



Burkina Faso: a crisis foretold

by Cristina Barrios and José Luengo-Cabrera

The rapidity with which the political crisis in Burkina Faso is unfolding is unprecedented for a nation that has enjoyed relative stability since independence. Although the scale of last week's violent protests was unforeseen, the degree of opposition to Blaise Compaoré's announced intention to extend his rule by another term set the stage for the mass demonstrations that led to his forced resignation.

With the armed forces taking *de facto* control over a transitional authority, civil society and opposition groups – backed by the European Union (EU) and other international actors – have called on the military to quickly restore civilian rule. As the dust begins to settle in the Sahelian country, regional organisations like the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS are pressing the armed forces to hand power back to civilian authorities so as to hold general elections as soon as possible.

In circumstances somewhat reminiscent of the Senegalese youth uprisings of 2011, Burkina Faso's popular uprising now faces a critical juncture akin to that confronted by the Arab countries in 2011. While the civil disobedience movement has fed the narrative of democratic change in Africa, the political system is structurally weak, and general elections *per se* will be no panacea for the West African country.

A crisis in the making

The depth of popular disillusionment with Compaoré had been expressed repeatedly in the years and

months preceding this crisis. A series of events revealed strong popular opposition to the president's determination to extend his mandate. His various political manoeuvres show that he had been attempting to change article 37 of the constitution without resorting to a national referendum.

As early as May 2013, when Compaoré announced his plans to form a new Senate, opposition groups warned of the dangers of a legislative body filled with handpicked sympathisers of the president. With the election of the new Senate taking place in late July 2013, Compaoré was able to directly appoint a third of the 89-strong body. Thousands of protesters rallied in the streets of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso to oppose the establishment of the Senate, which was indeed postponed.

This was the first sign of political unrest following a series of protests that had prompted a government reshuffle already in 2011. The protest incidents included a military mutiny led by disgruntled members of the presidential guard demanding unpaid housing allowances in April 2011. During the same month, large-scale rallies were organised to protest against the rising cost of basic goods – with similar demonstrations repeated last summer.

The sudden way in which the social disobedience campaign escalated into countrywide violent protests took many by surprise. Yet early warning signals had been flagged up by the International Crisis Group as early as July 2013, with claims that any attempt to

amend the constitution could provoke a replica of the 2011 popular uprisings.

The political climate was already highly-charged at the start of 2014. In the wake of Compaoré's public announcement of his intention to extend his term in office, the ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) was rocked by a wave of resignations in early January. By mid-January, thousands of *Burkinabés* were participating in opposition-led rallies across the country, while heavyweight CDP defectors formed a new opposition party – the Movement of People for Progress (MPP) – presenting itself as a credible contender of the CDP's longstanding political hegemony.

On 30 January former President Ouédraogo declared that 'the ingredients for a possible social explosion are there' and offered to launch mediation talks. However, negotiations kept stalling as Compaoré's representatives steadfastly refused to commit against amending the constitution.

Another 'Spring' in the making?

Unlike the military coup that brought Compaoré to power in 1987, this crisis bears some resemblance to the 2011 'Arab Spring' that Africans followed on their TV screens, possibly waiting for their turn. Back then, however, many of the continent's ageing leaders rushed to discredit and denounce the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt as 'non-African' movements that were dangerously destabilising society (Equatorial Guinea's Obiang, for instance, went as far as to censor broadcasts of demonstrations on national television). For their part, in the wake of Compaoré's resignation, civil society and opposition groups gathered in the capital's main square to protest against the possible installation of a military regime, in scenes redolent of Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Following the military's dubious initial handling of the protests, the EU voiced its concern and called on Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida – the self-proclaimed leader of the interim government – to transfer power back to civilian authorities. A transition period should follow, but security and institutions here are not as fragile as for example in the Central African Republic.

Yet restoring constitutional order and holding general elections will be challenging. A possible 'unity government' resting on a shaky consensus and torn amidst factionalism within the military and divisions among opposition groups could lead to chaotic scenarios resembling those in Guinea (2009) and Mali (2012).

Pan-African ramifications

With growing uncertainty regarding the stability of the West African country, important allies like the US and France are concerned about their military operations in the Sahel. Having served as a strategic operational hub, a messy Burkina Faso could complicate France's plans to reinforce its military presence in the region, forcing Paris to rely more on its bases in Chad and Niger. Moreover, Western cooperation with the G5 – the regional grouping constituted by Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad that leads the fight against terrorism in the Sahel – could become problematic if the security situation in Burkina Faso deteriorates further.

Finally, this crisis showcases the risks to which other leaders may be exposed when attempting to extend their mandates (a phenomenon, incidentally, that is not limited to Africa, as the cases of Nicaragua and Ecuador show) at a time when citizens are becoming less acquiescent to the unconstitutional tricks of their rulers. While the 2010 coup in Niger served as a foreboding precedent, indications that President Kabila (Democratic Republic of Congo) and President Nkurunziza (Burundi) are exploring similar options raise serious concerns about the prospects for stability in the Central African region. With Benin currently muddling through a controversial electoral process and Nigeria preparing for a highly contested election next February, West Africa is expected to experience turmoil in an electorally-charged 2015.

In Africa, especially over the past decade, democratic processes have made significant headway. Electoral processes, however, have increasingly become catalysts of instability – with divisive electoral laws (often based on the winner-takes-all principle) and polarised political and party systems (often based on ethnic or geographical cleavages) frequently triggering post-electoral violent protests. All this is made potentially more dangerous by the fact that gerontocratic African rulers, in power for decades – in Equatorial Guinea, Angola, Zimbabwe, Cameroon and Uganda – and eager to extend their grip further, preside over an ever-younger population that has very few economic and political prospects.

While 'wars of succession' look unlikely, the potential for protest and turbulent transitions is definitely there – and the general symptoms and root causes do not differ much from those that the international community failed to discern in the Arab world.

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