

[Browse Africana](#)

Search:

Welcome Guest

[Home](#) > [Heritage](#) > [People's Power Prevails in Ivory Coast](#)

heritage



People's Power Prevails in Ivory Coast

Photo: Thousands gather in Abidjan's National Stadium to commemorate those killed in recent political and ethnic violence in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Nov. 9, 2000. AP Photo/Clement N'Taye

[Email](#) [Letter to the Editor](#)

While the US has had unprecedented trouble identifying a legitimate presidential successor in this bizarre election year, the West African state of [Ivory Coast](#) has recently had its own dramatic succession struggles. The popular uprising that drove General Robert Guei from power on October 22, leaving more than 200 dead and installing Laurent Gbagbo as president, has been celebrated by many Africa-watchers as heralding a new era of democratization and setting an inspiring example for the millions of Africans who continue to chafe under dictatorial rule. Others, however, have been less optimistic about the so-called "Milosevic effect," warning that the Ivorian situation is still precarious, with ethnic tensions simmering, and caution against the possible flare-up of ethnic conflict in this historically stable African country.

The recent political crisis can be traced to the 1993 death of [Felix Houphouët-Boigny](#), who had ruled Ivory Coast for 33 years. Boigny's political savvy, close ties to France, the former colonial power, and his ability to balance the country's different ethnic communities and interests, made Ivory Coast a bastion of stability in a region prone to coups and ethnic conflict. Peaceful relations among the country's four main ethnic groups -- Akan, Krou, Mandingo, and Voltaic -- were aided by a growing economy based on the exports of cocoa and coffee, and an open immigration policy that granted dual nationality and voting rights to immigrants from neighboring countries, who make up an estimated 30 to 50 percent of the country's population of 16 million.

"The situation was brewing for many years. It's a logical culmination of something started by Boigny," says Ivorian journalist Yves Sorokobi of the Committee to Protect Journalists. "Houphouët had achieved a sound

economic policy, by African standards, but he left the country in the hands of cronies. The problem was, who was going to run the country after Houphouët? In what style – 'Papa-style' or open-style?"

Henri Bedié, who succeeded Houphouët-Boigny, lacked the political skill of his predecessor, and, faced with political challenges and a deteriorating economic situation due to falling cocoa and coffee prices, tried to alter Houphouët-Boigny's "Ivoirité" ("Ivorianness") laws to serve his own political interests. In an effort to exclude his arch-rival, former prime minister Alassane Ouattara, from the presidential elections of 1995, Bedié came up with a new interpretation of "Ivoirité," which divided the nation's population into "pure Ivorians," the country's so-called original natives, and "circumstantial Ivorians," the country's immigrants and their descendants. Ouattara was thus dubbed a "circumstantial Ivorian" because of his alleged foreign parentage, and banned from running for the presidency – an action which angered Ouattara's supporters in the Muslim north and drew international condemnation.

"Ouattara was a serious challenge," notes Sorokobi. "He was bringing leniency, restructuring the economy -- he's from the IMF -- and carrying out structural adjustment programs. But he alienated the middle class who were of Houphouët's ethnic group -- southern and western -- and saw him as a threat to prosperity. Bedié was representing these frustrations. He began to say a northerner [Ouattara], who are generally underrepresented [in government], was coming to take revenge. Bedié politicized the fears of the people."

Consequently, when General Guei overthrew Bedié in a military coup in December 1999, many expected an interim military government that would step down after organizing free, inclusive elections. General Guei, however, passed new Ivoirité laws, again excluding Ouattara and paving the way for his own bid for the presidency. In presidential elections on October 22, Guei lost to his opponent Laurent Gbagbo. When the military strongman attempted to annul the elections and stay in power, supporters of both Gbagbo and Ouattara took to the streets calling for an end to military rule, provoking deadly clashes with Guei's soldiers. Seeing the rising popular tide, top military leaders turned against Guei, who fled the country for Liberia, where he is currently seeking asylum.

Gbagbo's ascension to power, however, has not appeased the Muslim north, and Ouattara has called for new elections. Pro-Ouattara demonstrations in the north and in the capital city of Abidjan led to a massacre of some 50 young men; the new government has started an inquiry into the massacre, but it remains unclear if the military or Gbagbo supporters murdered the protestors.

The United Nations, the Organization of African Unity and the United States have called for an election re-run in Ivory Coast, fearing further ethnic conflict and a splintering of the country. As one Western diplomat told the *New York Times*, "An Ivory Coast set ablaze by ethnic hatred will light a fire across the region." One press release notes that "Ivory Coast is now seriously divided into three regions of roughly equal size: a Muslim north with cultural links to Mali and Burkina Faso, a Christian southeast, which has dominated the country's history, and a Christian and animist southwest with strong ancestral ties to Liberia and Guinea."

Gbagbo has not responded to calls for a new election. As one BBC commentator explained, "Mr. Gbagbo has recently embraced the idea of 'Ivoirité' no less enthusiastically than Mr. Bedié and General Guei before him. After all, it was the sidelining of Mr. Ouattara which enabled to Mr.

Gbagbo to stage a political comeback, and it would not suit him to see Mr. Ouattara reestablish himself." Moreover, France, the Western power that wields the most influence in West Africa, has refused to call for new elections. "This is for Ivorians to decide," declared French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, noting that with new elections, "there is a risk of ending up in a situation without any authority in Ivory Coast, raising problems for democracy, the legislative elections, and even the question of presidential elections themselves."

"Ouattara made a tactical political error -- calling his people to rally," says Sorokobi. "Thirty minutes after Guei left, he called his supporters to challenge Gbagbo on the street. Gbagbo saw this as a unique chance to get rid of a military dictatorship. His tribe and Guei's tribe are friends. During a revolution, Ouattara was being a reactionary. He was putting his short-term interests ahead of the country's. Ouattara had crystallized the hopes of many, but people saw the end of military rule as the lesser of two evils. Ouattara challenged this. But new elections would be disastrous with emotions running so high. The military saw [the demonstrations] as a threat to national security and shot at people. Now even Ouattara's party and his people are challenging him and don't forgive him for this tactical error. They hold him guilty for the 200 dead."

Regardless of Ivory Coast's political future, Guei's ouster could have far-reaching significance for other African countries. Many commentators have spoken eagerly of the "Milosevic effect" in Africa, noting how, as in Yugoslavia, it was popular mobilization that brought civilian leaders to power in coup-prone states like Nigeria and Niger, and, most recently, Ivory Coast. Pro-democracy advocates speculate that Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe's embattled head of state, could also be toppled by a popular uprising. The *Zimbabwe Independent*, however, recently disputed this optimism. "There has been a lot said of late of the 'Milosevic effect,'" the paper wrote. "That is not happening here." And while many have drawn parallels between Yugoslavia's revolution and the recent uprising in Ivory Coast, one analyst noted a crucial difference between Gbagbo and Yugoslavia's new leader, one that could indicate that Ivory Coast's battles for political succession may not be over. "Where Vojislav Kostunica succeeded by uniting the previously fractious Serbian opposition, the Ivorian opposition remains deeply divided," he wrote.

Whatever Gbagbo's perceived shortcomings, the new Ivorian government has made a clear attempt to break with the ruling style of past regimes and to move away from the "cult of personality" politics that have characterized many African states. The government recently prohibited the display of the president's picture in hotels, airports, and other public places, and news broadcasts will no longer center around the president's daily activities. Moreover, there is talk of consensus between political elites.

"Elections have been set for December, when the parliament will vote on the constitutionality of Gbagbo's presidency," says Sorokobi. "This is a wonderful thing. I am proud to say that African people have realized that they are the power. Ivory Coast has set an example for Africa, for other countries manipulated by the oversized ambitions of politicians. If leaders are incompetent, the people can overthrow them. Two hundred people died to achieve this in Ivory Coast."

[Email](#) [Letter to the Editor](#)

[About Us](#) | [Your Privacy](#) | [Careers](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Help](#)

Africana.com web site © Copyright 1999-2003 Africana.com Inc.
Microsoft® Encarta® Africana content © Copyright 1999-2003 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved to media owners