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Burkina Faso 2014

Social movements and the fall of Compaoré

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Blaise Compaoré became President of Burkina Faso in 1991 as a result of a coup in 1987 in which his predecessor Thomas Sankara died. In 2000 the opposition succeeded in amending the constitution to limit a President to two five year terms. In 2014 Compaoré attempted to change the constitution back to allow him to remain in power and was eventually forced from office in October 2014. [*Afriques en Lutte*](#) spoke to Burkina Faso specialist Lila Chouli about how the social movements led to the fall of Compaoré.

Interview with Lila Chouli

AEL: You published *Burkina Faso 2011: Chronicle of a Social Movement* in 2011, which describes the methods of the Compaoré regime to suppress social movements in ‘The Land of Upright Men’. Could you give us a historical overview of earlier social movements?

Lila Chouli (LC): The presence of social movements has been persistent within the Burkinabe socio-political landscape since the beginning of the postcolonial period. There is a real tradition of struggle in the country, whose “founding act” indeed is the fall of the First Republic on 3 January 1966 – the result of a popular movement. Looking merely at recent times – the Blaise Compaoré regime left behind a country that was characterised by mobilisations that claimed the streets, going beyond the organised structures and that was not the sphere of the urban and/or “intellectuals”.

In rural as much as in urban areas, key questions such as access to land, involuntary resettlements, agribusiness, land disputes, corruption, impunity, the state of collective public facilities, etc., were very often at the centre of spontaneous revolts. Among the social movements that have really shaken the regime, there is the 1998 one, in response to Norbert Zongo’s assassination.

This movement spread in a sustained manner over two years, across the entire territory and brought different social and political elements together. We have been observing a real increase of popular mobilisations since this particular sociopolitical crisis.

The second such movement, which almost brought down the regime, goes back to 2011. This popular movement – borne out of the death of the highschool learner Justin Zongo – followed multiple police arrests and the deadly repression of demonstrations demanding that light be shed on the case. It effectively had already put the country in a situation of quasi insurrection. Additional problems that arose were a series of military mutinies and social conflicts in basically all sectors of the economy (from farmers to administration, including the mines, etc.). The country had become ungovernable. All along, the question of the 2015 elections and handover of power was underlying this social movement.

AEL: What eventually allowed the social movements of October 2014, against the constitutional changes, to bring about Compaoré’s fall?

LC: What really led Compaoré’s fall was a primarily young population (60% of Burkinabe are under 25) that was fed up, and the degree of awareness this population has regarding the real reasons for the burdensome reality faced by the vast majority. It is significant that primarily because they experienced its trials in a very concrete manner (land grabs, dispossession, repression, etc.), it wasn’t merely among the intellectual and urban classes that individuals

would point fingers at the regime and rebel against it.

These protest dynamics are also due to the groundwork some trade unions and public organisations carried out (Collectif contre l'impunité [Collective against impunity], Organisation démocratique de la jeunesse [Democratic youth organization], Mouvement burkinabé des droits de l'Homme [Burkinabe Human Rights Movement], Coalition contre la vie chère [Coalition against high cost of living, etc.], that for years broadened and politicised the realm of protest activities in the country. The day Blaise Compaoré resigned, young protesters – be they members of a civil society organisation or a political party or not – put the political opposition under pressure demanding he step down.

The motion to establish a Senate in May 2013 – perceived by the majority as a means for Blaise Compaoré to modify the Constitution – became the catalyst to mobilise and to demand a change-over. On 29 June 2013 the political opposition, which for a long time had forsaken public mobilisation as a means of making political claims, prompted by its leader, called for a march, which was against the setting up of this chamber and the modification of Article 37.

This march brought together an impressive crowd, consisting of different social classes, of all ages, whether activists in political or civil organizations or not. It initiated a series of marches and meetings that were all characterised by a high turnout. At the same time, we saw the establishment of a plethora of organisations against the modification of Article 37, among them Balai citoyen [“Citizen broom”] in July 2013.

The resignation of members of the political bureau of the party in power on 4 January 2014, amongst them three leading figures (Roch Christian Kaboré, Simon Compaoré and Salif Diallo, pillars of the Compaoré regime) and the formation of their new party also had a significant effect. In the wake of the army mutinies of 2011, notably of the presidential guard, which had exposed the regime’s unmistakable vulnerability, the departure of these leading figures provided a good prism through which to view the status quo. What however facilitated the fall of Compaoré has indeed been the radicalism of the popular masses.

AEL: Balai citoyen also played its part in the fall of the Compaoré regime in Burkina Faso. What do you make of it? And what are your thoughts regarding its support for Lieutenant-Colonel Zida?

LC: It cannot be denied that succeeded in bringing together people that did not see themselves represented by established political organisations, which effectively was one part of the “critical mass” mobilised against Compaoré. Furthermore, it also mobilised people around social issues (power cuts, state of hospitals, etc.). In that sense, it is an important movement.

However, Balai citoyen had a tendency to consider fighting for Blaise Compaoré’s departure to be sufficient in itself; it considered organisations insisting on the exigency and necessity to create an alternative political and social project as not being separate steps but inseparable, and to be in fact adding fuel to Compaoré’s cause.

This groundwork would have avoided a weakening of the debate on the postCompaoré period, which expressed itself through the support given to the attempt by the second in command of the former Praetorian guard’s – of a president removed by the popular movement – to divert popular victory.

It is the expression of a limited, even confused political sense: in one day, Balai can say “we’re wary of politicians, so we remain prudent” and provide backing to Lieutenant-Colonel Zida, who is close to Gilbert Diendiéré, Compaoré’s Chief of Staff, so he could seize power, acknowledging that the army deserves a “minimum of confidence”.

AEL: If the transition was to lead to elections, do you think there is a credible political alternative in Burkina Faso? What about the Sankarist parties?

LC: The fact that during the popular uprising no politician was called upon by the protesters is still a good indication of the credibility of the formal political opposition. In an opposition consisting of dozens of parties there is none that offers an alternative.

Responsible for the Union for Progress and Change (l'Union pour le progrès et le changement, UPC) and leader of the opposition, Zéphirin Diabré, for example, clumsily stated last year: "Today the world is ours, belongs to us neoliberals; we defeated and conquered it" (which he subsequently denied).

Asked about his programme by the journalist Anne Frintz, who interviewed him in Ouagadougou prior to the popular uprising, Z. Diabré replied: "UPC does not have a specific programme ... The project is that of the background sweepers". He pointed out to her: "Within the opposition we speak with one voice. We all attack the same problem: poverty. We work for better education, access to care and health, an export and food crop agriculture and above all, better governance. We must tackle corruption, which is a national sport here ... The difference between the opposition groups is their ability to implement the programme. The will and commitment."

With regards to the Sankarist parties, understandably fighting for justice to be served for the assassination of Tomas Sankara, they cannot be considered to be carrying an alternative political project (economic, social, etc.). Judging by the mass of people identifying with Sankara and gauging from these parties' low popularity, one has to recognise that they are not considered as his true heirs in terms of a political alternative, including the rejection of all external domination.

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