

CÔTE D'IVOIRE SITUATION ENTERS A NEW PHASE WITH LAURENT GBAGBO IN CUSTODY

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The political situation in Côte d'Ivoire has remained deadlocked since the presidential runoff elections held at the end of November 2010. The standoff between the two main candidates – the incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and his opponent, former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara – continued with both rivals declaring victory after the elections. The situation entered a new phase, however, when Mr. Gbagbo was taken into custody on April 11, 2011.

First, what is background behind Mr. Gbagbo's capture?

After Côte d'Ivoire gained its independence in 1960, its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, kept the country generally stable for a period of 33 years. Following his death in 1993, however, confrontation among political parties intensified in the absence of a unifying political leader, and for many years the nation was a breeding ground for instability.

Ivorian presidential elections were held in 2000, the year after the 1999 military coup, in order to transfer power to a civilian government. However, large-scale riots erupted after the junta leader manipulated election results and declared a unilateral victory. It was Laurent Gbagbo who assumed the presidential post amid this chaos. Although Mr. Gbagbo displayed sound political skills during the initial stages of his administration, his governance began to assume more authoritarian tones as he tried to hold on to power after a 2002 armed uprising by a rebel force made up primarily of deserters from the national army, that plunged the nation into a civil war.

The November 2010 presidential elections, held as the final phase of the peace process to end the civil war, resulted in a runoff between incumbent president Gbagbo and former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara. Overcoming a history of political repression, Ouattara's campaign was his first venture into the national election arena, which also added the crucial importance to the elections in charting the nation's course into the future.

After the Electoral Commission in charge of vote counting announced the victory of Mr. Ouattara, Mr. Gbagbo contested the results before the Constitutional Court, over which he wielded enormous influence. The Constitutional Court judged that nearly 700,000 votes, or 15% of the total, were invalid and declared that Mr. Gbagbo had won the election, reversing the original results.

Following this announcement, both Mr. Ouattara and Mr. Gbagbo took the presidential oath of office. Côte d'Ivoire now had “two presidents” both alleging to be the legitimate president and unwilling to budge. Despite the efforts of various African countries to mediate the conflict, pro-Ouattara forces launched a

full-scale military assault in late March 2011, which gradually escalated into the recent fighting between the two sides in Abidjan, the largest city in the country.

On April 4 and 10, U.N. peacekeeping forces, backed by the French military, bombed the Gbagbo stronghold, citing the protection of civilians as the objective. On April 11, the troops stormed the presidential compound where the militarily cornered Mr. Gbagbo had been holed up; upon locating their target, the forces detained and moved him to Mr. Ouattara's headquarters.

What does the capture of Mr. Gbagbo really mean?

While the confusion triggered by last year's election results has reached some degree of closure for the time being, it is clear that the future is fraught with difficulties for the new Ouattara administration.

The original "best scenario" involved Mr. Ouattara and Mr. Gbagbo reaching a peaceful agreement so that both sides might work together in running the country. The fact that Mr. Gbagbo was captured by troops – a tough, aggressive measure – made it difficult, however, for Mr. Ouattara to earn confidence among Gbagbo supporters.

While the African Union (AU) established its position in early March 2011 by backing Mr. Ouattara as the rightful president of Côte d'Ivoire, it has not gone so far as to approve the use of force by Ouattara's forces to overthrow Mr. Gbagbo. Mr. Ouattara will most likely be called upon to explain his actions to the AU member states in the future.

Moreover, while the U.N. and France cited the protection of civilians in accordance with a U.N. Security Council resolution to justify the bombing of Gbagbo positions, the nature of the action did, in effect, signify military support for the Ouattara's forces. The involvement of U.N. and French forces had the consequence of undermining the legitimacy of the Ouattara government, creating an image of a non-independent regime reliant on foreign powers.

Having secured the full support of the U.N., the E.U., France, the U.S., and other countries, Mr. Ouattara is expected to work with these outside powers to bring the confrontation under control, restore normalcy to civilian life, and achieve national reconciliation. Still, just how well the Ouattara regime will be able to deliver on its goals remains uncertain.

What are the key points in the monitoring of the future developments?

There are two points at the moment.

The first point is the issue of how to administer justice to the perpetrators of massacres, human rights violations, and other crimes that have occurred during the civil war since 2002 and the recent armed conflict. Justice and the investigation of the truth are vital steps towards national reconciliation and

therefore cannot be avoided if the nation is to move forward.

Ouattara's side has expressed its intention to bring Mr. Gbagbo and his aides to justice in hopes of referring the case to the International Criminal Court (ICC); as this is sure to provoke a backlash from Gbagbo supporters, however, the issue must be approached with caution to prevent destabilizing the situation.

Meanwhile, forces loyal to Ouattara have also been implicated and held accountable in a massacre that occurred in the western region. To win the trust of the entire nation, it is essential for Mr. Ouattara to leave his own involvement open to investigation.

The second point is the dissolution and integration of the armed forces that exist inside the country. The pro-Ouattara Republican Force of Ivory Coast (FRCI), the new national army established by Mr. Ouattara in his capacity as president, must be integrated with the pro-Gbagbo former national army as part of their efforts to rebuild the nation's security forces.

Furthermore, the Ivorian government needs to disarm the "Commando Invisible" militia that has waged an independent guerilla war against Gbagbo forces in the areas north of Abidjan during this conflict (Note: This rebel organization was eliminated at the end of April following an offensive by the FRCI). Also, to resolve confusion in the western region, some sort of measures must be taken on the large numbers of Liberian mercenaries who have streamed into the country.

What does the international society's response to this incident suggest?

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said the arrest of Laurent Gbagbo "... sends a strong signal to dictators and tyrants throughout the region..." and French Prime Minister Fillon has made a similar statement. Their sentiments echo the notion that the international community no longer tolerates acts that ignore the popular will expressed through elections.

This kind of argument, however, is one-sided. Although the U.N. and French military intervention may have had the aim of preventing the escalation of fighting and violence toward civilians, it is also true that democracy cannot be realized through military means. Eliminating a "dictator" by force would not necessarily brighten the prospects for democracy.

After the outbreak of the recent battle, Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian-born historian, said that the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire "does not have an 'angel' and 'a devil,' challenging the international community's views of Mr. Ouattara and Mr. Gbagbo. With this phrasing, Mbembe voiced his concern that framing the confrontation into a dualistic scheme of "good guy" against "bad guy" could preclude the potential for resolving the conflict through dialogue. Unfortunately, Mbembe's apprehension has proved prescient as prospects for a fundamental solution to the situation remain dim even after the capture of Mr. Gbagbo.

What about its implications on the economic outlook?

During this conflict, fighting in Abidjan, the country's largest city, lasted nearly 10 days, striking a massive blow to popular livelihood. With no prospects for rapid stabilization, economic activity will almost certainly experience some stagnation over the short term.

Yet, the economic potential of Côte d'Ivoire, boasting the world's largest cacao production and significant growth in its oil and gas sectors in recent years, has sustained little damage despite the turmoil. The nation can also look forward to aid from major donors; France, for instance, swiftly announced a contribution worth 400 million euros (approx. 4.6 billion yen) to the Ouattara administration.

If measures for stabilization and national reconciliation yield steady results, Côte d'Ivoire is highly likely to achieve economic recovery over the medium- to long-term.