Côte d’Ivoire’s Instability: Power struggles within the political elite? Ethnic and religious Conflict? Impact of economic crisis? What is really to Blame?

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Côte d’Ivoire’s Instability: Power struggles within the political elite? Ethnic and religious Conflict? Impact of economic crisis? What is really to Blame?

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Abstract
Since the November-December, 2010 electoral stalemate between Laurent Gbagbo and Alassane Ouattara in Côte d’Ivoire, most individuals and bodies that have taken time to engage in the Ivorian conflict have often succumbed to the same superficial explanations of Africa's wars - that they stem from immutable tribal and sectarian differences. Instead of a simplistic assumption and hence conclusion as above, this article explores the background to, and transformation of the current conflict in Côte d’Ivoire through a committed engagement with its history, economic structure, state-society relations and the nature of political power. Despite the prevalence of ethnic and religious faultlines, the article submits that the current conflict in Côte d’Ivoire is above all political.

Keywords
Civil war; economic decline and growing social tensions; Ethnic and religious conflict; political stability; power struggle within the political elites; state-society relations.

Introduction
Côte d’Ivoire, a West African country is situated on the North Atlantic Ocean between Ghana and Liberia, bordering Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso. It has a total land area of 322 460 square kilometer (Kamidza, 2010). As a country, Côte d’Ivoire was once a beacon of rapid economic development and political stability in Sub-Saharan Africa. It has experienced significant economic decline and growing social

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tensions over the past two decades. These tensions reached their peak in 2002 when civil war briefly broke out across the country. The civil war culminated in the de-facto partition of the country with the rebel anti-government forces controlling over half of the country to the north, whilst the south including the principal city, Abidjan remained a government stronghold. For much of the eight years since, French troops and UN Operation Côte d’Ivoire (UNOCI) have commanded a narrow belt known as the zone of confidence across the centre of the country. Numerous peace settlements have been signed and reneged and the elections first promised in 2005 finally took place in November/December 2010 having been postponed six times. However, far from establishing the foundations for a more viable peace settlement, the elections have re-opened ill-healed wounds and the threat of renewed civil war is now at its highest since 2002.

Responses in the international community to events in Côte d’Ivoire are laced with despair that yet another African state has succumbed to the scourge of conflict. The ethnic and religious differences between the north and south of the country are cited above all else as the major explanation. Implicitly or explicitly, the problem with Côte d’Ivoire is essentialised; it is an ethnic conflict, the roots of which lie in the supposedly immutable propensity for violence inherent in tribalism and within countries displaying a high degree of ethnic heterogeneity. Even the various reports which have taken the time to engage in Ivorian politics have often succumbed to the same superficial explanations or alternatively have blamed the crisis narrowly upon power struggles within the political elite. However, it is the opinion of this article that, the current events in Côte d’Ivoire can best be understood through a committed engagement with the country’s history, its economic structure, state-society relations and the nature of political power, all of which are ignored in the quest to unravel the problems in Côte d’Ivoire.

**Côte d’Ivoire in Historical Perspective**

Côte d’Ivoire had been explored by the Portuguese as early as the fifteenth century and by the mid nineteenth century it came under increasing French influence, becoming a French protectorate in 1889 and a French colony in 1893. The French established Côte d’Ivoire’s plantation economy, planting vast cocoa and coffee plantations across the southern belt of the country. The colonial economy was dominated by these primary commodities which were exported to Europe through the
country’s southern coastal ports. The French encouraged and coerced vast amounts of cheap labour from other parts of French West Africa, notably Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Mali to work on the plantations, often through systems of taxation that could only be paid in the currency with which they paid plantation workers. 

Heavy economic reliance on primary commodity exports and the north-south migratory patterns first developed under French colonial rule have remained an enduring legacy ever since.

In 1960, Côte d’Ivoire gained independence and Félix Houphouët-Boigny became its first President, a position he maintained until his death in 1993. Having been elected to the French parliament and having served in a number of ministerial positions in the French government, he was one of only a few post-colonial African leaders with considerable political experience. Under Houphouët-Boigny’s relatively benign autocratic leadership, Côte d’Ivoire became one of Sub-Saharan Africa’s greatest success stories recording average annual growth rates in the region of 7-8% throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The ‘Ivorian miracle’, as it became known, was founded upon sound economic management, effective development of the coffee and cocoa industries and the maintenance of close trade links with the west. Houphouët-Boigny actively encouraged the same migration patterns that had underpinned the colonial plantation economy by allowing migrants to quickly gain Ivorian citizenship and stating that ‘land belongs to he who works it’. Rapid economic growth across the southern coastal belt of the country encouraged migrants from the north and from Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinea, Ghana and beyond. By 1998 a quarter of the population were migrants who had been born outside of Côte d’Ivoire or had parents who had. 

The liberal landownership laws were designed in part to ameliorate the profound economic inequalities between the north and the south by allowing migrants from the north to settle quickly. Houphouët-Boigny also sought to placate the ethnic groups in the north through a policy of ‘ethnic quotas’ which ensured that all the country’s major ethnic groups and regions were fairly represented within state institutions and strived to prevent economic inequalities from translating overtly into political inequalities.

Houphouët-Boigny maintained a very close relationship with France, through a policy that became known throughout West Africa as Françafrique. Under the 1961 Defence Agreement between France, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger and Dahomey (now Benin),
France enjoyed priority access to all those raw materials classified as strategic. Côte d’Ivoire was required to:

Inform the French Republic of the policy they intend to follow concerning strategic raw materials and products and the measures that they propose to take to implement this policy.

And concerning these same products,

the Republic of Ivory Coast for defence needs, reserve them in priority for sale to the French Republic, after having satisfied the needs of internal consumption, and they will import what they need in priority from it.

Côte d’Ivoire’s foreign policy was also closely aligned with its former colonial power, reflected most clearly in Houphouët-Boigny’s vehemently anti-communist stance and his support for the opposition to Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966, Mathieu Kérékou in Benin in 1977, and his suspected involvement in the overthrow of Thomas Sankara in neighbouring Burkina Faso in 1987.

Economic Growth and Decline

Despite its sustained success during the 1960s and 1970s Côte d’Ivoire’s developmental model, based entirely upon primary commodity exports, proved extremely vulnerable. The worldwide recession in the late 1970s and early 1980s induced by the oil crises and the growing competition amongst primary commodity exporting countries saw the price of cocoa and coffee on the world market, and other commodities exported by Côte d’Ivoire such as cotton, pineapples, sugar and coconuts plunged dramatically. By 1990 cocoa prices stood at a quarter of their 1977 prices. With virtually no industrial sector and with only a limited tertiary sector, the huge fall in commodity prices saw Côte d’Ivoire suffer one of the worst economic collapses in Sub-Saharan Africa and across the world. Faced with a huge balance of payments deficit, Côte d’Ivoire became one of the first countries to sign up to the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) offered by the World Bank and the IMF.

These SAP loans came attached with extensive conditionalities underpinned by neo-liberal economic dogma that sought to reduce state intervention in the economy and promoted privatisation and trade liberalisation. The state corporation, Caisse de Stabilisation, which had managed the cocoa industry throughout the 1960s
and 1970s was forced to halve the prices it paid to producers and was also forced to dismantle the Price Stabilisation Fund, which offered producers a relatively stable price for their cocoa from year to year, saving money in years of plenty to spend in bad years, but which had become a huge drain on state resources. Public sector salaries were cut by as much as 50% almost overnight and the government was also forced to dismantle state-run welfare systems. Government investment in education especially higher education and health rapidly declined throughout the 1980s as the government sought to reduce its fiscal deficit. Structural adjustment however failed to address the root causes of Côte d’Ivoire’s economic vulnerability, namely its extreme reliance upon primary commodity exports and lack of economic diversification, and hardly surprisingly its impact was limited. Growth rates remained below 1% throughout the 1980s and inflows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) have been far smaller than the World Bank and the IMF envisaged.

The Emergence of Democracy and the Rise of Ivoirité

The prolonged economic crisis, high unemployment and the declining welfare system led to growing political opposition, social unrest and a clamour for democracy spearheaded by the country’s student population. In 1990 Houphouët-Boigny finally legalised opposition parties and promised multi-party elections. During the early 1990s three major political parties emerged. The Front Populaire Ivorien (FPI) led by Laurent Gbagbo, a university history lecturer, commanded much support amongst students and trade unions and became the first major opposition to Houphouët-Boigny’s ruling Parti Democratique de la Côte d’Ivoire (PDCI). Following Houphouët-Boigny’s death in 1993 a power struggle within the PDCI saw the party split in two after Henri Konan Bedie beat Alassane Ouattara in the battle to succeed the revered president. Bedie became the country’s president until 1999 when he was overthrown by a military coup led by General Guei. Ouattara left Côte d’Ivoire to take up a leading position in the IMF and his supporters abandoned the PDCI to form their own party, the Rassemblement des Republicans (RDR). During the elite power struggles that raged during the 1990s, ethnicity became increasingly politicised and the country’s underlying ethnic and religious heterogeneity became a major site of political contestation. ‘Ivoirité which literally means Ivorian-ness became the major political discourse of the 1990s. It argued that the country’s troubles lay in the pollution of true Ivorian identity and its future would be reliant upon liberating the
country’s autochthonous citizens who had suffered from decades of excessive immigration. First, second and even third generation migrants and settlers began to face increasing discrimination as they were made the scapegoat for the country’s stagnation. The distinction between internal and international migration became blurred in the conceptualisation of Ivoirité and quickly led to the discrimination of those who had settled in the south regardless of whether they had immigrated from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea or beyond or were internal migrants who had lived in the north of the country for generations.

Gbagbo was the first to employ the notion of Ivoirité in what may largely be seen as an attempt to break the backbone of Houphouët-Boigny’s support base which the FPI argued was rooted in the large immigrant and settler populations which had benefited from his pro-migration policies and liberal landownership rights. Ivoirité later became a more overt strategy to marginalise Gbagbo’s main rival, Ouattara, and also formed part of the FPI’s anti-imperialist efforts to redefine a sovereign Ivorian culture.

Upon becoming President, Bedie enthusiastically embraced the Ivoirité discourse in an increasingly desperate attempt to overcome the challenges he faced from a split party and the prolonged economic crisis. The political motivations behind his support for Ivoirité became most explicit in the country’s New Electoral Code (1994) which restricted the right to vote to Ivorian nationals. It also stated that all presidential candidates must have complete Ivorian parenthood, must not have lived outside of the country within the past five years and should never have renounced their citizenship to take the nationality of another country. It was clearly designed to prevent Ouattara from running against him for President since Ouattara’s father was purportedly Burkinabe and Ouattara had worked abroad for the IMF since 1993 and had once travelled on a Burkinabe passport. In 1998, Bedie also introduced a new Land Code which stated that only Ivorians had the right to buy land, effectively denying non-nationals the right to settle in the south and left those already settled vulnerable to land-grabbing. Many of these policies had formed the backbone of the FPI’s early manifestos and allowed Bedie to steal much of Gbagbo’s thunder.

During the Côte d’Ivoire’s first election in 1995, Ouattara was excluded from running for President, the RDR and the FPI both boycotted the election and the PDCI led by Bedie recorded a large majority although lacked much popular legitimacy. Over the course of the 1990s Ouattara and his supporters in the RDR portrayed his
exclusion from the presidential candidacy as a result of him being a northerner and a Muslim and thus managed to invert Ivoirité in order to convert the latent discontent across the north of the country into their own ethnicised support base.

By the late 1990s, with the economy stagnating and unemployment growing, social tensions continued to grow and in 1999 Bedie was overthrown in a military coup by General Guei. Initially an impassioned critic of Ivoirité discourses Guei promised to serve as caretaker leader only until fresh elections could be held. However, he soon performed a rapid volte-face, deciding to stand for election in the 2000 and again employed Ivoirité to ban Ouattara for running against him. Gbagbo and the FPI recorded a decisive victory in the elections despite desperate efforts by Guei to curtail the election process. Gbagbo has remained President ever since.

**Civil War and fractious peace**

Under Gbagbo’s presidency ethnic groups in the south began to enjoy systematic favouritism including preferential access to some of the country’s most fertile coffee and cocoa growing regions in the west and south-west. The ‘baoulisation’ of the political system, the economy and the army marked a major departure from Houphouët-Boigny’s policy of ethnic quotas. Northern groups, predominantly the Kru and northern Mande became increasingly marginalised ensuring that the north of the country experienced growing political exclusion to add to the socio-economic inequality it already suffered. The final straw came in 2002 following the government’s decision to demobilise northern troops that had been recruited to the army under Guei. The troops refused to relinquish their weapons and what began as a localised army mutiny quickly escalated into widespread civil war.

The war effectively pitched Gbagbo’s supporters against an array of opposition groups, including supporters of Ouattara and the RDR, but also a handful of smaller rebel groups including the Movement of the Ivory Coast of the Great West (MPIGO) and the Movement for Justice and Peace (MJP). The military wing of the government was comprised of the National Army (FANCI) and the Young Patriots, a youth nationalist militia closely aligned with Gbagbo personally. The rebel forces gradually converted themselves in the Forces Nouvelles (FN) under the leadership of Guillame Soro. The fighting, which began in September 2002 lasted only four to five months with the first formal peace agreement being signed at Linas-Marcoussis in January 2003. By that time the opposition forces controlled about 60% of the country.
all to the North but their efforts to take control of major towns and cities in the south had been thwarted.

The Linas-Marcoussis agreement retained Gbagbo as President of a government of reconciliation in which the opposition gained control of the Ministry for Defence and the Ministry for the Interior. French troops and later, a UN force in February 2004 undertook to keep the peace by forming a narrow peace-belt across the centre of the country effectively partitioning Côte d’Ivoire into north and south. By March 2003 the government of reconciliation was already floundering under accusations of government orchestrated political deadlock and the FPI’s refusal to share power. Following the government’s heavy-handed and brutal response to a peaceful anti-government march, which left over one hundred protestors dead, the majority of opposition leaders which had taken up positions in the government walked out. However, in July both sides signed an ‘End of War Agreement’ which again formally recognised Gbagbo’s authority and saw both sides commit to a program of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR).

A second peace agreement – Accra III – in July 2004 tried to reactivate the political process of reconciliation but again failed as Gbagbo refused to act on his pledge to reconsider the criteria for presidential candidates and the rebels refused to disarm. The situation in Côte d’Ivoire, already tense, was further complicated in 2004 by the final disintegration of relations between France and Gbagbo. A FANCI air attack on the northern town of Bouake allegedly hit a French military base killing ten French soldiers and an American citizen. Chirac’s response was uncompromising and orders were swiftly given for French troops to take control of the country’s major airport in Abidjan and to destroy the Côte d’Ivoire air force consisting largely of two fighter bombers and a handful of helicopters. Anti-French and anti-imperialist outrage across the country rapidly escalated (both sides had criticised France for supporting the other) and most expatriates abandoned the country.

A third peace settlement, this time at Pretoria in South Africa was agreed in 2005 and initially resulted in concerted efforts on both sides to disarm. However, these efforts again proved short-lived until 2007 when Gbagbo and Soro met twice in Ouagadougou. The peace process finally seemed to be making significant process as Soro became Prime Minister under Gbagbo, the UN buffer zone began to be dismantled, Gbagbo travelled to the north on an official state visit for the first time.
since the civil war had broke out and FANCI and FN troops marched together in a show of solidarity.

Tensions remained, although at an altogether lower ebb, before resurfacing with renewed ferocity during the 2010 presidential elections in which Ouattara was finally able to stand, in a run-off against Gbagbo and Bedie. No candidate gained an outright victory in the first round and Bedie, with fewest votes, was eliminated leaving Gbagbo and Ouattara to enter a second-round in which Ouattara was declared the winner by the Electoral Commission and foreign observers. Gbagbo however has refused to stand down, claiming massive electoral fraud in the north, and orchestrated the overturning of the result by the Constitutional Council which now proclaimed Gbagbo as the victor with 51% of the vote.

France, committed in its opposition against Gbagbo even before the election process began, led the calls for Gbagbo to stand down which have since been voiced by the UN, the US, ECOWAS and many states across Africa. Gbagbo however has continued to stand firm and with tensions rising the prospect of civil war looms again. Even if war is averted and Gbagbo stands down to be replaced by Ouattara it is highly likely that the tensions which have pulsated through Ivorian society for much of the past twenty years will remain extremely high.

**Refuting mainstream explanations of the conflict in Côte d’Ivoire**

It is little exaggeration to state that the majority of analysis of Côte d’Ivoire’s growing instability over the past two decades has been underpinned by latent discourses of atavism and primordialism that have invariably tended to essentialise the linkages between ethnicity and conflict. This was perhaps elucidated most clearly by Bono (2010) in the New York Times at the start of 2010, when, in emphasising the positive impact that the World Cup would have on Africa, he commented that,

… A few years ago, Ivory Coast was splitting apart and in the midst of civil war when its national team qualified for the 2006 jamboree. The response was so ecstatic that the war was largely put on hold as something more important than deathly combat took place, i.e. a soccer match. The team became a symbol of how the different tribes could-and did-get on after the tournament was over.

Bono’s willingness to disregard Côte d’Ivoire’s complex civil conflict as little more than the manifestations of tribal primitivism may be abhorrent and utterly reductive
but it is perhaps not so far removed from the beliefs held by many in the west. Learned academics have also given great credence to essentialist explanations of conflict across the developing world. Samuel Huntingdon’s influential work on the ‘Clash of Civilisatons’ is arguably the best example. Cultural characteristics and differences, Huntingdon (1993:27) argues, ‘are less mutable and hence less easily compromised and resolved than political and economic ones’ creating an ‘us versus them’ mentality. Huntingdon (1993:35) goes on to point out that ‘Islam has bloody borders’ and that the fault lines between Christian and Muslim civilisations, that clearly appear across a number of West African countries such as Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, will likely create conflict-prone ‘torn countries’.

What Bono and Huntingdon both seem to advocate and it is a view that is certainly dominant in most explanation of Côte d’Ivoire, is that the country’s conflict can be quickly understood as soon it is acknowledged and realised that is an ethnic and religious conflict. It is almost as if these two adjectives alone are sufficient to provide readers with the information required to form an understanding of what is happening in this corner of West Africa. The complex historical, social, political, economic and probable western foundations of Côte d’Ivoire’s conflict are effectively repackaged into a simplistic and depoliticised atavistic or at least culturalist discourse, which gives analytical pre-eminence to the seemingly irrational and pre-modern forms of social organisation that continue to fracture the dark continent.

The mere facts that Côte d’Ivoire has experienced peace and stability throughout much of its post-independence history and that other countries which share similar ethnic and religious diversity, notably neighbouring Ghana, which shares Côte d’Ivoire’s distinctive poor Muslim north, richer Christian south divisions, have remained for the most part peaceful since independence, seem to be unimportant.

The major weakness in the essentialist characterisation of Côte d’Ivoire’s conflict lies in the fact that it is tautological; it argues that ethnic divisions lead to conflict which in turn heightens ethnic divisions which then creates heightened conflict. It is a sort of chicken and egg scenario from which one can only escape by taking the leap of faith and proclaiming that the seeds of conflict are contained within the very formation of ethnic identities, that the ‘us versus them’ mentality underpins the very fabric of ethnic identities. Of course, the fact that Ivoirité discourses have become such an important part of Ivorian politics has seemingly justified those who
have argued that the conflict is rooted in the country’s ethnic diversity. However, Ivoirité must be understood as a reaction, a symptom not a cause, of the wider political and socio-economic challenges that the country faces.

To properly understand why Côte d’Ivoire again stands on the brink of civil war, the culturalist thesis must be rejected in favour of an analysis that instead acknowledges and engages with the three deeper foundations of the country’s crisis: (i) the politicisation of ethnicity across the country; (ii) the hugely adverse impact of Côte d’Ivoire’s prolonged structural economic crisis which has been exacerbated and not alleviated by World Bank and IMF imposed neo-liberal economic policies; and finally (iii) the very nature of the country’s political system and the way in which political power is constructed and wielded.

The politicisation of ethnicity

Historically, ethnic identities throughout Côte d’Ivoire have been dynamic and fluid and the starting point for deconstructing the essentialist analysis of the country’s social tensions must begin with an understanding that the growing rigidity afforded to ethnic identities is politically motivated. The politicisation of ethnicity over the past two decades has been motivated by three major political factors. The first is the elite power struggle between Gbagbo, Bedie, Ouattara and Guei which has encouraged all of them to play the ethnic card in an effort to mobilise support. The intractable nature of Côte d’Ivoire’s economic crisis and the tensions this has raised has also encouraged those in power to divert anger away from the government by channeling discontent towards migrants, from both the north and neighbouring countries, who have become a convenient scapegoat. High unemployment, growing social tensions, declining welfare provision and weak institutional capacity have all undermined the government’s ability to uphold the social contract which in turn has eroded the legitimacy of both the government and the political system as a whole. The reactionary resort to xenophobic and nationalist rhetoric has thus become an alternative mechanism by which to retain legitimacy and support.

The ethnicisation of politics has therefore sought to achieve what may best be termed ‘horizontal inequalities’, that is inequalities between culturally defined groups (ethnicity, religion or race) in the form of economic inequalities (restricted access to assets such as land and capital), social inequalities (restricted access health and education and consequently poorer outcomes), political inequalities (unequal
distribution of decision-making powers) and cultural inequalities (refusal to recognise cultural norms) (Stewart, 2001, Langer, 2004). Efforts to enshrine these horizontal inequalities are designed to strengthen fragile governments by systematically favouring supporters and excluding opposition. It is these horizontal inequalities, both perceived and actual that underpin the rising tension, frustration and anger in Ivorian society. The explicit political calculations that have underpinned Ivoirité discourses has certainly encouraged a far more nuanced analysis of the politicisation of ethnicity in Côte d’Ivoire than elsewhere in Africa (e.g. the Rwandan genocide). However, such analysis often tends to remain descriptive rather than analytical in that it fails to consider why this political strategy has emerged only in the past twenty years and why political elites have abandoned the seemingly more effective and more stable policy of accommodation embraced by Houphouet-Boigny. The growing politicisation of ethnic identities cannot be attributed merely to changing political personalities but is in fact rooted in the very different economic and political structure that has emerged in Côte d’Ivoire since the 1980s.

The impact of Côte d’Ivoire’s economic crisis
It is a great irony that Côte d’Ivoire, one of the first countries to be subjected to IMF and World Bank imposed structural adjustment programmes had largely adhered to the kind of economic policies advocated by the Bretton Woods institutions. Unlike other parts of the developing world, notably Latin America, where inefficient state led Import Substitution Industrialisation (ISI) was blamed for the debt crisis, Côte d’Ivoire had in fact embraced Ricardo’s theory of comparative advantage, which underpins neo-liberal economic theory, and the country’s development model was based on exporting primary commodities to the west through the global market. Whereas in Latin America aid conditionality was designed to coerce countries to dismantle expensive industrialisation policies and instead open up their markets to free trade and focus on exporting primary commodities in which they had a comparative advantage, in reality Côte d’Ivoire had been pursuing such policies since independence and should have served as a warning of the inherent structural flaws in this development model. Sadly, it did not.

Côte d’Ivoire was instead forced to adhere to the same rationale of rolling back the state to allow the free market to flourish. The 1980s saw the systematic dismantling of the poverty safety nets that Houphouet-Boigny’s government had
installed in the coffee and cocoa sectors. The Price Stabilisation Fund was abolished and almost overnight the prices paid to cocoa producers were halved. Investment in agriculture declined and the credit systems once available to the farming sector dried up. The Caisse de Stabilisation was dismantled, a process finally completed after much opposition from the Ivorian government in 2000, as the country’s most profitable sectors were cleared of state intervention in readiness for privatisation. The country’s welfare system was also heavily scaled back and many public sector employees were either made redundant or saw their salaries halved. Economic stagnation and fewer jobs saw the growing informalisation of the labour market whilst Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), prophesised as the engine of future growth, remained largely absent except in the most profitable sub-sectors. The free market proved unable to plug the country’s huge finance gap and Côte d’Ivoire suffered one of the greatest and prolonged economic declines anywhere in the world in the 1980s.

The prolonged economic crisis has created two interlinked problems. Firstly, and most obviously, it has fuelled rising poverty, disaffection and anomie. Secondly, heavy aid conditionality has drastically reduced the government’s policy space and hence its ability to proactively address this rising tide of poverty. Privatisation, trade liberalisation and the sale of state institutions, much to the chagrin of Côte d’Ivoire’s leadership has vastly reduced the government’s sphere of influence in the economy. Large multi-national companies, including Nestle, Bouygues, Total and France Telecom effectively control the most lucrative economic sectors. There are still subtle differences between the leading parties; Ouattara, having worked at the IMF for a number of years and having been instrumental in the implementation of Structural Adjustment during his period as Côte d’Ivoire’s Prime Minister (1990-1993), is certainly more in favour of the Washington Consensus model of economic reform. Gbagbo, on the other hand, has shown a far more vehement dislike of the neo-liberal economic reforms his government has found themselves implementing. His distaste for the influence of French capital has certainly resulted in attempts to diversify Côte d’Ivoire’s sources of investment with major US players such as Cargill and Archer Daniel Midland (ADM) gaining a larger presence over the past decade. However, the fact remains that whoever becomes President will have very little room to manoeuvre since, as the US Department of State itself acknowledged as early as 2001, ‘the Ivorian government has largely removed itself from economic activity’.
Growing poverty and inequality combined with the government’s declining ability to tackle its root causes has thus had a double impact. It has greatly increased social tensions whilst at the same time it has denied parties the ability to appeal to economic reform as a possible basis of support in the way Chavez and Morales have done in Venezuela and Bolivia for example. In this toxic environment, they resort to xenophobic nationalism, with immigrants, who form approximately one quarter of the country’s population, forming an easy scapegoat has become an essential means by which to generate support. Secondly, and far more importantly, the program of Structural Adjustment in Côte d’Ivoire completely failed to understand or engage with the nature of the country’s political system and has thus inadvertently eroded the very foundations of political power and stable governance.

The nature of Côte d’Ivoire’s political system
Western development policy in the developing world has a terrific propensity to analyse states in terms of their failures to conform to what we think they ought to be like rather than engaging with how they actually function. As a consequence states tend to be analysed in terms of their deficiencies; their failure to uphold liberal democracy, their failure to enshrine free market capitalism, their failure to establish institutional governance underpinned by the rule of law. The majority of western development policy is thus designed to rectify these failures by imposing changes to the recipient country’s political, economic and social structure. However, the normative assumptions of development policy contain a major failure of their own, namely the failure to engage in how politics and power actually function in the societies they proclaim to be remedying.

All societies experience social tensions which provide a challenge, albeit not an insurmountable one, to effective statehood. The two most enduring political systems that have emerged in the modern world to address and manage these social tensions are institutional governance and patrimonial governance. In Weberian analysis, institutional governance and social conflicts are institutionalised and addressed within political institutions underpinned by so-called ‘rules of the game’, the most important being the rule of law. Patrimonial governance however works to a different set of rules founded upon the establishment of patron-client relationships in which the patron rewards loyal supporters once in power. Patrimonial politics can be understood as an ‘auction of loyalties’ (Alex de Waal, 2009, 99–113) with a chain of
buyers and sellers of loyalty stretching from political elites to local government and
underpinned by the mutually beneficial ties that link patrons and their followers. To
western eyes, patrimonial governance is corrupt, inefficient and unenlightened.
Perhaps, but it can also be a foundation for stability. Indeed, Houphouët-Boigny’s
long and relatively stable tenure was based largely upon his clear understanding of the
logic of patrimonialism and his ability to adhere to its rules, his policy of ethnic
quotas perhaps being the clearest example.

Côte d’Ivoire’s economic crisis and the structural adjustment policies which
followed have completely undermined the logic upon which patrimonial politics is
based. Competition for declining economic resources has become increasingly intense
over the past twenty years whilst at the same time the huge debt that the government
is saddled with and the pervasive privatisation of the commanding heights of the
economy has vastly reduced the resources with which the state is able to buy loyalty.
Lucrative concessions and economic decision-making powers have all largely
disappeared from the state’s portfolio denying the government the opportunity to
‘buy-in’ support across the country. There is no doubt that such policies have
historically tended to undermine economic efficiency since resources are invariably
used for in un-economic ways for political ends. However, it is equally true that the
dismantling of the economic foundations of patrimonial rule have also had a
devastating impact. Successive governments have abandoned efforts to buy-in loyalty
across the country in the way that Houphouët-Boigny sought to do and have instead
sought to construct more limited regional support bases by politicising ethnic
identities. It is the underlying conflict for diminishing resources that has created the
‘winner-takes-all’ mentality in Ivorian politics and has meant that strategies to buy-in
loyalty nationwide have been replaced with a more limited agenda to secure a smaller
support base. This changing political policy has dramatically heightened what is at
stake in the country’s elections which in turn has increasingly destabilised the
country’s nascent democratic system.

The erosion of the traditional economic basis for patrimonialism has
encouraged political elites to try to foster loyalty in non-economic ways. Playing the
ethnic card is in many ways best understood as an attempt to demonetarise the
patrimonial system. It has become a way of buying loyalty on the cheap and the
promises of the major parties to enact favourable policies for certain ethnic groups
regarding employability, voting rights and citizenship for example, epitomised in
Ivoirité, embody a relatively cost effective (albeit destabilising) way of generating widespread support.

**Conclusion**

The political stalemate in Côte d'Ivoire, therefore, is not that its tribes can’t get on or that the country’s ethnic and religious diversity mean that conflict is in some way predetermined. The problem in Côte d’Ivoire lies with the country’s structural economic crisis and the poverty, the sheer disaffection and the anomie of a generation that has seen its hopes frustrated and its dreams largely disappear. It is a result of the impact that perpetual economic crisis and structural adjustment have wrought on the country’s political system and the way that they have destabilised patrimonial politics and state-society relations. Until this is properly understood by development policymakers it is unlikely that regional and international intervention in Côte d’Ivoire be it military, economic or political, will be able to promote stability and peace.

**References**


