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A heated time for Côte d'Ivoire

While struggling with Covid-19, internal strife and organising elections, Côte d'Ivoire faces an unprecedented political crisis

Shortly before Côte d'Ivoire's presidential election campaign really begins to heat up in October 2020, the government party *Rassemblement des Houphouétistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix* (RHDP) is facing massive challenges.

First of all, the incumbent Prime Minister, Amadou Gon Coulibaly, died from a heart attack during a cabinet session on 8 July. In March this year, the 61-year-old loyal acolyte of President Alassane Ouattara had been put forward as presidential candidate to the party committee. The human tragedy was preceded by a high-intensity political career in spite of years of heart problems and finally two months of medical treatment in Paris. Now, everything is up for grabs again for the presidential elections in 2020 and the candidacy of the RHDP.

Côte d'Ivoire's current crisis has been exacerbated by the fact that President Ouattara finally accepted Vice-President Daniel Kablan Duncan's request to step down, which he had handed in at the end of February. He had been Prime Minister twice and is a former member of the former RHDP coalition party *Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire* (PDCI), which he left – out of loyalty to Ouattara – when the RHDP and the PDCI split. He certainly hoped to be the joint presidential candidate in 2020, but since months had already been entrusted less and less frequently with presidential tasks. Duncan standing independently as a candidate cannot be ruled out, but it's unlikely because of the RHDP's political pressure and his slim chances of success.

Moreover, the President of the Senate has been infected with the coronavirus, receiving treatment in Germany for two weeks now, and the President of the National Assembly is abroad in France (rumours have it he's receiving treatment as well). That means that there's currently no Vice-President, no Prime Minister and both Presidents of the parliamentary chambers cannot currently perform their official duties.

A veritable political crisis

This is an unprecedented situation in the history of Côte d'Ivoire. It increases the pressure on the 78-year-old President Alassane Ouattara, not only to reorganise the country's institutions quickly, but to re-set the RHDP's election campaigning machine. The process of collecting signatures, which allows the candidate to run, started on 16 July. And all this is going on during the Covid-19 crisis, which is still ravaging across the country with rising numbers of cases. Add to that the terrorist attacks in the north of the country.

Even if currently, out of respect for the late Prime Minister, the succession is not openly discussed, the issue remains the main topic of conversation in offices, living rooms and *maquis* throughout the country. The names of possible candidates are floating around, but essentially three selection criteria seem to be taking shape: First, proximity to the traditional core of the former *Rassemblement des Républicains* (RDR), which is part of today's government party RHDP, in order to motivate its members and supporters to vote; second, the reputation of a highly-educated technocrat to continue with economic development in a professional way and to attract investors; third, the unconditional loyalty to the party's father figure, Alassane Ouattara, to protect his interests in the long term. It was the ever loyal Amadou Gon Coulibaly who fulfilled all these characteristics.

A French expression conveys the sense of what is going on in terms of democratic development: 'Ce n'est pas encore gagné!' (There is still work to be done).

Now, the clear favourite is the current Defence Minister and interim Prime Minister, Hamed Bakayoko, who is widely loved in the very young Ivorian population because of his young age and modern communication techniques. He also has a reputation for keeping channels for discussion open even in opposition circles. At the same time, there had been conflicts between him and the late Gon Coulibaly. Therefore, his loyalty is in doubt. In addition, there are more and more rumours about him that, although unproven, are publicly tarnishing his image as a candidate. Nor does he belong to the traditional core of the RDR government party and several generations of party officials might feel bypassed.

Then there's Patrick Achi, the current Minister of the Presidential Office. Just as with the former Vice-President Duncan, he defected from the PDCI to the RHDP when there was a fight between both parties. He

has a good international standing, cultivates his image as a highly-educated technocrat and enjoys the full trust of President Ouattara, for whom he has been working for years. However, he comes from the south of the country and has no base whatsoever in the RHDP. It's therefore unclear how, in an election campaign, he can win over people from the party's stronghold in the north. However, he has an excellent reputation among western embassies. His election would mean economic continuity.

Can Ouattara stand again –and should he?

Currently the most likely scenario is the renewed candidacy of the Ivorian President, Alassane Ouattaras, which would contradict his announcement in March this year. He had already announced in 2019 that, according to his lawyers, he would have the right to a third mandate – as, since 2016, a new constitution has been in force, which would put the numbering of terms of office back to zero. Considering his position in the party and the state as well as his international reputation, he certainly symbolises stability. Moreover, he could win time for a re-orientation of the government and party. By potentially standing down early, he would then hand over power. However, with such a decision, he would miss the historic opportunity to step down voluntarily as a sitting head of state in Africa and to thereby give way to a new generation. This could also pose a risk to peace in the country.

A big part of civil society would view a third period in office very critically. The fragile and split opposition would also then find a reason to come together in an 'Anything but Ouattara'-coalition. Protests and demonstrations seem possible. Then, there's an increasingly likely candidacy of the 86-year-old former head of state Henri Konan Bedie for the PDCI, combined with the hope of many supporters of the former government party, the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI), for the return of former President Laurent Gbagbo – who is currently still in exile in Brussels following a trial at the International Criminal Court. The return of the big three politicians could awaken the old ghosts of the civil war, while the situation at the beginning of the year gave rise to the hope for a transition to a new generation of politicians, which were no longer involved in the fights of the 1990s and beyond.

The spontaneous visit of French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, on the occasion of the funeral of Gon Coulibaly on 14 July 2020 – despite it being France's national day of celebration – shows the significance that France and also Europe attach to *Côte* d'Ivoire.

President Ouattara's conversation with Le Drian the evening before certainly provided an opportunity to stress the need for elections to be carried out in a transparent and peaceful way and to discuss France's position on a third term of office for Ouattara.

However, there are much more important things to keep peace in the country than the question of candidates: the political climate in which the elections take place, how inclusive the process is and how transparently the elections themselves are conducted. Currently parts of the opposition are boycotting the election process. Who will stand as a candidate has not been finally democratically cleared up for any of the big parties and the organisation of elections in a time of the pandemic, terrorism and internal fights for power within all the parties requires major efforts. A French expression conveys the sense of what is going on in terms of democratic development: 'Ce n'est pas encore gagné!' (There is still work to be done). Hopefully this will be followed in October 2020 with an Ivorian 'Ca va aller!' (It'll be alright).



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