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The Military Junta in Burkina Faso



Ibrahim Traore, shortly after the military coup in September, 2022. Youtube screengrab.

West Africa has, in recent years, seen a flurry of coup d'états spanning across the Sahel and extending into the tropical shores of Guinea. France, the former colonial power for these nations, has been caught on the backfoot again and again – French President Emmanuel Macron was reportedly “furious” with French intelligence services for not predicting the Niger Coup. The anti-Western sentiments accompanying these events, alongside the encroachment of the Wagner Private Military Company (PMC) throughout the African continent, remain a significant topic of discussion as the world reacts to the reshaping of the West African geopolitical scene. This is the first of a series

of articles that will offer a brief summary and analysis of the coup d'états in Burkina Faso (January 2022, September 2022), Guinea (September 2021), Mali (March 2012, August 2020, May 2021), and Niger (July 2023). We begin with Burkina Faso.

Burkina Faso has had two coup d'états since 2020, the first taking place on 23rd-24th January 2022 under the leadership of Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. Lieutenant Colonel Damiba was notably trained in Paris alongside Mamady Doumbouya – the military officer who seized power in Guinea the previous year, as will be explored in a later submission. Both men also received training from the United States. Damiba acted in response to perceived inefficiency and inadequate responses by the Burkinabé government to the growing insurgency towards the north of the country. For example, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré refused the military's requests, including that of Damiba, to hire Wagner mercenaries to help fight against the spread of jihadist extremism.

Kaboré had been democratically elected in November 2015 in the first elections following the fall of long-time (1987-2014) neocolonial ruler, President Blaise Compaoré – the man who had murdered his friend and colleague, Captain Thomas Sankara, with French and US support. Kaboré was a former Prime Minister (1994-1996) and a long-serving member of Compaoré's government and political party, the Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP). He had left and founded an opposition party (People's Movement for Progress – MPP) after Compaoré's unpopular attempt to change the constitution and extend his term limits, the move that ultimately led to his November 2014 downfall.

I was living in Burkina Faso at the time and recall seeing pictures of Thomas Sankara being waved on the streets and in news reports as mass protests finally toppled the 27-year-long neocolonial government of Compaoré. By the end of Compaoré's rule, Burkina Faso was among the poorest nations in Africa, with almost half of the country living under the poverty line. The rapid development and progress made under the four years of Sankara's rule (1983-1987) had been stopped in its tracks by Compaoré's Western-backed illiberal adherence to Françafrique, maintaining French business, cultural, and political interests at the expense of his compatriots. Compaoré's unpopularity contrasts significantly with the widespread popularity of Sankara, a Marxist-Leninist and Pan-African, whose radical ideas in the Sahelian country have resurged in recent years. But Kaboré failed to capitalise on both Sankara's popularity and policies.

Years into his democratic government (2015-2022), old friends in the country informed me of a feeling of dissatisfaction among the youth over the lack of meaningful

change following Compaoré's fall. Sankara had been rehabilitated on the national political scene, and Compaoré was made to stand trial in absentia over his murder of Sankara. Still, other than that, Sankara's popular policies weren't felt to have been put into practice by Kaboré. The country still retained the capitalist mode of production, and a strong French presence. Not enough had been done, adding to Kaboré's increasing unpopularity among the masses. The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was the rising tide of the danger posed by the Islamist insurgency to the North of the country. Enjoying French logistical and military support combined with excellent diplomacy, Compaoré had long kept the insurgency in check, only for the situation to spiral out of control under Kaboré.

Before leaving Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso's capital, I had known it to be an incredibly safe city. Jihadist terrorism was not a concern on anybody's mind, and this was true across all sections and classes of Burkinabé society. But with the instability following the fall of Compaoré, militants from Boko Haram, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, Ansar Dine, Ansar ul Islam, and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, launched attacks on the capital as well as seemingly indiscriminate slaughters of unarmed rural civilians. The conflict, since 2015, has claimed over 10,000 lives, displaced 1.4 million people, and sent shockwaves throughout the country with shootings and car bombings on Hotels and Cafés. A bus carrying school children was blown up after hitting an explosive device. Foreign embassies and restaurants have also been targeted. Outside of the cities, hundreds of men, women, and children have been killed on raids targeting local markets and rural villages.

The security situation has well and truly deteriorated to a disastrous level. Poverty breeds extremism, so the intensive regime of neocolonial superexploitation maintained for decades by France certainly deserves its fair share of the blame. However, poor leadership has also exacerbated an already critical situation. In November 2021, a mass jihadist assault on a security outpost claimed the lives of 49 soldiers near the northern town of Inata. The soldiers were reportedly underpaid and undersupplied by the Kaboré government; resentment and unpopularity among the civilian population in West Africa is one thing – but in a region with over 20 attempted coup d'états since 2010, there's nothing riskier than allowing resentment and unpopularity to build up among the military. Kaboré was removed from power by Lieutenant Colonel Damiba just two months later, in January 2022.

In his first speech to the nation, he blamed the president for failing to contain violence by Islamist militants. Damiba made sure not to repeat Kaboré's errors and sought to retain the support of the people. One way he did this was by channelling the image of the ever-popular Captain Sankara; donning Sankara's iconic dress sense by sporting a red beret and military fatigues, he also sought to appease ECOWAS concerns – the regional bloc suspended Burkina Faso's membership following the coup – by promising to return to constitutional civilian rule when the conditions were right. Unfortunately for Damiba, conditions would only further deteriorate during his nine months in power. By September 2022, over 40% of the country's territory had been captured by non-state actors. This was nothing short of a political and military catastrophe.

Without hesitation, Captain Ibrahim Traoré intervened in a September 2022 coup d'état, seizing power with the support of the 'Cobra' elite special forces fighting at the frontlines of the insurgency. This was also a unit he had previously led in the Northern region of Kaya. Junior officers had grown dissatisfied with Damiba's leadership as he had failed to keep his promise to control the security situation. Since taking power, Captain Traoré has ordered a 'general mobilisation' of the population in a radical effort to turn the tide of the debilitating insurgency. Importantly, Traoré has taken an explicitly anti-Western stance, much more so than his Paris-trained predecessor, Damiba. This has proven to be especially popular with the masses, among whom anti-imperialist sentiments towards their former colonial power had long existed; after all, France had kept the nation in poverty and assassinated Sankara, seen by many in Burkina as the 'father of the nation'.

Traoré comes from a very modest class background, somewhat similar to Sankara's. Like Sankara, he also seized power at the age of 33-34, making him the youngest head of state in the world. He has nominated a Marxist, Pan African and ally of Sankara, Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla, as his Prime Minister – a man who has already reduced salaries of government ministers and declared, to the adoration of many, that "I have already said that Burkina Faso cannot be developed outside the path set by Thomas Sankara". The Sankarist line being boldly taken by Captain Traoré, at least on paper, marks a radical turn from the neocolonial path, economic instability, and lack of development that has characterised his predecessor regimes. In the anti-imperialist spirit of Sankara, Western military aid has been refused as Traoré sets a course away from France, the EU and the US. French-owned foreign media channels have been prohibited, French troops have been ordered to leave the country and military accords have been terminated.

While anti-imperialist organisations and social media commentators have rightly celebrated these actions, Traoré’s domestic record presents a sobering picture. For starters, there is speculation that he will turn towards the Wagner Group – who are already operating in neighbouring Mali, resulting in a disproportionate number of civilian deaths in Wagner-involved operations, as well as reports of rape and torture against African civilians. These reports remain unconfirmed, and there is no evidence suggesting that Wagner is active in Burkina Faso. With that said, Traoré’s comments at the 2023 Russia-Africa summit, alongside his Prime Minister’s visit to Russia, suggest collaboration with Wagner is undoubtedly on the cards. He has also hailed Russia as a strategic ally to the nation, seemingly shifting from alignment with one capitalist imperial power, to yet another.

A string of massacres – one event saw 147 people killed in the northern (Yatenga) village of Karma, “including 28 women, 45 children from 9 days old to 14 years old, and 9 wounded” – and assaults on the towns and villages of Nouna, Holdé, Yaté, Ména, and Dabere-Pogowel, have claimed scores of civilian lives. Such horrors may be inevitable during war, but it raises serious questions and eyebrows at Traoré’s leadership. Civilian slaughters committed under a military junta, ruling illiberally without the great masses of the people, is not exactly something that can be described as ‘progressive’ or even celebrated, regardless of the anti-imperialist rhetoric offered by the junta. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the context of the ongoing insurgency; what country can be expected to develop and rule progressively or liberally while 40% of its territory has been violently captured? Burkina Faso, as an impoverished Global South nation struggling to free itself from the chains of French colonialism, is simultaneously going through a national crisis; our analysis must not lose sight of this vital context.

The situation has many nuances, and even 10,000 words wouldn’t do it all justice. For now, those who concern themselves with the enfranchisement and empowerment of the people, should take a cautious and critical approach to the Burkina Faso military junta. Traoré’s anti-imperialist rhetoric is indeed worth celebrating, but we must not make the mistake of seeing it as any more than just that... rhetoric. Violence towards civilians should always, unconditionally, be condemned. The country’s alignment with Russia, and the flirtatious courting of Wagner, is worrisome; alignment with Russia, despite its imperialist invasion of Ukraine, undermines Traoré’s anti-imperialist credentials. Other than protests and empirical observations, there is no reliable data to confidently suggest that the majority of the Burkinabé support this ideological reorientation towards Moscow.

Traoré's actions over the past year and throughout this coming year will decide whether the rule of what appears to be a 'Sankarist' military elite, is indeed acting as a vanguard of the people, or whether they are instead just serving the role of protecting national bourgeois property interests – the very function and purpose of armed forces in capitalist nation-states like Burkina Faso. It is in the interests of the Burkinabé national bourgeoisie to expand its rates of profit and control over the means of production by expelling France, the neocolonial power. It is in the interests of the Burkinabé national bourgeoisie to end a war harming the country's land and labour. But is it in the interests of the people, the peasant and working masses, to align with yet another imperial power? Is it in their interests to retain the capitalist mode of production? There are many questions to be asked, and many answers to be heard.

Perhaps the wisdom of Amílcar Cabral may be of use to us:

“Always bear in mind that the people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone's head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace.”

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