



CASE STUDY

November 2024



**Democratic
oscillations in
Burkina Faso**

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INTRODUCTION

On 31 October 2014, a popular uprising toppled Blaise Compaoré's twenty-seven years of authoritarian rule in the space of two days, a pivotal moment that provides a glimpse of the underlying dynamics and possible levers of change. The spark that ignited the uprising was the umpteenth attempt to amend the Constitution in favour of the President, who wanted to extend his term of office. It put constitutional reform and the commitment of civil society to the fight for democratisation back at the heart of the public debate, and offered new hope to the people of Burkina Faso.

Ten years on, the situation remains worrying. Burkina Faso is currently governed by a military junta, which seized power in a coup d'état in 2022. The return to a uniformed government, and the extension of the transition period by Captain Ibrahim Traoré in May 2024, crystallise the persistent governance and security challenges facing the country. For several decades, this 'double-sided democracy' had maintained a hybrid regime in which the holding of elections

① was no more than the appearance of democracy, but not enough to disguise the authoritarian nature of the government. In addition, the security situation remains extremely tense: armed Islamist groups control certain regions, particularly in border areas, leading to displacement of thousands of people and a severe humanitarian crisis.

Looking back at the events of October 2014, however, allows us to consider the events that led to a massive mobilisation of civil society, and to consider the reasons for the democratic backlash that ultimately ensued.



Ibrahim Traoré,
leader of the junta in Burkina Faso.

① HAGBERG, Sten. 'Conclusion of Part Three. Démocratie à double façade'. Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire Le cas du Burkina Faso, Karthala, 2010. p.295-306. CAIRN.INFO,

I. POLITICAL HISTORY OF BURKINA FASO

A - CONSOLIDATION OF POWER AND MULTIPLE CRISES IN HAUTE VOLTA: FROM YAMÉOGO TO SANKARA

Burkina Faso is still struggling to establish solid democratic institutions. Maurice Yaméogo was President of Upper Volta when it gained independence from France on 5 August 1960. Yaméogo continued the consolidation of power that had already begun before independence, and began by eliminating the parliamentary opposition. On 28 February of the same year, having obtained special powers for the Assembly, he decided to dissolve it. Thanks to a new strategy of redrawing constituency boundaries, he succeeded in making his group the majority party. He dissolved several opposition parties, including the Parti National Voltaïque (PNV), the Parti Républicain de la Liberté (PRL) and the Parti d'Action Paysanne (PAP), and imprisoned opposition figures. On 30 November 1960, the dictatorship gave itself a new framework and proclaimed a new constitution.

Upper Volta was then faced with a number of crises. The first was social, with the administrative abolition of the chiefdoms in January 1962, which shook the traditional structure of Burkinabe society. This authoritarian act undermined a central political mechanism. More than three-quarters of the population live in rural areas, and, according to an Afrobarometer opinion poll conducted in 2008, 75% of those surveyed trusted traditional chiefs.

They act as intermediaries between the central government and local populations, and the State knows that it must rely on their assent if it wants to enforce the law. According to Arsène Brice Bado, *'as the administrative and political entities of traditional societies, chiefdoms are in competition with the state and its administrations [...] The failure to integrate these two systems has led to a lack of transparency and accountability. [The failure to integrate these two systems of governance undermines the State and the functioning of democracy]*. In addition to their role as guarantors of customary law, they were previously often responsible for maintaining the cultural tradition of their people through various festivities. Added to this is a growing contempt for religion, a disastrous health situation and a shortage of teachers.

Then there was the economic crisis: like many African countries in the post-colonial era, Burkina Faso experienced major financial difficulties after independence. In an attempt to turn the economy around, Maurice Yaméogo imposed severe austerity measures, including wage cuts for civil servants and tax increases. These measures exacerbated popular discontent, particularly among trade unions and the civil service. These economic choices, combined with a lack of investment in key sectors such as education and health, led to growing dissatisfaction among the population. In 1966, massive strikes by trade unions and students broke out. This unrest led to the forced resignation of

② Afrobarometer. (2008). Summary of results: Botswana Round 4 survey. Disponible en ligne.

③ Researcher in political science and international relations at the CERAP/Jesuit University in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, specialising in the relationship between democracy and ethnic pluralism,

Yaméogo following a military coup led by Lieutenant-Colonel Sangoulé Lamizana.

Despite the critical situation, Lamizana continued his anti-democratic turn. In 1970, he pushed through a new constitution that allowed him to become President without consulting the people, and then appointed Joseph Ouédraogo as Prime Minister. However, their relationship gradually deteriorated, and Sangoulé Lamizana decided to suspend the Constitution to renew the government, making it exclusively military.

In 1980, numerous strikes broke out across the country, paralysing entire sectors. Saye Zerbo seized power in a coup d'état, only to be overthrown in turn on 7 November 1982 by Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo and his Prime Minister, Thomas Sankara. In May 1983, Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo dismissed Thomas Sankara, who took power three months later in another coup.

B - REFORMS AND TENSIONS AT THE HEART OF THE BURKINABE REVOLUTION

Thomas Sankara's seizure of power marked a significant break in the country's history. He renamed Upper Volta Burkina Faso, which translates as 'the land of men of integrity'. Under his leadership, the country took its first steps towards democracy, with a determination to emancipate the people and promote social justice. On the political front, Sankara attached particular importance to transparency, declaring his assets publicly himself. He limited state spending and fought against corruption and cronyism.

- ④ Sankara introduced a revolutionary programme aimed at transforming Burkinabe society through radical reforms

in the economy, agriculture, health and women's rights. On the economic front, it aimed to avoid all external dependence and to achieve food self-sufficiency. He stimulated the country's internal industrial economy by promoting local production. In foreign policy, Sankara openly criticised the excesses of globalisation and adopted an anti-imperialist stance. Although these reforms benefited certain sections of the population, they also provoked discontent, particularly among civil servants, whose privileges had been reduced. Austerity measures, the nationalisation of certain industries, and tensions with neighbouring countries have also contributed to weakening Burkina Faso, which finds itself diplomatically isolated, increasing pressure on the regime. They are also provoking resistance from traditional elites, the military and its own allies in the Conseil National de la Résistance (CNR). Some members of the government began to criticise his authoritarian approach and lack of consultation. Sankara's growing isolation within the CNR exacerbated internal tensions, particularly with his close friend and long-time colleague Blaise Compaoré.

Sankara finally orchestrated his assassination on 15 October 1987 and seized power by force. Thomas Sankara left behind a political legacy that would later be reclaimed by those involved in the current uprising.

④ France Info. (2018). Burkina Faso: The Legacy of Heads of State, the Day Thomas Sankara Broke the Taboo. Available online.

C - COMPAORÉ IN POWER: TOWARDS CONTROLLED DEMOCRACY AND THE REINVENTION OF THE REGIME

Compaoré imposed a government formed by the Popular Front, a coalition of several political parties that supported the new head of state. In June 1991, a new constitution was put in place, introducing a multi-party system, the separation of powers, term limits of two seven-year terms, the organisation of regular and transparent elections, administrative decentralisation, the creation of a Constitutional Court, and the application of certain fundamental rights (freedom of the press, freedom of association, etc.). These advances made it possible to gradually establish a democratic model, supported by the so-called 'rectification' process.

'Rectification' is presented as a political approach aimed at slowing down the revolutionary process and appeasing the population. The process was based on criticism of Sankara's policies. Blaise Compaoré attempted to moderate revolutionary ideas by moving towards more liberal policies, in particular by introducing structural adjustment programmes in collaboration with the IMF and the World Bank. Rectification also aimed to reconcile Burkinabè with some of the traditional and religious elites, who had often been marginalised under Sankara, while neutralising revolutionary grassroots structures such as the *Comités de Défense de la Révolution* (CDR).

However, the majority party controls all the administrative and governmental institutions, without allowing any political alternation. The liberalisation of political life

is far from complete: the army still plays a central role in the government apparatus, and political opponents are repressed, often imprisoned or persecuted. In short, the regime set up by Compaoré is more akin to a democrature than a real democracy, which is confirmed by the longevity of his term of office (27 years), made possible by multiple constitutional amendments.



Thomas Sankara,
President of Burkina Faso from 1983 to 1987.

II. FROM INSURRECTION TO TRANSITION: DYNAMICS AND LIMITS OF THE INSURRECTIONS OF 2014 - 2015

A - RECOUNTING THE 2014-2015 UPRISINGS

In 2013, an opposition party, the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), led protests against the creation of the Senate. There was a risk that the Senate would be used to keep Blaise Compaoré in power, as it was composed mainly of senators appointed by him and chaired by his brother. A year later, people close to Compaoré resigned to form a new party, the Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès (People's Movement for Progress). Associations and civil movements also joined forces to express their dissatisfaction with Compaoré's government.

From 21 October 2014, civil society organisations, trade unions and associations (such as Balais Citoyen, Front de Résistance Citoyenne, Collectif Anti-Référendum, Collectif des Femmes pour la Défense de la Constitution, Coalition Contre la Vie Chère) mobilised in the streets to demonstrate against the amendment to Article 37 of the Constitution, which limits the number of authorised presidential terms to two.

⑤ On 30 October, the demonstrators stormed the National Assembly, ransacking it and setting it on fire. In some places, they were reluctant to use excessive force against their compatriots, which allowed the protesters to advance. In some cases, the security forces even joined the demonstrators or decided to remain neutral.

The crowd of demonstrators was unprecedented, estimated at several tens of thousands. They attacked the homes of several members of the government, which they looted and ransacked, and then the headquarters of the national television stations. The demonstrators then went to several places of power to express their demands: the presidential palace, the Place de la Nation (renamed Place de la Révolution for the occasion), and the army headquarters. The government decided to abandon the bill, but Blaise Compaoré simultaneously dissolved the Assembly. Following the rallies, Blaise Compaoré fled to Côte d'Ivoire.

On 31 October, Lieutenant-Colonel Yacouba Isaac Zida took power, supported by the army, and was appointed Head of State of the Transition. However, the organisations that took to the streets were accused of having 'sold the revolution' to the military. Confrontations broke out between demonstrators. Two days later, the junta led by Zida decided to meet with representatives of each political party to resolve the crisis and create the Charter of the Transition, under which the President of the Transition and his government would not be eligible for the forthcoming presidential elections in 2015. On 16 November, Michel Kafando was appointed President of the Transition and Zida was appointed Prime Minister.

⑤ LeFaso.net. (2016). 30 and 31 October 2014: The 48 hours that marked the fall of Blaise Compaoré.

In September 2015, a coup was led by the Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP), an elite unit loyal to Compaoré. The troops succeeded in arresting the leaders of the transition, but the coup failed due to a double protest: civil, with several thousand citizens on the streets; and military, with loyalist army units rapidly converging on Ouagadougou, threatening to attack Camp Naaba Koom (RSP headquarters), and thus forcing the coup plotters to capitulate. The people of Ouagadougou were quick to describe it as *'the stupidest coup d'état in the world'*. The presidential and legislative elections did take place, but with a month's delay. Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected president.

B - FACTORS BEHIND THE 2014-2015 UPRISINGS

Since Sankara's revolution, Burkina Faso's citizens have taken a different approach to their participation in political life and aspire to the change it promised, as shown by the recurrence of the slogan 'Nothing will ever be the same again'. Sankara's legacy is evident in the symbols used by the main militant groups. The broom, which gives the Balai citoyen its name, refers to the gesture of the revolutionary president, who was known for literally and symbolically taking a broom to sweep the streets of Ouagadougou. His aim was to illustrate the importance of the participation of everyone, including leaders, in improving living conditions in the community, and the need to clean up political life by ridding it of corruption.

The 2014 demonstrators drew on a committed popular culture, and in particular used excerpts from an album by

the rapper Smarty and the Bolo Benn Roots, quoted by Pierre Jacquemot in his book *Afrique, la démocratie à l'épreuve: 'The chief's hat floats in the air/ Heads bobbing to see who will wear it/ May peace die in war! /The problem with a king is the distance between the truth he receives.../And what the people think of him/Despite the tension that has become immense.../It is to the same melodies that the king's griot dances. [...]* This, concludes Pierre Jacquemot, is how *'ruecratie'* came about, the use of the *'legitimacy of the street'* to demand the resolution of certain political issues deemed fundamental, as well as those of everyday life'.

The politicisation of the Burkinabe population also took place through social networks, which were essential for spreading calls for insurrection, and then played a key role in organising demonstrations, allowing actions to be broadcast in real time while circumventing censorship. They also helped to raise national and international awareness, and finally highlighted human rights violations and gave a voice to the most marginalised populations.

However, street power alone does not explain the overthrow of October 2014: we must also take into account the category of political entrepreneurs as drivers of the revolt: they saw Compaoré's change to the Constitution as a moment to be seized. Figures such as Michel Kafando and Yacouba Isaac Zida were able to seize this 'window of opportunity' to push through reforms and restructure the country's institutional framework. The idea of a window of opportunity defined by John

^⑥ Le Nouvel Observateur. (2015). Mondovision: Au Burkina Faso, le coup d'état le plus bête du monde, Available online.

^⑦ Universitaire puis diplomate, il a été en poste dans plusieurs pays africains (Sénégal, Algérie, Burkina Faso, Cameroun, Kenya, Ghana, République démocratique du Congo)

^⑧ Pierre Jacquemot. *Afrique, la démocratie à l'épreuve*. Fondation Jean-Jaurès. Fondation Jean-Jaurès-Edition de l'Aube, 2022, LIVRE, 978-2-8159-5086-2.

^⑨ Kingdon, J. W. (1984). *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*.

¹⁰ Kingdon, corresponds to a moment favourable to change when three elements converge: the problems (a crisis), the solutions (proposals to alleviate the crisis) and the political context (an environment favourable to change). When these elements come together, political entrepreneurs can act quickly and introduce reforms. In the context of Burkina Faso, the new political leaders have made it possible to highlight the problems and propose institutional reforms.

It is also interesting to note the crucial role played by traditional chiefs in the 2014 insurrection: their intervention enabled a major mobilisation in rural areas. In this way, they gave legitimacy throughout the country to the protest movement initiated in Ouagadougou, and thereby contributed to its success.

C - LIMITS OF THE TRANSITION

The transitional government in Burkina Faso, set up after the fall of Blaise Compaoré, has been marked by internal tensions that have undermined its functioning. At the heart of these tensions has been the complex relationship between President Michel Kafando, a civilian diplomat, and Prime Minister Yacouba Isaac Zida, a high-ranking military officer.

From the outset, this duality between civilian and military governance created a dynamic of conflict. Kafando, chosen to embody the people's desire for a return to consensual governance, advocated caution and dialogue. For his part, Zida, who had played a crucial role in managing the post-insurrection period, advocated a more authoritarian approach and rapid reforms

to break with the old regime.

The issue of disbanding the Presidential Security Regiment (RSP) has become the main point of contention. Zida, a former member of this elite unit, had turned against it, seeing the RSP as an obstacle to democratic reform. He actively campaigned for its abolition. On the other hand, Kafando, aware of the risks of a direct confrontation with this influential military group, opted for a more measured approach, seeking to maintain a fragile balance. These disagreements hampered the coherence and effectiveness of the transition regime. Unable to reconcile these divergent visions, the transition gradually got bogged down, leaving the country in a precarious political situation. The absence of a single leader, while laudable in principle, made it more difficult to reform and democratise the country.

In addition, to consolidate the democratic transition, the government set up several political bodies to act as checks and balances. They proved ineffective, however, because *'the Zida government undertook reforms as if the CRNR (Commission de la réconciliation nationale et des réformes) did not exist, even though it was working on reform projects'*. The various political bodies did not cooperate with each other. A number of contradictory projects emanated from each organisation, slowing down the Transition. *"This lack of synergy reflects the divergence of objectives that characterised the three-headed government (CRNR, Conseil National de Transition and*

¹¹*government)"*.

¹⁰ Political scientist, emeritus professor at the University of Michigan.

¹¹ Saidou, A. K. (2020). Political Entrepreneurs and the Test of Power: Transition Regimes and Public Action in Burkina Faso (2014-2015) and Niger (2010-2011). *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée*.

Finally, although presidential and legislative elections were held, the democratic process was interrupted by two coups d'état in 2022. The coup d'état led by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba in January 2022 was motivated by growing discontent within the army over the government's inability to manage insecurity due to jihadist attacks. On 24 January 2022, Damiba and

his supporters overthrew President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. He then dissolved the government and suspended the Constitution, promising to restore security and set a timetable for political transition. He was succeeded on 30 September of the same year by a coup d'état led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who raised the same issues as Damiba.



Soldiers attempt to stop protesters in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on October 30, 2014

III. TODAY, THE RULE OF THE MILITARY JUNTA

A - OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT SITUATION IN BURKINA FASO.

Since taking power, Ibrahim Traoré has implemented several measures to stabilize the country's security situation. He reorganized the defense and security forces, acquired new military equipment, and recruited additional soldiers. Since the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016, the country has been in a constant fight against terrorism. Traoré cites this security crisis as a reason for postponing the elections originally scheduled for mid-July 2024. In August 2024, he stated that he preferred to focus on the country's stability, believing that holding elections under the current circumstances would prevent fair participation by all Burkinabé citizens. While presenting himself as a true heir to Sankarism, the opposition and the press are silenced, and regime critics are intimidated, imprisoned, or sometimes even abducted. This includes activists like

- ¹² Guy Hervé Kam (a figure in the anti-Compaoré protests), former minister
- ¹³ Ablassé Ouedraogo, journalist Atiana Serge
- ¹⁴ Oulon, and artist Moussa Thiombiano.

B - WHAT DEMOCRATIC HORIZON FOR BURKINA FASO

In West Africa, Senegal and Ghana have followed the democratic model since 1960 and 1992, respectively. Their experiences highlight several crucial elements for the stability of democratic power: committed leadership that respects transitions of power, and strong institutions that fight against corruption; the political neutrality of the armed forces; and press freedom. These factors have had a positive impact on the

management of both internal and external crises.

However, although these democratic systems may seem desirable for Burkina Faso, it would be wise to consider adapting this model to traditional political systems to make it a clear solution. As demonstrated by the 2014 uprising, traditional leaders can be important actors in state politics, serving as *"intermediaries between their local communities and the central government."* As Arsène Brice Bado explains, *"traditional and modern governance systems coexist alongside each other without truly intersecting or merging into a single system on which the state could rely to establish its authority over the entire national territory."* Representative democracy must, therefore, be adapted to traditional hierarchical structures. The role of traditional leaders in a unified political system could be even more significant, given that the majority of the Burkinabé population is rural.

¹² RFI. (2024). Burkina Faso: Lawyer Guy Hervé Kam Placed Under Detention Again. Available online.

¹³ RFI. (2024). Burkina Faso: Former Minister Ablassé Ouedraogo Appears for the First Time in a Video. Available online.

¹⁴ Reporters sans frontières. (2024). Burkina Faso: Deafening Silence from Authorities After the Abduction of Atiana Serge Oulon. Available online.

¹⁵ Bado, A. B. (2015). Democracy in Burkina Faso Confronted with Traditional Governance Systems. *Études*, April(4), 19-30.

CONCLUSION - WHAT TO RETAIN FROM THE UPRISINGS OF 2014-2015 IN BURKINA FASO?

1.

These uprisings were marked by massive mobilization of the Burkinabé people across the country. This engagement was supported by key actors at different levels: traditional leaders in rural areas who encouraged the spread of the movement, and political entrepreneurs who seized the opportunity to assert themselves as legitimate leaders and initiate institutional changes.

2.

These uprisings were made possible by new means of mobilization for the population. The use of social media allowed for bypassing traditional censorship and raising awareness among a large number of citizens. Activist movements relied on symbols and figures from popular culture, particularly rap music.

3.

The Transition, however, did not result in a truly democratic regime, primarily due to the strong military presence in the political structure. The army's presence sparked numerous disagreements, highlighting the government's weaknesses and the lack of common ideological principles behind the transition. The security situation, plagued by terrorism, perpetuated a vicious cycle, which serves as a pretext for a strong military power.

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