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THE INTERNET AND CORRUPTION
Transparency and accountability online



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CÔTE D'IVOIRE

THE STORY OF GUILLAUME KIGBAFORI SORO: HOW OPEN AND TRANSPARENT CAN CÔTE D'IVOIRE GO WITH HIM?



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Côte d'Ivoire, commonly known to English speakers as the Ivory Coast, is arguably the most thriving French-speaking country in the western part of the African continent. At least 26% of its 21 million inhabitants are non-Ivorians, with a huge percentage from neighbouring countries of West Africa. Also notable is the large population of youth. In 1998, around 43% of the total population was under the age of 15 in comparison to only 4% considered aged. In 2012, it is estimated that the youth population is still higher than in most countries on the continent. The country's urban population is estimated at 49% and the literacy rate at 55%, one of the highest in the region.

The landing of broadband cables SAT3/SAFE, WACS and ACE and the effective inland cabling done by national carriers have placed the citizens at a comfortable internet access rate, more comfortable than other countries in West Africa. GLO-1 is also adding to access speeds. In December 2011, the government granted 3G licences to three mobile phone operators in the country. The effective introduction of 3G access by mobile telecommunications companies to the population has increased citizen access to the internet and its benefits at minimal costs.

The story of Côte d'Ivoire is closely linked to its presidents and leaders in general. Felix Houphouët-Boigny was its "Father of Independence" and also its longest-standing leader (in office for 33 years). Though his leadership may have been considered "authoritarian" by some and "paternal" by others, there is evidence that the country enjoyed steady social, economic and peaceful growth in those years. Immediately after his death, Aimé Henri Konan Bédié, who was then the president of the National Assembly, took over, as was constitutionally determined. In 1999, there was the first military takeover of power. In a hectic electoral exercise, Laurent Gbagbo came to power in 2000. At the time of this report, Gbagbo was being tried for war crimes by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. A new president, Allasane

Dramane Ouattara, is the current leader. His election came after a strenuous electoral exercise in which one person played a key role: Guillaume Kigbafori Soro.

Guillaume Soro I: Student union leader

FESCI

Little is known about Guillaume until 1995 when fellow students elected him to be the leader of the Fédération Estudiantine et Scolaire de Côte d'Ivoire (FESCI), the Federation of University and High School Students. The political weight of FESCI may only be measured by the demographic strength of the youth and school-going population. Such a choice, therefore, was of huge political responsibility. Between 1995 and 1998, Guillaume led many student and youth demonstrations. Most of these were geared to student demands for better social amenities and education infrastructure.

Zouglou

Zouglou is the authentic music of Côte d'Ivoire. It is born of a philosophy – the student movement philosophy of the late 1990s. With more student and youth claims on the government, and an increasing use of force by government to quell such movements, the students turned to music. Zouglou was born. As a musical expression, it has become an important arm of social activism. As a student leader, Guillaume took on "Boghota" as a nickname, certainly in admiration of the fighters in Colombia. And he was regularly arrested due to clashes between students and the government.

Guillaume Soro II: Freedom fighter

Forces Nouvelles

Little was seen of "Boghota" until 2002. He came back under rather strange circumstances – as the leader of an armed rebel group, the Forces Nouvelles (New Forces). Though the details have not been clear, what is evident is that the New Forces, a coalition of three rebel movements, occupied at least 50% of the country's land mass and brought the Laurent Gbagbo government to a power-sharing deal.



A screen shot of Guillaume Kigbafori Soro's personal website.

National identity

If there was an issue that stood out as the reason for the rebellion, it was the national identity enigma. Because of the high percentage of immigrants in the national population, the attribution of national identification cards to citizens was an uphill task for the government. At a certain point, individuals whose family names showed possible background links to neighbouring countries could not justify their citizenship. This denial of citizenship and corresponding social benefits became one of the issues that the Guillaume Soro-led rebellion took on as a cause.

Guillaume Soro III: The minister

In the shared government that resulted from the rebellion, Guillaume became an important actor in the policy landscape of the country. He was named the minister of communications, with the Radiodiffusion et Télévision Ivoirienne, the national broadcasting service, under his direct authority. At this time he took on the challenge of press freedom in the country, establishing two very important laws: 2004-643 and 2004-644 of December 2004. These were to be the new Press Code. A key article was Article 68 which states, among other things, that “prison terms are formally excluded for all press offences.” In a country that had seen several prison terms for media professionals, this was indeed a great step in the direction of media freedom.

For the five years between 2003 and 2007, Guillaume held several ministerial posts in the “Government of Reconciliation” and rose up to be a minister of State.

Guillaume Soro IV: The prime minister

Following a political agreement, Guillaume was given the post of prime minister on 26 March 2007.

GOUV.CI

The official government website was established while Guillaume was the prime minister and head of the government. This might well be considered the most important step towards transparency using the internet in the life of the nation. The portal, among other things, provides:

- A one-stop shop for all of the government’s official information
- Minutes of the cabinet meetings
- News that citizens ought to have
- Up-to-date information on key government activities
- Links to all other government ministries and parastatals
- A government contact form
- An interactive work platform for officials

- **GOUVLETTER** – a personalised newsletter of government decisions and activities that citizens may receive directly.

During the period between the elections of 2010, the post-election crises and the effective take-off of the Allasane Dramane Ouattara leadership, GOUV. CI played a strategic role in giving unbiased information to citizens and maintaining much-needed information services to the country.

Guillaume Soro V: Prime minister, version II

It is not clear why the new president decided to nominate Guillaume as prime minister again in 2011. One of the reasons may be the strategic role he played as the incumbent prime minister and quasi-organiser of the disputed presidential elections that saw Ouattara come to power. On 11 April, not only was he named prime minister, he was also asked, as the head of the government, to propose a cabinet to the new president. With the new government, Guillaume also took on the mantle of minister of defence. At this time, he introduced a governance tool that might well be considered as the most powerful transparency tool ever: the Government Ethics Charter.

The Ethics Charter

Among its ten articles, the charter dedicates two to good governance and public dialogue:

Good governance: Each member of Government shall seek to cultivate excellence and promote the practices of good governance in his/her ministerial department and within the structures placed under his/her authority. The strict respect of the laws of the Republic is a national interest necessity on which depend both the moral trajectory of our country and its sustainable and integral development. In keeping with the right to information of the sovereign people, each member of Government also pledges to account for the actions of his/her department whose results shall be his/her responsibility.

Public dialogue and availability: Each member of Government shall dedicate himself/herself, as a priority, to the exercise of the missions that constitute his/her position and shall be wholly available to this effect. S/he shall, by the way, maintain a public dialogue... with social bodies and other actors in the sector.¹

Guillaume Soro VI: The eGuillaume Soro

Social media

Without doubt, Guillaume has made significant use of the internet during his leadership. He has embraced social media for reasons that he himself provides in a blog post:

Since I joined social networks, I have noticed their influence because I have a real and handy interaction that allows me to get feedback. I mean, all types of feedback without exclusion or partiality. Feedback from the rich, from the poor, from my adversaries, and criticism from my friends. Feedback which ordinarily I could not have received through traditional means.

Web tools

On Facebook Guillaume's personal account is already full and has subscribers in the thousands. He also has an official page. This page has fans in the thousands and generates a huge discussion among its subscribers. The official page is regularly updated with photos of his official activities.

Guillaume made his Twitter debut as @Boghota – most certainly a reference to his earlier student days. He arrived in the very heat of the post-election crises in the country, couched by Alain Logbognon and Sidiki Konaté, close friends who now are also ministers. Over the months, @Boghota has modified and improved his Twitter profile. He is currently using the @SoroKGuillaume handle. Though only a few months old, this account has followers in the thousands already.

On LinkedIn, Guillaume has a well-constructed profile. Though only just set up, his connections are already in the hundreds. He has sought out key professionals of the policy and technology industry of the country and has connected to them.

He has maintained the #SoroKGuillaume handle on Pinterest as well. Though only a new service, he has put up photos and pins about his activities. His pins include family and official ones.

Web platform

Perhaps the most advanced step that Guillaume has taken towards openness and transparency as a leader in the country is the web platform that he has established: www.guillaumesoro.com. This is a one-stop shop for most of his personal activities, missions, and interactive channels and also serves as an information platform. The website includes speeches, his curriculum vitae, publications, policy, political, cultural and sports news, web TV,

¹ nennaorg.blogspot.com/2011/08/cote-divoire-government-ethics-charter.html



On his Twitter page, Guillaume Soro announces that the National Assembly will be receiving the finance minister, who will be reporting on the newly acquired HIPC debt relief. He requests that citizens send in their questions to the Minister via Facebook and Twitter. One tweet says: “As I promised you, our National Assembly will be listening to you, including with the use of ICT. Bring the questions on!”

photos, links to social networks, an aggregation of his tweets, his blog, and his newsletters.

While there are many other things that Guillaume can do to increase transparency, he has undoubtedly established a solid internet platform on which citizens can engage him as a decision maker, a leader, and an influential political actor in Côte d’Ivoire.

Guillaume Soro VII: President of the National Assembly

In Côte d’Ivoire the government is a mix of parliamentary and presidential systems. Since 1990, the president appoints a prime minister who is also head of the government. The senate, which, in this case, is the National Assembly, is headed by a president. The constitution recognises the president of the National Assembly as the second political power in the country. If, for any reason, the president is unable to carry out his duties, power shall be transferred, not to the prime minister, but to the president of the National Assembly. As the senator of the Ferkéssedougou constituency, it was to the post of the president of the National Assembly that Guillaume was elected by his peers, following the renewal of the National Assembly in Côte d’Ivoire. His investiture was on 12 March 2012.

For the first time in many years, national television had a live transmission of the deliberations of the National Assembly. This allowed a lot of concerned citizens to live-tweet the events as they unfolded. With live transmission and live tweets, there is increasing interest from the Ivorian diaspora.

In the few months that Guillaume has been the head of the legislature and the second political figure in the country, he has heightened his use of the internet in governance. He does regular “Twitter consultations” with the citizenry and also encourages feedback from his constituency and the nation. Apart from the official website of the National Assembly, he has also instituted a Twitter handle for the legislature’s presidency for communication purposes: @SC_PANCI.

In pursuit of the vision of using available technology to liaise with citizens, Guillaume appears to be personally keeping an eye on internet actors and their respective communities. During the first Google Technology Days² in the country, he extended an invitation to the community, while looking to understand what new technology was available for him personally, for the legislature and for the public.³

2 news.abidjan.net/v/9487.html

3 www.cyriacbogou.com/google-days-cote-divoire-jour-1-telechangement-terme

On 8 May 2012, Guillaume turned 40. After consulting online on the possibility of starting a Facebook community page of all those born on the same day as he was, he settled for a face-to-face dinner with outstanding internet community members – professionals, entrepreneurs and bloggers. Discussions, certainly, did go on about the use of internet and its benefits for governance purposes.

One of the key actions in openness and transparency that the National Assembly will undertake in 2012 will be the ratification of the ongoing National eGovernance Plan. Among other proposals, the plan suggests the establishment of a National eGovernance Agency.

Guillaume Soro next: 2012-2015

There are several reasons why Guillaume may be the best possible political actor in Côte d'Ivoire to mainstream the internet as a governance tool for openness and transparency. The first is his youth. At only 40, and from the Zouglou generation, he does not inherit the inhibition of older politicians. He has a wealth of experience in governance that can rival people more than 30 years his senior. Over time he has established a large network with the youth and internet community of the country, and has come to assert his authority over the population both online and offline.

Already young and at number two, the only questions that need to be asked are:

- How long will it take for Guillaume to get to number one?
- What next course will he champion when it comes to the internet?

- How open and transparent can he get the national government to be?
- How long will it take to influence the National Assembly?
- How long can the country keep up the pace of openness and transparency already in motion?

Whatever the answers, one thing is sure: Guillaume is evidently the most “open” and “transparent” in the use of internet technology in the political sphere in Côte d'Ivoire. Eight of ten internet community members in the country who responded to the question “Who has the greatest potential of influencing Côte d'Ivoire by using the internet for openness and transparency?” answered: “Guillaume Kigbafori Soro”.

Action steps

Among other things, civil society will need to push for:

- The effective use of ICTs in monitoring governance, other than just citizen participation, in national finances.
- A proactive stance by the National Assembly in initiating laws to use ICTs in governance and oversight in Côte d'Ivoire.
- The use of ICTs in the transparent management of the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debt relief just received by the country. ■