Chapter 2
Political Overview
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History

Unlike most of West Africa, little is known of the early history of Côte d'Ivoire. It is thought that a Neolithic culture existed there. France made its initial contact with Côte d'Ivoire in 1637, when missionaries landed at Assinie near the Gold Coast (now Ghana) border. Early contacts were limited to a few missionaries because of the inhospitable coastline and settlers' fear of the inhabitants.

In the 18th century, two related ethnic groups invaded the area, the Agnis, who occupied the southeast, and the Baoules, who settled in the central section. In 1843-44, Admiral Bouet-Williaumez signed treaties with the kings of the Grand Bassam and Assinie regions, placing their territories under a French protectorate. French explorers, missionaries, trading companies and soldiers gradually extended the area under French control inland from the lagoon region.

Côte d'Ivoire officially became a French colony in 1893. Captain Binger, who had explored the Gold Coast frontier, was named the first governor. He negotiated boundary treaties with Liberia and the United Kingdom (for the Gold Coast), and later started the campaign against Almany Samory, a Malinke chief who fought against the French until 1898.

From 1904 to 1958, Côte d'Ivoire was a constituent unit of the Federation of French West Africa. It was a colony and an overseas territory under the French Third Republic. Until the period following World War II, governmental affairs in French West Africa were administered from Paris. France's policy in West Africa was reflected mainly in its philosophy of "association," meaning that all Africans in Côte d'Ivoire were officially French "subjects" without rights to representation in Africa or France.

During World War II, the Vichy regime remained in control until 1943, when members of General Charles de Gaulle's provisional government assumed control of all French West Africa. The Brazzaville conference in 1944, the first Constituent Assembly of the Fourth Republic in 1946, and France's gratitude for African loyalty during World War II, led to far-reaching governmental reforms in 1946. French citizenship was granted to all African "subjects," the right to organize politically was recognized, and various forms of forced labor were abolished.

A turning point in relations with France was reached with the 1956 Overseas Reform Act (Loi Cadre), which transferred a number of powers from Paris to elected territorial governments in French West Africa and also removed remaining voting inequalities.

In December 1958, Côte d'Ivoire became an autonomous republic within the French community as a result of a referendum providing community status to all members of the old Federation of French West Africa except Guinea, which had voted against association. Côte d'Ivoire became independent on Aug. 7, 1960 and permitted its community membership to lapse.
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Note on History: In certain entries, open source content from the State Department Background Notes and Country Guides have been used. A full listing of sources is available in the Bibliography.

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Political Conditions

The Legacy of Felix Houphouet-Boigny

Côte d'Ivoire's contemporary political history is closely associated with the career of Felix Houphouet-Boigny, president of the republic and leader of the "Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire" (PDCI). He was one of the founders of the "Rassemblement Démocratique Africain" (RDA), the leading pre-independence inter-territorial political party in the French West African territories (except Mauritania).

Houphouet-Boigny first came to political prominence in 1944 as founder of the Syndicat Agricole Africain, an organization that won improved conditions for African farmers and formed a nucleus for the PDCI. After World War II, he was elected by a narrow margin to the first Constituent Assembly. Representing Côte d'Ivoire in the French National Assembly from 1946 to 1959, he devoted much of his effort to inter-territorial political organization and further amelioration of labor conditions.

After his 13-year service in the French National Assembly, including almost three years as a minister in the French government, he became Côte d'Ivoire's first prime minister in April 1959. The following year he was elected Côte d'Ivoire's first president.

In May 1959, Houphouet-Boigny reinforced his position as a dominant figure in West Africa by leading Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Upper Volta (Burkina) and Dahomey (Benin) into the Council of the Entente, a regional organization promoting economic development. He maintained that the only true road to African solidarity is through step-by-step economic and political cooperation, recognizing the principle of nonintervention in the internal affairs of other African states.

Following from his service in the French National Assembly, Houphouet-Boigny was a close ally of the socialists under Francois Mitterand. He married these socialist roots to his authoritarian rule, creating what has been described as a paternalistic autocracy. He both recognizing the needs of the poor and built great, passionate monuments hallmarked by the building of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace (modeled on the one in Rome) in his hometown of Yamoussoukro.

Until 1990, Houphouet's "Parti Démocratique de la Côte d'Ivoire" (Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire or PDCI) was the sole permitted party in the country. In 1990, Houphouet liberalized the political system and called for multi-party elections. Opposition parties, independent newspapers, and independent trades unions were legalized. Several dozen parties formed following Houphouet's announcement, including the "Front Populaire Ivorienne" (Ivorian Popular Front or FPI), the largest of the opposition parties. The opposition won 10 seats in the National Assembly out of a possible 175, and Houphouet