

## Will History Repeat Itself? The Presidential Elections and Security in Ivory Coast

*As Ivory Coast gears up for the 2015 presidential elections, Marco Wyss examines the prospects of a repeat of the violence that followed the last elections in 2010.*

*This post is part of the [African Elections series](#).*

The 2010 presidential elections in Ivory Coast led to the so-called post-electoral crisis in early 2011, which was marked by large-scale violence. The crisis was eventually resolved by French and, to a lesser degree, UN intervention that led to the arrest of Laurent Gbagbo, and allowed Alassane Ouattara to seize the reins of power in line with the election result.



Ivorian refugees fleeing the post-conflict violence in their country ended up in this refugee camp in Liberia Credit: Oxfam International via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/1OY8Mtl>) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Now, almost five years later, Ivory Coast is about to hold its first presidential elections since the post-electoral crisis. In light of events after the 2010 elections, and the crisis which started in 2002, it seems legitimate to worry about the potential consequences of the 2015 election, or at least to question whether there is the potential for renewed violence.

Although the country cannot be considered peaceful, there remains a substantial potential for violence, and the reconciliation process is far from complete. Despite this, it is rather unlikely that history will repeat itself. By revisiting the legacy of the post-electoral crisis, and examining current security concerns, there is some evidence that the outbreak of large-scale violence is unlikely.

The dramatic events that followed the presidential elections of 2010 were both the culmination and end point of the Ivorian crisis. While the Ouattara camp ended up victorious, the incumbent, the Gbagbo camp, was clearly defeated. After almost a decade of protracted crisis, the country could finally be reunited under the auspices and with the support of the international community. Yet after so many years of hostility and division, this reconciliation could not be achieved instantly. Moreover, from a military perspective, the losing side had not necessarily been defeated by Ivorians, but rather French and UN forces. There was some cause for concern that Gbagbo supporters could seek revenge by staging a coup, especially in light of sporadic, yet <sup>readily</sup>

attacks on the *Forces Républicaines de Côte d'Ivoire* (FRCI), the country's armed forces, in the years immediately after the crisis.

Despite the Ivorian crisis officially ending, the UN Security Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI), which also covered the French forces, and has continued to do so – most recently on 25 June for another year. Similarly, the French forces in Ivory Coast, which have succeeded Operation Licorne, remain in a state of readiness – as illustrated by an exercise earlier this year.

The overall security situation has improved over the last few years. However, there remain tensions, injustices, old grievances, as well as security incidents and threats. Firstly, an important faction of Gbagbo's *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI), led by Abou Drahamane Sangaré, refuses to play the democratic game, and even overtly criticised the official FPI presidential candidate, Pascal Affi N'Guessan.


Secondly, independent observers have also accused the Ouattara government of victor's justice. On the one hand, Gbagbo and his youth leader, Charles Blé Goudé, are awaiting trial in The Hague, while the wife of the former President, Simone Gbagbo, as well as some of his other close associates have been or will be condemned to heavy prison sentences in Ivory Coast.

Meanwhile, many leaders and commanders of the former *Forces Nouvelles*, who sided with Ouattara under the banner of the FRCI and who are by no means innocent, have not felt the brunt of justice. Guillaume Soro, the former *Forces Nouvelles* leader, who was propelled to the highest echelons of power, is a case in point. Instead of facing charges, he presides over the National Assembly and moves about freely on the international diplomatic stage. The recent indictment of former warlords or com-zones, notably Chérif Ousmane and Losséni Fofana, is therefore a step in the right direction. It remains to be seen, however, whether this is not mainly a pre-electoral manoeuvre by Ouattara.

Thirdly, old demons are still very much alive. The issue of eligibility, for instance, has not been resolved, and Ouattara still faces accusations from opposition politicians that he is not eligible for the Presidency because of his foreign origins. Similarly, land reforms have not gone far enough to defuse tensions.

The fourth cause for concern is that neither the national reconciliation, nor the disarmament of ex-combatants has been completed, and relatively large numbers of weapons remain in circulation. The fifth point is that undisciplined elements of the FRCI and ex-combatants are abusing their authority or the power of their weapons to enrich themselves. Finally, there continues to be sporadic attacks and intercommunal clashes in the western part of the country. In light of this list of problems, which is by no means exhaustive, there seems to be a substantial potential for violence – especially since the security forces lack operational capabilities and capacities.

Yet this is only one side of the coin, and overall, the picture looks much more positive. First of all, Ouattara is no longer the underdog; according to commentators, he is likely to achieve a clear electoral victory which, as a result, could not be challenged. If we believe a recent opinion poll (International Republican Institute), then 77 per cent of Ivorians are satisfied with his presidency, and two-thirds consider the country to be on the right track. Admittedly, the alliance of his party, the *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR), with the *Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI) under the banner of the *Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix* (RHDP), has not prevented some PDCI heavyweights, notably Charles Konnan Banny, from challenging him.

Yet the opposition, and this is the second point, whether the rather loose *Coalition Nationale pour le Changement* (CNC) or, as we have seen, the FPI, seems to be even more divided. Thirdly, there are no longer two powerful blocs, each with its own army, but a single government with its armed forces. Moreover, since 2011, the FRCI have been substantially reformed with the help of the French. 

The fourth point is that ahead of the elections, the government has positioned recently established special forces in strategically sensitive locations, notably close to the Liberian and Ghanaian borders. Fifth, the disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration efforts have significantly reduced the number of disaffected ex-combatants. Furthermore, the unprofessional handling of weapons stocks has rendered many useless. Sixth, both the UN and the French clearly back Ouattara, or whoever rightfully wins the elections. The achievements of Ouattara's government, despite its sometimes authoritarian drift, are clearly recognised by the international community. This leads me to my seventh point, which is that it is unlikely that the Ivorians would be willing to risk their recently-gained relative stability and substantial economic growth. Finally, it is even more likely that after all these years of crisis, the people of Ivory Coast simply no longer have the stomach for civil war.

Consequently, despite there being potential for conflict, it does not seem likely that the presidential election could spark large-scale violence. Moreover, if violence did erupt in response to the election results, then the government would not only be much better prepared, it would also be facing much weaker opponents as well as being able to rely on support from the UN and French forces.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that everything is in good order. As discussed earlier, there remain important security and political issues that will have to be addressed by the second Ouattara government, or whoever wins the elections. In this process, the Ivorians will be supported by the UN and the French. It is possible, however, that if the security situation does not deteriorate in the wake of the presidential election, UNOCI will begin to withdraw or at least reduce its troop presence. This should not be problematic, because the reformed Ivorian security apparatus should be in a position to deal with limited, mostly criminal violence, and the French will remain present in line with their overall African strategy. Looking further into the future, it could be that potential conflict in the country could arise from religious extremism rather than political friction given the regional and sub-regional dynamics promoting religious tensions.

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the authors and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**

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