

POLITICAL INFLUENCE OF THE LEBANESE DIASPORA IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE BEFORE THE 2020 ELECTIONS

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The recent political developments that took place in West Africa, encompassing several bloody civil wars and the following reconstruction, were marked by the involvement of a number of regional and completely external stakeholders. It has been, furthermore, broadly acknowledged by the recent scope of globalization, international, and transnational studies that diasporas constitute a significant portion of the internal groups of interest in local political processes. This tendency is true to West Africa and, most particularly, Côte d'Ivoire, the country that has experienced the latest large-scale civil conflict among the states in this part of Africa (Akyeampong, 2000: 200). Further signifying the special role of diasporas in this conflict-ridden state is the fact that foreigners constitute 24.2% of the population according to the 2014 census (with the issue of stateless persons common for West Africa now largely addressed) (Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat, 2014). Most of these foreigners are citizens of the neighboring Sahel states earning to gain access to the Ivorian economic opportunities that are simply not present in the countries of their origin.

These have a history of being victimized both during the French colonial rule and the new post-independence national government, as the Togolese and the Dahomeans were terrorized and expelled from Ivory Coast in 1958 and migrants from other neighboring states got consistently disenfranchised and discriminated against in the wake of the 1980's national recession and the following civil war (Cooper, 2014: 353). Nevertheless, low-paid regional workforce has largely contributed to the Ivorian export-based economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s. Their electoral support became crucial in maintaining the regime of the nation's first President, Felix Houphouët-Boigny, in power until his death in 1993 (Marshall-Fratani, 2006: 19).

Expats from France have also played a notable role in the country's post-independence development despite never making up a substantial portion of the country's population and mostly confined to maintaining the economic viability of

the established export-oriented model. This diaspora also became a target for attacks by violent pro-government protestors in 2004 in the course of the Ivorian civil war when France annihilated the country's entire air force (Piccolino, 2012: 2).

Meanwhile, another diaspora has established itself both in the country and the greater region as a powerful economic actor and internal political player with a broader presence than that of the French. The Lebanese have actively settled in the country since at least the 1920s, encouraged by lucrative opportunities in local trade and colonial administration, and are still revered or feared for having great influence on regional politics and economics (Bierwirth, 1999: 80). The given article aims to determine the role played by the Lebanese diaspora in the current political situation in Côte d'Ivoire, especially considering the upcoming 2020 presidential elections and their uncertain outcome.

A set of controversies regarding the named diaspora is to be addressed, which is crucial to determine its actual impact on the Ivorian society. These include the actual size of the diaspora considering the wide array of conflicting statistics as well as its control over local economy and ties to powerful foreign players, namely Shia radical Islamist organizations in Lebanon and their backers in Iran.

Controversies arise starting from various estimates of the actual size of the Lebanese diaspora. These estimates rank from as low as 25,000 to 300,000 people, depending on the political agenda of those providing the data and the peculiarities of data collection in the existing Ivorian realities. The census of 1975, the last one to take place before economic turmoil and civil war erupted in the country, sets the number of Lebanese residing in the country at 5,233 while the next census, taking place in 2014, three years after the end of violent hostilities and the last one to be held to date, marks an increase of their presence to 30,000 out of the overall 22,700,000 Ivorian population (Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat, 2014). Nevertheless, both of these figures are considered to be improbably low, especially the one describing the 1970s, when the state saw the largest influx of the Lebanese immigrants due to both rapid economic growth in this West African state as the cocoa beans, the country's largest export commodity, experienced record-high demand on the global market and the outbreak of civil war back in Lebanon (Losch and Banegas, 2002: 150). Since then it was expected for the number of Lebanese residing in the country to remain unchanged. The main reason for that was the economic recession of the 1980s caused by the downturn in global cocoa prices. Besides, the Ta'if accords of 1989 concluded the Lebanese civil war and enhanced reconstruction under the premiership of Rafik Hariri. Soon after that came a long-term Ivorian political turmoil and a civil war in the following two decades (Peleikis, 2003: 81).

Moreover, in the given period, many Lebanese residing in the country went on to obtain Ivorian or French citizenship, which took them out of statistics. One reason for the statistical underestimation of the diaspora's size is the gradual naturalization of its representatives. Another reason is the fact that the Lebanese were afraid of hostility from the local population due to their financially privileged status and a history of foreign minorities' purges and expulsions from Ivory Coast (Marshall-Fratani, 2006: 19).

Therefore, the diaspora's members tried to downplay its size and avoid representation in Ivorian censuses, hence their officially small number. These tendencies deem the official Ivorian statistics to be dubious.

An alternative official source of information on the size of the Lebanese diaspora in Côte d'Ivoire is the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates. According to their official statement of February 2018, they registered roughly 40,000 compatriots residing in the West African country (National News Agency, 2018). This number still seems to exclude those ethnic Lebanese who represent second- or third-generation immigrants and lack citizenship of the country of their ancestors. Moreover, the Lebanese embassy is also interested in downplaying their citizens' presence in the host country in order to avoid hostile treatment and allegations of taking over the local economy by the diaspora (Bierwirth, 1999: 80). Considering this, the overall number of Lebanese residing in the country should be somewhat higher than the figure presented by the embassy.

On the other hand, Ivorian press outlets considered to be in alliance with the country's ethno-nationalist movements claim the size of the Lebanese diaspora in Ivory Coast to be 100,000 or even 300,000 people (Bigo, 1992: 515-516). While these figures and estimations lack reliable statistical backing, disseminating such information serves the purpose of rallying nationalist sentiment against wealthy minorities and using them as political scapegoats for the social and economic setbacks for which, otherwise, they used to blame the ruling government. Therefore, it is safe to consider these figures to be deliberately inflated. The given span of estimates has led most of the researchers to consider the size of the diaspora to realistically amount to 50,000-60,000 people due to the lack of more accurate figures (Peleikis, 2003: 82).

As it can be seen, such a wide array of estimates is maintained. On the one hand, by the diaspora's desire to keep a low profile to avoid hostile local attention to their wealth and, on the other hand, by the nationalist media seeking to exploit the "economic threat" allegedly posed by the Lebanese in order to divert attention from social and economic issues faced by local communities as well as possible resentment of political authorities.

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Once we have established the approximate size of the Lebanese diaspora in Côte d'Ivoire, it is important to understand its internal divisions, historical origins, and social niches occupied by its various representatives. It is relevant due to the ethnic and religious complexity of the society of origin as well as different waves of migration and its reasons.

Initial migration from Lebanon to West Africa started at the turn of the 20th century with the first settlers arriving in significant numbers from the 1870s (Peleikis, 2003: 79). This wave mostly consisted of Maronites fleeing persecution of the Ottoman government (which, at the end of the 19th century, reversed on its Tanzimat reform policies and denied sufficient protection to the Christian communities of the Middle East) to safe havens under the French or British control (Neil, 1979: 86). As these European colonial powers were reluctant to permit Lebanese settlement in significant numbers in the metropolitan territory, they encouraged the Middle Eastern migrant inflow to the recently colonized West Africa as the newcomers were capable of acting as intermediaries between the scarce European community along with colonial administration on the one hand and local population on the other. Furthermore, new-coming migrants established themselves in the local trade, buying up local produce at higher prices than those offered by the French or British and soon took over this niche, thus making West Africa and, namely, Ivory Coast a lucrative destination for other Lebanese migrants.

The period discussed has seen the emergence of the *durables* – established trading families that maintained this role over the course of the 20th century even as the colonial powers that had harbored them left West Africa, leaving the diaspora with the largely poor and therefore sometimes hostile local population (Bierwirth, 1999: 83). Having preserved their initially somewhat privileged role, they have entered new lucrative regional markets, establishing themselves in fuel, rice, rubber, and diamond trade and getting involved with other notable West African commodities (nevertheless, leaving cocoa production in Ivory Coast largely to French firms and their local contractors). The share of Lebanese representing the descendants of those who had arrived with this initial Maronite wave in the overall diaspora that emerged in Côte d'Ivoire is relatively low but the *durables* form its core and exert maximal influence on local economy and politics.

The next significant influx of the Lebanese into West Africa and specifically Ivory Coast came in the wake of WWI and the silk-worm economic crisis that hit South Lebanon and its most viable export commodity. With South Lebanon being mostly populated by Shia Muslims that were the fastest growing demographic group in the country, they naturally composed the majority of those leaving for Ivory Coast (Bierwirth, 1999: 88). They also joined in the local trade as intermediaries and established some trading families that later also became a part of the *durables*. With their arrival, Lebanese presence in Côte d'Ivoire became noticeable and coincided with the foundation of the first nativist organizations informally aligned with local colonial elites. One of such organizations, the League of Inhabitants of Côte d'Ivoire, was responsible for a number of pogroms mainly against settlers from other French

West African territories; specifically the Senegalese, the Dahomeans, and Togolese, but occasionally targeted Lebanese settlers as well. So early on, under the French colonial rule, a dual role of the Lebanese diaspora in Côte d'Ivoire was established both as a wealthy commercial intermediary bringing local resources to the global markets and as an occasional target of nativist sentiment, which grew stronger as the French colonial system got gradually dismantled.

Yet another, so far the largest, wave of Lebanese labor migration was observed in the 1960s right after Ivory Coast obtained independence, lured by the economic prospects of the rapidly growing cocoa industry and the national economy in general (Losch and Banegas, 2002: 150). The arrival of Lebanese immigrants to the country got especially significant in the 1970s as a civil war erupted in Lebanon, urging many to seek security overseas. In this particular case, the newcomers mostly found employment at the firms and businesses established by the *durables* and took a much more humble economic niche than their predecessors.

Today these are considered to be the largest fraction of the diaspora but possess much fewer instruments to wield their political influence. It was also at that time that the local Lebanese diaspora, mostly Shia, got divided along the lines of the domestic civil war. The main split came in accordance with allegiances displayed towards the two rival Shia Lebanese movements, more moderate Amal and Iran-allied Hezbollah (ISS West Africa Report, 2015: 2). Therefore, up until now, the internal relations inside the diaspora are largely determined by the complex state of affairs in Lebanese politics. This, along with religious differences between Lebanese Christians and Muslims and their various denominations, as well as the social split between the *durables* and later-day labor migrants, constitutes major internal divisions inside the diaspora, just as complex as the local society of the host country.

As it has been mentioned, it is the economic role played by the Lebanese diaspora in the Ivorian society that has contributed both to their power to influence the local state of affairs and their potential victimization by the nationalists considering them to be draining out the country's national wealth. Members of the diaspora indeed control a large share of the local economy. According to the data provided by the Ivorian section of the Lebanese Global Cultural Union, 3,000 Lebanese companies currently control 40% of the internal market and pay 15% of all the taxes while 250 Lebanese manufacturing firms employ 2,000-3,000 Lebanese workers. It was also assessed by scholars that an 18,000-19,000-strong Lebanese-Ivorian legal workforce exists in the country, as could be derived from transparent local business operating "outside of the shade" (Bierwirth, 1999: 84). As most of the Ivorian small businesses, including Lebanese, are avoiding fiscal enforcement, it is considered that the overall number of Ivorian workers and the self-employed is substantially higher.

Much attention was drawn to this economic presence in both local and regional press. Nevertheless, Lebanese business in Côte d'Ivoire is now hard-pressed by the recently emerged Chinese (3,000 people) and Indian (1,500 people) diasporas bypassing competition by more established firms to dominate local small and medium-sized businesses (Jain 2017: 20). Yet, these emerging diasporas, so far, do

not seek to establish a significant political presence in the country thus converting their newly-acquired commercial influence, which still leaves the Lebanese by far more powerful than any other non-European expats.

The most significant criticism often faced by the Lebanese trading families residing and operating in West Africa (with Côte d'Ivoire not being an exception) appears due to the alleged involvement of diaspora members in regional civil conflicts that took place in 1989-2011 in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire, and to lesser extent in other countries of the region. Their interest in the intermediary trade of diamonds, metal, wood, crops, retail goods, and petroleum made them necessary for the various warring factions to establish mechanisms of financing their cause (Melber and Southall, 2006: 312). This was frequently conducted by some of the *durables* through the facilitation of smuggling and illicit loans.

The most controversial example of such cooperation can be found in the relations established between the local Lebanese diaspora and Charles Taylor of Liberia, condemned for war crimes by the Special Court for Sierra Leone and Liberia. Among instances of illicit trade between these two parties, one could name the 1997 rice deal of Taylor's government with Basma family as well as the 1998 petroleum deal with George Haddad, both cases mired in corruption and substantial humanitarian abuses (Melber and Southall, 2006: 312). These families also had a role in financing the atrocious RUF operating in neighboring Sierra Leone (Gberie, 2002:10-11). It was done not only for the sake of greater profits but also because of a need for political protection in the ongoing violent clashes.

Turning to the particularities of the Ivorian case, the local Lebanese diaspora was historically supportive of any ruling authorities in order to obtain protection against local nationalist sentiments, but its most firm ties were established with the regime of Laurent Gbagbo, a former dissident who came to power driven by a largely nationalist agenda of the oppressed population of the southwestern part of the country. His outspoken nationalist stance and especially that of his backers organized in street movements in large Ivorian cities in the wake of the 2000 presidential elections, largely viewed as unfair, alienated the mostly Muslim northern half of the country. Enactment of the respective policies led to a northern-backed

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abortive coup d'état in September 2002, followed by an outbreak of civil war that saw a quick transition of the northern part of the country to the rebels and the arrival of French and other international peacekeepers (Dulin, 2007: 19).

In these conditions, the Lebanese diaspora became indispensable to the ruling regime, helping establish war-time finance. The admission of Roland Dagher and Fouad Omais (representatives of Maronite and Shia *durables*) to the President's economic council took place in 2000, as the internal political crisis was escalating while also lending legitimacy to the new government on behalf of the local Lebanese (Serhan, 2015: 64). Later, the Lebanese Commerce and Industry Chamber in Côte d'Ivoire was established to promote the interests of both domestic Lebanese businesses and those of the metropolitan community (Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie Libanaise de Côte d'Ivoire, 2018). Members of the diaspora assisted Gbagbo in maintaining friendly relations with the state of Lebanon, which proved their strength after the contested October 2010 presidential elections, whereas most of the international observers declined to recognize Gbagbo's victory, leading to the large-scale regional crisis settled by direct French military intervention deposing Gbagbo in April 2011. Along with Angola and Gambia, Lebanon was among the few to grant Gbagbo an initial recognition of his victory (Colombant, 2010). Close relations between Gbagbo and Ivorian Lebanese diaspora have developed despite Israeli pressure on the president due to alleged ties between the Shia part of the diaspora and the radical Hezbollah movement (Israel supplied Gbagbo with drones to be used against the rebels at an early stage of the Ivorian civil war and could wield a significant amount of pressure on Abidjan) (McGovern, 2012: 248-249). Thus, solutions to economic difficulties during the civil war offered by local Lebanese were crucial enough for the Gbagbo regime to maintain such relations.

Due to Gbagbo's imminent loss of the civil war, the current position of the diaspora is jeopardized by having supported the lost cause – a leading source of mistrust between the community and the regime of victorious Alassane Ouattara. Moreover, allegations of ties between the diaspora and Hezbollah have come to light, boosting concern on behalf of Moroccan, Israeli, and Vatican diplomats stationed in Côte d'Ivoire (ISS West Africa Report, 2015: 2). Both of these problems could have long-term negative consequences for the political prospects of the Ivorian Lebanese diaspora, making their positions in the country's markets potentially more vulnerable. Nevertheless, their political weight has the opportunity to become a decisive force in the upcoming 2020 presidential elections as Alassane Ouattara has served his permitted two terms in the president's office and it is absolutely not clear who will inherit his position.

The diaspora's representatives possess the *Inter* newspaper, which could become a crucial tool to sway public opinion, for now closely divided between the four major contesting parties. These include the incumbent Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly, Defense Minister Hamed Bakayoko, former leader of the rebels and the Speaker of the Ivorian Parliament, Guillaume Soro, and Pascal Affi N'Guessan, the political heir to Laurent Gbagbo. The first two are considered to be Ouattara's

favorites, while Ouattara promised support to Soro in becoming president in a power-sharing deal executed prior to his arrival to power in 2011. A similar deal was struck at approximately the same time between Ouattara and Henri Conan Bedie, the political successor to Felix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire's first president. As Bedie himself is old, it is believed by his partisans that Ouattara's support is owed to whoever inherits Bedie's political legacy. Simultaneously, Gbagbo's supporters seek to regain power, which they claim was unconstitutionally taken away from them due to interference by a foreign power.

It is thus obvious that the current ruling Ivorian regime has burdened itself with more political commitments than it can possibly fulfill in the process of securing power transition from Laurent Gbagbo. Having all the prominent political forces compete in upcoming elections without a set mechanism of peaceful political transition poses a threat to the country's stability and a threat of descending into another civil war. Therefore, the financial and media resources available to the Ivorian Lebanese community might become crucial in controlling this potentially dangerous situation, contributing to the emergence of yet-unestablished pre-election alliances.

Having reviewed the evidence regarding the Lebanese diaspora in Côte d'Ivoire, one could state that it maintains a continuous ambivalent role in local politics, simultaneously acting as a lucrative political ally in control of financial resources and the media as well as a scapegoat that attracts criticism of the nationalist and nativist political movements and is in need of protection by the local political allies. It is useful in the facilitation of war-time finance, as was shown during the civil wars that ravaged West Africa in the 1990s and 2000s. The political ties of the Lebanese diaspora might prove helpful in finding allies in the Middle East, although there is a risk of simultaneously finding adversaries in the same region and in the West due to possible contacts with Hezbollah. The diaspora also remains deeply internally divided, just as is the entire Ivorian political spectrum in the run-up to the 2020 presidential elections. These divisions stem from the migrants' background and political ties in Lebanon as well as their social strata. This might curb the diaspora's ability to cohesively act in the upcoming crisis as a single unit to best serve its interests and avoid serious setbacks. ☀

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