

## **POSTPONED SEVENTIMES AND STILL NO SOLUTION IN SIGHT. THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE**

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In 2010, the first presidential elections for nine years are supposed to be held in the Côte d'Ivoire. Free and democratic elections are supposed to enable a new start and heal the wounds of the civil war, which erupted in 2002. The civil war divided the country into two halves and ruined the once highly praised economy of West Africa. Since the Quagadougou Agreement of 2007, the government has existed in a state of national unity, being able to involve the former rebels from the north. President Laurent Gbagbo and his Prime Minister, the rebel leader Guillaume Soro, rule the country together and have the task of executing democratic elections. After seven election postponements since 2005, a new presidential election is planned for the end of February or early March 2010.

The crisis in Côte d'Ivoire began following the death of the first president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, in 1993. Political clashes over his succession, the system's economic crisis and the disintegration of the unity party were the catalysts. The country's political system was dominated by a single party during the decades after gaining independence, the Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI). A military coup by General Robert Guei brought the reign of the PDCI and President Bédié to an end. The interim government of General Guei was also toppled after it refused to accept the results of the 2000 elections. After substantial street protests the president resigned and Laurent Gbagbo took office. The FPI (Front Populaire Ivoirien) emerged from the subsequent parliamentary elections in 2000 as the strongest force. 2002 saw an attempted coup by parts of the army, which resulted in civil war and the division of the country into the government controlled south and the rebel-controlled north. The creation of a buffer zone in the middle of the country halted hostilities.

In 2003, with active involvement of France, the Linas-Marcoussis Agreement was created. It envisaged, amongst other things, the disarmament of the rebels, the regulation of electoral law and the preparation of elections by October 2005. By the end of October 2005 a new government was to be formed and an international task force was to follow the implementations of these arrangements. Despite this promising start, political obstacles soon began to emerge again. A continual bone of contention was the order of the implementation of measures. Should the population be registered first or should troops be demobilized first? When, once again, no elections were held by October 2006 the United Nations Security Council reacted by passing resolution 1721, which extended the competences of Prime Minister Banny. President

Gbagbo opposed this as unconstitutional, which resulted in increased international pressure on himself.

With the start of negotiations mediated by President Compaoré of Burkina Faso, the international community bore witness to the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. On March 4, 2007, President Laurent Gbagbo, rebel leader of the Force Nouvelles, Guillaume Soro, as well as Blaise Compaoré as mediator signed the agreement in Quagadougou, which to this day forms the country's basis for continued peace. With the Quagadougou Agreement, all the main spokesmen negotiated with each other for the first time without international pressure. As a result of the negotiations, rebel leader Guillaume Soro became Prime Minister. By the end of 2007, presidential elections were meant to have taken place. The implementation of the agreement is overseen by an advisory council, which meets in Quagadougou at regular intervals and discusses the progress of the peace process. President Laurent Gbagbo, Prime Minister Soro, President Blaise Compaoré, as well as the two most promising candidates Henri Bédié and Alassane Ouattara are members of this council. As part of the agreement, the elections set for October 2007 were postponed to December 2007. This date was also not met by President Gbagbo.

Today, almost three years after the Quagadougou Agreement, any hope for a prompt resolution of the crisis has vanished. The election process has turned into a never ending marathon and large parts of the population do not believe that President Gbagbo is genuinely interested in holding elections. Nevertheless it must be said that the agreement has brought about positive developments. The population is able to move around the country again and the military checks, mostly carried out in Abidjan, have disappeared. Government administration has started to be implemented in the whole country again, in order to overcome the division of the country. Exchanges between the north and the south show that people are finding mutual ground. However, there is no processing of past events. In the meantime, technical preparations for the elections have progressed considerably. Registers of voters exist, but a political decision clarifying the disputed issues over citizenship is still outstanding. All of this contributes to the gradual healing of old wounds, although the political and economic agony is still palpable.

President Gbagbo is set to profit from the current state of limbo. Despite having only been elected once he is currently in his second mandate and has the opportunity to complete a third period in office by taking part in the coming elections. He had good reason to postpone the election date, as he could not have been sure of his own re-election. Prime Minister Guillaume Soro's interests would have been similar. His appointment rests solely on the Quagadougou Agreement. Should the country return to a "normal" state, his re-election could be called into question. To date, the Force Nouvelles are not a party and cannot therefore play a part in regulating the current state of

affairs. It is not known whether there are political agreements in place about Soro's future beyond the Election Day. The other promising candidates such as Bédié or Ouattara were not able to put sufficient pressure on the president.

The question of what will happen after the elections has been completely forgotten after the lengthy discussions about the election date, the recording of the election votes and other technical details. The implementation of presidential elections can only mean initially that government exists once again within legal and constitutional boundaries. President Gbagbo has been in office illegitimately since 2005. It is necessary to have a clearly defined voting population as part of generally accepted elections, in order for no part of society to feel excluded. The question over citizenship should be clarified once and for all with the election. If no resolution is found that can be accepted by all, the conflict will continue. Elections can, therefore, only be one of many steps towards normality and must culminate in a national reconciliation.

Should elections be postponed yet again in 2010, it is expected that the international community will cease its assistance. Combined with the poor economic situation, this could lead to a social "explosion". Up to now, the population has remained remarkably calm, because it is hopeful that its patient waiting will lead it out of the crisis. Should this hope fail, the enormous social tensions could lead to new violence on the streets. For this reason, President Gbagbo should be careful that the endless postponement of elections is not connected to his name. The impact of not holding elections in the spring of 2010 will not only be dramatic for the country, but for the entire region, which depends on Côte d'Ivoire as an economic powerhouse. An economically and politically stable Côte d'Ivoire is essential, both for the country itself as well as the region.

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