

*The Second Republic was born under the sign of violence*

***Ivory Coast, democracy or barbarism***

*It was the "Switzerland of West Africa": an enlightened dictator (Houphuet Felix Boigny), father (and later master) of the nation, exports of cocoa and coffee, very close links with France. But in the Nineties the country, unable to change, is doomed to decay. Until the dramatic events of recent months, the military coup, elections, the victory of the democratic opposition with unseen violence: a chronicle of a nation on the brink of civil war*

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A soldier's corpse has no longer anything human. It is a charred dummy, the arms stretched out forward, perhaps to try to get free of the tire that they put on him to burn him alive. Someone says that he asked for it: he did not want to surrender, they punished him with a sadly notorious technique throughout Africa. Abandoned in the park in front of the presidency, it has not been removed for two days, as if it were to greet the inauguration of the Second Republic's first president, Laurent Gbagbo, who is the Kostunica of Ivory Coast (and perhaps even better, but the situation is much worse than in Belgrade). Democracy eventually won, the good guys triumph, the bad ones (represented by General Guei) go away, but the corpse is still there, indicating that the people's piety is less strong than fear.

The "Plateau," the little Manhattan of Abidjan, charming city on the Ébrié lagoon, shows the marks of battle. They count dead people: about 200 officially recognized, but some human rights groups report many more than these (500 and over). An unseen bloodbath: Ivory Coast was an oasis of peace for forty years (since independence in 1960). Now it is a country that goes back to the polls in an atmosphere of great tension and with the ghost of civil war. Nobody had expected such a scenario, even if the signals of last ten months were more and more disturbing, since the Christmas Eve of 1999.

The only real news from the world, that accompanied last year's Christmas dinner: the coup in Ivory Coast. A bloodless coup, no shot was fired, in the category: "the situation reached the limit, we must act for the good of the country (of course), power will return to civilians as soon as we settled the situation". Or rather "clean house" ("*balayer la maison*") in the official statement of (retired) General Robert Guei, Santa Claus on duty. Thus, Ivory Coast, so long spared from criminal adventurism of African soldiers, for the first time it experienced the seemingly revolutionary emotion of "National Committee for public safety."

But who or what was Ivory Coast to be "saved" from? Officially, from President Henri Konan Bédié (escaped to Paris) and from his attempts of authoritarian turning point to perpetuate a corrupt to the bone regime, even at the cost of using xenophobia and ethnic hatred in a country that is a mosaic of peoples (five main groups for almost eighty different ethnic groups) and that has 30 percent of residents from other nations.

More concretely, the coup was the signal of an extreme inability to change, a decadent stagnation passed off as "stability" for at least ten years.

Ivory Coast was the most advanced, wealthy and peaceful of the former French West African states. In the preferences of Paris it had surpassed Senegal, once favorite colony, as well as new, shiny Abidjan had replaced very ugly and "old-fashioned" Dakar. The secret of "Switzerland of West Africa"? A politician of rare cunning and skill (Houphuet Boigny Félix) and cocoa. Ivory Coast is a republic of cocoa: the first world producer, export records in the seventies, rivers of hard currency that guaranteed unseen well-being in African countries of that area. The president for life Houphuet Boigny, a former minister in France, unknown age, an old legend that looked like a black-skinned Enrico Cuccia, administered Ivorian Vegetable Treasure (also made by coffee, bananas, pineapples, rubber, precious wood and more) with wisdom and cleverness: while he, his family, his clan, became rich beyond measure, the country was provided with infrastructures, roads, schools,

ensuring the agricultural producers (the *planteurs*) a fixed price and the marketing of stocks, through a bank (the Caistab) who profited by exports.

For nearly three decades, the mechanism wonderfully worked, both the robberies of the political class (organized in a state party -PDCI- that handed out favors and sinecures), and the colossal waste of public works made only to flatter quite president Houphuet megalomania and a certain national pride went unnoticed.

There was a such sense of luxury: in many villages of the forest, planteurs got champagne and Italian liqueurs (even though there was no electricity or running water). The relative wealth attracted the emigration from poor neighboring countries, especially from the north (Mali and Burkina Faso). Retail trade was managed by Muslim immigrants, Lebanese managed import-export, Burkinabe farm workers filled cocoa and coffee plantations, Europeans (especially French) ran the most important companies: average Ivorian had as his highest aspiration "replacing the hoe with a pen", ie, working in the office, or at least wearing the uniform. To meet this need (and maintain consensus), myriad of agencies, development organizations, departments with increasingly unlikely bureaucratic names were created. And at the same time a small caste of soldiers, policemen, gendarmes, customs officers, forest guards was formed: they supplemented their meager salaries through a crazy checkpoints system widely scattered throughout the territory, hard to move without paying duty. Living off their more or less legal, more or less parasitic, luxurious or miserable wealth has become a national characteristic: "*se débrouiller n'est pas voler*" (making shift is not stealing), popular wisdom says.

The real skill of Houphuet is, more or less, satisfying everyone. He promotes the Catholic Church (which often returns with devotion), but also Muslims, who have a relative majority (about 40 percent of the population). He brings out the narcissism of his ethnic group (Baoulé) by moving the capital in his native village Yamoussoukro (a small Brasilia created in the middle of nowhere), but he gives a territorial structure of the party, present everywhere. He welcomes poor immigrants and wealthy foreigners. He is so tied to West that he establishes an official relations with South Africa back in 1992, after being the softest of African leaders against apartheid. He constantly offers his mediation in conflicts (Houphuet dreamed of the Nobel Peace Prize), even when he supports the Liberian guerrilla warfare (Charles Taylor, now president, owes a great deal to him). Actually, as required, he could hit hard his adversaries, without the slightest scruple; but he always tried not to create martyrs, he showed the stick to emphasize his magnanimity. Journalists, critics, intellectuals went in and out prisons with disconcerting ease. The rights must always appear courtesy, personal acts of humanity: the legacy of Houphuet is simply this one.

Too many people happily wallow in the corrupt and authoritarian paternalism of the "Old Man" (as Houphuet was called). But "Ivory Coast system" has reached the end in the last eighties: the fat period is over.

Ivorian State was one of the most indebted countries in Africa, the price of cocoa is threatened by corporations that facilitate market access to Malaysia and Indonesia, to lower the price. The producing countries are divided, in 1989 Houphuet tries to force the situation blocking sales: the stores are full of cocoa, Abidjan is enveloped in a sweet and nauseating blanket. The wheeling and dealing continues to the total surrender of the "Old Man", who eventually sells out. The market for cocoa and coffee no more turns around. European Union gave recently a further blow (there is no limit to the worse) by lowering the minimum percentage of cocoa in the manufacture of chocolate (in the face of European consumers).

But the wind of revolution of 1989 also blows in Africa, especially in the French-speaking countries. Students rise up everywhere: Benin, Togo, Mali, Niger. The University of Abidjan is in turmoil: the young are tired of single party and the president for life, they ask for freedom and economic improvement. Take to the streets shouting "Houphuet thief," the myth of the untouchable father of the country is broken, the simulation of a hypocritical society without conflicts unmasked. To exacerbate the situation, building the pharaonic cathedral in Yamoussoukro, true imitation of the Basilica of St. Peter, a slap to people's poverty, contributed. Houphuet has the chutzpah to declare that the church was built exclusively by drawing on his personal wealth (as if it was normal for a

head of state who comes from nowhere be so rich.) After an initial coolness, Vatican accepts the troublesome gift: John Paul II visits Ivory Coast (September 1990) and blesses the church, but the hospital and the school Houphuet had promised to build next to the cathedral (in desert) will never be realized.

1990 is an important year for Ivory Coast: under the pressure of protests, multiparty system is recognized and the first presidential elections with multiple candidates are held. All the protagonists (who will crash ten years later in Ivorian thriller: always between farce and tragedy) are already present on the political scene: Henri Konan Bédié, Alassane Ouattara, Robert Guei and Laurent Gbagbo.

Henry Konan Bédié is the president of the National Assembly, heir apparent of Houphuet Boigny. He belongs, broadly speaking, to the same ethnic group (Akan group, or Ashanti in Ghana), he represents the PDCI-labeled continuity. Behind a sweet face, he hides enormous ambitions. Alassane Ouattara is the technocrat: brilliant economist, former bank manager, he is called by Houphuet to direct the government to apply the usual bitter recipe dictated by the International Monetary Fund, the infamous measures of "structural adjustment" (public spending cuts that primarily affect weaker sections of society). A native of Burkina Faso, Muslim, he quickly becomes the most beloved man by West (primarily Washington), and after his experience in Ivorian government is appointed Managing Director in the IMF, where he works until 1999. Robert Guei was chief of staff. Long-time official, trained in military schools in France. He comes from an obscure west village, near the border with Liberia, he is laconic and mysterious as his people (the Yacouba) are. He is responsible for the brutal repression against student in 1991, but Houphuet saves him from the inquiry committee by guaranteeing him impunity. Laurent Gbagbo is the only opponent. University professor of history, a Catholic, he cuts his teeth in the teachers' union and he know soon the country's prisons. After six years of exile in France, where he established strong ties with the Socialist Party of Mitterrand and Jospin, he goes back to Ivory Coast in the late eighties to establish Ivorian Popular Front (FPI) and challenge, in a quixotic way, first and unique in the history of the country, Houphuet Boigny. Gbagbo is a western Beté, his ethnic group has always been considered the most rebellious of Ivory Coast and rival of Houphuet's Baoulé. He tries to give a solid foundation to his national party, rejecting any ethnic or religious characterization, even if Ivorian electorate is still very sensitive of candidates' origin. Houphuet triumphs in presidential election, Gbagbo gets a modest 19 percent. Needless to say that intimidation and fraud was massive, although not so massive to affect the final verdict: Ivory Coast is not ready for change, the fact that Houphuet did not reach 90 percent of the vote is already considered an affront. Gbagbo damaged the monolithic regime of PDCI and Houphuet, he is a courageous voice raised against the power abuses: when he protests against the violence against students, he is arrested for the fourth time. On the eve of the death of "Old Man" (1993) the places of future candidates are very clear: Bédié, Guei and Ouattara in power, Gbagbo in prison. Houphuet's death does not change anything. Bédié takes his place and continue the old politics as usual. The economy goes from bad to worse, agricultural products prices remain insignificant for farmers and in 1994 the shock of the devaluation of the CFA franc comes, the unique currency of many West African countries, its value is halved. Moreover, Ivory Coast has to face an exodus of refugees from Liberia (about 600 thousand), in addition to those from Sierra Leone. The presence of so many foreigners in times of crisis begins to be an element of tension. Ivorian people, accustomed better than their neighbors, systematically see their living standards become worse, and a future increasingly bleak. The political situation is blocked: the only change is the breakaway of a wing of PDCI, which forms a "new" party, the "*Rassemblement des Républicains*" (RDR), led by Alassane Ouattara. Laurent Gbagbo's (having left the prison after the usual amnesty) opposition boycotted the elections of 1995: Bédié is elected president, in practice Ivory Coast returned to the sole candidate. Corruption is rampant, the government has no real program, Bédié cares only to introduce constitutional reforms to increase presidential powers and extend his mandate.

Houphuet 's heir apparent, young apprentice wizard, thinks of riding the wave of popular discontent

turning it against foreign immigrants and showing a grotesque patriotism. The new election date approaches: to eliminate Alassane Ouattara, considered the strongest of his opponents, Bédié comes up with the concept of "Ivorianity": the presidential candidate must be born in Ivory Coast, by Ivorian parents, Ouattara's parents are from Burkina Faso (though he denies). The RDR militants are not in, their manifestations are particularly violent, the situation is desperate. So when the soldiers break out into the scene with the Christmas coup, most of politicians and public opinion welcomes the change. They all will regret bitterly.

General Guei promises to respect the electoral calendar and assures that he will never run as a candidate. Political parties stand the gaff, the army, never so close to power, gets restless. A shocking poker game ten months long starts, each player believe to be smarter than others. Also Laurent Gbagbo participates in the tiring power negotiations. The issue of "Ivorianity" returns. In fact, it seems to be a priority for everyone, even Alassane Ouattara (who will be the first to be hit): Parliament approves constitutional reform by a large majority, the amendments are submitted to popular referendum and the sovereign people agree without hesitation: presidential candidates must therefore be Ivorian, as well as they must have a spotless morality.

Meanwhile, the army lays down the law: more and more arrogant and unpunished, separated into factions, they have (for some reason, all Italian) criminals nicknames: "*Cosa Nostra*", "*Camorra*", "*Brigades Rouges*". It is their time: they want more money, more power. Just before the referendum, they go out on the streets of Abidjan and, for two days, steal, beat, blackmail, threaten. General Guei hardly brings them back to calm, probably announcing his candidacy, which became official in August. Guei present himself as a "candidate of the people", his resounding right about is a clear signal: the army does not intend to leave. Too many people smell a rat: the United States (really just worried about their favourite's fate, Alassane Ouattara) immediately suspend financial assistance for the elections. UNDP, the coordination UN agency, retires, commanded by Washington. The date of the election is moved from September to October: everybody waits for the Supreme Court verdict of 19 candidates for the Second Republic president.

On October 6, the die is cast: Alassane Ouattara is out, because he is not Ivorian; Henri Konan Bédié is out, for a story of illicit enrichment against the State; as well as PDCI new candidate, Emile Bombet for the same reasons. Just five remain: General Guei, President in office, Laurent Gbagbo, the challenger, and three minor extras. The excluded are outraged, they cry the plot: the President of the Supreme Court Tia Kone was legal advisor of Guei. In any case, as a great legal expert, he does not seem to have gone beyond the Constitution. For most of the commentators, October 22 elections are already decided at the start: General Guei wins. "Le Monde" writes that "there will be a rigged vote, a prelude to the establishment of a military dictatorship".

Yet, in the strange quiet of a scared or resigned country, the only signs of life come precisely from the opposition. The supporters of Popular Front are many, especially young people, who manifest with passion the desire of a profound change and they do not want to miss a historic opportunity. Guei campaign is painful: he is locked in his palace, he does not even make a speech, his supporters are virtually nonexistent.

In the streets of Abidjan, common people seem to have clearer idea than so many European experts, journalists or diplomats: they are all sure of Laurent Gbagbo's victory, provided that the elections are transparent. The only real division is between pessimists (the silent majority), already resigned to the military regime, and optimistic ones (supporters of Popular Front) who do not want to accept a rigged verdict.

Sunday, October 22 the sun is shining on the lagoon, Abidjan is quieter than ever: people go to Mass as every Sunday, then they go to the polling stations to do their "civic duty" (the term is very popular). The turnout was low but regular: on the other hand, the traditional parties (PDCI and RDR) decreed a boycott, and even Islamic imams followed Alassane Ouattara's exploitation, who argued that its exclusion was the exclusion of every Muslim and people of the north. Everything proceed with calm until six p.m., when the counting begins: in an instant, soldiers surround every polling station and every crossroad, with intimidating behavior. People who

promised to celebrate the victory on the evening of Sunday disappeared. Fortunately, there are representatives of Popular Front and other parties, as well as thirty European observers who work so that there are no irregularities.

At eight, by presidential decree, General Guei announces that next day will be festive. The tension begins to rise, the election results do not come. The headquarter of the Electoral Commission looks like a barracks: there are more soldiers (armed to the teeth) than journalists. On Monday, news leak out: Laurent Gbagbo has clearly won, the president of the Electoral Commission has already told to General Guei to accept the result. But the official announcement does not come. Tuesday, October 24 the situation precipitates: journalists are threatened and sent away, a commando arrests all the electoral commission, the Interior Minister declares it dissolved and proclaims Guei the winner. From his headquarter, Laurent Gbagbo does the same, calling citizens to take to the streets. The Plateau, the nerve center of Abidjan empties as to clear the field for the final struggle, which takes place on Wednesday 25 in the morning: the crowd of unarmed demonstrators advancing in waves against the military patrols, while in the corridors of power there are betrayals and showdowns. The city is a unique field of battle, soldiers fired on the crowd, but the soldiers of the presidential guard began to retire. At half the news that everyone expects comes: Guei ran, Gbagbo won.

It would seem be over, but it is not: taking advantage of chaos, Alassane Ouattara asks for the annulment of the elections and calls his supporters for insurrection. A criminal behavior, worthy of a man ready to sacrifice everything for his unbridled lust for power. For two days the slaughter rages, it loses any political connotation: Muslims against Christians, Ivorian against foreign militants, FPI supporters against RDR, soldiers against civilians. An orgy of blood, to inaugurate the new "democracy" under the sign of chaos.

When the wave of madness blows over, they return to speak of "national reconciliation". The new Popular Front government is already established after an agreement with the PDCI. President Gbagbo has already forgiven them all, even General Guei, who, disappeared for a few weeks, suddenly reappeared to recognize the new course and invite soldiers who still support him to return to their barracks (!).

In a surreal atmosphere, Ivory Coast goes back to the polls for parliamentary elections. Once again, on Christmas Eve, the nation is at a crossroads. The horrible violence that for the first time contaminated the country makes the choice more drastic, an alternative that is valid for the entire continent of Africa: democracy or barbarism.

**Cesare Sangalli**