

"What the World Got Wrong in Côte D'Ivoire"

Why is the United Nations entrenching former colonial powers on our continent? Africans can and should take the lead in resolving their own disputes.

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The second round of the Nov. 28, 2010, presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire pitted against each other two long-standing political opponents, Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara. For this reason, and of strategic importance, it was inevitable that this electoral contest would decide the long-term future of the country.

Everybody concerned should have probed very seriously the critical question: Would the 2010 elections create the conditions that would establish the basis for the best possible future for the Ivorian people?

This was not done.

Rather, the international community insisted that what Côte d'Ivoire required to end its crisis was to hold democratic elections, even though the conditions did not exist to conduct such elections.

Though they knew that this proposition was fundamentally wrong, the Ivorians could not withstand the international pressure to hold the elections.

However, the objective reality is that the Ivorian presidential elections should not have been held when they were held. It was perfectly foreseeable that they would further entrench the very conflict it was suggested they would end.

The 2002 rebellion in Côte d'Ivoire divided the country into two parts, with the north controlled by the rebel Forces Nouvelles, which supported Alassane Ouattara, and the south in the hands of the Gbagbo-led government. Since then, Côte d'Ivoire has had two governments, administrations, armies, and "national" leaders.

Any elections held under these circumstances would inevitably entrench the divisions and animosities represented and exacerbated by the 2002 rebellion.

The structural faults which lay at the base of the 2002 rebellion include such inflammable issues as trans-national tensions affecting especially Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso, Ivorian ethnic and religious antagonisms, sharing of political power, and access to economic and social power and opportunities.

In this regard, the international community has assiduously suppressed proper appreciation of various explosive allegations which, rightly or wrongly, have informed and will continue to inform the views of the Gbagbo-supporting population in southern Côte d'Ivoire -- and much of Francophone Africa!

These are that Ouattara is a foreigner born in Burkina Faso, that together with Burkinabè President Blaise Compaoré he was responsible for the 2002 rebellion, that his accession to power would result in the takeover of the country especially by Burkinabè foreigners, and that historically, to date, he has been ready to advance French interests in Côte d'Ivoire.

Taking all this into account, the African Union understood that a lasting solution of the Ivorian crisis necessitated a negotiated agreement between the two belligerent Ivorian factions, focused on the interdependent issues of democracy, peace, national reconciliation and unity.

In protracted negotiations from 2002, the Ivorians agreed that the presidential elections would not be held until various conditions had been met. These included the reunification of the country, the restoration of the national administration to all parts of the Ivorian territory, and the disarmament of the rebels and all militia and their integration in the national security machinery, with the latter process completed at least two months ahead of any presidential elections. Despite the fact that none of this was honoured, the presidential elections were allowed to proceed.

In the end, Ouattara has been installed as president of Côte d'Ivoire. Gbagbo, and his wife Simone, have ended up as humiliated prisoners. Many Ivorians have died and have been displaced, much infrastructure has been destroyed, and historic animosities have been exacerbated in the lead up to this outcome.

Many things have gone radically wrong along the road to this result.

Agreements relating to what needed to be done to create conditions for free and fair elections were wilfully and contemptuously ignored. The Ivorian Constitutional Council (CC) is the only body constitutionally empowered to determine the winner in any presidential election and to install the president, with the Electoral Commission (IEC) mandated to forward its *provisional results* to the CC. However, the very people who insist on the sanctity of the rule of law as fundamental to all democratic practice, elected illegally to recognise the *provisional result* announced by the chairperson of the IEC on his own, as the authentic outcome of the presidential election.

As provided by the law, Gbagbo contested the fairness of the elections in certain parts of the country, especially the north. The CC, rightly or wrongly, accepted the majority of the complaints made by Gbagbo, identified other "irregularities," annulled the votes in some districts, and declared Gbagbo the victor. The chairperson of the IEC did not take these alleged irregularities into account and decided that Ouattara had won.

The envoy of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, his fellow South Korean, SRSJ Young-jin Choi, also determined that Ouattara had won, but on the basis of fewer votes than those announced by the IEC, having determined that some of the complaints made by Gbagbo were legitimate. In terms of the votes cast for the two candidates, the IEC, the CC, and the U.N. SRSJ made three different determinations.

Gbagbo proposed that to resolve this matter, which bears on the important issue of the will of the Ivorian people, an international commission should be established to verify the election results, with the important pre-condition that both he and Ouattara should accept the determination of the commission.

This proposal was rejected by the international community -- despite the fact that it would have resolved the electoral dispute without resort to war, and despite the fact that some election observers questioned the fairness of the elections, especially in northern Côte d'Ivoire.

For instance, reporting on the elections in the north, the election observer mission of the AU led by Joseph Kokou Kofigoh, former prime minister of Togo, the independent civil society Société Civile Africaine pour la Démocratie et l'Assistance Électorale led by Seynabou Indiegoune of Senegal, and the Coordination of African Election Experts (CAEE) from Cameroon, Senegal, Benin, Mali, Morocco, Gabon, and Togo led by Jean-Marie Ongjibangte of Cameroon, all sounded the alarm about the elections in the north.

For instance, the CAEE said: "After sharing information with other national and international election observers, we hereby state that the second round of the presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire was held amidst major problems in (various northern) regions...

"These problems were stealing of ballot boxes, arresting of candidates' representatives, multiple voting, refusal to admit international observers to witness counting of ballots, and the murder of representatives of candidates. To that effect, we hereby declare that the second round of voting was not free, fair and transparent in these (northern) localities."

For its part, to this day, the ECOWAS election observer mission has not issued its report on the second round of the presidential election! Why?

Clearly the independent international commission proposed by Laurent Gbagbo could have been established and empowered to make a definitive and binding determination about what had happened. Time will tell why this was not done!

Further, the U.N. SRSJ took the extraordinary decision to exceed his mandate by declaring who had won the presidential election, contrary to his tasks as detailed by the Security Council. This positioned the U.N. Mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) as a partisan in the Ivorian conflict, rather than a neutral peacemaker, equidistant from the belligerent parties.

From this point onwards, UNOCI had no choice but actively to work for the installation of Ouattara as president of the country and the removal of Gbagbo. Ultimately, this found expression in the blatant use of its military capacities to open the way for the Forces Nouvelles to defeat the Gbagbo forces and capture Gbagbo, under the shameless pretence that it was acting to protect civilians.

While obliged to respect its peacekeeping mandate, which included keeping the belligerent forces apart, UNOCI did nothing to stop the advance of the Forces Nouvelles from the north to the south, including and up to Abidjan. Nor did UNOCI or the French Licorne forces, as mandated by the United Nations, act to protect civilians in the area of Duékoué, where, evidently, the most concentrated murder of civilians took place! This recalls the United Nations's failure to end the more catastrophic murder and abuse of civilians in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo!

The Ivorian reality points to a number of incontrovertible conclusions.

The agreed conditions for the holding of democratic elections in Côte d'Ivoire were not created. Despite strong allegations of electoral fraud, the international community decided against conducting any verification of the process and the announced results. This left unanswered the vitally important question of who actually had won the elections, which Ouattara might have done.

The United Nations elected to abandon its neutrality as a peacemaker, deciding to be a partisan belligerent in the Ivorian conflict.

France used its privileged place in the Security Council to position itself to play an important role in determining the future of Côte d'Ivoire, its former colony in which, *inter alia*, it has significant economic interests. It joined the United Nations to ensure that Ouattara emerged as the victor in the Ivorian conflict.

This addressed the national interests of France, consistent with its *Françafrique* policies, which aim to perpetuate a particular relationship with its former African colonies. This is in keeping with remarks made by former French President François Mitterand when he said, "Without Africa, France will have no history in the 21st century," which former French foreign minister Jacques Godfrain confirmed when he said: "A little country [France], with a small amount of strength, we can move a planet because [of our]...relations with 15 or 20 African countries..."

The AU is also not without blame, as it failed to assert itself to persuade everybody to work to achieve reconciliation among the Ivorians, and therefore durable peace. Tragically, the outcome that has been achieved in Côte d'Ivoire further entrenches the endemic conflict in this country. This is because it has placed in the exclusive hands of the failed rebellion of 2002 the ability to determine the future of the country, whereas the objective situation dictated and dictates that the people of Côte d'Ivoire should engage one another as equals to determine their shared destiny.

During the decade he served as president of Côte d'Ivoire, Gbagbo had no possibility to act on his own to reunify the country and achieve reconciliation among its diverse people, despite the existence of negotiated agreements in this regard. As he serves as president of the country, Ouattara will not succeed to realise these objectives, acting on his own, outside the context of honest agreement with the sections of the Ivorian population represented by Gbagbo.

What was to come was foreseen by the then U.S. ambassador in Côte d'Ivoire, Wanda L. Nesbitt. In July 2009, she advised the U.S. government:

"It now appears that the Ouaga IV agreement, [the fourth agreement to the Ouagadougou Political Agreement which prescribed that disarmament should precede the elections], is fundamentally an agreement between Blaise Compaore [President of Burkina Faso] and Laurent Gbagbo to share control of the north until after the presidential election, despite the fact that the text calls for the Forces Nouvelles to return control of the north to the government and complete disarmament two months before the election..."

*"But the 5,000 Forces Nouvelles soldiers who are to be "disarmed" and regrouped into barracks in four key cities in the north and west until a new national army is created, represent **a serious military capability** that the FAFN [Forces Nouvelles] intends to keep well-trained and in reserve **until after the election**. The hand-over of administrative power from the FAFN to civilian government authorities is **a pre-requisite for elections** but, as travelers to the north (including Embassy personnel) confirm: the **FAFN retain de-facto control of the region** especially when it comes to finances."*

The failure to address the "pre-requisite for elections" predetermined their outcome. The rebel "control" of the north, mentioned by Ambassador Nesbitt, prescribed the outcome of the 2010 presidential election. Similarly, it was the "military capability" of the rebellion, which Ambassador Nesbitt mentioned, that was used to ensure that Ouattara became president of Côte d'Ivoire.

It is little wonder that as the post-election crisis deepened, Laurent Gbagbo would cry out: I was betrayed!

At the end of it all, there are many casualties.

One of these is the African Union. The tragic events in Côte d'Ivoire have confirmed the marginalization of the union in its ability to resolve the most important African challenges.

Instead, the AU has asserted the ability of the major powers to intervene to resolve these challenges by using their various capacities to legitimize their actions by persuading the United Nations to authorise their self-serving interventions.

The United Nations is yet another casualty. It has severely undermined its acceptability as a neutral force in the resolution of internal conflicts, such as the one in Côte d'Ivoire. It will now

be difficult for the United Nations to convince Africa and the rest of the developing world that it is not a mere instrument in the hands of the world's major powers. This has confirmed the urgency of the need to restructure the organisation, based on the view that as presently structured the United Nations has no ability to act as a truly democratic representative of its member states.

Thus, in various ways, the events in Côte d'Ivoire could serve as a defining moment in terms of the urgent need to reengineer the system of international relations. They have exposed the reality of the balance and abuse of power in the post-Cold War era, and put paid to the fiction that the major powers respect the rule of law in the conduct of international relations, even as defined by the U.N. Charter, and that, as democrats, they respect the views of the peoples of the world.

We can only hope that Laurent and Simone Gbagbo and the Ivorian people do not continue to suffer as abused and humiliated victims of a global system which, in its interests, while shouting loudly about universal human rights, only seeks to perpetuate the domination of the many by the few who dispose of preponderant political, economic, military and media power.

The perverse and poisonous proceedings that have afflicted Côte d'Ivoire pose the urgent question: How many blatant abuses of power will Africa and the rest of the developing world experience before the vision of a democratic system of global governance is realised?

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