

Freedom in the World 2014 - Burkina Faso

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2014 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 4.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5

OVERVIEW

Despite being surrounded by neighbors experiencing political crises, Burkina Faso has been spared similar upheaval thanks to its relative internal stability and robust security apparatus. Nevertheless, the country has experienced a series of protests over the last three years, including large demonstrations in June and July 2013 that opposed alterations to the constitution and the creation of a new Senate; the protests successfully stalled the proposed body's creation.

In September, Romuald Tuina, an ex-presidential guard who had been wanted for bank robbery, shot a gun at the entrance of the presidential palace in what was taken as an attempt to assassinate President Blaise Compaoré. Tuina was then shot dead at the scene. He was believed to have acted alone, and the attempt was not judged to be politically motivated.

The turmoil in neighboring Mali resulted in continued tension along its border with Burkina Faso, including a steady influx of refugees.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 17 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 5 / 12

Compaoré, a former army captain, has held power since ousting populist president Thomas Sankara as an army captain in 1987. With his Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) party, Compaoré went on to win Burkina Faso's first democratic elections in 1991. In 2000, two-term presidential limits were reintroduced, but the law was not retroactive, allowing Compaoré, who had already served two seven-year terms, to run for reelection again. Compaoré won presidential elections in 2005 and 2010, the last for which he was eligible under the current term-limit rules.

The CDP won a comfortable majority in concurrent parliamentary and municipal elections held in December 2012. The CDP took 70 seats in the 127-seat, unicameral National Assembly. The next two largest parties – the Alliance for Democracy and Federation-African Democratic Rally (ADF-RDA) and the new Union for Progress and Change (UPC) – won 19 seats each; smaller parties hold the remaining seats. In total, pro-Compaoré parties control 97 seats. Members of the National Assembly serve five-year terms.

International monitors have judged recent elections in Burkina Faso to be generally free but not entirely fair, due to the ruling CDP's privileged access to state resources and the media. Some reported problems with the 2010 presidential election included traditional leaders mobilizing voters for the incumbent, inadequate numbers of voting cards and ballots at the polls, incorrect electoral lists, and the use of state resources for Compaoré's campaign. The 2012 parliamentary and municipal elections were run more efficiently and were generally considered free by domestic and international observers, though the opposition claimed that the ruling party still possessed privileged access to state resources.

Compaoré has not attempted to change the constitution to give himself another term in office – an issue that concerns the opposition – and under Article 37 of the current constitution he would have to leave office in 2015. In May 2013, Compaoré announced the creation of a new Senate with 89 members, 29 of whom would be appointed directly by the president, with the rest appointed by local officials. The opposition expressed fears that the new Senate could be more amenable to altering Article 37 in addition to further concentrating power in the hands of the president.

Electoral reforms in 2009 extended the right to vote in presidential elections and referendums to Burkinabé living abroad, but not until the 2015 presidential election. A 2010 law requires that all voters show picture identification when arriving at the polls.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 8 / 16

The constitution guarantees the right to form political parties, and 13 parties are currently represented in the legislature. The 2009 reforms also included an injunction against the practice of switching parties after elections. UPC is the main opposition party and one of the three largest in the country; other parties that genuinely oppose the government are small. The ruling CDP controls much of the resources and limits the playing field for opposition parties, many of which it has coopted. ADF-RDA, while formally the largest opposition party, supported Compaoré or his party in both the 2005 and 2010 elections.

Corruption among military elites and in recruiting practices bred resentment among the ranks in 2011, leading to large protests and vandalism by mutineers. Hundreds of soldiers were arrested and prosecuted in 2012, at which time Compaoré assumed the role of minister of defense and initiated

reforms that are ongoing. One reform involved partial disarmament in order to prevent protests within the military.

Minority rights are generally respected in politics, although a small, educated elite, the military, and labor unions dominate the scene.

C. Functioning of Government: 4 / 12

Corruption remains widespread, despite a number of public and private anticorruption initiatives. The courts have been unwilling or unable to adequately prosecute many senior officials charged with corruption. The government stepped up anticorruption efforts in 2012, firing the head of the country's notoriously corrupt customs office in January; no firings or high-profile arrests were made in 2013. Burkina Faso was ranked 83 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

In 2012, parliament voted to give all presidents since Burkina Faso's 1960 independence immunity from prosecution, despite an opposition boycott of the vote.

Civil Liberties: 36 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 13 / 16

Although freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed and generally respected, many media outlets practice self-censorship. Journalists occasionally face criminal libel prosecutions, death threats, and other forms of harassment and intimidation. In October 2012, two journalists at the private weekly *L'Ouragan* were sentenced to 12 months in prison for defamation, and their paper was suspended for six months for publishing allegations of corruption against the state prosecutor's office. In July 2013, state media employees, dissatisfied with working conditions and censorship, participated in protests organized by the Autonomous Syndicate of Information and Culture Workers. The journalists staged a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Communications building in Ouagadougou. Minister of Communications Alain Edouard Traoré responded by insisting that the government does not issue directives to journalists, only attempts to offer guidance. Along with the state-owned outlets, there are over 50 private radio stations, three private television stations, and several independent newspapers. The government does not restrict internet access.

Burkina Faso is a secular state, and freedom of religion is respected. Academic freedom is also unrestricted.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12

The constitution provides for the right to assemble, though demonstrations are sometimes suppressed or banned. While many nongovernmental organizations operate openly and freely, human rights groups have reported abuses by security forces. Violent protests broke out in February 2011 throughout the country in reaction to the death of a student, Justin Zongo, in police custody. While initially composed mainly of students, the protests later swelled to include soldiers, police, and teachers. The government imposed some reforms after the protests and took steps to increase the wages of civil servants and to reduce corruption. New protests erupted in the capital and second largest city, Bobo Dioulasso, in June and July 2013 against perceived plans to alter Article 37 of the

constitution, as well as the rising cost of staples such as sugar and rice. The protests were dispersed with tear gas.

The constitution guarantees the right to strike, and unions are able to engage freely in strikes and collective bargaining, although only a minority of the workforce is unionized.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16

The judicial system is formally independent, but it is subject to executive influence and corruption. The courts are further weakened by a lack of resources and citizens' poor knowledge of their rights.

Human rights advocates in Burkina Faso have repeatedly criticized the military and police for committing abuses with impunity. Police often use excessive force and disregard pretrial detention limits. The sentencing in August 2011 of three police officers charged with the torture and death of Zongo was seen as a positive step.

Discrimination against various ethnic minorities occurs but is not widespread. However, gay men and lesbians, as well as those infected with HIV, routinely experience discrimination. In an effort to address discrimination against the disabled, Burkina Faso ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2009 and adopted a new law on the protection and promotion of the rights of the disabled in April 2010. Civil society actors also noted increased government efforts since 2010 to provide access to health care and a decrease in costs for maternal health services.

The crisis in neighboring Mali that began in 2012 has resulted in more than 40,000 refugees fleeing to Burkina Faso over the last two years, including many into the country's already drought-ridden Sahel region. Clashes between ethnic groups along the Mali-Burkina Faso border left 25 people dead in May 2012, and the situation remained tense throughout 2013 as local farmers vied for land with Malian refugees.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16

The constitution provides for freedom of movement within the country, although security checks on travelers are common. Equality of opportunity is hampered in part by the advantages conferred on CDP members, who receive preferential treatment in securing public contracts.

While illegal, gender discrimination remains common in employment, education, property, and family rights, particularly in rural areas. There are 20 women in the 127-seat National Assembly. Reforms in 2009 established a 30-percent quota for women on all party candidate lists in municipal and legislative elections, but the law is vague regarding implementation. In the north, early marriage contributes to lower female school enrollment and a heightened incidence of obstetric fistula. Human rights groups have recorded a significant drop in the prevalence of female genital mutilation since its criminalization in 1996.

Burkina Faso is a source, transit, and destination country for trafficking in women and children, who are subject to forced labor and sexual exploitation. According to the U.S. State Department's 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report, Burkina Faso does not comply with the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking; it is placed in Tier 2 of the report. However, the report noted the

government's reform efforts as evidenced by a larger number of children – 1,427 – intercepted from traffickers in 2012.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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