



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on September 18, 2012

Installed by UN and Obama, Ivory Coast Regime Attacks Press and Opposition

The new regime of Muslim central banker Alassane Ouattara, [installed in the Ivory Coast using United Nations troops backed by the Obama administration](#), suspended all of the country's opposition newspapers and is reportedly leading a vicious crackdown on political opponents. Human rights activists and Western diplomats spoke out against the assaults, leading to a temporary lifting of the media suspensions this week. But trouble is still brewing.



The week of September 10, the government's so-called "National Press Council" decided to temporarily ban all six newspapers critical of the new regime. The alleged crime: publishing photographs of former Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo with his government, which was ousted by [ruthless Islamic militias and the UN](#) last year following a contested election outcome. The nation's highest court declared Gbagbo the winner.

An estimated 3,000 people died, including [over a thousand Christians slaughtered by Ouattara's forces](#) as they marched to Abidjan backed up by international air power. And while the war largely faded after Gbagbo was arrested with UN support, the lawlessness and violence are still ongoing as attacks on police are cited to justify arrests of opponents and the censoring of critical media voices.

"Ivorian people should be allowed to determine for themselves the validity of competing political views, statements and arguments," said a statement issued by the U.S. embassy in Abidjan after the assault on opposition media. The UN "peacekeeping" mission in the Ivory Coast, meanwhile, called the attack on newspapers by the regime it put in power "a very unhealthy sign."

Press freedom advocates and human rights organizations decried the regime's actions, too. "This collective suspension worries us," [said](#) the group Reporters without Borders. "This decision is a true step back for the freedom of the press in Ivory Coast." Other activists also condemned the move.

According to the Ivorian media regulator, publishing the photos and the allegedly "seditious" captions was "contrary to national reconciliation" and was designed to "prolong the post-election crisis." Apparently the pictures might have led some Ivorians to believe that there was a second government. The newspapers were all ordered shut down for at least two weeks.

The strong and swift international outcry over the decision put immense pressure on the regime, as even its supporters who put it in power were speaking out against the abuses. Indeed, the global furor likely led to the announcement on September 17 that the suspensions would be temporarily lifted.

"We decided to suspend the sanction that hit the newspapers, in the context of ongoing mediation with the association of press publishers of Ivory Coast and the dialogue, truth and reconciliation commission," [said](#) National Press Council boss Raphael Lakpe. "We want to give a chance to these mediations."



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The attack on newspapers, however, may only be a symptom of a much larger problem. According to observers and opponents of the new regime, under the guise of “terrorism,” Ouattara’s government is waging a ruthless campaign against all opposition forces — especially supporters of the former president.

Last month, for example, Gbagbo’s party, the Ivorian Popular Front (FPI), had its headquarters raided by armed attackers in broad daylight. Later that same day, the headquarters of an organization that publishes an opposition newspaper supporting Gbagbo was ransacked. Numerous top party officials have been arrested, and most of Gbagbo’s senior military and political supporters are either in jail or living in exile.

“In the course of these operations ... the acts committed are invariably the same,” the FPI said in a statement about the regime’s crackdown. “Beatings, extortion ... torture to extract confessions to back up the thesis of an FPI plot against Ouattara or force the pro-Gbagbos to quit the FPI, rushed judicial procedures on far-fetched accusations.”

FPI President Sylvain Miaka Oureto echoed those remarks, saying the party was ready to have a dialogue with the regime but that the lawless crackdown must end. “We have done nothing wrong,” he said. “We cannot accept being made the scapegoats in a war for position among the regime’s supporters.”

While the Ouattara regime claims to be battling “terrorists” and an alleged “coup d’etat” effort aimed at removing him from power, outside observers are not entirely convinced. And even if it was true — implausible but possible as tensions still run deep after the former president was violently ousted — the vicious tactics and terror aimed at opponents are hardly justified, according to human rights groups.

“These infringements of civil and political rights, including the right to the freedoms of expression and of the press, are not conducive to the consolidation of the rule of law to which the Ivorian authorities are committed,” [said](#) Paris-based International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) President Souhayr Belhassen. “It is incumbent upon Ivorian authorities to ensure all these rights are respected.”

Among other serious concerns, FIDH and its affiliates in the Ivory Coast expressed alarm at the use of government troops to spread “panic among civilians.” Another growing problem highlighted in a statement released by the human rights groups was the mass arrests and jail sentences handed out to Gbagbo supporters.

FPI General Secretary Akoun Lawrence, for example, was arrested on August 26 and charged with “disorderly conduct” for statements he made at a meeting of his political party. The prosecutor was hoping to secure a five-year sentence for the comments, but Lawrence was sentenced to six months in prison — extreme by any standard. There are also serious questions about the judiciary.

“The national judicial proceedings must proceed in a transparent, independent and impartial manner, on the recent events, as well as on the post-election crisis,” [said](#) FIDH Honorary President Sidiki Kaba in a statement. “The Ivorian authorities must avoid contributing to feelings of stigmatization and distrust among the people, which can only strain the process of national reconciliation — a pressing challenge for Ivory Coast.”

The new regime of Muslim central banker Ouattara was brought to power last year by international military forces allied with Muslim militias after a contested election held in November of 2010. The original vote count indicated a narrow victory for Ouattara from the largely Islamic Northern part of the country.



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However, after discovering evidence of widespread voting fraud and ballot stuffing, the nation's Constitutional Council ruled that Gbagbo — a leftist Catholic from the South — had actually won the election. According to the Ivorian Constitution, that ruling should have been final, so Gbagbo refused to step down.

Instead of letting the Ivory Coast sort out its own affairs, the UN, the French government, and the Obama administration demanded that Gbagbo hand over power to Ouattara, a former official with the International Monetary Fund. When he declined, [international forces joined Islamist fighters in attacking the government](#), eventually leading to Gbagbo's arrest.

"Civil war" erupted, leaving thousands dead. UN bombs rained down on the capital as [Islamic forces overran the presidential palace and arrested Gbagbo](#). The former president is currently awaiting trial at the self-styled "International Criminal Court" for alleged crimes against humanity stemming from the conflict — despite the fact that Ouattara and his militias were [accused of wanton slaughter in their bid to seize power](#).

Speaking before the UN General Assembly last year, President Obama was [celebrating an assortment of international wars and calling for more](#). Among the examples of supposedly successful UN-backed military interventions he listed was the violent overthrow Gbagbo to install Ouattara.

"The world refused to look the other way," Obama [declared](#), mistakenly claiming that Gbagbo had lost the election. "The Security Council, led by the United States, Nigeria, and France, came together to support the will of the people."

Despite Obama's celebration, the Ivory Coast — like [virtually every other nation where the U.S. government or UN troops have intervened](#) — is still in turmoil. The new regime installed by international power-brokers has already shown its true colors, and analysts say the worst may be yet to come.

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Photo: Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara escorts U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton as she arrives at the presidential palace in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Jan. 17, 2012: AP

Images



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