



Freedom in the World - Burkina Faso (2010)

Capital:
Ouagadougou

Population:
15,757,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *
Civil Liberties Score: 3 *
Status: Partly Free

Overview

Thibault Nana, an opposition party leader who had been sentenced to three years in prison for his role in 2008 protests, was released in January 2009. Electoral reforms enacted in the spring created a gender quota for party lists and extended suffrage to Burkinabe living abroad. In September, severe rainfall and flooding left over 100,000 people homeless and damaged the country's infrastructure.

Burkina Faso experienced a series of military coups after gaining independence from France in 1960. In 1987, Thomas Sankara, a populist president who had risen to power through a coup in 1983, was ousted by army captain Blaise Compaore; Sankara and several of his supporters were killed. In 1991, a democratic constitution was approved in a referendum, and Compaore easily won that year's presidential election due to an opposition boycott. Compaore 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. However, in December 1998, Norbert Zongo, a journalist investigating the death of an employee of Compaore's brother, was assassinated. An independent investigative body concluded in 1999 that the murder was linked to his reporting and identified six members of the presidential guard as suspects. Only one suspect was charged, and an appeals court dismissed the charges in August 2006, citing lack of evidence.

The 2002 National Assembly elections were the first conducted without a significant opposition boycott. Compaore's Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) party won only 57 of 111 seats, compared with 101 in 1997. Compaore secured a third term as president in 2005, though it was shortened to five years by a 2000 constitutional amendment. A 2001 amendment had imposed a two-term limit for presidents, but the CDP argued that it was not retroactive. The country's first municipal elections were held in 2006, with the CDP capturing nearly two-thirds of the local council seats. The CDP gained 16 seats in the 2007 National Assembly elections, for a total of 73, while the largest opposition party, the

Alliance for Democracy and Federation–African Democratic Rally (ADF-RDA) lost three seats, for a total of 14.

In January 2009, Compaore pardoned Thibault Nana, leader of the opposition Democratic and Popular Rally (RDP) party, who had been sentenced to three years in prison in 2008 for allegedly orchestrating violent protests against high food prices that year. To cope with the price increases, the World Food Programme launched a \$5.9 million voucher program in February 2009, providing vouchers to 200,000 residents of Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso.

Also in 2009, Burkina Faso embarked on further electoral reforms. The National Assembly voted in April to establish a quota of 30 percent for women on all party candidate lists in municipal and legislative elections. In May, the Assembly extended the right to vote in presidential elections and referendums to millions of Burkinabe living abroad.

On September 1, 2009, severe rainfall and flooding left more than 100,000 people homeless. Thousands of the displaced were taken in by local families, but thousands more slept in schools, churches, and government buildings. The flooding put further strains on health facilities and sanitary infrastructure, which were already under-equipped. Earlier in the year, a measles outbreak led to more than 45,000 infections and 300 deaths. The 2009 UN Human Development Report ranked Burkina Faso at 177 of 182 countries based on key development indicators.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Burkina Faso is not an electoral democracy. International monitors have judged the most recent presidential, municipal, and legislative elections to be generally free but not entirely fair, due to the ruling CDP's privileged access to state resources and the media. President Blaise Compaore is currently serving his third term in office, and he is expected to seek another five-year term in 2010. The 111-seat National Assembly is unicameral, and members serve five-year terms. The legislature is independent, but subject to executive influence.

The constitution guarantees the right to form political parties, and 13 parties are currently represented in the legislature. Opposition members have argued that 2004 revisions to the electoral code, which tripled the number of electoral districts, gave an undue advantage to larger parties, particularly the CDP. Some civil society groups have also criticized the 2009 electoral reforms, which established a gender quota and extended suffrage to citizens living abroad. The CDP has notably higher numbers of female members, and there are concerns that the overseas polling will be managed exclusively by embassies, with fewer monitoring opportunities for the opposition and civil society. Opposition parties remain weak; in the 2007 legislative elections, only two parties, the CDP and ADF-RDA, reached the 5 percent vote threshold needed to qualify for campaign financing. Another April 2009 electoral reform reduced that threshold to 3 percent of the vote so as to include a greater

number of parties.

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 79 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index. It also ranked 147 out of 183 in the World Bank's 2010 Doing Business Report on business regulations and enforcement, though this represented the best performance among all Francophone African states except Madagascar.

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. There are over 50 private radio stations, a private television station, and several independent newspapers, and 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, as evidenced by the authorities' crackdown on protests in 2008. Many nongovernmental organizations, including human rights groups that have reported abuses by security forces, operate openly and freely. 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. In April 2009, a 23-day strike by employees of the French oil company Total closed all of its gas stations in Ouagadougou.

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. Although the right to own property is legally guaranteed, the inadequate judicial system and the frequent recourse to traditional courts in rural areas limit this right in practice.

Human rights advocates in Burkina Faso have repeatedly criticized the military and police for committing abuses with impunity. Police often use excessive force and disregard pretrial detention limits.

Discrimination against various ethnic minorities occurs but is not widespread. However, the disabled, homosexuals, and those infected with HIV routinely experience discrimination.

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.

Gender discrimination, though illegal, remains common in employment, education, property, and family rights, particularly in rural areas. In the north, early marriage contributes to lower female school enrollment and a heightened incidence of fistula. Female genital mutilation still occurs despite being banned in 1996.

Unpaid child labor is illegal but common. 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 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report, Burkina Faso does not comply with the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking. However, the report notes the government's efforts to reform, including May 2008 legislation which criminalizes all forms of human trafficking and assigns more stringent penalties to those convicted.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*