

Opinion piece - coup attempt in Ivory Coast

Today, the 19th September 2002, has seen more sustained gunfire on the streets of Abidjan. We are not yet in a position to ascertain the reasons for the violence, but it is the latest stage in a sad descent from the peace Ivorians had enjoyed since their independence.

Now, however, their reputation as one of Africa's most stable countries is in tatters, with coups d'etat in 1999, a rigged election in 2000, and failed coups in 2001 and 2002. Even in comparison with its neighbours, Côte d'Ivoire is in tumultuous political condition - and the possibility of prolonged internal violence can no longer be dismissed.

Côte d'Ivoire's descent into chaos is a sobering tale for those who believe that democracy is the inevitable result of globalisation, liberalisation and the end of the Cold War. The zeitgeist may well be in favour of civil rights, freedom of the individual and democratising the State. However, this is a theme of western and westernised intellectuals, that does not by any means enthuse the rest of a given society, especially in societies with urgent material concerns. It also leads to the situation which confounds western thinkers, of a society using the workings of democracy to fight against the interests of the people. Côte d'Ivoire shows both of these.

One-party democracy

From independence in 1960 to his death in 1993, the presidency was held by just one man, Felix Houphoët-Boigny. Houphoët-Boigny was a giant figure not only on the African stage, but also the world stage - first ever black minister in a French government, dominant figure in pan-African politics, a political thinker of rigorous intellectual merit. During his presidency, Côte d'Ivoire was stable and relatively prosperous, its money based on massive sales of coffee, rubber and cocoa. By African standards, corruption was restrained, and the great man's status and permanence led to confidence in the business community.

Yet stability and permanence can also debase democracy as a system of governance. If a democratic leader is impervious to criticism, who can protect the public against bad decisions and bad governance? Astonishing wastes of public money were allowed, such as the massive Basilica at Yammasoukro - bigger than St Peter's Rome, and able to accommodate more worshippers at once than there are Catholics in the entire country. The revered status of Houphoët-Boigny also left his successors an impossible legacy, and they would continually suffer from their own lack of status and credibility.

A more general question should therefore be posed: how long can a democratic leader remain in power without damaging his country's democracy? Africa provides several cautionary tales. Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe (22 years in power) cannot contemplate losing power, and has deployed all the resources of the State to eliminate challengers. Daniel arap Moi in Kenya (24 years in power) is stepping down, but rigging a puppet successor. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia (15 years) has consistently won "99.9%" of the votes, and has changed the constitution to allow him to continue on contesting elections indefinitely. On the other hand, some long-standing leaders do not leave their democracies obviously impaired. Helmut Kohl was in power for 16 years, but German democracy is still in fine shape. Margaret Thatcher may have changed the face of Britain

in her 11 years at the top, but democracy has not been a casualty. We await with eagerness the consequences on political life of the end of the Suharto era (32 years) in Indonesia, and the Mahatir era in Malaysia (21 years so far - he stands down in 2004).

Complacent governments, growing illegitimacy

These examples show that a tradition of political participation does not prevent populations from voting for one person or party again and again - witness Roosevelt in the USA. However, if a new democracy repeatedly throws up the same result, then there is a greater danger of it allowing complacent governments to undermine democratic values in themselves. Africa and Asia are particularly at risk, since decolonisation was less than 50 years ago. Even countries that start their democratic lives as models to others, must be wary. One only needs to remember the high hopes for Zimbabwean democracy in 1980, and compare it with the "democracy" of 2002. I also remember the first post-apartheid South African elections of 1994, and very much hope that the ANC will not continue to poll more than 66% in the future.

This should give a strong message to new democracies across the world, and their international sponsors. It is not enough to have a democracy - without a viable pluralism there is no real advantage in democracy over dictatorship. Therefore the new Afghan democracy, the Kosovan democracy - even the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi democracy - will only work if Afghans, Kosovans and Iraqis have the right and are encouraged to disagree with their western-imposed governments. Indeed, for democracy to be real in these places, they must be able to replace pro-western governments for other ones - even if this causes foreign-policy concerns for the West.

Representing all the people

Côte d'Ivoire's politics also highlight a particular failing of weak democracies, which is that in the search for votes, politicians attempt to utilise security fears to demonise certain sections of society. In Côte d'Ivoire's case, the problem was one of social and economic security, where a weak leader in the shape of Henri Konan Bedie responded to economic decline by blaming Muslim northerners and foreigners from Burkina Faso and Mali. After General Robert Guei's coup, he wished to legitimise his rule by contesting elections - again on the ticket of anti-Muslim and anti-foreigner policies. This resulted in vicious rioting in Abidjan, and the banning of an opposition party leader Alassane Ouattara, because he was partly of Burkina Faso origin (although only forty years ago, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire were united under French rule). The new president, Laurent Gbagbo, is similarly guilty of this sin - and his rule has been similarly punctuated by violence which never existed before 1999.

The demonisation of minority sections of the population is not new, and not going to go away. All leaders do it, since although you can convince all of the people some of the time, and you can convince some of the people all of the time, you can't convince all of the people all the time.

According to the rules of democracy, the people with the highest number of votes are legitimately in power - but leaders everywhere forget that they are the representatives not of the people who voted for them, but the totality of the population. If policies pursued are seen to be divisive, biased and threatening, there will be a backlash - which if pluralism is not maintained, must express itself in other ways than talking. Yugoslavia in

the 1990s showed once again what Europe should have learned in the 1940s - that homogeneous populations do not exist, and that nationalism and chauvinism cannot answer economic problems. Africa must also learn this - though Rwanda, Uganda, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire prove that it has not yet done so.

Nor should the West remain complacent. Even the justified anxiety after the 11 September attacks does not justify stereotyping "others" as threatening national and personal security. The introduction of racial profiling in the United States, and the pan-European demands for "integration" of immigrants, are not in themselves threatening measures: but behind them lies a willingness to make people into stereotypes. Disproportionate suspicion from the State towards a group of people - whether these be South London blacks, Arab-Americans or Ivorian Muslims - provokes reciprocal suspicion. This is no way to run a democracy.