INTERVIEWS 03.11.2020

'The next few weeks will be crucial'

Thilo Schöne in Abidjan on Côte d'Ivoire's post-election power struggle that threatens the country's stability

Unsurprisingly, President Alassane Ouattara has cruised to victory after large parts of the opposition boycotted the elections in Côte d'Ivoire in what they see as an unconstitutional third term for Ouattara. How does the situation on the ground now look like one day after the elections?

The security situation in Abidjan and other parts of the country has calmed down for the time being after the riots, roadblocks and killings of recent weeks. Normal life seems to be slowly resuming.

However, the political situation remains very tense. The opposition is almost unanimous in not recognising the result of the presidential elections and has formed a transitional council headed by former President Henri Konan Bedie (Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire, PDCI). The transitional ministers are due to be nominated today. At the same time, entering a dialogue with the government in office has so far been denied, despite attempts at mediation by the United Nations (UN), the Economic Community of West African Regions (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), as well as the European Union (EU).

Yesterday evening, the homes of all key opposition leaders were allegedly attacked with tear gas and gunfire. This should probably have been a warning. Arrests can be expected in the coming days in view of the formation of a parallel government. The behaviour of the security forces, which have been relatively restrained in recent weeks, will also play a decisive role.

Election day itself was overshadowed by the (almost) complete boycott of the opposition, violence in many places and further deaths as well as blockades of the country's centre and southeast by Ivorians close to the opposition. According to international election observers, about 50 per cent of the election offices could not open on time and about 25-30 per cent could not open for the whole day. The election commission itself says that 22 per cent of the polling stations could

not be opened. Voter turnout varied widely depending on the region and district, ranging from over 90 per cent in ruling party strongholds to 10 per cent in regions close to the opposition.

As you mentioned, the opposition announced that they are creating a transitional government that would organise a new election. Do we have to fear a repeat of the 2010-2011 crisis when 3,000 people died after then-president Laurent Gbagbo refused to accept defeat by Ouattara?

No, I don't think so. The context is different. Back then, two highly equipped armies faced each other. That's not the case now. The ruling party already controls large parts of the political and economic areas as well as the security forces. There are not two equal actors facing each other.

In my view, the last nine years of a certain but fragile stability and the high economic growth have led to many Ivorians no longer willing to take to the streets in masses – also in the context of the growing middle class and the trauma of the civil war. This does not mean, however, that the majority of Ivorians currently agree with the government's approach. There is great passivity and lethargy on political issues. The disinterest in national politics is growing and the lack of consensus on the basic rules of these elections has unfortunately only increased.

At the same time, there is of course still a sword of Damocles hanging over Côte d'Ivoire, which could lead to an escalation: The failure of reconciliation between the country's different ethnic groups and political actors. Despite undeniable economic and social progress, this is certainly the greatest shortcoming of Ouattara's term of office: irrespective of the formal establishment of truth and reconciliation commissions, he did not succeed in investigating all crimes committed and in reconciling Ivorians with one another.

Furthermore, there are numerous inequalities, prejudices and also real pain that has never been processed or forgiven. And parts of the ethnic groups close to the opposition feel that they have been neglected and excluded for the last nine years. Since Alassane Ouattara's announcement to run for re-election, I have again seen a resurgence of ethnic violence. This has led to dozens of deaths, house fires and lynchings in recent weeks, spurred on by 'fake news' on social media.

Even if the current conflict is for the moment still a political one between supporters of the ruling party and the opposition, the spill-over effect on the ethnic group close to them is already there and could get out of control. Party supporters can be controlled by their

leaders, but ethnic violence quickly develops a momentum of its own that is difficult to contain.

Earlier this year, it looked like Ouattara would not run and hand over power peacefully – until the sudden death of his hand-picked successor left the country in a deep political crisis. How can the country get out of this crisis now?

Dialogue and negotiations are the only solution! First, both conflict parties must rhetorically disarm, also in order to prevent ethnically motivated violence from spiralling out of control. Already now, terrible scenes are again taking place in the centre and south-east of the country. Some places are completely barricaded, with shops and markets burnt down and people shooting at each other. With intra-Ivoirian struggles, with a high level of mistrust and a brutalisation of the political dispute through an ever increasing legitimacy of violence, Côte d'Ivoire is showing once again an old face, which we all hoped never to see again in this wonderfully diverse country.

All the economic, social and political progress of the last decade will have been wiped out unless the government and opposition agree on a peaceful solution soon. In my view, the newly re-elected President Alassane Ouattara must, as of now, strip off his campaign shirt and seek dialogue with the opposition. Gestures of reconciliation, liberation of prisoners as well as clear concessions on electoral law reform as well as a reform of the controversial Electoral Commission and the involvement of the opposition in government will be essential to quickly restore stability in the country. Given the importance of Côte d'Ivoire as a West African economic locomotive, a very attractive location for investment and also the real threat of terrorism, the country cannot afford to allow instability to flourish for weeks on end through roadblocks, transport robberies or burning cars and shops.

While the current conflict has been foreseen for months, if not years, international observers had predicted that it would end with the election on 31 October 2020. However, the conflict will continue in the absence of a recognition of Ouattara's candidacy by the opposition and, consequently, of the elections. The history of Côte d'Ivoire shows that unresolved conflicts always flare up again, even though sometimes months or years later. Following the non-inclusive election of Bedie in 1995, there was a coup d'état in 1999. After the exclusion of some candidates in the 2000 election, the north of the country rebelled two years later. The next few weeks will be crucial as to whether Côte d'Ivoire remains a safe port in West Africa or falls back into old instability. Dialogue, concessions and reconciliation are the only long-term solution.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



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