

Côte d'Ivoire: a series of damaging events?

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The credibility of the international community appears to be on the line with regard to the row between President Laurent Gbagbo and President Alassane Ouattara in Côte d'Ivoire, when the former refused to cede power after having lost the presidential elections of November 2010. Whether or not this conflict suggests a broader confrontation between Africa's autocracies and its democracies, the international community represented in this case by the UN, the AU and the ECOWAS is still struggling to change the outcome of this quarrel.

On this rare occasion the world seems to be speaking in one voice, as several multilateral organizations of international and regional character have condemned Laurent Gbagbo and recognized Alassane Ouattara as the legitimate president. The United Nations Security Council has passed a resolution¹ recognizing Ouattara's legitimacy and agreed with ECOWAS and the AU's judgment on the case, which calls for the immediate withdrawal of Gbagbo from the presidential palace by using military force if necessary. Besides former South African and Nigerian presidents Thabo Mbeki and Olusegun Obasanjo, several other personalities have already been sent to the country, ECOWAS sent a team of three emissaries – President of Cape Verde Pedro Pires, President of Sierra Leone Ernest Koroma and President of Benin Yayi Boni – and the AU one representative – Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga – which held talks with Gbagbo but achieved no concrete

results.² The European Union and former colonial patron France have also supported Ouattara's electoral victory and have imposed diplomatic sanctions on all Ivorian ambassadors appointed by Laurent Gbagbo, as well as frozen the assets of the latter and his loyalists.³ Only Angola and Lebanon sent an ambassador to Gbagbo's swearing-in ceremony and appear to mildly support him.⁴

However, the talks and efforts to pressure Gbagbo to leave office have still not produced any effect and it is still not certain that they will on the short term. Although the international community's condemnation is solid, a serious willingness to intervene diplomatically or perhaps even militarily in the country is lacking, and Laurent Gbagbo knows this. One has only to remember President Nicolas Sarkozy's nervous shuttle diplomacy during the Russian-Georgian war of 2008 as president of the European Union Council to understand the complete lack of high profile involvement at a global scale in the issue at hand. Yet, even pressure from world leaders with immense visibility would not work on Gbagbo, specially since he refused to take a telephone call from President Barack Obama himself.⁵ Although diplomatic efforts have until now failed, the ECOWAS's capacity to intervene should not be taken lightly, as it proved when it

1 "Resolution 1962" (United Nations S/RES/1962, 20 December 2010).

2 "US offers Ivory Coast's Laurent Gbagbo 'dignified exit'" (BBC News, 4 January 2011).

3 "Côte d'Ivoire: EP backs EU sanctions and calls on Gbagbo to step down" (European Parliament News, 16 December 2010).

4 Paulo Gorjão, "Côte d'Ivoire: a test tube for Angola's regional policy?" (IPRIS Viewpoints, No. 29, December 2010).

5 "Ivory Coast president refuses phone call from Barack Obama" (Telegraph, 30 December 2010).



interceded militarily in Sierra Leone in 1997 to reinstate President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah's government after it was overthrown by Revolutionary United Front and Armed Forces Revolutionary Council rebels. However, the idea of using force is losing momentum because it could trigger a bloody civil war.⁶

There appears to be no easy solution to Côte d'Ivoire's problem. Perhaps instead of having only the ECOWAS leading the process, more responsibility in the form of direct cooperation should be given to Angolan diplomacy, possibly the only actor with significant leverage and influence to reach a settlement in the presidential dispute. Although Angola has its own reasons for not promoting the intervention of a regional organization to oust the leader of a country, the power to reach some sort of compromise with Gbagbo might rest solely on Angola's diplomatic skills and friendship ties. So far, Angola has silently refused to join the coalition to oust Laurent Gbagbo. On the other hand, it is also not clear whether Nigeria – currently chairing the presidency of ECOWAS and leading the efforts in Côte d'Ivoire – is interested in Angolan mediation. Nigeria might attempt to smooth down competition by maintaining its role as the primary leader in the negotiations, thus keeping Angola at bay. However, Angola has been active in attempting to solve the political conflict in Guinea-Bissau and a conflict or civil war in Côte d'Ivoire would only jeopardize these efforts.

There is also the mandate of President Alassane Ouattara to be considered. The high degree of condemnation coming from multilateral organizations is in fact withdrawing substantial political power and visibility from President Ouattara, who already stated Gbagbo's time to cede power was over and called on ECOMOG – ECOWAS's military arm – to intervene. Therefore, the elected President of Côte d'Ivoire has been put in a powerless position, only able to wave his head in agreement with the international community but

unable to act in any way due to his political dependency on ECOWAS and the 10.000 UN peacekeepers stationed in the country, among other reasons to preserve his physical integrity. This situation might have nefarious consequences on his mandate in case Gbagbo refuses to leave the country and remains as a political actor.⁷ In fact, due to the latter's intense control of the army, the only peaceful future for Côte d'Ivoire is if Laurent Gbagbo abandons the country and refrains from projecting any political influence from abroad. Finally, the rhetorical speech adopted by the international community produces wider consequences in the African continent. Leaders analogous to Robert Mugabe have used international mediation to strengthen the accusations of imperialistic behavior in African (autocratic) countries, accusing Western 'colonialists' of once again meddling in the internal affairs of their former subjects. Although there resides no truth in this argument but the need to solidify power around the authoritarian ruler, the international community and its bodies should have understood by now that any recommendation or condemnation targeting authoritarian leaders in Africa must not be done lightly, so as to avoid the many negative consequences of criticizing the regimes of former colonial states. Indeed, with the ongoing dispute in Côte d'Ivoire, Robert Mugabe now possesses one more stone to throw at his opposition in the presidential elections of 2011.

While nothing substantial has really changed in Côte d'Ivoire after all these consultations, the international community might be causing more harm than good by giving Laurent Gbagbo all this attention, while watching regional leaders play musical chairs to intervene in his country. Perhaps the score has been settled and the world just lost the first round to Laurent Gbagbo and his loyalists.

⁶ "Ivory Coast's Ouattara sees hope fade for regional military intervention" (*Bloomberg*, 11 January 2010).

⁷ "Ivory Coast unity cabinet possible, says UN ambassador" (*BBC News*, 11 January 2010).

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