Côte d'Ivoire's October 2020 Presidential Elections

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On August 6, President Alassane Ouattara (*WAH-tah-rah*) of Côte d'Ivoire declared that he would run for a third term in presidential elections scheduled for October 31. The announcement confirmed weeks of speculation that Ouattara would seek reelection following the death, on July 8, of his prime minister and favored successor. Ouattara, who had toyed with running before pledging in March to step down at the end of his second term, has won praise for presiding over general stability and rapid economic growth since taking power in 2011 following a protracted political crisis that ended in a brief civil war. Analysts warn that his decision to vie for a third term, which the opposition considers unconstitutional, could reopen societal cleavages in a country that has never seen a peaceful electoral transfer of power.

The forthcoming elections may have implications for U.S. interests in Côte d'Ivoire, which partly center on supporting "a democratic government whose legitimacy can be accepted by all," according to the State Department. Some Members of Congress may also consider Ouattara's decision to run for reelection in the context of eroding respect for presidential term limits and broader democratic backsliding across West Africa—a region that previously led the continent in the advancement of democratic principles but has recently recorded rapid declines in civil liberties trends. (Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Tibor Nagy had lauded Ouattara's initial decision to forego a third-term bid, stating via Twitter that his "commitment to democratic norms sets an example far beyond Côte d'Ivoire.") In this regard, Ouattara's candidacy resembles recent moves by Guinea's President Alpha Condé; both leaders assert that constitutional revisions reset the clock on term limits, enabling a third consecutive term.

Whether possible political turmoil might affect U.S. assistance to Côte d'Ivoire, including nascent counterterrorism support, is another potential consideration for U.S. policymakers. U.S. aid largely seeks to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other health challenges, promote accountable governance, and help professionalize the military. Côte d'Ivoire also is a focus country of U.S.-backed efforts to end child labor in the cocoa industry. An ongoing $524.7 million Millennium Challenge Corporation compact focuses on education and infrastructure.

Figure 1. Côte d'Ivoire
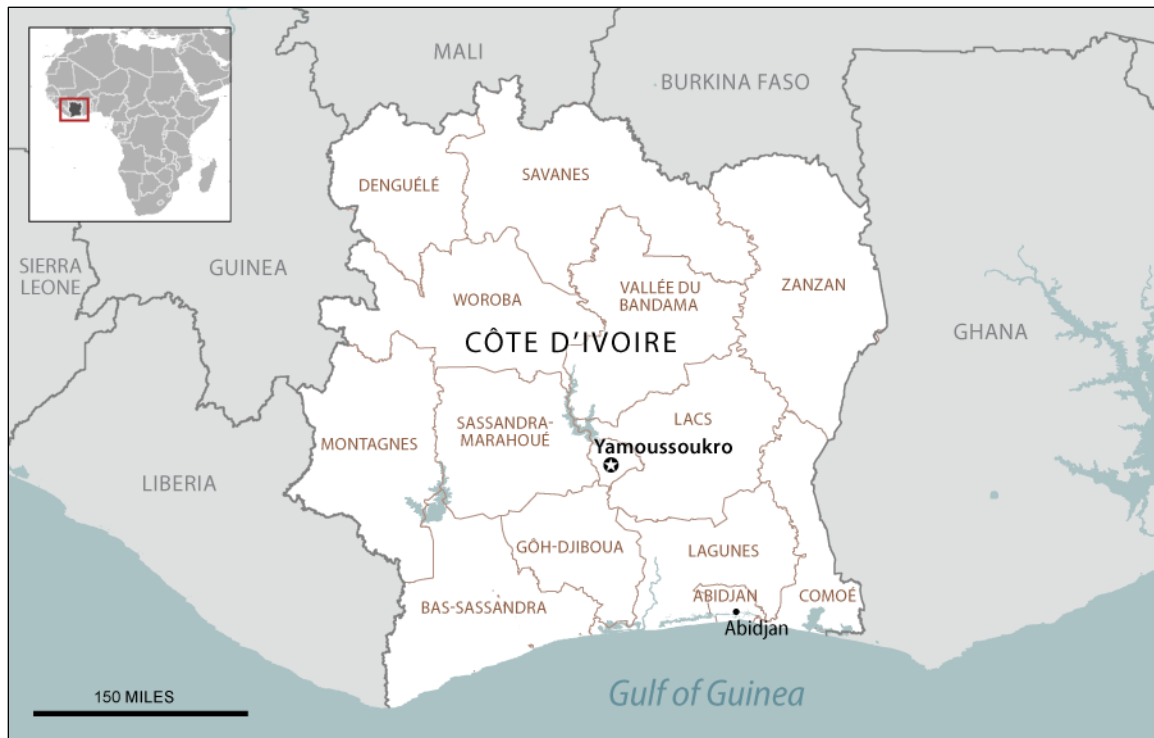
Background and the 2002-2011 Crisis

Côte d'Ivoire experienced decades of stability and prosperity after gaining independence from France in 1960. Yet simmering ethno-regional tensions erupted in the 1990s, predicated in large part on southern Ivoirians' resistance to perceived marginalization by northerners and immigrants from neighboring countries who migrated to the fertile south in search of work. Many southerners are Christian or follow indigenous religions, while many (but not all) northerners and migrant workers are Muslim. In 2002, a military mutiny by northern soldiers evolved into an attempt to unseat then-president Laurent Gbagbo (*BAHG-boh*), a southerner. Rebels seized the country's north, instituting a parallel state. International mediation efforts produced a series of peace accords, and French troops and U.N. peacekeepers deployed to uphold a ceasefire. In 2010, Ouattara, an economist and former prime minister, defeated the incumbent Gbagbo in an election intended to end the crisis. The U.N. certified the result and the international community, including the United States, recognized Ouattara's win, but Gbagbo refused to step down.

The stand-off spurred months of unrest and violence along ethno-political lines in which an estimated 3,000 people died. The conflict ended in April 2011, when northern rebels, aided by French and U.N. troops, arrested Gbagbo. Ivorian authorities transferred Gbagbo to the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity, but he was acquitted in early 2019 and appears intent on returning to Côte d'Ivoire, pending an appeal by the ICC Prosecutor.

The 2020 Elections: Context and Prospects

The post-crisis period has been generally stable, buoyed by average annual GDP growth of 8.3% between 2012 and 2019. The government has taken steps to restore security, strengthen state institutions, and reform the security sector. Ouattara's reelection in 2015, the adoption of a new constitution in a 2016 referendum, and credible legislative polls later that year raised hopes for a consolidation of democratic

 progress. During Ouattara's presidency, successive U.S. Administrations have viewed the country as a development partner and a pillar of democracy and stability in a region beset by Islamist extremism and democratic backsliding.

Political and regional fissures have persisted, however, and tensions have mounted since 2018 amid the disintegration of a political coalition uniting Ouattara with longtime rival and former president Henri Konan Bédié. Local elections in 2018 featured pockets of violence and several deaths; in 2019, an ethno-political dispute in the central town of Béoumi killed 14 people. Analysts have warned of a risk of larger scale violence surrounding the October polls. The opposition disputes the constitutionality of Ouattara's candidacy, which Bédié and other leaders have vowed to reject, as well as the independence of the national electoral commission, a key source of tension. Critics also accuse Ouattara of using the justice system to sideline rivals. Ivoirian courts have convicted *in absentia* two opposition leaders: former president Gbagbo (for economic crimes) and former rebel leader Guillaume Soro (for embezzlement); both are now in exile and could face arrest should they return to the country. Authorities have arrested several other opposition figures, prompting human rights groups to express concern over due process.

Security conditions have improved since 2011, but intercommunal conflicts over access to land persist, and often overlap with local ethno-political tensions. Security force indiscipline is another concern: ex-rebels integrated into the military since 2011 have staged repeated mutinies, and former rebel leaders (including Soro) reportedly retain influence and oversee parallel chains of command over their erstwhile rank-and-file. Meanwhile, two mass-casualty attacks by armed Islamists—a 2016 massacre at a beach resort that killed 19, and a June 2020 raid along the northern border with Burkina Faso that killed 12 security personnel—have heightened fears about Côte d'Ivoire's vulnerability to extremism.

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