

Cote d'Ivoire succession crisis raises specter of a new North-South partition

By Sebastian Spio-Garbrah, Chief Frontier Markets Analyst

The Ivory Coast, the world's largest cocoa exporter and West Africa's third largest economy is in the throes of a presidential succession crisis which could see the country again re-divided between a mostly Muslim north and a Christian south. Having just emerged from a decade of civil war, instability and a de facto division of the country in 2011, a mere six years ago, the country may be sliding back into a prolonged period of political instability.

Pro-west business friendly leader President Alassane Ouattara whose term ends in 2020 has no chosen successor. However a recent constitutional change and cabinet reshuffle have effectively sidelined the most powerful outside contender for the presidency, former prime minister, insurrectionist rebel leader and current Speaker of the National Assembly Guillaume Soro. Angry ex-rebel military factions aligned with Soro have over the past few weeks mutinied several times in the northern stronghold of Bouake and in several cities around the country under the pretext of demanding better salaries. The mutinies signal that Soro, a former rebel leader still holds strong sway over large sections of the Ivoirian military.

Historically, the Speaker of the Ivoirian National Assembly based in Yamoussoukro was second in line to the presidency. A constitutional change pushed by Ouattara in 2016 has however installed a new vice president as the second in line, – effectively demoting Soro in the line of presidential succession. With rumors of the president's failing health persistent, the battle over his successor which would have naturally occurred closer to 2020 is already afoot. With Ouattara's newly appointed VP Kablan Duncan, a southern Christian, now second in line to the presidency, effectively signaling him as Ouattara's successor, Soro, who is a northern Muslim, (like the president), and troops loyal to Soro sense that power is slipping away. Soro's rebel forces who effectively helped install Ouattara as president in 2011 following a decade of civil war, vow not to countenance any attempt to install a southerner as a successor to Ouattara. To add to Soro's sense of injury, Ouattara then bypassed him this week and chose a longtime personal friend Amadou Gon Coulibaly as the country's new prime minister, effectively putting a second buffer between Soro and the presidency.

In short, despite the enormous economic and social-infrastructure successes of the Ouattara administration in six short years, the eerie return of army mutinies, ex-rebel re-mobilization in the north, and a struggle for political power at the heart of the Ivorian government is reminiscent of the period in the early 1990s presaging the Ivoirian civil war and North-South partitioning of the country. If Ouattara is unable to tame the ex-rebel military forces occupying Bouake, or reach some political accommodation with Soro, a new civil conflict and re-partition of the country may be inevitable.

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