some 700 soldiers attempted to stage a coup by simultaneously attacking a number of cities nationwide. Under unclear circumstances, government forces killed Guei in Abidjan on the first day of fighting. Clashes intensified between troops loyal to the government and the disgruntled soldiers, who formed a rebel group called the Patriotic Movement of

Cote d'Ivoire (MPCI). The MPCI quickly seized the northern part of the country and called for Gbagbo to step down. Other groups in the west, angered by the killing of Guei, echoed the calls for Gbagbo's resignation. By December 2002, the rebels 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 that called for a broad-based coalition to rule until elections could be held. However, that accord broke down. Following the deaths of nine French peacekeepers in a government bombing campaign against the NF in November 2004, 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 presidential and legislative elections for the end of that year, but disarmament and preparations for the polls were not completed in time. As a result, the AU extended Gbagbo's term in office for another year and, with Mbeki's help, appointed economist Charles Konan Banny as interim prime minister.

Despite moderate political improvements in early 2006, when leading members of the major coalitions met numerous times to discuss prospects for peace, the likelihood of elections being held by the end of Gbagbo's extended mandate in October 2006 grew increasingly dim. In particular, the two prerequisites for a successful election—the identification of potential voters and the disarmament of combatants—had both stalled by August. 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. By November, the National Assembly's mandate had expired, and there was no election in sight. The UN Security Council subsequently passed a resolution ostensibly transferring all political and military power to the prime minister. But Gbagbo refused to accept the authority of the Security Council and instead called for the removal of all foreign troops from the country.

By 2007, the situation seemed more hopeful. Gbagbo and Soro met in the Burkinabe capital, Ouagadougou, and in March 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 accepted by the international community for its potential to bring peace after other efforts had failed. Throughout the summer, a number of symbolic steps were taken to demonstrate progress—for example, Gbagbo's first visit to the north since 2002 and the freeing of the last remaining NF troops being held in the south—but substantive measures were lacking. Only in September was the "confidence zone" separating the north and south officially dismantled and the last international checkpoint removed. Also that month, the voter identification process was finally able to get under way. Although the violence associated with this process in 2006 was noticeably absent in 2007, it remained unclear whether identification papers could be successfully distributed to all legitimate citizens, including many in the north without birth records.

The country suffered a major environmental disaster in 2006 when the

Netherlands-based company Trafigura Beheer BV dumped some 400 tons of petrochemical waste containing hydrogen sulfide, a toxic substance, in and around Abidjan. Ten people were believed to have died, more than 80,000 people sought medical treatment, and Banny suspended a number of high-ranking officials for their involvement in the scandal. A few months later, in an act of defiance, Gbagbo reappointed the officials. In 2007, Trafigura agreed to pay the Ivorian government \$198 million in exchange for the abandonment of official legal action. Gbagbo announced that the majority of the money would go to the victims, but they later complained of never receiving the money.

Cote d'Ivoire is by far the world's leading producer of cocoa, and the country was once a beacon of stability and economic progress in West Africa. In June 2007, the European Union announced that it would discontinue its emergency aid, finding that stability had begun to return. Since 2002, the European Union has spent 25 million euros (US\$36 million) in Cote d'Ivoire, primarily on refugee aid and the provision of basic infrastructure needs like water and sanitation. At the same time, China has canceled 40 percent of the country's debt, amounting to almost \$25 million.

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. The next elections are planned for mid-2008, but this is dependent on the successful distribution of identification cards and the thorough disarmament of both the NF and the progovernment militias. The president traditionally appoints the prime minister; in 2007, President Laurent Gbagbo removed Charles Konan Banny, the UN-backed prime minister, and appointed NF leader Guillaume Soro to the post following the accord between the two men in Ouagadougou. 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. Corruption did not noticeably improve in 2007. Cote d'Ivoire ranked 150 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional protections for press freedom, it is generally not respected in practice, though the situation seems to have improved slightly since 2006. The greatest threat faced by journalists in 2007 was from defamation suits and the possibility of interrogation and imprisonment for articles critical of the president. Throughout the year, a number of journalists were charged with defamation, and many received crippling fines for covering such issues as the toxic waste scandal. Despite a 2004 law that removed criminal penalties for press offenses, a journalist with the private daily *Soir Info* was held for five days in January on contempt of court charges after he published an article accusing the state prosecutor of corruption. Between May and July, four separate media outlets with a variety of political affiliations were raided by burglars. The incidents were not believed to be

politically motivated.

Legal guarantees of religious freedom are not always upheld in practice. 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 attempted to destroy a mosque to make space for a shopping center, but the effort was thwarted, and direct attacks on Muslims have, on the whole, decreased in recent years. In 2007, Gbagbo met with Muslim leaders to discuss the completion of a prominent mosque and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, among other things.

The government, which owns most educational facilities, inhibits academic freedom by requiring authorization for all political meetings held on college campuses. The progovernment Student Federation of Cote d'Ivoire (FESCI), operating on the University of Abidjan campus, regularly intimidates students through physical violence and sexual harassment. In 2007, FESCI members ransacked the offices of a local human rights group after it showed support for a teachers' union strike.

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, leaving many dead. However, in 2006, a number of peaceful antigovernment demonstrations were successfully staged, notably in response to Gbagbo's decision to reappoint the civil servants accused of involvement in the toxic waste scandal. 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 August and September 2007, doctors went on strike demanding better wages. During the August strike, they allowed a minimum of services to be provided at state hospitals, but by the time of the September strike, even potentially fatal cases were being turned away from hospitals manned only by menial staff and interns.

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. Also in June, the government announced its intention to redeploy judges and other civil servants to the north, where no functioning judiciary had existed since 2002. By year's end, it appeared that a number of high-ranking officials had in fact returned.

Cote d'Ivoire's cocoa industry has 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 success of the voter identification process, particularly in the north, could significantly ease the tension among these groups.

Freedom of movement between the government-controlled south and the rebel-held north has been severely curtailed in recent years, but the United Nations began to dismantle the internal border after the Ouagadougou agreement in March 2007, and the last of the international checkpoints was removed in September. Nonetheless, arbitrary roadblocks remain throughout the country, forcing travelers

to pay informal tolls and bribes.

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.

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.