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Côte d'Ivoire: 2020 presidential election

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Summary

Côte d'Ivoire held a presidential election on Saturday 31 October 2020.

Controversially, incumbent President Alassane Dramane Ouattara was permitted to run for a third consecutive term. This prompted several protests in the major cities, despite an increased crackdown on the opposition.

President Ouattara was declared the winner by election authorities, securing a landslide 95 per cent of valid votes cast, helped by the opposition candidates encouraging their supporters to boycott the election in a bid to discredit Ouattara's legitimacy.

Violence has continued since the election result was announced.

1. Background

Presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire take place every five years and those eligible to vote must be aged 18 or older.

Presidential candidates must be aged 35 or older, hold only Ivorian nationality and have one Ivorian parent. If one candidate does not receive an overall majority, the top two from the first round go through to a run-off poll.

Under the terms of the amended Constitution of November 2016, presidents can be re-elected only once, limiting the number of terms they can serve to two.

Côte d'Ivoire gained independence from France in 1960. Dr Félix Houphouët-Boigny was the country's first President and held power until his death in 1993.

Between 2002 and 2007 the country effectively split in two – between the Government-controlled Christian south and the Muslim-rebel held north – in what became the First Ivorian Civil War. During President Gbagbo's state visit to Italy, groups of soldiers loyal to Brig-Gen. Gueï (formerly Chief of Staff of the Ivorian armed forces) staged a mutiny that rapidly split the country's armed forces.

Dissidents killed the Minister of State, a close ally of Gbagbo, and Brig-Gen. Gueï was also killed in Abidjan, apparently by soldiers loyal to Gbagbo.

The President returned to Côte d'Ivoire and, amid renewed inter-ethnic tension, the United States deployed 200 special forces to Korhogo, to airlift foreign nationals from the rebel-held town.

The first contingent of a UN peacekeeping force was deployed in March 2004.

In March 2007 Gbagbo's Government signed a power-sharing peace deal with the New Forces rebel group, mediated by Burkina Faso. Under the deal, New Forces leader Guillaume Soro was named prime minister.

The former rebels handed over ten northern zones to civilian administrators in May 2009, as part of the process of returning the northern part of the country to state control.

With the Civil War ending, the country returned to the polls in 2010 for a presidential election. Alassane Ouattara was declared the winner of the run-off by the Electoral Commission, but President Gbagbo refused to concede. This prompted a post-election confrontation between the two opposing sides that was to continue for four months.

Both Gbagbo and Ouattara claimed to have won the second round of the election, were sworn in to the presidency in separate ceremonies, and appointed cabinets, forming parallel administrations. Both claimed

to exercise national executive authority over state institutions and took steps to consolidate their control.¹

Post-election violence left 3,000 dead and 500,000 displaced.

In April 2011 Gbagbo was captured by Ouattara's forces and was later handed over to the International Criminal Court in The Hague to face charges of crimes against humanity. Ouattara was sworn into office the following month.

President Ouattara was re-elected with a large majority in 2015.

On 6 August 2020, the President controversially announced his candidacy to seek a third consecutive term in office, arguing the constitutional amendments introduced in 2016 effectively reset the clock on the two-term limit and allowed him to run again. The opposition claimed Ouattara's candidacy was illegal and showed contempt for the Ivorian people.

¹ Gibert, Marie. [Recent History \(Côte d'Ivoire\)](#), Europa World online, Routledge. [Retrieved 23 November 2020]

2. 2020 Presidential election

2.1 Political parties

The major political parties in Côte d'Ivoire are the ruling Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP) party, and opposition parties the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire - African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA) and the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI).

From independence in 1960 until 1990, the PDCI was the country's only legal political party and its candidates continued to serve as President until 1999. The FPI came to power after disputed elections in 2000 and ruled until 2010, when Alassane Ouattara of the RHDP was elected President.

Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP)

The (RHDP) is a centre-liberal party and was named after Côte d'Ivoire's first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. The party was founded in 2005 as an alliance of multiple parties, including the Rally of Republicans (RDR) and the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire - African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA).

Imagined as a grand liberal-conservative alliance, the party divided into two polarised camps: one dominated by the liberal RHDP, the other by the conservative PDCI. In July 2018 the PDCI left the alliance.

Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire - African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA)

The PDCI-RDA is a centre-right party and was founded in 1946, during colonial rule, as a section of the pro-independence movement African Democratic Rally (RDA). It was the only authorised political party for 44 years and, every five years, its leader Félix Houphouët-Boigny was automatically elected president and a single list of PDCI-RDA candidates was returned to the National Assembly.

Ivorian Popular Front (FPI)

The FPI is a left-wing party and was formally recognised as a political party in 1990. The party is more concerned with democratic reform than radical economic change, but accomplished very little when it held the presidency, partly as a consequence of the contested legitimacy of the 2000 election result.

2.2 Candidates

Ivory Coast's Constitutional Council cleared four candidates to run in the country's presidential election, narrowing down an initial list of 44.

Incumbent President Alassane Ouattara stood for a third consecutive term in office, with former President Henri Konan Bédié and former Prime Minister Pascal Affi N'Guessan representing the main opposition parties. Kouadio Bertin ran as an independent candidate.

Alassane Dramane Ouattara (RHDP)

Alassane Ouattara (often referred to as ADO) was born on 1 January 1942 in Dimbokro, Côte d'Ivoire. He is a Muslim with Dioula ethnicity (also known as Manding or Mande) and, in August 2018, completed the Hadj pilgrimage to Mecca, gaining the title El Hadj.

As a child, Ouattara moved to Burkina Faso with his parents and completed his school education there, before winning a scholarship to study in the United States. In 1965 he graduated from the Drexel Institute of Technology, Philadelphia, with a BSc in Business Administration; he then attended the University of Philadelphia, gaining an MA in Economics in 1967 and a PhD in the same field in 1972.

Ouattara married Dominique Folloroux (a French citizen) in 1991 in Paris and they have four children.

Before entering politics, he began his career as an economist at the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington DC, before going on to govern the Central Bank of West African States.

In November 1990, Ouattara was appointed Prime Minister by President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, for whom he served until retiring upon the President's death in December 1993. The following year Ouattara was appointed Deputy Director of the IMF

In November 2009, the Ivorian Constitutional Council confirmed Ouattara as presidential candidate for the Rally of Republicans (RDR) party in the 2010 election. He came a close second to President Gbagbo in the first round was widely recognised as the winner of the run-off poll. However, Gbagbo claimed victory and refused to step down, sparking widespread violence. The two candidates established parallel administrations until Gbagbo was arrested in April 2011.

Ouattara won a landslide re-election in 2015, gaining almost 84 per cent of votes cast. He was re-elected again in 2020 despite his earlier promises not to seek a third term, having reversed his decision following the death of his designated successor, Amadou Gon Coulibaly.

Henri Konan Bédié (PDCI—RDA)

Henri Konan Bédié was born on 5 May 1934 in Dadiékro, Côte d'Ivoire, and has Baoule ethnicity. He married Henriette Bomo Koizan in 1957 and they have four children. Bédié graduated from the University of Poitiers, France, in 1954 with a degree in Law. He gained further graduate degrees in economics and, in 1969, a PhD in economic sciences.

Before entering politics, Bédié was a diplomat and held Ambassadorial appointments at the Ivorian Embassies in the United States and Canada and is a former Permanent Representative at the United Nations.

In December 1993 Bédié assumed the presidency, following the death of Félix Houphouët-Boigny and, in October 1995, won a landslide 95.3 per cent of votes in the presidential election.

He was ousted in a military coup led by General Robert Guei on 24 December 1999, who accused Bédié of corruption and causing ethnic divisions in the country. Bédié fled to France.

He returned to the Côte d'Ivoire in September 2005 to contest the presidential election.

Pascal Affi N'Guessan (FPI)

Pascal Affi N'Guessan was born in 1953 in Bouadikro, eastern Côte d'Ivoire. He is of Agni (Akan) ethnicity and is married with seven children. In 1986 he graduated from the National Telecommunications Institute in Evry, France, with a degree in Engineering.

Before entering positions, N'Guessan worked in the telecommunications sector.

He was appointed Prime Minister by newly elected President Laurent Gbagbo in October 2000; he stood down in 2003 as part of a peace agreement aimed at ending an armed rebellion in the country.

In 2015 N'Guessan contested the presidential election and came second, winning nine per cent of votes.

Kouadio Konan Bertin (Independent)

Kouadio Konan Bertin (also known as KKB) was born on 26 December 1968 in Lakota, southern Côte d'Ivoire.

A former member of the PDCI party, he left when his candidature to lead the party – allowing the younger generation to take over – was rejected.

He stood in the 2015 presidential election and came third, winning almost four per cent of votes.

2.3 Election campaign

The start of the election campaign was dominated by President Ouattara announcing his candidacy for a third consecutive term in office.

On 29 July opposition leader and presidential candidate Henri Konan Bédié said it would be illegal for Ouattara to seek a third term. In an interview with French television channel France 24, Bédié said:

There is no third term in Côte d'Ivoire... Ouattara has served his two terms... He is using the pretext that the constitution was redrafted or amended to reset the clock... His candidature would be illegal... This is the right occasion for him to strengthen our democracy by respecting the practice of democratic handover of power.²

When asked what he would do if Ouattara were to run, Bédié added:

It is the people who will see that a man reneged on his word and violated the constitution. The people will render their verdict. As a

² 'Biography: Henri Konan Bedie', *BBC Monitoring – Côte d'Ivoire*, 12 November 2020

candidate, regardless of the circumstances, I will fight to mend this illegality.

Fellow opposition candidate, Pascal Affi N'Guessan, warned "maintaining Mr Ouattara as head of state is likely to lead to civil war."³

Both opposition candidates urged their supporters to boycott the election in a bid to discredit the poll. There were also widespread fears of post-election violence as more than 3,000 Ivorians were killed following the disputed election a decade earlier.

During August, demonstrations against Ouattara's candidacy broke out in Abidjan and several other towns – particularly opposition strongholds – despite having been banned by authorities. Several people lost their lives in clashes between protestors and police.

In the run-up to the election, 3,200 people fled to Liberia, Ghana and Togo, fearing post-election violence.⁴

Pre-election clashes resulted in at least 30 deaths, according to Amnesty International, including five killed on election day. President Ouattara's main opponents said their homes had been shot at.⁵

Several legal challenges were submitted to the Constitutional Council, contesting Ouattara's candidacy, but these legal challenges were ruled inadmissible on 14 September and his listing on the ballot was validated.

This led to further demonstrations and calls for the dissolution of the Constitutional Council.

The election itself was marred by intimidation, violence and electoral malpractice. PTI Advocacy Group said in a statement:

An election is the moment when a society comes together to experience and live out democracy, but the context that prevailed on election day... shows that a large segment of the Ivorian population did not experience this election in peace.⁶

The group added that, because 23 per cent of polling stations did not open, a significant number of voters were disfranchised. Those that were able to vote did so "in a context of fear and anxiety", with observers reporting threats or intimidation in five per cent of polling stations.

The Electoral Commission dismissed these figures, saying the disturbances were minimal and affected just 50 polling stations out of a total 22,381.

³ ['Ivory Coast election: Alassane Ouattara wins amid boycott'](#), *BBC News Online*, 3 November 2020

⁴ ['Ivory Coast's Ouattara wins 3rd term, amid rising tensions'](#), *AP News*, 3 November 2020

⁵ ['Ivory Coast president wins third term after opposition boycotts 'sham' election'](#), *The Guardian*, 3 November 2020

⁶ *Ibid*

2.4 Election results

Côte d'Ivoire's Electoral Commission published election results on 9 November. These showed President Ouattara secured a third term in office with a landslide victory.

Candidate	Party	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Alassane Ouattara	Rally of Houphouetists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP)	3,031,483	95.30
Kouadio Konan Bertin	Independent	64,011	2.01
Henri Konan Bédié	Democratic Party of Cote d'Ivoire - African Democratic Rally (PDCI-RDA)	53,330	1.68
Pascal Affi N'Guessan	Ivorian Popular Front (FPI)	31,986	1.01
Total ^(a)		3,180,810	100.00

^(a) In addition there were 53,904 invalid votes and 35,099 blank votes

Source: [President \(Côte d'Ivoire\)](#), Europa World online, Routledge. [Retrieved 22 November 2020]

The opposition described the election as a “parody” and, although official figures suggesting a turnout of almost 54 per cent, claimed only eight percent of voters turned up to the polls “despite ballot stuffing and other forms of trickery”.⁷

On 2 November the opposition announced that it had formed a National Transitional Council, chaired by Henri Konan Bédié, with the intention of paving the way for a transitional government and to “prepare the organisation of a fair, inclusive and transparent presidential election”.⁸

Deadly violence broke out in several cities following the announcement of the election result and, on 11 November, Government Spokesperson Sidi Tiemoko Toure announced that 85 people were killed in the days surrounding the election (34 before the vote, 20 on election day and 31 subsequently) and a further 484 people were wounded.

The UK Government issued a statement following the election, with the Minister for Africa, James Duddridge, condemning “the violence and incendiary rhetoric during the electoral period” and urging “all parties to exercise restraint”. In a nod to the formation of an opposition-led transitional government, the Minister for Africa said “creating parallel structures is not a resolution.”⁹

As of 19 November 2020, a total of 15,684 Ivorians have fled Côte d'Ivoire, mainly to Liberia, and the numbers continue to rise amid persistent tensions. This comes despite validation of the election results by the Constitutional Court.¹⁰

⁷ ‘Biography: El Hadj Alassane Dramane Ouattara’, *BBC Monitoring – Côte d'Ivoire*, 12 November 2020

⁸ Ibid

⁹ [UK statement on the 31 October 2020 presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire](#), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office press release, 5 November 2020

¹⁰ [Cote d'Ivoire Situational Emergency Update](#), UNCHR, 21 November 2020

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