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Democracy on trial

Côte d'Ivoire's election doesn't just test a president — it tests whether democracy can survive a generation's disillusionment

Shortly before the presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire, the eligible candidates had been announced. Although the outcome was hardly surprising, many were disheartened. Only five people are on the list — including the incumbent Alassane Ouattara and Simone Ehivet Gbagbo, the former First Lady and strongest opposition candidate. The remaining three have significantly less political support. Both Laurent Gbagbo, the former president (2000-2011), together with his party, the African People's Party – Côte d'Ivoire (PPA-CI), and Tidjane Thiam, the new hope for the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire – African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA), have been omitted.

The two largest opposition parties are therefore not officially running for office. They had submitted their candidacies, even though they had previously been excluded from the electoral roll — in the case of Gbagbo because of his conviction and the withdrawal of his civil rights, and in that of Thiam due to temporary dual citizenship. Other promising applications were also rejected — for example, that of Assalé Tiémoko, the Mayor of Tiassalé, whose social reforms have met with approval. Many observers interpret the decisions of the Constitutional Court as politically motivated. Nevertheless, countless voices have called for calm. In the past, frustrations have erupted all too frequently during elections.

The stakes are high

The list now contains only one prominent opposition figure: Simone Gbagbo, with her party Movement of Capable Generations (MGC). As the speaker of the CAP-CI coalition for peaceful change, she unites a number of different forces, but not all of them: Laurent Gbagbo's PPA-CI remained on the sidelines and soon afterwards formed its own alliance with the PDCI. The former couple appears to split the political landscape into two camps. As leaders are more important than programmes, the opposition is likely to have difficulty agreeing on a

common candidate and forcing a second ballot.

In this situation, the question arises as to whether a change in government is possible at all. Last year, hopes were still high: during the previous elections in 2020, President Ouattara had announced a generational change for 2025, with Thiam providing a youthful option on the political stage for the PDCI. The disappointment was all the greater when Ouattara announced his candidacy for a fourth legislative term on 29 July — even though the current constitution only foresees two. After 15 years of government by theRally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP), much is now at stake.

Côte d'Ivoire plays a key role in Western Africa's stability. The government was able to curb terrorist threats in the country, but the risk remains high — particularly as a result of the situation in neighbouring Burkina Faso, which records the deadliest attacks worldwide according to the Global Terrorism Index 2025. Since the Traoré military government took power, relations between Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire have remained extremely tense. Time and again, Ivorian soldiers and Burkinabé operatives are arrested on both sides of the border. Each country accuses the other of aiming to destabilise it. In August, civilians were attacked in the north of Côte d'Ivoire, only two kilometres from the border to Burkina Faso. It is unclear who instigated the attack.

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Relations between both countries are tense, especially since they represent different, opposing alliances of states in Western Africa: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The Ouattara government's close links to France continue to be contentious and hamper diplomatic relations with the pro-Russian military regime in Burkina. As a result, the neighbours are ideologically opposed — with uncertain consequences for the whole region, particularly in the common fight against the terrorist threat.

The future of Côte d'Ivoire is also decisive for Western Africa's economic equilibrium and migration flows. Many people from Western and Central Africa come to the country to seek work and better career prospects than in their home countries. Despite the impressive growth and diversification of the Ivorian economy in recent years, many sections of the population remain excluded from economic progress. Staple foods and rents have become more expensive. Forced evictions and the

destruction of several informal residential areas have affected thousands of people in Abidjan.

Whereas 80 per cent of all economic activities take place there, only around one-fifth of the population lives in the capital. Precarious infrastructure and conflicts over resources characterise the rural regions, which also take in most of the refugees from neighbouring countries. In the meantime, the dissatisfaction is aimed at asylum seekers: a looming battle over resource allocation is being conducted along the wrong lines. Despite its long history as a benevolent host country, the debate about migration in Côte d'Ivoire is taking a dangerous turn for the worse. Until now, the RHDP government has not succeeded in promoting equal opportunities and economic participation sufficiently — and there is no evidence that a further Ouattara mandate would improve anything.

An understanding of what constitutes democracy is also at stake. If it is poorly implemented, there will be a high price to pay. Democracy has not kept its promises, particularly vis-à-vis the young population, with little or no evidence of political participation. According to the Afrobarometer survey in 2024, the government does not sufficiently confront the problems that young people are facing. They are mostly concerned with the creation of good jobs and career prospects. Only a small section of the population benefits from economic growth. France's strong presence and the Lebanese community's economic dominance contribute to everyday dissatisfaction. It is a generation that has experienced a rigid political system during most of their adult lives.

Many are not prepared to risk their lives for political leaders once again.

This raises doubts about the legitimacy of a system that may present itself as a democracy but in practice is strongly focused on the president's power. In their search for alternatives, some see the military governments of the AES states as a way of obtaining more autonomy from France, as well as a hope of redistribution. Young Ivorians are now faced with a presidential election, in which many of their favourite candidates are not authorised to stand — and the impression remains that the overall context favours a victory of the government party. This would put a damper on further democratic engagement and the hopes of the young generation.

On 25 October, the opposition will not only be standing against the RHDP, but rather an entire system that this party has consolidated over

15 years. It is not completely impermeable, but only by presenting a united front and joining forces at the ballot box is a breakthrough possible. After holding talks with different sections of the excluded opposition, Laurent Gbagbo still rejects, however, the possibility of supporting a single candidate in favour of 'peaceful and democratic action'. It remains to be seen what form this will take.

A demonstration in August with 20 000 participants – the largest since 2020 – brought fresh hope. It demonstrated that the desire for change is shared by many.

With just under two weeks to go until the presidential elections, the political climate came to a head.

On 11 October, the opposition called for a large march in Abidjan. In an attempt to 'maintain public order', the authorities banned all demonstrations until the elections and broke up the march with tear gas. Since then, protests have broken out in several places, resulting in over 700 arrests and one death. The public prosecutor has labelled the protests an 'act of terrorism', and according to initial court rulings, those arrested have been sentenced to three years in prison.

Even though the desire for change unites the protests, memories of violence and crises have not gone away. Many are not prepared to risk their lives for political leaders once again. Côte d'Ivoire awaits an election that will raise key questions regarding political participation, equal opportunities and particularly trust in democratic processes. It remains to be seen whether political change is possible in the current circumstances — or whether President Ouattara's fourth term of office will further entrench the status quo.



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