



## Keeping the Peace in Electoral Conflicts: The Role of ECOWAS, UNOCI and the International Community in Côte d'Ivoire

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Côte d'Ivoire's 28 November 2010 presidential election, and the months of tension and political violence that followed, marked a new type of challenge for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)<sup>1</sup>. For the first time the organization was expected to react to a post-electoral dispute within the context of a long-running, costly, multilateral peacekeeping operation. The significant difficulties created by acting in an environment populated by several external bodies were magnified by the importance of Côte d'Ivoire, a major regional economic power. The challenges faced by ECOWAS can be broadly divided between those internal to the organization and those that concern its relationship with external partners. Internally, there were multiple organizational, logistical and political issues as the institution sought to develop and pursue a united response from West Africa's diverse collection of states. Externally, difficulties emerged as the institution attempted to manage a web of external partners that included the African Union, the United Nations and France. The lessons that can be drawn from the crisis of 2010-11 have a broad relevance for future peacekeeping and electoral missions.

### A Troubled Recent Past

At the time of the 2010 election Côte d'Ivoire had been the site of an international peacekeeping presence since 2002. A full treatment of the factors that led to the conflict is beyond the scope of this article. It will suffice to say that they include economic and, crucially, citizenship-orientated discrimination in the context of fierce politi-

cal competition which fermented into an armed rebellion, led by Guillaume Soro and his *'Forces Nouvelles'* (FN) against the sitting President, Laurent Gbagbo.

The first international intervention was a unilateral French deployment ("Operation Licorne"), facilitated by the former colonial power's permanent military presence in the country since its

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independence in 1960. Later in 2002 *Licorne* was followed by the deployment of an ECOWAS force (ECOMICI). In 2004 ECOMICI was amalgamated into a UN peacekeeping force, the UN Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI). French forces were mandated to support UNOCI but *Licorne* would maintain a separate command structure throughout their joint deployment. By 2007 the situation in Côte d'Ivoire had resulted in the deployment of over 7,000 peacekeepers.

A peace accord signed in early 2005 in Pretoria, South Africa, tasked UNOCI to oversee preparations for a presidential election later that year. These preparations included voter registration and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR). The timeframe for this election proved to be unrealistic given the extent of political obstacles. The presidential election was therefore postponed several times in a five-year period. The first round eventually took place on 31 October 2010 and the run off followed a month later, on 28 November 2010.

## The 2010 Elections

In the wake of this election both parties claimed victory. Alassane Ouattara, who had been banned from standing in Côte d'Ivoire's two previous presidential elections on ethno-political grounds, claimed a victory that was supported by the national electoral commission and certified by the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in Côte d'Ivoire (who had an unprecedented mandate from the UN Security Council to conduct this process of certification). However, the result was disputed by the Constitutional Court of Côte d'Ivoire who ruled in favour of incumbent Laurent Gbagbo, a decision that hinged upon the nullification of roughly 600,000 votes in the pro-Ouattara regions of the centre and north. The resulting standoff led to the country descending into large-scale violence once more. The conflict ended in April 2011 when former rebels supporting Ouattara were aided by French and UN forces, resulting in the arrest of Laurent Gbagbo.

As the crisis erupted ECOWAS was faced with two major obstacles: First, how to develop and pursue a united strategy in the face of the constantly changing situation; and second, how to mobilise and organise resources to support a resolution to the crisis.

### Timeline

#### Security Council Resolutions and troop deployment in Côte d'Ivoire:

- From 19 September 2002: deployment of French forces in response to the failed coup in Abidjan and capture of the north by the insurgents, without a UN mandate
- 18 December 2002: setting-up of ECOWAS mission in Côte d'Ivoire (ECOMICI) and progressive deployment with the logistical assistance of French forces
- 4 February 2003: UNSC Resolution 1464 authorized and gave a mandate to ECOWAS and French troops already deployed
- 13 May 2003: UNSC Resolution 1479 authorized the creation of a political UN mission with a small military component (MINUCI)
- 27 February 2004: UNSC Resolution 1528 authorized the creation of a fully-fledged peacekeeping force, the United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) replacing MINUCI and ECOMICI from 4 April 2004
- 2005-2012: UNOCI mandate renewed and modified by a series of UNSC resolutions

## Coordinating Crisis Response?

Given the longstanding divisions in Côte d'Ivoire, the international community should have more fully anticipated that neither side would be prepared to accept defeat. However, no precautions were taken and this lack of planning resulted in a confused initial reaction to the outbreak of violence from ECOWAS and its international partners. It should be noted that electoral disputes are uniquely challenging for external bodies as they merge a factual question – who received the greatest number of votes – with a series of domestic political considerations. In this case it



appears as though ECOWAS, and its international partners, felt unable to address political developments until the facts of the electoral dispute were established.

Though the organization did little in the first days of the crisis, in the period following the electoral commission's endorsement of a Ouattara victory ECOWAS rallied and consistently called for these results to be upheld. The international community was fortunate that in this case the 'real' margin of victory was decisive, and as such Gbagbo's claim to have won the election was difficult to sustain. Nevertheless, ECOWAS should be given credit for its swift recognition of the realities on the ground.

By contrast the AU failed to establish the reality of the electoral situation until after a mission from a panel of heads of State gave its conclusions in early March 2011, three months after the beginning of the post-electoral violence. The different reactions by ECOWAS and AU illustrate an advantage of smaller sub-regional organizations: They are less susceptible to being bogged down in geopolitical conflict, a risk which multiplies with the number of actors involved. In this case, the tension between Nigeria and South Africa at the level of the AU proved particularly problematic.

While ECOWAS' proximity to developments in Côte d'Ivoire aided the forging and maintenance of a consistent position on the leadership battle, it had a converse effect on the effort to create a policy response. This was most apparent when, in December 2010, the organization threatened the use of force to dislodge Gbagbo from power. Within days of the ECOWAS communiqué, a number of ECOWAS members publicly distanced themselves from the threat of force, as they feared that a military intervention could jeopardize the safety of their citizens in Côte d'Ivoire. They also considered that the military enforcement of an electoral result could set a dangerous precedent in a region where the democratic nature of presidential elections in many countries has often been questioned.

In addition, ECOWAS' threat to use force also lacked credibility. Meetings of the organization's Chiefs of Defense Staff confirmed the suspicion that an intervention by the region's emerging standby force was not operationally feasible. The military intervention which would ultimately end the post-electoral bloody impasse was conducted in April 2011 by French, UN and pro-Ouattara "Republican" forces, on the basis of a Security Council resolution (Resolution 1975 of 31 March 2011). The fact that the regional organization had to finally turn to the UN and crucially to France, the former colonial power of the troubled country, for decisive military action against the presidential compound in Abidjan, was an embarrassment.

### Some Lessons for ECOWAS and the International Community

There are two lessons to be gleaned from the organization's U-turn on the use of force. Firstly, failure to match rhetoric with force projection capability undermines an organization's credibility. Secondly, the problems that affected ECOWAS in this case – limited personnel and logistical capacities; member-states' own relative instability; and fears of reprisal attacks against member states' citizens in the conflict zone – are likely to apply to many similar organizations acting in conditions of serious financial constraints.

While ECOWAS was able to swiftly calculate the electoral realities, condemn the distortion of the electoral process and impose some sanctions, it was unable to provide a serious threat of intervention. This is a pattern that is likely to be repeated across regional organizations.

Externally the organization faced a series of challenges in its dealings with global partners. These can be divided into first, challenges stemming from the overlapping mandates for the promotion of peace shared by several institutions and the lack of clearly established conventions on the role of regional, continental and global institutions and second, the difficulty of interacting with organizations which were not internally united.



It has already been noted above that ECOWAS took a clear early position on the issue of who had won the November 2010 election. Both the UN at the Security Council level (despite the electoral certification role of the UN Secretary-General Representative in Côte d'Ivoire) and the AU were less resolute in their support of Ouattara. The AU openly entertained the possibility of a power-sharing agreement in early 2011 while the UN Security Council was hamstrung by opposition from Russia, South Africa and Brazil for much of the crisis. This lack of international unity, combined with overlapping diplomatic efforts (largely from ECOWAS and the AU), led to confusion and contradictory messages being sent to domestic parties in Côte d'Ivoire.

### The Way Ahead

ECOWAS, the AU and the UN all have the formal capacity to deploy peacekeeping forces and they all have the ability to engage in diplomatic activity for ensuring peace in West Africa. Confusion is likely to re-occur until clear formal or informal conventions are developed to order their currently overlapping roles.

In fact this confusion has already re-emerged in 2012 in the context of the major new crisis developing in West Africa. The lack of clearly defined roles for the regional bodies involved in conflict resolution is currently evident in Mali, where the state has brutally collapsed as a result of a rebellion in the north and a military coup in the capital. With forthcoming presidential elections in Sierra Leone and Ghana which will be highly contested and potentially destabilising (in November and December 2012 respectively) the failure to address this problem of coordination amongst international and regional organizations may be evident once more in West Africa.

The problems of unclear delimitation of roles and responsibilities are compounded in situations where, as in Côte d'Ivoire, the key organizations are internally divided. The AU was divided along several fault lines, most notably there was conflict between Nigeria and South Africa regarding who should be the continent's leading actor in the crisis. This situation showed the limitations of ECOWAS, the organization being unable to move ahead with the peace process, instead being forced to wait for a repeatedly delayed report from the AU Panel of heads of State. The ill-feeling this caused between the influential West African countries on the Ivorian dossier led by Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Senegal on the one hand and the Southern Africa group led by South Africa and Angola on the other was visible during a tense AU summit in Addis Ababa in January 2011. Similarly, the UN Security Council was paralysed by internal divisions and was moved to action only by the rising death toll in early 2011 and traditional political bargaining between its permanent members.

The most striking lesson from the Ivorian crisis of 2010–2011 is that the international community should begin to demarcate more clearly the procedures that govern the interaction of international institutions. Not only would this strengthen ECOWAS's hand in negotiating with larger regional entities, it would also minimise the risk of its lack of resources exposing the organization diplomatically. It may even reduce the influence of geo-political conflict, such as that between Nigeria and South Africa in this case, upon the vital work of conflict resolution.

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