

## Cote d'Ivoire: Row Over Mass Naturalizations in Côte D'ivoire

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Abidjan — Which of Côte d'Ivoire's 20 million inhabitants qualify as nationals is a question that has driven political debate and conflict here for many years, and one that came to the fore earlier this month when thousands of people who had lived here all their lives were finally, and simultaneously in a public ceremony, given formal citizenship documents.

While some 600,000 people with origins or parentage in nearby West African states have been discreetly granted citizenship since 2011, a ceremony in the administrative capital Yamoussoukro on 5 March to issue citizenship to 8,133 people of Burkinabé descent drew far more attention.

Among the most recent batch to receive citizenship was 53-year-old Maurice Kamgabéga whose family settled in Côte d'Ivoire's central-western Bouaflé region in 1933 from what was then known as Upper Volta (present day Burkina Faso).

"I breathed a sigh of relief ... Finally the end of a long struggle," Kamgabéga said after being handed a certificate giving him Ivoirian citizenship.

"We were frustrated and angry because our Ivoirian brothers and sisters treated us like foreigners. It was humiliating to know that we never belonged to a country and were somehow non-existent," he told IRIN.

"For my children and grandchildren to go to school at times I had to do under-the-table dealings with the schools. But it's when they were to take final examinations that things got more complicated because we did not have any documents," he added.

Kamgabéga's brother Zongo, who also took part in the ceremony, said: "We now have the same rights [as other Ivoirians] ... We are all very proud of the decision by the government. The harassment on the roads that some of us have suffered will be over. We are grateful to the Ivoirian authorities."

[Identity](#) has been at the heart of Côte d'Ivoire's political crises for decades. After independence from France in 1960, founding president Felix Houphouet-Boigny continued the French tradition of encouraging workers from neighbouring countries to come and work in the Ivoirian cocoa fields.

However, Ivoirian nationality became a controversial political issue when current President Alassane Ouattara, Houphouet-Boigny's then prime minister, set his eyes on the presidency upon the founding president's death in 1993.

Henri Konan-Bédié, who later succeeded Houphouet-Boigny, used Ouattara's mixed parentage - Ivoirian and Burkinabé - to bar him from running in 1995 by engineering a constitutional amendment requiring that only candidates both of whose parents are Ivoirian citizens were eligible to contest the presidency.

Ouattara was again barred by from taking part in the 2000 presidential and parliamentary polls, leading to street protests in which scores died and which was seen by some observers as sparking

the 2002 rebellion that split the country in two, with the north under insurgent rule and the south under former president Laurent Gbagbo.

"The issue of nationality is one of the causes of Côte d'Ivoire's crisis that stretches back two decades. It should therefore be dealt with carefully," said René Hokou Légré who heads the Ivoirian Human Rights League.

Légré argued that mass naturalization was irregular, as it ought to be done on a case by case basis. "We need to agree that naturalization must be in accordance with the procedure. It is an individual not a collective matter. We fear that dealing with it in this manner could cause further conflict."

### **Political move?**

Other critics accuse the government of using the process to boost its electoral support base.

"The government is bolstering its electoral strategy ahead of the 2015 or 2020 presidential polls. Otherwise there is no urgency to naturalize so many people ... It is a worrying situation and the authorities must explain themselves," said Françoise Bah, a teacher in the commercial capital Abidjan.

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), of the 950,000 stateless people in Côte d'Ivoire, 600,000 have received citizenship since 2011.

Justice Minister Mamadou Gnénéma said: "It is unacceptable that people can belong to no country. The statelessness of these people had to be resolved to make them understand that they can now enjoy the same rights as other Ivoirians. It's been a long time since their names were gazetted."

### **Dissenting voices**

Lawyer Nick De Bessou said the country's laws required that one must first apply to become an Ivoirian national. "You cannot give nationality to hundreds of thousands of people at once."

"It's not at the discretion of the authorities to issue citizenship to foreigners ... Moreover, for such a huge number of people to be naturalized there should be a debate in parliament to determine their eligibility. But this naturalization was never announced. It's like selling nationality at a throw-away price," Bessou argued.

However, Paul Koréki, a technical adviser at the Justice Ministry, explained that the 8,133 people recently handed citizenship had been identified in the official government gazette in 1996, but that the notice had not been sufficiently publicized.

For Salifou Soro, who heads the NGO SOS Apatride, criticism of the government has no basis. He argues that the lack of documents created a class of citizens who were constantly marginalized and treated as foreigners.

"Over time this situation caused socio-political tensions. It was therefore important to regularize their status in order to turn the page on this sombre history of Côte d'Ivoire," he said.

*[This report does not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.]*

