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The Politics of Côte d'Ivoire

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Introduction

Côte d'Ivoire, situated on the vibrant southern coast of West Africa, stands as a testament to the complexities and possibilities of African politics. Over the decades, the nation has experienced sweeping changes in its political architecture, from pre-colonial kingdoms through the colonial era and onto its emergence as an independent republic. The dramatic shifts following independence in 1960 have continually reshaped the nation's institutions, party system, and patterns of governance, making Côte d'Ivoire a focal point for those seeking insight into the intricate mechanisms of modern African states.

The country's political narrative is characterized by both remarkable achievements and profound challenges. Having enjoyed a long period of stability under its first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Côte d'Ivoire later witnessed turbulence that included military coups, civil war, and contested elections. These upheavals have left indelible marks on the nation's collective memory and on the practices of its political actors, shaping the evolution of Ivorian democracy and the formulation of its political institutions.

Today, Côte d'Ivoire operates as a presidential representative democratic republic, underpinned by a multi-party political landscape and guided by a constitution that defines the separation of powers. The executive, legislative, and judicial branches each play distinct, constitutionally established roles. However, lingering issues such as ethnic and regional divisions, land disputes, and corruption continue to pose significant threats to both governance and national unity. The question of identity remains at the heart of political competition, particularly as manifest in the concept of "Ivoirité" and the lasting repercussions of civil conflict.

This book, "The Politics of Côte d'Ivoire: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Côte d'Ivoire," is dedicated to unpacking the layers of the Ivorian political system. It provides an in-depth examination of historical developments, institutional frameworks, electoral rules, and the dynamics among key political parties and actors. It also investigates the social, ethnic, and regional factors that inform the country's political life, drawing links between contemporary issues and historical legacies.

By examining the critical roles played by civil society, the media, and the judiciary alongside the interactions among local, regional, and international forces, the chapters that follow aim to offer a holistic understanding of Côte d'Ivoire's contemporary political landscape. The book does not shy away from the persistent challenges that face the nation, but it also seeks to highlight the resilience, creativity, and hope that define the Ivorian political experience.

Whether you are a student, researcher, policymaker, or simply a curious reader, this guide aspires to illuminate the diversity, dynamism, and complexity of the Ivorian political scene. Understanding Côte d'Ivoire's politics is not simply a matter of tracing the rise and fall of presidents or cataloguing electoral results; it requires exploring how history, geography, society, and global trends intertwine to shape the ever-changing path of this West African nation.

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CHAPTER ONE: Historical Overview: From Pre-Colonial Kingdoms to Independence

To understand the political landscape of modern Côte d'Ivoire, one must first journey back through time, long before the arrival of European ships and the imposition of colonial rule. The land that is now Côte d'Ivoire was a tapestry of diverse peoples and polities, each with its own intricate social structures, economic activities, and systems of governance. Archaeological evidence suggests human presence in the region dating back to the Palaeolithic era, with later inhabitants either being displaced or absorbed by the ancestors of contemporary Ivorians.

In the northern savanna regions, towns grew around communities of Dyula traders. These merchants, some of whom had fled religious conversion under the Mali Empire, played a significant role in the trans-Saharan trade networks, exchanging goods like gold and kola nuts as early as the thirteenth century. This trade facilitated the spread of Islam, transforming centers like Kong into hubs of both commerce and Islamic learning. The Kong Empire, established in the early 18th century by Sekou Ouattara and his sons, endured for centuries until its destruction by Samory Touré in 1897 during his quest to forge a new Muslim empire. Another notable savanna kingdom was Bouna, founded in the late 17th century by immigrants from the Dagomba region of present-day Ghana, which also became a center of Islamic education.

Further south, in the forest belt, the political landscape was shaped by the migration of Akan peoples, driven by the rise of the Asante Empire in the late 17th century. The Abron, an Akan group, established the Bono kingdom of Gyaman, with its capital at Bondoukou becoming a major center of trade and Islamic scholarship. This kingdom developed a centralized political and administrative system, although it was later conquered by the Asante. Similarly, the Anyi kingdoms of Indénié and Sanwi emerged under comparable circumstances. A particularly interesting case is the Baoulé kingdom, founded in the mid-18th century by Queen Abla Poku and her followers who had fled a succession struggle within the Asante Empire. The Baoulé kingdom at Sakasso became known for its unique blend of Akan and local traditions and, despite eventually fragmenting into smaller chiefdoms, the Baoulé people fiercely resisted French encroachment.

Prior to the 19th century, European interaction with the region was largely confined to the coast. Portuguese and French traders sought slaves and ivory, with the Portuguese arriving as early as the fifteenth century. The French made initial contact in the 17th century, establishing a small settlement and later a fort at Assinie. However, widespread European penetration into the interior did not occur until the 19th century.

French explorers, missionaries, and traders gradually extended their influence inland from the coastal lagoons. In the 1830s, French admiral Louis-Édouard Bouët-Willaumez signed treaties with coastal chiefs, paving the way for the establishment of French forts and trading posts.

The late 19th century saw an acceleration of European powers vying for control of African territories, a period often referred to as the "Scramble for Africa." Amidst this intense competition, France formally claimed Côte d'Ivoire as a colony in 1893. Captain Louis-Gustave Binger, who had explored the Gold Coast frontier, was appointed the first governor. Treaties with Liberia and Britain helped define the colony's western and eastern borders, though the northern boundary remained fluid for a time. The imposition of French rule, however, was not met with open arms by the indigenous populations.

The French colonial administration implemented policies aimed at extracting resources and asserting control, including forced labor and head taxes. This sparked fierce resistance from various groups, notably the Baule, Anyi, and Abe. The resistance was further fueled when France conscripted thousands of Ivoirians to fight in World War I. Despite facing superior French weaponry, these acts of defiance demonstrated a strong desire for autonomy among the Ivorian peoples. Full control of the territory was not consolidated by the French until 1918.

From 1904 to 1958, Côte d'Ivoire was integrated into the Federation of French West Africa, governed from Paris. French colonial policy, initially based on "association," officially considered Africans as French subjects but without equal political rights. This began to change after World War II, as reforms were introduced granting French citizenship to African subjects and recognizing their right to political organization. While some Ivorian leaders initially favored assimilation due to perceived economic advantages, a growing sentiment for independence emerged by the mid-1950s.

A pivotal figure in the movement towards independence was Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Born in Yamoussoukro in 1905, he came from a wealthy Baule family and inherited a cocoa plantation and a tribal chief status at a young age. After studying medicine and working as a medical assistant, Houphouët-Boigny became involved in advocating for African farmers' interests, co-founding the African Agricultural Syndicate in 1944. His political career gained momentum with his election to the French National Assembly in 1945. The following year, he founded the Democratic Party of Côte d'Ivoire (PDCI), which became affiliated with the inter-territorial African Democratic Rally (RDA).

Houphouët-Boigny's political influence grew, and he served in several ministerial positions within the French government between 1956 and 1959, advocating for the abolition of forced labor, fair prices for African farmers, and greater autonomy for the colonies. In 1958, Côte d'Ivoire became an autonomous republic within the French Community following a referendum, a step towards greater self-rule. Houphouët-

Boigny successfully campaigned for this increased autonomy while maintaining close ties with France. He became Prime Minister of Côte d'Ivoire in 1959, further solidifying his leadership position.

Finally, on August 7, 1960, Côte d'Ivoire achieved full independence from France. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, having spearheaded the independence movement and served in key roles within both the colonial and transitional governments, was elected as the country's first president. His assumption of the presidency marked the beginning of a new era for Côte d'Ivoire, one that would be defined by his long and influential rule. The journey from a collection of diverse pre-colonial kingdoms and societies through the period of French colonization had culminated in the birth of a new, independent nation, with its political future resting on the shoulders of its first leader.

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