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Parliament votes by overwhelming majority to hold a constitutional referendum. Meanwhile, 23 opposition parties, including the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI) unite by signing a declaration that opposes the referendum. Kacou Brou, Kadet Bertin, Watchard Kédjébo and Yahon Franck, former aides to president Laurent Gbagbo (2000-2011), return after almost five years in exile. Inadequate services at the Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny and high electricity prices from the Compagnie Ivoirienne de l'Électricité (CIE) lead to increased social tension.

Parliament approves referendum vote for constitutional reform

Parliament, on 22 July, approved the bill to hold a referendum to vote on implementing constitutional reform.¹ The referendum was one of President **Alassane Dramane Ouattara's** (2010-present) electoral promises. Ouattara pledged to increase inter-institutional collaboration and transparency (see *ARC Briefing Cote d'Ivoire May 2016*). However, critics allege that Ouattara is trying to implement sweeping constitutional reform on issues that many citizens do not justify the need for a referendum. The reform would revise Article 35, which makes 75 the maximum age of a presidential candidate and defines "ivoirité".² The current Article 35 makes 74-year-old Ouattara ineligible to run for another term; the media also speculates that Ouattara may also be of non-Ivoirian nationality.³ The proposed reform could also see the introduction of a vice-president and senate in the Ivoirian republic polity (see *ARC Briefing Cote d'Ivoire May 2016*). This would change the power dynamic in government.

The precise issues of the referendum are not yet explicit. Ouattara will attempt to finalise its content in parliament.⁴ Under the current constitution, parliament president **Guillaume Soro** would assume the duties of president if Ouattara were to die in office. Many commentators believe he would lose this position if the constitutional reform were to create the position of vice president.

*"If the referendum takes place and we get a new constitution with a vice presidency, it is clear that Soro will no longer be next in line to Ouattara [as is currently the case]. This privilege would go to the vice president. But with legislative elections approaching and the political weight that Soro holds in Cote d'Ivoire, there's nothing to say that this was not prepared so that he becomes vice president."*⁵

Despite parliament's vote to hold a referendum, it appears that Ouattara will face significant resistance from opposition parties – including those not in parliament, such as the **Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI)** – and civil society. On 30 June, 23 opposition parties said they would boycott the referendum, including the FPI, **Liberté et Démocratie pour la République (LIDER)**, **Congrès Panafricain des Jeunes et des Patriotes (COJEP)**, the **Union Républicaine pour la Démocratie (URD)** and the **Renouveau pour la Paix et la Concorde (RPC)**, as they deem the project anti-democratic, illegal and illegitimate.⁶

¹ RFI, 30 Jun 2016.

² Literally translated as Ivoirity – the legal definition of someone of Ivoirian nationality, which Ouattara allegedly seeks to amend in order to include foreign immigrants, most notably from border countries such as **Burkina Faso** and **Mali**.

³ RFI, 30 Jun 2016.

⁴ RFI, 30 Jun 2016.

⁵ Source, lawyer, Abidjan.

⁶ RFI, 30 Jun 2016.

“The signatories reject this anti-democratic, authoritarian and unilateral procedure undertaken by the president, to introduce a new constitution and invite the president to show discretion and retract... the entire project. The nomination of a vice president would essentially enable [Ouattara] to choose his successor, which implies a monarchical deviation of power.”⁷

Opposition members who signed the declaration reproached Ouattara for his limited dialogue with opposition and civil society, calling for dialogue with a larger range of stakeholders within Ivorian society.⁸ **Soko Waza Emile**, president of the **Congrès du Peuple pour le Développement et la Liberté (CPDL)** claims that the referendum is part of a longer trend of unsuccessful reconciliation since the post-electoral crisis of 2010-2011, and could unnecessarily exacerbate tensions in the country,

“Reconciliation has not been effective – we still have prisoners and exiled peoples. This has not been resolved... To try to impose the referendum on Ivoirians will do nothing but accentuate social cleavages. Of which reconciliation does Ouattara speak if one part of the political class and civil society says no to the new constitution within the current socio-political context? There is a social revolt very near because of this; people are unhappy with their standard of living, not the constitutional referendum... This referendum serves only one purpose, which is for Ouattara to extend his mandate even further.”⁹

Gbagbo’s exiled aides return to engage with reconciliation effort

Four partners, aides and cabinet members of former president **Laurent Gbagbo** (2000-2011) returned to Gabon on 30 June after close to five years in exile. Their return from exile would appear to be a positive step towards full reconciliation with the FPI. The four partners are former defence minister **Bertin Kadet**; former naval commander **Kakou Brou**; **Galaxie Patriotique** militant group member **Watchard Kédjébo**; and **Franck Yahon**, Gbagbo’s former bodyguard.¹⁰ The four told local media that they wanted to contribute to the reconciliation process, while defence minister **Alain Donwahi** was quick to deflect questions about a political return,

“We refuse all commentary. They have come back above all for their families and also for peace in Cote d’Ivoire. There is nothing to say about their political destiny.”¹¹

Although the FPI declined to comment, local commentators see the return as a way for the ruling coalition to weaken the FPI further,

“There is something to beware of in authorities when you are an exiled person and close to the former president. Even if the government appears to have good intentions by sending officials to welcome them, it is important to understand that these pardons are not made without meeting certain conditions. It is likely that they will not have the ability to express themselves freely.”¹²

Bertin refuted accusations of ‘selling out’ to the ruling **Rassemblement Houphouetistes pour la Démocratie et la Paix (RHDP)**, and emphasised the poor conditions in which he had lived in a refugee camp in **Ghana**.¹³ Gbagbo’s four cadres are reportedly the most important of his associates in exile.¹⁴ This indicates that the links between political remnants of the FPI are tenuously bound together, and less able to rally people following a five-year period of near irrelevance since it lost power in 2011.

⁷ RFI, 30 Jun 2016.

⁸ RFI, 30 Jun 2016.

⁹ Source, president of the CPDL, Abidjan

¹⁰ L’Essentiel, 1 Jul 2016.

¹¹ L’Essentiel, 1 Jul 2016.

¹² Source, journalist, Abidjan

¹³ Imatin, 7 Jul 2016.

¹⁴ Imatin, 7 Jul 2016.

Anti-CIE protests turn violent

At least two people were killed as a result of police violence during protests against the **Compagnie Ivoirienne de l'Électricité (CIE)** in the capital **Yamoussoukro, Bouaké** and **Daloa** on 19 and 20 July.¹⁵ The demonstrators were protesting high electricity bills, the result of CIE's monopoly on energy provision. Ouattara had announced in May that he would open up the sector for investment to further players, after the CIE announced a 10% increase in electricity prices for a majority of CIE consumers in January (see *ARC Briefing Cote d'Ivoire May 2016*). Ouattara had also called on the CIE to be more responsive to consumer demands. Reportedly, price hikes were closer to 50% in many urban parts of the country, especially in Yamoussoukro and Bouaké.¹⁶ Protesters said the joint billing for April to June electricity usage exacerbated consumers' difficulties.¹⁷ The CIE had delayed its invoicing following Ouattara's announcement.¹⁸ In an effort to placate the protesters, the CIE has extended payment of bills until September. However, protesters feel that this does not resolve the issue,

*"The government is responsible for the increase in social tension at the moment and for the protests across the country. The government and the CIE should drop this project of price increases, which only exacerbates the difficulties that many consumers are experiencing."*¹⁹

There are reports, however, of unitary price increases in excess of 85% in the last six months, indicating that the CIE has disregarded its own pricing terms.²⁰ Many consumers criticise the CIE's recent addition of supplementary taxes, such as value added tax (VAT) (previously not applied to electricity), as public sentiment increasingly focuses on the government,

*"We reproach the CIE for not only the increase in price, but also the supplementary taxes added to this. This does not solve our problems. The company is stealing from us, with the government's approval."*²¹

...and FESCI members protest against government's educational shortfall

Meanwhile, students, many affiliated with the **Fédération Estudiantine et Scolaire de Côte d'Ivoire (FESCI)** (Cote d'Ivoire student and school union) at the **Felix Houphouët-Boigny University** and **Université de Cocody** in **Abidjan**, protested on 18 July against the evacuation of student residences.²² The FESCI remains a strongly Gbagbo-affiliated union with a strong ability to mobilise student communities across the country. Police forces dispersed protesters, with several injuries and arrests resulting from clashes with students.²³

Students criticise the government for insufficient investment in the public education system. They claim investment in education has dropped for several years,

*"Ouattara's government is far from making education its priority. The students are submitted to deplorable conditions. Lecture halls are not equipped, hence professors do not teach, for example, in the medicine and pharmacy departments... Students are avidly against the police's violent response, our friends are arrested and sent to the **Maca** (infamous detention centre in Abidjan)."*²⁴

¹⁵ L'Essentiel, 24 Jul 2016.

¹⁶ L'Essentiel, 18 Jul 2016.

¹⁷ L'Essentiel, 24 Jul 2016.

¹⁸ L'Essentiel, 24 Jul 2016.

¹⁹ Source, president of the federal consumers' union, Abidjan

²⁰ Source, journalist, Abidjan

²¹ Source, activist, Abidjan

²² Abidjan.net, 18 Jul 2016.

²³ Abidjan.net, 18 Jul 2016.

²⁴ Source, FESCI member, Abidjan

The government has reportedly announced a renewed budget of \$507m to finance infrastructural shortfalls, but called for the immediate suspension of student union mobilisation.²⁵ Ouattara had in 2012 dismissed education ministry head of finance **Adama Méité** for issues of governance in the rehabilitation of the Université de Cocody, with an alleged increase of the project cost from \$80m to \$113m, which later reportedly surged to \$186m.²⁶ The ministry has a reputation for corruption and has struggled to appease students, with continuing protest action in ensuing months.²⁷ Despite this, the government has increased education spending by 18% – to over \$2 billion – in 2016, to comprising 9% of the total.²⁸

Implications

The referendum process appears to face significant obstacles, despite an apparently dominant passing of the motion in parliament. The opposition and civil society could still undermine the process, which could have a profound impact on power dynamics within the Ivoirian political context.

The reconciliation with four former aides and cabinet members demonstrates a willingness within the ruling RHDP to reduce potential opposition from the FPI in particular, which continues to hold an influential position in Ivoirian politics, despite exclusion from parliament. The return of the FPI looks unlikely, however, as former cadres appear to fracture and divide.

Social discontent has intensified in recent months, especially against government public service provision inefficiency. The monopoly that the CIE continues to hold, which may last at least until 2020, is a debilitating factor for the ruling coalition with clear nonfulfillment of agreed tariff hikes. The students' protest reveals that the youth continue to be sensitive to government inaction in the education sector, especially since the alleged corruption of Méité post-2012.

²⁵ Source, education ministry employee, Abidjan

²⁶ Abidjan.net, 20 Jan 2013.

²⁷ Source, journalist, Abidjan

²⁸ Tresor.economie.gouv.ci

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