

POLICY BRIEF

ASSESSMENT OF THE BURKINA FASO TRANSITION PROCESS FROM JANUARY 2022 TO SEPTEMBER 2023

BY: Professor Augustin Loada

Introduction

Since 2015 Burkina Faso has been confronted with terrorist attacks, which it was unable to quell under Roch Marc Christian Kaboré presidency. This situation provided an excuse for Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Damiba's January 24, 2022 coup d'état. However, disagreements within the military junta led to a second military coup d'état on September 30, 2022. The new leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré maintained the ECOWAS-approved Transition time schedule within the new Transition Charter, which was adopted on October 14, 2022.

This policy note assesses the current transition process in Burkina Faso, focusing on the commitments, efforts and interventions of all stakeholders, and adherence to the roadmap and Transition Charter by the junta.



Figure 1 Map of Burkina Faso

Taking Stock of the Transition Governance in Burkina Faso

The agenda of the current transition regime, which has been in power since October 2022, is structured around four broad themes which the Transition Government wants to resolve through an action plan adopted in **January 2023**.

The first linchpin of this action plan is the fight against terrorism and the recapture of all territories under rebel or jihadist control. To this effect, the authorities have, among other things, reorganized the armed forces and increased their number; they have recruited and trained about 50,000 volunteers for the national army; they have acquired new

military equipment; they have sealed new partnerships with countries such as Russia and Turkey, all of these to the detriment of France. A patriotic support fund has been set up to collect various donations from ordinary citizens to help finance the war against terrorism; military cooperation with neighboring countries such as Mali and Niger have been reinforced. The security situation remains worrying in spite of all these efforts made.

The second goal of the Transition Government is the effective management of the humanitarian crisis, even though they have struggled to achieve it. The regime has had help from local and international humanitarian organizations. The challenge lies in addressing a humanitarian disaster that has affected nearly two million internally displaced people. Insecurity not only hampers the return of these individuals to their home villages but also constrains the capacity of humanitarian organizations to effectively respond to the crisis. However, two-thirds of the required US\$877 million fund, crucial for a comprehensive response to the needs of over three million people identified by humanitarian actors, is still pending.

In addressing the third challenge, focused on State reform and governance enhancement, the Transition Government's action plan outlines diverse reforms targeting the promotion of democracy, as well as improvements in economic and political governance. However, the current status indicates a standstill in the reform agenda and the associated consultation process that should engage all stakeholders.

Even though the Transition Charter has made provision for the organization of elections, no election timetable has been published yet, and one may wonder if this silent swing is not purposively intended to account for the *sine die* postponement of elections and thereby providing extra time for the Transition.

With respect to national reconciliation and social cohesion, the current government leans towards grassroots reconciliation rather than the former elite-based approach. However, in practice, social cohesion and the sense of a shared community have been eroding. Factors contributing to this include terrorist attacks, stigmatization of certain ethnic communities, human



rights violations, and the ostracism faced by citizens critical of the Transition Government.

In essence, the transition process since its inception in late September 2022 has not been inclusive. Civil society organizations and non-affiliated stakeholders and political parties are marginalized, and ostracized while the regime supporters are well-established and enjoy the goodwill of the government.

The transition process has failed to enhance women's representation in both parliament and the government cabinet. While there is a noticeable rejuvenation of the ruling elite within the Transition, the drafting of the Transition Charter, the appointment of key officials, and the establishment of Transition bodies have all lacked inclusivity. The military junta's control over the national conference responsible for adopting the Transition Charter has limited inclusion from civil society organizations, religious and traditional groups among others despite the diverse composition of the national assembly.

Assessing the Management of the Unconstitutional Changes of Power and Transitional Democracies at the Regional and Continental Levels in Africa.

Pursuant to the 2001 ECOWAS supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance, and the 2007 African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, Burkina Faso has been suspended from the organs of both the African Union and ECOWAS. Specifically, ECOWAS, tasked with managing the Burkina Faso crisis under the subsidiarity principle, has imposed milder sanctions on Burkina Faso. In contrast, Mali, facing a similar crisis, initially experienced heavier sanctions from ECOWAS, though these were lifted a few months after their imposition.



Figure 2 A picture of the ECOWAS Heads of State at a Summit

It must be said that the ECOWAS' carrot and stick approach appears to be ineffective. The dialogue between the Transition authorities and ECOWAS is notably challenging. This is

particularly so as the ECOWAS-appointed mediator has received little or no support from the Transition authorities. In recent years, the ECOWAS bloc has encountered a legitimacy crisis, with member states expressing discontent about the organization's actions and policies in addressing political issues within the region. The rift deepened when the Burkina Faso military junta backed its Niger counterpart following the July 26, 2023, coup in Niger.

In a nutshell, with the ECOWAS agreed deadline a few months away (July 2024), concerns are being raised about the Transition authorities' commitment to organize elections as scheduled on the ECOWAS agreed timetable. This skepticism is heightened by the ongoing insecurity, which remains unaddressed. The region has been characterized by an increase in human rights violations and restrictions on civic liberties, exacerbated by the increasingly uncompromising stance of the Transition authorities.

Assessing Burkina Faso's Current Relations with the International System

Under Captain Traoré's rule, Burkina Faso has strengthened its relations with junta-ruled neighboring countries such as Mali and Niger. The three Sahelian states, which are now in a populist and anti-imperialist mood, have formed an alliance aimed at mutualizing their efforts so as to make their respective territories more secure, but also ***"to defend their sovereignty against any external aggression."*** On the contrary, Burkina Faso's relations with neighboring countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Benin have soured.

Burkina Faso's relations with the United Nations system have also deteriorated, mainly with the expulsion of the UN Resident Coordinator on 23rd December 2022. The UN Secretary General has disapproved of this move, but he has reiterated the UN willingness to continue its engagement in favor of Burkina Faso. In certain instances, the UN Human Rights Commission has openly urged the Transition government to conduct credible investigations into alleged human rights violations and to ensure that those accountable for these violations face legal consequences.

Regarding Burkina Faso's relations with major powers, a significant geopolitical shift is evident. On one hand, Burkina Faso has distanced itself from France in terms of military cooperation, terminating several treaties and conventions, and closing down French media outlets. In response, France has suspended aid to Burkina Faso and suspended visa issuance to Burkinabe citizens and also suspended its flights to Ouagadougou. On the other hand, there has been an improvement in relations between Burkina Faso and Russia, with the latter now being considered a strategic partner. Despite



efforts by American officials to dissuade Burkina Faso from engaging the Russian private security group known as Wagner, Burkina Faso has proceeded, falling under Russian influence. China, Burkina Faso's primary trading partner, has maintained a low profile in global politics and counterterrorism efforts. While expressing concerns about Sahel insecurity affecting its investments, China avoids involvement in what it views as Burkina Faso's internal affairs.

Citizens perception of the Transition process in Burkina Faso

Since 2008, Afrobarometer surveys have always confirmed that the majority of the Burkinabe citizens feel attached to democracy. However, according to the September/October 2022 Afrobarometer survey, almost two thirds of the Burkinabè are not satisfied with the way the democratic system works in their country. In this context, it is not surprising to see that a large portion of the population, particularly the youth, is lured towards authoritarianism and militarism. Building on this popular disappointment, the military junta and its allies are waging a hostile campaign against what they consider as “electioneering democracy” allegedly imposed on African countries by the West.

The primary backing for the military junta stems from urban youth, particularly those belonging to marginalized lower social classes. Captain Ibrahim Traore, the young leader of the military junta, has astutely recognized the advantage of adapting the image former President Thomas Sankara, an icon among Burkinabe youth, to bolster his popular legitimacy. He distinguishes himself through a populist discourse that is both anti-imperialist and anti-intellectual. In the eyes of his supporters, Captain Traore is none but “a messiah” for Burkina Faso. However, some Burkina citizens are critical of him and his regime. They denounce the exclusionary transitional process, the junta's authoritarian tendencies, instances of nepotism and patrimonialism in state affairs management, and notably, a perceived lack of effectiveness in countering terrorism.

Analyzing the deficiencies that are likely to derail the transitional process

The institutional framework of Burkina Faso's ongoing transition is organized based on the Transition Charter, which was adopted on October 14, 2022, as an addition to the still-active Constitution. The Transition Charter is based on democratic values and principles, including the separation of powers. It explicitly outlines the Transition's duration (21 months), its primary missions, and the ineligibility of its key leaders, among other aspects.

However, in practice, the Transition authorities and their supporters struggle to uphold constitutionalism and the rule of law. This is evident through their limited tolerance for critics, a tendency to question the independence of the judiciary, and a discernible trend towards autocratization within the military junta. Contrary to the Constitution and the Transition Charter, arbitrary restrictions have been imposed on political parties, independent media, and civil society organizations not under government control. Leaders who influence public opinion but express criticism of the military junta face threats. Under the pretext of a general mobilization for the defense of the homeland, which has a legal basis, certain opinion leaders have been forcibly enlisted into the army as volunteers and subsequently deployed to the front lines for “reeducation.” Consequently, the fight against insecurity has become a pretext for perpetrating violations and abuses against human rights and civic liberties.



Figure 3 Protestors in Burkina Faso holding an image of the country's first president, Thomas Sankara

Rather than prioritizing the essential tasks of the Transition, the military junta, attempting to retain power, has shifted towards a partisan and non-inclusive governance approach. This undisclosed change in the direction of the transitional process raises the risk of heightened social and political resistance, potentially worsening the security crisis. The military junta has already voiced concerns about destabilization attempts, showing a heightened focus on its own security, which could divert armed forces, security personnel, and volunteers from their primary mission of combating terrorism. Despite significant efforts, Burkina Faso continues to face numerous attacks, and the flow of internally displaced people shows no signs of abating. If this trajectory persists, there is a potential for a shift in public opinion, which has so far favored the Transition authorities, leading to delays in the transitional schedule and possibly the entire transitional process.



Conclusions and Recommendations

Given the limited inclusivity of the Transition, a reorientation of the Burkina transitional process is imperative to foster greater consensus and inclusion, particularly concerning political parties and social organizations. In this regard, the support of international and regional partners, along with the engagement of all national stakeholders, is essential. Achieving this transformation will hinge on the willingness of the President of the Transition to embrace a form of political liberalization.

Burkina Faso's international and regional partners should actively and transparently contribute to strengthening the country's capacity to respond to its current crisis. This support is crucial for addressing both the security crisis while upholding human rights, and the humanitarian crisis, which brings human suffering to civilian populations. Recommendations include reinforcing the monitoring process of the Transition, encouraging Transition authorities to establish a sustainable constitutional order through democratic reforms in an impartial and non-partisan manner, and in accordance with the Transition Charter and its agreed-upon deadline. Additionally, international and regional partners should refrain from any actions that could foster distrust towards the international community and radicalize the regime and its supporters. For instance, they should avoid imposing sanctions that negatively impact the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Regarding the Transition Government, it is suggested that it adheres strictly to its designated missions outlined in the Transition Charter. The government should actively work to implement the Transition action plan and enhance the inclusiveness of the transitional process. It is crucial that the Transition Government adheres to the Transition Charter, the rule of law, and the fundamental rights of citizens. This includes respecting civic liberties such as freedom of the press, the activities of civil society organizations, and political parties. Additionally, it is strongly advised that the Transition Government takes decisive action against human rights violations and abuses related to good governance. The government should actively pursue democratic reforms outlined in the Transition action plan and, crucially, take timely measures to restore the democratic system within the agreed-upon deadline of the Transition.

For other stakeholders such as political parties, civil society organizations, traditional and religious leaders, it is advised that they organize themselves both individually and collaboratively. This will empower them to actively participate in the implementation and ongoing monitoring of the Transition process, leveraging their unique capacities. Their involvement should be guided by the principles of democracy, human rights, unity, and national reconciliation, ensuring a more meaningful and impactful contribution to the transition period.

Rationale for the Assessment Report

Burkina Faso is one of four countries in political transition within the West African sub-region.

Captain Ibrahim Traore, had promised a return to civilian leadership through elections by July 2024. However, recent comments by the junta leader suggests an extension to the end of the transition process.

The Policy Paper is a summary of a yet-to-be-published assessment report commissioned by the West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network (WADEMOS) to better appreciate the political transition processes in the sub-region and also contribute to thought-leadership and knowledge production.

Ultimately, the aim is to influence policy and help CSOs, regional bodies and institutions to better design their interventions.

The scope of the work spans from January 2022 to September 2023.

WADEMOS is a non-partisan, independent civil society-led transnational democracy solidarity network. The WADEMOS Network consists of over 35 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) located in 15 countries in West Africa.

Professor Augustin Loada is the founder and first Executive Director of the Center for Democratic Governance (CGD), a Burkina Faso-based research center conducting studies in the fields of governance and democratization. He also represents his institution on the Steering Committee of the WADEMOS Network

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