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*Vasco Martins*

### Portuguese Journal of International Affairs

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# The Côte d'Ivoire crisis in retrospect

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The most recent political crisis and conflict in Côte d'Ivoire did not differ much from other post-electoral conflicts in Africa. To the ordinary observer, what took place in the Côte d'Ivoire was not unlike other historical events in Angola, Kenya or Zimbabwe, but simply another tragedy in Africa. Notwithstanding the specificities of each conflict, their roots can be traced back to electoral processes, to the definition of who in the country will assume the position of power and represent the population. This situation added momentum to the argument of those who defend the unspoken assertion that Africans are incapable of governing themselves.

Conflict in Africa is generally explained by the weight of history, its ethnic, economic and political transformations, and above all, poor governance, popularly associated with lack of development and endemic corruption. Popular exclusion from the political process (with or without ethnic or religious underpinnings), lack of access to or complete failure of national institutions of governance, and a long reliance on a single, vertical center of power, usually commanded by an authoritarian individual, are some of the factors behind political conflict in Africa. While historical and ethnic issues take time to heal and overcome, governance problems can be addressed in a timely manner if the quality of the leadership improves, the distribution of power is solid and loyal to the established hierarchy and system, and democratic and good governance norms are respected by enhancing popular knowledge of these democratic proceedings. In the case of the Côte d'Ivoire, the quality of the leadership, the lack of political alternatives and exclusion from power based on ethnic alignments are the main causes of the political conundrum of today.

In order to retain power, political leaders sometimes dismiss negative electoral results as unjust and biased, quickly mobilize the army or create civilian militias and engage in open conflict for power and recognition. This was the overall scenario in the Côte d'Ivoire. This article, however, will not dwell on comparative analysis or microscopic examinations of what led Côte d'Ivoire – which used to be one of the most developed countries in Western Africa – to the brink of open civil war. Instead, this article will provide the reader with a broader description of the events that took place in the international arena, of

all the relevant actors and organizations involved in attempting to solve the crisis and finally a close analysis of the errors of judgment and inaccurate observations made by regional and international leaders and organizations involved in the peace process. To this end, a brief historical explanation of the forces at conflict and the actors who led the country to the brink of full-scale civil war will be made, followed by the description of all the important regional and international political interventions. Looking at the decisions made in both the domestic and international arenas allows us to determine what failed and how it can be corrected.

### **Historical background**

The electoral problems in Côte d'Ivoire can be traced back to 1990, when the country experienced a rough regime transformation toward a multi-party democratic system. Felix Houphouët-Boigny, the father of Ivorian independence, considered by many as an 'iron hand' ruler, saw his country hit hard by the 1980s world recession. Its external debt rose exponentially, which obliged the country to borrow capital and reschedule debt payments under the auspices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). When in 1987, however, Côte d'Ivoire was to start paying the debt it rescheduled in 1984, its economy had not improved at all. The country's economy would not recover from this financial crisis as the continuing decline of cocoa and coffee prices did not permit it to support its economy, which led to popular unrest in 1990 when hundreds of civil servants went to strike, protesting against institutional malpractice and corruption. The 1990 unrest had enough impact to make the government support the dawn of multi-party democracy, following the political trend in Africa. However, Houphouët-Boigny, already ill in 1990 (having died in 1993), nominated Alassane Ouattara – a former economist at the IMF – as the Chairman of the Inter-ministerial Committee for Coordination of the Stabilization and Economic Recovery Programme of Côte d'Ivoire, subsequently nominating him to be Prime Minister of the country, a position Ouattara held between November 1990 and December 1993. The President of the National Assembly, Henri Konan Bédié succeeded the late Houphouët-Boigny as the President of Côte d'Ivoire, a succession which would alter the ethnic power balance of the country and immerse Côte d'Ivoire in a well of division and political exclusion.

In October 1995, running against a fragmented and unorganized opposition, Henri Bédié scored an overwhelming victory in the presidential elections, which provided him with enough political maneuver to support his concept of 'Ivrité', a process of ethnic differentiation which excluded presidential candidates from being able to attain power if these were not born to Ivorian parents or had not lived in the Côte d'Ivoire for the preceding years. This concept served to exclude Alassane Ouattara – who hailed from the immigrant-heavy northern part of the country –, from the presidential race, after he was accused of descending from Burkinabé parents and was thus excluded from presidential nomination. Bédié's tight grip on the political life of the country and the arrests of several

opposition supporters created ethnic tensions which would linger through decades to come. This period of instability, corruption and failure of political inclusion under Bédié's regime resulted in the 1999 military coup and the replacement of Bédié with General Robert Guéï. A presidential election followed in 2000, pitting Laurent Gbagbo – who had in 1990 run against Houphouët-Boigny – against Robert Guéï, who had refused to allow both Alassane Ouattara and Henri Konan Bédié to run for constitutional reasons. Guéï, the leader of the transitional military regime lost the elections to Laurent Gbagbo, although he refused to admit defeat and proclaimed himself the winner of the 2000 presidential election. This subversion of democracy led to a popular revolt and to the ousting of Guéï in favor of Gbagbo, who became President of the Côte d'Ivoire in 2000.

A brief civil war followed between 2002 and 2004, with some lingering conflict until 2007, between Laurent Gbagbo's government and a northern rebel movement, the *Forces Nouvelles*. The rebellion was sparked mainly by the fragility of democratic institutions, economic issues, and ethnic tensions due to the large number of immigrants in the country and discrimination towards people of Burkinabé origin, who make up a significant percentage of the population in the northern part of the country. This resulted in a division between the rebel north and the government controlled south of Côte d'Ivoire. A unity government was then formed, but collapsed without having achieved any significant changes in the country. In 2005, although Laurent Gbagbo's mandate had expired, the continuation of hostilities between groups, problems with the identification and registration of voters and the failure to complete a proper disarmament of the population led to the first of several postponements of the scheduled presidential election.

This process of rescheduling and postponement continued throughout most of the rest of the decade, often with the consent of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Although changes to the country's constitution in 2000 forbid presidential candidates from running unless both their parents were Ivorian, Laurent Gbagbo allowed Alassane Ouattara to run for President in an attempt to smooth the conflict between north and south. Ouattara used this opportunity to invite the former northern rebel group, the *Forces Nouvelles*, to run with his party in order to garner more support. By then, there were two main political forces in the country, divided between north and south, each supported by rebel forces and government troops, respectively.

With a lingering background of conflict and lack of political freedom, the 2010 presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire opposed three politicians well known to the population: Alassane Ouattara, Laurent Gbagbo and Henri Konan Bédié. The first round of elections, on October 31, eliminated Henri Bédié, allowing both Alassane Ouattara and Laurent Gbagbo to compete in the second round of elections, which took place on November 28. Four days after the second round of elections, the Côte d'Ivoire Election Commission (CEI) declared Alassane Ouattara the winner with 54% of the votes against Laurent Gbagbo's 46%. While international observers declared the elections free and fair – albeit reporting sporadic violent incidents due to ethnic tensions between north and south –

the Constitutional Council declared the elections fraudulent and excluded votes from certain constituencies of the north. Consequently, by excluding votes from seven regions where Alassane Ouattara was the favorite contender, the Constitutional Court – presided by Paul Yao N'Dré, considered to be an ally of Laurent Gbagbo – considered the CEI to have no authority left to proclaim the results because the announcement deadline had passed, and attributed the victory of the presidential elections to Laurent Gbagbo with 51% of the votes. Based on the CEI results, Alassane Ouattara argued the Constitutional Court was abusing its power and maintained he was the winner of the elections. The international community quickly supported Ouattara's declaration of victory, although military officers stood behind Laurent Gbagbo. The result of this conundrum led to two inauguration ceremonies and competing claims to power, thus igniting the conflict which took place during the first four months of 2011.

### **A borderless political conflict**

On the international political scene, this crisis was the focal point of many negotiations and great pressure, but little compromise from Laurent Gbagbo's side. On December 4, 2010, the African Union (AU) acknowledged the results of the CEI, which deemed Alassane Ouattara the rightful President of the Côte d'Ivoire. On December 6, former South African President Thabo Mbeki arrived at the Côte d'Ivoire, under the auspices of the AU, on an emergency mission to assist both contenders in solving their differences, a mission which was consented to by both parties. Upon his arrival Mbeki met with electoral rivals Gbagbo and Ouattara, the head of the UN mission to the Côte d'Ivoire, Young Jin-choi, Constitutional Court chairman Paul Yao N'Dré, and CEI chairman Youssouf Bakayoko. Having met and held talks with all the relevant players involved in the electoral crisis, Mbeki then submitted a preliminary report to the AU chairman, arguing that only a negotiated settlement would prevent civil war. Mbeki warned the AU not to present the standoff as a "good people versus bad people" type of crisis since that would inevitably increase the difficulty of arriving at a negotiated settlement.<sup>1</sup> Mbeki, experienced in negotiating power-sharing agreements, had already been involved in settling governmental disputes in Zimbabwe by pushing for a unity government between Zanu-PF's decade long leader Robert Mugabe and opposition leader MDC's Morgan Tsvangirai. Yet, Mbeki's solution in Zimbabwe is now considered to be a complete failure and a discredit to power-sharing solutions. From the beginning, it was clear that such a straightforward simple solution would not be enough to disrupt the stalemate between Côte d'Ivoire's two sides, which were in possession of military forces and had a background of open ethnic conflict. Mbeki probably knew his visit would not yield any concrete results, as Laurent Gbagbo was extraordinarily determined not to cede power. Knowing this, Mbeki warned the AU not to become too critical of either party – as any kind of hostile condemnation would only be counterproductive – and so was quick to put the option of a power-sharing agreement on the table. Both the AU and the

Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), however, decided to disregard Mbeki's recommendation – probably the best among many bad solutions at the time – and continued the expression of regional and international condemnation.

Already on December 7, a day after Mbeki's departure from Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS – which had already stated that Laurent Gbagbo should accept the decision of CEI – suspended Côte d'Ivoire from the regional bloc after an extraordinary summit held in Abuja, Nigeria. Although representatives from only seven of the fifteen member states were present at this meeting,<sup>2</sup> ECOWAS requested the UNSC to strengthen the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and to enable the mission to use all necessary means to protect lives and property, and to facilitate the immediate transfer of power to Alassane Ouattara. It then requested the UNSC to adopt international targeted sanctions against Gbagbo and his associates. It is noteworthy how ECOWAS paid little heed to Mbeki's calls for restraint, instead basing its judgment on ideals of democratic rule which did not apply to Côte d'Ivoire and adding more fuel to the crisis. There is always a remarkable distance between rhetorically defending democratic rules and unilaterally imposing them on a country whose democratic credentials are at best mediocre. Such condemnation only revealed the ECOWAS' lack of experience in dealing with delicate issues, although this type of heavy-handedness remains a recurring mistake for most world powers and organizations. Furthermore, by suspending Côte d'Ivoire, the ECOWAS closed the one regional forum where both Gbagbo and Ouattara could negotiate and debate with proper international and regional supervision. By doing so, the ECOWAS doomed the possibilities of having open channels of communication to solve what was still, above all, a political problem.

Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan's term was also renewed at this summit, making him the leader of the proceedings regarding the Côte d'Ivoire. The fact that only seven out of the fifteen ECOWAS member states were present when these measures were adopted failed to favorably underpin the organization's unity and served to reinforce Gbagbo's position of defying international condemnation and international order without any visible major consequences.

On December 9, 2010, the UNSC backed Ouattara as the winner of Côte d'Ivoire's elections, which was followed by a call from both the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) for Gbagbo to cede power. On the same day, after a meeting at its headquarters in Addis Ababa,<sup>3</sup> the AU suspended the Côte d'Ivoire from the continental organization until Ouattara took over from Gbagbo, thus following the ECOWAS in closing viable diplomatic channels.

By now all the relevant international organizations with sufficient power and credibility to intervene had stated that Gbagbo should respect the CEI electoral results and leave office. Hence, December 9 can be considered as a sort of 'bluff line', a line Laurent Gbagbo was resolved to cross. Indeed, by this point the unrecognized President of Côte d'Ivoire stood between a loosely united regional and international community and the seat of power,

only holding the lukewarm political support of Lebanon and Angola, who had previously sent ambassadors to assist the swearing in ceremony of Gbagbo. Having crossed the point where international and regional condemnation were ignored by Gbagbo due to his disbelief of it posing any threat, new efforts began to unravel and new actors joined the negotiations. On December 17, Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga called for African states to remove Gbagbo from power by force if necessary. Odinga was among the first negotiators to put the military intervention option on the table. When criticizing the AU for not turning its words into actions, Odinga was in fact strengthening Gbagbo's decision to challenge the 'bluff line', by throwing the AU's prior inability to find a solution to the crisis into the spotlight. Odinga's intervention marked the start of hostile rhetoric and the threat of using force. However, Odinga did not advance any plan or project, but simply paid lip service to the previously mentioned democratic discourse, failing to foresee the implications and implementation processes of such ideals in Côte d'Ivoire.

On December 18, Gbagbo ordered UNOCI and French peacekeepers, who had been deployed since 2004, to leave the country, stating that he no longer considered the UN mission neutral, a probable reaction to Odinga's call for military intervention. On December 19-20, the US State Department ordered its personnel to leave the country and stated that Gbagbo should resign immediately. The EU imposed travel ban sanctions on December 19 to pro-Gbagbo officials and the UN extended the mandate of its peacekeeping mission. Even though by now Laurent Gbagbo stated he was ready for talks in order to find a solution to the threat of civil war haunting the country, on December 23 the UN formally recognized Ouattara as President. In response, Côte d'Ivoire's military renewed its commitment to support Gbagbo which then triggered the blocking of funding by the West African Central Bank in an attempt to create the conditions for disintegration among the ranks of the military by failure of salary payment.<sup>4</sup> Instead, access to funding was given to internationally recognized President Ouattara. In support of this funding blockade, after a summit in Abuja decided to send a high-level delegation to meet with Gbagbo, ECOWAS threatened the latter with the use of military force if he continued to refuse to step down from the presidency, with Nigeria presumably taking the lead and providing the largest number of troops. On December 28, an ECOWAS delegation composed of Presidents Boni Yayi of Benin, Pedro Pires of Cape Verde and Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone was sent to the Côte d'Ivoire to deliver an ultimatum to Gbagbo: step down immediately or face the use of force. Gbagbo was given until January 3, 2011 – the date of the next meeting – to respond. Yet, already on December 31, West African military chiefs said a plan was devised to oust Gbagbo from power, although it was only to be used as a last resort.

On January 2, 2011, a day before the scheduled deadline for Gbagbo to cede power, Kenyan President Odinga – now officially named by the AU to attempt to broker a deal between the two conflicting parties – met with ECOWAS chairman and Nigerian President Jonathan on his way to Abidjan. A day later, Odinga and the three African leaders representing



ECOWAS met Gbagbo in Abidjan and urged him to step down. Odinga then returned to Abuja to brief Jonathan about the meeting. By now Thabo Mbeki's power-sharing solution had been completely erased from the table, only to be replaced by economic sanctions and by vague, transparent threats of military intervention.

Overall, the situation evolved very slowly after Gbagbo crossed the 'bluff line' and defied the international community. Several heads of state continued to hold talks with the unrecognized President – namely former Nigeria President Olusegun Obasanjo and former Cape Verdean Prime Minister José Brito – and others stepped forward and joined the international condemnation and sanctions, without producing any significant results. The three-President delegation sent to Côte d'Ivoire to negotiate with Laurent Gbagbo had failed to achieve any breakthroughs, even when backed up by the threat of military intervention. Hence, since Mbeki left Abidjan December 6, 2010, not only nothing substantial changed within the domestic scene of Côte d'Ivoire, but also the peaceful power-sharing solution was no longer under consideration, removing the most likely diplomatic solution to the crisis. The sheer number of actors involved, from international and regional organizations to states unilaterally meddling in the Côte d'Ivoire crisis, complicated the issue to an extent that none of these players were able to adopt a common solution to oust Gbagbo. This immense political disorganization provided Gbagbo with time and with a very simple solution: remain in power without paying any heed to the foreign chatter.

With the popular revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen, the attention of many international organizations and countries shifted towards the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It was clear that Gbagbo was confident the international and regional uproar against him was all but ineffective. Gbagbo knew it would take much time for any armed intervention to take place. He knew the AU, the UN, ECOWAS, and other international associates – mainly the US, France and the EU – would first explore any possible diplomatic solution before starting a humanitarian war. Yet, diplomatic solutions had already been exhausted and any likely military intervention far from coming to fruition. Meanwhile, Ouattara's forces, weary of continued failed diplomatic efforts, continued battling and advancing, attempting to gain control of the entire country, a successful endeavor which managed to surround Gbagbo and the military loyal to him in Abidjan.

### **The unilateral failures of plastic diplomacy**

There were many pro-Ouattara states involved in attempting to solve the Côte d'Ivoire crisis, especially France and the US. In Africa, South Africa remained largely idle, and Angola was seen as taking Gbagbo's side in the conflict, although later on it then changed its position and supported the AU in calling for Gbagbo's resignation.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy endorsed Ouattara as the prime winner of the contested elections. Sarkozy had issued an ultimatum to Gbagbo on December 17, 2010,

stating sanctions would be upheld if Gbagbo refused to forfeit the presidency by the end of that week. France never did rule out the military option, although Sarkozy and Defense Minister Alain Juppé were always heavy defenders of a diplomatic solution. In a meeting with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, Juppé said economic sanctions were the best tactic to be deployed against Gbagbo. This came in line with France's support and confidence in the AU, ECOWAS and UN to solve the crisis. There were however bilateral diplomatic problems between the French government and Gbagbo's camp. Gbagbo's spokesperson announced on January 22, 2011, the revocation of the accreditation of Jean-Marc Simon, French ambassador to Côte d'Ivoire. The Simon affair became a thorny issue between the two countries and injected much hostility into the political rhetoric. Gbagbo was very critical of Sarkozy's ambitions and objectives in the Côte d'Ivoire, even stating that France was preparing to commit a Rwanda-like genocide in the country.<sup>5</sup> The nature of this statement alone made clear Gbagbo's unwillingness to negotiate with Paris. Nevertheless, the French government was always more interested in political and economic sanctions, while attempting to get its citizens out of the troubled West African country. On April 3, 2011, after Sarkozy spoke with Ouattara and asked for the summoning without delay of all French citizens in Abidjan,<sup>6</sup> UN and French peacekeepers – who had been boosted with 300 French troops – took control of the Felix Houphouët-Boigny Airport in Abidjan, a move which cleared any doubts regarding the idleness of both the French and the UN peacekeeping mission. Having boosted its forces up to 1.400 soldiers, France had previously obtained a UN Resolution allowing its Operation Unicorn to act in defense of civilians.

After taking control of the airport, French and UN forces laid siege to Gbagbo's residence, reportedly "reducing it to rubble with tank and helicopter missiles"<sup>7</sup> in an attempt to take out the remaining heavy weaponry Gbagbo's forces still operated. Hence, French troops with UN support and authorization managed to break the remaining chains of Gbagbo's power, while carefully stepping back to give way to Ouattara's forces to arrest Laurent Gbagbo, consequently shielding Sarkozy's administration from accusations of neo-colonialism or imperialism. Apart from this episode, France refrained from taking a more direct, unilateral military path to oust Laurent Gbagbo, which at the time was not in line with the alternatives advanced by regional organizations. Nevertheless, the French initiative to take over Abidjan's airport, combined with the UN's destruction of most heavy weaponry under Gbagbo's control enabled Ouattara's forces to push forward with little resistance, opening the way to April 11 capture of the deposed President in the residence in which he was hiding, thus putting an end to the political crisis and military conflict that had lasted over four months.

The US adopted a similar position to France, although its political statements were less heated and more conclusive. US Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice was among the first senior diplomats to advocate Ouattara's victory in the runoff election. The Obama administration followed suit, threatening Gbagbo with severe sanctions if the CEI's

electoral results were not respected. Unlike Mbeki, and always defending a diplomatic solution – although rhetorically assuming that “no option should be ruled out” – the US made clear that any negotiations and compromise from the Gbagbo side that included a power-sharing agreement in which he retained the presidency and Ouattara was named Vice-President would be completely unacceptable. Apart from this much cooler approach to the crisis, the US was the only strong player with enough vision to warn about the loss of unity and momentum that both the ECOWAS and the AU were enduring, pointing out that although it supported the efforts of both these organizations, any type of consensus in solving the crisis would be further complicated if these actors continued to trample each other by producing different statements and calling for different types of intervention. On the diplomatic front, the US replaced Gbagbo’s envoy to the country with one nominated by its recognized President, Alassane Ouattara, although unlike France, the United Kingdom and Canada, no plans to close the US embassy in the Côte d’Ivoire were announced by Gbagbo.

Among African powers, South Africa’s position regarding the Côte d’Ivoire crisis was ambiguous. After the second round of elections, South Africa congratulated Ouattara for his victory, only to announce its neutrality afterwards. The South African government then released two statements, the first, on December 4, served to acknowledge the situation of tension in Côte d’Ivoire, while the second, released on December 9, called for national reconciliation and unity – perhaps following Mbeki’s report – while urging Gbagbo to respect the statements made by ECOWAS and the AU.<sup>8</sup> Finally, at a press briefing in Pretoria on January 21, South African President Jacob Zuma broke the silence and stated that “there were some discrepancies on the manner in which the election had come to the final pronouncement of the vote”,<sup>9</sup> while labeling the international calls for Gbagbo’s departure as counter-productive. Dimpho Motsamai, researcher at the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa, argues that the “lack of an unambiguous public stance on the matter [the Côte d’Ivoire crisis] by the South African government is seen to be influenced by Pretoria’s perceived invocation of a certain kind of pan-African solidarity and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other countries”.<sup>10</sup> However, as Motsamai states, South Africa had already been involved in mediating the conflict opposing Laurent Gbagbo to the *Forces Nouvelles*, between 2004 and 2006. Due to a biased report sent to the UNSC where South Africa’s mediators attributed the responsibility for the continuing of the impasse to the rebel forces, South Africa’s impartiality was on the line at a time when Gbagbo was already cornered politically and financially. Indeed, although South Africa remains an influential continental power, the fact that it took sides in a past conflict in Côte d’Ivoire came only to complicate any peaceful solution to the issue. Nevertheless, South Africa switched stances and on March 15, 2011, when President Jacob Zuma said that “South Africa fully supports the position taken by the African Union on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March, namely that Mr. Ouattara is recognized the winner, which is a reaffirmation of the position of the ECOWAS”.<sup>11</sup>

For its part, Angola took a very singular and polemic path. The Angolan government seemed to be supportive of Gbagbo at first, when it sent an emissary to witness his swearing in ceremony and later when it stated that a revision of the electoral process and new elections were needed, with President José Eduardo dos Santos arguing that Gbagbo was the constitutional President of Côte d'Ivoire and that he should remain so until the next elections, since the electoral results of November 28 were announced past the deadline by those who did not possess the competences to do so.<sup>12</sup> However, Angola's confusing stance on the issue of Côte d'Ivoire changed when its government rallied behind the AU but also defended that the Côte d'Ivoire should create a government of national unity on the basis of dialogue since Gbagbo was constitutionally elected.<sup>13</sup> Hence, Angola did not openly recognize Ouattara as the legitimate President, but rather advocated a power-sharing agreement while arguing that Gbagbo was the constitutionally elected President. This was a unique position amidst the criticism and condemnation adopted by many AU envoys and African leaders.

### **The counter productiveness of regional involvement**

The AU had the vaguest resolve of all three organizations during the process of seeking a peaceful solution to the Côte d'Ivoire crisis. The AU aligned its position with ECOWAS and the UN and stood firmly behind Ouattara. Yet, immersing itself in meetings, examinations, considerations and abstract deadlines, throughout the entire crisis the AU was completely unable to change the course of events in Côte d'Ivoire. First with Mbeki, then with Odinga, who only further worsened the relations between the AU and Gbagbo, and finally with a high-level panel composed of many African heads of state, the AU remained ineffective.<sup>14</sup> The five leaders' panel was to create a proposal to solve the electoral problems in Côte d'Ivoire, a report which took too long to develop. The panel's report called for the formation of a government of national unity, involving all political parties and civil society.<sup>15</sup> Yet, adding to the AU's failure, this proposal was rejected not by Ouattara – the rightful President and therefore in a legitimate position to reject any power-sharing agreement – but by Gbagbo, who would ironically be arrested one month after the five heads of state met in Addis Ababa to present their ideas of forming a government of national unity in Côte d'Ivoire to the AU's Peace and Security Council. While it is extremely difficult to find solutions to these types of crises, it took the AU a colossal amount of time to devise a solution that had firstly been roughly sketched by Mbeki, albeit with some differences. Unsurprisingly, by the time the report was presented, the situation in the country had already changed significantly.

On the other hand, ECOWAS was by far the most involved and critical organization throughout the entire Côte d'Ivoire episode. Like the AU, ECOWAS fell into a well of consultations, summits and reunions, although it managed to build considerable pressure on Gbagbo. ECOWAS set up a high-level delegation to take on the mediation efforts on Côte d'Ivoire. The three heads of state delegation<sup>16</sup> visited Abidjan twice and

held meetings with both Ouattara and Gbagbo. After the delegation failed to convince the latter to withdraw from power, ECOWAS called for the creation of a road map to allow military intervention as a last resort. Even with the threat of military invasion on the table, Gbagbo refused to cede, perhaps because any type of ECOWAS military involvement was surrounded by a mist of disagreement and lack of willingness, since its chiefs of defense had differing ideas and were not able to create a consensus on the proper military strategy to adopt.<sup>17</sup>

The President of the ECOWAS commission, Victor Gbeho also took part in the mediation efforts. The Ghanaian diplomat hinted that some countries were breaking unity and unilaterally supporting Gbagbo, referring to South Africa or perhaps Angola. Gbeho accused the South African government of stationing a warship in Ivorian coastal waters, in anticipation of military action, although the South African Defense Ministry argued the SAS Drakensberg was a supply vessel, possessing little armament and on a routine training operation in West Africa.<sup>18</sup> Unable to maintain public unity, and openly pointing fingers, ECOWAS followed the AU in draining its own credibility in the eyes of Laurent Gbagbo.

Finally, the UN managed to avoid producing any counterproductive statements, a stance backed by its peacekeeping nature and due to a predictable discomfort exhibited by Russia and China at the UNSC. Nevertheless, the UN followed ECOWAS and the AU in recognizing Ouattara as the winner of the elections, though it never endorsed any military solution to the conflict. Throughout the entire conflict, and amidst strong international pressure, the UN was able to keep its mandate with the single purpose of maintaining peace and finding a suitable solution to the Ivorian conundrum. UNSC Resolution 1967, adopted on January 19, 2011, authorized the deployment of 2.000 additional UN troops, transferred from the UN Mission to Liberia, in an attempt to safeguard civilian lives, a transfer which then proved useful when UN and French helicopters attacked forces loyal to Gbagbo. The UN Secretary-General then made use of Gbagbo's continued aggression as a justification to take out any remaining heavy weaponry his forces possessed, denying the troops loyal to Gbagbo the necessary equipment to mount any further successful resistance. By opening up the path for Ouattara's forces to take Abidjan, the UN stood by its condemnation of Gbagbo's electoral manipulations while still attempting to prevent major loss of life. During the final days of this episode, the UN was also able to assure Gbagbo's security, as he was transported to the north of the country by the organization's peacekeepers, thus ending conflict.

## **Conclusion**

As has been demonstrated, the international and regional attempts to solve the Côte d'Ivoire dispute were above all marked by colossal confusion and extraordinary disorganization. Every other week new actors became involved and old ones changed positions, while others remained critical of Gbagbo without having a clear approach to

the problem, only adding instability to the political environment. On the other hand, the likes of the US or the UN were able to use their previous experience in solving such conflicts and, most importantly, managed to keep a clear horizon line as to what the outcome of this crisis should be. When many criticized Gbagbo and produced vague threats of military intervention, others remained politically committed to the same goal throughout the entire episode.

The Côte d'Ivoire crisis not only reignited the debate about the ethics and morality of military intervention based on humanitarian reasons, but also opened divisions within some countries. In Angola, for example, UNITA manifested their discontent concerning the official line of the government toward Gbagbo.

In more practical terms, although many believe international condemnation is still enough to oust presidents and change regimes, the Côte d'Ivoire crisis showed that this often cannot be achieved without some type of physical confrontation, either based on a fast takeover of the adversary – where the internationally recognized warring party is given support and the rogue party is overcome within days – or through foreign armed intervention. Either option tends to produce substantial civilian casualties, but often severely narrows the time span of the overall conflict. The question here is to balance the rationale between two options: armed intervention or support to a specific internationally backed party with inevitable civilian casualties, or allowing the lingering of the military stalemate, which in turn catches innocent civilians in between and may produce more refugees and displaced people than the previous option, depending on the longevity of the internal conflict. The lessons from the Côte d'Ivoire crisis teach us that after all the international condemnation and all the actors involved in the mediation, only one of the above mentioned key steps – in this case armed conflict with international armed intervention – was effective and functional in producing a solution to the Côte d'Ivoire's crisis. Since Gbagbo initially decided to challenge the international resolve and refused to cede to foreign pressure, it became clear the only way to remove him from power would be by the hand of Ouattara's loyal militias or by any foreign state willing to step in militarily.

In the absence of functioning democratic institutions and a participative civil society capable of upholding the checks and balances advanced by the national constitution, in the case of Côte d'Ivoire, diplomatic alternatives did not achieve the desired political or humanitarian outcomes. Indeed, the international and regional communities failed to take the necessary steps to avoid an open conflict in the country. Taking into consideration the background of the conflict and the amount of information every party involved had about Côte d'Ivoire, nothing substantial was done to prevent this political crisis from escalating into a very difficult civil war. Instead, only when military support from France and the UN arrived did Ouattara's forces manage to gain ground and encircle Gbagbo, when all the regional and international bodies involved in this crisis had otherwise been unable to prevent the spread of violence and create the necessary conditions to corner Gbagbo. In

the end, while many seek to solve conflicts and several organizations and forums exist to do so, only a handful of experienced states and organizations, with diplomatic experience and modern militaries, are able to successfully stop budding conflicts.

The Côte d'Ivoire conflict proved one of the keys to solving such political crisis lies in the stability and unity of the entire international community and its states, by supporting each other in providing equal solutions and producing equal statements and condemnations, while leaving the door open to a serious and fast paced military intervention under the UN's umbrella. Since such unity was not achieved, looking back it is not hard to comprehend why Gbagbo managed to resist for so long, even under paralyzing sanctions and extreme pressure. The dichotomy of the discussion thus now balances between an international community able to resort to force if necessary and diplomatic pressure, which if not backed by serious and real threats may not spur the desired outcome. In extreme political cases, such as that of Côte d'Ivoire, safeguarding civilian life and local economics cannot be accomplished without coordinated efforts, placing the 'unity' and resolve back in the international community.

#### (Endnotes)

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- 14 The AU panel was composed by Presidents Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz who head the panel, Jacob Zuma of South Africa, Idriss Déby of Chad, Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso and Jakaya Kikwete of Tanzania.
- 15 "Ivory Coast's Ouattara says AU panel backs him as President" (*Voice of America*, 11 March 2010).
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- 18 "Côte d'Ivoire: statement on the SAS Drakensberg vessel in the West coast of Africa" (*Republic of South Africa*, 16 February 2011).



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