



Burkina Faso

On January 24, 2022, military officers ousted President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré—the first head of state in Burkina Faso to have entered office via elections—amid a worsening security and humanitarian crisis. The military takeover came amid rising tensions over the government’s inability to stem Islamist insurgent attacks, and followed coups in Mali and Guinea. Regional and Western leaders have struggled to respond to the spread of conflicts in the Sahel region and democratic backsliding. Donors have also raised concerns with the recent arrival of Russian military contractors in Mali; some in Burkina Faso have called for increased Russian security assistance.

Kaboré was reelected to a second term in 2020 in elections marred by security threats in several regions and opposition claims of fraud. He faced growing public demands for greater security, job creation, governance reforms, and accountability for abuses under prior governments. In late 2021, as restiveness grew among troops and civilian protesters, he dismissed his cabinet and reshuffled the military leadership. Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, age 41, an army special operations forces officer who was elevated to a regional command post in the 2021 reshuffle, appears to have led the January 24 seizure of power.

Insurgent groups control parts of the country and some have carried out terrorist attacks in Ouagadougou (Fig. 1), most recently in 2018. Some local and regional armed groups have ties to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. Kaboré’s administration struggled to counter insurgent gains despite donor backing and military aid, while state security forces and state-backed militia groups have been implicated in severe human rights abuses. The conflict has crippled health and education systems in parts of the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened health and socio-economic hardships. Over 1.4 million Burkinabè (6.5%) were internally displaced and 2.9 million faced food insecurity as of late 2021, according to U.N. data.

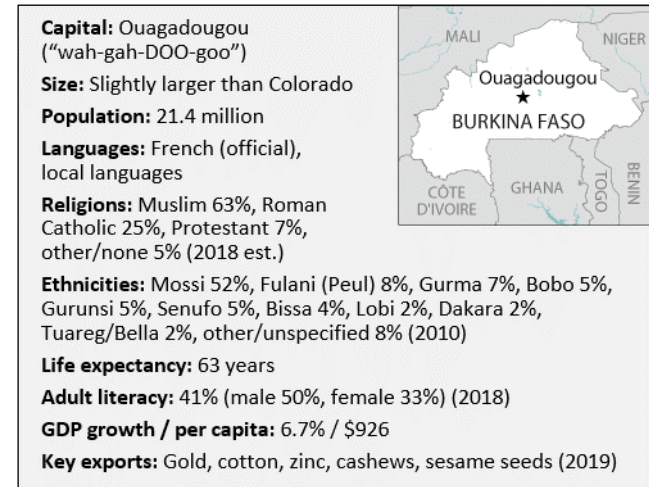
Background. Burkina Faso has a history of military intervention in politics and social unrest. Kaboré’s election in 2015 capped a political transition after mass protests, backed by some military commanders, ousted semi-authoritarian President Blaise Compaoré. A towering figure in West African politics, Compaoré had come to power in a 1987 coup; his attempt to evade term limits again by changing the constitution sparked the protests that unseated him. A counter-coup by Compaoré loyalists nearly derailed the civilian-led transition, but protesters and conventional army units induced the coup leaders to stand down.

Terrorism and Insurgency

Burkina Faso enjoyed relative peace and stability prior to 2016, when an Islamist insurgency known as Ansarul Islam emerged in the rural north and regional Al Qaeda affiliates claimed a large attack in Ouagadougou that killed 30

people, including an American. These events coincided with the southward spread of conflicts in Mali.

Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance



Source: CIA World Factbook, IMF; 2021 figures unless noted.

Attacks escalated in 2017 after a faction of Algerian-origin Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) merged with a regional offshoot and two Mali-based groups to form the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM). In 2018, JNIM claimed a complex assault on the military’s headquarters and the French embassy in Ouagadougou.

Burkina Faso’s northern and eastern regions have been most affected by conflict, with signs of spillover into the countries of coastal West Africa. Local security forces and civilians have been the primary victims. In the north, Ansarul Islam and JNIM have exploited ethnic tensions and perceptions of state neglect, as well as grievances over corruption, patronage politics, social stratification, and land disputes. Eastern Burkina Faso is a stronghold of the Islamic State-Greater Sahara (IS-GS), a former AQIM splinter faction that has reportedly cultivated ties with local criminal networks. IS-GS notably claimed the 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. troops in neighboring Niger. U.N. sanctions investigators report that IS-GS has some ties to Nigeria-based IS-West Africa but remains distinct.

Several factors may explain why violence has spread so quickly in Burkina Faso despite a history of religious and ethnic coexistence. Compaoré’s ouster in 2014 and the transitional government’s decision to dissolve his elite presidential guard unit (aka the RSP) arguably disrupted the state security apparatus, which in any case had little combat experience. Mali-based insurgents appear to have lent support to Burkinabè allies, and have long threatened to attack countries, such as Burkina Faso, that have deployed U.N. peacekeeping troops to Mali. Minority Christian dominance of the civil service and political class reportedly spurred tensions as well.

State counterinsurgency tactics also may have driven armed group recruitment in some areas. Human rights groups and journalists have reported extrajudicial killings and other abuses by state security forces and state-backed militias. Members of the minority ethnic Fulani (alt. Peul) community, who are Muslim and are often livestock herders, reportedly have been particularly targeted; several Islamist armed factions, including Ansarul Islam, were founded by Fulani individuals. Perceived collective punishment may further fuel local grievances and prompt communities to turn to armed groups for protection or revenge. Kaboré’s administration pledged to investigate abuses, which appeared to decrease after mid-2020.

Rights advocates also raised concerns with legislation enacted in 2019 barring citizens from publishing or circulating information on terrorist attacks or military operations without state authorization, and criminalizing reports that could “demoralize” the armed forces.

Regional Initiatives. Burkina Faso and other members of the G5 Sahel (Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger) have sought to coordinate counterterrorism operations in border areas. Lack of capacity, mutual distrust, and tensions between Mali’s military junta and Western donors have complicated these efforts. Donors—including the United States, the European Union, and Arab Gulf states—have provided equipment and training, but have not offered funding at the scale that G5 leaders have solicited. Pledges from the African Union and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS, to which most, but not all, G5 Sahel countries belong), to increase participation in regional security efforts have been slow to materialize.

French Military Operations. France conducts regional counterterrorism operations in the Sahel, to which the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) provides logistical and intelligence support. French military cooperation with Burkina Faso expanded after the 2018 Ouagadougou attacks, at President Kaboré’s request. In 2019, French forces intervened in Burkina Faso to free two French hostages from possible JNIM custody, and also freed a South Korean and an American hostage whose existence had not been reported. The former colonial power’s role in the region has sparked local criticism, including from some state officials. In 2021, France announced it would reduce its forces in the Sahel. President Kaboré and some officials in his government called for more Russian support, a call echoed by some pro-military protesters in January 2022.

Politics

The 2015 general elections produced Burkina Faso’s first ever electoral transfer of power. President Kaboré was reelected in 2020 with 58% of the vote against 12 other candidates, a margin large enough to avert a run-off. His People’s Movement for Progress party won 56 out of 127 seats in simultaneous legislative elections, with allied parties winning enough seats to form a majority. The former ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress performed relatively well, possibly reflecting Compaoré’s enduring influence and nostalgia for a more peaceful era.

Opposition candidates ultimately conceded to Kaboré after initially rejecting the 2020 election results as “riddled with fraud.” Polling stations did not operate in about a fifth of the country due to security threats, affecting some 300,000

voters out of 6.5 million who registered. Local civil society observers noted some procedural problems and voter disenfranchisement in conflict-affected areas, but expressed satisfaction with the election process overall.

The Economy

Landlocked with a largely agrarian workforce, Burkina Faso is one of the world’s poorest countries. Food insecurity is widespread, and remittances from Burkinabè workers in wealthier coastal states are a lifeline for many. Exports of cotton and gold are a key source of tax revenues and foreign exchange. Economic growth slowed from 5.7% in 2019 to 1.9% in 2020 amid the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimated a rebound to 6.7% in 2021. The State Department’s latest *Investment Climate Statement* reported that Burkina Faso “welcomes foreign investment” but noted growing security threats. Insurgent attacks on gold mining operations have notably swelled in recent years.

U.S. Policy and Aid

Prior to the January 2022 coup, the State Department characterized bilateral relations as “excellent”; U.S. engagement generally focused on regional security, development, and humanitarian relief efforts. The State Department condemned the military seizure of power, and announced on February 18 that it would apply §7008 of annual foreign aid appropriations legislation, i.e., coup-related restrictions on certain aid to the government, which it said would affect some \$160 million in funds. Members of Congress may examine the impact on U.S. security and development assistance for Burkina Faso and consider implications of events for regional stability and governance.

In 2020, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) agreed to a five-year, \$450 million compact to enhance Burkina Faso’s electricity sector—the country’s second MCC compact. The State Department and USAID separately allocated \$53 million in FY2020 bilateral aid for Burkina Faso (latest publicly available, not including food aid or emergency humanitarian relief). These funds largely focused on health (\$46 million), education (\$4 million), and governance (\$2 million). Additional development aid has been provided through regional and global programs, including a Sahel-focused USAID initiative.

Additional counterterrorism aid has been provided by DOD under its global train-and-equip authority (10 U.S.C. §333), and by the State Department under the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP) and other regional programs. Burkinabè forces have participated in and hosted DOD exercises, and Burkina Faso has a State Partnership Program with Washington DC’s National Guard.

In mid-2020, U.S. officials publicly threatened to suspend security assistance unless Burkinabè authorities addressed human rights concerns. As noted above, abuses appeared to decrease. The FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act required the executive branch to submit a “plan to address gross violations of human rights and civilian harm” in Burkina Faso and other Sahel countries (P.L. 116-283, §1294). A plan was submitted to Congress in June 2021.

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