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Mobilization, Negotiation, and Transition in Burkina Faso

By *Eloïse Bertrand*



Women take part in a rally in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on October 27, 2014, opposing President Blaise Compaoré's attempt to seek another term. (Photo by Theo Renault/AP)

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Summary

- A popular uprising in October 2014 forced Burkina Faso's president, Blaise Compaoré, to resign after he tried to remove constitutional limits barring him from a fifth term.
- Persistent popular mobilization shaped the subsequent transition and helped lead to substantial reforms. The transition benefited from a culture of dialogue and consensus and a vast, resilient network across negotiating groups.
- Several recommendations arise from these events. All actors should encourage a culture of dialogue and help build networks between stakeholders well before popular mobilization begins.
- A rushed transition focusing on the quick delivery of elections may be less desirable than a longer and more ambitious transition that aims to address deep-rooted failures of the old system.
- International actors should back the priorities laid out by domestic forces and have a context-specific approach.
- Stakeholders need to anticipate the emergence of spoilers who want to roll back the transition and strategize accordingly.
- Finally, movements need to prepare for and guard against an inevitable decline in momentum after their initial successes.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines how nonviolent action and negotiation processes together facilitated an unlikely peaceful democratic transition in Burkina Faso in 2014 and 2015. Based on extensive research and interviews with key figures in the transition, including political leaders and civil society activists, it was funded by the People Power, Peace Processes, and Democratization project, a joint initiative of the Nonviolent Action and Inclusive Peace Processes programs at the United States Institute of Peace.

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People gather on the Place de la Nation in Ouagadougou on October 31, 2014, to await the announcement of a new interim leader after President Blaise Compaoré resigned under pressure from protests. (Photo by Theo Renault/AP)

Introduction

In October 2014, a popular uprising in Burkina Faso toppled President Blaise Compaoré’s regime. In power for twenty-seven years, Compaoré was trying to remove constitutional term limits that barred him from seeking reelection in 2015. Unprecedented mobilization against this attempt led to massive protests and the arson of the National Assembly building in the capital city of Ouagadougou, forcing Compaoré to resign and paving the way for a negotiated political transition. These events provide a crucial case study of how popular mobilization and negotiations intersect in determining the outcome of successful nonviolent action campaigns and the long-term consequences of nonviolent action for more peaceful and inclusive governance.

The 2014 uprising and the transition that followed have had important positive consequences for Burkina Faso, even if the uprising’s revolutionary spirit and the promise that “nothing will be as before” have not been fully realized.¹ The new president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, first elected in 2015, is an old Compaoré regime figure who joined the opposition less than a year before the uprising.² Although the new ruling party did not dominate the legislature as Compaoré’s had, forcing the incoming president to build a coalition including small parties to secure a legislative majority, the promised overhaul of the political system and a new constitution have not unfolded. Meanwhile, spiraling violence by jihadists and other militia groups since 2016 has dealt a serious blow to the country’s prospects, raising insecurity in a country once renowned for its social cohesion.³

Despite these challenges, Burkina Faso remains a powerful case of transformative popular mobilization and political transition. Ordinary citizens, roused by activists and the opposition, thwarted Compaoré’s attempt to meddle with the constitution and opened the door to a long-overdue political transition.⁴ Although the military initially stepped into the void, negotiations involving civil society, opposition parties, security forces, religious and traditional authorities, and even the former ruling elite quickly ushered in an inclusive civilian-led transition, which went on to pass defining legislation on key issues such as corruption and judicial independence.⁵ A massive domestic nonviolent action campaign and international pressure put down a reactionary coup d’état attempt in 2015 after only a week.⁶ Free and fair elections—held in late November—were only slightly delayed by the coup attempt.⁷

This report analyzes the intersection of popular mobilization, dialogue and negotiation, and democratization during the 2014 uprising and the subsequent transition, focusing on the following questions: How, amid a so-called catchall uprising, was consensus built among disparate stakeholders around the transition’s nature and institutions? To what extent did actual and potential popular mobilization influence negotiations between the old regime, civil society, and the political opposition? What was achieved during the transition period? What legacy has the transition left in terms of democratization and peace in Burkina Faso, and what can be learned from it?

The report draws on long-term research on the political opposition to the Compaoré regime, including fifty-seven anonymized semi-structured interviews with opposition politicians and activists in Burkina Faso between 2017 and 2018, telephone interviews conducted in July and August 2020 with five civil society activists who played a part in the uprising and the transition, and the personal and investigative accounts of key individuals who took part in, or closely observed, these events.

Burkinabè Uprising

Compaoré held on to power as long as he did due to the dominance of the ruling party (the Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, or CDP), the politicization of the administrative and business elite, and Compaoré’s personal control of the armed forces.⁸ He also benefited from entrenched rural support fueled by his patronage of influential traditional chiefs. The presidential guard, known as the Régiment de sécurité présidentielle (RSP), was a loyal elite unit of some 1,300 troops. Under the command of Compaoré’s close adviser General Gilbert Diendéré, it was better paid, trained, and equipped than the rest of the security forces and became perceived as “an army within the army.”⁹

For the better part of Compaoré’s regime, opposition parties were characterized by their weakness and divisions, and prone to *political nomadism*—politicians frequently crossing over to other parties or creating new parties, as is common across West Africa.¹⁰ These challenges were partially addressed by the creation of the Chef de file de l’opposition politique (CFOP) in 2009, a designation that refers to both an individual—the leader of the opposition party with the most parliamentary seats, who acts as opposition leader or spokesperson—and to the collective group of opposition parties. The CFOP was first headed by Bénéwendé Sankara of the Union pour

MAP OF BURKINA FASO

Adapted from artwork by
Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock

la Renaissance–Parti Sankariste (UNIR–PS), a small party claiming the legacy of the revolutionary regime of President Thomas Sankara, who was assassinated in 1987 during a coup organized by Compaoré. Under Bénéwendé Sankara’s leadership, the opposition secured a more independent electoral commission and the introduction of biometric technology in the 2010 elections. However, when



a wave of popular protests and army mutinies erupted in 2011 over disparate grievances, the opposition failed to harness the dissent into a coherent anti-incumbent movement.¹¹ In 2012, the Union pour le Progrès et le Changement (UPC), founded by Zéphirin Diabré two years earlier, became the largest opposition party and assumed leadership of the CFOP, which then included more than thirty parties. In January 2014, the opposition was strengthened by the defection of key CDP figures—Roch Kaboré, Simon Compaoré (no relation to Blaise), and Salif Diallo—who created a new party, the Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès (MPP), and joined the CFOP.

Burkinabè civil society has long been characterized by its diversity and its combativeness. Trade unions, whose membership is rooted in the administrative state rather than the working class, have a rich history: they were instrumental in bringing down the country’s first post-independence government in 1966, for example, and have continued to be a strong opposition force ever since.¹² The unions, along with student associations and prominent human rights and anti-corruption organizations, are powerful machines characterized by a strong leftist ideological alignment. Another section of civil society is made up of think tanks and nongovernmental organizations promoting development and good governance and animated by academics, journalists, and other intellectuals, some of whom were gathered in the Front de Résistance Citoyenne (FRC) from 2012. These organizations played an important part in disseminating information about—and promoting adherence to—democratic principles and institutions.¹³

Beginning in 2013, several new activist groups emerged in response to Compaoré’s attempt to modify the constitution. This included the Balai Citoyen (Citizen’s Broom), a movement formed around two Burkinabè artists in the summer of 2013 to “sweep away” the corruption of Compaoré’s regime, and the Collectif anti-référendum (CAR), an umbrella organization founded in 2014 to oppose a constitutional referendum over term limits. These younger movements had a powerful mobilization capacity, stemming from the popularity of their art and their Sankarist rhetoric (which drew from the ideals of Thomas Sankara).¹⁴ They engaged in novel protest tactics



Protesters gather at Place de la Nation in Ouagadougou on October 28, 2014, calling for President Blaise Compaoré to abandon plans to hold a referendum on changing term limits to allow him to stay in power. (Photo by Joe Penney/Reuters)

and appealed to urban youth to be part of the struggle.¹⁵ Yet their role in the 2014 uprising has also been overinflated in international media given their appeal to foreign audiences and their savvy use of social media. Their mobilization power was critical, but supported a broader existing movement led by opposition parties and older activists.

THE ISSUES

The question of term limits, and of *alternance* (alternation) more broadly, had been at the heart of political tensions throughout the Compaoré era. Alternance is a popular term in francophone West Africa referring to the transfer of power from one party to another.¹⁶ The 1991 constitution originally helped ensure alternance by including a two-term limit to the presidential tenure. Compaoré removed this provision in 1997. Following a political crisis sparked by the assassination of journalist Norbert Zongo the following year, however, Compaoré reinstated term limits as part of a reform package designed to diffuse the unrest. This was based on the recommendations of a Conseil des Sages (Council of the Wise) that included respected figures such as former presidents and religious and traditional authorities. Yet Compaoré was reelected twice more—in 2005 and 2010—on the understanding that the law was not retroactive.¹⁷

After 2010, voices within the ruling party began advocating for a modification of the constitution, which would allow Compaoré to run yet again in 2015. The government used various strategies to this end: political dialogue in search of a consensus with other political forces, the creation of a Senate, talks of a referendum, and a bill in Parliament. Following the 2011 protests, the government launched a political dialogue process involving parties and civil society known as the *Cadre de concertation sur les réformes politiques*. The political opposition, gathered in the CFOP, boycotted the process, perceiving it as an attempt to meddle with term limits. Meanwhile, Compaoré failed to secure a consensus even among participating stakeholders.¹⁸ Further, the creation of a Senate, in part appointed and in part elected, led to renewed protests throughout 2013. The public saw the new chamber in an overwhelmingly negative light—at best as an unnecessary expense and at worst as a ploy by Compaoré to secure another term or to groom his unpopular brother as his successor.¹⁹ On October 21, 2014, after months of speculation and intermittent mobilization, the government introduced a bill to hold a referendum on modifying the constitution to allow the president to be reelected twice rather than only once.²⁰ On October 25, Compaoré secured the support of the Alliance pour la Démocratie et la Fédération/Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, a party belonging to the ruling majority that had previously rejected scrapping term limits.²¹ With their votes, Compaoré had a two-thirds majority in Parliament to approve the amendment without a referendum. This prospect prompted escalating protests organized by the CFOP, civil society organizations, and trade unions—the unions focusing on sectorial grievances but nonetheless adding to the pressure on the regime. Then, in the early hours of October 30—the day legislators were due to vote on the bill—protesters marched on the National Assembly, invaded the parliamentary building, and set it on fire.²² Compaoré backtracked, pulled the bill, and announced he would step down at the end of his term. It was too little, too late, however. He resigned the following day, October 31, and fled to Côte d'Ivoire.

FINDING CONSENSUS

Although the insurrection was the outcome of a series of crises rather than a single event or issue, Compaoré's resignation still surprised both analysts and activists. As one UNIR-PS official explained, "This is why when Blaise had gone, it took us days to find a president to lead the transition—we were not prepared. Blaise had become something like a god. We didn't think he would just resign like that." No clear succession order was in place. Four people claimed the presidency in only two days: General Honoré Nabéré Traoré, the army's chief of staff; Lieutenant-Colonel Isaac Zida, the RSP's second-in-command; General Kouamé Lougué, a popular retired soldier; and Saran Sérémé, the leader of a small opposition party belonging to the CFOP.²³ The hours and days following Compaoré's resignation saw intense negotiations among civil society organizations, political parties, the armed forces, and international partners to define the modalities of a transition.

In early November, despite their heterogeneity, these stakeholders were able to ultimately find consensus on and adopt the Transition Charter, a formal agreement that established both the transitional institutions to be set up and basic principles such as civilian leadership and the one-year duration of the transition. How did such a remarkable consensus emerge?

STICKING POINTS AND DIVIDING LINES

The uprising saw many divergent groups come together behind the same objectives: protecting constitutional term limits and ensuring political alternance after 2015. Diverging interests and priorities emerged once Compaoré was gone. Luc Marius Ibriga, a prominent intellectual and civil society figure who led the writing of the Transition Charter, referred to the uprising as a *fourre-tout* (catchall).²⁴ The sole goal of some was to protect the constitution; others, such as the Balai Citoyen, had broader objectives in favor of social justice and against corruption; and some simply sought political power. The international community also had diverging views. The US ambassador condemned Compaoré's intent to change the constitution.²⁵ His French counterpart supported the regime and facilitated Compaoré's flight to Côte d'Ivoire on a French air force plane.²⁶

Two issues were important sticking points in the negotiations: the transition's leadership (civilian or military) and the length of the transition period. Political parties pushed for a short transition of three to six months, focused on organizing elections. Meanwhile, civil society argued in favor of a longer transition so as to have enough time to "cleanse the Augean stable"—as activist Augustin Loada remarked in an interview—and conduct necessary reforms to allow a new political system to emerge. Rasmane Zinaba from the Balai Citoyen further explained that their movement wanted to take advantage of the transition to implement substantial reforms that would affect the population's living conditions, and to go even beyond the ambitions set before the uprising.

Yet each of these actors was beset by internal divisions. Among opposition parties, the CFOP institution provided a semblance of unity because it was already providing a space of interparty dialogue and consensus building. They considered quick organization of elections the priority. Zinaba argued that "parties wanted to start campaigning quickly to benefit from the profile they had built during the uprising." Disagreements among the parties, however, prevented the political opposition from taking the lead, allowing civil society to assume a more prominent role. Civil society activists have argued that opposition parties were either not ready or unwilling to take over when Compaoré resigned. In fact, on October 30, Zéphirin Diabré, as the CFOP, initially shied away from demanding Compaoré's resignation but acceded under pressure from other parties and civil society figures.²⁷ A UPC official argued that opposition parties "were taken by surprise by Blaise's resignation, and then made political calculations to obstruct each other," being less interested in the transition and more in the 2015 elections. Hervé Ouattara from the CAR argued that "the transition didn't suit [the opposition parties]. They wanted to wait for free and transparent elections to get credibility."

Civil society organizations were also highly heterogeneous. Many activists—among them the Balai Citoyen, the CAR, and the FRC—called for the army to force Compaoré out and fill the void to prevent chaos. However, when it came to the transition, many vehemently rejected a military takeover. Trade unions and radical associations, which had stayed on the side of the insurrection and remained outside these negotiations, also denounced "yet another coup d'état," mobilized against the "usurpation" of the people's revolution by the army, and warned against a repetition of past mistakes (after the country's first uprising in January 1966, the army stepped in and never left).²⁸ During internal civil society negotiations, some organizations were accused of being agents of political parties.²⁹ Indeed, many associations were founded and financed by political parties, such as the MPP, making Burkinabè civil society not "really civil."³⁰

Burkina Faso has long had a tradition of dialogue and a norm of consensus, even during Compaoré's semi-authoritarian regime. . . . The regime often set up formal dialogue mechanisms that included the majority, the opposition, and civil society.

The army was also at first highly divided internally. When, minutes after Compaoré's resignation, General Traoré announced that he would "assume [his] responsibilities as head of state," he did so without the army's backing.³¹ Tensions between the RSP and the regular army were pronounced, and the RSP refused to accept Traoré's leadership. Meanwhile, civil society and opposition parties pressured the army to find internal consensus.³² Internal army negotiations led Traoré to

stand aside and back Zida, the RSP's second-in-command, to take the head of the transition.³³

CONSENSUS

From then on, further negotiations shaped the transition. Augustin Loada described the negotiation process as highly compartmentalized. Indeed, each group negotiated on its own, and a few key figures—prominently Ibriga of the FRC—went back and forth between them to design a document laying out the transition's path. The only time a plenary of all stakeholders was held was in fact the day the Transition Charter was signed.

The charter functioned as a temporary set of institutions complementing the existing constitution and intended to restore a constitutional order. It provided for a civilian president of the transition, as well as a government and a legislative Conseil National de la Transition (CNT) that drew from the various signatory groups. To promote a level playing field, it also barred the president of the transition, president of the CNT, and members of the interim government from running in the 2015 elections. The president of the transition, Michel Kafando, was appointed by a special body. He immediately appointed Isaac Zida as prime minister, demonstrating that the army had not completely lost control. Meanwhile, Cheriff Sy, a journalist and civil society activist, was elected as CNT president by his fellow parliamentarians, who had been appointed by the signatory groups: ex-opposition parties (thirty seats), civil society organizations (twenty-five), security forces (twenty-five), and former "majority" parties (ten).³⁴

Consensus around these institutions is surprising given the fragmentation of interests and heterogeneity of the actors. Four factors contributed to this result. First, Burkina Faso has long had a tradition of dialogue and a norm of consensus, even during Compaoré's semi-authoritarian regime. Among the opposition, for example, the CFOP provided a framework for dialogue among opposition parties, and decisions were usually taken by consensus. During moments of crisis, such as after the 1998 Zongo assassination or the 2011 protests and mutinies, the regime often set up formal dialogue mechanisms that included the majority, the opposition, and civil society. Traditional and religious authorities have also long promoted and facilitated dialogue and mediation, either as part of the Council of the Wise or individually. In particular, the Catholic Church, the Mogho Naaba (the emperor of the Mossi, the largest ethnic group), and former President Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo have been important and near universally respected mediators in times of crisis.³⁵

A second and related factor is the informal mechanisms and personal networks among the stakeholders. The dense interrelations between politicians—who are related or went to the same schools—have contributed to the peaceful resolution of political crises in the past.³⁶ Despite a growing diverse population, people from different political parties and civil society



Transitional president Michel Kafondo (center) is photographed in Ouagadougou on November 21, 2014, a few days after being sworn into office. (Photo by Joe Penney/Reuters)

movements still have dense networks—such as from revolutionary defense committees in the 1980s or student politics at the University of Ouagadougou.³⁷ This interconnection between stakeholders in the uprising played a huge part in allowing direct negotiations and encouraging trust. Abdoul Karim Saidou of the FRC explained: “There is a tradition of dialogue among these stakeholders who know each other very well and are used to working together.” Former CNT president Cheriff Sy says much the same in his account of the insurrection: “From October 21, 2014, an informal brainstorming and action center was spontaneously formed at my home.”³⁸ He also describes how individuals met, talked, called others, and exchanged contact details even during the height of the insurrection.

Third, stakeholders were conscious of the necessity to find a consensus quickly, which motivated them to compromise. Pressures to reach consensus came from both internal and external factors. Internally, all stakeholders were concerned that the insurrection could descend into chaos or violent conflict. After burning the National Assembly, protesters went on to target buildings associated with the Compaoré regime, such as the CDP’s headquarters and the homes of CDP figures. This “selective violence” expanded to looting the next day, leading many civil society activists to demand that the army step in.³⁹ “If we wanted a minimum of peace and security, and

to stop the looting,” Zinaba explained, “the army had to provide security across the national territory; we said so and we stand by it.” The army restored order, but a consensus was still needed to avoid the popular mobilization degenerating into chaos.

Externally, international partners threatened to impose sanctions based on anti-coup policies unless stakeholders agreed quickly on a consensual, inclusive, and civilian charter. For example, the African Union’s (AU) African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance rejects unconstitutional changes of government and allows the AU to suspend that country’s membership after a coup.⁴⁰ The United States and several other countries also threatened to freeze bilateral cooperation.⁴¹ To avoid these sanctions, Burkinabè stakeholders had to convince their international partners that the change of government was a result of a popular uprising, not a coup, and had to restore some sort of constitutional order quickly.⁴² As Saidou summarized it, “Everyone had an interest in finding a negotiated solution.”

Finally, the persistent popular mobilization in the days after Compaoré’s resignation also influenced the negotiations and their outcome. In particular, persistent mobilization on the Place de la Nation in Ouagadougou was key in signaling the army that it had to allow a civilian-led transition. Zinaba explained that “the army had no choice, the popular pressure was such that it was out of the question to have another 1966,” when the army held on to power. Ouattara remarked that “the army saw what was going on, what the population wanted was clear.” This mobilization also created a new source of legitimacy, the *ruecratie* (“streetocracy”). Activists mobilizing in the streets—and their capacity to get the population out—had to be considered by negotiating forces. As Saidou remarked, “The permanent mobilization in the streets demonstrated that those who had led the insurrection had the right to have their voice heard.”

Popular Mobilization and the Transition

The need for both negotiations and mobilization did not disappear when the transition was initiated but in fact became more important than ever, both to ensure that the transition fulfilled popular expectations and to protect it from spoilers. For example, the Balai Citoyen warned its activists from the start that they should not demobilize too quickly: “The popular uprising must be celebrated, but we must stay alert about our objectives.” This section analyzes how persistent mobilization shaped transition authorities’ decisions and achievements, and how popular pressure then protected the transition from spoilers—in particular during the attempted coup d’état of September 2015.

TRANSITION AGENDA

The Transition Charter had put new institutions in place but had not defined a clear road map or objectives for the transition. This absence meant that activist movements maintained popular pressure to steer the transition and influence decisions. It also meant that any reforms successfully pushed through were subject to constant negotiations between the various stakeholders—civil society, political parties, and the army—as well as across institutions, in particular the CNT

and the transition government. The different groups pushed for different reforms, Saidou noted, and “the government tried to arbitrate, taking into consideration key demands that civil society had not managed to put on the agenda under Blaise Compaoré.”

Many civil society organizations therefore saw the transition as an opportunity to push substantial reforms they had been unable to advocate for during the Compaoré era. As Zinaba argued, “The transition was the best period to implement in-depth reforms and to impose them on the ruling class.” Some movements, such as the Balai Citoyen, stayed out of the transition’s decision-making institutions to monitor their work from the outside—though they did sit in consultative bodies such as the Commission de réconciliation nationale et des réformes. Other stakeholders participated in the transition’s institutions. As noted, the CNT included representatives from all Transition Charter signatory groups—yet civil society was the most influential, illustrated by the proactive leadership and influence of Cheriff Sy. The nature of the reforms was determined by the fluctuating leverage of various stakeholders and the priorities determined by the government—both heavily influenced by persistent popular mobilization.

Mobilization potential did not evaporate when the transition got underway: people went home but were ready to come out again if necessary. Trade unions and civil movements, for example, led protests that forced two members of the transitional government out. First, in November 2014, was Adama Sagnon, the prosecutor in the Zongo assassination case, who resigned barely two days after his appointment as minister of culture.⁴³ Second was Moumouni Dieguimdé, who was rejected as minister of transport on the basis of criminal charges against him for corruption in the United States.⁴⁴ The proposed salary for legislators sitting in the CNT was also controversial, after a legislator admitted during a television debate that they earned 1,778,000 CFA francs per month (\$3,200)—an amount considered obscene by trade unions, civil society activists, and the public.⁴⁵ The CNT responded to intense popular condemnation by cutting these salaries in half.⁴⁶

The power of the streets was also apparent in the government’s priorities. Legal cases that had been ignored or closed during the Compaoré era, and that symbolized the former regime’s impunity, were reopened, including those related to the deaths of Thomas Sankara and Norbert Zongo. Substantial reforms were adopted to strengthen the anti-corruption institution led by Luc Marius Ibriga to improve judiciary independence and to launch an emergency plan for youth employment. All these actions responded to key grievances that had fueled the anti-Compaoré mobilization and remained high on the civil society agenda both within and outside the CNT. The transition’s pace and its substance were thus heavily influenced by popular mobilization.

TRANSITION SPOILERS

Popular pressure also ensured that the transition stayed on track in the face of reactionary setbacks. Two remnants of the Compaoré era threatened to derail the transition: the old political elite and the presidential guard.

Given the long dominance of Compaoré’s circle in Burkinabè politics, many in civil society and from former opposition parties sought to exclude the old political elite from running in the 2015 elections. Compaoré’s attempt to modify the limit on presidential terms set in Article 37, they argued, had been a “constitutional coup d’état” and a lustration process was therefore legitimate.⁴⁷ More than 60 percent of the population, according to a 2015 survey, agreed.⁴⁸ A

Sit-ins and protests erupted in many towns and cities across the country [following the September 16 coup], benefiting from the organizational expansion of the Balai Citoyen and other movements.

new electoral code barring “anyone who has supported an anti-constitutional change interfering with the principle of democratic alternation, notably with the principle of presidential term limits, leading to an insurrection or any other type of uprising” from standing in the 2015 elections was adopted—effectively banning members of the last Compaoré regime government. Politicians from the CDP

and allied parties, as well as international partners such as France and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), condemned the move and demanded “inclusive” elections. The transition authorities, however, defended the provision, arguing that it was in line with the AU’s African Charter, which includes the “condemnation and total rejection of unconstitutional changes of government” (Article 3.10), and maintained this exclusion despite a contrary, but non-binding, judgment at the ECOWAS Court of Justice in July 2015.⁴⁹

Many in civil society and the population also demanded that the presidential guard be dissolved.⁵⁰ Cheriff Sy, for example, in his memoirs described his conviction that “a new era could not be open for my dear Faso as long as the foundations of the previous regime, that of Blaise Compaoré, were not completely and properly demolished.”⁵¹ Isaac Zida, the prime minister, came from the RSP’s ranks but nonetheless moved quickly to support its dissolution.⁵² The RSP reacted violently, interrupting the Council of Ministers and trying to arrest Zida in February 2015, and, four months later, starting a mutiny demanding his resignation and that of soldiers loyal to him.

The most serious threat, however, came on September 16, when the RSP took the president, the prime minister, and two ministers hostage. General Diendéré, the historical leader of the RSP and head of intelligence during the Compaoré regime, led the coup, announcing that the transition institutions would be suspended, a new transition council set up, and “inclusive” elections organized. In a testament to the reactionary alliance between the RSP and the old political elite, CDP officials refused to condemn the move.⁵³

Yet the coup was foiled after only a week. Popular mobilization resumed, with people taking to the streets to denounce the takeover. Cheriff Sy went underground and denounced the coup.⁵⁴ Civil society organizations and former opposition parties mobilized their networks. Trade unions called for an open-ended general strike.⁵⁵ In Ouagadougou, no major demonstrations took place in the city center, as in 2014; instead, youth mobilized in peripheral neighborhoods, blocking main roads with barricades. Meanwhile, sit-ins and protests erupted in many towns and cities across the country, benefiting from the organizational expansion of the Balai Citoyen and other movements.⁵⁶ This countrywide mobilization was crucial in motivating the regular army to confront the RSP rather than align behind it.

International and supranational organizations swiftly condemned the coup. The AU suspended Burkina Faso, described the coup perpetrators as terrorists, and imposed sanctions on them.⁵⁷ Meanwhile, ECOWAS sent a mediation team led by Presidents Macky Sall of Senegal and Thomas Boni Yayi of Benin. The team’s arrival, interviewees related, stopped a spiral of RSP violence and repression. At the same time, Burkinabè activists greeted it with suspicion and its suggestions coldly. Many of them saw ECOWAS as a “presidents’ club” that had sided with Compaoré rather than with the people of Burkina Faso.⁵⁸ After a short visit in Ouagadougou to meet with various



A protester waves the Burkina Faso national flag as people gathered on September 21, 2015, to oppose the coup attempt led by General Gilbert Diendéré, the head of intelligence during the Compaoré regime. (Photo by Theo Renaut/AP)

coup perpetrators, political leaders, hostages, and diplomats, the mediators released a draft agreement, arguing that it was “the only means of protecting Burkina Faso from violence and impasse.”⁵⁹ The plan included liberating the hostages and restoring the transitional institutions, but also modifying the electoral code to allow the old elite to participate in the

upcoming elections and guaranteeing immunity for the coup perpetrators.

The mobilized forces across the country found the accommodations unacceptable. Cheriff Sy, the Balai Citoyen, union leaders, and other civil society figures were all adamant that the transition institutions be restored unconditionally and coup leaders prosecuted. The mediation team’s top-down approach focused on restoring peace and failed to account for popular pressure and the unwillingness of civil society to compromise.⁶⁰ Zinaba of the Balai Citoyen explained that ECOWAS was “trying to force us into doing some things; they aren’t going to impose a road map, when these organizations and these heads of state are the one who supported the coup.” In the end, the draft agreement was set aside, and at a special conference in Abuja, Nigeria, on September 22, ECOWAS heads of states formally demanded the unconditional restoration of the transition.

The coup also laid bare divisions within the army, having been perpetrated solely by the RSP and not supported by the rest of the army. Initially, the military hierarchy adopted a cautious approach, waiting for the dust to settle. Among the ranks, disgruntlement with the RSP was high, fueled by the RSP’s better pay, training, and equipment. The RSP had also violently repressed regular army mutinies in 2011.⁶¹ Popular pressure added to this division as protesters in secondary towns converged on army barracks, demanding that the army put down the coup.⁶² Parties and civil society figures who had contacts among young officers and rank-and-file soldiers across the country not only urged them to oppose the coup but also provided them with logistical and financial support.⁶³ The domestic outcry from former opposition parties, civil society, trade unions, and youth ultimately forced the regular army to pick a side—that of the people. Troops entered the capital on September 21 and threatened to attack the RSP barracks.⁶⁴ Besieged and outnumbered, the coup perpetrators finally surrendered. General Diendéré was arrested and later convicted.⁶⁵

In sum, persistent mobilization by Burkinabè civil society kept the transition on track—monitoring authorities’ decisions, pressing them to respond to key grievances, and ultimately safeguarding

the transition from a counterrevolutionary coup. The Balai Citoyen, for example, expanded its organization outside the capital and even among the diaspora. Other civil society figures, under the leadership of Ibriga and the FRC, maintained a consultation framework to ensure monitoring of the transition. Meanwhile, the youth that had come out in massive numbers in October 2014 remained alert and ready to demonstrate again. Ouattara explained that “the whole population was monitoring closely what was happening,” and Marcel Tankoano of the Mouvement du 21 avril, which he founded in April 2013, stated that “when the people feel involved in how government functions, everything becomes easy. Everyone felt involved, everyone shared a responsibility, and everyone wanted for [the transition] to go well and to be an example.”

Legacies of the Transition

The transition ended in successful elections on November 29, 2015—only slightly delayed by the attempted coup. Roch Kaboré of the MPP was elected president in the first round; his opponent, Zéphirin Diabré of the UPC, quickly acknowledged his defeat. The elections were widely and overwhelmingly praised as the freest and most transparent the country had ever experienced, benefiting from an effective domestic observation initiative.⁶⁶ The lack of an absolute majority in Parliament forced Kaboré’s MPP to build a ruling coalition with smaller parties, leading to a reconfiguration of the party landscape that put the UPC and the CDP in the opposition.

During the insurrection, protesters had shouted on the Place de la Nation—which they had renamed Revolution Square—“Rien ne sera plus jamais comme avant!” (Nothing will be as before). Actual change has been less dramatic, however, and the transition’s legacy is mixed. The leaders elected in November 2015, interviewees asserted, have spent most of their political careers in the upper tiers of Compaoré’s system, and their policies have not fundamentally differed from those of their predecessors, giving rise to frustration and disappointment. A new constitution has not come to fruition. Revision of the current one has been minimal but does include several key measures: for example, it “locks” Article 37 (presidential term limits) and authorizes independent electoral candidates.⁶⁷ After the 2015 elections and a participatory process that included workshops across the country to gather people’s views, an inclusive and representative commission drafted a new constitution.⁶⁸ Despite apparent consensus over its content, agreement on whether and when to hold a referendum remains elusive. This lack of political will means that the draft constitution now gathers dust on President Kaboré’s desk. Old problems persist even as new difficulties have emerged. Previously spared from the armed insurgencies affecting the rest of the Sahel region, Burkina Faso has seen the expansion of Islamist armed violence across the country kill close to five thousand people and displace more than a million others in the past five years.⁶⁹

At the same time, despite the huge role popular protests played throughout the transition, the monitoring and mobilization power of the streets appears to have lost steam. Saidou of the FRC remarked that “paradoxically, regarding civic monitoring, the legacy is very poor. . . . [It] continues, but really below what we could have expected.” The current authorities have also actively eroded civil society’s capacities by throwing accusations of corruption at figures of the transition—Zida in particular—and civil society more broadly to weaken these potential opponents.⁷⁰ According to Tankoano, “This explains why today the temperature has cooled down.” Ensuring

the accountability of the transition authorities is crucial, and the Burkinabè anti-corruption body performed an audit in 2016, uncovering irregularities that needed to be addressed and brought to justice (such as public contracts awarded without competition and expenses found to be ineligible)—but also pointing out that these were common before the transition as well, and demonstrated the structural weakness of the administration and its need of reforms.⁷¹

Meanwhile, following the precedent set by civil society figures during the transition, several key figures have crossed over to politics, setting up political parties or joining the government after the 2015 election. This does not necessarily weaken civil society, as Augustin Loada—the FRC activist who founded a political party in July 2019—asserts. However, it does highlight the necessity for new figures to take the lead and continue to act as independent counterpowers. Further, the young and active movements that emerged around the term limit issue either failed to reinvent themselves or became more institutionalized and less grassroots. Still, Zinaba argues that “mobilization has indeed decreased, but reasons to remobilize remain, and we are working on it.”

The insurrection nonetheless has had important positive effects that should not be minimized. Term limits for the presidency appear set, opening the door to a peaceful transfer of power between two democratically elected leaders in 2025, Kaboré having been reelected in November 2020. Although turnovers themselves do not make a democracy, on a regular basis they do promote a healthy circulation of elites and equalize the political playing field. Meanwhile, the rich legislation passed during the transition is a crucial legacy. A striking example is the impact of the judiciary reforms now being implemented—such as the incarceration of a former government official for corruption.⁷² Such reforms were impossible to imagine during the Compaoré era and may not have been achieved in a setting other than the transition and without the persistent popular mobilization efforts of civil society organizations.

Implications and Lessons

Shortcomings aside, Burkina Faso’s 2014–15 political transition was carried out successfully and ushered in positive, if not dramatic, changes to political governance. Unlike those in Egypt, Zimbabwe, and Algeria, the Burkinabè insurrection did not lead to an army takeover but instead to a civilian-led and inclusive transition. A reactionary attempt to derail the transition was thwarted and a peaceful transfer of power took place after free and fair elections. The transition also passed an important set of reforms addressing some of the major flaws of the Compaoré regime to limit the risk of a setback.

How was this outcome achieved? Persistent popular mobilization—either latent or active—shaped the nature of the transition and its achievements and provided a new form of legitimacy, enabling reforms that have had a substantial and long-term impact. Burkina Faso has also benefited from its established culture of dialogue and consensus as well as from a vast, resilient, and interconnected network across the negotiating groups, making a consensual, peaceful, and democratic transition possible. International stakeholders played a positive role when they put their weight behind popular demands—such as the demand for a civilian-led transition—but were disruptive and counterproductive when they failed to take stock of the priorities of civil society and the mobilized population.

Promoting a culture of dialogue and consensus building can also go a long way in allowing successful negotiations. It also fosters interpersonal contacts, creates networks, and ultimately creates trust among stakeholders.

The events in Burkina Faso highlight that the fast pace and unpredictable nature of negotiations to establish a transition limit stakeholders' room to maneuver. To enhance the likelihood of success, domestic stakeholders, in particular civil society, need to lay the groundwork early. International partners can support this effort. Two related recommendations emerge.

First, the role of informal yet strong, resilient, and diverse activist networks cannot be overemphasized. The cooperation of, on the one hand, pro-democracy intellectuals able to analyze events, promote democratic governance, draft laws, and design institutions and, on the other, grassroots activists able to mobilize masses and create popular pressure enabled Burkinabè civil society to adapt to changing conditions and benefit from their heterogeneity. This flexibility allowed institutions to be built during the transition yet maintained enough potential mobilization to stay on a democratic track.⁷³

Second, promoting a culture of dialogue and consensus building can also go a long way in allowing successful negotiations. It also fosters interpersonal contacts, creates networks, and ultimately creates trust among stakeholders. The specifics necessarily vary from case to case, but facilitating pre-transition forums for dialogue and relationship building both within and across political and civil society coalitions can help form such a culture.

Further, the Burkinabè transition underscores the importance of several usual recommendations in the peacebuilding and democratization space.

First, international stakeholders need to support domestic forces but certainly not take over decision-making or impose conditions contrary to popular demands. Implementation of a strong no-coup rule that threatens sanctions if the military seizes power is a valuable deterrent to military takeovers and can compel security forces to support an inclusive and consensual transition framework, as happened in Burkina Faso in 2014. International stakeholders can also, however, inflame tensions and be counterproductive if they ignore grassroots voices. The ECOWAS mediation strategy during the September 2015 coup was rejected for its ignorance of the resisting spirit and mobilizing power at play across the country. International organizations and foreign diplomats perceived as accommodating to the previous regime and whose pro-democracy discourse has been more performative than genuine—such as ECOWAS and France before the uprising—are bound to be less legitimate in the eyes of civil society activists and ordinary citizens.

Second, a rushed transition focused on delivering elections may be less desirable than a longer and more ambitious transition that aims to reform the playing field and address deep-rooted failures of the old system. In the face of regime change, the international community tends to favor short-lived transitions focused on organizing elections. Installing a democratic regime that draws its legitimacy from free and fair elections is indeed desirable, but this narrow approach is not always the best way forward, as the Burkinabè transition makes clear. The legislation passed during the transition leveled the playing field for the next elections and constrained the incoming governing elite, leaving a long-term tangible legacy of the uprising, including reforms to the anti-corruption body, the judiciary, and the electoral code—though not the new constitution originally envisioned. Without such reforms, elections can be empty, effectively favoring a



Members of civil society group the Balai Citoyen (Citizen's Broom) sing the Burkina Faso national anthem before distributing flyers encouraging people to vote in the national elections on November 29, 2015. (Photo by Joe Penney/Reuters)

procedural rather than an organic approach to democratization and risking a wasted opportunity for substantive political change. Meaningful elections require an independent and trusted electoral commission and a level playing field for all competing parties and candidates, and do not in themselves guarantee a more democratic and prosperous future. Transitional institutions benefiting from legitimacy rooted in popular mobilization may be both more willing and better able to adopt necessary and substantial reforms than future governments emerging from the ballot box. This is not to say that transitions do not need strong limits and accountability mechanisms, but that a rush to elections without addressing underlying systemic deficits may limit the democratization potential of the transition.⁷⁴

Third, all stakeholders need to anticipate potential spoilers that could attempt a reactionary setback during the transition and strategize to address related risks. In particular, praetorian guards such as the RSP are often a major threat to transition given their powerful stance within the armed forces and connections to the old elite. In Burkina Faso, because both civil society and the broader population were aware of the threat that the RSP represented, they remained watchful and were able to mobilize quickly and effectively when the coup was launched.⁷⁵ They also used their in-depth knowledge of the armed forces to leverage tensions between the RSP

and the regular army, and took this opportunity to achieve the RSP's dissolution and reintegration into the army.

Last, movements that succeed early need to prepare for the inevitable momentum drain. Sustainably maintaining accountability after the transition is over is imperative. Adopting substantial institutional reforms and establishing long-lasting mechanisms to ensure democratic, inclusive, and accountable governance are also essential. Movements should promote long-term interest and involvement in public affairs among the population, especially young people, who in this case made up the bulk of protesters. Movements in Burkina Faso had a mixed record on this, largely maintaining momentum through the transition but falling off afterward. In particular, balancing between those who entered politics and those who sought to maintain external accountability was a challenge. Developing awareness of and strategies for responding to these challenges may help maintain longer-term momentum for accountability.

These lessons from the transition in Burkina Faso can inform the dynamics of popular mobilization, negotiations, and prospects for long-term peace and democracy in other settings. This is particularly relevant as anti-incumbent protests and uprisings have erupted in all corners of Africa, making the understanding of the interrelation of nonviolent action, negotiations, and peaceful democratic transformation a major issue with consequences for the peace and stability on the continent.

Notes

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