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Burkina Faso's rocky road to democratic consolidation

On 22 November 2020, Burkina Faso will hold presidential and parliamentary elections. The current security situation partly causes and partly overshadows some structural concerns that will affect these elections. This policy brief highlights some of the key challenges, such as civil unrest, governance deficits, party (system) fragmentation, rampant insecurity and internal displacement, that affect the electoral process, as well as the (in)ability of the current ruling administration to address and resolve governance issues. A too-overt focus on the counterterrorist agenda risks overlooking some of the key challenges that need to be addressed to safeguard and consolidate the country's democratic institutions.

Background

At the end of October 2014, the 'land of upright people'¹ was going through one of the critical turning points of its post-independence political history. President Blaise Compaore, who had ruled over Burkina Faso for 27 years, was forced to resign in a popular uprising. The resignation followed a controversial attempt to amend the constitution and remove presidential term limits by the then-ruling party, Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP). Most of the 'insurgés' saw the collapse of Compaore's regime as a new era in Burkina Faso's march towards economic development and accountable governance, epitomised by the popular motto 'rien ne sera plus comme avant' (nothing will be as it was before). Despite the troublesome

nature of the political transition, punctuated by a failed coup attempt by Compaore's notorious Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP), Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of the People's Movement for Progress (MPP) was sworn in as the new president-elect in December 2015.

Acknowledging the popular demand for a new Burkina Faso, President Kaboré pledged in his inaugural address to fight corruption, pursue further democratic reforms and tackle the issue of poverty.² However, a few weeks after the period of grace, he was confronted by what would be one of the critical challenges of his presidency, namely terrorism. In January 2016, the capital city, Ouagadougou, was targeted by fighters loyal to Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb in a high-profile attack. Since then, jihadi attacks have

1 This is an expression generally used to refer to Burkina Faso. Initially known as the Republic of Upper Volta, the country was renamed Burkina Faso in August 1984 by President Thomas Sankara. The name stems from the three different languages spoken in the country.

2 LeFaso.net (2015) 'Discours d'investiture du Président Roch Marc Christian Kaboré', <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article68881>

increased in scope and intensity and the patchwork of government responses have failed to reverse the spectrum of instability.

Yet looking upon Burkina Faso only from the angle of counterterrorism would be insufficient to address the country's difficulties. Although insecurity remains a hard nut to crack for central government, democratic governance in Burkina Faso also faces a number of structural hurdles. With an increase in civil unrest and the erosion of social cohesion, the stakes of the November 2020 general elections are high. A few months ahead of the joint elections, this policy brief aims to highlight some of the key challenges that will affect the electoral process, as well as the (in)ability of the current ruling administration to address civil unrest and key governance issues. The window of opportunity for the consolidation of democratic governance is slowly closing. This policy brief offers some recommendations on how the international community could support Burkina Faso to address these challenges.

Civil unrest is outpacing the government's response

Burkina Faso has a strong legacy of social activism.³ The first president of the Upper Volta (as the country was named before 1984) was toppled in January 1966 following massive protests by the labour unions. Since then, there have been some attempts by successive regimes, including the Compaore regime, to bargain with the unions and contain protests. Burkina Faso was among the African countries where protests against the high cost of living in 2007-08 were intense. The regime barely survived a quasi-insurrectionary episode in 2011. Following the suspected death of a school pupil in custody in the western city of Koudougou, thousands of Burkinabe took to the streets to demand justice and protest against the rising costs of living. Protests took a

worrying turn when mutinies erupted within the ranks of the defence and security forces. Even Compaore's loyal guard rebelled, compelling him to temporarily leave the presidential palace. In 2014, it was by linking socioeconomic grievances to political demands that the political opposition and social forces managed to oust the regime.

Current President Roch Marc Christian Kabore assumed office in a context of pressing social demands. Most of Burkinabe expectations were that the regime change would translate into tangible socioeconomic dividends, with civil servants in particular expecting that central government would significantly improve their socioeconomic welfare. To undertake a structural transformation of the economy, and foster good governance and human capital development, the Kabore regime crafted a development policy framework known as the Plan National de Développement Economique et Social.

Yet as the outcomes promised by the national development plan took time to materialise, there was a series of strikes across different sectors of the administration – initially by magistrates. After months of sit-in protests, their demands were met by the government. However, by not linking the magistrates' claims to that of other public sector units to propose a coherent and standardised response, the government opened a Pandora's box. Despite its incessant calls for a truce in a context of increased military spending and pressing social demands, the government has not succeeded in containing sit-in protests. In 2019, Burkina Faso's wage bill was estimated at 48% of total tax revenue, largely above the 35% West African Economic Monetary convergence criterion.⁴

Overwhelmed by the proliferation of sit-in protests, the government has resorted to a series of initiatives, including legal action to contain social unrest. It brought the case of sit-in protests before the Council of State

3 Engels, B. (2015) 'Trade unionism in Burkina Faso', *Revue Tiers Monde* 2015/4 (No 224), p. 67-82.

4 International Monetary Fund (2019) *Burkina Faso, IMF Country Report No. 19/15*.

to seek advice on their legality.⁵ Moreover, it convened a conference of all stakeholders in June 2018 to discuss the necessity of revising Burkina Faso's current wage structure. Nevertheless, while the process of standardising wages across government agencies is still ongoing, magistrates have formally declared that they will not make any concessions on their salaries and benefits.⁶

Larger governance deficits

The sit-in protests are but one example of the wider process of the erosion of state capacity and authority.⁷ As regards authority, the Burkinabe state's ability to project and maintain its power over all its territory is put to the test by a wide range of malevolent non-state armed groups. Crippled by the lack of adequate equipment and not immune from corruption, the bureaucratic and administrative capacity of the Burkinabe state is severely limited countrywide.⁸ The small pool of qualified civil servants has been reluctant to accept positions outside Ouagadougou or other major urban centres. This has an effect on the ability of state officials to implement policies and deliver public goods, which constitute critical symbols of statehood and nationhood in a given political setting.

Officially, decentralisation was designed to devolve political decision making to local authorities and to make central government more responsive to local needs. However, the benefits associated with decentralised governance structures such as economic performance, political participation and service delivery still remain tenuous to many Burkinabe.⁹ In an emergent democracy like Burkina Faso, legitimacy through ballots makes sense only when coupled with legitimacy through performance.

In terms of economic management and the fight against impunity, the government's record is not convincing to many citizens. Although Burkina Faso's economic growth has been steady over the last 15 years, its economic structure remains largely based on natural resources, namely cotton and gold. Many jobs created to absorb the expanding labour force are insecure, unsafe or low paid.¹⁰

On the level of transparency and the fight against impunity, it is true that the trial of the main protagonists of the 2015 coup is nearing the end. The investigation into the assassination of President Thomas Sankara is ongoing. However, corruption is still rampant at different levels of the state and in the business sector, although it is below the average in Africa.¹¹ The extractive industries sector, the judiciary and the public health sector are all vulnerable to corruption.

Stating that bold socioeconomic and political reforms are needed in Burkina Faso would be a truism. However, in a political system still dominated by clientelism and patronage networks, the ruling elites will always ensure that reforms are kept to a bare minimum. Overall, Burkina Faso is heading to the polls in a context of weakening state capacity and authority. This situation is

5 Whereas the Council of State declared sit-ins illegal in its ruling, another legal opinion given by the International Labour Organization upon the government's request reaffirmed the legal character of sit-ins as far as they are not prejudicial to public order.

6 Le Faso.net (2019) 'Rémunération des agents de l'Etat : L'Intersyndicale des magistrats met en garde le ministre de la Fonction Publique', <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article89313>.

7 The notion of street power implies a penchant for demonstrating in the streets to resolve certain political issues. For more details see Somda, S. (2015) *Polémique sur la "ruecratie"*: "On peut regretter qu'en quelques mois, Michel Kafando oublie d'où il vient", propos du Secrétaire général confédéral de la Confédération générale du travail du Burkina Bassolma Bazié, in: Lefaso.net, www.lefaso.net/spip.php?article62736.

8 Mahieu, S. and Yilmaz, S. (2010) 'Local government discretion and accountability in Burkina Faso', *Public Administration and Development*, 30(5):329–344.

9 World Bank Group (2018) *Country Partnership Framework for Burkina Faso for the Period FY18–FY23*.

10 Weber, Michael (2018) *Jobs Diagnostic Burkina Faso*, The World Bank.

11 Ardigo, Iñaki Albisu (2019) 'Burkina Faso: Overview of corruption and anti-corruption', U4 Anti-Corruption Helpdesk.

further compounded by the current political landscape, which remains fragmented and characterised by low programmatic capacity.

Anatomy of Burkina Faso's post-transitional political landscape

Burkina Faso's post-transitional political landscape is marked by the fragmentation of the party system and party organisations. Out of the 170 political parties, only a few – such as the MPP, the CDP and the Union for Progress and Change (UPC) – display a strong organisational capacity with substantial national electoral bases. In the 2015 parliamentary elections, 14 out of 99 political parties managed to win some seats in the national assembly. Although most political parties have not officially designated their candidates for the upcoming elections, incumbent President Kabore has already announced that he will be a candidate for his own succession.

In 2015, the current ruling party's candidate was elected in the first run. Given the current political configuration, the outcome of this year's presidential elections will largely depend on the ability of political parties to build solid and stable electoral coalitions. A few months before electoral consultations, Burkina Faso's political landscape is likely to witness the proliferation of small parties, often centred around well-known public figures but devoid of substantial organisational structure. Therefore, imposing discipline and maintaining cohesion within their ranks remain the key challenges for the different political parties.

A quick glimpse at the most significant parties, such as the MPP, UPC and the CDP, shows that each has its own wounds to heal to optimise their chances of occupying the Kosyam Palace. Despite the comparative advantage that the ruling party could have over its rivals in terms of control and access to media and resources, repeating the 2015 electoral performance would prove difficult for the presidential party. In 2015, the MPP was one of the few political formations that benefited from a controversial piece of legislation banning politicians from

standing for office if they had supported the constitutional amendment to scrap term limits. Consequently, serious candidates from political parties like the CDP, the Alliance for Democracy and Federation–African Democratic Rally and the New Alliance of Faso among others were banned from taking part in parliamentary and presidential elections. Additionally, the MPP inherited most of the CDP's old networks of supporters and managed to co-opt some of the party's political elites after Compaore's downfall. However, the demise of a kingmaker like Salifou Diallo,¹² who had contributed to the quick territorial outreach of the MPP, will not be without consequences for party unity, stability and performance. If performance were to determine the outcome of November's elections, an opinion poll conducted in the first quarter of 2019 reveals increasingly popular disillusion with the Kabore regime on issues of security, social services and the fight against corruption.¹³

The political opposition has its own vulnerabilities that need to be addressed. At its creation in March 2010, few political analysts would have taken the UPC call for political change seriously. Yet when the party entered the political scene, the then-ruling CDP party was facing a fragmented and weak political opposition with no substantial ability to undermine its rule. By taking a gradual approach to the conquest of power,¹⁴ the

12 With his impressive network, Salifou Diallo was one of the big men who contributed to the consolidation of Compaore's regime. He defected from the ruling party in January 2014 along with other major political figures like Simon Compaore and Roch Marc Christian Kabore to set up the MPP. In August 2017, he suddenly passed away.

13 Diallo, A. (2019) 'Burkina Faso: avec le Présimètre, les Burkinabè notent Roch Kaboré', *Jeune Afrique*, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/767724/politique/burkina-faso-avec-le-presimetre-les-burkinabe-notent-roch-kabore/>

14 Created in March 2010, the UPC refrained from taking part in the presidential elections of 2010. Instead, in the first two years of existence, it devoted its efforts to the organisation of the party throughout the country. This strategy paid off, as it managed to win 19 MPs and 1,615 municipal councillors in the 2012 legislative and municipal elections.

UPC not only managed to position itself as a credible opposition party but also contributed to crystallising tensions around Compaoré's old and decaying regime. In the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, the party came second, receiving almost 30% of the vote and winning 33 parliamentary seats. Despite being one of the heavyweights of the political opposition platform ('Chef de File de l'Opposition Politique'), however, the UPC witnessed the emergence of a dissident faction within its parliamentary group at the national assembly. This is not without any electoral implication for countries like Burkina Faso, where a personality-based rather than a party-based vision of politics prevails.

The CDP, which dominated Burkina Faso's political landscape for decades, is still struggling to recover from the 2015 popular uprising. Frictions around leadership positions have left the party weakened and its social base alienated. Divided as it currently stands, the CDP could jeopardise its chances of ruling again. Moreover, the party will need to work hard to convince the Burkinabe citizens that it has learned from its past mistakes. It seems unlikely that this fragmented party landscape will produce an electoral result that can take a firm stance with regard to the crucial issues of institutions and identities, state and nation building.

Why are these elections fraught with fragility?

Next to dynamics within political parties, the necessity of having a solid electoral infrastructure will be critical for a free, open and transparent electoral process. Contrary to the 2015 elections, where the international community was mobilised behind Burkina Faso to make the popular uprising a success story, this time the Burkinabe will have to rely on themselves. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has reaffirmed that elections will be held on 22 November 2020 as scheduled and

has been working towards this aim.¹⁵ On the domestic level, the revision of the electoral roll has already started.¹⁶ However, taking into consideration the current security parameter, some political parties have cast doubts on the ability of the electoral administration to make the November 2020 'rendez-vous' happen.¹⁷

Security dynamics will severely affect the electoral process. Since 2016, attacks perpetrated by non-state armed groups have become frequent and have targeted both unarmed civilians and the security forces. Twenty out of 25 provinces are currently confronted by security challenges and (parts of) six out of 13 regions are under states of emergency.¹⁸ Lessons from neighbouring Mali tell us that voter turnout may be low if large sections of the population refrain from casting their votes due to fear of violence. In addition, assaults and threats of assassinations throughout the electoral process may prevent some candidates from meeting the electorate.

15 LeFaso.net (2020) 'Elections 2020 au Burkina Faso: Nous avons un challenge important qui consiste à amener le fichier électoral à être conforme à l'état de la population', annonce Newton Ahmed Barry, Président de la CENI, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article94166>

16 Moreover, the CENI will be organising the diaspora vote for the first time in Burkina Faso's political history. For some political commentators, the extraterritorial vote of two million potential voters abroad was seen as one of the key factors that could affect the electoral outcome. However, despite the media hype, as of 21 January 2020 (i.e. one week before the end of enrolment) the number of Burkinabe who had enrolled themselves was estimated at 14,185. LeFaso.net (2020) 'Processus Electoral: Faible taux d'enrôlement chez les Burkinabé de l'étranger', <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article94484>

17 Burkina 24 (2020) 'Le CDP souhaite que les "élections se tiennent à la date établie"', <https://www.burkina24.com/2020/02/09/burkina-le-cdp-souhaite-que-les-elections-se-tiennent-a-la-date-etablie/>.

18 Although the northern, centre-nord and eastern regions remain the most vulnerable to non-state armed group activities, the Boucle du Mouhoun, the Centre-Est regions and the Hauts-Bassins region have also witnessed some sporadic attacks.

The vote of internal displaced persons (IDPs) is another conundrum to deal with. Since the crisis broke out, at least 780,000 people have fled their homes as the result of mounting violence.¹⁹ Two options have been proposed by the electoral administration to allow IDPs to cast their votes. The first scenario would be to link the voter to his or her municipality of departure. In the second scenario, the displaced person would be enrolled where she or he has been received and his or her vote will be counted for the constituency in which she or he lives. The second scenario could significantly impact Burkina Faso's electoral and administrative map as municipalities under threat will be left without elected officials.

Portrayed by analysts as one of the freest and fairest elections ever, the voter turnout of the 2015 presidential elections was around 60%. With the expansion of the IDP community, which constitutes a major portion of the rural electorate, risks of a low voter turnout are not to be ruled out. A low voter turnout would diminish the next government's legitimacy both at home and abroad. This would probably make it even harder to enact bold socioeconomic and political reforms while pursuing the fight against jihadi groups.

Conclusion

Burkina Faso continues to face a many significant challenges in the run-up to the November 2020 elections. What initially started as a new dawn with the downfall of the Compaore regime has given rise to disillusion among a large section of the population, in both rural and urban areas. The geography of attacks testifies to a crisis of governance in the hinterlands. During Compaore's time in office, central government was able to exercise a degree of social control over local populations through a network of intermediaries. The collapse of his regime has been followed by a crisis of rural governance.

Recommendations

First, central government should devise a national strategy to resolve conflicts around resources in the hinterlands that have often been exacerbated by jihadi groups. While committed to the stabilisation of rural areas, in the long run central government will need to undertake deep administrative reforms and rebuild the coercive capacity of the state. Burkina Faso's emergent democracy will not prosper if socioeconomic despair and insecurity continue to take root. The international community should take care to adopt these dimensions in any counterterrorist agenda.

Second, as previously mentioned, the November 2020 elections are fraught with fragility. Some political actors could perceive the weakening state capacity as well as the eroding social cohesion as an opportunity to capture power at all costs. The emergency measures put in place in the wake of the COVID-19 epidemic could also be garnered towards this end. As occurred in the 2015 joint elections, the international community could promote the adoption of a code of (good) conduct prohibiting violence and hate speech, and regulating the activities of political parties throughout the process should be adopted by the different stakeholders.

Third, the current volatile security context requires strong safety measures to ensure a minimum standard of electoral integrity. Central government should allocate close protection to all presidential candidates. In order to ensure the security of electoral agents, polling stations and other critical infrastructures throughout the elections, Burkina Faso could well use assistance from the international community.





The November 2020 joint parliamentary and presidential elections constitute a critical test for Burkina Faso's democracy. A too-overt focus on the counterterrorist agenda risks overlooking some of the key challenges that need to be addressed to safeguard and consolidate the country's democratic institutions.

¹⁹ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa>
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