# Ivorite to Rathrapage: Challenges of Democratisation in Cote d'Ivoire

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**Abstract**: Attacks from a variety of current and new threats have increased, changing the relative stability that existed in West Africa after a period of brutal and protracted conflicts in the 1990s. Studies have majorly looked into the nature, causes, consequences, challenges of post-conflict peace-building process, sustenance of the post-conflict peace process, weak state and its conflict dilemma, lessons learnt from peace-building process, interventions that led to the cessation of hostilities between the parties to the conflict in the country (Yere, 2007; Owusu-Sekyere, 2009; Langer, 2010) while little attention has been given critiquing and rethinking the concept of identity conflict within the narrative of democratisation in Cote d'Ivoire. Using the 2015 and 2020 elections in Cote d'Ivoire as case studies, this paper explores the electioneering process as one of the critical markers of democracy and addressing issues of identity within the context of democratisation. In this paper, efforts have been made to draw upon what has been the event in the last forty years and attempting to clarify what is temporary and what is permanent, what is important and what is superficial in recent Ivorian electioneering process and democratic system in place. The historical trend around issues of identity conflict in Cote d'Ivoire has shaped and introduced some dynamics and thoughts on democratisation. This paper therefore was designed to critique and rethink the concept of identity conflict within the broader narrative of nationality and democratisation in Cote d'Ivoire. While a case study research design was adopted, Primary and secondary data were obtained as well as Key informant interviews with stakeholders. The concept of rathrapage is fundamental to the contestations around identity conflict. These arguments indicate a need to reconsider familiar tropes of identity and institutions and the way we think about democratic elections and violent conflicts in Cote d'Ivoire.

**Keywords:** Cote d'Ivoire, violent conflicts, democratisation, electoral process, Peace.

## INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Côte d'Ivoire's political identity from *Ivoirité* to *Rattrapage* reflects a persistent struggle over citizenship, inclusion, and the meaning of belonging in the Ivorian state. While *Ivoirité* institutionalized exclusion based on ethnicity and origin, *Rattrapage* has emerged as a compensatory ideology seeking to redress historical marginalization, particularly of groups perceived to have been excluded from power. However, the lack of constitutional or institutional grounding for *Rattrapage* has turned it into a divisive political tool rather than a reconciliatory framework. This has intensified identity-based grievances and widened social fractures, undermining national unity and democratic consolidation.

Despite Côte d'Ivoire's relative peace since the 2011 post-election crisis, unresolved tensions among political elites, ex-combatants, and marginalized groups have continued to threaten the fragile stability of the nation. Recurrent military agitations, protests, and political rivalries between 2017 and 2018 point to underlying discontent with the

implementation of the Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programme and the perceived inequities of *Rattrapage*. The persistence of these divisions suggests that Côte d'Ivoire's democratic progress remains superficial, with deep-seated identity conflicts continuing to shape governance, representation, and access to national resources.

Previous scholarly attention on West African conflicts has often overlooked Côte d'Ivoire's complex transition from *Ivoirité* to *Rattrapage*, leaving critical gaps in understanding how identity politics affect democratization in the post-conflict era. The continuing cycle of exclusionary policies and retaliatory ideologies poses a serious threat to peacebuilding and democratic development. Therefore, this study seeks to interrogate the causes, implications, and impact of violent conflicts on Côte d'Ivoire's democratic process, with particular focus on the role of political actors, the manipulation of identity, and the consequences for sustainable peace and governance in the country.

The paper further addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the underlying causes and dynamics of the shift from Ivoirité to Rattrapage in Côte d'Ivoire's socio-political context, and how have these ideologies influenced identity and citizenship contestations?

2. In what ways have the Rattrapage policy and post-conflict political strategies affected democratic development, governance, and national reconciliation in Côte d'Ivoire?

3. What are the implications of recurring violent conflicts and identity-based exclusions on Côte d'Ivoire's efforts toward sustainable peacebuilding and democratic consolidation?

This study is significant as it interrogates the complex evolution of Côte d'Ivoire's identity politics from *Ivoirité* to *Rattrapage*, providing new insights into how these ideologies shape political inclusion, citizenship, and governance. By analysing *Rattrapage* as an operational ideology without constitutional or institutional standing, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how informal political practices can influence state-building and democratic consolidation. The study thus offers a nuanced lens through which to examine the relationship between post-conflict recovery, elite politics, and national identity formation in Africa's fragile democracies.

Secondly, the study is of critical importance for policymakers and peacebuilding practitioners seeking sustainable solutions to identity-based conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire and the wider West African sub-region. By assessing the causes and implications of violent conflicts and examining the effects of exclusionary ideologies on democratic development, the research provides evidence-based recommendations for inclusive governance, reconciliation, and social cohesion. The findings will also assist national and regional policymakers—such as ECOWAS and the African Union—in designing context-specific frameworks for managing diversity, mitigating conflict, and strengthening democratic institutions.

Finally, the study contributes to academic discourse by filling an existing gap in literature on Côte d'Ivoire's post-conflict democratization. While previous studies have focused on broader West African conflicts, limited scholarly attention has been given to the post-*Ivoirité* political trajectory and its implications for democracy. The study therefore adds value to theoretical debates in international relations and peace studies, especially

through the application of the Democratic Peace Theory, Fukuyama's *End of History* thesis, and Nye's concept of *Soft Power*. Its empirical findings, drawn from primary and secondary sources, will advance scholarly understanding of the interplay between identity, conflict, and democratic governance in post-conflict African societies.

## CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Certain key terms have been identified such as: Ivorite, Rathrapage, violent conflicts, peacebuilding, Democratisation, Cote d'Ivoire.

### Ivoirite

Conceptually, **Ivoirité** refers to a politicised notion of national identity in Côte d'Ivoire that emerged in the 1990s as both a cultural and political construct defining who qualifies as truly Ivorian. Initially articulated as an affirmation of shared national values and unity, the concept evolved into an exclusionary mechanism that differentiated between "indigenous" Ivorians and those perceived as "foreign," particularly northern populations and migrant communities from neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali (Marshall-Fratani, 2006; McGovern, 2011). This redefinition of belonging became central to political competition, especially during the electoral crises of 2000 and 2010-2011, where citizenship and eligibility for political office were contested. As a result, Ivoirité transcended its cultural origins to become a potent instrument of political mobilisation and exclusion, shaping both the trajectory of conflict and the limits of democratisation in the country. It reflects the intersection of identity, nationalism, and power illustrating how narratives of belonging can be weaponised in fragile democratic settings to entrench division and justify exclusionary state practices.

### Rathrapage

Rattrapage (literally meaning "catching up" or "redress") in the Ivorian context refers to a policy and discourse of political and social rebalancing introduced after the 2011 civil war to address perceived historical injustices and marginalisation within Côte d'Ivoire's state institutions. Initially presented by the post-crisis government as an effort to promote equity and inclusion across ethnic and regional lines, *rattrapage* has been widely debated for its ambiguous implementation and political implications. Rather than functioning purely as a reconciliation mechanism, critics argue that it has sometimes reinforced divisions by privileging groups aligned with the ruling coalition while deepening perceptions of exclusion among others (Akindès, 2017; Kouadio, 2021). In essence, *rattrapage* encapsulates the tension between restorative justice and partisan redistribution in post-conflict governance and illustrating how policies aimed at correcting past inequalities can, when politicised, perpetuate the very identity conflicts they seek to resolve. Although it has not ben institutionalised, the policy is operational and fast becoming an emerging concept in Cote d'Ivoire (Agunbiade, 2023). Within the broader discourse of democratisation, the concept thus symbolises the challenge of constructing inclusive citizenship and legitimate state authority in the aftermath of civil war.

## Violent Conflicts

Violent conflict in the context of Côte d'Ivoire refers to the systematic and often organised use of force by state or non-state actors to pursue political, ethnic, or identity-based objectives, resulting in loss of life, displacement, and the breakdown of social cohesion. Unlike isolated acts of violence, violent conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire have historically been rooted in deeper structural tensions particularly those linked to citizenship, resource control, and political exclusion (Bah, 2010; Kouamé, 2016). The Ivorian civil wars of 2002 and 2011 exemplify how unresolved grievances over belonging and access to state power can escalate into large-scale armed confrontations when democratic processes fail to provide equitable representation or redress. Thus, violent conflict embodies both the symptom and the consequence of weak state institutions, contested identities, and the instrumentalization of ethnicity within political competition. In the post-conflict period, understanding violent conflict requires examining not only its immediate triggers but also its enduring legacies in shaping democratic norms, electoral behaviour, and the prospects for sustainable peace.

## Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding in the context of Côte d'Ivoire refers to the multidimensional process of rebuilding political, social, and institutional foundations after violent conflict, with the aim of addressing root causes of instability and fostering sustainable peace. It extends beyond the cessation of hostilities to encompass reconciliation, institutional reform, and the re-establishment of trust between the state and its citizens (Barnett et al., 2007; Paris, 2010). In Côte d'Ivoire, peacebuilding has involved disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR) programmes, transitional justice mechanisms, and efforts toward inclusive governance following the 2011 civil war. However, these processes have often been complicated by persistent identity tensions and uneven democratisation, raising questions about the inclusivity and durability of peace efforts. Thus, peacebuilding in Côte d'Ivoire is not merely a technical or institutional exercise but a deeply political and social endeavour that requires transforming exclusionary structures, reconciling divided identities, and embedding democratic norms within everyday governance.

## Democratisation

This refers to the dynamic and often contested process through which a society transitions from authoritarian or exclusionary governance toward a political system characterised by participation, competition, accountability, and respect for civil liberties. In the Ivorian context, democratisation has involved efforts to institutionalise electoral politics, strengthen the rule of law, and promote inclusive citizenship following years of political instability and civil war. However, Côte d'Ivoire's experience reveals that democratisation is not a linear or purely institutional process—it is shaped by historical divisions, identity politics, and struggles over belonging (Akindès, 2017; Cheeseman, 2018). The persistence of identity-based exclusion, particularly through notions such as *Ivoirité*, demonstrates how formal democratic structures can coexist with underlying social and political inequalities. Thus, in Côte d'Ivoire, democratisation is best understood as both a structural transformation and a normative project aimed at reimagining citizenship, reconciling

fragmented identities, and embedding democratic values that transcend electoral procedures.

## Cote d'Ivoire

Côte d'Ivoire represents both a geographical state and a socio-political construct defined by its complex interplay of identity, politics, and post-conflict transformation. Situated in West Africa, it has historically been a microcosm of the region's broader struggles with nation-building, democratisation, and identity-based contestation. Once lauded for its economic prosperity and relative stability under Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire's social fabric began to unravel in the 1990s as issues of nationality, belonging, and political exclusion emerged at the heart of its political discourse (Akindès, 2004; Marshall-Fratani, 2006). The ensuing crises and civil wars of 2002 and 2011 exposed the fragility of its democratic institutions and the volatility of identity politics. Côte d'Ivoire today symbolises a post-conflict society navigating the challenges of democratisation, reconciliation, and inclusive governance. It thus stands as both a case study and a cautionary example of how the manipulation of identity within democratic transitions can perpetuate cycles of conflict and test the durability of peacebuilding efforts.

## RATHRAPAGE AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATISATION IN COTE D'IVOIRE.

The operational concept of rathrapage in Cote d'Ivoire describes the catching-up or levelling up of the northerners as against a perceived long-standing marginalisation by the south. Rathrapage as a concept seeks to redefine the concept of citizenship, nationality, ethnicity and identity within a broader socio-political space in Cote d'Ivoire. Research conducted in the southern part of Cote d'Ivoire has shown that certain jobs will not be given unless the applicant has a name affiliated to a northern ethic group. There has been an unperceived transition from Ivoirite to rathrapage. Ivorite was an ultranationalist concept introduced into the constitution by former president Henry Konan Bedie but was expunged from the constitution when Alhassan Quattara, a president from the north assumed power.

In this paper, efforts has been made to draw upon what has been the event in the last forty years and attempting to clarify what is temporary and what is permanent, what is important and what is superficial in critiquing and re-thinking the concept of identity conflict and nationality within the broader narrative of democratisation in Cote d'Ivoire. In this study, more attention is given to the concept of electioneering as one of the critical markers of democracy.

The 2010 presidential elections in Cote d'Ivoire (after the 1995 and 2000 elections) were the third straight presidential contest, and they turned violent. Despite considerable delays, the 2010 presidential election was generally praised as being peaceful, according to Cook (2011). Both candidates declared victory in the runoff election, swore themselves in independently as president, picked their cabinet members, and established parallel administrations. Both declared they had national executive authority over state institutions and moved to bolster their hold on power. The disputed election results increased political tension and provoked political violence, which resulted in some homicides in Côte d'Ivoire and the 2011 Ivorian civil war. The political squabble caused tensions between the Gbagbo administration and regional groups like ECOWAS and the U.N. Security Council. Intense

pressure from the international community was put on President Gbagbo and his administration, including financial, political, diplomatic, and military threats, to compel him to recognise the election's results and transfer power to Alassane Ouattara (Cook, 2011). The result of the electoral dispute has altered the socio-political environment in Cote d'Ivoire and its close neighbours.

In 2016, the ACHPR ruled that the Independent Electoral commission (CEI) was biased in favour of the government and ordered amendment to the electoral law. President Quattara to the CEI's reorganisation, increasing the number of civil society members in the CEI from four to six by parliamentary amendment in 2019. Freedom house (2023) asserts that Civil society criticized the reforms, warning that the government would still exert influence due to its continued nominating powers, and changes that could make the body more independent were only partially implemented. Ruling party members were largely left to run the CEI due to staff changes, allegations of irregularities in appointment and other procedures, and opposition boycotts that affected district-level staffing.

In April 2020, the government amended the electoral code by emergency executive ordinance—enabled via COVID-19 emergency measures—without consulting candidates. The updated electoral roll was opaque and regionally unbalanced; the CEI refused to report detailed data or submit to an independent audit. That July, the ACHPR ruled that Côte d'Ivoire must take steps to further reform the CEI, including the nominating process, to reduce potential government influence over nominations. A critical look at the challenges of democratisation in Cote d'Ivoire, these important questions forms a critical mass; do the people have the right to organise in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles? The Ivorian constitution permits multiparty competition. Recent presidential and legislative elections have been contested by a large number of parties and independent candidates. The ruling RHDP, dominated by Ouattara's Rally of the Republicans (RDR), holds a virtual lock on political power but has faced increased competition in recent years. In 2018, the PDCI of former president Bédié broke away from a coalition with the RHDP. Guillaume Soro, meanwhile, formed the GPS after being pressured into resigning as National Assembly speaker in 2019.

In contrast to the 2020 presidential elections—which had been boycotted by several leading opposition parties—competition improved in 2021, with multiple parties participating in that year's parliamentary elections. More parties have been formed since those polls. In June 2021, former president Laurent Gbagbo returned to Côte d'Ivoire after 10 years, following his acquittal by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity; he launched the African People's Party–Côte d'Ivoire, a left-wing pan-African party, that October.

Studies have shown that opposition parties have little chance of gaining power without reforming the electoral framework, which favours the ruling party. The RHDP has an absolute majority in the National Assembly, limiting the opposition's ability to pursue such reforms. Opposition groups' chances to meaningfully contest the 2020 presidential election were dashed that August when the Constitutional Council rejected the candidacy of 40 of the 44 parties and individuals who submitted a nomination, including Soro and Laurent Gbagbo. International observer missions noted there was no appeals process for rejected candidates. The government ignored the ACHPR's ruling to accept Soro's and Gbagbo's candidacies. Opposition figures were arrested and detained by security forces

after the 2020 election took place, while dissidents were arrested for participating in protests during that year's electoral period.

Opposition within the context of political participation and organisation in Cote d'Ivoire fundamentally revolves around contestations on identity. The dynamics of political participation and political engineering has been shaped by the shifting concepts and transition from Ivoirite to rathrapage. While the ultranationalist Ivoirite policy has been expunged from the constitution, the concept of rathrapage has become operationalised within the political and democratic space in Cote d'Ivoire. In a recent research, it was discovered that names not affiliated to an ethnic tribe in the north will most likely not get a job. This further strengthens the concept and ideology of rathrapage which is also considered as levelling-up. Further research has gathered that the national television is considered a huge bias in news reportage by southerners. Individuals faced intimidation, threats, and physical violence when participating in the 2020 presidential election. Those who held protests despite the government's ban faced forceful reprisals, with several demonstrators being killed during the campaigning period. Members of leading civil society institutions, like academics, suggested that participating in public debate about the elections would be seen as protest by their superiors.

Supporters of the opposition faced threats from the police and the military, while militia members engaged in violence and enjoyed impunity. Party-linked militias refrained from such violence during the relatively peaceful and transparent March 2021 parliamentary elections, Freedom house (2023) asserts that, however citizenship has been a source of tension since the 1990s, when Ivorian nationalists adopted former president Bédié's concept of "Ivoirité" to exclude perceived foreigners, including Ouattara, from the political process. A law relaxing some conditions for citizenship went into effect in 2014 but its application remains uneven. Hundreds of thousands of individuals, mostly northerners, lack documentation.

One of the critical markers of democracy is the conduct of elections. The electioneering process in Cote d'Ivoire has shaped the dynamics of sustainable peace. The Ivorian peace process made some significant achievements in the electoral process. The Ouagadougou political agreements spelled out provisions for the 2010 election and a successful and itch-free transition of government. Pertinent among the numerous issues identified in the Ivorian peace process is the electoral process. Mr. Comoe Achile speaks about these issues in an interview at Khorogo, Northern Côte d'Ivoire.

It will be very interesting to create an ad hoc committee that will reflect the Ivorian people which will make up the composition of the electoral body. If the rules and laws are good and they work with that just to turn the law that has been unfair into a fair law. We can have five civil society members and five opposition members and five ruling party members. That will balance things and it will be something that people will agree with and bring a form of confidence. At that time, we can go to the election. But that has not been the case. It is like the ruling party has pushed things forward forgetting an electoral body management that will arrange for them. This is something that the opposition party contests **(Interview with Mr. Comoe at Khorogo, Côte d'Ivoire, 2020)**

In furtherance of the above, BADO and Zapata (2019) posits that in 2010, the politically polarised Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) produced contested results – at least in part due to issues in polling operations – that triggered the crises. The polling

operation in the initial stage of the election for president on October 31 was badly run because "the extremely late and shallow training offered to poll station employees" often occurred less than 48 hours before the commencement of voting". However, despite additional irregularities, including polling station employees failing to check on ink stain on voter's hands, national and international observers, as well as Ivorian Civil Society Organisations, claim that the integrity of the voting process was not harmed.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The normative foundation of the International Relations paradigm known as Democratic Peace Theory (DPT) holds that established liberal democracies are less prone to resort to violent conflict with one another because of shared norms, institutional constraints, and mutual accountability (Doyle, 2024). Recent literature questions the universal scope of this theory, especially in the 21st century, pointing to democratic backsliding, populism and contested legitimacy as conditions that may erode its pacific effect. For example, Bhuiya & Jahan (2023) found that "authoritarianism, democratic back-sliding, the rise of populism … have become critical issues in democracies where neither the values of democracy are protected, nor the liberal ideology is followed in the state mechanisms." In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, the persistence of identity-based conflict even after formal democratisation illustrates that the mere presence of elections and institutions is insufficient for the kind of normative internalisation that democratic peace presumes. This suggests DPT must be nuanced: in fragile or post-conflict states, institutional democracy needs to be matched by inclusive identity recognition and legitimate governance for conflict reduction to take hold.

The interpretation of Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man" thesis offers a second lens: the suggestion that liberal democracy might represent the "final form" of human government. Fukuyama claimed that with the end of the Cold War the ideological contest between systems, liberal versus communist, had largely been resolved in favour of liberal-democracy and market economics (Fukuyama, 1992). Yet recent critiques argue that this "end of history" claim was premature, especially given the resurgence of authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, and renewed ideological contestation. For instance, a quantitative study modelling political-regime transitions through a Bayesian Markov-chain estimated that full democracies may plateau around 46 % of global regimes and that autocracies may even increase for some time. Moreover, commentary in 2023 asks whether the "end of history" has been reversed, pointing to shrinking faith in liberal-democracy worldwide. In Côte d'Ivoire the trajectory of democratisation after the 2011 civil war and the 2015/2020 elections may reflect this: the formal transition doesn't automatically result in the internalisation of liberal democratic culture. Identity conflicts tied to nationality and citizenship (such as the notion of "Ivoirité") continue to shape politics, suggesting that the endpoint ideal of liberal democracy is more aspirational than automatic.

The third dimension of the framework considers Joseph Nye's concept of soft power - the ability of a polity to attract and shape the preferences of others through values, culture and norms rather than coercion. Drawing on this, one can argue that democratic legitimacy in post-conflict states hinges not only on institutional reforms but on the attraction of democratic norms and practices in ways that cut across identity cleavages. Nye's (2023) work, *Soft Power and American Foreign Policy*, assesses how normative influence can

underpin democratic governance in a great-power competition context. In Côte d'Ivoire, democratic election-processes and constitutional reform might generate institutional form, but unless they are bolstered by inclusive norm-building-legitimacy, civic identity, recognition of diverse groups—the soft-power dimension of democracy remains underdeveloped. In other words, it is the normative appeal and attractiveness of democratic governance - fairness, inclusion, responsive citizenship-that helps to stabilise plural societies.

Bringing these three theoretical strands together helps illuminate how democratisation, identity-conflict and peace interact in the Ivorian case. Democratic Peace Theory signals the aspirational link between democracy and reduced violent conflict, yet without inclusive identity recognition that link is weakened. The End of History thesis suggests that liberal democracy could be the endpoint of ideological evolution, but the Ivorian experience shows that path is far from linear or assured. Soft power emphasizes the normative and identity-embedded dimension of democratic legitimacy rather than just the institutional mechanics. Together they suggest that for Côte d'Ivoire the key challenge is not only building democratic institutions but fostering a civic identity and normative foundation that integrates formerly excluded groups, thereby making democratic elections meaningful, credible, and stabilising. This calls for a rethinking of democratisation as both structural and normative, situating identity and recognition at the heart of democratic legitimacy and peace-building.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This study adopted a case study research design that identifies the various political actors in Cote d'Ivoire. Data were derived through Primary and secondary sources. Primary data source includes Key Informant Interviews, In-depth Interviews and Focused Group Discussions with purposively selected respondents. Materials from texts, journals, online sources and the Centre de Recherche et d'action pour la Paix (CERAP) helped to understand the Ivorian peacebuilding.

### Democratisation and Electioneering Process in Côte d'Ivoire

The trajectory of democratisation in Côte d'Ivoire exemplifies the complex and fragile nature of post-conflict democratic transitions in West Africa. Since the end of the 2011 civil war, the country has sought to rebuild its political institutions and reinforce electoral credibility under a formal democratic framework. The process of democratisation in Côte d'Ivoire remains deeply intertwined with identity politics and contested notions of belonging, particularly the legacy of *Ivoirité*. While successive governments have pursued peacebuilding and institutional reform, these have often been overshadowed by persistent distrust among political elites and the instrumentalization of ethnicity for electoral gain (Akindès, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2020). This tension reflects what Giulia (2006) terms "agreement engineered by tension", a phenomenon where peace and democracy coexist precariously under the shadow of unresolved grievances.

The **2015 presidential election**, though hailed as peaceful compared to previous cycles, revealed the limits of reconciliation and inclusivity in Côte d'Ivoire's democratic process. President Alassane Ouattara's landslide victory with over 80% of the vote, amid a

boycott by key opposition figures, signalled not only electoral stability but also democratic stagnation, as meaningful political competition was curtailed (Bleiker & Damiba, 2016; Carter Center, 2016). Despite the absence of large-scale violence, underlying fractures persisted, particularly around issues of justice, citizenship, and elite dominance. The peace achieved was therefore fragile, reflecting a procedural democracy rather than a participatory one. As one interviewee from Khrogo observed, "They keep talking about peace, but the actions of the leaders show otherwise... if we leave things like this, we will arrive at the previous situation we had in the past." (Interview at Khrogo, Cote d'Ivoire, 2020). This sentiment encapsulates the contradiction between the rhetoric of peace and the realities of exclusionary politics in post-conflict Côte d'Ivoire.

The **2020 presidential election** further exposed the fragility of Côte d'Ivoire's democratisation process. The decision by President Ouattara to seek a controversial third term, following the sudden death of his chosen successor, reignited fears of authoritarian regression and deepened political polarisation (Reuters, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2021). Opposition parties contested the legality of his candidacy, leading to widespread protests, the deaths of over 80 people, and the displacement of thousands (Amnesty International, 2021). Although Ouattara secured another electoral victory, the process highlighted how constitutional manipulation and elite-driven politics continue to undermine democratic consolidation. The democratic façade, while institutionally intact, masked structural inequalities and the enduring salience of identity-based exclusion, a continuity of the dynamics that sparked the 2011 crisis.

Conceptually, Côte d'Ivoire's democratisation and electioneering process reveal a pattern of **"stability without transformation"**, where formal democratic institutions coexist with deep-seated societal fractures. The persistence of ethnic polarisation, elite dominance, and uneven access to political participation suggest that elections have functioned more as instruments of regime legitimisation than as mechanisms of genuine accountability (Cheeseman, 2018; Gyimah-Boadi, 2022). The need to rethink identity conflict within the framework of democratisation is crucial to sustaining peace. True democratic consolidation in Côte d'Ivoire will require more than periodic elections, it demands a reconfiguration of political culture, inclusive citizenship, and institutional reforms that transcend the politics of exclusion and revenge, fostering a civic identity grounded in justice and shared belonging.

## Re-thinking the Concept of Identity Conflict in Cote d'Ivoire

The discourse on identity conflict in Côte d'Ivoire remains central to understanding the country's turbulent postcolonial political history. Identity has long served as both a marker of belonging and an instrument of exclusion. The concept of *Ivoirité*, which emerged in the 1990s, institutionalised this tension by linking citizenship and political legitimacy to ethno-regional origins. What began as a cultural assertion of national authenticity under President Henri Konan Bédié soon evolved into a mechanism for political exclusion, particularly targeting northern Ivorians and migrants from neighbouring countries. This politicisation of identity not only fractured national unity but also contributed to the 2002 rebellion and the decade-long civil war. Within the broader process of democratisation, *Ivoirité* represented a form of identity politics that conflated ethnicity, citizenship, and power, thereby shaping

the dynamics of post-conflict peacebuilding and electoral participation (Akindès, 2017; Bah, 2019).

Following the end of the 2011 crisis, Côte d'Ivoire entered a new phase of governance under President Alassane Ouattara, who sought to reconstruct national identity through policies framed as "inclusive recovery." Yet, this phase introduced a new form of identity-based politics encapsulated in the discourse of *rattrapage*—a term loosely translated as "catch-up." Originally designed as a corrective mechanism to address historical exclusion of northern groups, *rattrapage* gradually acquired negative connotations as critics perceived it as a reverse discrimination policy privileging certain ethnic or regional identities over others (International Crisis Group, 2020; Kouamé, 2021). This evolution from *Ivoirité* to *rattrapage* underscores how identity, rather than being resolved, has merely shifted in form—maintaining its potency as a site of political contestation. In this sense, Côte d'Ivoire's political elites have continued to manipulate identity narratives to legitimise authority, sustain political dominance, and consolidate patronage networks.

The shifting dynamics between *Ivoirité* and *rattrapage* reflect what Escobar and Elizam (2021) describe as the "internal process of self-examination" inherent in the politics of liberation. The struggle over who defines Ivorian identity—who names and who is named—remains at the heart of Côte d'Ivoire's ideological and institutional challenges. While *Ivoirité* sought to exclude, *rattrapage* aims to include, yet both are anchored in politicised constructions of belonging that reproduce old hierarchies under new guises. These politics of recognition continue to shape the distribution of state resources, representation, and legitimacy. As one interviewee in the memorised research observed, the challenge lies not in reconciliation rhetoric but in how leadership practices perpetuate symbolic and material inequalities. This underscores Escobar's argument that identity politics, when unexamined, risk becoming self-perpetuating instruments of power rather than vehicles of emancipation.

Re-thinking identity conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, therefore, requires moving beyond the binaries of exclusion and inclusion to interrogate how statecraft, ideology, and memory interact in post-conflict governance. The path forward must involve a civic-based redefinition of identity that transcends ethnic or regional boundaries, fostering a shared sense of belonging grounded in citizenship rather than origin. As recent studies have shown, sustainable peace in Côte d'Ivoire depends not only on institutional reforms but also on transforming the social imaginaries that underpin identity-based politics (Gyimah-Boadi, 2022; Cheeseman, 2018). This paradigm shift demands critical reflection from both elites and citizens—a recognition, as Escobar (2021) argues, that liberation is as much an internal process of re-narrating the self as it is a political project. Only through this introspective and inclusive rethinking can Côte d'Ivoire overcome the cyclical burdens of identity conflict and achieve a more cohesive democratic future.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Agunbiade (2023) posits that the Peace agreement was meant to address issues of Identity (Ivorite) which was the bane of the conflict at the onset, as well as disarmament, demobilization, and re-integration of ex-combatants Forces Nouvelle de Cote d'Ivoire (FAFN) among other issues but the obvious end to Ivorite has produced another similar identity challenge which is tearing the once war-weary nation apart even though discretely and covertly. The focus and origin of the conflict was an identity clause introduced into the

constitution which made southerners superior to the northerners, but there are other issues such as land issues, and marginalization of the military which were left unaddressed which this study has been able to identify. Agunbiade & Abiodun (2025) asserts that if political processes are not remodelled from the short-term power dominated interests towards longer-term co-operative and people centered interests, conflicts in Africa will continue. These borders primarily on historical trend around issues of identity conflict in Cote d'Ivoire that has adversely shaped and introduced some dynamics and thoughts on democratisation.

The various ideologies of Ivorite policy and that of Rattrapage that were found to be inimical to the peace process in Cote d'Ivoire should be avoided in order to enable positive peace process attainment. There is a need to provide an equal playing field for all Ivoirians free of tribal and ethnic sentiments to prevent a resurgence into violent strife. Likewise, the dominance of the ruling political in constituting the electoral body does not promote confidence and trust which truncated the 2010 elections which led to the civil war. As prescribed by the 2007 Ouagadougou Political agreement, the electoral body should be jointly constituted for transparency. The study recommends that members of the various political parties as well as members of civil society should be allowed to constitute the electoral body. This will give room for transparency and build the confidence of Ivoirians.

Considering that opposition within the context of political participation and organisation in Cote d'Ivoire fundamentally revolves around contestations on identity, it is therefore recommended that any strategy aimed at strengthening political participation and opposition organisation in Côte d'Ivoire should prioritise initiatives that address the deep-rooted identity-based divisions shaping the country's political landscape. Efforts should focus on promoting inclusive political dialogue, fostering civic education on national identity and citizenship, and supporting institutional reforms that ensure equitable representation across ethnic and regional lines. Civil society organisations, regional bodies, and international partners should collaborate to create platforms that encourage issue-based rather than identity-based political engagement. Such interventions would not only enhance democratic participation but also contribute to long-term social cohesion and political stability in Côte d'Ivoire.

**NOTE:** There are no competing interest in this research paper.

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