



Burkina Faso: Conflict and Military Rule

Burkina Faso has experienced two military coups in 2022, ending a brief period of elected civilian leadership after a historic democratic transition in 2014-2015. On September 30, 2022, Captain Ibrahim Traoré ousted Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who had taken power in a coup eight months earlier. Traoré has proclaimed himself head of state for now, while suggesting that he might hand power to another transitional leader following “national consultations.” He has pledged to adhere to the previous junta’s commitment to holding elections in 2024.

Developments in Burkina Faso underscore the country’s escalating security crisis and suggest that regional leaders’ efforts to deter coups have fallen short. Since 2020, military officers have also seized power in Mali, Guinea, Chad, and Sudan. Some Members of Congress have called for increased U.S. efforts to address military coups in Africa, including during a July 2022 Senate hearing on the Sahel region. Congress also provides and oversees U.S. governance, stabilization, and security aid for the Sahel.

The latest coup in Burkina Faso comes amid tensions in the military and on the streets over authorities’ inability to stem gains by regional insurgencies linked to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Days before Captain Traoré seized power, a military-protected convoy was hit by a massive insurgent attack that killed dozens of soldiers and civilians. Traoré has accused his predecessor of failing to secure the country or provide better equipment and pay for troops. Rivalry among specialized units—to which both Traoré and Damiba belong—may also have been a motivating factor.

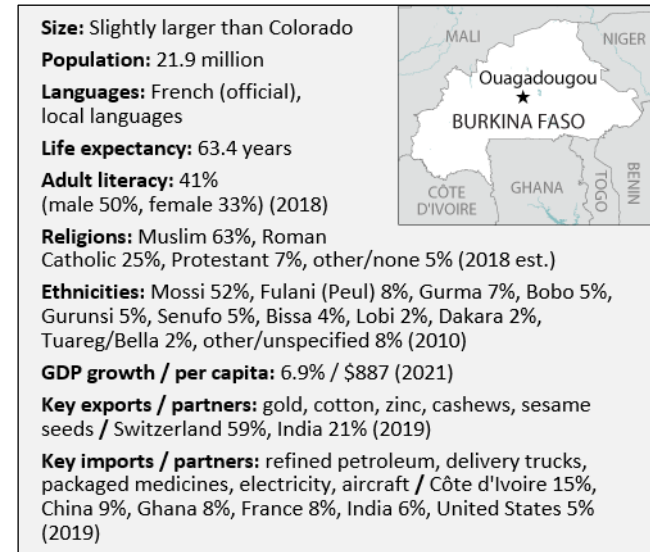
Junta members appear to be considering whether to limit counterterrorism cooperation with former colonial power France in favor of greater support from Russia. French troops are stationed in Burkina Faso and provide security assistance, but officials in successive Burkinabè governments have asserted a desire to “diversify” security partnerships. As Captain Traoré seized power, pro-junta protesters waved Russian flags and attacked the French embassy and cultural centers in the country. In neighboring Mali, the junta has contracted with U.S.-sanctioned Wagner Group, a Russian private military firm, deepening a rift with France, which withdrew its military forces from Mali in August 2022. Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin praised Traoré’s seizure of power in a statement.

Background

Burkina Faso has a history of military mutinies, coups, and social unrest, though it was seen as relatively stable under former authoritarian leader Blaise Compaoré, who came to power in a 1987 coup. A towering and controversial figure in West African politics, Compaoré was ousted in a popular uprising in 2014 while trying to bypass constitutional term limits. Civilian politician Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected in 2015, after a failed coup attempt by senior

officers loyal to Compaoré. Kaboré was Burkina Faso’s first post-independence leader to enter office via elections.

Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance



Source: CIA World Factbook, IMF; 2022 figures unless noted.

Armed Islamist violence emerged in Burkina Faso around 2016, as conflicts expanded in neighboring Mali. Military casualties rose, while President Kaboré faced growing public demands for greater security, job creation, governance reforms, and accountability for abuses under the Compaoré regime. Among other controversial actions, Kaboré oversaw the expansion of state-backed militias and “volunteer” fighters that human rights groups accused of abuses. He was reelected in 2020 in a vote that local civil society observers deemed satisfactory, although opposition leaders initially claimed fraud, while security threats prevented voting in several areas. On January 24, 2022, Kaboré was ousted in the coup led by Lt. Col. Damiba.

Terrorism and Insurgency

Burkina Faso enjoyed relative peace prior to 2016. That year, regional Al Qaeda affiliates carried out an attack in Ouagadougou that killed 30 people, including an American, while a local Islamist insurgency emerged in the rural north. Attacks escalated in 2017 after regional Al Qaeda affiliates merged to form the Malian-led Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM). JNIM and a former splinter movement known as the Islamic State-Greater Sahara (IS-GS) now control much of the countryside. In 2018, JNIM claimed a complex assault on the Burkinabè military’s headquarters and the French embassy in the capital.

Burkina Faso’s northern and eastern regions have been the most affected by conflict. In the north, JNIM has exploited ethnic tensions and state neglect, as well as grievances over corruption, patronage politics, social stratification, and land disputes. The east is a stronghold of IS-GS, a former

splinter faction and rival that has reportedly cultivated ties with criminal networks. IS-GS notably claimed the 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. soldiers in neighboring Niger.

Several factors may explain why violence has spread so quickly despite Burkina Faso's history of religious and ethnic tolerance. Mali-based insurgents appear to have lent support to cross-border allies, and have long threatened to attack countries, like Burkina Faso, that have deployed U.N. peacekeeping troops to Mali. Compaoré's ouster, and the transitional government's decision in 2015 to dissolve his elite presidential guard, arguably disrupted the state security apparatus and may have upset rumored tacit arrangements with regional insurgents. Longstanding minority Christian dominance of the civil service and political elite reportedly also spurred tensions. Since 2016, abuses by state security forces and state-backed militias and vigilantes—including extrajudicial killings and torture—may have driven insurgent recruitment, according to human rights advocates. Abuses have reportedly particularly targeted minority ethnic Fulanis (alt. Peuls), who are Muslim and often livestock herders, reportedly prompting some to turn to armed groups for protection or revenge.

Rights advocates have also criticized laws that restrict publication of information on terrorist attacks or military operations without state authorization, and criminalize reports that could “demoralize” the armed forces.

Regional Initiatives. The G5 Sahel, an intergovernmental body comprising Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger, has sought to coordinate regional counterterrorism efforts with support from donors, including the United States. A lack of capacity, mutual distrust, and tensions over military rule have complicated these efforts. Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel in May 2022, prompting questions over the initiative's future. The African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have pledged to increase regional security efforts but with little concrete impact to date. ECOWAS also is seeking to induce the region's military juntas to hold timely elections. The bloc has imposed targeted sanctions on junta members in Mali and Guinea, but not Burkina Faso to date, citing satisfaction with the latter's election timeline.

French Military Operations. France has conducted counterterrorism operations in the Sahel region for nearly a decade, with U.S. logistical and intelligence support. The former colonial power's role has fueled some criticism and protests, including in Burkina Faso. French troops withdrew from Mali—their former operational focus—in 2022 amid worsening tensions with the junta there. France's operations in Burkina Faso remain limited compared to Mali pre-2022, or to Niger, which has absorbed some of the French troops leaving Mali. In 2019, French forces intervened to free two French hostages in Burkina Faso from possible JNIM custody, and also freed a South Korean and an American hostage whose capture had not been previously reported.

Humanitarian Emergency

Landlocked with a largely agrarian workforce, Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries. Food insecurity is widespread; remittances from Burkinabè workers in wealthier coastal states are a lifeline for many households. Exports of cotton and gold are key sources 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, before rebounding to 6.9% in 2021, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Insurgent violence has caused largescale displacement and crippled the health and education systems in parts of the country. As of mid-2022, over 1.5 million Burkinabè (about 7% of the population) were internally displaced, and about 29,000 had fled as refugees, according to U.N. data. Over 4,000 schools were shuttered due to insecurity, affecting over 700,000 children. Most of the country's northern and eastern districts were facing “crisis” or “emergency” level food insecurity as of September 2022, according to the Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS NET). Insurgent groups have besieged towns in an apparent effort to force residents into submission and preclude cooperation with state security forces, reportedly causing severe shortages of food and medicines in areas struggling with high levels of displacement. Insurgents also have attacked gold mines, threatening a major economic sector and possibly extracting revenues from illicit gold smuggling.

In early 2022, U.N. officials warned that crises in the central Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) were “outpacing” available relief funding. Since then, the ripple effects of the Russia-Ukraine war on global food, fuel, and fertilizer supplies have created new challenges. FEWS NET has expressed particular concern for Burkina Faso, noting its reliance on Russian imports for 20% of its wheat supply.

U.S. Policy and Aid

Prior to the January 2022 coup, the State Department characterized bilateral relations as “excellent,” with U.S. engagement focusing on regional security, development, and humanitarian relief efforts. In February, the State Department announced it was applying coup-related restrictions on aid to the government under §7008 of annual foreign aid appropriations legislation. The restrictions primarily affect military aid, along with some development aid implemented through the government. Humanitarian aid and democracy-related aid are exempt, as is certain internal security assistance that Congress has authorized “notwithstanding” most legal restrictions. The Millennium Challenge Corporation has separately terminated a planned \$450 million aid compact that was to focus on electricity access, citing statutory eligibility requirements.

The United States allocated about \$66 million in bilateral aid for Burkina Faso in FY2021 (latest publicly reported), focusing primarily on health, along with basic education and governance. Additional health and development aid, including COVID-19-related assistance, has been provided through regional and global programs.

Prior to 2022, Burkina Faso received substantial additional security assistance through State Department- and Defense Department-administered regional and global programs focusing on counterterrorism and peacekeeping capacity. In 2020, U.S. officials publicly threatened to review and possibly suspend security assistance unless Burkinabè authorities addressed human rights concerns. Congress, in 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 Sahel countries, including Burkina Faso (P.L. 116-283, §1294).

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