

Freedom in the World 2012 - Burkina Faso

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2012 Scores

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

Overview

In the first half of 2011, Burkina Faso was rocked by antigovernment protests and army mutinies, followed by an increased level of violence and instability. In response, President Blaise Compaoré replaced the prime minister and declared himself minister of defense. In July, the leaders of the army mutiny were arrested and several hundred soldiers were dismissed, while three policemen responsible for the death of a student in their custody were convicted in August.

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 coup in 1983. 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, including the introduction of an independent electoral commission, a single-ballot voting system, public campaign financing, and a third vice presidential position in the legislature for the opposition leader. The 2002 National Assembly election 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 this 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 won 73 seats in the 2007 National Assembly election, while the largest opposition party, the Alliance for Democracy and Federation-African Democratic Rally (ADF-RDA), captured only 14.

In the November 2010 presidential election, six opposition candidates ran against Compaoré, who won with just over 80 percent of the vote. His closest challenger, Hama Arba Diallo, captured less than 10 percent. Only 55 percent of registered voters came out to the polls; the Burkina-based think tank, Center for Democratic Governance, estimated that over 3.5 million eligible voters remain unregistered. Although four opposition candidates challenged Compaoré's victory and called for a new election, the Constitutional Council upheld the results. The 2010 election was the last in which Compaoré was eligible to run under the current constitution. However, the CDP has stated its intention to revise Article 37 of the charter, which would allow him to run again in 2015.

In February 2011, student riots broke out in many major cities in reaction to the death of a student, Justin Zongo, while in police custody. The government ordered universities to close and cut off funding for student services. Meanwhile, army soldiers mutinied over unpaid wages from March to May, a period of looting and general violence nationwide. In April, policemen and teachers joined the protests, demanding better pay and working conditions. Compaoré responded in mid-April by replacing the prime minister and the security chiefs, and naming himself minister of defense. However, soldiers rampaged in Bobo-Dioulasso, the second-largest city, for several days in early June until elite troops arrived to quell the unrest. Later in June, Compaoré replaced all 13 of the country's regional governors. In July, 217 leaders of the army mutiny were arrested and 566 soldiers who took part were dismissed. In August, three policemen were sentenced for Zongo's death.

The crisis in neighboring Côte d'Ivoire in early 2011 caused significant disruptions in the volume of trade to and from Burkina Faso, as well as a sharp decrease in remittances from the large Burkinabè emigrant community in Côte d'Ivoire.

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 include 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 111-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 will be formed before the May 2012 legislative and municipal 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 to the polls, though there were problems with delayed distribution of the cards.

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. Burkina Faso was ranked 100 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 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 March 2011, student demonstrators at the University of Ouagadougou attacked journalists from the state-owned Burkinabe Broadcasting Corporation for allegedly censoring coverage of an earlier protest; later that month, RTB journalists were prevented by an angry mob from covering a labor union meeting. 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. At least six people were killed in February 2011 as a result of demonstrations following the death of student Justin Zongo in police custody, as security forces used tear gas and live ammunition to subdue the protests. 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, which sparked the protests in February. 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, homosexuals and 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 healthcare 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 16 women in the 111-seat national legislature. 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 2011 Trafficking in Persons Report, Burkina Faso does not comply with the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking. However, the report also noted the government's reform efforts, including a 2008 law that criminalizes all forms of human trafficking and assigns more stringent penalties to those convicted. In 2010, Burkinabè authorities intercepted 660 children from traffickers.

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