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Will There Be Trouble? The West African Elections and Their Consequences

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The citizens of three West African countries stricken by political crisis (Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso) will elect their presidents in 2015. The European Union must be ready for the escalation of political conflicts in the aforementioned countries, and stand ready to launch Common Security and Defence Policy missions. Polish input into such missions could be based around Poland's military experiences from Afghanistan and Mali, and political know-how on integration and regional cooperation within the Visegrad Group.

The structural weaknesses of the state institutions, and their utilisation in intra-political conflicts in different Sub-Saharan African states, come to the fore during local, parliamentary and presidential elections, when sectarian or political divisions are often compounded. This leads to the escalation of violence, which undermined the fragile internal stability of many countries of the region. In the past, such events unfolded in Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and especially Mali. In 2013 the EU launched a CSDP mission (with the participation of Polish troops) in Mali, aimed at strengthening the local military. It is involved in a fight against Islamist rebels who have controlled large swathes of territory in the crisis-stricken country since the 2012 coup d'état. Forthcoming elections in three West African countries (local, parliamentary and presidential in Nigeria in February; and presidential in Côte d'Ivoire in October and Burkina Faso November), could have similar consequences.

The eventual destabilisation of more countries of Sub-Saharan Africa will hinder the EU's cooperation with the region, which is geared towards increasing local security through supporting democracy, the rule of law and good governance. The EU assumes that the African partners will aim to strengthen their domestic democratic institutions, which should in turn be the proponents of the EU's involvement in Africa, and help reduce internal political conflicts. Unfortunately, the lack of such involvement leads to more violent conflict, which the EU often tries to solve by launching new CSDP missions (the latest started on 1 May 2014, in the Central African Republic).

The Fall of an African Giant. Nigeria has the largest population in Africa and is the continent's biggest economy. It is politically dominated by the People's Democratic Party (PDP), but the next elections, conducted in a climate of increasing polarisation, deepening political conflict and a worsening security situation, could spell the end of its successes. In February 2013 the opposition parties united and formed the All Progressives Congress (APC), which was also strengthened by PDP defectors, unhappy with unpopular PDP president Goodluck Jonathan. This means that the PDP, accustomed to power, and in the past ready to rig elections and use violence to achieve political goals, now has a potent electoral rival. Nigeria's stability is also undermined by the Islamist Boko Haram (BH), which is expanding its territorial reach beyond north-eastern Nigeria. Its high-profile terrorist activity (such as the kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok), the government's belated response, and its inability to produce and execute a counter-terrorism strategy in general, all weaken Nigeria's standing as an African leader.

A crisis in internal security, along with increasing political rivalry, potential electoral fraud (similar to that of the 2007 general election), outbursts of violence between PDP and APC supporters, and sectarian strife, could lead to the destabilisation of Nigeria, and have more far-reaching consequences than the fallout from the 2011 election, when

around 800 people died in clashes. Neither should intensification of BH activities be ruled out, as the organisation will attempt to utilise social concerns associated with the Islamist rebellion in order to increase its terrorist activity beyond north-eastern Nigeria.

Back to the Past in Côte d'Ivoire. Between 2002 and 2011, Côte d'Ivoire saw two civil wars between the followers of Laurent Gbagbo, (president from 2000 to 2010) who originates from the Christian south, and Alassane Ouattara, the current president who hails from the Muslim north. Côte d'Ivoire is one of the fastest growing African countries, but it is not able to address the consequences of the civil war, especially bringing to justice those guilty of crimes against humanity. The proponents of the former president boycotted the parliamentary elections in 2012 and local elections in 2013, and they refuse to participate in the EU-supported reconciliation process, which could result in their leaders being imprisoned. Some of president Ouattara's allies behave in a similar manner.

The Côte d'Ivoire conflict could escalate before and during the 2015 elections, as President Ouattara has already indicated his intention to run, and his allies are not keen on the opposition's participation in the political process. Such conditions could lead to renewed civil war, and the necessity of intervention, similar to the UN–French action of 2011.

Burkina Faso—The Risk of Destabilisation. Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world. Since 1987 it has been governed by President Blaise Compaoré. In order to augment his country's international standing, and secure the ongoing flow of donor money (including contributions from the EU Member States, which are responsible for around 50% of all aid received by Burkina Faso), Compaoré conducts an active foreign policy and mediates in political conflicts in Western Africa. He is currently attempting to amend the constitution, to enable him to run for another term in the 2015 election. His preoccupation with international matters, the possible extension of his rule, and the strengthening position of his brother and potential successor, François Compaoré, are all met with disapproval by the opposition, local chiefs and a significant segment of the president's own ruling party.

Compaoré's prolonged struggle to remain in office could threaten the internal stability of this West African state, which has already seen coup d'états (in 1983, and 1987) and social unrest over economic conditions, as well as military rebellion (2011). The scale of the unrest in 2015 could, however, be greater than in 2011, as Compaoré is unlikely to give up power voluntarily, and he might be faced not only with economic but also political demands from the opposition and some of his former followers.

Next Year's Challenges for the EU and Poland. After Mali, major outbursts of violence in other West African countries will focus EU's attention, as it is extremely interested to continue cooperation with Nigeria (especially regarding trade and energy), and with Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso (to promote good governance, work towards increasing internal stability, continuing development aid, and securing neighbouring Mali). As a consequence, calls for operational involvement in the region could arise, as the EU is intent on preventing a repetition of the Malian scenario from 2012, or of the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010–2011. Especially France, militarily and politically present in the region for years, and since recently involved in counter-terrorism assistance to Nigeria, will be lobbying for European (including Polish), support for military operations in Western Africa.

Poland is intent on strengthening relations with EU partners in Western Africa (France, the UK, and Spain). It is also interested in adding to its image as a country interested in furthering CSDP, including in the context of threats emanating from the south. For these reasons, it should be ready for limited participation in the next stabilisation missions in Africa.¹ The alternative is increased involvement in the already existing CSDP mission in the Central African Republic, or the return of Polish troops to Mali. Using its experience in Afghanistan and Mali, Poland could also offer training assistance to security institutions of the West African countries, while cooperating with the U.S. within the framework of the Counter-Terrorism Partnership Fund, which was announced by President Barack Obama on 28 May. It would also be worth using Poland's Visegrad experiences in promoting regional cooperation in Western Africa, including through intensified contact with the G5 group of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso. At the same time, Poland, which has no diplomatic presence in Côte d'Ivoire or Burkina Faso, should support the EU's actions aimed at ensuring fair, transparent and calm elections in Nigeria, and the establishment of a politically consensual environment before the electoral campaign is due to begin. This could be done, for example, through a PDP–APC pre-election agreement on the code of electoral good practices, and making counter-terrorism assistance from EU Member States to Nigeria conditional on the code being upheld and recognised.

¹ For more on that issue, see: M. Radziejowska, M. Terlikowski, "EUFOR RCA and the Future of Polish Engagement in Crisis Management Missions," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 75 (670), 28 May 2014.