

The more things change... can Côte d'Ivoire weather its point of maximum instability?

Blog post by Senior Associate Isabelle Trick, 25 August 2020

Togo's president has done it this year. Burundi's resisted the temptation. Guinea's just decided to do it, while Côte d'Ivoire's president said he wouldn't, but recently changed his mind - the issue at hand is "third termism" or a president's attempt to stay in power beyond the originally envisioned number of terms. These constitutional coups tend to lead to significant political instability and violence, often followed by a contraction in growth. However, while the decision of Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara to run in the October election has already led to protests, there are a set of stabilising factors that may mean an escalation of violence is avoided.

In reality, third termism is often a slippery slope, with leaders extending their rule by decades. But it is often when a leader crosses the third term threshold that the risk to stability is greatest. A striking example is Burundi in 2015, when President Pierre Nkurunziza successfully won a third term but undermined fifteen years of peacebuilding since the country's civil war and violently suppressed protests. 150,000 Burundians fled the country. There are similarities to Côte d'Ivoire today: less than a decade has passed since post-election violence spiralled into civil war in 2010, during which more than 3,000 people died and half a million were displaced.

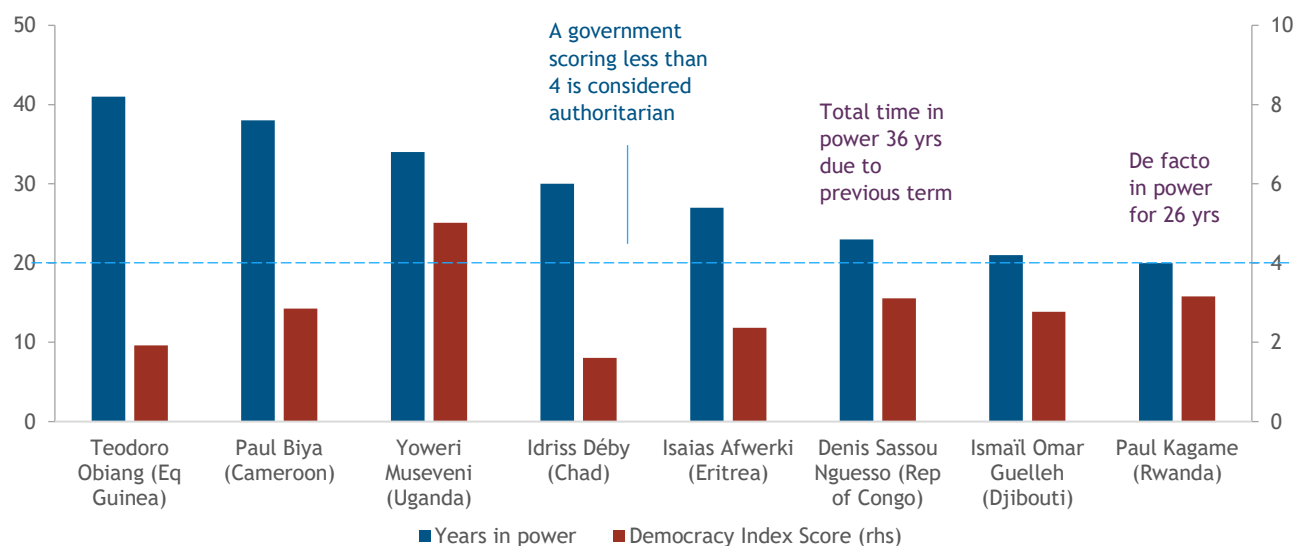
However, things were looking up in Côte d'Ivoire. Since Ouattara came to power, the country returned to economic growth - which, at 6.9% pre covid-19, was among the highest in Africa. And the 78-year-old president announced in March that he would not seek another term, instead supporting his prime minister, Amadou Gon Coulibaly, as his party's presidential candidate. Then Coulibaly died suddenly of a heart attack on July 8th at the age of 61. With less than four months to the election and faced with intra-party competition for the top spot, Ouattara announced he would be seeking a third term two weeks ago.

The reaction was swift. Opposition parties across the board condemned the move as unconstitutional. Demonstrations were held throughout the country and at least five protesters have died in clashes with security forces. However, while we are certain to see further clashes, there are three broad factors that make an escalation of violence on the scale of 2010/2011 less likely.

First, there will likely be little international pressure. Had Ouattara chosen to run outright, international condemnation may have been swift. But in the face of Coulibaly's death, Ouattara claimed force majeure and argued that his candidacy would preserve stability. Accordingly, ECOWAS and the African Union have remained silent. It helps that he has established himself as a safe pair of hands with investors, having consistently improved Côte d'Ivoire's ease of doing business ranking since coming to power. Further, while often quick to condemn, the international community has a habit doing business with Africa's 'presidents for life' - the longest-serving of whom has been in power since 1979, the same year Margaret Thatcher was elected - despite their negative impact on democracy within their countries.

African presidents in power for more than 20 years tend towards authoritarian rule

Years in power (lhs), democracy index score* where 10 = full democracy, <4 = authoritarian (rhs)



Source: GC own research, Economist Intelligence Unit
 *The democracy index is based on 60 indicators grouped in five categories measuring electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture.

Second, much like investors, Ivorians will be eager to hold on to economic gains. Not only is the civil war's violence still fresh in the minds of many, so too is the impact on the economy, with GDP growth contracting by 4.4% in 2011. Ivorians already living through a pandemic and facing a decline in per capita income due to the global economic crisis may be reluctant to jeopardise the growth Ouattara has delivered. While term extensions make it harder for citizens to hold their leaders to account and can foster corruption, this may seem the lesser of two evils in the short term compared to large-scale violence and further economic hardship.

Third, the current state of the opposition may, surprisingly, also help avoid an escalation. For different reasons, two of the figures who could have rallied significant support, former president Laurent Gbagbo and former prime minister, Guillaume Soro, are both unable to contest the election and are stuck abroad. While their supporters will certainly participate in demonstrations, their absence is a net positive for stability. Moreover, Ouattara's key challenger will struggle to build a convincing argument that he is the change Côte d'Ivoire needs: not only is Henri Konan Bédié, the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire, another former president, he is 86 years old.

So, while Ouattara's decision to follow a path well-trodden by other African leaders will inevitably lead to some violence and unrest, the country may weather this potential point of maximum instability better than expected. Other leaders considering following that path would be advised not to take too much comfort from that. The relative stability in Côte d'Ivoire reflects the particular circumstances there, which are unlikely to be replicated elsewhere.