

# Burkina Faso: A Complex Transition to Power is in the Making

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Blaise Compaoré's demise, following 27 years at the helm of Burkina Faso, was a show of popular resilience and strength. A growing civil society and an active political opposition played an important part in organizing and mobilizing demonstrations. This development will likely resonate beyond Burkina Faso and reach other nations led by individuals who have managed to overturn or ignore constitutions for years.

Surely, a new generation of young Africans, who comprise the majority of the population in the continent and who did not experience the anti-colonial wars, have given rise to a new kind of Africa with a greater sense of liberty, democratic values and rule of law. They represent a growing middle class that prizes access to near-instantaneous information from the Internet and mobile phones. These young, knowledgeable and better-off young Africans are thus better able and prepared to demonstrate their disillusionment and disgruntlement against ruling elites, making their voices powerful enough to be decisive in the survival odds of a regime. Undoubtedly, Compaoré's demise portrays it.

While Compaoré's fall from grace after nearly three decades marks a fundamental shift in sub-Saharan Africa's historical record—some may say it can become the trigger to an Arab Spring-like revolution—the immediate aftermath of this event raises some doubts over whether anything will change at all. Since independence, the armed forces have acted as the primary game changers across sub-Saharan Africa, often by launching frequent *coups d'état*. The armed forces often justify toppling a re-

gime by upholding the goals of protecting the nation and guaranteeing the well being of its people, although private interests are normally at its core. Was Burkina Faso the exception? Was Compaoré ousted by a popular uprising? Or was the 'usual suspect' behind it? The answer is Compaoré resigned due to the popular protests and the anti-establishment violence that ensued. Nevertheless, the revolution seems to have been hijacked by the military.

President Compaoré's October 31 resignation followed the largest popular demonstrations and violence in the country since 2011. This was motivated by Compaoré's intention to make the Parliament approve a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for another term in the November 2015 elections. In the capital, Ouagadougou, protesters set the National Assembly ablaze, and targeted other government buildings. The protests spread to other parts of the country, including the second largest city. In a first reaction to the popular upheaval, Compaoré dissolved the government and the Parliament, offered negotiations to his adversaries in order to form a transitional government headed by himself to pave the way to the 2015 elections, for which he would not run. The proposal was met with indifference by the opposition, who continued demanding his resignation.

Just before Compaoré's announcement an army spokesman told demonstrators in the capital that President Compaoré was no longer in power,<sup>1</sup> and a few hours

1 "Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaore ousted, army says" (*Daily Monitor*, 31 October 2014).



later General Honoré Nabéré Traoré, the chief of staff of Burkina Faso's armed forces and a Compaoré loyalist, announced in a press conference he had assumed the functions of head of state. Surprisingly, later in the evening, Lieutenant-Colonel Isaac Yacouba Zida, second in command of the presidential guard, said in a radio broadcast that he had "taken things in hand" and, distancing himself from the armed forces command, affirmed Traoré's claim as "obsolete". Zida also announced the creation of a new "body of transition" and the suspension of the Constitution.<sup>2</sup> In addition, he stated that he would assume the "responsibilities of transition leader and head of state" and attempt to define in a "consensual manner (...) and with all the political parties and organizations of civil society, the contours and content of a peaceful democratic transition".<sup>3</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Zida was unanimously elected by the military hierarchy to lead the transition period.<sup>4</sup>

The announcement that the army was to lead the transition government was the moment when hopes for a civilian takeover went bust. In the words of a coalition of opposition parties and civil society groups "the victory of the popular uprising—and consequently the management of the transition—belongs to the people and should not in any way be confiscated by the army".

The army's power grab is certainly a bad sign for Burkina Faso's democratic prospects. However, the situation gets bleaker considering the close links the new leadership has to Compaoré. In fact, it is perceived that what changed is just the figurehead, while everything else remains the same—same policies and priorities. Rumors have it that Zida's appointment was a political maneuver by Compaoré.<sup>5</sup> That isn't too far-fetched. For Compaoré, who according to Zida moved to Côte d'Ivoire, returning to Burkina Faso without firm control over the authorities and, most importantly, lacking the endorsement of the US and France as a vital security player in the region, would pose a threat to his integrity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, to return under such conditions would certainly remove his immunity from prosecution for a number of accusations, including charges that he was complicit in the assassination of Thomas Sankara, supplied arms and troops to fight UN peacekeepers in Sierra Leone in exchange for diamonds, had links to the 2002 rebellion in Côte d'Ivoire, and dealt in the diamond trade during Angola's civil war. Moreover, losing grip over the country would also prob-

ably mean losing the vast business interests Compaoré and his family hold in the country.<sup>7</sup>

One of the few positive developments in the aftermath of Compaoré's demise was the army's swift agreement over who would take charge. That joint decision itself has in principle averted the possibility of an all out war between military factions, thus guaranteeing the valuable relative peace and stability that the country has enjoyed for the last three decades. Considering this, although the international community is calling for the Constitution to be respected, it surely recognizes that this is not the worst possible scenario. Despite all of Compaoré's wrongdoings, the international community, namely France and the US, have had in Compaoré's regime a strategic and reliable ally in the region. Not only has the regime played a vital role in monitoring and resolving sources of conflict in West Africa, the Sahel and the Sahara—worth noting Compaoré's mediating role in northern Mali, in particular in initiating talks with Ansar Dine, and in negotiations to free Western hostages held by the jihadists groups—but soldiers from Burkina Faso have had a regular presence in UN peacekeeping missions in the continent.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, having the military at the helm of the country should guarantee the continuation of Compaoré's policies on terrorism and cooperation with the West. In sum, it seems that for now France and the US will keep one of its major allies in the region.

However, international and domestic pressure for the return to constitutional order highlights the need for Burkina Faso's international partners to pressure transitional authorities towards ceding power to a civilian body. In order to satisfy the international community's security interests, and also to answer calls for the return to constitutional order, some sort of equilibrium must be attained. That quest is clearly favored by the joint mission of the UN, AU and ECOWAS in the country. While emphasizing "the important role that Burkina Faso plays and will continue to play in efforts to ensure global peace and security as well as political stability within the region and the continent at large, particularly with its active participation in peace keeping and mediation processes", the joint mission also affirmed its readiness "to work with all stakeholders to ensure a rapid return to the respect of constitutional norms".<sup>9</sup>

If one can learn anything out of recent transitions from military to civilian rule in West Africa it is that pressure by ECOWAS, in collaboration with other regional and international organizations, can have an impact.

2 "Burkina: Compaoré quitte le pouvoir, la présidence encore vacante" (*Le Monde*, 31 October 2014), and "Blaise Compaoré resigns as president of Burkina Faso amid violent protests" (*The Washington Post*, 31 October 2014).

3 "Burkina Faso: qui est Isaac Zida, adoubé par l'armée et déjà contesté?" (*RFI*, 2 November 2014).

4 "Burkina Faso opposition parties, African Union reject army takeover" (*Reuters*, 1 November 2014).

5 "Zida, le nouvel homme fort du Burkina Faso" (*France Inter*, 3 November 2014).

6 The West became disgruntled with his intention to overturn the Constitution.

7 "Blaise Compaoré, the African peacemaker who faced rebellion at home" (*France 24*, 31 October 2014), and "Mariam, veuve de Thomas Sankara: Blaise Compaoré "doit répondre de ses crimes"" (*Oeil D'Afrique*, 2 November 2014).

8 "Meet President Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso - the man who could help solve Africa's al-Qaeda crisis" (*The Telegraph*, 17 November 2012).

9 "On the Joint Mission of the United Nations, African Union and ECOWAS to Ouagadougou Following the Events of the Last Few days in Burkina Faso" (ECOWAS, 2 November 2014).



For example, in Guinea-Bissau the international community, via ECOWAS, managed to pressure the military junta that took power following the 2012 military coup towards holding elections in early 2014. The military accepted the results and a civilian government took charge of the country. The coup leader who pulled the strings during the transition period was exonerated and the situation seems to have stabilized. In the case of Burkina Faso, things seem to be even more favorable for a positive outcome. The country's armed forces have had for decades a close relationship with the US and France, and benefited from large flows of aid—which often translated into personal gains—especially military assistance. Thus, in a show of force towards a transition to civilian rule, both France and the US threatened to cut off aid to the country.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as a State Department official stated, “it doesn't appear at this moment that the new transitional government would seek to turn a shoulder to the US or any Western partner” as they will want to keep the threats that have been ravaging its neighborhood at bay.<sup>11</sup> Taking this into consideration, exerting the right amount of pressure on the military may expedite the transfer of power to civilian rule while also maintaining the army's loyalty to Western interests.

Lieutenant Colonel Zida stated that the military has not taken the helm of the country to “usurp power and to sit in place and run the country but to help the country come out of this situation”, thus showing an apparent strong resolve to respect domestic and international pleas for respect for the Constitution. Surprisingly or not, Zida made it clear that “the executive powers will be led by a transitional body but within a constitutional framework that we will watch over carefully”.<sup>12</sup> This last statement indicates that the army does not intend to completely step aside from politics, while also signaling that the chosen leader will have to be borne out of a consensus. Such a consensus depends therefore on the military, political parties and the international community's interests, i.e. France and the US.

Surely, the West cannot afford to have a new government with foreign policy views radically different from that of Compaoré's regime. That would mean losing a main ally in a turbulent and volatile region. Considering this, it seems that the solution would be the election of a pro-Western government. However, one should not think of Cold War style alliances of convenience in which ‘my enemy's enemy is my friend’. Rather, it is possible to marry Western goals of secu-

urity and stability in the region with the broader international community's goals of returning the country to constitutional order. Considering the possibility that the West will use its leverage in the appointment of a new government, the question is who will be the consensual leader among the military, the political opposition and the civil society. Burkina Faso's history has shown that political coalitions have short life spans, bringing down hopes that a political team up between opposition parties can materialize. Nonetheless, the context in Burkina Faso has changed: Compaoré is out of office after three decades, and this fact can become a unifying force.

Zéphirin Diabré, the leader of the parliamentary opposition coalition before the body was dissolved, seems to be in the pole position to lead the country. A former finance minister under Compaoré, founder of the largest opposition party, the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), and also former Deputy Director General of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), he has been the most active voice against Compaoré. Diabré met in September 2014 with Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, former president of the National Assembly and who has defected from Compaoré's party in January 2014, also forming his own political party. The meeting aimed at strengthening relations and act together toward Compaoré's demise and a democratic transition.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Diabré's close cooperation with the opposition was a major factor behind the successful organization of the popular demonstrations that led to Compaoré's resignation. The question now is if collaboration among political forces is sufficiently committed in order to form a coalition capable of reaching a consensus with the military, get the international community's endorsement, and hence put the country on the right track.

Diabré is an experienced politician and aware of the machinations within the international community. Given this, he has sought to woo international partners. In a public speech, in May 2014, Diabré declared his commitment to “tranquilize every brother countries, partners and friends of Burkina Faso” that from “democratic change (...) will result neither chaos, neither decline, nor instability and much less a civil war”. Diabré still congratulated “the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, and through him President Barack Obama, for his firm stance over the respect of presidential term limits”.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Diabré's most important asset in regards to Western interests may turn out to be his proximity to Paris, namely his past chairmanship of the Africa and Middle East Regions at Areva Group, a nuclear energy company

10 “Burkina Faso's Army Backs Zida as Leader” (*The Wall Street Journal*, 1 November 2014).

11 Lee Ferran, “Why Upheaval in Burkina Faso Matters to US National Security” (*ABC News*, 31 October 2014).

12 “Burkina Faso leader says to hand power to transitional body” (*Reuters*, 3 November 2014).

13 “Visite du MPP à l'UPC: Tous unis pour une alternance au Burkina Faso” (*Monfaso.info*, 5 Septembre 2014).

14 “Notre détermination est totale”, dixit Zéphirin Diabré” (*LeFaso*, 2 June 2014).



owned by the French State.<sup>15</sup> It may also be worth recalling that Areva was one of the main reasons behind the 2013 French military intervention in Niger.

Although Diabré is not the only one aspiring to succeed Compaoré, he is still the one who seems to be in a better position. Undoubtedly, much can happen during the forthcoming transition period, including a change in Zida's already stated plan to quickly transfer power to civilian hands. The next few days will certainly provide a better light over who will be preferred to take up the country's presidential seat. Despite the main doubts that cloud the transition process, one thing is certain: the military will not easily abandon its influence over the country's affairs.

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<sup>15</sup> "Zéphirin DIABRE is appointed Chairman of the Africa and Middle East Regions, International and Marketing Department" (Areva, 1 December 2005).

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