

# Burkina Faso's Test of Resilience and Democratic Stability – The 2015 Political Dynamics and Drifts

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

With the renaming of Upper Volta to Burkina Faso in 1984, the concept of the



January 18, 2014 Protests in Burkina Faso  
Source: [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com)

“Land of Upright People” set forth a new promise for political stability and economic prosperity. Those hopes and aspirations were amplified with the ushering in of democratic rule over the past 15 years. This is now tested as the country prepares for elections in 2015. On January 18 2014, over 10,000 Burkinabe's rallied in the nation's capital, Ouagadougou, and other cities to protest what they consider to be the centralization of political power in the presidency since 1987. Underpinning the protests were allegations of moves

by the President to alter the current constitutional provisions (particularly article 37) in order to contest elections in 2015 when his tenure would be ending. This provision, incorporated in 2000, limits the president to two five-year terms. Although President Compaore has issued no official statement nor made any comments concerning his intention to seek another term in office, his critics contend that he is laying the groundwork for a

constitutional amendment to extend his rule beyond 2015<sup>1</sup>.

Whereas a section of Burkinabe society see nothing wrong in any moves by the President to contest the 2015 election provided

it is within the limits of the law, others argue that the current constitution should be maintained and respected without any amendments whatsoever. President Blaise Compaoré's regime on the other hand has successfully managed and maintained institutional stability and economic reforms. When in 2011, popular protests shook the very foundations of the regime; President Compaoré reshuffled the government and appointed Luc Adolphe Tiao as prime minister. The successful conduct of municipal and legislative elections in December 2012 strengthened opposition political representation though the ruling Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP) still won a sweeping majority. The current



January 18, 2014 Protests in Burkina Faso - Source: [www.prestv.com](http://www.prestv.com)

<sup>1</sup> Political transitions and respecting term limits as stipulated in the Constitutions of African States have been the source of discontent, political anxiety and violence in some African Countries in the past. Specific examples include Togo where the issues around the term limit of the incumbent President remains a contentious one. Niger (2009-2010), Senegal (2011-2012).

## West Africa Early Warning & EARLY RESPONSE Network (WARN)

The West Africa Early Warning Network (WARN) is an integral part of the West Africa Preventive Peacebuilding Program co-ordinated by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). Through its WARN Program, WANEP is setting the stage for a civil society-based early warning and response network in Africa with emphasis on human security.

WARN covers the entire Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) region.

Since 2002, WANEP entered into an agreement with ECOWAS through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in the framework of capacity building in Conflict Prevention. One of the goals of

this agreement is to interface WARN with the ECOWAS Early Warning Systems to optimize early warning conflict prevention in West Africa. In view of this development, WANEP has been operating a liaison office located at the ECOWAS Secretariat in Abuja, Nigeria since April 2003.

In recognition of the role and achievements of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding in Africa, particularly in West Africa, the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations at its substantive session of 2006 granted WANEP Special Consultative Status to the UN. WANEP is therefore mandated to designate official representatives to the United Nations in New York, Geneva and Vienna to further its advocacy and outreach strategies for peace and human security.

internal political events and dynamics is set to test Burkina Faso's resilience and stability since attaining independence in 1960. It is important to observe that President Blaise Compaore's leading roles in several mediation efforts in the region where he has reminded some of his former peers about the importance of respecting constitutions continue to be acknowledged among his peers.

This policy brief is aimed at analysing the polemics and dynamics of these indicators to political instability, its implication for peace in a region already enmeshed in a lot of skirmishes and proffering options for collaborative actions and engagement.

## 2.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The United Nations ranks Burkina Faso as the fifth least developed country in the world<sup>2</sup>, even though it remains the leading cotton producer in sub-Saharan



Source: Getty Images

Africa with evidence of other natural resources including gold in commercial quantity. Since its independence from France in 1960 Burkina Faso has experienced political instability with power changing hands on frequent basis through a series of coup d'états, including what many refer to as an "inspired revolution" in 1983 that installed Thomas Sankara as president. It was at this period in its history that President Sankara renamed the republic from Upper Volta to its current name, Burkina Faso, or "Land of Upright Men." On October 15, 1987, President Sankara was killed in a coup that brought in the



Source: www.jbrussellimages.com

current President Blaise Compaoré, who served in the upper echelons of Sankara's government and was believed to have been a childhood friend of Sankara. Since then, President Blaise Compaoré has ruled the country.

Following series of protests, President Compaore in 1990 initiated a political liberalization, allowing for decentralization of power and constitutional reforms. It should be noted that the government did not favour the convening of a national conference with the opposition and proceeded to draw up a new constitution on its own terms for multiparty elections. The constitution was approved in a referendum in 1991, albeit with a poor turnout. The opposition parties boycotted the December 1991 presidential election, and President Compaore stood unopposed, winning on a 25 percent voter turnout.

The ruling alliance also dominated the 1991 legislative election, with the Organization for Popular Democracy - Labour Movement (ODP-MT) party winning 78 out of 107 seats in parliament and the fragmented opposition winning only 23. In 1996, ODP-MT absorbed several smaller parties (including some opposition parties) and formed the new Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP). With the power of incumbency and significant resources at its disposal, the CDP dominated the legislative election of 1997, winning 101 of 111 seats. President Compaore was re-elected in 1998 with a 56 percent turnout and 87 percent of the vote, despite some of the opposition parties boycotting the

elections. With this victory, President Compaore was inaugurated for a 5-year term in office as a democratically elected civilian president.

As stipulated in the original constitution, the president was only eligible to be re-elected once, this constitutional provision was changed to allow him to be re-elected for an indefinite tenure of office. Following public protest, this amendment was reversed in

2000 so that any president may now only be re-elected once for a second and final term. Notwithstanding the protests by other presidential candidates, the constitutional court ruled in October 2005 that since President Compaoré was the sitting president in 2000, the amendment would not have a retroactive effect on him. In effect, the provision for only two presidential terms would be effective only at the end of the second term of the president thus paving the way for his candidacy in the 2005 election. On 13 November, President Compaoré was re-elected in a landslide majority, largely because of a divided political opposition. Five years later, in the 2010 November Presidential elections, President Compaoré was re-elected for another term in office, in an election where only 1.6 million people voted, out of a total population that is 10 times the size of the eligible voters.

## 3.0 THE CURRENT CONFLICT POLEMICS, DYNAMICS AND STAKES

Political turbulence started to gain hold by 2011 with public dissension manifested over economic hardship, lack of inclusive governance and unresolved issues including the inability of government to satisfactorily conclude inquiries and prosecute the assassins of Nobert Zongo<sup>3</sup>, the

<sup>2</sup> UNDP Human Development Index Report 2013 (page 198): [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/14/hdr2013\\_en\\_complete.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/14/hdr2013_en_complete.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Assassination of Norbert Zongo. : Ref : policy brief on Burkina Faso in 2011 (visit website [www.wanep.orghttp://www.wanep.org/wanep/files/pub/pb/pb\\_burkina\\_faso\\_mar\\_2012.pdf](http://www.wanep.orghttp://www.wanep.org/wanep/files/pub/pb/pb_burkina_faso_mar_2012.pdf))

Journalist. This led to an army mutiny against the government with ensuing series of protest marches and strikes by organized labour, CSOs and students. Further public perception of the weakening of the government continued with cracks emerging in the ruling party with threats and actual resignations of some influential leaders in the party.

In the current political context, there are two main issues of concern from the perspectives of the key stakeholders including the opposition and political elites in Burkina Faso. On one hand, there is a perception that President Compaoré is attempting to manipulate the constitution to enable him contest again in the forthcoming presidential elections of 2015. On the other hand, the creation of a Senate with the president nominating 32.5 per cent<sup>4</sup> of its members is viewed by the opposition parties as a ploy for amending the constitution under the guise of “the representatives of the people”, which in effect will be to the advantage of the incumbent. Other polemics and dynamics of the situation include:

**The Political Maneuvering Around Clause 37 of the Constitution:** For the second time in the Fourth Republic, Article 37 is at the heart of the political anxieties amongst the Burkinabe political class. Indeed, on the 27th of February, 1997, the CDP, relying on its overwhelming majority in the Parliament, abrogated the clause on tenure limits provided for in the 1999 Constitution. This revision of article 37 of the constitution, which currently limits the tenure of office of the president to only two five-year terms, is strongly opposed by some political parties as well as some sections of the electorate. The agitation against the amendment of clause 37 of the constitution is founded on the grounds of the approval of the two-term limits in 2005 which allowed President Compaore to contest despite his nearly two decades in office at the time. In this case, the opposition and the political elites are emphatic and resolute against any attempt to amend the constitution.

**Establishing a Senate:** Another area of concern for the opposition is the move to create a Senate in Burkina Faso with the potential power to amend the constitution. Although the Consultative Council on Political Reforms (Conseil consultatif sur les réformes politiques - CCRP) favored the establishment of a Senate, it was met with stiff opposition by majority of civil society, the Catholic Church and the opposition political parties. The establishment of the Senate was considered ill-timed and with an ulterior motive. The opposition also argued that the creation of the Senate will worsen the budgetary deficits. The government and proponents of the creation of the Senate view its establishment as a means of involving all the various socio-professional groups in the legislative processes of the country. In view of these dynamics, there seems to be an increasing loss of confidence in the functioning of governance with implications for potential political destabilization in the build up to the elections.

#### 4.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR 2015 ELECTIONS AND THE REGION

**I. Effect of Political Instability on neighbouring Countries:** A period of instability in Burkina Faso could prove disastrous for other countries in the region, especially neighbouring Cote d'Ivoire, which is due to have elections around the same time. Cote d'Ivoire already has a substantial Burkinabe population, and their presence is often resented by a large section of Ivorians. If more Burkinabe immigrants enter the country, it could prove politically noxious. Moreover, with the anxiety surrounding Ivorian elections due to unresolved ethnic tension (around the Ivoirite question), instability in Burkina would be difficult to manage.

**II. Violent Extremism and Rebel Proliferation:** In a region already

enmeshed in various levels of insecurity including insurgencies around the Sahel with the increasing trends of violent extremism, radicalism, and piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, Burkina Faso's political instability could provide more grounds for widespread insurgencies and rapid deterioration of human security in the region. Secondly, the huge presence of unemployed youths and small arms proliferation in a region with a history of civil wars, provide a fertile recruiting ground for extremists and rebels to upscale regional insecurity.

#### III. Multilateral Relations, the Electoral Process and the Economy:

Burkina Faso's economy is largely dependent on donor funding and foreign aid. The UN rates the country as the fifth poorest country in the world. Should President Blaise Compaoré proceed to contest the 2015 elections regardless of the internal political dissensions, ECOWAS and the rest of the international community may place the country under sanctions. This could jeopardise the electoral process due to lack of funding with grievous effects on the economy and the citizenry.

#### IV. Increased ethnic cleavages:

Regardless of its internal political and economic challenges, Burkina Faso's record of inter-ethnic peaceful coexistence and social cohesion has been commendable. Considering the 26-year rule of President Blaise Compaore, who hails from one of the dominant ethnic groups, political resentments could be exploited to become ethnocentric. This could become the basis for inter-ethnic cleavages and tensions that could form a latent dimension of the crisis. The October 15, 1987 coup that took the life of President Sankara is providing impetus for mobilization even around ethnic lines. The implication of all these in the build-up to the 2015 elections is that it could be difficult to manage with the potential for a protracted post-election crisis along these ethnic cleavages.

**V. Impact on the ECOWAS Mediation process in the region:** Over the past decade, President Compaoré

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.africareview.com/News/Senate-slot-divides-Burkinabe-religious-groups/-/979180/1994830/-/v8faww/-/index.html>

has led ECOWAS mediation processes and played a vital role in the peace and security architecture of the region. He upheld the norms and values of ECOWAS treaties. Notable among them are the Ivorian, Guinean and Malian political crises where ECOWAS and the African Union mandated him as lead mediator. Should President Compaoré contests in the 2015 elections after 26 years in power, his mediation role could run contrary to the principles and norms of the 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and the 2002 Constitutive Act of the AU, with implications on the on-going ECOWAS mediation efforts in the region.

## 5.0 SCENARIOS

In view of the foregoing analysis, we anticipate the following scenarios playing out in the Burkina Faso's political dynamics.

### I. Best Case Scenario

- **The International Community** including President Compaoré's peers in the ECOWAS region prevail on him to make categorical statement and clear the speculations on his intention to contest elections again in 2015; a level playing ground is provided for a successful election and transition to power; the Burkina Faso's democratic credentials gain international recognition and the country is on the path of economic development (*Less likely*)



Mali's Ansar Dine Meets With ECOWAS Mediators  
Source: [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com)

- **President Compaoré** is prevailed upon by his peers in the ECOWAS region to maintain his invaluable role of mediation in the region and take on more mediation roles as a former president and elder Statesman not just of Burkina Faso but of the West Africa region on the whole; he accepts this offer and agrees not to stand for election in 2015; Elections take place in a peaceful environment and the transition is smooth (*Likely*)

### II. Realistic Case Scenario

- **The Constitution** is amended through the new Senate, giving President Compaore "legitimacy" to contest the elections again; he has the support of his party, reinforced by ethnic and political patronage. Despite peer pressure, he contests and wins amidst demonstrations and boycott of the elections by the other political parties. The country's transition is managed with the intervention of ECOWAS supported by the international community; aggrieved parties are encouraged to seek redress in court (*Likely*)

- **Article 37** is amended to allow President Compaoré to contest the 2015 elections; opposition political parties boycott the elections; the president records a "landslide victory" and persuades some leaders of opposition parties to form a Government of National Unity (*Likely*)

### III. Worst Case Scenario

- **The Senate** is inaugurated despite public outcry; it (the senate) amends article 37 of the constitution and paves the way for President Compaoré to contest the election.

Political and social tension in the electoral process creates an environment that is not conducive for the conduct of the elections; ECOWAS assesses the situation and determines that it is a threat to regional peace and security and with the support of the international

community intervenes to establish a transitional arrangement leading to the organisation of credible elections (*Very Likely*)

- **President Compaoré's** insistence to contest in 2015 aggrieves the International Community and support for the 2015 elections is withdrawn; ECOWAS decides not to monitor the election and convinces African Union to do same; the election is conducted irrespective of inadequate funding and preparation; the election lacks legitimacy and recognition. The political environment deteriorates and the economy of Burkina Faso dwindles, increasing public anxiety and tension continues to rise until there is breakdown of law and order (*Likely*)

## 6.0 OPTIONS FOR RESPONSE

### a) ECOWAS and the International Community

- ECOWAS initiates preventive diplomacy including peer pressure to persuade President Compaore not to contest the 2015 elections and make a categorical statement to this effect thereby assuring the public and the international community of his commitment towards a free and fair transitional process

- Organizes a genuine multi-level stakeholders roundtable dialogue during which all the political issues can be discussed with the objective of advancing the national interest and periodically review outcomes and commitments

- ECOWAS places Burkina Faso as a country of special focus and seeks updates from the ECOWAS Early Warning System (ECOWARN) and WANEP National Early Warning Systems (NEWS) on events and changes in Burkina Faso in order to optimize the flexibility of re-strategizing and ensuring timely response

- Undertake to establish a long-term observation mission for the electoral process and where necessary provide technical support

**b) Government**

- The government needs to assuage public anxiety on the tension around the amendment of article 37 and its commitment towards organizing free, fair and transparent election in 2015
- Organize series of public engagements through civic education, the media and other agencies on the dangers and implications of ethno-political tensions and conflicts especially on the economy of the country
- Be inclusive (with the regular participation of the opposition) in the preparations and processes of the 2015 elections
- Provide a level playing ground for all political parties to organize their activities without hindrance or intimidation
- Provide adequate internal security and manage the borders well to prevent potential incursions by insurgency groups
- The government and opposition political parties should hold joint-public programmes on the need for a non-identity based politics as well as a violence-free election during primaries and in the general elections.

**c) Civil Society Organizations**

- **CSOs** should establish a cooperation mechanism through which they can monitor the electoral process and provide intermediary roles towards free and fair elections. Systems like the WANEP national early warning mechanism for monitoring and

responding to violent activities at the pre/ during and post-election stages should be supported. More CSOs including women and youth groups should intensify efforts on sensitization at the community level on the importance of addressing any grievances through legal means.

- CSOs should lead in the efforts to establish a national infrastructure for peace (comprising of traditional rulers, religious leaders and other stakeholders) with a high level of respect and moral authority as a third party in mediating political disputes. This group should be provided with early warning reports from the ECOWAS Early Warning System (ECOWARN) as well as the WANEP National Early Warning System (NEWS) in order to respond accordingly.

- **The media** should intensify efforts and draw attention to issues in the political process by objectively reporting key happenings and focusing attention on the critical concerns affecting peace, stability and unity of Burkina Faso.

**7.0 CONCLUSION**

The current political context in Burkina Faso is a cause for concern to WANEP and other CSOs in the region and beyond. Tensions around Constitutional amendments and transitions, political intolerance, identity based politics as well as lack of institutions for managing grievances is evident in the run up to the elections. In 2014, all efforts must be deployed to ensure a peaceful transition and the prevention of election-related violence in Burkina Faso in 2015. This is the only way to affirm the meaning of Burkina Faso as the “Land of the Upright People.” The potential of the country in maintaining political stability, social cohesion and economic development can only be enhanced with the increasing production of cotton and acquisition of new revenue through harnessing of natural resources.

It is possible for Burkina Faso to overcome the test confronting the deepening of its democracy and constitutional rule. It can demonstrate this in its resilience to overcome the current challenges and ensure a peaceful democratic transition in 2015. We believe that if the various stakeholders take steps to implement the aforementioned policy recommendations, the realisation of the best-case scenarios will be possible and Burkinabes will take a major step in history to demonstrate to the world that it has the internal capacities for managing political differences while continuing to grow its frontiers in the comity of nations.

<sup>4</sup> [www.ecowarn.org](http://www.ecowarn.org)

<sup>5</sup> WANEP Concept Note on National Early Warning System (NEWS), 2011