



Cote D'Ivoire's High-Stake Presidential Election

Ivorians will head to the polls to vote in a presidential election on 31 October 2020. The election is already causing severe tensions along long-standing political and ethnic divides, raising security risks in the country.

With only a few weeks to the elections, the president of CEI announced that the 2020 provisional electoral list, indicating a 14% increase in the number of registered voters from 6,595,790 in 2018 to 7,500,035 voters in 2020¹. A total of 1,645,693 new requests were processed, although more 60,000 were rejected for non-compliance². On 14 September, the Constitutional Council approved four presidential candidates and rejected 40 candidates - three representing the major political parties and one independent.

Cote d'Ivoire Presidential candidates

Candidates	Political Party	Vote Share (2015)	Age
President Alassane Ouattara	Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP)	83.7%	78 years
Henri Konan Bédié	The Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI)	Did not run	87 years
Pascal N'Guessan	The Ivorian Popular Front (FPI)	9.29%	67 years
Kouadio Konan Bertin	Independent	3.9%	51 years

The Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) founded in 1946 by the country's first president, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, was the ruling party from independence in 1960, until 1999 when the then president, Henri Konan Bédié, was ousted by a military coup. The Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) took over the country in 2000 when Laurent Gbagbo won the presidential election. The FPI, founded by Sangara and Laurent Gbagbo in 1982, ruled from 2000 to 2010 until it, eventually, seceded to Alassane Ouattara of the Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP), an offshoot of the PDCI formed in 1994. Ouattara has ruled the country since 2011. The transfer of power between these three political parties has dominated post-independence Ivorian politics. October's vote is set to be no different, in what is set to be a high stakes election due to Côte d'Ivoire's winner-takes-all political system that bestows all the power to the presidency.

¹ <https://news.abidjan.net/h/677240.html>

² Provisional electoral list- Coulibaly Kuibriert Ibrahime: "Why there was the rejection of 60,031 people" <https://news.abidjan.net/h/677260.html>

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The third term debate

In March President Ouattara stated his intention to transfer power to the younger generation by nominating prime minister, and close ally, Amadou Gon Coulibaly as his anointed successor. But the death of Coulibaly in July, combined with successive resignations and denouncements, left it scrambling for a suitable candidate. Ouattara resolved to re-joining the race given his years of experience, and announced in August that it would be in the best interest of the nation for him to serve again. Many members of the ruling party as well as traditional authorities and chiefs are supportive of the president's third term, but are it legal?

Cote d'Ivoire's constitution limits individuals to two presidential terms. However, the latest iteration of the basic law was adopted in 2016, primarily to abolish the '*principle of Ivoirité*', which required that a presidential candidate's parent both be Ivorian. A measure that was perceived as excluding northerners, whose lineage may not originally be from Cote d'Ivoire, from running for high office. The 2016 constitution allows a presidential candidate to only certify that he or she is exclusively Ivoirian, born of an Ivorian father or mother by birth.

Whilst the constitution successfully resolved the 'Ivoirité' problem, it created a new one due to its ambiguity over when the two-term limit should begin. Ouattara has exploited this ambiguity and argued that the 2016 constitution has reset the clock thereby allowing him the right to run again. He is not the first West African president to make this claim in recent years, with both Alpha Conde in Guinea and Faure Gnassingbe in Togo employing similar justifications to extend their time in office.

Opposition parties and activities disagree with this interpretation and argue that a third mandate is unconstitutional. The executive secretary of PDCI-RDA, Prof. Maurice Kakou Guikahué argues that Article 183 in the 2016 Constitution prohibits a third term and regards Ouattara re-run as a disregard for the constitution. It states "the legislation currently in force in Côte d'Ivoire remains applicable, except for intervention of new texts, in that it has nothing contrary to this constitution". But recognising that regardless of this view, Ouattara will stand in 2020; opposition parties have begun to form coalitions against the ruling party in a bid to see the president fail. Henri Bédié and former President Laurent Gbagbo have agreed to support each other's candidate in any run-off. Ouattara's third term race could fracture an already fragile country and the rise in political tension and incidents of insecurity will most likely disrupt the electoral process.



Removing political threats

In 2018, Ouattara and his team of senior officials launched the RHDP. The new party, consisting of RDR, Union pour la démocratie et la paix en Cote d'Ivoire (UDPCI) and others, aimed at positioning Ouattara to win the first presidential round of voting. But when some parties, notably the PDCI, refused to join, the RHDP began to take down strong opponents that posed a threat to their continuation in power. Corruption allegations against Guillaume Soro, the charismatic ex-parliamentary speaker, who is currently on a self-imposed exile in France have been aggressively pursued. Shortly after Soro refused to support the merger, he announced his candidacy for president and an arrest warrant was issued by the Ivorian court on grounds of coup plotting and money laundering. In April 2019, he was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment in absentia. Ex-president, Laurent Gbagbo was also convicted in absentia by the Ivorian national court and sentenced to twenty-year imprisonment for robbing the central bank following his electoral defeat in 2010. Even those within the party have been pushed aside. Just a week after the sudden death of Prime Minister Gon Coulibaly, vice president, Daniel Kablan Duncan's resignation, which he had submitted to Ouattara in February, was accepted. Given the time the resignation was tendered, one could possibly link it to Ouattara's choice of Coulibaly over Duncan and former foreign minister, Marcel Amon Tanoh, who had already resigned in March following Coulibaly's nomination.

Despite these attempts to clear the path to victory the possibility of RHDP winning the first round of the elections is very slim. Although the FPI is split, the ruling coalition has been weakened by the departure of top officials and allies such as the Vice President Daniel Kablan Duncan, and Guillaume Soro and the PDCI.

The risk of violence

The election is set to take place nine years after a post-election crisis that killed at least 3,000 people. Although, subsequent elections in the country have been relatively peaceful, the country is still nursing old political and ethnical wounds that have not been properly addressed.

First, regional and ethnics division and tied to presidential candidates. The primary support and base of the incumbent president, Alassane Ouattara lies with Muslim northerners and the Dijoula people from the Mande tradition. Bédié, on the other hand, is often associated with the Baoule people of the central and east-central regions of the country; assumed to be the largest ethnic group and majority Christian. While, support for former president Gbagbo, the primary supporters and base for Pascal N'Guessan lies with the Bete people of the south and south west. Given Bédié's refusal to support Ouattara like he did in the 2015 elections, the elections could see a deepening of the already existing ethno-regional rivalries.

Second, recurring political exclusion may cause further unrest. The revision of the electoral list for the presidential elections in Cote d'Ivoire, resulted in the irrevocably rejection of 40 out of 44 candidates. Despite the criticisms of the third term race based on constitutional limits, Ouattara's candidacy was validated. However, Gbagbo and Soro, were excluded from the electoral list due to their convictions by the Ivorian courts. However, the two candidates appealed their cases in the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which ruled in their favour. The African Court requested that Gbagbo's conviction be excluded from his judicial record until a full judgement was delivered and requested that the Ivorian authorities allow



Guillaume Soro³ and Laurent Gbagbo⁴ to contest in the elections. Although, it's highly unlikely that these two candidates will be cleared to contest in this election, both their continued exclusion, and unexpected inclusion, will increase tensions and the risk of protests. Constitutional Council are yet to decide their fates.

Third, the response to a third term mandate in parts of the country might be violence. On one hand, Ouattara has delivered a strong economy that maintained a 7% growth rate since 2018, making Cote d'Ivoire one of the fastest growing economies in Africa. On the other, his unwillingness to relinquish power could threaten the legitimacy of the constitution and electoral process as well as deepen the divide among citizens. Since Ouattara's announcement in August, several protests have broken out in different cities, including in southeastern Bonoua, where about 300 youth marched against Ouattara's candidacy. Other demonstrations pulling hundreds of protesters were also staged in the main western cities of Guiglo, Bangolo, Facobly and Duekoue⁵.

The role for ECOWAS

There is a lot at stake in Cote d'Ivoire's presidential election. The instability that might arise as a result of this election will have wider political and security implications in West Africa. In Guinea, President Condé will also be running for a third term, further exacerbating the ongoing political tension in the region. So far, ECOWAS has been quiet as these leaders threaten the legitimacy of democracy in the region.

Regional pressure and international influence is necessary to navigate the political dynamics of the electoral process amidst the pandemic. ECOWAS mediation has been useful in past in cote d'Ivoire. Its initiative contributed in resolving the post-electoral violence of the 2010 elections during which Laurent Gbagbo was successfully persuaded to respect the result of the election, which was won by Alassane Ouattara. In this election, obvious rivalry among competing candidates in the elections could aggravate the spiralling conflicts unfolding in the country. The rejection of candidacies by the constitutional council may resurrect divisions and impending violence especially from pro-Gbagbo and Soro's supporters who may be seeking revenge. With a clear action plans, ECOWAS should facilitate constructive political dialogue with key stakeholders that result into achieving these goals:

- Avoiding violence during and after the election
- Inclusive, free and fair election
- Preventing security agents and military from using violence and violating citizens rights

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/26/african-court-requests-gbagbo-be-added-to-i-coast-electoral-roll>

⁴ <https://www.africanews.com/2020/09/17/pro-gbagbo-eds-coalition-calls-for-protests-against-ouattara-s-third-term/>

⁵ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/26/african-court-requests-gbagbo-be-added-to-i-coast-electoral-roll>



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