

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	113
Land:	Elfenbenskysten
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World 2011 – Côte d'Ivoire
Udgivet:	16. maj 2011
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	10.juli 2011

Title	Freedom in the World 2011 - Côte d'Ivoire
Publisher	Freedom House
Country	Côte d'Ivoire
Publication Date	16 May 2011
Cite as	Freedom House, <i>Freedom in the World 2011 - Côte d'Ivoire</i> , 16 May 2011, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4dd21a4a17.html [accessed 8 June 2011]

Freedom in the World 2011 - Côte d'Ivoire

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

Population: 21,395,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Ratings Change

Côte d'Ivoire's political rights rating declined from 6 to 7 and its civil liberties rating declined from 5 to 6 due to incumbent president Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to step down or recognize the November 2010 electoral victory of opposition presidential candidate Alassane Ouattara, as well as political violence that stemmed from the postelection standoff, including state security forces' targeting of ethnic minority groups that supported Ouattara.

Overview

A long-delayed presidential election, required under a 2007 peace accord signed by President Laurent Gbagbo and rebel leader Guillaume Soro, was finally held in 2010 despite the failure of a disarmament program and problems with the voter registration process. While the October first round was peaceful and deemed relatively free and fair by the international community, Gbagbo refused to concede his loss to the internationally recognized winner of the November runoff, Alassane Ouattara. A curfew was imposed, international media were banned, and the country's borders were closed as violence escalated between the two men's supporters at year's end.

Côte d'Ivoire gained independence from France in 1960, and its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, ruled until his death in 1993. Henri Konan Bédié, 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 Guéï seized power in 1999 and declared himself the winner of an October 2000 presidential election after initial results showed that he was losing to opposition politician Laurent Gbagbo. Guéï 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 Bédié's Democratic Party of Côte 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 Guéï under unclear circumstances on the first day of fighting. Rebel forces quickly took control of the north and called for Gbagbo to step down. This call was echoed by other rebels 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 French-brokered ceasefire 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 delays prevented elections from taking place in 2006. With the expiration of Gbagbo's extended mandate in October, 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 peace deal, the Ouagadougou Political Accord (APO), according to which Soro was appointed interim prime minister until elections could be held. 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 postponed five times over the next three years. Less than 12,000 of more than 30,000 FN troops and almost none of the pro-Gbagbo militia groups slated for formal disarmament actually went through the process. Some progress was made during this period on voter registration, particularly among previously disenfranchised groups in the north who were often described as foreigners by the southern ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the registration effort was badly organized, cumbersome, and frequently contested by both sides of the political divide.

In February 2010, Gbagbo unilaterally suspended voter registration and dissolved the government and the electoral commission, accusing the commission of partisanship. This brought thousands of people, particularly in the north and in Abidjan, to the streets in protest, and five people died amid an aggressive police response. A new head of the electoral commission and a new cabinet had been appointed by April, and in September the registration process yielded an official voter list of 5.8 million people, including 500,000 new voters.

The first round of the presidential election, held on October 31, was deemed relatively free and fair by domestic and international observers. Gbagbo led with 38 percent of the vote, and Ouattara of the Rally of the Republicans (RDR) party placed second with 32 percent. Bédié of the PDCI-RDA, who came in third with 25 percent, threw his support behind Ouattara ahead of the November 28 runoff. Dozens of people were injured in partisan clashes before the second-round vote, and the government imposed an indefinite nationwide curfew in response. The day of the runoff itself was relatively peaceful, and UN and European Union observers generally approved of the polling, but violence increased considerably during the period before the results were officially announced. On December 1, pro-Gbagbo militiamen and government security forces raided the Ouattara campaign headquarters in Abidjan, arresting dozens of people and

leaving four dead.

On December 2, the electoral commission, backed by the United Nations, formally announced that Ouattara had won with 54 percent of the vote. Pro-Gbagbo officials had prevented the panel from announcing the results earlier. The Constitutional Council, which was made up of Gbagbo loyalists, quickly annulled the results from largely pro-Ouattara northern districts, alleging widespread fraud. It then announced that Gbagbo had won with 51 percent. The government closed the country's borders and banned all broadcasts of international news, as the international community formed a united front in pressing Gbagbo to concede to Ouattara. By December 4, both Gbagbo and Ouattara had been sworn in as president in separate, conflicting ceremonies. The standoff remained unresolved at year's end, with escalating violence between the two sides causing dozens of deaths.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Côte 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 elections were held in 2000, and the 2010 presidential election degenerated into a violent stalemate in which both runoff candidates – incumbent Laurent Gbagbo and challenger Alassane Ouattara – declared themselves president. Former rebel leader Guillaume Soro, who was appointed to the position of prime minister under the terms of the APO, resigned in December 2010 to protest Gbagbo's refusal to step down. Gbagbo's party, the FPI, dominates the legislature. Other major parties include former president Henri Konan Bédié's PDCI-RDA and Ouattara's RDR.

Corruption is a serious problem, and perpetrators rarely face prosecution or public exposure. 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 June 2010, National Assembly members accused Interior Minister Désiré Tagro of misappropriating compensation funds paid by the Dutch company Tragricura for the dumping of toxic waste in 2006. The prime minister was also implicated in the affair, but both were exonerated after an investigation found that the claims had been politically motivated.

Despite constitutional protections, press freedom is generally not respected in practice. Violence against journalists increased in the period surrounding the 2010 presidential election. Prior to the vote, local journalists who criticized the government were detained and harassed, and foreign journalists were directly targeted during and particularly after the balloting. All international broadcasts were banned amid the dispute over runoff results. An in-depth Reporters Without Borders report found that election coverage was remarkably balanced prior to the second round vote, with even the state broadcaster giving equal airtime to both candidates. However, the National Broadcasting Council reportedly imposed tight restrictions on election coverage by private radio stations, and print outlets were often highly partisan. After the second round, the state broadcaster – the country's only national broadcasting station – was little more than a mouthpiece for Gbagbo.

The government does not generally restrict internet access and made no attempts to do so during the election, but mobile-telephone text messaging was suspended from October 31 through the end of the year.

Legal guarantees of religious freedom are typically upheld. However, the north-south political divide corresponds roughly with the distribution of the Muslim and Christian populations, and the voter registration effort of recent years was designed in part to address claims of disenfranchisement among Muslim ethnic groups.

The government, which owns most educational facilities, inhibits academic freedom by requiring authorization for all political meetings held on campuses. The progovernment Student Federation of Côte d'Ivoire (FESCI) engages in systematic intimidation. It and other student groups were involved in the political violence of 2010.

The constitution protects the right to free assembly, but it is often denied in practice. While opposition parties were given some freedom to campaign in the months leading up to the 2010 election, street protests during the year often turned violent, and progovernment vigilante groups like FESCI and the Young Patriots reportedly joined security forces in cracking down on demonstrators. In February, security forces allegedly killed five protesters demonstrating against Gbagbo's decision to suspend the electoral commission. A number of planned opposition rallies against the repeated postponement of elections were banned by the Gbagbo administration during the year.

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. A number of strikes were harshly suppressed in 2010, particularly in the rebel-controlled north. Election and registration workers repeatedly went on strike during the year over unpaid wages.

The judiciary is not independent. Judges are political appointees without tenure and are highly susceptible to external interference and bribes. The Constitutional Council exhibited a remarkable lack of independence in 2010 when it annulled the election results from the north and declared Gbagbo the winner, despite endorsement of Ouattara's victory by the election commission and international observers.

In addition to Ivorian security forces, over 9,500 UN peacekeepers operated in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, along with both rebel and pro-Gbagbo militias. The west continued to be particularly unstable, with pro-Gbagbo militias maintaining control through fear, setting up roadblocks, and attacking vehicles indiscriminately throughout the year.

Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa and other industries have historically depended on workers from neighboring countries, but conflicts between immigrant groups and longer-term residents have contributed to the broader political divisions in the country. Gbagbo's repeated use of xenophobic language helped to fuel ethnic violence during 2010.

Côte 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, and a large share of those involved in prostitution in the country are reportedly 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 remained a serious problem in 2010, particularly in the militia-controlled west.

** 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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