

The Security Dilemma and Conflict in Cote d'Ivoire

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ABSTRACT

In October of 2002 Cote d'Ivoire fell into a state of near civil war and the situation remains tenuous. Until recently, Cote d'Ivoire was considered to be one of the most stable West African countries, but fractious relations between so-called *étrangers*, typically of Burkina Faso and Malian heritage, and those of "pure-blooded" *Ivoirite* led to open conflict. This study seeks to thoroughly examine the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire. The paper will provide both a historical examination of the roots of the conflict and an overview of all the actors that are involved in the conflict. The study will analyze the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire through the theoretical framework of the security dilemma.

Keywords: Africa, Cote d'Ivoire, security dilemma, West Africa, ethnic conflict

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflict has emerged as one of the most pressing security issues since the termination of the Cold War. The trend is salient throughout the world and Africa has witnessed more than its fair share of ethnic conflict with states such as Rwanda, Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo providing some of the most visible cases. What conditions allow for outbreaks of ethnic conflict? There have been several theoretical approaches to the study of ethnic conflict. One approach has been to use large scale data sets of nonstate communal groups that are susceptible to ethnic violence (Gurr & Harff 1994). This approach uses the ethnic group as the unit of analysis and concludes that the dynamics and scale of ethnic violence varies by region. It also finds that ethnic conflict is a manifestation of the enduring tension between states that want to consolidate their power and ethnic groups that want to defend and promote their collective identity and interests (Gurr & Harff 1994: 13). Another perspective looks at ethnic conflict from three-pronged approach, which argues that ethnic wars are driven by mass ethnic hostility, outbidding by belligerent elites, and a security dilemma (Kaufman 1996: 108). Others argue that ethnic violence is a confining as a discourse and that it is necessary to consider deeper cultural factors and to examine each case contextually (Brubaker & Laitin 1998: 446). Finally, a different school of thought argues that inter-ethnic conflict can be traced to the emergence of a security dilemma (Posen, 1993: 27; Snyder and Walter 1999: 23).

The concept of the security dilemma was especially useful during the Cold War. The security dilemma allowed analysis of how and why states sought to control or neutralize other states (Jervis 1978: 169). Snyder and Walter now argue that the theoretical framework of the security dilemma is not only applicable in the context of conflict between states, but it is also able to provide analytical insight into civil wars as well (Snyder and Walter 1999: 15). A security dilemma is a situation in which each party's efforts to increase its own security reduces the security of the others. Even non offensive actions can invoke a security dilemma and this is why it is important to disentangle predatory goals from goals that ensure security. Jervis points out that "attempts to establish buffer zones can alarm others who have stakes there (169)."

A security dilemma is a social situation with social and perceptual causes, not simply a fact of nature (Snyder & Walter 1999: 24). What conditions must exist for a state to be overwhelmed by ethnic conflict? One prerequisite for the emergence of a security dilemma and ethnic conflict is the collapse or severe weakening of a state or empire. Posen argues that in states, "there will be competition for the key to security-power. The competition will often continue to a point at which the competing entities have amassed more power than needed for security and, thus, consequently begin to threaten others (Posen 1993: 28)." A security dilemma puts in motion an upward spiral of security for all involved (Ganguly & Taras, 2002: 294). A closer inspection of the political viability of African states elucidates the conditions that allow for the conflagration of ethnic differences.

2. THE AFRICAN STATE

Before looking at the specific characteristics of the case of Cote d'Ivoire it is important to review the political capacity of African states in general. It is, after all, within the confines of the state that intra-state ethnic conflict has emerged. A state is defined as the totality of a country's governmental institutions and officials which possesses the legal authority to make and coercively enforce, laws that are binding on the population (Sodaro 2001: 116). One strain of literature argues that the weakness of African states is rooted in the emergence of a dominant informal economy and the loss of national territory to neighboring economies (Zartman 1995: 9). Some observers have also argued that a weak state is created through the instrumentalization of disorder, which is in turn profitable to African political elites (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 13-14; Reno 1999: 25). Van de Walle posits that most African states have limited capacities and that they are rarely able to project power and achieve stated goals (2001, 46).

The weak nature of African states has been cited as one of the obstacles to economic and political development in that part of the world and it is this same weakness that has allowed ethnic conflict to emerge. In theory, "the existence of a government can adjudicate disputes and assure security for all citizens

(Saideman 1998: 134).” The politically incapacitated nature of post-colonial African states such as Cote d’Ivoire are characterized by a deficit in the institutional strength necessary to overcome ethnic division. Some of the characteristics of weak states are lack of a command over sufficient resources, dependency on external funds, no concrete plan of development, lack of territorial control and lack of support and legitimacy with its population and the international community. Cote d’Ivoire exhibits some or all of these characteristics. It is difficult to disentangle the inherently weak nature of African states from the outbreak of ethnic conflict. In fact it can be argued that the attributes of a weak state not only fail to prevent ethnic conflict but that they also contribute to outbreaks of ethnic violence.

In European nation states such as France and England, absolutist systems engendered a political framework that leveled many political, economic and cultural differences (Welsh 1993: 63). In the contemporary context democracy is the preferred form of governance and this has made it difficult for nascent democracies, such as those in Africa, to eliminate ethnic differences. Absolutist systems are discouraged although in the eyes of some they are a necessary step on the path to democratization. By contrast, democracy has reified ethnic differences and provided disparate ethnic groups with individual voices in the political process. In democracies, “the scope of ethnic politics is dramatically widened (Welsh 1993, 66).” In Africa this has been especially true as many nations on the continent have struggled with the challenge of governing an ethnically diverse population. Cote d’Ivoire is no exception and a discussion of the creation of the state of Cote d’Ivoire and its post-colonial history sheds light on the contemporary state of affairs.

3. THE ROOTS OF DIVISION

From 1960 until his death in 1993, Felix Houphouet-Boigny led Cote d’Ivoire to the achievement of enviable economic growth that rendered it a powerhouse of the sub-region. The vibrant economy of Cote d’Ivoire partially concealed the fractious relations that existed between so-called *étrangères*, typically of Burkina Faso and Malian heritage, and those of “pure-blooded” *Ivoirité*. Despite societal friction based on class, religion and region of origin, Côte d’Ivoire never suffered from civil wars or military coup d’états. To some observers this established the foundation for a stable and prosperous nation (World Bank/WTO Report). Little attention was paid to the fragile ethnic fabric of the country and the steps that government officials had taken to exacerbate ethnic cleavages, especially in the post Houphouet-Boigny era. At the inception of the rebellion many observers expressed surprise that a “stable” country like Cote d’Ivoire could fall victim to war. A more profound examination from a historical perspective reveals political divisions along class and cultural heritage lines that had developed systematically over the course of the last one hundred years.

The *résidents de nationalité étrangère* (foreign national residents) in Côte-d'Ivoire, number 3 million in population and still another 2 million are descendants of *étrangères* which in total accounts for 30 % of the total population. It is also worth noting that the vast majority of the *étrangères*, sometimes referred to as *Nordistes*, identify themselves as followers of Islam. Most *étrangères* inhabit the northern region of Cote d'Ivoire, hence the name *Nordiste*. Conflicts between residents of foreign nationality and "Ivoiriens" are not new, there had been episodes of conflict in the past (1958, 1969, 1993). Today's situation is different however, in that the purposive polarization of ethnic identity has become a political instrument used by those in power (Janin 2000). Although ethnic tensions were high in Cote d'Ivoire they had never reached the point of open conflict like they did in the fall of 2002.

When the French arrived in Cote d'Ivoire in the late 1800s there was no clear ethnicity that dominated the region. The French were able to colonize the territory with relative ease, with the exception of the north where they were met with fierce resistance from Almami Samory Toure (Akindes 1984: 29). Ethnic groups that offered less resistance were more easily assimilated into the French colonial structure. The Baoule, of which Houphouet-Boigny was a member, easily adapted, more so than other ethnic groups, to the French colonization of the territory. Their rapid assimilation allowed the Baoule to assume a greater role in the colonial administration and ultimately the post-colonial government as well. The French quickly realized that Cote d'Ivoire offered great potential in terms of natural resources. Abundant rainfall, vast forests of desirable wood and fertile soil, in addition to hospitable deep-water ports, were all attributes that made the exploitation of Cote d'Ivoire's resources attractive. Before any exploitation of resources could be undertaken, however, investments in infrastructure were needed. Burkinabes and Malians were recruited for forced labor by the French to build roads, buildings and perform other tasks, thus starting a history of massive migration (Gregory et al., 1989: 75).

A second factor that compelled Burkinabe and Malians to move south was the per capita tax that was imposed on each subject and only payable in French currency. Salaried positions were limited in the Sahel and the only option was to immigrate to more profitable areas. The *mise en valeur* of certain regions created regional economic disparities between regions like Burkina (formerly known as Upper Volta) and Cote d'Ivoire. In 1936 the European plantations in the Ivory Coast employed some 20,000 people from Upper Volta, 50% of whom were there in a situation of forced labor (Songre 1974: 403).

After Ivorian planters agreed to bid for laborers rather than recruit them by force, the Mossi and other Sahelien ethnic groups moved en masse to Cote d'Ivoire. Many of the Malians and Burkinabes who worked on farms saved their money and bought land to become land owners themselves. Between 1940 and 1944, 277,000 migrants entered Cote d'Ivoire from Upper Volta (Songre 1974: 403). Although the contribution that foreign laborers made to the Ivoirien economy was indisputable, Houphouet-Boigny was reluctant to change the exploitative nature of the labor market. In the traditional plantation economy of

the Ivory Coast, foreigners constituted one-half to two-thirds of the labor force. In the modern sector of the economy of the Ivory Coast, foreign labor represents 46.6% of the labor force (Songre 1974: 404).

As the years passed, the relations between immigrant workers and Ivoiriens deteriorated. One observer noted that the “general trend in the Ivory Coast today is not towards according a liberal welcome to foreign Africans (Deniel 224: 1974).” Tensions between *étrangères* and Ivoiriens served as a backdrop to the way Houphouet-Boigny monopolized politics and economics at the exclusion of the vast majority of the Ivoirien people. Some Ivoiriens referred to this phenomenon as the “Akanisation” of power in Cote d’Ivoire (Toungara 1990, 32). The term makes reference to the central ethnic group to which Houphouet-Boigny and the Baoule belong. The tensions, however, were easily hidden from the west thanks to spectacular economic growth.

During the 1960s and 1970s Cote d’Ivoire experienced what some economists referred to as the Ivoirien Miracle. Average annual GDP grew by a record 11% between 1960 and 1970, and by 7% between 1970 and 1980. The main exports, coffee and cocoa enjoyed high prices on the world market. High profile construction projects, such as the administrative towers dotting the skyline of the downtown section of Abidjan, two major port facilities capable of handling large volumes of traffic and government-owned housing projects throughout the suburbs form part of the “tangible national heritage (Toungara 1990: 40).” Houphouet-Boigny also built a 300 million dollar Basilica in his hometown of Yammousoukro. Houphouet-Boigny, claimed to have only spent his personal fortune on the Basilica, but the fact that he did not make a similar gesture to the Muslim population, damaged the unity of the country.

Starting in the 1980s the economy of Cote d’Ivoire began to lose its miracle qualities. By the 1980s the country’s export economy was already in tatters and then the debt increased, consuming 35% of export earnings. Like other African countries, the country adopted Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and as directed, it rolled back state subsidies and strikes followed. SAPs sent Cote d’Ivoire deeper into debt and at the same time hurt social programs through the implementation of rollbacks. In 1990 and 1991, the country experienced mass protests and strikes by students, police, customs officers, university professors, transport workers and trade union members. In 1990 army conscripts staged a takeover of the national airport in Abidjan. The strikes and civil unrest were a direct response to the severe economic reforms imposed on the country by the IMF and the World Bank.

At the same time the third wave of democracy was starting to sweep across Africa. The internal politics of Cote d’Ivoire would be forever changed by the introduction of multipartism. Houphouet-Boigny’s political party, PDCI, would no longer be the party of the state. In the days of better economic conditions and before the advent of multipartism Houphouet-Boigny was able to co-opt leaders of the various ethnic groups and offers of cash and political appointment were enough to quiet ethnic discontent. Additionally Houphouet-Boigny had the support of France in instances of regional flare ups. The emergence of

democratic reform forced the French to back away from their intervention in African politics. Political plurality also rendered the *Nordistes* the voting majority and if Ivoiriens voted along regional lines there was no doubt that the *Nordistes* would emerge the victors.

In 1993, Houphouet-Boigny died and although he was able to maintain a relatively peaceful and prosperous Cote d'Ivoire for almost thirty years, the fact remains that he never made concrete steps to ensure a lasting union. Immigrants from other nations contributed to the success of the nation as a whole, but they were never politically remunerated for their work. The *étrangères* number five million in population and in the era of democratic reform it is difficult to keep a group of that size politically marginalized. That may have been acceptable as long as the economy was doing well, but with a sagging economy it was not as easy to hide. An earlier integration of Muslims and *Nordistes* into mainstream Cote d'Ivoire would have assured a smoother transition to democracy and avoided the creation of an environment with heightened ethnic tensions.

After Houphouet-Boigny's death his hand-picked successor, Henri Konan Bedie assumed power. Bedie, a member of Houphouet-Boigny's Baoule ethnic group, had previously served as Minister of Finance. Under Bedie the economy struggled and opposition to his government increased. Bedie chose to play the ethnic card and began a series of policy changes that alienated people of *étrangères* descent and empowered those who were considered to be of *Ivoirité* background. Bedie's increasingly xenophobic ways became unpopular with a large segment of the Ivoirien population. He also stated that "Ivoiriens are those who have lived in Cote d'Ivoire for many generations (Kamissoko 1999: 117)." Bedie eventually took steps to remove Muslims and *Nordistes* from positions in the government.

The redrafting of the electoral code made it obligatory that a presidential candidate be Ivoirien of birth and that his/her parents be Ivoirien of birth as well. The redesigned electoral code also stated that a presidential candidate could never hold another nationality and he/she must have resided in Cote d'Ivoire for the five years preceding the election (Kamissoko 1999: 117). The changed electoral code was a thinly veiled attempt to block the candidature of the North's most viable candidate, Alassane Dramane Ouattara. Bedie claimed that Ouattara was not a true Ivoirien, but in fact a Burkinabe.

By declaring Ouattara ineligible, Bedie eliminated his most competent challenger. Ouattara's extensive resume as an experienced technocrat made him eminently qualified for the presidency of Cote d'Ivoire. The western educated Ouattara at one point served as the Governor of the BCEAO (Central Bank of West African States) and later held the position of Prime Minister of the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire from November 1990 until December 1993. After Houphouet-Boigny's death he served as Deputy Managing Director of the IMF from 1994 to 1999. Ouattara is also the leader of the political party of RDR, which is closely associated with the *Nordiste* population.

The exclusionary policies of the Bedie administration created a tense climate of ethnic and religious division. In various regions of Cote d'Ivoire conflicts

over natural resources emerged between different ethnic groups. In the cocoa growing region of Gagnoa skirmishes broke out between Bétés and Baoulés. In the region of Tabou violence erupted between Baoulés et Burkinabé. In November of 1999, almost 20,000 Burkinabés workers and their families were chased out of the aforementioned region in the space of one week.

4. CURRENT INSTABILITY

In December of 1999, retired general Robert Guei overthrew Bedie and seized power in a nearly bloodless coup d'état. Guei claimed to be a reformer and promised to "sweep out the house." Guei's putsch was welcomed by many Ivoiriens, especially when it was revealed how much money Bedie had been siphoning from the government in order to fill his personal accounts. Geui, unfortunately, followed a path that many military strong men before him had taken which was to hold onto power and steal an election. Guei lost the election and was removed from power, which left Laurent Gbagbo, the leader of the FPI party, as president.

Gbagbo inherited the concept of *Ivoirité* and used it to his political advantage. Much like his predecessor, Gbagbo considered Ouattara to be a Burkinabe. Gbagbo also made it difficult for Ivoiriens from the north to register to vote through the stricter enforcement of identity cards. *Nordistes* were also subject to unjust treatment at the hands of the police and gendarmerie. It became obvious that Gbagbo was following the same path as his predecessors and in October of 2002, the north and parts of the west rebelled, leaving the country bitterly divided.

There are several factors that have led to the conflagration of a security dilemma in Cote d'Ivoire. First, a weak state and economic crisis compelled certain groups to revert to a primordial attachment to ethnic and religious background, which supersedes national identity and creates intense power struggles. This reversion to ethnic identity caused the parties to identify each other as offensive threats. Due to the dire economic situation in states such as Cote d'Ivoire, the struggle for the control of resources has become intense. "Any economic improvement by one ethnic group is frequently perceived as an example by the center: the ethnic security dilemma has an economic component, as all sorts of motives and fears are read into any change in the economic status of each ethnic group (Saideman 1998: 135)." Therefore the distribution of resources to one ethnic group and not another decreases the security of latter and increases the security of the former. Control and distribution of resources is primarily the responsibility of the government. Political appointments therefore confer power to the appointee and his entourage, which in turn can be interpreted as a security threat to certain groups. At one point other ethnic groups assumed that the government of Gbagbo and his ethnic group had a stranglehold on the means of entry into the police and gendarmerie. Gbagbo was

accused of filling the national gendarmerie academy with members of his own ethnic group (Akindes 2004: 7). The rebels of the northern and western regions of Cote d'Ivoire claim that the rebellion was carried out to increase the security of members of their ethnic group. The rebellion in turn decreased the security of the national government located in the south of the country.

Posen's ideas of offense and defense are applicable to the security dilemma in Cote d'Ivoire. Posen states, "Particularly in the close quarters in which groups find themselves, the combination of infantry based ground forces with strong group solidarity is likely to encourage groups to fear each other (1993: 30). At the beginning of the rebellion the *Nordistes* moved quickly south and claimed more territory. This offensive strategy raised the national governments perceived sense of danger. After the outbreak of the conflict it was reported that the government of Cote d'Ivoire purchased several attack helicopters and secured the use of South African mercenaries. This tit for tat scenario resulted in violent conflict.

The concept of solidarity is also important (Ganguly & Taras, 2002: 9). Despite the fact that the rebels are not ethnically homogenous, they have been able to create a movement based on solidarity. It is simplistic to label the situation in Cote d'Ivoire as an ethnic or religious conflict. Ethnic groups share a "persisting sense of common interest and identity that is based on some combination of shared historical experience and valued cultural traits-beliefs, language, ways of life, a common homeland (Gurr and Harff 1994: 5)." Although the *Nordistes* are not composed of one single ethnic group they do have a common identity that was shaped by the way they have been treated over the years. Ethnic groups after all are social constructs and the identity of *Nordistes* is a construct as well. Dioula is the title that most *Nordistes* have been given despite the fact that they are from a wide array of ethnic groups and not entirely Dioula. The image of solidarity among the rebels and the existence of alliances based upon regional ethnic groups causes the opposing group to fear for its security.

Perception is an important aspect of a security dilemma. In some cases a perceived threat is as dangerous as a real threat. Members of the Ivorian government have had the perception that the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaore, played an integral role in the rebellion. Compaore has a reputation as a well connected purveyor of small arms in the sub-region and his perceived role in the conflict may have likely increased the security dilemma. He has been linked to the provision of arms and human resources to rebels in Sierra Leone and Liberia (Reno 1999: 81, 124). In December of 2000 Compaore was formally accused by the UN of supplying weapons to RUF Rebels in Sierra Leone and UNITA Rebels in Angola. The BBC reported that Burkina Faso supplied to RUF rebels manpower and equipment, including weapons from Eastern Europe with false end-user certificates (BBC, August 6th 2000). The involvement of Compaore, real or perceived, elevates the tension associated with the security dilemma in Cote d'Ivoire.

Another factor that has brought about a security dilemma in Cote d'Ivoire is the destabilization of the sub-region, particularly in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. The conflicts in these two countries have added to the potential of widespread and prolonged conflict. The conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia have been, for the most part, resolved, but there are still large numbers of rebels who have not been reintegrated into society. It has been reported that some these same rebels have gravitated to the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire. As a result, the emergence of a local sub-culture of mercenaries of Liberian and Sierra Leonian origin has complicated the identification of legitimate political actors. This is particularly true in the western region of Cote d'Ivoire. The southern portion of Cote d'Ivoire has expressed concern that foreign rebels have entered the conflict and this has heightened their concerns.

5. CONCLUSION

Observed through the lens of the security dilemma, there are several factors that precipitated and exacerbated the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire. It is also important to consider other perspectives such as outbidding. In outbidding, elites use political space to promote increasingly extreme nationalist positions to garner support from the masses. Outbidding has been salient in Cote d'Ivoire as evidenced by the way that Gbagbo has exploited youth to form organized gangs to intimidate members of the opposition. The *Nordistes* fear their physical security for a number of reasons. The use of *Ivoirité* and outbidding was an attempt to undermine their legitimacy as citizens of Cote d'Ivoire.

It is also important to consider the international aspect of the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire in terms of its effect on the international relations between Cote d'Ivoire and other nations. In other words, what are the cross-border interests of states such as Burkina Faso and Mali, which have significant portions of their diaspora in Cote d'Ivoire? Will the relations of these countries be permanently damaged by the recent conflict?

The study of ethnic conflict can be approached in several ways and one of the most effective methodological approaches has been through the use of the security dilemma. The circumstances and characteristics of the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire make it a case to which the theoretical framework of the security dilemma may be applied. Saideman's critique of the security dilemma expanded the definition of security to include economic, physical and political security (Saideman 1998: 135). Saideman's redefinition of the term makes it more applicable to a diverse range of cases. In conclusion, it should be noted that there is no single theory that can explain all cases of ethnic conflict. Brubaker and Laitin state, "There is no reason to believe that these heterogeneous components of large-scale evidence can be understood or explained through a single theoretical lens (1998: 447)." To be sure, a security dilemma is merely one theoretical lens that can be used to analyze the roots of ethnic conflict.

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