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One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Côte d'Ivoire's 2015 Presidential Polls

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Abstract: The 2015 presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire was seen as an important test for the country given the 2010 post-election crisis. Although the 2015 polls were peaceful, they were affected by problems not new to Côte d'Ivoire: lack of competition due to non-participation of major political actors, low voter turnout, mistrust in electoral institutions. The unpreparedness of the Commission Electorale Indépendante (CEI) was also problematic, especially with respect to the revision of the voter list. Due to the boycott of partisans of former president Laurent Gbagbo and because of the support of the Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP), President Alassane Ouattara's re-election was essentially a given from the start. With the ruling coalition firmly in control, Côte d'Ivoire appears stable. However, the country's democratic deficit might lead to renewed violence once the RHDP has to pick Ouattara's successor.

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On 25 November 2015, Ivoirians went to the polls to elect their president. Many observers still had fresh memories of the 2010 presidential election, which plunged the country into a crisis that led to at least 3,000 deaths (Piccolino 2012; Bouquet 2011; McGovern 2011). In many respects, however, the remarkably peaceful 2015 election was different. Due to the boycott of part of the opposition and the decision of the second-biggest member of the governing coalition, the Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire, PDCI), to support incumbent president Alassane Ouattara, his re-election was inevitable. Ouattara won without a run-off, obtaining 83.7 per cent of the vote in the first round. Indeed, the voter turnout – which in the end totalled 52.9 per cent – attracted more attention than the results themselves.[1]

While the absence of violence has encouraged optimism, the 2015 election presented a series of striking similarities with Côte d'Ivoire's pre-2010 elections. This might represent a step backward rather than a step forward with respect to democratic consolidation. A series of recurring problems in the history of Ivorian elections – lack of competition due to non-participation of major political actors, low voter turnout, lack of trust in electoral institutions – affected the 25 October polls. The inability of Côte d'Ivoire to institutionalise democratic political competition does not bode well for the future. The 2020 presidential election, in which Ouattara will probably not participate, will be a crucial test. This article looks at the background of the 2015 election, analyses the different phases of the electoral process, and assesses the implications of the recent polls for the future of the country.[2]

The Legacy of the 2010/2011 Post-Election Crisis

The history of Côte d'Ivoire since the introduction of multiparty politics in 1990 and the 1993 death of the first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, has been marred by the manipulation of electoral rules and by the exclusion of certain groups and candidates (Bouquet 2007). In 1995 Henri Konan Bédié, leader of the PDCI (formerly Côte d'Ivoire's only

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1   The results of the 2015 election (CEI 2015), as well as those of the previous elections (CEI 2010), are published on the official website of the Commission Electorale Indépendante. The CEI has, however, not published a breakdown of the results for all regions of Côte d'Ivoire, so the article will subsequently also refer to *Abidjan.net*, Côte d'Ivoire's most popular online news outlet.

2   I would like to thank Rodrigue Koné for his assistance and helpful comments.

party), won an election boycotted by the two other major Ivorian parties, Laurent Gbagbo's Front Populaire Ivoirien (Ivorian Popular Front, FPI) and Alassane Ouattara's Rassemblement des Républicains (Rally of the Republicans, RDR) (Crook 1997). In 2000 the Constitutional Court disqualified the PDCI and RDR candidates, and FPI leader Laurent Gbagbo ran alone against former military ruler Robert Guéï. In protest, the RDR boycotted the following legislative elections (Bouquet 2011).

The outbreak of an armed rebellion in 2002 can be partly traced back to the contestation of previous elections (Bouquet 2011; McGovern 2011). The presidential election that took place in 2010, after having been postponed for five years, marked a break from previous elections in several respects (Bassett 2011). For the first time, the candidates of all three major parties participated, and voter turnout (83.73 per cent) was the highest ever in the history of Côte d'Ivoire's multiparty elections. Key to Alassane Ouattara's victory was the creation of the Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (Rally of Houphouëtistes for Democracy and Peace, RHDP), an electoral alliance between the PDCI, the RDR, and other minor parties. When Ouattara passed the first round, Bédié and the PDCI supported him against Gbagbo. Although the 2010 election was judged free and fair, it ended in violence. Gbagbo disputed the results and Ouattara needed the military support of the former insurgent group the Forces Nouvelles (New Forces, FN) and of French and UN peacekeepers to take power in April 2011. Gbagbo was arrested and later transferred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, which indicted him for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Many of his supporters are still convinced that Gbagbo was the legitimate winner of the election and the victim of a neocolonialist plot (Piccolino 2012).

The legacy of the 2010/2011 crisis and the polarisation between pro-Gbagbo and pro-Ouattara supporters have continued to affect Côte d'Ivoire. The FPI boycotted both the 2011 legislative elections and the 2013 local elections and posed a series of unrealistic conditions for its return to politics – in particular, the release of Gbagbo. Some fissures within the party had already appeared, however, as early as 2011, when the former president of the National Assembly, Mamadou Koulibaly, left the FPI.

The government announced that crimes committed during the 2010/2011 crisis were to be investigated and it instituted the Commission Dialogue Vérité et Reconciliation (Commission for Dialogue, Truth, and Reconciliation, CDVR). Transitional justice, however, deepened the discontent of Gbagbo's supporters, since both the ICC and Ivorian

courts have focused on crimes committed by pro-Gbagbo personalities (Piccolino 2015b). The CDVR officially concluded its work in 2014. There was a general lack of clarity about its mandate, and its president, former prime minister Charles Konan Banny, did not provide effective leadership. Due to disputes between Konan Banny and the Ouattara government, moreover, the final report of the CDVR has not yet been made public; this has left the Ivorian public under the impression that the commission has not done its job.

The Realignment of Alliances and the Birth of the CNC

The debate within the FPI about whether the party should take part in the election intensified in 2013 with the release from jail of Pascal Affi N'Guessan, official party president and former prime minister. Determined to be a presidential candidate, he found himself in conflict with the interim leadership of the party, headed by the vice president, Aboudramane Sangaré. After a contested internal congress, the clash between the factions went to court in 2014, and Affi N'Guessan obtained the exclusive right to use the party name and logo (*Abidjan.net* 2015b). In spite of this apparent victory, his efforts to style himself as Gbagbo's heir encountered numerous obstacles. The splinter faction retained the support of the jailed former president, whom it elected new party chairman. The perception that the Ouattara regime backed Affi N'Guessan against Sangaré led to accusations of treachery from Gbagbo's supporters. Affi N'Guessan, who was born in central Côte d'Ivoire, was moreover not well placed to gain the trust of the autochthonous populations of the southwest, who traditionally form the core of FPI support.

In the meantime, in what became known as the Daoukro Appeal, Bédié declared his support for Ouattara and announced that the PDCI would not present a candidate (Konan Bédié 2015). Bédié, who could not run again for the presidency because of the age limits set by the Ivorian Constitution, was accused by some members of his party of undermining the interests of the PDCI (*Le Monde* 2015). Three PDCI politicians – former prime minister Charles Konan Banny, former leader of the PDCI youth wing Kouadio Konan Bertin (nicknamed KKB), and former minister of foreign affairs Amara Essy – decided eventually to run as independent candidates.

Alienated by their official parties, the FPI hardliners and the PDCI dissidents tried belatedly to unite their forces. On 15 May 2015, a group of opponents including Konan Banny, KKB, Koulibaly, and representa-

tives of the FPI-Sangaré wing signed a charter establishing the Coalition Nationale pour le Changement (National Coalition for Change, CNC) (*Radio France Internationale* 2015).[3] The CNC charter stressed the importance of ensuring a fair electoral process and securing respect for the Constitution, but it also hinted at a possible evolution of the CNC into an electoral alliance on the model of the RHDP (CNC 2015). However, the coalition included individuals with different political histories, whose opinions even about whether to participate in the election differed. In July, Konan Banny was elected chairman of the CNC (*Fraternité Matin* 2015) but he did not achieve his goal of becoming its official candidate. In the end, the CNC was able to make the opposition more visible and its grievances more widely known, but it did not prove an effective electoral tool.

The Voter Registration Process

One of the main sources of contention between the government and the CNC was the perceived lack of neutrality of the electoral institutions, particularly the CEI. The current electoral commission was created in 2005 as part of peace negotiations. Its copious members, nominated on a fixed-term basis as representatives of the political forces that had signed the peace agreements, had little experience in organising elections.

A revised law adopted in 2014 reduced the representatives of the political parties to four for the governmental coalition and four for the opposition, in addition to including, for the first time, five representatives of the main state institutions and four representatives of civil society organisations (CEI 2014). The CEI is thus dominated by pro-governmental members. In view of the 2015 election, in a context where the technical and logistical support of the UN has been drastically scaled down, an even more pressing problem has been the commission's lack of technical know-how. With the exception of its president, Youssouf Bakayoko, most current members of the CEI were appointed after 2013.

The first serious test that the renewed CEI faced was the revision of the voter list. Ahead of the 2010 election, voter registration had been a contentious issue between Gbagbo's and Ouattara's supporters. The final list covered less than 73 per cent of the voting population, according to estimates by the National Institute for Statistics (Piccolino 2015a). For the 2015 election, the CEI used biometric voter registration for the second time. The same controversial firm that had provided the biometric

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3   Essy also expressed his support for the CNC, but refused to sign the charter.

technology in 2010 – Sagem Sécurité, since renamed Morpho – was again tasked with doing so (Piccolino 2015a). The CEI was hoping not only to update the list but also to significantly improve its coverage by enrolling approximately three million previously missing voters. However, the process, launched on 1 June 2015, did not go as planned. Because of reduced financial and logistical support from international donors, the CEI cut down the number of centres where voters could enrol. Moreover, a national ID or a certificate of nationality was necessary to enrol (République de Côte d'Ivoire 2015), and the FPI-Sangaré encouraged a boycott of the operation. In the end, the 2015 voter list looked very similar to the 2010 list, with only 344,295 voters having been added.

The Pre-Electoral Atmosphere and the Electoral Campaign

On 10 September 2015, the Constitutional Council validated ten candidates: Ouattara; Affi N'Guessan, candidate for the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques (Alliance of the Democratic Forces, AFD), a coalition of his wing of the FPI and some small parties; Mamadou Koulibaly, supported by Liberté et Démocratie pour la République (Freedom and Democracy for the Republic, LIDER), a party he founded in 2011; the three PDCI dissidents, plus four other, minor candidates with little chance of gaining a significant share of the votes.

Although Laurent Gbagbo was in jail at The Hague awaiting trial, he was very much present in pre-electoral debates. The shared strategy of the opposition candidates was to present themselves as men of reconciliation, able to overcome the pro-Ouattara/pro-Gbagbo cleavage, and to court Gbagbo's electorate. Many of them insisted that, if elected, they would do anything to set Gbagbo free (Miquel and Rosenberg 2015). However, none of the independent candidates managed to become genuinely popular. Hopes of mobilising Gbagbo's voters vanished a few days before the polls when, through his spokesman Justin Katinan Koné, Gbagbo issued a statement requesting that candidates cease associating his name with their electoral campaigns (Katinan Koné 2015).

In addition to Gbagbo's fate, pre-electoral debate was dominated by polemics about the fairness of the electoral institutions. The CNC insisted that the composition of the CEI was overwhelmingly favourable to the government and repeatedly asked for Youssouf Bakayoko to be replaced. Having announced the victory of Ouattara in 2010, Youssouf Bakayoko was seen as a partisan of the incumbent president and as a symbol of the post-election crisis. The Constitutional Council was also a

target of the opposition's suspicions, especially after the resignation of its president, Francis Wodié, under dubious circumstances in February 2015. The opposition saw the replacement of Wodié, a man regarded for his independence, with former justice minister Mamadou Koné, a long-time RDR militant, as a way to secure the loyalty of the Constitutional Council to the incumbent president, especially with respect to the valida-tion of Ouattara's presidential candidature.

Indeed, in the eyes of the opposition, Ouattara's eligibility was in doubt because of article 35 of the Ivorian Constitution (*Connection Ivoir-ienne* 2015). Considered a symbol of the divisive politics of *ivoirité* (Bou-quet 2011), the article states that a presidential candidate should be of an Ivorian father and mother, themselves having been born Ivorian citizens; in addition, a candidate must never have claimed a nationality other than the Ivorian one. Longstanding doubts about whether Ouattara would be able to fulfil both criteria, and therefore be eligible, ultimately manifested in violence in September, when the CNC called for demonstrations to protest the Constitutional Council's decision to validate Ouattara's can-didature. There were numerous clashes between pro-Gbagbo and pro-Ouattara supporters, and in Gbagbo's home region at least one demon-strator was killed (*Jeune Afrique* 2015).

The official start of the electoral campaign on 9 October highlighted the disproportional means available to the candidates. The government allocated XOF 100 million (approximately EUR 150,000) to each presi-dential candidate for the campaign. This was, however, no match for the budget of the incumbent president, estimated to be at least XOF 10 billion (approximately EUR 15 million). Ouattara's dominance was mostly evi-dent in the omnipresence of his electoral posters in Abidjan, while the other candidates struggled to achieve visibility (Schneider 2015).

While the discourse of the CNC candidates revolved to a very large extent around the 2010/2011 crisis and its aftermath and touched upon issues related to transitional justice and democracy, Ouattara's campaign took a different approach. The incumbent president talked about the crisis as an episode that belonged to the past. His discourse focused on the economic successes of his government, his commitment to address-ing youth unemployment and other social problems more resolutely during his second term, and his dedication to transforming Côte d'Ivoire into an emerging economy.[4] The message conveyed was that, by focus-

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4   See, for instance, Ouattara's intervention on the TV show "Face aux électeurs," where each candidate was invited to deliver a speech and then reply to journalists' questions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw30vPx4rR0> (15 December 2015).

ing on Gbagbo's fate, the opposition wanted to keep the country in the past, and that Ouattara was best placed to address the daily needs of the Ivorian population.

As the day of the polls approached, the opposition appeared disillusioned. Claiming that the preconditions for transparent and fair elections had not been met, three candidates – Essy, Koulibaly, and Konan Banny – decided to withdraw from the race shortly ahead of the polls and join the FPI-Sangaré in calling for a boycott of the election (Konan Banny 2015; *L'Intelligent d'Abidjan* 2015).

The Voting Operations

In spite of the polemical stance of the opposition, the election on 25 October took place without violence. In contrast to the 2010 election, major international observer organisations such as the EU and the Carter Center did not send missions to the country, and the UN had no equivalent of the 2010 certification mandate. However, local civil society organisations created observer platforms with international support and training (Plateforme de Veille des Femmes et des Jeunes pour des Elections Apaisées et Crédibles en Côte d'Ivoire 2015; POECI 2015a). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) also sent a delegation chaired by former Nigerian president Olusegun Obasanjo.

Overall, observers found that the voting operations had been fair and had taken place in a peaceful environment (Plateforme de Veille 2015; POECI 2015a). However, they also denounced serious technical and organisational shortcomings. The majority of the polling stations were not able to open on time on the day of the election and the CEI was forced to extend voting times by two hours in places where there had been delays.

Difficulties also affected the system of biometric voter verification. Each of the 19,000 polling stations should have been equipped with a biometric tablet in order to check the fingerprints of the voters. There were, however, problems in the distribution of the tablets, and the polling staff was not trained properly in their use. Election observers estimated that in almost one-third of the polling stations the system failed at some point (POECI 2015b).

The Results

The CEI took three days to officially announce the final outcome. The provisional results, which gave the victory to Ouattara in the first round

with 83.7 per cent of the vote, were announced by Youssouf Bakayoko on 28 October. In spite of the harsh critiques of the electoral process mounted by the opposition, the only candidate who presented an appeal to the Constitutional Council was Koulibaly. The appeal was predictably rejected and Ouattara's election was validated by the Constitutional Council on 2 November (*Abidjan.net* 2015e).

Conscious that the incumbent president was going to win in any case, the opposition attempted to undermine his legitimacy by lowering voter turnout. There were considerable polemics about the accuracy of the rate of participation reported by the CEI, which, on 26 October, announced that total turnout had been approximately 60 per cent, before it revised the figure to 52.9 per cent upon the release of the election results two days later (*Abidjan.net* 2015c). Although turnout in 2015 was much lower than in 2010, the results show that the opposition's strategy failed overall. Ouattara has not been able to massively expand his electorate. Considering that the current voter list is incomplete, Ouattara's share corresponds to 2,618,229 votes out of an Ivorian population of voting age estimated at nine million (*Abidjan.net* 2015a). Nevertheless, Ouattara has held onto his electorate and even slightly improved his numbers in terms of total votes obtained with respect to 2010 (Bouquet 2015). This was not an obvious result, given the trauma of the post-election crisis, the dissidence within the PDCI, and the non-competitive character of the election. The outcome can in part be attributed to the president's control of the media, but also to his capacity to convince an electorate that wants peace above all that he is the best guarantor of stability.

Winning a modest 9.3 per cent of the vote, well below Gbagbo's 45.9 per cent in 2010, Affi N'Guessan came in second. A breakdown of the results shows that, although the former prime minister has been unable to successfully sell himself as Gbagbo's successor, he has managed to at least co-opt a component of the FPI electorate, scoring decently in several localities of central Côte d'Ivoire traditionally favourable to Gbagbo. The FPI-Sangaré has thus been reduced to the "ethnic core" of Gbagbo's southwestern electorate. KKB, who did not join the boycott and congratulated Ouattara on his victory before the official announcement of results, came in third with only 3.9 per cent of the votes.

Conclusion: The 2015 Election and the Future of Côte d'Ivoire

The picture that emerges from the 2015 election is one of substantial continuity. Ouattara's success, the discipline of the PDCI electorate – who

bought into the Daoukro Appeal, the inability of Affi N'Guessan to convince the majority of the FPI electorate to support him, and the failure of the independent candidates all serve to show that the three men who have dominated Ivorian politics since the death of Félix Houphouët-Boigny – Ouattara, Bédié, and Gbagbo – still do so today. This might come across as paradoxical, given that one of them is in jail and another is too old to stand for election. Regional results show that Ivorian politics has remained "frozen" also in terms of the anchorage of the main parties in specific ethno-regional blocks: the RDR and the PDCI are respectively supported by Ivorians of northern ethnicities (belonging to the North Mandé and Voltaic linguistic groups) and by the Baoulé of central Côte d'Ivoire, in spite of the two parties' efforts to include politicians from other regions (the two recent general secretaries of the PDCI come from the same ethnic group as Gbagbo).

The crisis of the pro-Gbagbo opposition has left the RHDP the unchallenged protagonist of Ivorian politics. The next issue on the agenda of the leadership of the RHDP is the transformation of the coalition into a unified party. Considering that the RDR was born as a splinter faction of the PDCI, this would mean the de facto reconstruction of Houphouët-Boigny's single party. The RHDP, however, is at risk of becoming a narrower and less inclusive version of the old PDCI. It is important to stress that Houphouët-Boigny took care to ensure that all ethnic groups in Côte d'Ivoire felt represented in the then-single party (Langer 2004; Akindès 2004). Today, a significant minority, formed by the so-called "autochthonous" populations of the southwest, support the FPI-Sangaré and feel marginalised by what they see as an alliance between "Northerners" and Baoulé. This minority's marginalisation has been exacerbated by its exclusion from electoral politics since 2010 and its subsequent lack of representation.

The second and perhaps even more alarming problem is that the dominance of the RHDP means that intra-party competition, rather than democratic elections, will be crucial in determining who will rule the country. Ouattara has already announced that he will respect the age limits set by the Constitution and will not run again in 2020. In five years, the RHDP will face the same problem that the PDCI faced after 1993 – a problem at the heart of Côte d'Ivoire's recent history of recurrent instability: picking a successor. The outbreak of a fratricidal struggle is looming: among the protagonists will probably be politicians that have a reputation for not shying away from violence, such as former FN leader Guillaume Soro and the powerful interior minister Hamed Bakayoko.

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Ein Schritt vorwärts, zwei Schritte zurück?
Die Präsidentschaftswahl 2015 in Côte d'Ivoire

Zusammenfassung: Angesichts der politischen Krise in Côte d'Ivoire nach den Wahlen im Jahr 2010 galt die Präsidentschaftswahl 2015 als wichtiger Test für die Lage im Land. Die Wahl verlief friedlich. Allerdings traten Probleme auf, die in Côte d'Ivoire nicht neu sind: mangelnder politischer Wettbewerb, weil wesentliche Akteure nicht an der Wahl teilnahmen, geringe Wahlbeteiligung sowie Misstrauen gegenüber der Wahlorganisation. Ebenso problematisch war die schlechte Vorbereitung durch die unabhängige Wahlkommission (Commission Electorale Indépendante, CEI), das gilt insbesondere für die Revision der Wählerliste. Weil Parteigänger des früheren Präsidenten Laurent Gbagbo die Wahl boykottierten und der amtierende Präsident Alassane Ouattara die Unterstützung der Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP) besaß, war seine Wiederwahl von vornherein gesichert. Die regierende Koalition konnte die Kontrolle aufrechterhalten und das Land wirkt stabil. Allerdings könnte das Demokratiedefizit zu erneuten Gewaltausbrüchen führen, wenn in der RHDP die Nachfolge Ouattaras ausgehandelt werden muss.

Schlagwörter: Côte d'Ivoire, Wahl/Abstimmung, Politisches System, Parteiensystem