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Burkina Faso

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2015 SCORES

STATUS

**Partly
Free**FREEDOM RATING
(1 = BEST, 7 = WORST)**4.5**CIVIL LIBERTIES
(1 = BEST, 7 = WORST)**3**POLITICAL RIGHTS
(1 = BEST, 7 = WORST)**6**

RATINGS CHANGE:

Burkina Faso's political rights rating declined from 5 to 6 as a result of the dissolution of the government and parliament by the military, which took charge of the country after President Blaise Compaoré was forced to resign amid popular protests over his attempt to run for reelection in 2015.

OVERVIEW:

After a series of protests over the past four years, including mass demonstrations in 2013 against alterations to the constitution and attempts to create a second legislative chamber, the situation in Burkina Faso became more volatile in 2014. A proposed change to the constitution to allow President Blaise Compaoré to suspend term limits and run in the 2015 presidential election caused disagreement within and between the country's political parties. The government and opposition clashed throughout the year over the issue, and mass opposition protests led to confrontations with security forces in late October. Following a declaration of a state of emergency on October 30, Compaoré stepped down from office, and the country came under military rule. A transitional government took power in mid-November.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Political Rights: 9 / 40 (-8) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12 (-3)

Compaoré, a former army captain, had held power since ousting populist president Thomas Sankara in 1987. Supported by his Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) party, Compaoré won Burkina Faso's first democratic election in 1991, and was last elected in 2010 to his second seven-year term since two-term presidential limits were reintroduced in 2000. In 2012, the CDP won a comfortable majority in parliamentary elections, taking 70 of the 127 seats. The constitution gives members of the National Assembly five-year terms.

International monitors have judged recent elections in Burkina Faso to be generally free but not entirely fair, due to the CDP's privileged access to state resources and the media. Electoral reforms in 2009 extended the right to vote in presidential elections and referendums to Burkinabé living abroad, but not until the 2015 presidential election.

Compaoré's bid to change the constitution in order to be eligible for reelection to a third term caused profound political instability in 2014. Amid disagreement between the government and the opposition on the proposed amendment and violent protests by opposition supporters, a state of emergency was declared on October 30. The military intervened that day and dissolved the National Assembly, and Compaoré stepped down from the presidency on October 31. The military took control of the country and suspended the constitution. Lieutenant Colonel Isaac Zida, a deputy commander of the elite presidential guard, emerged as the new head of state.

Following talks mediated by the Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Senegalese presidents, civilian and military leaders agreed on a transitional charter on November 13. The charter allowed a special

college of religious, military, political, civil, and traditional leaders to elect an interim president, who would then appoint a prime minister, who would in turn appoint a cabinet. A 90-member transitional council would serve as a legislative body, comprising 30 members from former opposition parties, 25 members from civil society, 25 members from the military and security services, and 10 members drawn from Compaoré's CDP and other parties.

On November 15, Zida agreed to restore the Burkinabé constitution. Michel Kafando, former foreign minister and former UN ambassador, was named transitional president, while Zida was appointed transitional prime minister. Under the transitional charter, neither Zida nor Kafando will be eligible to run in the next presidential election, slated for 2015. The transitional council met for the first time in late November.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 6 / 16 (-2)

The Burkinabé constitution guarantees the right to form political parties, and 13 parties were represented in the legislature prior to its dissolution in October 2014. The Union for Progress and Change (UPC) party was the main opposition party in the National Assembly. The ruling CDP controlled many of the government's resources and limited the playing field for opposition parties, many of which it had coopted. One such party was the Alliance for Democracy and Federation–African Democratic Rally (ADF-RDA), which, while formally the largest opposition party in the National Assembly, had supported Compaoré and the CDP in recent elections. In December, the transitional government suspended the CDP, the ADF-RDA, and the Federation of Associations for Peace and Progress with Blaise Compaoré (FEDAP-BC), an association that supported Compaoré.

The military suffers from corruption among elites and in recruiting practices, despite recent reform attempts. After the dissolution of the National Assembly and the suspension of the constitution in October, people's political choices came under the domination of the military. In addition to serving as transitional prime minister following the signing of the transitional charter in November, Zida also led the defense ministry. In all, military officials claimed 6 of the 26 posts in the transitional cabinet, with the remaining posts divided among members of political parties and civil society.

Minority rights are generally respected in politics, though a small, educated elite, the military, and labor unions have historically dominated the scene. Under the military and transitional regimes, the ability of all groups to exercise full political rights and participate in political life was hindered.

C. Functioning of Government: 1 / 12 (-3)

The dissolution of the National Assembly, suspension of the constitution, and subsequent political actions by the military following Compaoré's resignation effectively eliminated the ability of elected officials to carry out their duties, including in legislation and policymaking. The military had no mandate to interfere in political succession. Domestic protests continued while Zida ruled, reflecting popular dissatisfaction with the actions of the military.

Corruption remained a problem in 2014, despite public and private anticorruption initiatives in recent years. Courts are often unwilling or unable to adequately prosecute many senior officials charged with corruption. The government stepped up anticorruption efforts in 2012, firing the head of the country's notoriously corrupt customs office; no major anticorruption actions were taken in 2014. Burkina Faso was ranked 85 out of 175

countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

In 2012, the National Assembly voted to give immunity from prosecution to all presidents since Burkina Faso's 1960 independence, despite an opposition boycott of the vote. There was a near-total lack of accountability and transparency following the military intervention in October 2014, which removed elected representatives from power and impeded the functions of state institutions.

Civil Liberties: 36 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 13 / 16

Although the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, which is generally respected, many media outlets practice self-censorship. Journalists occasionally face criminal defamation prosecutions, death threats, and other forms of intimidation. In addition to the state-owned outlets, dozens of private radio stations and newspapers, along with several private television stations, operate in the country. The government does not restrict internet access.

In October 2014, antigovernment protesters stormed and looted the Ouagadougou offices of the state-owned Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina, which has traditionally been heavily influenced by the government. Media outlets were generally able to cover the actions of the military and the transitional government, with mainstream media providing room for some critical discussion.

In November, Zida announced his intention to reopen a probe into the 1998 murder of journalist Norbert Zongo, who had been killed while investigating the death of an employee of Compaoré's brother. In March, the African Court

on Human and People's Rights had ruled that the failure of the Compaoré government to seek accountability in Zongo's death had left a negative impact on media freedom in Burkina Faso. In December, the court ruled on the appeal case of the editor of the private weekly *L'Ouragan*, who had been sentenced to 12 months in prison over articles alleging corruption in the state prosecutor's office. In that case, it found that imprisonment on charges of defamation was a violation of the right to free expression, and that the enforcement of criminal defamation laws should be limited.

Burkina Faso is a secular state, and freedom of religion is respected. Academic freedom is generally unrestricted, though for years the Compaoré government pointedly quelled student-led protests and political agitation, fearing their potential to spread to other segments of society. Universities were occasionally shut down and student protestors arrested and dispersed.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12

The constitution provides for the right to assemble, though demonstrations are often suppressed or banned. While many nongovernmental organizations operate openly and freely, human rights groups have reported abuses by security forces. In January 2014, Burkina Faso's largest opposition protest in decades occurred as crowds demonstrated against the proposed term-limit extension as well as attempts to create a second legislative chamber. Compaoré's supporters organized rallies to endorse the contested changes. In October, ahead of a parliamentary vote on amending the constitution to remove the presidential term limit, opposition supporters clashed with security forces, who used tear gas to disperse the protesters on at least one occasion. By the end of the month, protesters were demanding the president's

resignation, and the violence of the demonstrations escalated; government buildings, including the parliament building, were lit on fire. According to Amnesty International, at least 10 people were killed and hundreds injured in the October protests.

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.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16

The judiciary is formally independent but has historically been subject to executive influence and corruption. The courts are further weakened by a lack of resources and citizens' poor knowledge of their rights. The operations of the judiciary were impeded by the suspension of the constitution in October 2014 but resumed following the charter's reinstatement and the establishment of the transitional government.

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. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, as well as those infected with HIV, routinely experience discrimination.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 8 / 16

The constitution provides for freedom of movement within the country, although security checks on travelers are common. Prior to the dissolution of the government, equality of

opportunity was hampered in part by preferential treatment given to CDP members, including in the acquisition of public contracts.

While illegal, gender discrimination remains common in employment and education, as well as in the upholding of property and family rights; it is particularly common in rural areas. Reforms in 2009 established a 30-percent quota for women on all party candidate lists in municipal and legislative elections, but the law was vague regarding implementation. Before its dissolution, the 127-seat National Assembly included 20 women. In the north, early marriage contributes to lower female school enrollment and a heightened incidence of obstetric fistula. Human rights groups have recorded a significant drop in the prevalence of female genital mutilation since its criminalization in 1996.

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 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report, Burkina Faso does not comply with the minimum standards for eliminating human trafficking.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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