

ORIGINS AND NATURE OF THE IVORIAN CONFLICT⁴

The Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire, otherwise known as FANCI, were created in May 1960 by the government of the late President Houphouët-Boigny with a focus on creating a small army for various political and developmental activities. These included administration of the civil service and serving in other capacities as Ministers, Ambassadors and Directors in hospitals. FANCI was to also engage in road construction and infrastructural development, agriculture/fisheries and other marine activities, and the running of the national airlines (Air Ivoire). In terms of actual combat role before the current crisis, FANCI has not been involved in any military aggression or serious peacekeeping missions. During the Congo crisis in the early 1960s, FANCI was attached to the medical services unit of the UN force in the country.

FANCI's capacity as a fighting force was, therefore, severely limited. Before the ongoing crisis, 80% of the FANCI budget was devoted to paying salaries of soldiers. This obviously had broad implications with respect to the capacity of the state to equip and defend itself, as has been glaringly manifested during the current crisis.⁵

The role of FANCI changed, however, under the leadership of ex-President Bedie. Bedie's efforts to use FANCI in a political role - to suppress popular protests - resulted in serious tensions within the army's officer corps and rank and file, and led to the sacking of the then armed forces commander General Guei. This prompted an attempted coup d'état in 1996, and a successful one in 1999. The current crisis has its genesis in these events.

Past insurgencies in West Africa have typically started as incursions from neighbouring countries by armed groups, beginning with attacks from the border areas and gradually progressing towards the capital city, which has often been far removed from the initial scenes of fighting. This was the trajectory of the Liberian and Sierra Leonean conflicts. In the Ivorian case, however, the violence flared up, suddenly and unexpectedly, in the large commercial capital, Abidjan, and very quickly, with little apparent movement of forces, spread to the northern cities of Korhogo and Bouaké, the country's second largest city and a major industrial base. The attacks, involving about 800 soldiers who were about to be retrenched

from FANCI, appeared to have been well-coordinated. They were also bloody. In the first few days of fighting, 400 people were killed, many of them in Abidjan, including the country's Interior Minister, Emile Doudou, and a former President, General Robert Guei (the country's first successful coup-maker) and his entire family.

An ill-equipped and ill-prepared Ivorian army was able to mobilize quickly, however, and in a few days of fighting repelled the rebels from Abidjan. The rebels, though, had already taken over the northern cities of Bouaké and Korhogo. A less than spirited attempt by FANCI to retake the cities was repulsed. A crack force of French troops staged a dramatic rescue of foreign nationals, including hundreds of American students, from Bouaké in the first weeks of fighting, and a reinforced French contingent established camps just outside Bouaké and along a zone roughly dividing the country into two parts - a formal acknowledgement, if this were needed, that the rebels now controlled the northern half of the country. The government of President Laurent Gbagbo, elected just over a year before in a popular but controversial vote, reinforced its control of the southern half.

An uneasy stalemate ensued in the country, to be quickly disrupted, in November 2003, by the emergence of two new 'rebel' groups in western Côte d'Ivoire. The two groups, the Mouvement Populaire du Grand Quest (MPIGO) and the Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix (MJP), said they were fighting to avenge the death of General Guei, and determined to do so by removing Gbagbo, whom they accused of the killing, from power. It emerged, however, that the rebels were really former Revolutionary United Front (RUF) soldiers and units from Liberia's army loyal to then President Charles Taylor,⁶ and that pillage, far more than politics, was driving their 'insurgency'. Unlike the group holding the north of the country (the Mouvement Patriotique de la Côte d'Ivoire (MPCI), which established itself as a rather well-behaved force in key cities, the new groups in the west of the country soon became notorious for vandalism and terror, and they soon after clashed with French troops, leading to serious casualties. Tens of thousands of Ivoirians fled the country.

If it was easy to establish the character and provenance of the western rebel groups, understanding the motivation and nature of the much more important northern group proved far more difficult. Were they simply mutinous soldiers hungry for power? Or were they champions of a marginalized sector of the country, the mainly Muslim - and Dyula-speaking - half of the country (the north), as they claimed? Or were they, as Gbagbo's government claimed, an assorted bunch of disgruntled rogue soldiers and foreign mercenaries carrying out a plot by Côte d'Ivoire's neighbours, particularly Burkina Faso, to destabilize the country? These questions

persisted months after the failed coup and the beginning of the insurgency. Western reporters who ventured into the rebels' stronghold generally found them genial and charming, behaving well to the civilian population but otherwise not engaged in any form of governance. A reporter from a major American newspaper found the rebels "lazing about," and possessing "more satellite phones than battle scars." She noted that five months after the rebels' occupation of Bouaké, the banks there were not functioning, businesses were boarded up, schools closed and half the town's population had fled.⁷ As the months progressed, the World Food Programme announced that 50 per cent of residents in Bouaké had no savings, and that the rest had lost 80 per cent of their purchasing power. Starvation loomed, precipitating a further mass exodus from the city.⁸

All that was clear about the rebel leadership was that it comprised of mainly ex-soldiers and that a prominent figure in the group was a former radical student leader named Guillane Soro. Soro soon emerged as spokesman for the group, and in one interview he reacted impatiently to questions about his group's real identity. "Who are we? We are young Ivorians, and we are ready to fight and die." He then described his group as a mix of exiled soldiers and former students who were furious at the Ivorian government's mistreatment of northern Ivorians. "If you are from the north," he said, "you are subhuman, according to the government. We want a united Ivory Coast. We want a country that lives in harmony and includes everyone. We want a Pan African nation where the Ivory Coast is a melting pot."⁹

Though evidently self-serving, this rhetoric undoubtedly taps into long-simmering grievances among the relatively impoverished, and largely politically marginalized, inhabitants of Côte d'Ivoire's northern regions. Since independence in 1960, Côte d'Ivoire has been ruled by people from the southern part of the country, who as a result constitute an elite class dominating the country's government, civil service, academia and the business sector. This charmed circle, from mainly the Baoule and Bete ethnic groups (the first two Presidents of the country, Houphouët-Boigny and Conan Bedie, were Baoule, and Gbagbo is Bete) has in the past even contorted the country's constitution to maintain the lopsided status quo. The most striking case was the adoption of a new electoral code by the National Assembly, at the instance of Bedie, which stipulated that Presidential candidates must be born in Côte d'Ivoire to parents who were themselves born in the country. Gbagbo, then an outspoken opposition figure, angrily described the electoral code as "liberticide, racist, xenophobic and dangerous."¹⁰

The intention, however, was purely churlish: to exclude from participation in the polls Bedie's chief rival, Alasane Quattara, of Dyula ethnicity from the north, and

a former Prime Minister of the country. Quattara's mother is said to have come from Burkina Faso, and he was subsequently barred from contesting the 1995 Presidential polls, which Bedie won. But the code, which sedulously created a distinction between 'pure' and 'mixed' Ivorians, had far-reaching implications.

When Côte d'Ivoire gained independence in 1960, it had a population of 3 million; in 2002 the population stood at 17 million. The remarkable increase resulted as much from natural growth as from labour immigration. Under the patrician President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who led the country to independence and ruled it until his death in 1993, the Ivorian government made it a policy to encourage huge immigration into the country of other Africans from the more depressed - and sometimes chaotic - states adjacent to Côte d'Ivoire. The new immigrants were smoothly integrated into Ivorian society, with some of them holding important governmental positions, and the majority were employed in the country's booming agricultural sector.

By the 1980s, world market prices for cocoa and coffee (the country's key export commodities) slumped drastically, and the huge presence of nationals from other African states began to be seen as a burden. In 1990, Houphouët-Boigny named Quattara, a senior official of the IMF, Prime Minister partly to handle the economic crisis. Quattara introduced residency permits for foreign nationals in the country. They cost \$50 per annum for nationals from ECOWAS states and \$500 for non-ECOWAS nationals. Houphouët-Boigny died in 1993, and Bedie, then head of the National Assembly won a power struggle with Quattara to become President. It was then that the toxicity of ethnic politics was smuggled into the debate about non-native Ivorians. In 2002, there were an estimated 3 million Burkinabes, 2 million Malians, 500,000 to 1 million Ghanaians and over 250,000 Guineans, plus tens of thousands of Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire. In his power-struggle with Quattara, Bedie's rhetoric persistently hammered on the concept of 'Ivorite' or 'pure Ivorian-ness'. It was his way of ensuring that he remained at the helm, one of the most invidious uses of ethnicity. It irked the millions of non-native residents of Côte d'Ivoire, and, more significantly, Ivorians in the north who generally supported Quattara.

Differences within the political class and the rolling back of the armed forces of Côte d'Ivoire from its previous engagement in the administration and developmental activities of the country eventually led to the 1999 coup d'état and subsequent crisis after the elections in 2000. The reason for the actual crisis, however, came from the elimination of ex-President Bedie and Alassane Quattara from the elections based on constitutional issues and issues of identity, citizenship and nationality.

In December 1999, a group of non-commissioned officers, led by Staff-Sergeant Ibrahim ("IB") Coulibaly, ousted the unpopular Bedie in a bloodless coup, and invited former army chief Robert Guei - who had been sacked by Bedie for refusing to use the army to crush civilians protesting the flawed electoral process of 1995 - to become the new Head of State. Guei was himself forced to organize elections in October 2000 in which he contested for the Presidency. Making use of the Bedie electoral code, he banned Quattara from contesting. Longtime oppositionist Gbagbo stood, however, and he appeared to have emerged victorious by a wide margin. Guei's attempts to rig the results were scuttled by massive demonstrations in Abidjan, and he fled the country in a helicopter. Gbagbo became President. Less than two years later, the foiled coup and insurgency occurred, with the rebel leaders citing the controversial elections which excluded Quattara as one of the reasons for their rebellion.

The question of national identity in Côte d'Ivoire, in other words, although instrumentally used by all parties, has become a key issue in the conflict, one that has threatened to unravel all the best efforts at bringing peace to the country. It may yet unravel the Ivorian state itself. For a country with more than 40 per cent of its population immigrant, the threat can hardly be over estimated. Côte d'Ivoire's famous musician, Alpha Blondy, called 'Ivorite' "black Nazism," and opined, insightfully, that the "only people benefiting from the madness are the people in politics."¹¹ Unfortunately, everyone else, including the state, has lost as a result of the "madness".

Still, because ethnicity is used in an opportunistic manner, with hardly any of the warring groups having an ideological determination to carry out ethnic cleansing, the threat of genocide on the scale of Rwanda, which has been persistently evoked recently, is virtually non-existent. A more likely model would be Liberia, whose civil war, also involving the exploitation of ethnicity by warring groups, had a much lower casualty figure per proportion of the population, and never became an ethnocide as was earlier feared.

Another overarching factor that was frequently evoked during the workshop was the problem of youth and, linked to this, the emerging problem of mercenarism in the region. Some participants argued that the 'rebellious but patriotic syndrome' in Côte d'Ivoire may be the beginning of the explosion of an unresolved and potentially devastating youth factor in Africa. Demographically, Africa is the world's youngest continent, and a large proportion of the continent's youth are unemployed and marginalized by corrupt and oppressive gerontocracies. But the problem goes beyond Côte d'Ivoire, and is potentially

explosive for much of the continent. In situations of collapsing state institutions and the emergence of predatory warlordism, the youth has become restive, and is ready-made cannon fodder for opportunistic 'rebel' leaders and the long-entrenched corrupt political elites alike. Mercenarism and youth, therefore, become congruent; and they have become, not special actors, but key actors and increasingly "institutionalized" ones. They are a strategic group of sub-state actors that have become an 'aphrodisiac' for the political elite.

A cognate factor in this trajectory, as evoked in the workshop, is the issue of whether Côte d'Ivoire is a failed state or not - is it functioning or non-functioning? One of the truly disturbing questions thrown up by the crisis in Côte d'Ivoire, as in Sierra Leone and Liberia, is this: How is that a small group of largely self-interested characters can recruit support and hold the country virtually hostage while the state, even with significant outside support, appears so ineffective in meeting the challenge?

It was generally agreed that Côte d'Ivoire is not in the category of Liberia and Sierra Leone, both virtually bankrupt by the time their insurgencies started. Côte d'Ivoire was a reasonably functioning state, with established institutions and a growing middle class. But a number of unresolved and potentially explosive factors - its internal contradictions, as have been highlighted - had rendered it highly vulnerable. The situation of vulnerability was strikingly demonstrated by the weaknesses that were exposed in its security networks - the police, the army, the gendarmerie - since the crisis started.

Another important issue that was raised in discussion concerned the rather overlooked regional dimension of the crisis, and how this impacts the peace process. Some speakers observed that the role of Burkina Faso, in particular, in supporting the rebel *Forces nouvelles* needs to be formally condemned by the international community, and that lasting peace could depend on addressing the sources of outside support for the rebel groups.

In summary therefore, the instability in Côte d'Ivoire is anchored on the controversial nationality question that disenfranchises 26% of the Ivorian population and the presence of fugitive opposition leaders in Côte d'Ivoire especially those from Liberia who maintained a highly visible presence in Abidjan did not help the case of Côte d'Ivoire. The immediate cause can however be attributed to the plans to demobilize about 800 soldiers allegedly loyal to General Guei.¹² In view of some of these obvious signposts, it is a surprise that the mutiny by soldiers in Niger did not send a warning signal to Côte d'Ivoire authorities to be more circumspect with the welfare of those it has entrusted with weapons.