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President for Life, and Then Some

By HOWARD W. FRENCH

In the months before his death in 1993 at the age of 88 (or, as widely rumored, as old as 100) and after 33 years in power, the president of Ivory Coast, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, fondly repeated a formula he had once announced publicly to the nation.

"A king of the Baoulé has no right to know the identity of his successor," he is reported to have said.

Mr. Houphouët-Boigny may have belonged to royal lineage, but critics said he seemed to be forgetting that the Baoulé were only one of Ivory Coast's 50 or so ethnic groups, and that he was the president of a would-be modern country. Few were fooled about the old leader's real intention to rule as president for life, come what may in his aftermath. And the aftermath in Ivory Coast has indeed been grim.

West Africa's most prosperous country has been ripped apart by a civil war whose roots trace directly back to the contested circumstances of his succession, and the old regime has been replaced by a predatory authoritarianism under new leaders determined to hang on at all costs.

If discouraging African plotlines like these were limited to Ivory Coast, few would dwell on these circumstances nearly two decades later.

Unfortunately, the muddled and forestalled succession story of Ivory Coast has become a prevalent narrative across much of the continent, symptomatic of what political analysts increasingly regard as a kind of African disease.

With increasing frequency, leaders are scheming to modify the rules governing the transfer of power with the aim of hanging on as long as possible, and in an increasingly common twist, Africa's presidents are positioning their children to assume the reins of power after their demise.

The latest African country to be visited by this leadership crisis is Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation by a big margin, and one of the world's 10 largest oil exporters. Nigeria walked a tightrope for the last six months as its elected president, Umaru Yar'Adua, who finally died last week, disappeared from public view, while being treated for a number of serious ailments. During most of that time, he was hospitalized in Saudi Arabia and silent, save for a few words weakly uttered into the microphones of the BBC, in a bid to quell rumors that he had died or was comatose.

Ostensibly aimed at reassuring the public, Mr. Yar'Adua's whispered mini-interview did nothing of the sort. By that point, Nigerians and foreign diplomats alike were worried about the maneuverings not of the president but of his handlers, who seemed mostly determined to prevent the constitutional transfer of power to the vice president, Goodluck Jonathan, who persevered for several months as an acting head of state, but one with sharply limited powers, and a cabinet, bureaucracy and possibly even security forces reluctant to accept his leadership.

These were vulnerable times for Nigeria. What was most dangerous about this stretch was not the mere fact of a power vacuum, though. As with Ivory Coast, forestalled and unresolved successions often invite ethnic polarization and heightened competition along other identity lines, from geographic to religious to linguistic.

The Nigerian presidency has recently rotated between northerners (who are predominantly Muslim) and southerners (who are often Christian). In this instance, in Nigeria, that meant northern elites grumbling about the loss of their "turn" at the presidency with the disappearance before the end of his term of Mr. Yar'Adua, a northerner, and his replacement by Mr. Jonathan, a southerner.

Nigerians have, of course, been down this road before. Their civil conflict, the Biafran War, fought between 1967 and 1970, is one of the worst episodes of violent identity politics in post-independence Africa.

"The pathology here is the failure of elites to transfer their loyalty from their precolonial identities to the postcolonial state," said Makau W. Mutua, the dean of the University at Buffalo Law School. "Instead of a tool for governance, the office of the president becomes a tool for domination, in which the resources of the nation are husbanded for the benefit of a family, a clan or an ethnic group."

Although war is the most spectacularly costly consequence of fudged presidential transitions in Africa, it is far from alone in stunting the continent's development. More common than civil war, and yet quietly devastating, due to its atrophy of the state, sycophancy and corruption, is the effective presidency-for-life.

Although few have openly proclaimed it since the days of Idi Amin in Uganda, it has become the virtual quest of so many African heads of state that it ranks today as a near standard.

Between 2005 and 2009, the presidents of three African countries, Togo, Guinea and Gabon, died in office, after a cumulative 104 years in power; two of these leaders, Omar Bongo of Gabon (42 years) and Gnassingbé Eyadéma of Togo (38 years), were succeeded by their sons. Political analysts say that similar scenarios could unfold in countries as diverse as Egypt, Libya, Equatorial Guinea and Burkina Faso, where long-ruling African leaders appear to be grooming their children to follow them.

"What we're seeing is what happens in places where the only way to get rich or to stay rich is through political power," said Patrick Keenan, a scholar at the University of Illinois College of Law. "This is not about resource wealth alone, but wealth in general. The people in these regimes hang on for dear life."

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