Special Report: Ivory Coast

*Upcoming regional elections to serve as indicator of nation's progress since 2011 post-election violence*

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Introduction and Background

The Ivory Coast is slated to hold nationwide municipal elections on April 21. The elections were originally planned to transpire on February 24, but were postponed in January to give opposition parties, primarily the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), an opportunity to negotiate with the Government for their inclusion in the polls. The United Nations peacekeeping mission has issued warnings regarding intimidation and threats of election-related violence surrounding the April 21 polls. These elections will serve as an indicator of the country’s stability and progress since the November 2010 elections which led to five months of violence that claimed some 3,000 lives after former president Laurent Gbagbo, who now faces trial at the International Criminal Court, refused to concede defeat.

Gbagbo’s FPI also boycotted legislative elections in 2011. These polls transpired with relative ease, but voter turnout was low and there were localized attacks on polling stations. Richard Kodjo, the FPI secretary-general, claims that the party refuses to participate in these current polls without reforms in the security sector and the national electoral commission, which the party asserts is unable to administer a free and fair election. The party also desires amnesty for alleged crimes committed during the aforementioned five month conflict. Current President Alassane Ouattara has ruled out any form of amnesty at the time of writing. Without FPI participation, there is potential for acts of unrest to be perpetrated by militant elements from the party.

Current Situation

The Ivory Coast’s outlying regions remain extremely volatile. The border areas with Ghana and Liberia are particularly so due to the stationing of militant loyalists of former president Gbagbo in camps located in both of those countries. A recent cross-border attack took place in Ivory Coast’s western Blolequin District on March 23, killing at least six people.

In urban centers, popular discontent continues to manifest in the form of mass protests, which are primarily a response to the lack of basic services and political representation. Protests turned violent at the end of March in Abidjan’s Abobo area when residents began attacking bill collectors of the state water supplier, responding to what they say are unfair payments for services not received. In addition, Abidjan’s Yopougon area, a stronghold of Gbagbo loyalists, witnesses sporadic violence in the form of random and apparent politically motivated shootings and demonstrations against the ruling Ouattara government.

As political tensions in the Ivory Coast persist, the country continues to be mired in a series of threats to the stability of its public sector. The confederation of Public Servants Union of Ivory Coast (COSYFOCI) has called for a seven day strike to commence on April 22, one day after the legislative elections, and last until April 30. The strike is in attempt to pressure the government over longstanding grievances related to wages.
Major Political Players

Democratic Party of the Ivory Coast (PDCI)
The PDCI, also known as the PDCI-RDA because its founder Felix Houphouet-Boigny had headed the Pan-African political party of West Africa prior to independence, was the only party legally allowed in Ivory Coast from the state’s formation in 1960 until 1990. Founded in 1946, the PDCI remained in power until a military coup in 1999. The PDCI draws its base largely from the center and center-east of Ivory Coast, especially around the capital and Houphouet-Boigny’s home village Yamoussoukro. This is due to the fact that Houphouet-Boigny was ethnically Baoule, a group which represents approximately 20% of the Ivorian population, and thus most Baoules support the PDCI. The party is currently headed by Henri Konan Bedie and maintains a center-right platform including Pan-Africanism.

Rally of the Republicans (RDR)
Currently the governing party in the Ivory Coast, the RDR split from the PDCI in 1994. In 2007, RDR absorbed the former New Forces (FNCI), an alliance of three northern political parties headed by Guillaume Soro which were known as the “rebels” in the first Ivorian Civil War. Headed by President Alassane Ouattara, the RDR is supported by most of the country’s northern territory, which is comprised mainly of Muslims of the Dioula, Malinke, and Senoufos tribes. The Rally of the Republicans maintains an ideology of 'democratic liberalism' and boasts itself as a centrist party.

Ivorian Popular Front (FPI)
Founded in 1982 by Laurent Gbagbo, the FPI was the only opposition allowed to compete in the 2000 elections and won that heavily disputed poll. The ethnic base of the FPI is the Bete people, who primarily reside in the Ivory Coast’s south and southeast. As it boycotted the 2011 parliamentary elections, the FPI has not participated in the electoral process since Gbagbo lost the highly controversial 2010 presidential election. Gbagbo now sits on trial at the ICC for crimes against humanity committed in that post-election period, thus leaving Pascal Affi N’Guessan as its leader. Many FPI sympathizers reside in neighboring Ghana and Liberia, from where they have conducted attacks on remote areas of the Ivory Coast, particularly in the southwest. The FPI maintains an ideology of social conservatism and promotes a center-left platform.
Ideological similarities point to low potential for RDR-PDCI related unrest

As the RDR originally split from the PDCI, the two parties have similar ideological backgrounds. Specifically, they both see the state as needing to be guided by the vision of Ivory Coast’s thirty year president, hence the naming of their coalition after Houphouet-Boigny in 2005. In addition, the RDR and PDCI worked for five years to depose former President Gbagbo, and have since spent three years working together in government. The two major RHDP players, together accounting for 198 of the 255 seats in the National Assembly, have thus proven themselves capable of cooperating. Given this, we assess there to be a low likelihood of post-election unrest in the majority of the country.

Of the 197 communes and 30 regions in which municipal elections are slated to transpire on April 21, certain areas are expected to have more contentious political battles. As such, these hotspots have an increased potential for unrest, although we still assess violent clashes to be unlikely. Given that some FPI members are running as independents, as are some former party members, elections with strong independent candidates are assessed to be more volatile areas.

Potential friction points for regional election unrest include: Cavally (RDR v PDCI), Poro (RDR v PDCI), Bounkani (RDR v PDCI), Gohue (RDR v PDCI), Tonki (RDR v UDPCI), Moronou (PDCI v independent), Aries (Independent v PDCI), and Bouake (RDR v independent). Municipal election hotspots include: Yopougon (RDR v PDCI), Adjame (RDR v former RDR), Treichville (RDR v PDCI), Marcory (RDR v PDCI), Kumasi (RDR v PDCI).
Increased potential for unrest in FPI stronghold, especially Yopougon area of Abidjan

While we assess it to be unlikely for elements within the RHDP coalition to clash over the results, the situation involving the FPI is different. This mainly derives from the FPI’s willingness to use violence, as particularly exhibited over the past six months, to exert political pressure. In addition, the FPI has remained politically stubborn in negotiations since Gbagbo’s arrest, as displayed in February.

Given this political obstinacy and use of force, we assess there to be an increased potential for violence in FPI strongholds before, during, and even after the election. The FPI is running candidates, listed on tickets as independents, and has a very strong support base across the southern half of the country, thus elevating the risk posed to this area. Politically motivated clashes that broke out between PDCI supporters and those of an independent candidate the night of April 9 in Bassam, a remote village southeast of Abidjan, point towards this elevated threat.
In addition to clashes involving Ivorian residents, FPI supporters currently in Liberia and Ghana also pose a threat. In the western regions, particularly the southwest, these militants have primarily attacked government and military installations, but there has also been a recent spate of attacks against village residents by the Movement for the Return of the West (MIWRO), who allegedly receive support from Gbagbo sympathizers. As Gbagbo sympathizers are also taking refuge in Ghana, the threat extends to the southeast as well, even though no attacks have been conducted by these militants in recent months.

In addition to the increased threat posed to more remote areas across the south, the Yopougon suburb of Abidjan is also a renowned FPI stronghold, as exhibited by past FPI and youth FPI (JFPI) rallies which have drawn crowds in the tens of thousands and have occasionally turned violent. Given that most pro-Gbagbo activity that transpires in Abidjan typically takes place in Yopougon, we assess there to be an increased potential for an outbreak of violence in this suburb. Reports of heavy gunfire in Yopougon the night of April 13, despite still unknown motivations and gunmen, further reflect the elevated threat level.

**Long-term threats to stability to persist despite progress since 2010 elections**

While widespread violence has ceased since the end of the five month long conflict that followed the 2010 elections several conditions pose challenges to the stability of the West African nation. Militant networks loyal to and affiliated with the former Gbagbo regime continue to make attempts at destabilizing the current government as highlighted by the more than two-dozen attacks that have taken place since August 2012, most in Abidjan. Moreover, the increases in intrastate crime, terrorism, and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea point to the ongoing criticisms that the nation’s security system is in desperate need of reform – a primary concern of opposition parties, which is one stated reason for the boycott of the FPI.

The manner in which these elections transpire, will however, serve as an indicator as to the real progress between the severely divided country. While widespread unrest within the population of the country has quelled, a recently released United Nations report indicating the need for a continued presence of a nearly 9,000-man military presence through the United Nation Operation in Ivory Coast (UNOCI) highlights the continued concern on part of the international community that there is still potential for significant violence.

**Results of upcoming elections unlikely to have impact on public sector grievances, while article enactment likely to work for economic betterment**

The impact of the upcoming elections on long-term stability and recent public outcry is likely to be minimal, mostly due to the fact that municipal and regional elections are only going to affect local policies and representation. Moreover the funding of local governments is allocated at the national level, effectively a restriction on municipal capabilities by the National Assembly. Via funding allocations, municipal and even national agendas are now in President Ouattara’s hands de facto. This is due to a law passed by the National Assembly on April 10 to invoke Article 75 of the Constitution. In the Ivory Coast, the President proposes most legislation and the legislative branch, in deciding whether or not to approve it,
provides the check. Article 75 empowers the President to decide all policies involving social and economic programs without the approval of the legislative branch.

Long term, we assess this to have positive implications for the Ivory Coast. Ouattara, a University of Pennsylvania trained economist and former senior official of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), was handpicked by former President Houphouet-Boigny to implement locally unpopular economic reforms in the early 1990’s. Since then, Ouattara has often faced stiff opposition, particularly because of other decision makers’ distrust of international institutions, misunderstandings of economic concepts, and aversion to reform. Dealing with social reforms for example, Ouattara dissolved his Cabinet in November 2012 because he could not pass a law to make husbands and wives equal heads of household. Unchecked power to institute the reforms for which he has advocated for years will thus likely improve the financial and social state of Ivorian affairs.

Recommendations

1. If traveling to Ivory Coast, it is advised to contact Max Security Solutions for itinerary based consultation and recommendations for on-ground support.
2. Avoid all polling stations throughout Ivory Coast on April 21 due to potential for violence at such locations.
3. We advise against all non-essential travel to the country’s outlying areas, including Abidjan’s environs with particular emphasis on Yopougon, due to increased risks associated with political tensions.
4. As a general security precaution, avoid large gatherings and political demonstrations in the Ivory Coast due to the incident risk posed to passers-by.