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Political opposition in the Ivory Coast

*Problems and
perspectives*

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Richard Moncrieff *analyses recent political events
in the Ivory Coast.*

At the beginning of 1990 the Ivory Coast, a country of 12 million people in West Africa, was thrown into chaos by a series of protests and strikes. The incidents started with a power cut in a university hall of residence in the capital Abidjan on 19 February, just before scheduled mid year exams (the whole academic year was later annulled). A small riot started and a handful of activists of the then clandestine opposition were arrested. Later the same week a group of students occupied the capital's cathedral and were also arrested. The next week protests grew, culminating in widespread rioting throughout the country on the 2 March. The direct grievance of the protesters was planned budget cuts, particularly in public sector salaries. However protests were not limited to the issue of budget cuts - the President was often a direct target of the crowd's anger and the lack of multiparty democracy in the country became another major grievance. Although in March the country became more peaceful, the real fear of the business and political elite was of a general strike. In the event

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the absence of independent unions and a ban on union meetings averted this, but sectoral strikes by teachers, the police and most damagingly by the transport workers along with demonstrations and occasional rioting continued throughout March and April. The persistence of protests, despite the government scrapping part of the budget cuts in mid April, finally forced the government to accept the re-legalisation of opposition parties on 5 May. Thirty years after opposition had been effectively banned at independence in 1960, the Ivory Coast entered a new political phase, with competitive presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for later in the year.

These events were of particular importance due to the position of the then President Felix Houphouet-Boigny who, having survived in power for thirty years and being the president of a regionally important country, had become a key figure in the Paris centred constellation of power which still dominates the sub-region. Post colonial Africa has of course had its fair share of autocratic leaders and tyrants, but the former French colonies of West and Central Africa have followed a unique historical path. France has maintained particularly close institutional and personal ties with African leaders and has guaranteed the survival of regimes by regular military intervention. Having a more successful economy than most others up to the late 1980s, the Ivory Coast government has received particularly strong support from the French. As a result the Ivory Coast has been notably 'stable' with no civil war or coups. The other side of this stability' has been the repression of dissent and the exclusion of the population from the political process. Furthermore the stability of the Ivorian state has not brought any meaningful development for the country's population. As elsewhere in Africa the introduction of multiparty elections has only succeeded to a limited extent in bringing democratic choice to the people. In this article I shall look at the reasons for this and I shall argue that the creation of a strong and principled opposition party or parties is one of the major and most urgent challenges facing this African country.

The underlying cause of the events of 1990 was the ruling elite's inability to cope with the debt crisis on the basis of an economy chronically dependent on the price of two commodities - cocoa and coffee. From the early days of independence the Ivorian elite had gambled heavily on agricultural export commodities, the high prices of the 1960s and 1970s encouraging them not to diversify the country's agricultural and industrial base. The relatively successful

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agricultural export sector was heavily taxed by means of a government purchasing body which bought all the raw produce at a price far below world market prices and sold it on to international trading companies. The ruling elites used the money to buy support around the country and attract new political activists into the single political party - the Democratic Party of the Ivory Coast (PDCI) - hence enabling it to buy off potential opposition while creating pockets of development. When world market prices for cocoa dropped by over half between January 1986 and July 1988 the PDCI no longer had the money to buy off criticism. The President, originally a farmers' union leader, refused to lower the price paid to farmers for the crops, thus effectively reversing the flow of resources from the government to the farmers and emptying the government's reserves.

As businesses started going bankrupt and jobs were lost, the President himself became a symbol of the country's growing inequality. In the mid-1970s he had ordered the construction of a huge catholic basilica in his native village of Yamoussoukro, a church which was to be the biggest in Africa. Alongside this a sumptuous presidential palace and an enormous conference centre were planned. All three were duly constructed at great cost but the village failed to become the new capital the President hoped it would. In a country lacking an adequate water supply, with a basic education system cracking at the seams and a chronic shortage of basic medical supplies, the buildings of Yamoussoukro stand today in eerie silence as an astonishing symbol of waste and vanity. When questioned about the financing of the basilica the President answered in March 1989 that the money came from his own pocket. When questioned later in October 1989, he replied, 'my account book is closed and placed at the foot of the Lord. Only God may know what I possess'. What we mortals do know is that he accumulated a personal fortune to be compared to Mobutu's and put most of it in Swiss bank accounts, having asked the press in 1983, 'what sensible man does not put some of his wealth in Switzerland?' Meanwhile his country was bankrupt and under the familiar guidance of the IMF's debt rescheduling and structural adjustment programmes. The subsequent wage cuts, job losses and losses of essential services were the reasons behind the waves of protest in 1990. What the events of 1990 showed is that when hardship reaches a certain point sustained resistance can bring real change. Opposition leaders still look at the legalisation of opposition parties as a major step in the right direction for their country. However just to be legalised doesn't

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mean you have a strong opposition up and running; major obstacles still stood in their way. To understand this one first needs to understand the remarkable strength of the ruling party and its leaders in the history of the Ivory Coast as an independent country.

Before 1990 - the Ivory Coast as a one party state

The survival of the PDCI and of President Houphouet-Boigny long after independence owed much to their role in fighting French colonialism and the respect this won them. Houphouet-Boigny first gained notoriety when as an MP in the French Parliament in 1946 he successfully proposed a law banning forced labour in the colonies. In the 1950s in the Ivory Coast the PDCI was harshly repressed by the colonial authorities that were fearful of the support it was getting from the Ivorian population. Most of the party's activists were arrested and Houphouet-Boigny's life was in danger more than once. This tactic on the part of the French failed to work and the PDCI continued to build its country-wide support. The colonial administration tried to counter its influence by creating and supporting a host of opposition parties. It is clear that at that time the role of opposition parties was to divide the Ivorian population and thereby to perpetuate French rule. This also failed.

By the time independence came in 1960 the PDCI had already created a *de facto* one party state. However with no credible rivals to campaign against on the ground, the PDCI became cut off from its popular base and was transformed into a vehicle for the personal ambitions of its leadership, which was more and more concentrated around the President. In 1958 Houphouet-Boigny was simultaneously president of the PDCI, an MP and a minister in Paris, Mayor of Abidjan and President of the Territorial Assembly. A series of purges of opponents and rivals in the early 1960s, the absorption of all union, student and political activity into the PDCI and a turn in policy towards supporting French interests ensured twenty years of almost unchallenged rule. The key element in Houphouet-Boigny's containment of dissent was a clever blend of heavy handed authoritarianism and symbolic reconciliation. He created a climate of fear in the country by regularly arresting and imprisoning opponents: then he released and publicly forgave them a couple of years into a life sentence. Clearly, observing the careers of other African leaders taught him that continual harsh repression would eventually backfire.

As with all single-party states the political system was based on a fictitious national unity. The entire population of the country were supposedly members of the party, and jobs and student grants depended on this membership. Of course within such a system the separation of powers was unimaginable - parliament, the judiciary and the administration were all absorbed by the party which itself was a vehicle for the ambitions of its leader. Some attempts were made to allow for political plurality in the early 1980s by allowing competition for party nominations for elections. However with no competition over programmes this experiment merely served to underline the limits of the one-party system. One-party elections remained a way of settling rivalries and promotions within the party and also served as an attempt to create a personality cult around the President through 100 per cent results at elections.

After 1990 - a difficult climate for opposition parties

The most important opposition party was until recently the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), led by the historian Laurent Gbagbo. Other important parties exist - the Ivorian Workers Party (PTI) and the Ivorian Socialist Party (PSI) - alongside a plethora of smaller and largely insignificant ones. Laurent Gbagbo was the opposition's official candidate in the presidential elections of 1990 and achieved what most consider a respectable 18 per cent of the vote, given that it only had a few months as a legal party in which to organise its campaign. The FPI was formed by Gbagbo in 1982. It existed as a clandestine opposition for eight years and has now enjoyed eight years as a recognised opposition party. Throughout this time its struggle to become a credible opposition has been conditioned by several factors: the continued strength of the PDCI establishment, even after the death of President Houphouët-Boigny in December 1993, continual disputes over electoral procedures which have often spilt over into clashes with the police; the tensions between ideological opposition on the one hand and regional and sectional opposition on the other; and the problem of alliances with other opposition parties.

The PDCI elite has retained its control over the Ivorian police, military and administrative structures and has used this to suppress opposition activity. The much boasted freedom of the press (newspapers close to the opposition parties are freely available) has been tempered by the government's willingness to imprison over-critical journalists. A law dating from 1959 has made it illegal

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to 'Throw discredit on political institutions or their functioning'. More than fifteen journalists were sent to prison between December 1993 and January 1996. The appalling conditions and cholera epidemics of Ivorian prisons ensure that this is a strong deterrent. According to *Le Monde* one journalist who had the temerity to criticise the interior minister was beaten by the police in the minister's office with the minister looking on. Some newspapers have been temporarily banned, including the influential *Jeune Afrique*. Although opposition candidates are allowed some air time at elections, the state run television is clearly pro-government, the long evening news acting as a eulogy to the latest government public works programme.

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Opposition leaders, as well as other prominent figures such as the president of the Ivorian Human Rights League, claim that both the two legislative elections and the two presidential elections held since the legalisation of opposition parties have been marked by fraud and mismanagement. One of the opposition's major campaign points is the setting up of a truly independent electoral commission. Voting papers, it is claimed, are regularly simply bought by local PDCI officials. Disputes often break out as members of the opposition are prevented from observing vote counting. Moreover the campaigns are spoilt by the difficulties which the opposition encounter in getting permission to hold meetings. Finally there are bitter disputes over the validity of electoral lists. However the opposition parties themselves are not free from blame in terms of hindering free and fair elections. In 1995, after disputes concerning the nationality criteria of candidates, they declared an 'active boycott' which in many cases took the form of disrupting the voting procedure and preventing others voting. Detailed discussion of policy or of the country's problems was lost in dispute over electoral procedure, which ultimately played into the hands of the ruling party and was a loss for the Ivory Coast's young democracy.

One of the main problems for opposition parties is reaching a critical mass of support in order to be seen as a potential winner. In a country so dominated by the party in power, voting, financial and activist support show a strong tendency to go to the candidates who are perceived as having the best chance of winning. This is further reinforced by a first-past-the-post constituency voting

system which ensures that the party with the largest percentage of the vote gets an even larger percentage of parliamentary seats. Remaining in opposition when favours and resources are distributed between those close to the government can be a frustrating experience. The material means and labour time needed to organise a party and gather the information needed to build a coherent alternative programme are simply not available. New parties generally start out by offering principled or ideological opposition, presenting a political programme of government argued from basic principles and designed to attract nation-wide support. However they are often forced to concentrate their resources in one region, and run the risk of representing the grievances of one ethnic group or else becoming isolated in one profession, notably the teaching profession, the source of most opposition activity in the Ivory Coast.

The 1995 elections showed that this situation can be disastrous for the opposition. Unable to create a strong nation-wide support they played on the grievances of minority ethnic groups (exacerbated by very uneven regional development). This is an unfortunate development in Ivorian politics as even among the PDCI elite there is little evidence of one ethnic group being dominant. Since independence the 'national unity' policy of the one party state, despite its drawbacks, did play down ethnic divisions. For the 1995 elections the PDCI responded by rewriting the electoral code to exclude foreigners from voting and from candidacy - essentially an attempt to grab the 'race card' for themselves. In the furore which followed, the two strongest opposition candidates - Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara - refused to stand. It is still a disputed point whether or not Ouattara was effectively barred by the new law due to his disputed parentage. (It is claimed that his parents come from Burkina-Faso, although he maintains that he is Ivorian). Another opposition leader - Francis Wodie - decided to stand, signalling the break-up of the opposition alliance. Lacking a support base, Wodie obtained only 3.5 per cent of the vote. The abstention rate was high, which the opposition claimed as a victory for their 'active boycott'. In several areas voting was totally disrupted by clashes between rival party supporters and with the police. Although this took some legitimacy away from the victory of Henri Konan Bedie (the PDCI candidate and effective heir of Houphuoet-Boigny), the opposition were probably more damaged by their failure to contest the election. The legislative elections which followed confirmed this as the PDCI won 147 out of 175 seats with the opposition putting

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up competing candidates in 71 constituencies. Five years after opposition parties had been legalised, the PDCI elite looked to be in a stronger position than ever.

The emergence of Alassane Ouattara's new party - the RDR - in 1994 brought a new kind of party into Ivorian Politics. While the FPI had always tried to present itself as a centre-left opposition to the centre-right PDCI, the RDR is a party of technocrats which has emerged from the PDCI itself. Ouattara, a former deputy head at the IMF and Ivorian finance minister, enjoys a network of powerful supporters both at home and abroad unrivalled by any other opposition leader. He offers the credibility that the opposition so desperately needs, but fails to offer the sort of discussion over fundamental principles which has traditionally been the lifeblood of politics.

Different kinds of opposition

Parallels with the Ivorian case of partial democratisation can be found throughout Africa. I would like to argue that the Ivorian case also reveals some important points concerning the role and importance of opposition parties in African states, almost all of which have until recently endured several decades of one-party rule. Firstly, opposition is part of the very principle of democracy, offering the people a choice of who they wish to be governed by. Secondly, in countries plagued by the financial corruption of the ruling elite, an opposition is clearly needed, along with an independent press, to provide a check on government activities and to expose corruption publicly. For this they must have adequate resources to gather information independently from government sources. Thirdly, opposition parties must provide a real chance of a change of government. Under the PDCI the lines between the business, administrative and political elites blurred to the point of disappearing. In such a situation only a change of government can begin to establish some sort of separation of powers. Even if the government does not actually change, the very possibility of change can act as a check on those in power.

These functions of an opposition can feasibly be performed in the Ivory Coast by Ouattara's RDR. However a political opposition is needed in order to play other roles and here I fear that the RDR may not be so suited. Firstly, an opposition should involve the whole population of a country in debate over how that country is run and should be run. We have already seen that the Ivory Coast's traditional opposition parties are under-resourced to perform this task. The FPI is currently

undertaking a country-wide tour of meetings in an attempt to correct this. It is questionable whether it has the money to sustain it. On the other hand, the RDR may have the resources *to do* so. However it is essentially a party already within the Ivorian political elite and made up of former PDCI technocrats and officials. It remains to be seen to what extent they engage with the concerns of the mass of the population in the run-up to the elections of 2000.

Secondly, an opposition is needed in order to present a coherent set of alternative ideas concerning the government of the country. The principles a party supports need to be explicitly stated, otherwise voters will quickly become disillusioned with the democratic process, suspecting that it consists of replacing one set of crooks with another. Of course a party elected on a principled platform can quickly succumb to the temptations and difficulties of being in power, but nevertheless the whole possibility of meaningful democratic debate depends ultimately on arguing from basic principles such as freedom and equality, pragmatism and idealism. To their credit the FPI has always tried to do this, producing books, newspapers and even cassettes explaining its

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position. Equally, a principled ideological stance can help avoid the ethnicisation of politics by providing a real debate on the political issues which cut across ethnic boundaries. Unfortunately, with the dominance of the PDCI elite, Ivorian politics in the years leading up to Houphouet-Boigny's death in December 1993 was dominated by the question of leadership succession from within the PDCI. In the event, Houphouet-Boigny's designation of Bedie as the leader of Parliament and therefore constitutional successor in the event of his death was a more decisive event in terms of future leadership of the country than the campaign around the presidential elections two years later. This effectively amounted to the traditional elites choosing their own successor with no reference to the country's population.

Foreign actors in African politics, and particularly aid donors, have recently turned their attention to supporting 'civil society' in an apparent attempt to allow room for expression and activity at a distance from the traditional political elites. The problem with this is that in the desperate rush to appear ever more liberal and business-friendly it becomes easy to

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confuse 'civil society' with commercial interests, which of course are already-very close to and well supported by the political elites. As Marina Ottaway has pointed out, civil society is either too close to government or too fragmented to ensure that a government behaves responsibly: this can only be done by a strong opposition.¹ Unfortunately but unsurprisingly, foreign aid and backing has always been used to support incumbent regimes, all in the name of 'stability'. (In 1990 the PDCI accused the FPI of most unfairly receiving a small amount of support from the French Socialist Party. The 'accusations' were largely true but were evidently absurd coming from a party hugely supported by the French for three decades.)

Of course it is bitterly ironic that opposition parties emerged in a legal way in Africa just as the very idea of ideological politics was being actively destroyed in Europe. However the concept and reality of political opposition must now be taken seriously and allowed political space to develop in the Ivory Coast and elsewhere in Africa. As Laurent Gbagbo has said: 'democracy is an act of humility. It is taking into account the relativity of individual intelligence and of doctrines... to be a democrat is to recognise that one does not have a monopoly over truth, wisdom or the love of one's country.'² It has been argued here that the legacy of forty years of autocratic presidential rule in the Ivory Coast, wherein political conflict and change occurred between a leader and a successor, not between a leader and an opponent, is ill-suited to a situation where the leader commands a large country with potentially rich resources. Although at certain times national unity rightly takes priority (as during the decolonisation period), those who still argue that ideological opposition is a distraction from the real job of national social and economic development are ignoring the record of waste and corruption under Africa's single party states.

1. Marina Ottaway, 'African Democratisation and the Leninist Option', in *Journal of Modern African Studies* 35, 1. 1997.
2. Laurent Gbagbo, *Cote d'Ivoire: Pour une alternative democratique*, Harmattan, Paris 1983,p153.