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How Republican are Alassane Ouattara's "Republican Forces"?

The Côte d'Ivoire now needs to enter a period of demilitarisation. This faces challenges in the long and the short term arising from the sort of resistance that developed under Bédié and Gbagbo. But there is hope that genuine republicanism might emerge from Ouattara's violent victory

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14 May 2011

Laurent Gbagbo's stubborn efforts to cling to power despite his electoral defeat have pushed his rival Alassane Ouattara to use force to gain effective presidency of Côte d'Ivoire. This choice is politically costly. It partially alters the legitimacy Ouattara won through the ballot box. It also raises the profiles of those who ousted Gbagbo through the gun: the former rebels, who were opportunistically rebranded "Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire" (RFCI) just before the assault against the security forces which remained loyal to the ex-president.

The political promotion of the ex-rebels triggers a series of questions about their capacity to ensure security in the country; the intentions of their chiefs; the future of

the forms of governance they have established in the north and the process of demobilization of their low-level combatants.

It is worth stressing that the bulk of Ouattara's troops do not generally correspond to the portrait of 'traditional warriors' from the north seeking ethnic revenge – this idea is more ideological than empirically grounded. The few serious sociological investigations available show the wide array of drivers of enlistment in the ex-rebel forces. Some may be opportunistic and personal. Others have to do with the deep moral outrage caused by the institutionalization of the discriminatory ideology of "Ivoirité" under Bédié and Gbagbo which made many Northerners feel like second-class citizens.

Furthermore, new untrained recruits might have been mobilized in Abidjan immediately before the fall of Gbagbo but most of the pro-Ouattara fighters were professional soldiers or enrolled in a process of professionalization as part of the integration programs stemming from the 2007 Ouagadougou peace accords. The army that fought for Ouattara in 2011 bears little resemblance to the hastily mobilized forces that fought Gbagbo's troops in the aftermath of the failed coup in 2002. Ouattara's RFCI were also rapidly reinforced by regular army soldiers abandoning Gbagbo as defeat got closer. The 'Republican' quality of this new and unusual composite of security forces still needs to be tested, though.

The first test concerns the capacity of the RFCI to secure the country's territory and prevent atrocities. The RFCI's accomplishments so far are hardly commendable. The minimum, consisting in capturing Gbagbo alive and avoiding the bloodbath prophesized by his followers, has been achieved. But, according to the international NGO Human Rights Watch, some members of the RFCI were involved in the massacres perpetrated in Duekoue. Similarly, the conquest of Abidjan was accompanied by bloody reprisals for the attacks perpetrated by the pro-Gbagbo militias after the elections in November.

A second major security concern relates to the future of the 'comzones', which is the name given to rebel officers who have been ruling the northern territories for almost a decade and who commanded the troops which ultimately dislodged Gbagbo. The comzones are important for at least two reasons: because of their ability to mobilise militarily and because of their hold on informal economic and political networks which buttress the forms of governance dominant in the north. Therefore, the comzones' expectations in the post-Gbagbo era are not only related to their contribution to Ouattara's rise to power; they also depend on the opportunity cost of relinquishing the advantages they derive from their northern fiefdoms. The popular legitimacy of the newly nominated préfets and the fulfilment of Ouattara's promises of decentralization will be key assets permitting political and economic transition and the dismantling of comzones' influence in the north.

On a personal level, the comzones' ambitions vary. Some have already expressed their intention to quit the army. Others hope to move up the military hierarchy. The man holding the key role in the shaping of the comzones' future is Guillaume Soro, Ouattara's current Prime Minister, whose trajectory so far has been questionable. Crimes that were perpetrated by the 'New Forces' under his command expose him to international prosecution and the recent killing of his old rival IB Coulibaly in Abidjan shows that interpersonal vendettas among ex-rebels are not over. Soro is due to leave office as part of an electoral deal between Ouattara and his circumstantial ally Henri Konan Bédié. Soro's resignation will be a welcome signal that power now belongs to civil authorities.

A third yardstick in Ivorian security politics concerns the demobilization of thousands of combatants from all sides. Most pro-Ouattara combatants expect some kind of compensation for what they perceive as a sacrifice for the cause while pro-Gbagbo militias may still trade their surrender. Reintegration programs plan to offer mostly economic reward to those returning to civilian life, and fresh flows of funding should satisfy the most pressing demands. In the longer term however, the dangerous effects on people's lives of years of socialization through the gun will have to be addressed.

The window of opportunity to restore Republican behaviour among reconfigured Ivorian security forces is narrow. The resolve shown by Ivorian authorities to introduce positive changes will be the best indicator for Ivoirians that impunity and arbitrariness inherited from the war are over.

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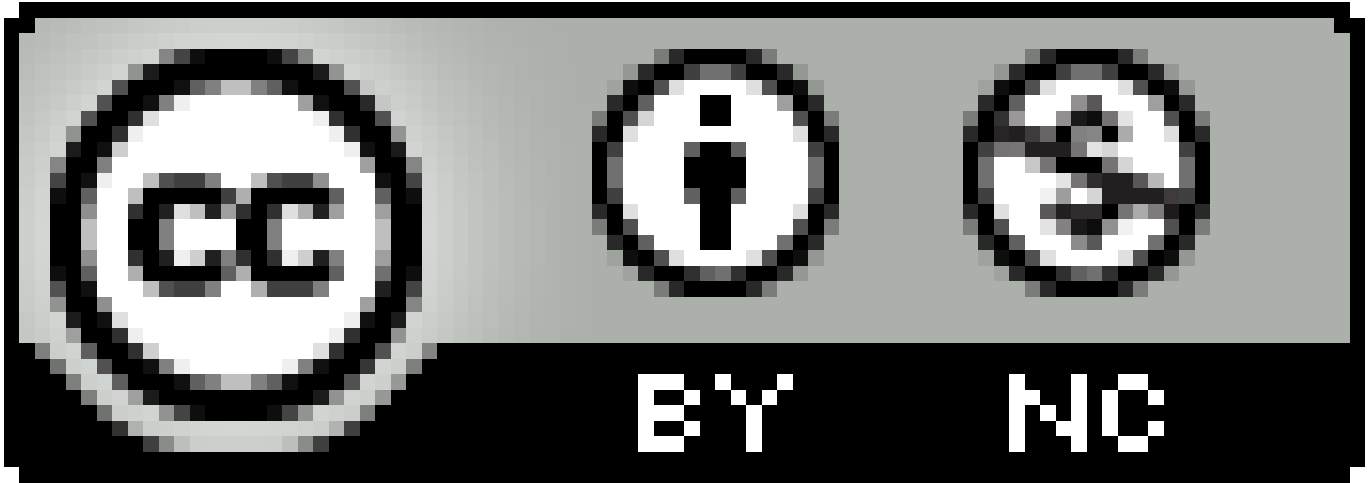
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