



# Appy birthdays

Côte D'Ivoire may be one of the few places where birther conspiracies run hotter than in America. For decades, opponents of the president, Alassane Ouattara, have accused him of hailing from neighboring Burkina Faso. They successfully exploited the controversy to keep him off the ballot in the 1995 and 2000 presidential elections. When he triumphed in the 2010 election, supporters of the incumbent, Laurent Gbagbo, blamed their man's defeat on hordes of "non-Ivorian" Ouattara voters.

But Ouattara is not the only Ivorian whose origins arouse suspicions. His fellow northerners, largely of immigrant backgrounds, have long been eyed warily by their countrymen, and Henri Konan Bédié, a former president, entrenched notions of otherness in the 1990s by promoting the idea of ivoirité, or "Ivorianness".

The issue is further complicated by the fact that fewer than half of children under 18 in the north - fewer than two thirds nationally - are officially registered with the state. For the many Ivorians who live in remote villages, registration often requires long treks to municipal buildings; the destruction of roads and government offices during the country's post-electoral violence two years ago has made the process even harder. The consequences are more than symbolic: birth certificates are needed in order to claim a range of rights of citizenship, including a public education.

To address the problem, Orange, a French telecommunications giant, has partnered with UNICEF to develop a mobile application that digitally catalogues births. The app would allow an accredited individual in each town - perhaps the local chief or a doctor - to transmit every newborn's data to a central server. That would produce a permanent electronic record that could be called upon at any time to procure a birth certificate.

The biggest advantage of the system - which awaits approval by the interior ministry - is its speed. Under Ivorian law, a birth must be registered within 90 days, after which the process becomes exponentially more onerous.

The project is no panacea. Mobile phone coverage in many areas is patchy; and the scheme requires buy-in from local officials who can be mistrustful of technology. Some have a more personal incentive to resist - if births can be registered phone, what will be the fate of the old bookkeepers?

But similar initiatives launched in other African countries suggest that, despite the challenges, the Ivorian plan could have a big impact. In 2011 Nigeria introduced RapidSMS, a mobile platform to monitor birth registrations (which continued to be recorded in the traditional way). By 2012, registration rates for children under five had more than doubled in many states.

Source: [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

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