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Freedom in the World 2010 - Cote d'Ivoire

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

Population: 21,395,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

Long-delayed national elections, required under a 2007 peace accord signed by President Laurent Gbagbo and rebel leader Guillaume Soro, were again postponed in 2009. Progress had stalled on voter registration, militia disarmament, the integration of rebel fighters into the military, and the restoration of government institutions in the rebel-held north, and both sides appeared to lack the political will to change the status quo.

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 an October 2000 presidential election after initial results showed that he was losing to Laurent Gbagbo. He was soon toppled by a popular uprising, and Gbagbo, who was eventually declared the winner, 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 December 2000 legislative elections, Gbagbo's Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) won 96 seats, while Bedie's Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire-African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA) took 94 and smaller parties and independents won the remainder.

Civil war erupted in September 2002 when some 700 soldiers mounted a coup attempt, and government forces killed Guei under unclear circumstances on the first day of fighting. Clashes intensified between loyalist troops and the rebels, who quickly took control of 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 (FN), led by Guillaume Soro.

Gbagbo's government and the FN signed a ceasefire brokered by France in 2003, but it

soon broke down. In 2004, following the deaths of nine French peacekeepers in a government bombing campaign against the FN, 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. 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. Gbagbo refused to accept the move and called for the withdrawal of all foreign troops.

In March 2007, Gbagbo and Soro met in Burkina Faso and signed an entirely new bilateral peace deal, the Ouagadougou Political Accord (APO), according to which Soro was appointed interim prime minister until elections could be held. Opposition political parties were left out, but the pact was seen as having a greater chance of success than its predecessors. Gbagbo soon visited the north for the first time since 2002, and the "confidence zone" separating the two parts of the country was officially dismantled. Despite the more peaceful climate, the elections envisioned in the APO were repeatedly postponed due to a combination of stalled preparations and lack of political will. Preelection hurdles included the distribution of identity cards, creation of a voter registry, integration of rebel forces into the army, disarmament of other armed groups, and restoration of administrative institutions in the north.

In 2008, notable progress was made in identifying voters; 600,000 new birth certificates were reportedly distributed by the middle of the year. Yet the process for formally registering voters was badly organized and cumbersome, involving five separate bodies with overlapping responsibilities. While the electoral commission announced in June 2009 that over 6 million voters had been successfully enrolled (short of the anticipated 8.6 million), the official registry had yet to be approved by all political parties at year's end.

The disarmament of both rebel and progovernment militias and the integration of rebel troops into the military have proven to be more problematic than the voter registration process. The United Nations reported that 7,704 former rebels had joined the reintegration program as of September 2009 – a notable increase over the 2008 figure of 2,600. However, the program had found new civilian roles for only 675 of them, and the government estimated that over 18,000 formal rebel troops and over 20,000 progovernment and rebel-aligned militiamen had not yet disarmed. The government has also proven unwilling to provide the \$1,000 in assistance promised to each former combatant under the APO, or the estimated \$87 million it would cost to create a joint police force. Most parties have now accepted that the planned integration of 5,000 rebel soldiers into the military will not take place until after an election.

Rebel military leaders in the north handed over nominal administrative authority to government officials in May 2009. However, it remained unclear at year's end how much power was actually relinquished. The rebels retained their military structures and appeared to continue collecting taxes, while the new government administrators lacked even basic office supplies.

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, the last legislative and presidential elections were held in 2000, and new voting has been repeatedly postponed; elections were most recently scheduled for November 2009, but they were pushed back indefinitely during the year. The president traditionally appoints the prime minister; in 2007, President Laurent Gbagbo replaced

UN-backed prime minister Charles Konan Banny with rebel leader Guillaume Soro in keeping with the 2007 APO. The president's party, the FPI, dominates the legislature. Other major parties include the PDCI-RDA and the Rally of Republicans (RDR), led by Alassane Ouattara.

Corruption is a serious problem. Earnings from informal taxes and the sale of cocoa, cotton, and weapons have given many of those in power – including members of the military and rebel forces – an incentive to obstruct peace and political normalization. In the only successful high-profile corruption case of 2009, Gbagbo's secretary was convicted of extorting roughly \$150,000 from the president of a telecommunications company. She was sentenced to five years in prison, stripped of her civil rights, and ordered to pay some \$600 in damages directly to Gbagbo for dishonoring the presidency. Cote d'Ivoire ranked 154 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional protections, press freedoms generally not respected in practice, though violence against journalists appears to have declined since the signing of the APO in 2007. The government maintains a virtual monopoly on national television and radio broadcasting and owns the largest daily newspaper. Reporters who criticize powerful political figures often face defamation charges. Journalists convicted of insulting the president in an article detailing government corruption were fined about \$40,000 in March 2009, and others found guilty of libeling the prime minister were fined some \$10,000 in October. The government does not restrict internet access, but penetration is limited by poverty and infrastructural obstacles.

Legal guarantees of religious freedom are generally respected in practice. In the past, the government has shown a preference for Christians, particularly as the north-south divide corresponds roughly with the distribution of the Muslim and Christian populations. 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 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.

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 since the signing of the APO, but militia protests over the slow demobilization process often turn violent, as they did in two instances in September 2009. Likewise, the activities of human rights groups are often hindered by progovernment forces, especially those that take a critical stance against the Gbagbo administration or those that attempt to operate in the north. While the situation has marginally improved ahead of the ever-anticipated elections, many human rights activists still face death threats and harassment from groups like the Young Patriots.

The right to organize and join labor unions is constitutionally guaranteed, and workers have the right to bargain collectively. However, these rights are not always respected in practice. A number of labor strikes were harshly repressed throughout 2009, particularly in the north, which is still controlled by rebel military leaders. In February 2009, while emergency services continued to be provided, medical workers went on strike for a few days to demand a pay increase. Voter registration workers have mounted repeated strikes over lack of pay and security, contributing to the delays in the process.

The judiciary is not independent. Judges are political appointees without tenure and are highly susceptible to external interference and bribes. Judges and clerks began to redeploy to the north in 2008, but they continue to encounter resistance from rebel soldiers who are unwilling to relinquish authority.

Cote d'Ivoire's cocoa and other industries have historically depended on workers from neighboring countries, but conflicts between immigrants and longer-term residents, coupled with the xenophobic concept of *Ivoirite*, have contributed to the current political crisis. The preliminary success of the voter identification process in 2008 has begun to ease these tensions, but a strong and inclusive national identity has yet to emerge, and political parties typically form along ethnic lines.

More than 7,000 UN peacekeeping troops will remain in the country until elections are held. While reports of violence have decreased since the signing of the APO, the border areas with Liberia and Guinea are highly unstable and continue to be used for smuggling small arms.

Cote d'Ivoire has made symbolic efforts to combat child trafficking, but tens of thousands of children from all over the region are believed to be working on Ivorian plantations. A 2007 German study also found that 85 percent of women involved in prostitution in Cote d'Ivoire were juveniles.

Despite official support for 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. Rape was reportedly common during the civil war, and it has remained a serious problem in the country, with perpetrators generally enjoying impunity.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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