Cote d'Ivoire's return to normalcy and the challenges ahead
Written by Assefaw Bariagaber

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ASSEFAW BARIAGABER, MAY 5 2011

 Now that the decade-old conflict and particularly the last four months of violence in Cote d'Ivoire have subsided dramatically, it is time to ask: what are the prospects for an enduring peace and which measures are likely to contribute to state sustainability in the country? Indeed, it would be a tragedy of major proportions if Cote d'Ivoire were to relapse to the state of civil war that killed and wounded tens of thousands, dislocated millions, destroyed infrastructure estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars, and resulted in serious violations of human rights of many innocent civilians. It would also be a tragedy if Cote d'Ivoire was to go back to the destructive state of the past decade after a rare and an unprecedented convergence of views of various actors on ending the conflict. The chances that the UN, AU, ECOWAS, and others will once more be involved in the remarkable way that they have been in recent months is near zero if the country were to return to the recent violence. What is more, return to civil war in Cote d'Ivoire may discourage concerted efforts by the international community in other potential conflict areas in Africa. Finally, it would be tragic to see the Cote d'Ivoire of yesteryears — prosperous, tolerant of religious and ethnic differences, and welcoming of neighboring peoples — return to the near anarchy of the last decade and throw away this opportunity for progress.

But why did the once "Island of prosperity" in the turbulent West Africa descend into hell in 1999 oblivious to the destructiveness of the similar descent of its neighbours some ten years earlier? Why did existing communal differences become politically salient and threaten to unmake the Republic? The Muslim-Christian confessional differences, or the regional belongingness of a "northerner" and a "southerner", or the ancestral lineage of a citizen from a neighbouring country, such as Burkina Faso, have existed long enough and were not recent creations. However, they never assumed a potent political meaning the way they did in the last decade. They became powerful mobilizing political force only after the economic difficulties the country faced because of stagnant commodity prices and the stringent structural adjustment programmes the IMF imposed. That is, the communal differences existed, for example, during the presidency of Houphouet-Boigny but *only* remained conditions necessary for conflict initiation. When the economic conditions started to deteriorate and the "national cake" became smaller, however, these communal differences assumed their present political salience primarily because the elites used these differences as instruments in their inter-ethnic elite rivalry. That is, the economic difficulties in the country provided conditions sufficient for the initiation of the conflict, and the conflict began at the time it did because of the simultaneity of the existing communal differences (necessary conditions) and the deterioration of economic conditions (sufficient conditions) in the country.   Ethnic and religious differences in and of themselves did not and cannot be reasons for the onset and continuation of the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire.

Although peace has gradually returned and people have began their normal daily activities, one should not take much solace. The chances of resumption of the conflict are real and not insignificant. The society is now highly segmented along many lines: regional segmentation into "northerner" and "southerner", religious segmentation in terms of Christian and Muslim, and identity and citizen segmentation based on who is "authentically" Ivorian and who is not. And the most alarming aspect of this communal divide is the near absence of cross-cutting cleavages between the two communal segments. The "northerners" are mostly Muslim and regarded as "non-authentically" Ivorian, while the "southerners" are mostly Christian and see themselves as "authentically" Ivorian. There is no better barometer of the prevailing wide divide than the result and distribution of the recently concluded elections, where Mr. Alassane

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Ouattara (a "northerner") and Mr. Laurent Gbagbo (a "southerner"), the two contenders for the Presidency of the Republic, received about 54% and 46% of the votes, respectively, more or less distributed along the north-south divide. In fact, the election stalemate and the accompanying violence occurred after the Constitutional Council annulled many of the votes cast in the northern part of the country and declared Mr. Gbagbo as the winner by a slim majority. In addition, there exists war-induced psychological divide of a "northern" victor, sinisterly backed by France, and a "southern" vanquished because he stood against French domination to protect the national interest. All of the above factors have made the communal divide real and wide and must be faced head on not only by Mr. Ouattara but also by the UN, AU, ECOWAS, France, and others.

So what steps should be taken to advance state sustainability and to prevent further conflict in Cote d'Ivoire? First, one must recognize that the victory of Mr. Ouattara relied on the critical role of France and the UN, but this is not likely to end the conflict over the longer term unless there is a commitment for continued support. It would have been much better had Mr. Ouattara been able to win the war relying only on popular support and the resources he had at his disposal. This being not the case, Mr. Ouattara will need the continued support of the UN, AU, ECOWAS (but perhaps not the active involvement of France) to (re)constitute the institutions of governance, and to build more neutral judiciary, police, defense, and other security forces. The building of such organs is critically important to avoid the temptation by Mr. Ouattara to rule outside the democratic norms similar to Mr. Gbagbo, who came to power as a champion of democratic rule only to become an autocrat. I doubt and worry if there will be continued commitment by the international community because of its rather short attention span in situations such as this. What is needed now is a massive program to rehabilitate the conflict areas, repatriate refugees and internally displaced persons, and financial and economic support from the IMF, the World Bank, the EU and others. In other words, the conditions that provided sufficiency for conflict initiation have to be removed through massive international support. The communal differences are not variables that can easily be manipulated, but they will gradually lose their appeal if there is sustained economic development.

Second, although it is to be welcomed that Mr. Ouattara has shown magnanimity after his victory and has promised humane treatment of Mr. Gbagbo, this should only be a function of the need for more stability. Hence, while justice has to be served, it may be better to focus more on finding the truth to advance national reconciliation.

Third, because there are two highly segmented communal groups, Arendt Lijphart's famous consociational democracy, a system designed to mitigate conflicting ethnic interests in multi-ethnic societies, may not work well because there are only two communal groups, and there is no incentive for the larger group to entertain a power-sharing arrangement which may provide the smaller group with a veto power over important policy matters. This is a critically important tenet in consociational democracy. The other three tenets — a grand coalition (each segment is represented at the highest levels of government), proportional representation, and segmental autonomy — also augment the power and influence of smaller communal groups at the expense of the power and influence of the larger group. And even if a power-sharing arrangement of this type is adopted, it will most likely fail because the chances of stalemate when only two groups are present are high. This has been shown to be the case in a highly segmented two-group scenario, as in Sri Lanka and Cyprus. The majoritarian electoral system, on the other hand, has a better chance of success: if the winner is to successfully govern, it will have no choice but to include the other group in a broad-based government. The fact that Mr. Gbagbo's group has significant backing, as the results of the recent election have shown, is reason enough to institute an inclusive, majoritarian government under President Ouattara.

For the first three decades after independence in 1960, Cote d'Ivoire was singular in its prosperity and political stability in West Africa. Along with the now stable, democratic, and prosperous Ghana and emergent Nigeria, Cote d'Ivoire has the potential to pull the entire region out of the quagmire of non-ending conflicts. To achieve this, however, President Ouattara's prudent leadership and the continued commitment of the international community will be critical in the next few years.

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