Ivory Coast: New Vision or Same Old Story?
First Published: March 2000 in Africana.com

By Zachariah Mampilly

Despite the fervent hopes of eternal optimists, the recent collapse of the democratic regime in Ivory Coast (Côte d'Ivoire) struck a perhaps-fatal blow to the idea of the African renaissance. Long considered the most stable country in a turbulent region, the Ivory Coast's domination by military leaders is just the latest in a string of coups that have plagued West Africa as late. Even with General Robert Guei (pictured), who took control in late December, promising a quick return to democracy, these developments have seriously undermined the Organization of African Unity's recent efforts to establish a democratic culture throughout Africa. (Guei currently rules as head of the National Committee of Public Salvation comprised of nine senior military officers. The committee, he says, will be to oversee the country for a transitional period.)

For those who have been monitoring developments in Ivory Coast over the past year, it was obvious that trouble had been brewing for some time. The current crisis had its roots in tension already existing among soldiers unhappy about unpaid salaries, foreign workers afraid of rising xenophobia from the ruling party, and cocoa farmers unhappy about the drop in cocoa prices worldwide. The armed forces in the Ivory Coast have traditionally refrained from taking an active role in politics; nonetheless the current situation was ignited by an army mutiny protesting unpaid salaries and poor living conditions. General Guei has claimed that the coup was caused by deposed president Henri Konan Bedie's recent harassment of foreign workers, who comprise around 30% of the country's population and play an important role in the economy.

The spark was provided by preparations for elections slated for October 2000, which would have pitted Bedie against Alassane Ouattara. Bedie had gone out of his way to discredit Ouattara by labeling him a foreigner with roots in neighboring Burkina Faso, and he arrested several leaders of Ouattara's political party. Ouattara had been in exile due to Bedie's harassment, but General Guei is a known ally of Ouattara, and it is unclear of what his role
in the current situation is or will be. General Guei has made it clear that in any elections to be held, Ouattara will be allowed to run, although Ouattara's spokesman has claimed that he had no role in the coup. Recently, Ouattara returned to the Ivory Coast and was welcomed by General Guei himself.

Although Ivory Coast registered an impressive 6% growth last year and has one of the highest GDPs in all of Africa, the current downturn in the world cocoa market has been causing stress for the farming sector. In addition, the summer of 1999 witnessed prolonged student riots, which were crushed with vigor by the Bedie regime – not the first time Bedie had put down student protests with a heavy hand. Bedie's 1995 quashing of student protests drew criticism from the then military chief Guei, leading to Guei's being removed from his post and demoted to a position as sports minister. The feud was exacerbated in 1997, when Guei was removed from the government altogether for supposedly planning a coup two years earlier. Despite his criticism of Bedie, Guei is not known as a great friend of students either. As military chief in 1990, he was believed to have allowed his soldiers to torture student protesters.

General Guei has claimed that the people of Ivory Coast have largely supported his action. Krista Desgranges, a student at American University who has roots in the Ivory Coast, confirmed that the general mood in Ivory Coast was one of disillusionment with the Bedie regime, and that many Ivorians were happy to see him go. Nevertheless, unhappiness with Bedie does not automatically translate into support for military rule. In a speech to the public broadcast by Television Ivoirienne the day before Christmas, General Guei made numerous comments related to his view of the current situation:

"Dear countrymen, judging from the demonstration of joy we noted in the various districts of the capital, we are happy to realize that you have really understood the profound meaning of the action the mutineers have taken…. I would like to reassure all friends of the diplomatic corps representing their respective countries that we shall ensure, in particular, their security and they should know that the agreements between their countries and ours will be
maintained…. One basic element should be noted: Democracy and the rules of democracy will be scrupulously respected and I will personally ensure that they are respected."

To reassure the foreign population, Guei added: "The security of Ivorians and non-Ivorians will also be guaranteed." All of this is standard fare for most military leaders who come to power through extra-constitutional means, and only time will tell whether he sticks to his promises or not. However, many political leaders in the Ivory Coast who initially had condemned the coup, have now stated their desire to work towards the resolution of this crisis. Many Ivorians believe that General Guei has sincere intentions, but most are also waiting to judge him by his actions in the coming months.

Admittedly Ivory Coast has a rather weak democratic tradition. The country's founding father, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, although admired by most Ivorians, ruled continuously for thirty years, only conceding elections due to renewed student protests demanding multi-party rule. After Houphouet-Boigny's death in 1993, Bedie – who was of the same political party and ethnic group as the fallen leader – came to power. He held his post in the 1995 election, which was boycotted by the opposition and which coincided with the worst violence in the country's history. This marked a strong departure from Houphouet-Boigny's philosophy of growth through stability, which was captured by his favored phrase, "la paix ce n'est pas un mot, c'est un comportement" (peace is not a word, it is a way of behaving).

This perception of tranquility had led to Ivory Coast's status as the darling of the international community, and especially favored by the French. On his recent African tour, U.S. President Bill Clinton visited Ivory Coast, in an apparent effort to make inroads into the French-dominated areas of West Africa. The current tensions between General Guei's government and the French over France's decision to grant Bedie assistance, and their controversial attempt to send in 300 additional troops, may just be the boon for further American involvement in Ivory Coast's affairs. Still, both the United States and France have condemned the coup. The situation on the ground in Ivory Coast has largely returned to normal after a
few tense days that witnessed extensive looting by both soldiers and civilians. Like the coup leaders in Nigeria and Niger before him, General Guei has refrained from declaring himself supreme, stressing instead the transitional nature of his regime—apparently the latest fad crossing the ECOWAS countries.

As for Bedie, he is currently touring other West African nations looking for support for his claim to power, but it is doubtful that he will be able to garner the necessary support. The regional giant, Nigeria, who at one time under General Sani Abacha freely sent in troops to other ECOWAS nations to prop up or pull down regimes at will, is now undergoing turmoil of its own. Although President Olusegun Obasanjo has condemned this coup, he had also made it clear that peacekeeping operations in other West African nations have been a drain on Nigeria's limited resources, and cutting back the military has been one of his main priorities since his inauguration. Nonetheless, in his short time at the helm, he has consistently pushed for an end to military rule in Africa, especially at the August OAU Summit – where a number of high-profile leaders had pledged their desire to see an end to coups on the African continent – and at the recently concluded Commonwealth Summit. President Chiluba of Zambia even tried to pass a motion that would authorize other countries to involve themselves in the affairs of a government that is overthrown illegally, an idea which goes against one of the cardinal principles of the OAU – noninvolvement in the internal affairs of member states. Although a milder condemnation was passed, it was nonetheless a significant step for the OAU, which has thus far remained a rather toothless tiger. This is the first significant test of what the OAU is willing to do to ensure that it becomes more than just a forum for discussion, but an actual political entity capable of influencing the behavior of its member states. Considering the ease with which the Ivorian junta came to and consolidated its power, it is doubtful if the OAU will be able to have any serious impact on the current situation.

For Ivory Coast itself, it is hard to imagine that the dawn of military rule in this most stable of African nations would not have lasting implications for its suddenly uncertain future. Perhaps its most vital asset was the perception that Ivory Coast was a lone oasis of stability. That image is on shaky ground, although some
say that Ivory Coast may be a unique situation. Even if General Guei sticks to his promise of returning the nation to democracy, it is clear that those who have supported Bedie will never accept any regime that he is not the head of, and if past experience is any indicator, violence should be expected. Bedie has remained defiant, and his attempts to move the international community to "restore democracy" in the Ivory Coast show that he will not just disappear without a fight. To General Guei’s credit, he has stated that if Bedie chooses to, he shall be free to return to the country.

As for the entire West African region, the current coup threatens the success of the eight member West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA). UEMOA is the most advanced form of regional economic integration in Africa, and January 1st was to have witnessed the creation of a "no borders" zone with no internal tariffs and a harmonization of economic legislation within the grouping. UEMOA was hoped to be able to attract foreign investment to offset the loss of aid money from the West. With the coup in the Ivory Coast and potential for a similar situation in Senegal, West Africa's other traditionally stable government, UEMOA's prospects of wooing foreign investment at this point seem small. Furthermore, while Senegal's President Abdou Diouf condemned the coup (probably because he faces a similar situation as Bedie did), not all of UEMOA's members have taken the same approach. Mali's President Alpha Oumar Konare has long been a critic of Bedie due to his harsh treatment of foreign workers, many of whom come from Mali. Such divisions between UEMOA's leaders regarding the coup spell trouble for this promising union.

The other unknown factor in the current situation is the ethnic dimension. Ivory Coast has been ruled by the Baoule from the south of the country since Independence. General Guei comes from the Guere ethnic group, based in the west, and Ouattara is a Muslim from the north. The question according to American University student Desgranges is, "with Guei's takeover and his apparent alliance with Ouattara, is this leadership going to form a new kind of presence in (Ivory Coast) that will isolate the Baoule, the Agni, the Attie and other Southern tribes?

Like most coup leaders with "good" intentions, General Guei seems to have put faith in his own judgment to draw the line when
the country has gone far enough away from his own ideal. The problem is such leaders rarely have the foresight about what to do next. Sadly, it is the people of Ivory Coast and to a less extent West Africa who will bear the brunt of the inevitable repercussions.

About the Author

Zachariah Cherian Mampilly is a writer living in Bangalore, India.