

# The Problem of Political Leadership and the Electoral Process in Côte d'Ivoire

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pp. 55-63

Over the period of ten years from 2000 to 2010 the Republic of Côte d'Ivoire was undergoing a severe political crisis that was overcome due to the intervention of the global community. The situation stabilized in the end of 2010, after A. Ouattara won the presidential election.

However, Côte d'Ivoire's society remains split between supporters of the acting president and those who stayed loyal to the previous one – L. Gbagbo. After being charged with crimes against humanity – murders, rapes, persecution and other inhuman acts – and spending seven years in jail in Hague, in the beginning of 2019 Gbagbo was acquitted by the International Criminal Court; he now lives in Belgium and hopes to stay there until the prosecution appeal is considered. The decision on appeal is to be made in summer 2020, several months before the presidential election.

## The attitude of the country's political elites towards the revision of the Constitution

The escalation of the political struggle could be observed long before the beginning of the election campaign. It was catalyzed by the problem of acting president A. Ouattara's third term of office: after winning the 2015 election, Ouattara decided to change the existing constitution that allowed presidents to serve no longer than for two terms. To make this decision seem more democratic, the head of state called a national vote – a referendum that took place on 30 October 2016.

Before holding the referendum, A. Ouattara consulted with traditional chiefs, promising them to include a chamber of chiefs into the structure of state power, and with some of the opposition leaders. They confirmed their approval of the idea of a referendum, as well as the plan to introduce the position of vice president<sup>1</sup> and create an upper house of parliament – the Senate<sup>2</sup>. The traditional chiefs expressed the wish for the amendments to the constitution «to open the path for A. Ouattara's third presidential mandate» (Amani, 2016).

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<sup>1</sup> A. Ouattara suggested electing vice president by direct popular vote, same as president of the Republic (later he appointed him single-handedly).

<sup>2</sup> The Senate was abolished by the constitution adopted in Côte d'Ivoire in 2000. Article 35 stipulated that president was to be elected for five years by universal direct suffrage and be only re-eligible once. Presidential candidates were to be forty years of age at least and seventy-five years at most.

At their 12<sup>th</sup> convention in 2016, the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI) that was part of a pro-presidential alliance until July 2018<sup>3</sup> adopted a resolution concerning the necessity of introducing the position of vice president. The party's leader and former president of Côte d'Ivoire, H. K. Bédié, supported the procedure of the Senate's formation suggested by A. Ouattara: two-thirds of its members were to be elected and one-third was to be appointed by the president (Nouvelle Constitution, 2016).

Nevertheless, not all opposition parties supported the constitutional referendum (Mel, 2016). For instance, Affi N'Guessan, the leader of the country's leading opposition party Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), claimed that «amending the constitution does not equal searching for consensus between the authorities and the opposition; quite the opposite, it will further exacerbate disagreements». Other opposition leaders believed that «Côte d'Ivoire is infected with a virus of “the third mandate”» (Amani, 2016). Such comments were caused by the fact that, despite the speculative character of all the statements concerning the third presidential mandate, allies of A. Ouattara struggled to justify its legitimacy.

Without consulting the opposition and gaining its approval, the president made use of his recent victory in the first round of the 2015 presidential election and decided to change the existing constitution and create the Third Republic with a new constitution – the third one – that would substantially limit the opportunities for the opposition.

93,43 % of voters endorsed the new constitution on a turnout of 42,42 % (Référendum, 2016). The support of changing the basic law by the population is partly explained by the fact that, with the help of mass media and other methods of propaganda, the Côte d'Ivoire's authorities managed to convince Ivorians in the necessity of making the amendments that would correspond to the country's realities. A special emphasis was laid on articulating the expedience of removing the concept of «ivoirité» from the constitution. Its elimination from the basic law appealed to many, especially non-indigenous citizens of the country.

## The Concept of «Ivoirité» and its impact on the electoral processes

This concept was born in 1994, at the time of crisis within PDCI, and dominated Côte d'Ivoire's political arena for fifty years (Dozon, 2011: 37). It was coined by H. K. Bédié – the leader of PDCI, who became head of state in 1993, after the death of F. Houphouët Boigny, and won the 1995 presidential election. To prevent one of his main political rivals, A. Ouattara<sup>4</sup>, from participating in this election, shortly before the beginning of the electoral campaign H. K. Bédié amended two articles of the constitution and introduced a new electoral code defining the rights and the criteria that had to be met by presidential candidates. The main thing was to have parents of Ivorian descent. As A. Ouattara's father was from Burkina Faso, the current president was eliminated from the election.

The idea of «ivoirité» was founded on H. K. Bédié's attitude towards the Dyula ethnic group whom he, as well as many indigenous citizens of the country, did not consider to be Ivorians. This was aggravated by religious differences between the ethnic groups. Each presidential aspirant in the country was supported by population groups of varying ethnic origins and religious beliefs who came from different social strata.

<sup>3</sup> This falling-out was caused by A. Ouattara who broke the agreement concerning the consecution of nominating presidential candidates from the presidential party – the RR – and the DPCI. According to this agreement, in 2020 a representative of PDCI should have become head of state.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1992 and 1995, both northern and southern electorates viewed A. Ouattara as a technocrat whose lifestyle differed from those of common people, and, in the eyes of many, that made him «a symbol of modernity», a «World man». Apparently, that was because he worked abroad – for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and for the Bank of Economic and Commercial Development of West Africa.

H. K. Bédié was supported by ethnic groups from southern and central regions of the country, primarily catholic *Baoulé*, who mostly represented wealthy social strata. His principal competitor, A. Ouattara, was mainly backed by the Dyula from northern regions, who overwhelmingly professed the Islamic faith and were generally much poorer than the southerners.

«Ivoirité» was also based on an economic component – the crisis of 1990s-the beginning of 2000s attributed to the drop in prices for cocoa beans on the world market. The concept emerged in the period when new job creation in the country stalled, while the influx of immigrants from the neighboring poor Muslim countries of overpopulated Sahel did not decrease. The situation was aggravated by H. K. Bédié's land tenure reform, according to which only citizens of Ivorian origin could legally own land<sup>5</sup>.

It is worth drawing attention to the fact that the concept of «ivoirité» laid emphasis on the Akan culture, or, to be precise, on the *Baoulé* world. It was made equivalent to «*baoulité*» (Dozon: 2011: 40). H. K. Bédié believed that «the *Baoulé* world must be the lodestar for the Ivorian nation on the way to the modernization of the society» (Dozon, 2011: 40).

According to French researcher C. Videll, «... the transition of Côte d'Ivoire's politicians from manipulating latent feelings against foreigners to xenophobic policy at the state level was not only a substantial element of the brutalization of the country's political class; worst of all, it paved the way for violence throughout the society» (Videll, 2008: 176).

The events following the adoption of the concept of «ivoirité» led to many years of permanent politico-military crisis in the country (military coup of 1999, civil war of 2002-2007).

It becomes clear why the majority of the country's constituents who took part in the 2016 referendum voted for amending the new constitution, as voters were eager to remove from it the concept of «ivoirité» that limited the rights of non-indigenous citizens<sup>6</sup>.

### **Exacerbation of the political struggle in the country after the Parliamentary Election**

It is undeniable that A. Ouattara had the greatest interest in the constitutional reform. As it happens, in the sitting of the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Hague, L. Gbagbo claimed that Côte d'Ivoire's acting president was implicated in the 2010-2011 politico-military crisis in the country (Sadovskaya, 2016: 22). The concern for his personal safety could have prompted A. Ouattara to think of a successor and to secure him the position of vice president by constitution. Côte d'Ivoire's head of state was undoubtedly interested in assigning this position to a person he could have full trust in.

The incorporation of the article concerning the formation of a bicameral parliament into the constitution was also aimed at strengthening the position of the acting president: in contrast with the lower house that is elected by universal direct suffrage, the upper house, or the Senate, is appointed in an undemocratic way – by indirect voting system and the appointment of a third of its members by the president himself.

The success of the Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP)<sup>7</sup> at the parliamentary election held on 30 October 2016 was yet another victory of the acting

<sup>5</sup> The law reforming the land tenure regime was adopted only in July 2004. According to the amendment passed by the National Assembly, non-indigenous *ivorians* also gained a right to inherit property.

<sup>6</sup> In his time, Houphouët Boigny allowed many immigrants from French West Africa to participate in the voting. By contrast with other French West African countries, they were employed in all economic sectors of Côte d'Ivoire. All this brought forward the development of multiculturalism and multiconfessionalism in the Ivorian society.

<sup>7</sup> The RHDP is an alliance of the DPCI and The Rally of the Republicans – RR (A. Ouattara's party). (any reason for being in bold?)

president, although in comparison with previous elections the accomplishments were less convincing: RHDP won 167 of the 354 seats against 197 in 2011 (Gohobi, 2017). Representatives of the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), including Affi N'Guessan, won only three mandates.

However, despite the political victory of Ouattara at the referendum and the parliamentary election, by early 2017 the domestic political situation in the country started to deteriorate. It provoked discontent both from the opposition that was unable to come to grips with the authoritarian tendencies in the president's actions and diverse sections of the Ivorian society that did not enjoy any of the hypothetical advantages of the constitutional reforms. Within three months after the parliamentary election, the country witnessed events that allowed to speak of a socio-political crisis: on 6 January 2017, demobilized soldiers – former militants of the New Forces who supported A. Ouattara during the civil war of 2002-2004 and were integrated into the Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (RFCI) in 2007 – launched armed mutinies in the country's second-largest city Bouaké. On the same day, they were joined by active soldiers from Daloa and Korhogo – cities situated in the north-eastern part of Côte d'Ivoire.

Former soldiers broke into police stations and looted weapons. Among their demands was the immediate payment of their military compensations and back wages from 2007 to 2011 amounting to from 5 to 10 mln francs CFA (from 7600 to 15200 euros) due to each soldier, as well as the improvement of their living conditions (Malagardis, 2017).

Fearing that the mutiny would escalate out of control, on 7 January A. Ouattara agreed to meet their demands and pay 8.5 thousand of 22 thousand soldiers who were serving in the Ivorian army at the time. The authorities announced that they would primarily pay to former members of the New Forces rebel group who had been receiving neither wages nor bonuses from 2007 to 2011 (Tagro, 2017).

This armed military upheaval prompted the president to reform the Ivorian army, advancing the drawdown planned in 2016. He explained his decision by the necessity of the army's modernization, as well as improving discipline and the living conditions of soldiers. One cannot exclude that the decision is connected with the fact that there are former members of the National Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (FANCI)<sup>8</sup>, many of whom still support L. Gbagbo and oppose to the prolonged term of A. Ouattara's presidential office, within the ranks of the RFCI (Côte d'Ivoire, 2017).

To prevent the prevailing situation of January 2017 from turning into a politico-military crisis, the day after the mutiny A. Ouattara dismissed the government and formed a new one, which now consisted not of 29 but of 36 ministers. The new cabinet was incorporated with 7 new members.

On 10 January 2017, after the political outings, A. Ouattara issued a decree appointing former prime-minister Daniel Kablan Duncan the country's new vice president. On the same day, former speaker Guillaume Soro, who is extremely popular among the military, was re-elected as president of the National Assembly.

The reason for his popularity lies in his being the leader of the New Forces (NF) in the early 2000s. Abidjan newspaper «*Libération*» draws attention to the fact that the «*January rebels*» snapped into action at the exact moment when their former leader lost the position of the country's second-in-command (Malagardis, 2017). The 2016 constitutional reform changed the power hierarchy in Côte d'Ivoire. Before that, G. Soro used to be second in authority, but after the reform he became the fourth after the president, the vice president and the prime-minister. This politician with presidential ambition had hoped that Ouattara would appoint him vice president.

<sup>8</sup> 13 thousand out of 23 thousand military officers of the Republican army were former rebels of the New Forces.

However, after the acting president claimed that the new constitution of Côte d'Ivoire allows him two more mandates from 2020 in his interview to «*Jeune Afrique*» magazine on 3 June 2018, the activities of the supporters of former NF leader G. Soro visibly intensified. They openly expressed their desire to see him, not A. Ouattara, as presidential candidate at the upcoming election.

At the same time their movement, the Soroist Union (SU) headed by Marc Ouattara, proclaimed the slogan «A. Ouattara is the Father of Injustice». As for G. Soro, many sympathetic Ivorian journalists saw in him the combination of such virtues as «A. Ouattara's selflessness and H. Bédié's wisdom».

G. Soro also had on his side another organization created in August 2017 – the Association of New Forces (ANF) led by its secretary-general Félicien Sékongo, former spokesman of the New Forces rebel movement.

It should be noted that, being the president of the National Assembly, G. Soro constantly advocated giving former rebels of the NF deputy seats in the country's parliament and his appeals had a certain success.

Nevertheless, there was no place for the representatives of the NF who helped A. Ouattara rise to power back in the day (in 2011 and 2015) in the new government formed by Ouattara after the events of January 2017 and headed by prime-minister A. Gon Coulibaly.

G. Soro's communications director Moussa Traoré believes that Soro's supporters are under the impression that members of the New Forces became unwelcome to the current authorities.

This became especially apparent after the military uprisings of January and May 2017 and the discovery of an arms cache in the house of G. Soro's director of protocol Souleymane Kamagaté. A. Ouattara realized that G. Soro was backed by former rebels who were displeased with the acting authorities and prepared to take a stand in Soro's support at any moment. To avoid confrontation, the president tried to draw him closer, «neutralizing» him before the election.

To this effect, in August 2018 he received G. Soro in his residence Cocody Riviere Golf and offered to pay the expenses on his education and accommodation in Harvard (USA), as the former NF leader entered a PhD program in finance, and to appoint him ambassador to a country of his own choosing. In return, the president asked G. Soro to meet one condition: he was not to ally with H. K. Bédié who had made a complete break with the presidential coalition (Mieu, 2018).

However, G. Soro could not put aside his presidential ambition even for these tempting offers. In early 2019 he made a final decision to run for president at the 2020 election<sup>9</sup> and formed the Political committee – a takeoff site intended for preparing for the election and discussing the principal issues of national interest. The committee will mainly focus on social matters, such as unemployment, impoverishment, corruption and young people. Although G. Soro is considered a fringe politician in Côte d'Ivoire's political circles, he is popular among the young generation who view him as a «rebel» and one of the youngest renowned political leaders in the country (Soro is 46 years old). His slogan is «Make Way for Youth!» He is convinced that «in 2020, none of the Ivorians want to live through the scenario of 2010» which through the fault of Gbagbo, Bédié and Ouattara almost escalated into a civil war (Nyamsi, 2019).

G. Soro believes that the soroist mobilization that started in 2013 and their long-term efforts in the country's regions will eventually lead to success. At the same time, he

<sup>9</sup> In February 2019, G. Soro resigned from the position of the president of National Assembly and, along with Bédié, became one of the main opponents of A. Ouattara.

understands that, to win the election, he needs to be supported by the global community. G. Soro is certain that in his many years of working in parliament (2012-2019) and in the government as prime-minister (2007-2012) he managed to achieve international standing. His plans include the intensification of contacts with Paris<sup>10</sup> and many African countries whose heads he regularly negotiates with.

## L. Gbagbo and the consequences of his return to Côte d'Ivoire

L. Gbagbo is also a power player in the country's political space. The ICC's acquittal of the former Ivorian president (2000-2011) paved the way for his return to Côte d'Ivoire, and this fact cannot fail to affect the 2020 election. The Ivorian society has a mixed attitude towards L. Gbagbo. He still enjoys the support of the population, especially in his home region in the western part of the country. Besides, his return to Côte d'Ivoire will confirm his alleged innocence and contribute to the success of the struggle against A. Ouattara.

L. Gbagbo is one of the founders of the country's leading opposition organization – the Ivorian Popular Front that put him forward as a presidential candidate in 1990, 2000 and 2010. After his arrest and extradition to Hague in 2011 FPI split between those who stayed loyal to him and those who wanted to move beyond his legacy. Abdoumame Sangaré, a friend of L. Gbagbo, rejected the idea of continuing the party's activities without him. He was convinced that the former leader would return to the country to challenge A. Ouattara. A. Sangaré even received an unofficial title 'the guardian of the temple' and bore it until his death in 2018.

The activities aimed at overriding L. Gbagbo's legacy were predominantly carried out by his government's former prime-minister P. Affi N'Guessan who became president of FPI before the 2015 election. This resulted in protests by L. Gbagbo's supporters, especially after P. Affi N'Guessan ran for president despite the boycott of this election by FPI's other wing led by A. Sangaré.

There are several possible scenarios in case of the return of L. Gbagbo to Côte d'Ivoire before the 2020 election. One of them is that he will assume leadership of FPI and run for president, especially since the new constitution abolished the age limit for presidential candidates (the limit was 75 years of age), thus giving him the right to stand. Another scenario is that FPI will join a new political alliance before the election to unify the opposition forces and put forward a new candidate, while L. Gbagbo stays the leader of FPI. Finally, the former prisoner of the Hague jail might stay out of the electoral process and exhibit activity on the political arena.

Yet, one cannot ignore that a sword of Damocles hangs over L. Gbagbo's head. The president and the government have cards up their sleeves. Although acquitted of the crimes against humanity by the ICC, he is still sentenced in absentia to 20 years' imprisonment for «economic crimes» in the so-called case of the Agency of Central Bank of West African States (ACBWAS) in Abidjan during the post-electoral crisis. It is worth paying attention to the fact that in August 2018 A. Ouattara granted amnesty for 800 prisoners, including L. Gbagbo's wife Simone Gbagbo, but not himself (Brouck, 2019).

## The problems of the Third Term. The solution proposed by A. Ouattara

The nearer to the election, the higher the political tension in the Ivorian society. Côte d'Ivoire's citizens are fearful of a new electoral crisis, and A. Ouattara's statement

<sup>10</sup> Especially since E. Macron spoke out against A. Ouattara's third term of presidential office.

concerning the date he would decide on whether he is going to run is ambiguous. He promised to make the decision before the beginning of the electoral campaign that is to start on 28 July 2020. The president's declarations concerning 'transferring the leadership to the new generation' are also intriguing. In this regard, it is worth noting the attitude of US under secretary for political affairs David Hale towards the third presidential term of A. Ouattara. Hale stated his views before his visit to Côte d'Ivoire in February 2019. The American politician called A. Ouattara's declaration on transferring the leadership to the new generation «worthy of praise» because he opposed to the prospect of one president remaining in power for too long. «Democratic society is in need of new blood, new ideas» (France 24, 2019). At the same time, D. Hale does not rule out the possibility of A. Ouattara's third presidential term and highlights the fact that 'this is not an American decision, the Ivorian people have their own experience, we just convey to you our best wishes», (Konan, 2019).

Some experts believe that if A. Ouattara does not prolongate his term of presidential office after all, he will appoint prime-minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly his successor. Coulibaly is not a random person in the first person's inner circle. They are warm friends and longtime associates. In times of F. Houphouët Boigny A. Gon Coulibaly used to be technological advisor to then-prime-minister A. Ouattara. When Ouattara rose to power, A. Gon Coulibaly was head of his office for six years (2011-2017). In the midst of the 2017 socio-political crisis A. Ouattara appointed him prime-minister and entrusted to him the formation of the new government. A. Gon Coulibaly enjoys the full confidence of the president. Ouattara allowed him to designate people loyal to the prime-minister for important positions and at the same time gave to him 15 of his councilors.

Nevertheless, many feel that this presidential aspirant is insufficiently popular in the Ivorian society compared with such figures as G. Soro, H. K. Bédié and L. Gbagbo. Ouattara's niece and the president's communications director Massé Touré-Koné, being a communications and marketing specialist, decided to enhance A. Gon Coulibaly's image herself. On top of that, the prime-minister can count on the support of his campaign by the presidential party (Bony, 2019), whose victory at the municipal election in October 2018 is called a test before the presidential election. The results of this municipal election confirmed A. Ouattara's strong position in the majority of the country's regions.

It is important to remember that the political system of Côte d'Ivoire, as well as of many West African countries, contains elements of neopatrimonialism. This is reflected above all in the close correlation between traditional ethno-religious, clan relations and those intrinsic to modern western states: constitutional and legal, parliamentary and cross-party relations etc. They allow A. Ouattara to mobilize the clientele base to affirm his authority. And the constitutional and legal façade created in the country does not mean compliance with respective democratic rules of the «political game». A. Ouattara is confident that the ambitions of his loyal vice president D. Kablan Duncan and prime minister A. Gon Coulibaly will remain subordinate to his own ambitions and they will continue to see him as the embodiment of a leader.

## Conclusion

The analysis of Côte d'Ivoire's socio-political environment in the period between the 2015 and the 2020 presidential elections shows the growth of political tension in the country caused mainly by the problem of A. Ouattara's third term. In view of the upcoming election the struggle for power will inevitably exacerbate and lead to a change in the balance of political powers that are connected with the foundation of new alliances and coalitions.

There is a chance that ethnic and religious factors will manifest themselves once again. For instance, the proposed alliance<sup>11</sup> between H. K. Bédié and G. Soro before the presidential election may well divide the northern electorate (mostly Muslims) and the southern one (mainly Catholics). The return of L. Gbagbo to Côte d'Ivoire may become yet another destabilizing factor.

Another new alliance – the Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace (RHDP) led by A. Ouattara, was established in January 2018. At the congress due to take place in 2020, the alliance will put forward their presidential candidate – possibly, A. Ouattara (Yansané, 2019).

## Acronyms

ACBWAS – Agency of Central Bank of West

ANF – Association of New Forces

BECDWA – Bank of Economic and Commercial Development of West Africa

FANCI – National Armed Forces of Côte d'Ivoire

FPI – Ivorian Popular Front

ICC – International Criminal Court

IMF – International Monetary Fund

NF – New Forces

PDCI – Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire

RFCl – Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire

RHDP – Rally of Houphouëtists for Democracy and Peace

RR – Rally of the Republicans

SU – Soroïst Union

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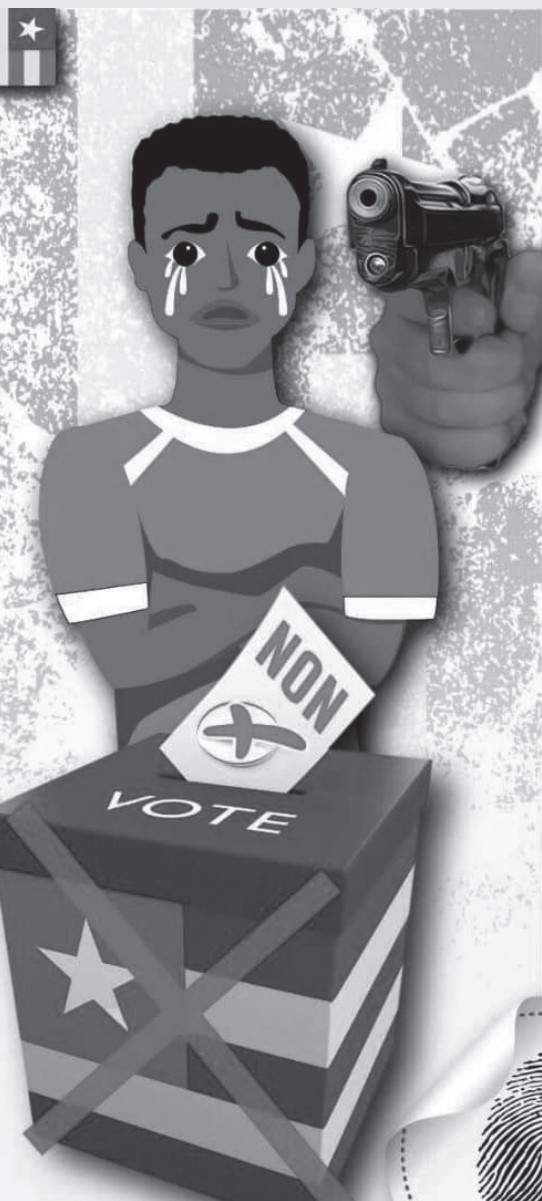
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<sup>11</sup> In October 2018, at the extraordinary congress of the DPCI aimed at defining its further strategy in view of the 2020 election, H. K. Bédié underscored the need for his party to unite with other opposition forces.



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# ÉLECTIONS AU TOGO

"Aucun passage en FORCE  
ne sera toléré par  
le PEUPLE TOGOLAIS"



Halte à la FRAUDE à ciel ouvert  
par des RAFLES et la prise des  
EMPREINTES DIGITALES  
de FORCE pour le BOURRAGE des  
URNES par des bulletins  
pré votés.

