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Burkina Faso Overview

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Environment

Burkina Faso, formerly Upper Volta, is bordered by Niger, Mali, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. The poor semi-arid soil supports few crops, produces low yields and loses its fertility rapidly. Extreme variations in rainfall have led to periods of severe drought, with large loss of life and livestock.

Peoples

Main languages: French (official), More, Dioula, Gurmanche

Main religions: Islam, Christianity, traditional beliefs.

Minority groups include Dioula, Peul and related groups, Lobi, Dagiri and related groups, Bobo and Guransi. (There are no reliable population figures on these groups.)

There is a great linguistic and ethnic diversity among the inhabitants of Burkina Faso (known as Burkinabe). It should be noted that ethno-linguistic allegiances have historically shifted in line with economic and climatic changes, a process that can be expected to continue and probably accelerate.

The Voltaic linguistic group includes Mossi, Gurunsi, Bobo and Lobi. Mande-speakers include Senufo, Dioula and Busani (Dioula/*juula* being a historically dominant oral language where business transactions are concerned). Other groups include Peul and Hausa (the latter having a minimal identity). Many Burkinabe adhere to traditional beliefs, but a steadily growing minority have a strengthening Muslim identity, despite the fact that this was historically resisted by both local leaders and the colonial French throughout the 20th century. Roman Catholics form an influential minority, especially prominent in local government in the capital Ouagadougou, and the southern economic centre Bobo-Dioulasso.

Peul (Fula) and Tamasheq (Tuareg) clans with their quasi-vassal associates, Bellah, are largely pastoralists, and are almost entirely Muslim. They inhabit the northern Sahelian region and the border areas with Mali. They have been historically marginalised as the Mossi domination of the state has grown since the 1930s, but individual Peul politicians and businesspeople remain prominent, especially in the trade and transport sub-sectors of the economy.

Christianized Gurunsi and Bobo live along the border with Ghana in south and south-east Burkina Faso. The Gurunsi, a collective term for several peoples including the Lele and Kassena, are an independent

group of cultivators; highly individualistic, they have never organized to protect themselves and have often been raided by their more powerful neighbours.

Of Burkina Faso's Mandé-speakers, the Dioula are Burkina's equivalents of the great business dynasties of Mali and northern Côte d'Ivoire, to whom they are often linked by family and clan lineage. The Senufo, a small segment of a larger Muslim Côte d'Ivoire and Malian ethnic group, live in the extreme south-west along the frontier. Far from central control, they have often viewed the government with mistrust. It should be stressed that all these minority groups are well represented in the capital, Ouagadougou, although they tend to have some local control over governance and economy.

Originally from north-west Ghana, Lobi migrated into contemporary Burkina Faso at the end of the eighteenth century, settling along the sparsely populated border with Côte d'Ivoire. Lobi traditionally lived in extended families with no larger political structure and were highly resistant to the imposition of colonial and then post-colonial central government. Social order is assured by the head of the extended family and by a series of cultural interdictions. Despite foreign influence, Lobi have retained their cultural identity and have displayed strong resistance to colonial rule, Islam, Christianity and modernity. While their strong individualism at village level has given their society great staying power and strength, they are as much subject to the forces of globalization and economic change as all other ethnic identities in one of West Africa's most complex polities.

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History

Mossi arrived in the area in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and established a powerful kingdom, a centre of contact with trans-Saharan traders and the forest kingdoms to the south, centred upon what is now viewed as the Asante regions of central Ghana. France asserted control over the area in the 1890s, first dividing it among other colonies but then reconstituting it within its present borders from 1919 to 1932, and again from 1947. A Mossi-dominated political party led Upper Volta to independence in 1960, but France retained strong influence, including through the provision of presidential advisors. This remains the case under the current president, Blaise Compaoré, regarded in Paris as one of France's closest African allies.

Governance

Political life has been dominated since independence in 1960 by a relatively small educated elite, military officers and labour unions. However, outside observers have generally underestimated the influence at local and provincial level of religious (especially Muslim) and 'traditional' leaders. A supposedly civilian government elected in 1978 was overthrown in a military coup in November 1980 and a series of military governments followed, with a radical left-wing regime coming to power in 1983. Captain Thomas Sankara and a group of radical young officers strove to revolutionize society; people were encouraged to create Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDRs) in cities and villages in order to build schools and clinics, run cooperatives and exercise local power. The government sought to divert funds from costly urban civil services to rural development, and Sankara came to symbolize popular democracy. In 1984 he renamed the country 'Burkina Faso' which means 'land of the upright people' in Mossi. With the assassination of Sankara - in which his deputy and close military friend, current president Blaise Compaoré, has always been closely implicated - Marxism-Leninism was quietly abandoned in 1987. Compaoré immediately started reorienting the country towards France, the major historical donors and the international financial institutions.

Military rule ended in 1991 with the installation of a transitional government and the adoption of a new constitution that nominally allowed for multi-party politics. Compaoré won the 1991 presidential elections amid violence and an opposition boycott, and set about quietly reducing the power of 'traditional' chiefs. Many of those imprisoned after Compaoré's 1987 coup remained in prison for years, and only among civil servants and trade unionists was there any opportunity for political involvement. Even here, opposition was a potentially risky game.

In the 1980s Compaoré had introduced a young Liberian named Charles Taylor to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who arranged for his training as a rebel leader along with the late Foday Sankoh of Sierra Leone. Throughout the 1990s Compaoré worked with Gaddafi, Taylor and Sankoh to funnel Sierra Leonean diamonds through Burkina Faso and Libya in exchange for cash and weapons that fuelled the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

At home Compaoré also inadvertently caused destabilisation in 1998 when a prominent local journalist, Norbert Zongo, was murdered. Zongo had been researching a story on the killing of an associate of Compaoré's brother. Although Compaoré himself has never been implicated in the journalist's murder, the case catalyzed Burkinabe civil society, spurred a general strike, and drew an unwelcome international spotlight onto Compaoré's authoritarian rule. Under pressure, Compaoré assented to a package of electoral reforms. The ensuing 2002 parliamentary elections were the first not boycotted by opposition parties, and the ruling party saw its near-total control the National Assembly cut to 51 per cent. In November 2005 Compaoré ran for a third term as president, arguing that a 2001 constitutional amendment limiting presidents to two terms could not be applied retroactively. With the opposition divided and Compaoré making extensive use of state resources for his campaign, he won with 80 per cent of the vote.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Drought and population pressure in the south had long increased flight from the land, accelerating the trend of emigration of young Burkinabe to Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, but with conflict erupting in Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, some 350,000 Burkinabe streamed back across the south-western border. Meanwhile, recurrent drought and abusive subsidy policies in the United States and the EU have reduced exports of Burkina Faso's main cash crop, cotton. Poverty and a lack of access to healthcare give the country one of the lowest life expectancy rates and highest infant mortality rates, although main indicators have improved slightly in recent years.

The Peul, Tamasheq and Bellah have been severely affected by environmental degradation. Running along the border between Mali and Burkina Faso is the Beli river, which has its source in Mali. Uncertainty about land and water rights has been a constant source of friction between the two countries; and on either side of the border families are arbitrarily separated by the frontier. The main economic and culturally valued activity of these semi-nomadic groups remains herding of camels, goats, oxen and sheep and their continual wandering for water and fodder leads them to cross the border, which has always been irrelevant to them. Tension mounted after alleged cattle raids by Malians brought in its wake an influx of weapons. In 1974, during the Sahelian drought, the then Upper Volta declared it had a right to deny Malian herders access to water resources in the disputed Agacher strip, and Malian troops and tanks subsequently moved in to occupy part of the area. As drought returned in the early 1980s Mali again launched a military attack on Burkina Faso. The remaining population in the Agacher strip was displaced, losing grain and animals to occupying soldiers. International arbitration has since determined that the frontier should run along the river. Tension continues at local level, although anecdotal observations are that pastoralists and agriculturalists have in some cases arrived at their own informal

arrangements behind the backs of both governments.

With renewed drought affecting the region in 2005, Peul and Tamasheq pastoralists from Burkina Faso drove large herds into Mali in search of water, leading humanitarian aid officials to warn of the potential for conflict.

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