



Centre for Democracy & Development  
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# Old Elites, New Fears

## Escalated Risks on the Road to Côte d'Ivoire's 2025 Election



### Briefing Paper

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# Executive Summary

Ivorians are scheduled to vote in presidential elections in October 2025 amid heightened apprehension, as the prospect of pre-electoral and post-electoral instability looms large. Côte d'Ivoire's political trajectory since independence has been one of a fragile governance under persistent strain. After decades of economic and social stability under Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the 1990s showed economic crisis and political contestation that redrew the political landscape. The rise of Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara as prominent political figures coincided with the weaponization of ivoirité, a politicized identity concept that eventually excluded Ouattara from the race at some points and entrenched north-south divisions. This culminated in a 1999 coup, a 2002 rebellion dividing the country, and a violent post-electoral crisis in 2010-2011 that left deep wounds and unresolved grievances. Since then, political alliances and party dynamics have shifted dramatically. The historic coalition between the Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) and The Rassemblement des Houphouëtistes Pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP) fractured in 2020, amid Ouattara's controversial third-term bid enabled by a 2016 constitutional reset. Opposition leaders such as Gbagbo, Blé Goudé, and Simone Gbagbo formed new political parties, while the death of PDCI leader Henri Konan Bédié in 2023 propelled Tidjane Tiam at the head of the party. The Ivorian opposition remains fragmented, hindered further by legal mechanisms excluding key candidates including Tidjane Thiam, Gbagbo, and Blé Goudé reflecting the ongoing use of citizenship laws and other tricks as political tools.

The forthcoming 2025 election echoes past crises, with Ouattara seeking a fourth term amid accusations of democratic erosion and normalized exclusionary politics. Despite strong economic growth under Ouattara, much of the population remains disconnected from these gains. The personalization of politics and dominance of veteran elites hinder democratic renewal and institutional consolidation. Selective legalism threatens social cohesion and raises the risk of renewed violence. In the meantime, within the region, Côte



d'Ivoire faces deteriorated relations with northern neighbors Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, triggered by diplomatic standoffs and shifting alliances such as the emergence of the Alliance of the Sahel States (AES). These tensions beside their ability to jeopardize vital economic ties, regional security cooperation, and social integration, fail to consider the complex regional environment which can exacerbate internal vulnerabilities, making the 2025 election a critical juncture for both national stability and regional stability and diplomacy. Without inclusive political reforms and renewed institutional legitimacy, Côte d'Ivoire risks perpetuating cycles of exclusion and conflict that have long defined its postcolonial politics.





# Introduction

In October 2025, Côte d'Ivoire is scheduled to hold its next presidential election amid mounting political uncertainty and rising social tensions. As the second-largest economy in West Africa—after Nigeria—and the economic powerhouse of francophone West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire plays a pivotal role in regional stability.<sup>1</sup> Yet, fifteen years after its devastating post-electoral crisis of 2010–2011, the country once again finds itself at a crossroads, haunted by unresolved political grievances, the return of almost the same political actors, and a fragile democratic framework. Moreover, the prevailing political climate in West Africa is unprecedentedly uncertain, given that three of Côte d'Ivoire's neighbors—Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger—have exited the ECOWAS regional bloc and are experiencing strained diplomatic relations with Côte d'Ivoire.


The Ivorian political landscape remains dominated by long-standing elites, with little sign of generational renewal or institutional reform. At the center of this dynamic is President Alassane Ouattara, now 83, who has been in power since his highly contested electoral victory in 2011. Re-elected in 2015, Ouattara amended the Constitution in 2016, a move that later enabled him to seek a controversial third term in 2020. Despite widespread opposition and a boycott by major political parties, he was declared the winner with 94.27% of the vote. The 2020 election was marred by violent clashes, with official sources reporting at least 85 deaths, though the true toll may be higher.<sup>2</sup>

As the 2025 elections approach, the specter of exclusionary politics and electoral violence looms large once more. Many observers speak of *déjà vu*. The language of exclusion is back. Veteran politicians monopolize the stage, while emerging voices contend for recognition. Conversations on social media, television debates, and taxis echo a growing fear: that history may repeat itself. Trust in institutions feels distant—if not broken. For many, elections are no longer about choice, but about survival.


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<sup>[1]</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce. "Côte d'Ivoire – Market Overview." Country Commercial Guide, International Trade Administration, 2024.

<sup>[2]</sup> Civicus Monitor. "Controversial Presidential Elections: Dozens Killed in Violence, Clashes." Last modified November 2020. Accessed June 3, 2025. <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/Controversial-presidential-elections-dozens-killed-violence-clashes/>.



Writing this brief took about six months during which I closely monitored the Ivorian political scene, often discussing it with friends both in Côte d'Ivoire and elsewhere in West Africa. Still, it was initially informed by interviews I conducted in Abidjan in January 2025, but it was also informed by an extensive monitoring of the media discourses of the key political actors and their close allies, and the literature on the recent history of conflict in the country. The paper returns to key moments in Côte d'Ivoire's recent political past, discussing how cycles of exclusion and violence have shaped the present. And it asks: what can be done—now—to break the pattern? Furthermore, the paper analyses the deterioration of diplomatic relations between Côte d'Ivoire and some of its neighbors—and its effects on the calm conduct of the election, its organization, and even on Côte d'Ivoire's domestic politics.





# A Legacy of a Democracy Under Strain

On April 11, 2011, pro-Ouattara forces, backed by United Nations (UN) peacekeepers and the French military, captured President Laurent Gbagbo in his private residence in Cocody. The scene broadcast on cable television was unprecedented.<sup>3</sup> It marked the end of a four-month-long post-electoral conflict and paved the way for Alassane Ouattara's accession to power. He was officially sworn in one month later. Yet, this dramatic episode was merely the culmination of a long political process that had begun in the early 1990s and came to define the nature of politics in Côte d'Ivoire.

At the start of 1990s, Côte d'Ivoire had been under the uninterrupted rule of Félix Houphouët-Boigny since independence in 1960. Although the 1960s and 70s were marked by what was then celebrated as the "Ivorian economic miracle," by the 1990s the country was experiencing a deep financial crisis, coupled with mounting political unrest.<sup>4</sup> Laurent Gbagbo, a rising opposition figure, began challenging the one-party system and mobilizing popular support for democratic reforms.<sup>5</sup> Bowing to growing internal and international pressure, Houphouët-Boigny organized the very first multiparty elections in 1990 (and won it)—an event that reflected the broader democratic wave sweeping across the African continent.


Alassane Ouattara emerged on the Ivorian national scene in this shifting political environment. Until then, he was a former Governor of the West African Central Bank (BCEAO) and advisor at the International Monetary Fund. President Houphouët-Boigny appointed him twice to key positions. In 1990, President Houphouët-Boigny appointed him to lead the economic recovery committee in response to a deepening fiscal crisis. Later that year, Houphouët-Boigny elevated him to the position of Prime Minister, signaling a technocratic turn in the regime's economic governance.

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<sup>[3]</sup> Al Jazeera English, Arrest of Laurent Gbagbo – Ivory Coast, YouTube video, 2:39, posted April 11, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CDokcR-qgl>.

<sup>[4]</sup> Corinne Moutout, Chute des Cours du Cacao, Impérite des Dirigeants. Qui croit encore au « miracle » ivoirien ? Le Monde diplomatique, December 1988, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1988/12/MOUTOUT/41324>.

<sup>[5]</sup> Frégeat, Bernard. Marcel Amondji: Félix Houphouët Boigny et la Côte d'Ivoire, l'envers d'une légende, Karthala, juillet 1984; Laurent Gbagbo: Pour une alternative démocratique, l'Harmattan, septembre 1983; Pascal Koffi Teya: Côte d'Ivoire: le Roi est nu, l'Harmattan, février 1985. Recherches Internationales, 1986, vol. 19, no 1, p. 110-113.



Following Houphouët-Boigny's death in December 1993, a bitter power struggle ensued between Henri Konan Bédié, President of the National Assembly and perceived heir apparent, and Alassane Ouattara, who was supported by segments of the political and economic elite.<sup>6</sup> Bédié ultimately prevailed, securing the presidency in 1995 through an election boycotted by Gbagbo, the longtime opposition figure, and from which Ouattara was barred due to contested claims about his Ivorian citizenship.

It was during this period that the controversial concept of *ivoirité* was introduced and weaponized as a tool of political exclusion. Ostensibly meant to promote national identity and cultural values, *ivoirité* was used to delegitimize Ouattara by casting doubt on his Ivorian origins—alleging, in particular, that his father was from Haute Volta (now Burkina Faso). This exclusionary discourse entrenched deep socio-political divisions between the predominantly Muslim and Dioula-speaking north, which increasingly felt marginalized, and the Christian-majority south, which continued to hold the levers of power.<sup>7</sup> Since the introduction of the *ivoirité* concept, Côte d'Ivoire has been engulfed in exclusionary identity politics, marked by a virulent nationalism in the south that targets France, regional immigrants, and Ivorians deemed “non-natives” based on origin, religion, or name, deepening social divisions and reinforcing discriminatory notions of citizenship.<sup>8</sup>

The crisis reached a new climax on December 24, 1999, when President Bédié was overthrown in a military coup led by General Robert Guéï.<sup>9</sup> The 2000 presidential election, organized by the military leaders, once again excluded both Ouattara and Bédié. Laurent Gbagbo, the only major candidate remaining, was elected president.<sup>10</sup> However, his legitimacy was never fully recognized in the north, further fueling resentment. On September 19, 2002, Robert Guéï, his wife, family members, and bodyguards were killed during a failed coup against Laurent Gbagbo in Abidjan.<sup>11</sup> The ensuing simmering discontent quickly erupted into an armed rebellion led by Guillaume Soro, a former student union leader, and his Forces Nouvelles, with the goal to march on Abidjan and overthrow Gbagbo's government.

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[6] Francis Akindès, “Côte d'Ivoire since 1993: The Risky Reinvention of a Nation,” in *African Studies Review* (2008), 38–58.

[7] Jibrin Ibrahim and Dauda Garuba. 2009. “From Fact-finding Mission to Intervention: Reflections on Civil Society Efforts in the Quest for Sustainable Peace in Côte d'Ivoire”, in Jibrin Ibrahim & Oumar Ndongo (Editors), *Resolving West African Conflicts: Early Warning, Early Response*, Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, pp. 31-70.


[8] Banégas, Richard. Côte d'Ivoire: Patriotism, ethnonationalism and other African modes of self-writing. *African affairs*, 2006, vol. 105, no 421, p. 535-552.

[9] Daddieh, Cyril K. Elections and ethnic violence in Côte d'Ivoire: The unfinished business of succession and democratic transition. *African issues*, 2001, vol. 29, no 1-2, p. 14-19.

[10] Banegas, Richard. Côte d'Ivoire: Patriotism, ethnonationalism and other African modes of self-writing. *African affairs*, 2006, vol. 105, no 421, p. 535-552.

[11] Rodrigue Loué, “Côte d'Ivoire: le procès de l'assassinat du général Robert Guéï est ouvert,” *Africanews*, January 25, 2016, <https://fr.africanews.com/2016/01/25/cote-d-ivoire-le-proces-de-l-assassinat-du-general-robert-guei-est-ouvert/>.





In just a few days, on September 20, 2022, the rebel forces seized control of the cities of Korhogo in the North and then Bouake in the center, effectively splitting the country into two: the north under rebel control, and the south under Gbagbo's administration.<sup>8</sup> It is important to note, however, that a substantial body of critical scholarship, including work by the Center for Democracy and Development West Africa that challenges such reductive geographic and cultural framings of the Ivorian conflict.<sup>12</sup> These narratives, often echoed in mainstream media, misrepresent the country's religious landscape by ignoring census data that reveal a far more nuanced spatial distribution of religious communities. More problematically, they depoliticize the conflict by attributing it primarily to religious difference, thereby obscuring its deeper structural roots in socio-economic inequality, contested citizenship, and political exclusion.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, what followed were eight years of tense ceasefires, failed peace efforts, and political stalemates. In 2007, the Ouagadougou Peace Accords brought President Gbagbo and Rebel leader Guillaume Soro together in a fragile political compromise. Soro was appointed Prime Minister, and plans for presidential elections were set in motion.<sup>14</sup> However, it would take until 2010 for the long-delayed election to finally be held.

The presidential race pitted incumbent Gbagbo against Ouattara, who was supported by the rebel forces, with Henri Konan Bédié endorsing Ouattara in the second round. The Independent Electoral Commission declared Ouattara the winner, but the Constitutional Council—loyal to Gbagbo—annulled the results from the north and proclaimed Gbagbo president. The international community, including the African Union, ECOWAS, the United Nations, and several Western powers, recognized Alassane Ouattara as the legitimate winner.<sup>15</sup>

This dual claim to the presidency plunged the country into a violent post-electoral crisis. The violence escalated rapidly, particularly in Abidjan, resulting in more than 3,000 deaths and the displacement of at least 700 000 people.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>[12]</sup> Jibrin Ibrahim and Dauda Garuba. 2009. "From Fact-finding Mission to Intervention: Reflections on Civil Society Efforts in the Quest for Sustainable Peace in Côte d'Ivoire", in Jibrin Ibrahim & Oumar Ndongo (Editors), *Resolving West African Conflicts: Early Warning, Early Response*, Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, pp. 31-70.

<sup>[13]</sup> Bassett, Thomas J. "Nord musulman et Sud chrétien": les moules médiatiques de la crise ivoirienne. *Afrique contemporaine*, 2003, vol. 206, no 2, p. 13-27

<sup>[14]</sup> Handy, Simon P. Alain. *L'Accord politique de Ouagadougou. Vers une sortie de crise pérenne en Côte d'Ivoire?*. 2008.

<sup>[15]</sup> BBC News. "Ivory Coast Timeline." BBC News, November 11, 2010. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-11917359>.

<sup>[16]</sup> United Nations Human Rights Council. Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Côte d'Ivoire. June 2011. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/710710?ln=en&v=pdf>



Gbagbo's arrest in April 2011 marked the end of the conflict, but not of the controversies that followed. Indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity, Gbagbo was acquitted in 2019. His supporters have consistently denounced what they describe as "victor's justice," pointing to the lack of accountability for the Ouattara camp in the aftermath of the violence.




# What Has Changed Since the Last Crisis?

The political landscape of Côte d'Ivoire has undergone significant changes since the early 2000s, characterized by alliances, fractures, and the reconfiguration of key political parties. Central to these developments has been the evolving relationship between major political figures and their respective parties, particularly within the framework of constitutional reforms and coalition politics.

The Parti Démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) and the Rassemblement des Démocrates Africains (RDA) shared a historically cooperative relationship but have diverged in recent years. This separation became particularly pronounced following the “Appel de Daoukro,” a pivotal moment in February 2015 when then-PDCI leader Henri Konan Bédié called on his party members and supporters to back Alassane Ouattara for the presidency. Initially, this call united the PDCI under the broader coalition known as the Rassemblement des Houphouétistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP), which aimed to continue the legacy of former Ivorian leader Félix Houphouët-Boigny. This coalition helped Ouattara to win the October 2015 elections.

However, tensions arose leading up to the 2020 presidential elections. Bédié opposed Ouattara's candidacy, arguing that he should no longer represent the coalition. This marked a definitive rupture, with Bédié forming a new coalition aimed at removing Ouattara from power. The fallout culminated in the dissolution of the PDCI-RHDP partnership in 2020, a significant moment in Ivorian politics. Since then, the PDCI has remained a critical but isolated actor, particularly following Bédié's death in 2023.

A major turning point came with the adoption of a new constitution in 2016, one year into Ouattara's second term, which reset presidential term limits. This change effectively allowed Ouattara to seek re-election, as the constitutional “compteur” was set to zero under the new legal framework.



Despite initial suggestions that he might not run, Ouattara's 2020 New Year's address made clear his intention to continue serving, citing his good health and commitment to the nation. The 2020 elections solidified Ouattara's leadership within the RHDP, but also deepened divisions with opposition leaders, including Bédié, who contested the legality and legitimacy of his candidacy.


While the ruling coalition under Ouattara's RHDP consolidated power during this third term, the opposition landscape grew increasingly fragmented. A key figure, Laurent Gbagbo, who returned to Côte d'Ivoire after his acquittal by the International Criminal Court in The Hague, faced legal challenges at home. Gbagbo and Charles Blé Goudé are accused of robbing the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) following requisitions ordered by the last Gbagbo government during the 2010–2011 post-electoral crisis. Gbagbo's political career faced constraints at home even though he was acquitted by ICC. Nonetheless, he broke away from the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) to form the Parti des Peuples Africains – Côte d'Ivoire (PPA-CI), signaling his intent to remain active in politics.

Blé Goudé, another significant opposition figure, followed a similar path, establishing his own political party after parting ways with the FPI. Meanwhile, Gbagbo's ex-wife, Simone Gbagbo, also entered the political arena by founding the Mouvement des Générations Capables (MGC). Unlike her former husband, Simone Gbagbo received a presidential amnesty, allowing her to engage freely in politics without pending legal issues.

The death of Henri Konan Bédié in 2023 marked a significant transition for the PDCI. His successor, Tidjane Thiam, former CEO of Credit Suisse, has inherited the challenge of maintaining the party's relevance in a political environment increasingly dominated by the RHDP and fragmented opposition movements. The PDCI's future will likely depend on Thiam's ability to forge new alliances or present a compelling alternative to the RHDP's governance. However, Thiam was initially ruled ineligible to run in the upcoming presidential election due to holding dual Ivorian French nationality.<sup>17</sup> Although he renounced his French citizenship in March, he was still removed from the official list of candidates on June 4. Clearly, the barring of Thiam mirrors the very mechanisms once used against Ouattara.

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<sup>[17]</sup> Reuters. "Ivory Coast Court Strikes Thiam's Name Off Electoral Roll over French Nationality." Reuters, April 22, 2025.



The political dynamics in Côte d'Ivoire are shaped by a mix of historical legacies, constitutional reforms, and individual ambitions. As the nation moves forward, the RHDP's dominance and the fractured opposition's attempts at cohesion will continue to define its political trajectory. The upcoming months will reveal whether new coalitions or leaders can challenge the status quo established under Alassane Ouattara's leadership considering that three of the top opposition leaders have been removed from the contest.



# The Specter of Electoral Crisis

To this day, the sponsors, funding sources, and alliances behind the 2000 rebellion remain only partially known,<sup>18</sup> highlighting the enduring opacity of a conflict that neither the Gbagbo nor the Ouattara administrations have been able to fully resolve. The looming electoral crisis, which is fast avalanching, is prefaced by Ouattara's bid for a fourth term while using the law he helped put in place to bar key opposition candidates from participating. In a sense, the 2025 election in Côte d'Ivoire unmistakably echoes the 2010 electoral showdown—not merely as a rematch of individual personalities, but as the return of unresolved tensions, institutional fragilities, and above all, cyclical exclusionary politics that define who can and cannot be a candidate.

President Ouattara's own political trajectory has been shaped by exclusion, marginalization, and personal risk. Once a victim of the ivoirité politics, he learned from his own victimhood how to better instrumentalize the law, entrench incumbency, and marginalize his political rivals. The full-scale rebellion which broke out in the North of the country in 2002, was linked to the Ivorian political class's inability to manage "the underlying issues of citizenship and ethnic identity" following the death of Houphouët-Boigny.<sup>19</sup> The barring of key political actors from contesting in the 2025 elections is reckless at best as it ignites the social tension already in the months leading up to the election.

The re-emergence of key actors from the 2010 crisis, albeit in inverted roles, underscores a troubling continuity in Ivorian political life.


This year, Ouattara seeks a fourth term amid accusations of democratic backsliding.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>[18]</sup> Michel Galy, "Politologie d'une rébellion: Une 'gouvernance par la violence' au Nord de la Côte d'Ivoire?," *Cultures & Conflits*, no. 65 (2007): 137–155.

<sup>[19]</sup> Jibrin Ibrahim and Dauda Garuba. 2009. "From Fact-finding Mission to Intervention: Reflections on Civil Society Efforts in the Quest for Sustainable Peace in Côte d'Ivoire", in Jibrin Ibrahim & Oumar Ndongo (Editors), *Resolving West African Conflicts: Early Warning, Early Response*, Abuja: Centre for Democracy and Development, pp. 31-70.

<sup>[20]</sup> During its second ordinary congress on June 21, 2025, in Abidjan, the RHDP nominated outgoing president Alassane Ouattara as its candidate for the October 25 presidential election. He has until August 26 to formally accept the nomination



This reversal of positions exposes not only the fragility of democratic norms but also a deeper crisis of political ethics, where exclusion has become a normalized strategy rather than a moment of national reckoning. As Achille Mbembe and others have argued in the context of postcolonial African polities, the state becomes a theatre of repetition, where elites exchange roles without altering the structural logic of domination.


Nothing speaks more in favor of President Ouattara than the strength of Côte d'Ivoire's economy, as reflected in data from credible institutions. According to the World Bank, over the past decade, Ouattara has led the country to become one of the fastest-growing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, driven by its leadership in cocoa and cashew production and a growing focus on industrial transformation. Between 2012 and 2019, the country averaged 8.2% annual GDP growth and maintained resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Growth rebounded to 6.5% between 2021 and 2023 and is projected to remain strong through 2026, fueled by investment, consumption, and favorable export prices.<sup>21</sup> But this normative economic development is not necessarily reflected in Ivorians' daily lives when considering the views of people interviewed for this paper.

The fragmentation of the opposition and the failed generational transition within the PDCI are symptomatic of a broader crisis of political renewal. Côte d'Ivoire's party system remains dominated by figures from the liberation or post-independence era, leaving little room for new leadership or alternative political imaginaries. This personalization of politics ensures that electoral contests remain about individual survival rather than institutional consolidation. As Peter Ekeh might suggest, we are witnessing the persistent entanglement of the "primordial public" (identity and loyalty to ethno-political elites) with the "civic public" (formal institutions), making elections less about accountability and more about existential power struggles.

Furthermore, the current pre-electoral environment is marred by selective legalism: the rule of law is invoked not to ensure fairness but to filter participation. The barring of candidates on technical or judicial grounds—while legal in form—betrays a political use of the judiciary, weakening public trust. This not only reignites historical grievances but also raises the specter of violence, as those who feel excluded from the ballot may be tempted to seek redress through extra-institutional means, as in 2010–2011.

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<sup>[21]</sup> World Bank. "The World Bank in Côte d'Ivoire: Overview." World Bank. Accessed June 2, 2025. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cotedivoire/overview>.



As of June 4, 2025, the Commission Électorale Indépendante (CIE) confirmed that Tidjane Thiam of the PDCI, former president Laurent Gbagbo of the PPA-CI, Charles Blé Goudé of COJEP, and Guillaume Soro<sup>22</sup> will not appear on the final electoral roll. With their candidacies now officially barred, these political heavyweights will need to designate substitutes if their parties hope to remain contenders in the presidential race. This announcement—marking the publication of a finalized list of nearly 9 million registered voters—underscores the CEI’s central role as both arbiter of electoral legitimacy and, increasingly, as a gatekeeper of political participation.<sup>23</sup>

Between 19 October and 10 November 2024, the CEI conducted a revision of the electoral register. To encourage broader participation, the government facilitated access to key civil documents—such as nationality certificates and birth certificates—by waiving associated fees.<sup>24</sup> All Ivorian citizens were allowed to file a claim in the event of an inconsistency or for any other reason until March 22, 2025. Despite these efforts, opposition parties have voiced persistent concerns over the integrity of the process and are demanding an independent audit of the voters' roll to bolster public confidence and ensure transparency ahead of upcoming elections.

It is worth recalling that Gbagbo, Goudé, and Soro were struck from the electoral rolls due to convictions by the Ivorian judiciary. As for Tidjane Thiam, his disqualification stems from issues related to his nationality. Although he has since renounced his French citizenship, the court considered the fact that he was still a French national at the time he registered on the electoral list. Now that the verdict has been rendered and the politically excommunicated have learned their fate, the question is how their respective political factions will respond. As the country heads toward a high-stakes electoral contest, the Commission’s decisions raise pressing questions about procedural fairness, institutional independence, and the future of political pluralism in Ivorian democracy.

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<sup>[22]</sup> Soro—former rebel leader, former Prime Minister, and former President of the National Assembly—has seen his political vehicle, Générations et Peuples Solidaires (GPS), officially dissolved in 2024. Without a formal party apparatus and barred from the electoral roll, Soro’s political leverage now hinges on informal networks, diaspora support, and potential alignments with other oppositional actors.

<sup>[23]</sup> Al Jazeera. “Key Ivory Coast Opposition Figures Banned from October Presidential Vote.” Al Jazeera, June 4, 2025. Accessed July 10, 2025.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/6/4/key-ivory-coast-opposition-figures-banned-from-october-presidential-vote>

<sup>[24]</sup> Africa24 TV. “Côte d’Ivoire – Révision des listes électorales: l’opposition dénonce des irrégularités et une période trop courte.” Africa24, October 22, 2024. Accessed July 21, 2025. <https://africa24tv.com/cote-divoire-revision-des-listes-electorales-lopposition-denonce-des-irregularites-et-une-periode-trop-courte>.





Ultimately, the 2025 election risks becoming not a moment of democratic consolidation but a recursive return to crisis, unless there is a collective reckoning with the cyclical nature of exclusion and a genuine effort to re-legitimize institutions beyond partisan logics. Without such transformation, the rematch of 2010 will be less about the past and more about the persistent failure to move forward.



# Diplomacy, Time of Fracture, and Fault Lines


Over the last few years, the diplomatic relations between Côte d'Ivoire and three of its francophone neighbors (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) have deteriorated. It used to enjoy amicable relations with all three countries until very recently. For example, on July 10, 2022, 49 Ivorian soldiers were arrested at Bamako airport. They were charged with mercenaryism and taken into custody, while Ivorian authorities stated that the soldiers were in Mali as part of logistical support operations for the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the now terminated United Nations' mission in Mali.<sup>25</sup> A diplomatic standoff ensued between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, with Togo acting as ECOWAS' mediator. The UN has acknowledged an administrative failure leading to discrepancies in the arrival of the Ivorian soldiers in Mali, which the Malian authorities interpreted as a disavowal of Abidjan. The mediation of Togo led to a de-escalation of the crisis in December 2022. An Ivorian delegation led by the Minister of Defense traveled to Bamako and signed a memorandum with the Malian authorities, the contents of which remain undisclosed.<sup>26</sup> However, the diplomatic rupture has left a significant residue of mistrust, and perceptions of Ivorian interference in Mali's transitional governance remain salient within political and security circles in Bamako.

Beyond this diplomatic standoff, the recent evolution of relations between Côte d'Ivoire and Mali must be understood within the broader context of a redefinition of national sovereignties in West Africa, marked by the birth of a new regional block: The Alliance of the Sahel States (AES). Additionally, growing distrust of traditional Western partnerships by the AES countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) and the heightened polarization around issues of security, governance, and legitimacy contributed to further stress the relation between Côte Ivoire and AES.

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<sup>[25]</sup> Studio Tamani. "Affaire des militaires ivoiriens : 20 ans de prison pour les 46 soldats et la peine de mort pour les 3 femmes." Studio Tamani, December 30, 2022. <https://www.studiotamani.org/123907-affaire-des-militaires-ivoiriens-20-ans-de-prison-pour-les-46-soldats-et-la-peine-de-mort-pour-les-3-femmes>.

<sup>[26]</sup> Zongo, Daouda. "Affaire des 46 soldats ivoiriens: une délégation ivoirienne s'est rendue à Bamako." Wakat Séra, December 22, 2022. <https://www.wakatsera.com/affaire-des-46-soldats-ivoiriens-une-delegation-ivoirienne-sest-rendue-a-bamako/>



The case of the 49 Ivorian soldiers served as a catalyst for the deterioration of already fragile diplomatic ties between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire. From Bamako's perspective, the crisis became an opportunity to assert enhanced sovereignty in the face of perceived interference from a "collaborator" country aligned with a neocolonial order, notably represented by France and its regional allies such as ECOWAS. This posture can be interpreted as an attempt to reshape regional power relations by rejecting postcolonial diplomatic frameworks in favor of a more assertive—perhaps populist—foreign policy, where discursive hostility towards certain neighbors becomes a domestic political asset.

The AES member states perceive Côte d'Ivoire under the leadership of Ouattara as an extension of the liberal, pro-Western model, the kind of model they are striving to get rid of at home. In July 2024, the Burkinabè government announced it had uncovered "a command center in Abidjan aimed at destabilizing the country."<sup>27</sup> Côte d'Ivoire is presented as serving as a "rear base" for opposition forces and enemies seeking to destabilize Burkina Faso. Meanwhile, Côte d'Ivoire rejected these claims, arguing that they are part of a broader strategy of power consolidation, where externalizing threats serves to legitimize regimes born of military coups.


While Ouattara was not the president of ECOWAS during the standoff between the soon-to-be AES countries and ECOWAS during the July 2022 coup in Niger, Nigeriens perceive Ouattara as a key architect of that mobilization seeking to restore deposed president Bazoum. At least two key informants from Niger responding to the question about Niger diplomatic relations with Côte d'Ivoire pointed out that Ouattara's words, largely reported in local media: "Côte d'Ivoire will provide a battalion and has made all the necessary financial arrangements for the operation. If it is expected to last three months, budgetary provisions will be made to ensure that our soldiers and officers participating in the mission lack nothing. Côte d'Ivoire is ready. I have just instructed the Chief of the Defense Staff to begin mobilizing troops for their participation in this ECOWAS operation."<sup>28</sup>

In practice, diplomatic relations between these states have entered a phase of cautious recalibration, marked more by mistrust than genuine cooperation.

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<sup>[27]</sup> Le Faso.net. "Le Burkina dénonce un 'centre des opérations' à Abidjan pour déstabiliser le pays," Lefaso.net, July 2024, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article133191>.

<sup>[28]</sup> ActuNiger.com. "Force en attente de la CEDEAO au Niger: le président Ouattara annonce la mobilisation d'un bataillon de 850 à 1 100 soldats ivoiriens." Accessed June 26, 2025. [https://www.actuniger.com/international/19419-force-en-attente-de-la-cedeao-au-niger-le-president-ouattara-annonce-la-mobilisation-d-un-bataillon-de-850-a-1-100-soldats-ivoiriens.html?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.actuniger.com/international/19419-force-en-attente-de-la-cedeao-au-niger-le-president-ouattara-annonce-la-mobilisation-d-un-bataillon-de-850-a-1-100-soldats-ivoiriens.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com).



While symbolic gestures of rapprochement have occurred—most notably the Togolese-mediated release of the Ivorian soldiers—bilateral ties remain fragile. The ideological divide between ECOWAS and AES, competing geopolitical alignments (Russia vs. the West), and an underlying regional crisis of trust all make a swift return to diplomatic normalcy unlikely. When Niger denounced the military cooperation with the USA and asked US troops to leave, Washington redeployed its military previously in Niger to Côte d'Ivoire further complicating the relations between the two countries.


Ultimately, these tensions reflect deep fractures in the postcolonial state-building project in West Africa, where models of sovereignty, sources of legitimacy, ideological orientations, and conceptions of security now diverge sharply. Côte d'Ivoire thus finds itself in a precarious position: both a regional power and a fragile country that is not trusted by some of its neighbors. This situation calls for a more agile foreign policy—grounded in subregional dialogue, a clear reaffirmation of national security interests, and a refusal to be drawn into politically motivated narratives. After all, in matters of statecraft, policymaking should not be guided by personal sentiments or individual interests, but by the rational pursuit of long-term, strategic objectives that serve the collective welfare and national interest.

Heading into a contentious presidential election under a cloud of mutual suspicion and rhetorical antagonism with three close francophone states—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—could be profoundly destabilizing for Côte d'Ivoire, particularly in light of the region's interwoven political and socio-economic realities. Historically, Côte d'Ivoire has served as an anchor of relative stability and diplomatic pragmatism in Francophone West Africa, maintaining close ties with its neighbors through frameworks such as the Conseil de l'Entente and ECOWAS. Beyond those regional tools, bilateral relations between Côte d'Ivoire and the AES countries used to be strong. For example, during former President Blaise Compaoré's tenure in Burkina Faso, a friendship and cooperation treaty was signed between the two countries in 2008.<sup>29</sup> This bilateral cooperation agreement was a shared will of both states to strengthen cooperation and friendship. It was perceived as a positive model of West African integration and a tool for development in the subregion.

The deterioration of these ties signals not just a diplomatic rift but a potential fracturing of the regional order.

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<sup>[29]</sup> "Traité d'amitié et de Coopération : Ouagadougou accueille la 8<sup>e</sup> conférence au sommet," Présidence du Faso, July 25, 2019, <https://www.presidencedufaso.bf/traite-damitie-et-de-cooperation-ouagadougou-accueille-la-8e-conference-au-sommet/>.



When the AES countries decided to exit ECOWAS, the regional organization could not rely on Côte d'Ivoire, which has a natural historical and geopolitical proximity with them more than any other ECOWAS country to negotiate their return. This fragmentation is particularly alarming given the structural interdependence of the Ivorian economy with those of its Sahelian neighbors. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger collectively account for a substantial share of cross-border informal trade and are integral to transit corridors, notably the Abidjan–Ouagadougou–Niamey axis.<sup>30</sup>

Any further disruption in these flows risks undermining Côte d'Ivoire's port revenues, food security, and regional transport logistics. Moreover, the social dimension of this interdependence cannot be understated: the largest foreign populations in Côte d'Ivoire hail from precisely these three countries. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Burkina Faso and Mali, and Guinea are the provenance of the top three immigrant communities of Côte d'Ivoire, playing key roles in the informal economy and the country's social fabric. Côte d'Ivoire is the second leading destination for international migrants in Africa, after South Africa, and its city, Abidjan, ranks among the continent's top three migration hubs, alongside Johannesburg and Nairobi.<sup>31</sup> In this context, nationalist political rhetoric or securitization of borders in response to diplomatic tensions may fuel xenophobic sentiment, disrupt labor flows, and deepen existing social fissures—particularly in urban centers already strained by youth unemployment and contested narratives of national identity.

Another factor to consider in the assessment of the pre-electoral political climate in Côte d'Ivoire is that the three Sahelian countries are engaged in protracted counterinsurgency efforts against transnational terrorist groups. The security externalities of these conflicts increasingly spill over national borders. In this context, it is imperative for relatively stable coastal countries such as Côte d'Ivoire to adopt a posture of strategic cooperation—through intelligence-sharing, coordinated border management, and joint security initiatives—to prevent potential insurgent incursions, particularly during periods of heightened political fragility like elections. Far from a mere bilateral fallout, the present climate threatens to recalibrate Côte d'Ivoire's geopolitical posture in the region, with implications for electoral stability, regional integration, and the broader West African security architecture.

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<sup>[30]</sup> African Export-Import Bank, *Informal Cross-Border Trade in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Region 2023* (Cairo: African Export-Import Bank, 2023), <https://www.afreximbank.com/reports/informal-cross-border-trade-in-the-economic-community-of-west-african-states-ecowas-region-2023/>.

<sup>[31]</sup> TRAORÉ, Nohoua et TORVIKEY, Gertrude Dzifa. *Migrants in the Plantation Economy in Côte d'Ivoire: A Historical Perspective*. *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader*, 2022, p. 189-208.



# Conclusion


Ouattara's own political journey reflects a strategic resilience and long-term investment in executive ambition, which he finally attained and sustained for 15 years. Now, at the twilight of legacy, will he relinquish his seat and let history honor him as a builder and not a breaker? Or will he cling to the crown deploying legal tactics at the risk of taking his country through another path of costly instability and uncertainty? What about former President Laurent Gbagbo—a man who knows both the inner workings of the Ivorian presidential palace and the corridors of the International Criminal Court, having spent nearly a decade in each? Why is such a man on another mission to conquer back power at the expense of potentially bringing more death and desolation in his country? As a former professor of history, he is uniquely positioned to understand the weight of history and the consequences of political obstinacy.

*"I have no recommendation. I only have prayers for my country. All the elites contesting this election know the price of violence. They have seen it before. I have no recommendation for anyone."*<sup>32</sup> These words, spoken by an Imam based in Abidjan, encapsulate a pervasive sentiment of dread and political fatigue—a fear of déjà vu rooted in Côte d'Ivoire's history of electoral violence. They also highlight the current incongruity between the gravity of the moment and the apparent political inertia. In the absence of institutional guarantees or credible mechanisms for conflict prevention, appeals to divine intervention become a substitute for political solutions. Yet what Côte d'Ivoire requires at this juncture is not fatalism, but a renewal of political leadership. One that is responsive to the country's complex social fabric and committed to inclusive governance, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, or migratory background.


More broadly, the West African region continues to suffer from a legitimacy crisis. In much of the region, democratic minimalism—where basic compliance with constitutional term limits or peaceful transfer of power is seen as exceptional rather than expected—is progressively becoming normalized.

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<sup>[32]</sup> Key Informant Interview in Abidjan, January 2025



When President Macky Sall accepted electoral defeat in Senegal in April 2024, regional bodies such as ECOWAS were quick to praise his decision not to pursue a third term, framing it as a heroic act. Meanwhile, the sustained mobilization by Senegalese youth, which played a decisive role in compelling adherence to constitutional norms, received scant recognition. This reflects a broader deficit in democratic accountability: West African incumbents are rarely held to account for democratic backsliding, poor governance, or the systemic weakening of the rule of law. If Côte d'Ivoire's current leadership—both incumbent and opposition—fails to prevent renewed instability, they must be held collectively accountable. The stakes are too high, and the historical lessons too vivid, to permit another cycle of elite impunity and political violence.





# About the Author

Dr. Lassane Ouédraogo is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Nazi Boni University in Burkina Faso. His research sits at the intersection of media, governance, and political mobilization in Francophone West Africa. He is particularly interested in how narratives of legitimacy, exclusion, and dissent are shaped and contested in public discourse.

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His reflections in this paper draw from fieldwork in Abidjan, regional political conversations, and long-standing scholarly engagement with the Ivorian political landscape.








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