

The Côte d'Ivoire Caution Sign

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Imagine, if you will, an African country that was once seen as a pillar of hope for an otherwise ravaged and impoverished continent. Democratic institutions were in place; and stability was the status quo for over thirty long and often prosperous years. No, I'm not talking about Kenya, but rather the West African country of Côte d'Ivoire.

When Côte d'Ivoire gained independence in 1960 it included 60 tribes and nearly 70 languages spoken by the 17.7 million native Ivorians within its borders, complete with the potential for tensions between the country's Islamic North and Christian South. So, as you can imagine, this former French colony had something of a mountain to climb from its very birth as a nation.

One might wonder how Côte d'Ivoire, with all of its hurdles, was considered a tale of democratic success in post-colonial Africa? The country's first President, one Félix Houphouët-Boigny, is largely to blame. The "Grand Old Man of Africa" ruled his country from an aloof distance and saw to it that the country enjoyed relative stability (as no attempt at a coup or other form of major protest was attempted during the over thirty years he was in power).

Houphouët-Boigny was able to stay in power for so long by dogmatically adhering to the first rule of politics: Get Re-elected. It is worth noting, however, that he was aided in this undertaking by banning all other political parties in Côte d'Ivoire. It was only on his seventh, and last, bid at reelection that he allowed competition on the ballot.

1993, the year that Félix Houphouët-Boigny died in office, proved to be a tuning point for Côte d'Ivoire. Since then we have seen two attempted coups, one successful coup, and every attempt at a democratic election being a spectacular failure. According to the World Bank the current life expectancy in Côte d'Ivoire is 48 years of age, nearly ten years less than it was only a decade ago. Every other indicator for political development, from the Gross Domestic Product per capita to the infant mortality rate, has dropped significantly.

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Côte d'Ivoire clearly illustrates the point that a stable country is not necessarily a stable democracy. Though the country had a constitution, it was little more than cut-and-paste carbon copy of France's, which did nothing to address the unique challenges that faced Côte d'Ivoire. Consequently, Houphouët-Boigny ruled his country more in the fashion of a Monarch, albeit a seemingly benevolent one, than a democratically elected President. The performance of his successors showed the stability of the country undeniably stemmed from the strength of its now deceased ruler, not the strength of its Constitution.

Côte d'Ivoire has been a clear cautionary tale for over 15 years which has, to the world's detriment, been largely ignored. It is reminder that a stable democracy does not need a strongman at the reigns, but rather that strong institutions need to be in place for democracy to thrive. It is a reminder that "stable" democracies that rely on strongmen rarely outlive the driving force behind them. Above all, the bloodshed that followed Houphouët-Boigny's passing should remind us that Constitutional governments, instilled with the lofty principles of freedom and equality, are meant to secure a better life for the governed, not plunge them into violence and misery. One can only hope that Kenya, and indeed the rest of the world community, can learn from the trails and tribulations of Côte d'Ivoire