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# Côte d'Ivoire's big surprise?

## With a voluntary handover of power, the West African country might be back on track – both economically and politically

Constitutional changes designed to maintain power, the exclusion of opposition candidates and referendums on third or fourth mandates are the order of the day in Africa. In Côte d'Ivoire, too, a democratic and peaceful transfer of power has never happened since the introduction of the multi-party system and free elections in 1990.

On 5 March 2020, Ivorian President Alassane Dramane Ouattara (ADO), however, took national and international observers by surprise when he declared that he would not contest – for the third time – the presidential elections in October 2020. Although the only surprising thing about the announcement was its timing, his statement attracted considerable attention and drew plaudits from the European Union, France – the former colonial power – and the United States.

The Ivorian constitution limits every president to two terms of office and ADO had already announced before his re-election in 2015 that he would not run again. However, even though he repeated this several times subsequently, ADO had tried, by means of public statements and interviews, to reopen the door. Following the mutinies by parts of the Ivorian security forces in 2017, he had hoped not to lose decision-making authority.

In any case, from a *realpolitik* perspective, Ouattara's announcement is first and foremost a surprise and one that deserves to be acknowledged. Following this announcement, ADO may go down in the history books as the president who led the country out of the continuous crisis that began in 1999 and who voluntarily enabled a new generation to take over the reins of government.

## All that glitters is not gold

However, the announcement of his renunciation of a third term of office

was accompanied by plans for constitutional changes that could influence the upcoming elections to the advantage of the current ruling party RHDP (Rassemblement des Houphouétistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix). The proposals say that the vice-president should no longer be elected jointly with the president but nominated by the latter once the election is over. This would mean that if the President resigns or dies the Vice-President can succeed to the office without ever having been elected.

Moreover, the legislative term of the Ivorian Parliament is to be extended until it decides on new elections. Previously, it was limited to five years. This means that in future the electoral term would effectively be unlimited, and this would enable the RHDP, in the event of a victory in the presidential election, to unhurriedly restructure what is currently a broad collective movement consisting of many different parties, and thus to avoid internal conflicts.

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In the event of a defeat, the current RHDP majority in parliament could oppose prime minister and president and it would effectively co-govern in a form of 'cohabitation'. A 'Russian scenario', in which a newly elected RHDP president nominates Ouattara as vice president, would also be legal but highly unlikely.

Last year's reform of the composition of the Ivorian Electoral Commission – under pressure from the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) –, also favoured the government. Together with the changes currently planned to the electoral laws, they show that the RHDP government is willing to use electoral law to its own advantage to remain in power beyond October 2020.

## Ouattara, the strategic genius

Since 1990, the same candidates – Ouattara, Laurent Gbagbo and Henri Konan Bedie – have run for every single election for the same three parties: RDR (Rassemblement des Républicains, now part of the RHDP), FPI (Front Populaire Ivoirien) and PDCI (Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire). All three have ruled, all three are in ripe old age (at 85, Bedie wants to be president again), all three are leading actors in the Ivorian conflict. Now ADO wants to hand over power: his, not his party's.

His party is regarded as the best organised and includes several potential successors, who are already jockeying for position. On 12 March, the

current Prime Minister Gon Coulibaly was officially nominated as their candidate – despite some internal opposition. Since 2014, the FPI has been split in several wings and former President Laurent Gbagbo is still under indictment by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, albeit acquitted at the first stage of proceedings.

It seems unlikely that he will return from Brussels (where he is currently living under restrictions) before the elections, given the sentences that have been passed against him in Côte d'Ivoire. Bedie (PDCI) is under internal pressure because of his age, his record in office between 1993 and 1999, which was not viewed positively by all party officials, and in particular because all the PDCI ministers and the vice president have since then switched parties to join the RHDP.

All observers expected the candidacy issue not to be resolved until the last possible moment, in July 2020, but by going on the offensive, ADO is forcing the other parties to react quickly. That has put particular pressure on Bedie to also refrain from running again and thereby to allow a new generation to take the lead. In view of the opposition's unpreparedness and internal discord, the RHDP's chances of retaining power are therefore increased. That, in turn, is seen by some sections of the international community as a guarantee of stability. Why is this so important?

## A significant step for stability in West Africa

Côte d'Ivoire is the most important country in West Africa after Nigeria, not only in political and military terms, but also and especially in economic terms. The country has the highest economic growth in Africa since several years now, is the world's biggest cocoa producer with 40 per cent of the world's cocoa output and presents the most important destination for West African migrants (25 per cent of the population comes from the surrounding countries) and the departure point for many emigrants to Europe. Therefore, stability in Côte d'Ivoire is an important political goal for European countries too.

Côte d'Ivoire has long been one of the EU's most important trading partners and one of the largest recipients of French development aid in Africa, as well as the largest recipient in French-speaking Africa of aid from the EU. It has also become increasingly important for Germany in particular as a partner country in the 'Compact with Africa' programme aimed at promoting investment, as is shown by the more than 200 million euros in additional development funds and controversial budget

support from the BMZ (Federal German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development), as well as the expanded presence of the now eight offices of the state-owned GIZ (German Corporation for International Cooperation) and other German development actors.

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The programmes are designed to create jobs and to reform individual sectors of the economy, but there is often a lack of political support and of research into the real needs of Côte d'Ivoire, both of which are prerequisites for the sustainable achievement of these objectives in a changing political context and in the face of 'donor rivalry'.

The growing threat of terrorism in the neighbouring countries of Mali and Burkina Faso together with infiltration by a few groups into the north-east of Côte d'Ivoire also help to explain the increased commitment of international actors to ensuring stability in the country. In 2016, the country suffered a terrorist attack in the seaside resort of Grand Bassam leading to a severe downturn in tourism, which had only just begun to develop again following the Ivorian crisis.

## Stability and democratic development

Stability in Côte d'Ivoire is undoubtedly important both for the further sustainable development of the country in line with the social needs of the population and for strengthening its security. President Ouattara's historic step is an important contribution in this direction and will enable a peaceful change of government for the first time in Ivorian history. However, it is now important to increase the transparency and legitimacy of the elections, because this change can only be guaranteed by an inclusive and transparent electoral process in which all citizens can participate both in law and in practice. The observation missions requested by the Ivorian government from the UN, EU, AU and ECOWAS are important forms of relevant support.

The discussions currently taking place on electoral law have revealed fundamental differences between the government and the opposition. The international community should now ensure that its efforts to secure stability in the region in order to curb terrorism and enable economic investment are not short-lived.

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ethnic and political tensions in the country. These were manifested, for example, in the general strike by public sector employees in 2017, in the army mutinies of 2014 and 2017 and in the arrest of politicians close to the former rebel leader and parliamentary president Guillaume Soro at the end of 2019. Ethnic conflicts resulting in deaths continue to occur on a regular basis.

All in all, Côte d'Ivoire has made enormous progress since 2011. Once a country with one of the largest blue-helmet missions in the world (ONUCI, up to 2017), Côte d'Ivoire is now sending its own soldiers to Mali under a UN mandate. Economic growth is high, the middle class is growing. The locomotive of West Africa is back on track and has certainly picked up speed. It is now up to all Ivorian political actors and to the international community which is monitoring and supporting the national electoral process to keep the train on track and enable everyone to board. In this context, the announcement by the train driver of his intention to vacate the driver's cab cannot be praised highly enough.

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