

Freedom in the World 2013 - Burkina Faso

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2013 Scores

Status: Partly Free
Freedom Rating: 4.0
Civil Liberties: 3
Political Rights: 5

Overview

Burkina Faso stabilized in 2012 following mass protests and army mutinies the previous year, though some small-scale demonstrations continued. In December, President Blaise Compaoré's Congress for Democracy and Progress party won a majority in concurrent parliamentary and municipal elections that were considered largely free and fair.

Burkina Faso experienced a series of military coups after gaining independence from France in 1960. In 1987, army captain Blaise Compaoré ousted Thomas Sankara, a populist president who had risen to power through a 1983 coup. In 1991, a democratic constitution was approved in a referendum, and Compaoré won that year's presidential election due to an opposition boycott. Compaoré secured another seven-year term in the 1998 election.

The government undertook a series of political reforms after 1998. The 2002 National Assembly elections were the first conducted without a significant opposition boycott, and Compaoré's Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) party won only half of the assembly seats.

Two-term presidential limits were reintroduced in 2000, but the law was not retroactive, allowing for Compaoré's reelection to a third term in 2005. The country's first municipal elections were held in 2006, with the CDP capturing nearly two-thirds of the local council seats; the CDP was also victorious in the 2007 National Assembly elections.

In the November 2010 presidential election, six opposition candidates ran against Compaoré, who won with over 80 percent of the vote. Although opposition candidates challenged Compaoré's victory, the Constitutional Council upheld the results. The 2010 election was the last in which Compaoré was eligible to run under the current constitution. However, in 2012 the CDP stated that it would revise Article 37 of the charter in order to allow Compaoré to run again.

In February 2011, student riots broke out in many major cities in reaction to the death of a student, Justin Zongo, in police custody. The government closed the nation's universities and cut off funding for student services. Starting in March, army soldiers mutinied over unpaid wages, beginning a period of general violence and unrest nationwide. In April, policemen and teachers joined the protests. Compaoré responded in mid-April by replacing the prime minister and the security chiefs, and naming himself minister of defense. In June, Compaoré replaced all 13 of the country's regional governors. In July, 217 leaders of the mutiny were arrested and 566 soldiers who took part were dismissed. In August, three policemen were sentenced for Zongo's death.

Minor protests continued throughout 2012, despite steps taken by the government to increase the wages of civil servants and reduce corruption. Separately, the 2012 crisis in neighboring Mali resulted in almost 36,000 refugees fleeing to Burkina Faso, including many into the country's already drought-ridden Sahel region. Clashes between ethnic groups along the border of Mali and Burkina Faso left 25 people dead in May.

The CDP won a comfortable majority in concurrent parliamentary and municipal elections in December. In the 127-seat National Assembly, the CDP took 70 seats; along with its allies, pro-Compaoré parties control 97 seats. The next two largest parties – the Alliance for Democracy and Federation-African Democratic Rally and the new Union for Progress and Change – won 19 seats each.

According to the International Monetary Fund, Burkina Faso's economy grew significantly in 2012 compared with 2011, largely as a result of gold mining and good rainfall.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Burkina Faso is not an electoral democracy. International monitors have judged recent elections 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 President Blaise Compaoré's campaign. The 2012 parliamentary and municipal elections were run more efficiently and were generally considered free by domestic and international observers, even though the opposition claimed similar privileged access to state resources by the ruling party. The newly expanded 127-seat National Assembly is unicameral, and members serve five-year terms. The legislature is independent, but subject to executive influence. In July 2011, the National Assembly dissolved the National Electoral Commission at the request of the opposition, and a new commission was formed prior to the December 2012 elections.

The constitution guarantees the right to form political parties, and 13 parties are currently represented in the legislature. Electoral reforms in 2009 extended the right to vote in presidential elections and referendums to Burkinabè living abroad, but not until the 2015 presidential election.

Reforms also included an injunction against the practice of switching parties after elections. In January 2010, the National Assembly passed a law requiring that all voters show picture identification when arriving at the polls. In June 2012, the parliament voted to give all presidents since Burkina Faso's 1960 independence immunity from prosecution, despite an opposition boycott of the vote.

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. Burkina Faso was ranked 83 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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 December, the Higher Council for Communication suspended the daily *Le Quotidien* for one week for breach of journalistic ethics, an act criticized by advocacy groups as a restriction on freedom of information. 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.

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. After violent demonstrations in 2011, continuing protests in 2012 have been peaceful. 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.

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 in 2010 to provide access to health care and a decrease in costs for maternal health services.

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 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report, Burkina Faso does not comply with the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking and it is placed in Tier 2. However, the report also noted the government's reform efforts as evidenced by a larger number of children – 1,112 – intercepted from traffickers in 2011.

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