Burkina Faso Overview of the Current Situation

Another Sahel G5 Country on the Brink of Instability

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This document is a one shot analysis designed by the OSC research team covering Burkina Faso’s current political, social and security dynamics. With the ongoing volatility and spillover of violence across the Sahel region, this document is aimed at providing a panoramic overview of Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso is one of the Sahel “G5” countries and a popular destination for expatriates, including NGO staff, as well as tourists. Understanding the key threats and trends in the ground is therefore a key component of risk management, particularly for clients operating in the country and the rest of the region.

CONTEXT SUMMARY

Geography and Economy

Burkina Faso is a landlocked West African country, bordering Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Benin, Togo, and Ghana. It is the sub-Saharan leading exporter of cotton. With a GDP of $29.31 billion (2014 est.) and a 4% (2015) annual growth rate, the country is ranked 23th in Africa and 204th in the world. Sectorial contribution to the country’s economy is 38% agriculture, 22% industry, and 40% services (2014 EST.). About 80% of the population is engaged in subsistence farming, with cotton being the main cash crop. The country has few natural resources and a weak industrial base. Burkina Faso’s economy experienced high levels of growth over the last few years, with gold accounting for about three-quarters of the country’s total export revenues in 2013. The country has seen an upswing in gold exploration, production, and export. However, its economy is vulnerable to changes in world prices. Burkina Faso's high population growth and limited natural resources have resulted in poor economic prospects for the majority of its citizens.

Political Situation

After more than six months in power, Kaboré¹ has imposed his primacy in the ruling troika of the People’s Movement for Progress² (MPP) and made gestures of appeasement in the direction of executives of the former regime (accused of being implicated in the 2015 coup). MPP scored a wide victory in the May 22 elections, which nevertheless revealed several internal fault lines in the party. Furthermore, the MPP is preparing an ambitious constitutional reform, which could be put to a referendum at the end of the year 2016.

Social Situation

The new Government is facing important social expectations, fueled by the initiatives of the Transitional Government³, which took steps without taking account of the state’s budgetary constraints; and due to

¹ Roch Marc Christian Kaboré is a Burkinabe politician who has been President of Burkina Faso since he was elected in the November 2015 general election.
² The People’s Movement for Progress (French: Mouvement du peuple pour le progrès, MPP) is a political party in Burkina Faso that was founded on 25 January 2014 by former Congress for Democracy and Progress member Roch Marc Christian Kaboré.
³ In November 2014, ruler Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign and a transitional government assumed power.
pressure from unions. President Kaboré does not wish to revisit the laws passed during the transition but seeks to defer their application.

However the suspension of rural financial aid, such as the statutory and financial measures concerning the judiciary and the military, has provoked anger and discontent among civil servants, students and the general population.

In addition to trade union organizations which incite street protests, influential civil society movements are regularly calling for demonstrations to request a ceiling on prices of basic commodities.

Security Situation

The January attacks in Ouagadougou\(^4\) have put security issues at the forefront of the Government’s concerns. Facing an increased terrorist threat, the President wishes to undertake a profound reform of the security apparatus and intelligence as well as a gradual replacement of General officers, whom he questions the competence and loyalty in private.

Aware of the security forces’ inability to exert control over the entire country’s territory, Simon Compaoré\(^5\) has prompted the Government to establish a privileged link with the Koglweogo (rural Mossi\(^6\) ethnic self-defense militias).

Funded and organized by the MPP, these militias are prone to brutal methods, and are extending their areas of influence from rural areas to the main cities. Their recent transformation into political militia could be linked to the fears of the Government concerning the eventuality of major social unrest. Yet such a transformation increases the possibility of community clashes, which have not so far been witnessed in Burkina Faso.

Religious Radicalization

Tensions between religious communities and frustrations caused by the perception of a State having a religious preference (and, above all, the rise of ostentatious Muslim conservative practices) reflect a certain radicalization on the religious side.

As such, the authorities are getting concerned of the sharp rise of foreign preachers coming to Burkina Faso (more than 425 of them travelled to the country since 2013). While few among them are considered to be dangerous, some are well known for their radical speeches.

Besides, those under scrutiny are commonly coming from west African states (ECOWAS\(^7\)) and do not need visas to enter the country, thus highlighting the vulnerability of the authorities in regard to this phenomenon.

The situation has become a concern to the authorities given the confirmation of existing sleeper cells, composed of persons suspected of facilitating the activities of terrorist groups. The recent arrests made by the Burkinabe security forces\(^8\) confirm such a concern.

Porosity of the borders

The border between Burkina Faso and Mali is known for its porosity. Attacks on security posts in northern Burkina Faso have mushroomed. In early June, President Kaboré requested that part of the

\(^4\) On 15 January 2016, gunmen armed with heavy weapons attacked the Cappuccino restaurant and the Splendid Hotel in the heart of Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. The number of fatalities reached 30, while at least 56 were wounded; a total of 176 hostages were released after a government counter-attack into the next morning as the siege ended.

\(^5\) Simon Compaoré is a Burkinabe politician who served in the government as Minister of State for Territorial Administration and Internal Security since 2016.

\(^6\) The Mossi are the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso, constituting more than 40% of the population, or about 6.2 million people.

\(^7\) The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS; French: Communauté économique des États de l’Afrique de l’Ouest, CEDEAO) is a regional group of fifteen West African countries. Founded on 28 May 1975, with the signing of the Treaty of Lagos, its mission is to promote economic integration across the region.

\(^8\) Since the beginning of June, about 20 people, mostly of foreign origin were arrested, on suspicion of having a connection with a terrorist undertaking.
Burkinabe’s troops - the greatest contingent amongst the MINUSMA\(^9\) force with some 1, 700 men - be redeployed near the border.

A month earlier, Burkina Faso had already announced its intent to repatriate its 850-strong contingent deployed in Darfur.

In order to protect their territory, Burkinabe authorities have multiplied spectacular actions, including several arrests of persons (national and international alike) suspected to be involved in the Ouagadougou attack as well as attacks against the security forces on the border with Mali. Despite this determination, some denounce a lack of overall strategy, necessary for sustainable and effective combat against violent extremism.

**Jihadists’ infiltration**

Two Burkina youths radicalized in Niger, who wanted to install a terrorist cell (with the aim to constitute a larger Jihadist group and replicate the Katibat model as seen in Mali) in Burkina Faso were arrested in late December 2015 for possession of explosives and a huge amount of cash.

The culprits are reported to have participated in several terrorist attacks in Mali, in particular against MINUSMA.

Meanwhile, information received by Burkinabe authorities since the January 15 attacks has revealed plans kidnapping plans targeting Westerners.

**Rise of the militias**

The rural areas, long abandoned by the State, have seen a rapid proliferation of self-defense groups in recent months.

In turn police officers, judges and executioners, as well as the Koglweogo (Koglweogo is a contraction of two Moré words that could be translated to "the guardians of the Bush") are maintaining order while also increasing terror. They are connected to one another and have a mission to put an end to banditry in the countryside.

While this phenomenon is not new (it has been present for almost ten years) it has recently taken a new direction. Initially, the Koglweogo served as zealous informants or even as police auxiliaries. When they stopped a thief, or a person they suspected to be one, they used to defer him/her to the security forces. This is no longer the case. For some time now, the Koglweogo act as if the State no longer existed: they stop the suspects, coax them into confessions and punish them accordingly. In the bush, militiamen are sometimes seen with the "Stop Koglweogo" sign, while carrying out checks on the countryside axes.

These elements reveal the existence in Burkina of a non-Republican army organization, with no territorial limits and with the power to arrest, torture and even to commit summary executions. Today, the afore-mentioned groups are more content to take justice into their own hands, thus challenging the authority of a State they no longer trust.

Representatives of the Koglweogo operating in parts of the country met with authorities in Ouagadougou on July 11, to discuss ways to implement new security measures across the country.

Yet it is not clear whether this new push for cooperation between the Koglweogo and police will be effective in addressing the security challenges facing various communities. It is likely that some Koglweogo will continue to engage in illegal activities and remain a security concern in areas where they operate.

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\(^9\) The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013 to support political processes in that country and carry out a number of security-related tasks.
CONCLUSION:

Political insecurity in neighbouring Mali, unreliable energy supplies, and poor transportation links pose long-term challenges for Burkina Faso. However, internal political turmoil presents an immediate problem.

Kaboré’s first six months in office are characterized by an on-sight navigation pattern: lack of coordination of government’s actions, inability to inject a new dynamic in the management of the state’s affairs, inability to discharge the domestic debt, growing insecurity, violence during the municipal councils election (3 deaths), and the refusal by the auto-defense militias (Koglweogo) to submit to the authority of the state.

If the political situation seems currently under control, the threat of a significant social upheaval seems possible while security issues have become the government’s top concerns.

It is under this volatile and potentially explosive situation that Compaoré and Diallo\(^{10}\) travelled to Côte d’Ivoire\(^{11}\) to seek support from President Ouattara\(^{12}\) for Burkina Faso’s economic recovery.

Meanwhile, what is happening in regards to the militias is alarming and is the result of three phenomena: the rise of insecurity in the cities as well as rural areas; the total absence of the State in rural areas (including during Blaise Compaoré\(^{13}\)’s tenure); and finally lack of confidence in state’s institutions. As long as these problems are not addressed, it will be futile to consider banning the militias.

A possible alliance between jihadists and militias in the near future could possibly pave the way for a “Malisation” of Burkina Faso, with the potential to engulf the entire region in a new string of violence.

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\(^{10}\) Salif Diallo is a Burkinabe politician who has been President of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso since 2015.

\(^{11}\) Côte d’Ivoire and Burkina Faso are bound by strong historical ties, if one recalls that the northern boundary of modern-day Cote d’Ivoire was not fixed until 1947 due the French colonial administration’s efforts to attach provinces of what was known as Upper Volta (today’s Burkina Faso) to modern-day Côte d’Ivoire for economic and administrative reasons.

\(^{12}\) Alassane Dramane Ouattara is an Ivorian politician who has been President of Côte d’Ivoire since 2010.

\(^{13}\) Blaise Compaoré (born 3 February 1951) is a Burkinabe politician who was president of Burkina Faso from 1987 to 2014. His attempt to amend the constitution to extend his 27-year term caused the 2014 Burkinabe uprising.