

Election Watch for the Digital Age



Côte d'Ivoire

Preelection assessment

Parliamentary elections set for October 2020

President Alassane Ouattara has backtracked on an earlier promise to step down after completing two terms. The reversal came after Ouattara's preferred successor, Amadou Gon Coulibaly, died suddenly in July. Opponents have criticized the move as unconstitutional, whereas Ouattara and his Rally of the Republicans party have argued that the adoption of a new constitution in 2016 reset his terms in office. The move has sparked political unrest: at least a dozen people have died and over one hundred were injured during clashes, while dozens have been arrested.

Recent political fractures make for a competitive and contentious election. Presidential candidate (and former president) Henri Konan Bédié, who belongs to the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire, split with Ouattara in 2018. Ouattara first won the presidency in 2010, but then-president Laurent Gbagbo refused to concede, plunging the country into a crisis that left more than 3,000 dead. In 2019, the International Criminal Court acquitted Gbagbo of crimes against humanity allegedly committed during the post-election conflict. He is now on conditional release and while the verdict is appealed by the prosecutor.

Meanwhile, Gbagbo and Guillaume Soro, a former ally of Ouattara and rebel commander during the Ivorian Civil War, have both been barred from running in October. Gbagbo's party, the Ivorian Popular Front, nominated former prime minister Pascal Affi N'Guessan as their candidate. In September, Bédié called for civil disobedience ahead of the vote and for Gbagbo and Soro to return to Côte d'Ivoire. Civil disobedience and protests may result in violence, given security forces' frequent use of force against protesters and the especially tense political environment.

Côte d'Ivoire has a score of 54 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on selection of key election-related indicators. Côte d'Ivoire's score reflects relatively weak rule of law and strained political and electoral conditions. The country is rated **Partly Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 51 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties. To learn more about Freedom House's annual assessment, please visit the Côte d'Ivoire country report in [Freedom in the World](#).

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Hate speech and violence:** The heightened political tensions create a high-risk environment for hate speech and incitement to violence. Given the ongoing intercommunal and ethnic conflicts

in Côte d'Ivoire, as well as the history of electoral violence in 2010-11, the potential for election-related incitement along ethnic lines should be closely watched.

- **Arrests and prosecutions:** The June 2019 criminal code includes a provision criminalizing false news “that results or could result in disturbance to public order” or “causing offense to the president or vice-president.” The vague nature of the provision and personalized exception to free expression make this law ripe for abuse and politicized application, particularly during a tense electoral period.