

# BURKINA FASO'S ONE-WEEK COUP

## AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS



Burkina Faso's One-Week Coup and its implications  
for free and fair elections

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COVER PHOTO: Street scene in Burkina Faso's capital  
Ouagadougou. In the background Place des Nations  
Unies, 'United Nations Square', where many of the  
demonstrations during the October 2014 uprising took  
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## AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

In the upcoming elections in Burkina Faso, there's a need for a democratic process that marks a clear break with the previous three decades of de facto one-party rule. At the same time, a moderate approach is required in dealing with the controversial legacy of the former regime, to avoid further polarisation in an already fraught political situation.

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The popular uprising of October 2014 resulted in the most significant political transition in Burkina Faso in decades. It started in reaction to President Blaise Compaoré's attempts to change the constitution to enable him to run for yet another term of office after 27 years in power. Wide-ranging public protests were mobilised behind the political opposition and a broad spectrum of civil society organisations. Compaoré was forced to resign and fled the country. After two weeks of de facto military rule, seasoned diplomat Michel Kafando was named transitional president and Isaac Zida, deputy commander of the Presidential Guard, *Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP)*, was appointed prime minister. The transitional charter outlined a one-year process to prepare for legislative and presidential elections, originally scheduled for 11 October 2015.

Less than a month before this date, on 16 September 2015, a group of RSP soldiers interrupted a ministerial meeting and attempted to oust the government.

### Redefining the Presidential Guard

Throughout the transitional period, divergent loyalties and positions as between the national army and RSP have been a source of concern. The internally divided army has always played a central role in Upper Volta's/Burkina Faso's post-independence politics. The well-equipped RSP was created by Compaoré and was one of the pillars of his regime. There had been speculation about its disbandment or reintegration into the regular army.

Since December 2014, recurrent crises have revealed growing conflict between Zida and his former comrades in arms in the RSP, who have demanded his

resignation on several occasions. The reasons for the tension were not always clear: the local press raised fears about the possible dissolution of the RSP and the reduction of salaries, controversial nominations to the military hierarchy, or pre-existing tensions that the public role of Zida may have exacerbated. Until the recently attempted coup, the government generally kept a low profile, while President Kafando tried to act as a mediator. He formed a commission to define the future structure of the RSP, a commission whose final report remains undisclosed. He also made various concessions, including a cabinet reshuffle that deprived Zida of his responsibilities for national defence.

### Exclusions from the electoral lists

The organisation of new presidential and legislative elections, the most important mandate of the transitional institutions, has also created controversy. A new electoral code, approved in April 2015, disqualified all candidates who had supported Compaoré's planned constitutional changes of 2014 to enable him to remain in power. A ruling by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court of justice criticised the new code. Nonetheless, many candidates considered to be close to the previous regime were excluded from the electoral lists. The parties targeted, mostly Compaoré's *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP)* and the *Nouvelle Alliance du Faso (NAFA)*, reacted by accusing the Constitutional Council of bias, or calling for a boycott of the elections.

### General Diendéré seizes power

On 16 September, news emerged that transitional President Kafando and Prime Minister Zida were being

held captive by members of the RSP. After a night of uncertainty and street protests in the capital, there was still no sign of Zida and Kafando. The following morning, a relatively junior RSP officer RSP, Lieutenant Colonel Mamadou Bamba, announced the dissolution of the transitional government on TV and proclaimed that a newly formed National Democratic Council (CND) would take power to prevent the “further deterioration” of the transitional process. The announcement specified that the changed electoral code had created divisions between “two kinds of citizens,” an allusion to the exclusion of certain candidates. The CND, it was announced, would take the lead in addressing the shortcomings of the transitional government and the “crisis within armed forces.” It would also ensure the preparations for “appeasing and inclusive elections.”

Shortly afterwards, General Gilbert Diendéré, former head of the personal staff of President Blaise Compaoré, was appointed head of CND. Diendéré has been a key and controversial figure in the Compaoré regime since the assassination of the former president, Thomas Sankara, in 1987. Formally demoted as head of the RSP after the uprising in 2014, he retained influence over this elite unit, which has been a major challenge for the transitional government. Incidents in February and July led to concessions towards the RSP and to doubts about Prime Minister Zida’s ability to control his former unit.

### National reactions to the coup

In the national political arena, there were varied reactions to the coup. Trade unions, traditionally active and influential in the country, proclaimed strikes for the following days. Former opposition parties quickly condemned the coup, and issued calls for mobilisation. By contrast, politicians considered close to Compaoré

were in a difficult position, since they had proclaimed support for “inclusive elections” prior to the coup, but feared the risks of openly supporting the coup. While some, like Djibril Bassolé of NAFA, kept a low profile, others, like Léonce Koné from CDP, expressed indirect support for the coup and blamed the transitional authorities for exacerbating tensions.

Soon after the coup was announced, popular protests began throughout the country. The social movements that had mobilised during October 2014’s uprising played an essential role once again in organising popular reaction, with the popular grassroots movement Balai Citoyen, “the Civic Broom,” being particularly vocal and active from the outset. In Ouagadougou, where most areas were under strict RSP control, riots in peripheral neighbourhoods and larger gatherings in the city centre encountered heavy repression. In the urban centres of Bobo-Dioulasso, Banfora and Fada N’Gourma, marches took place and barricades were erected in central public spaces without facing significant opposition from regular armed forces. Popular reaction to CND’s seizure of power was nearly unanimous, one exception being the aggressive pro-coup demonstrators, suspected of being RSP officials in civilian dress, at Hotel Laico in central Ouagadougou during the ECOWAS negotiations. This confirms the view that the coup-makers, despite their claims of representing voters excluded by the transitional government, remained largely isolated and lacking in popular support.

### International reactions

Outside reaction was generally swift and clear in urging CND to free members of the transitional government and refrain from further violence. Most significantly, the African Union was quick to condemn the coup and on 18 September excluded Burkina Faso pending restoration of civilian rule.



MICHEL KAFANDO, born 1942, former UN ambassador, was named interim president of Burkina Faso after the October 2014 uprising. Detained by the RSP during the one-week coup.



BLAISE COMPAORÉ, born 1951 (here seen with US Secretary of State John Kerry), was president of Burkina Faso from 1987 to 2014. Fled the country in October 2014, and has remained in exile.



GILBERT DIENDÉRE, born 1960, supreme commander of the Presidential Guard (RSP) until November 2014, and leader of the failed September 2015 coup d'état.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, along with French and American foreign ministry representatives, expressed support for the transitional government and urged the coup-makers to free the president and prime minister and allow the transitional process to proceed. The UN Security Council also strongly condemned the coup. On the evening of 16 September, when news of the coup first emerged, the UN, AU, and ECOWAS, as joint chairs of the International Follow-up and Support Group for the Transition in Burkina Faso (GISAT-BF), issued a press release condemning the coup as a “gross violation of the constitution and the transitional charter” and demanding the return to civilian rule under the transitional government.

However, the positions of ECOWAS’s member states were less clear. Côte d’Ivoire’s President Alassane Ouattara, for example, refrained from public statements until after the transitional government was reinstated a week later. By contrast, President Macky Sall of Senegal and Benin’s President Yayi Boni were quick to express condemnation and eventually emerged as the heads of ECOWAS’s delegation to mediate between coup-makers and transitional government.

### Return to civilian rule

On 18 September, Sall and Yayi arrived in Ouagadougou. ECOWAS mediation resulted in an initial agreement, publicised on 20 September, which ensured return to civilian rule, Kafando’s reinstatement as transitional president, inclusion of all candidates in the upcoming elections and impunity for all acts committed by the RSP during the coup. Kafando, representatives of civil society and the former political opposition expressed dissatisfaction with the agreement.

On the same day, Burkina Faso’s armed forces began mobilising at their posts outside the capital. They arrived in Ouagadougou during the evening of

21 September. Diendéré stated he would respect the ECOWAS agreement but would fight back if attacked, and a standoff seemed unavoidable. However, an agreement was reached after a meeting between Diendéré and the head of the armed forces under the auspices of the Mogho Naba, the most influential customary chief in the country. The RSP agreed to return to barracks on condition that the recently arrived army units withdraw 50 kilometres.

### Diendéré surrenders

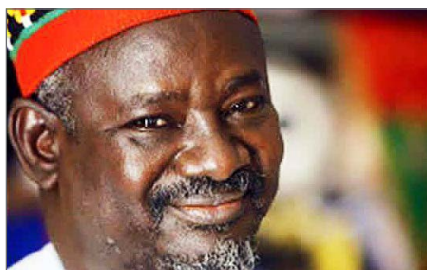
Following a special ECOWAS summit in Abuja on 22 September, the initial agreement was amended to emphasise the reinstatement of Kafando and the disarmament of the RSP, while the questions of impunity of coup-makers and inclusion of excluded candidates in the elections were deemed to be concerns of the transitional government. On 23 September, a delegation of four heads of state assisted in the reinstatement of Kafando as transitional president. In his speech to the Burkinabe people, he reiterated that the ECOWAS agreement would only be respected if it conformed with “the will of the people clearly stated in the transitional charter.”

The disarmament of the RSP ran into considerable difficulty, with Diendéré objecting to the condition and raising doubts about the guarantees for the security of coup-makers and their families. After a tense weekend, fighting broke out between the RSP and the armed forces on Tuesday 29 September on the outskirts of Ouagadougou, and the armed forces eventually seized control of the RSP’s Naaba-Koom II camp. Diendéré took refuge in the Vatican embassy and eventually surrendered on 2 October, marking the end of the coup.

The attempted coup entailed no other direct confrontations with loyalist armed forces. Casualties were



ISAAC ZIDA, born 1965, RSP second-in-command before the October 2014 popular uprising, and subsequently appointed prime minister in the transitional government.



NABA BAONGO II, since 1982 the 37th Mogho Naba (king) of the largest ethnic group in Burkina Faso, the Mossi. He has no official role under the constitution, but is very influential.



SMOCKEY & JAH (Sams’K Le Jah and Serge “Smockey” Bambara), musicians and founders of the political movement Balai Citoyen, which played a vital role in the October 2014 popular uprising.

mainly among the street protestors: it is estimated that between 16 and 21 September some 10 to 15 people lost their lives as a result of RSP brutality and around 270 were wounded.

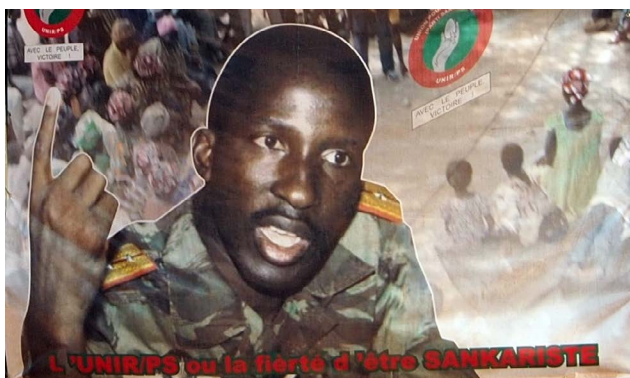
### Framing the coup as a civil conflict

For the coup-makers, framing the crisis as a potential civil conflict was an attempt to secure legitimacy in post-coup negotiations. This discourse achieved some recognition in the first agreement proposed by ECOWAS, with Macky Sall calling for “national reconciliation and forgiveness.” However, it was eventually greeted with more negative responses from national actors and the international community.

Statements by civil society organisations, political parties and religious authorities, as well as continuing popular mobilisation against the coup, clearly showed large support for the transitional authorities, leaving Diendéré isolated. The reactions to the attempted coup amply illustrated that the pervasive network Compaoré had built over the years to secure power had been weakened by the past year’s transitional process, as most members of these networks remained silent and could not be mobilised by the coup-makers.

### Electoral code at the centre of debate

Immediately after the reinstatement of Kafando’s government, investigations were initiated. People suspected of involvement in organising the coup were interrogated and, in some cases, jailed. The prosecution of the coup-makers and their suspected allies will play a significant role in the electoral process.



THOMAS SANKARA, Burkina Faso’s president from 1984 to 1987, was killed in a coup organised by his deputy and friend Blaise Compaoré. Over the years his popularity among the leftist opposition has achieved sometimes mythological proportions and his anti-imperialist and Marxist-inspired speeches have become legendary, even beyond the left-wing opposition. As a result, he has been portrayed as “Africa’s Che Guevara”.

Without formally targeting any party, the April electoral code aimed at excluding as candidates “all persons who have supported an anti-constitutional modification [in 2014] that threatens ... democratic turnover.” In the first TV message announcing the coup, Lieutenant Colonel Bamba described the electoral code as “tailored in favour of some individuals and criticised by law experts and institutions.” Similar allegations were made by former regime members. But, as noted, the coup-makers were unable to mobilise support for this narrative and allusions by international diplomats and ECOWAS mediators to “inclusive” elections and to the readmission of excluded candidates have gradually waned.

In the current phase, when the government seems focused on disarming the RSP and investigating responsibility for the coup, major amendment of the new electoral legislation seems ever more unlikely.

### Recommendations

- The universal principles of open and inclusive elections should be the long-term goal of Burkina Faso’s post-Compaoré political transition, but including the inner circle of the former regime in the upcoming elections could be counterproductive to that long-term goal.
- The need for an electoral process that marks a break with three decades of de facto one-party rule should not be underestimated. As part of setting a new political agenda, reopening investigations into the assassinations of Thomas Sankara, Norbert Zongo and other controversial cases from the Compaoré era may be of



NORBERT ZONGO, Burkinabe journalist, editor and publisher, was assassinated in 1998 when his newspaper *L’Indépendant* started to investigate a murder with links to former President Compaoré’s family. Just like Sankara, Zongo is a highly popular figure among many Burkinabe. Demands to reopen the investigation into his death played a crucial role in opposition politics during the Compaoré era.

particular symbolic importance.

- The transitional government and the next elected leadership should be encouraged to take a moderate approach in the prosecution of suspected conspirators in the attempted coup d'état. A firm line on arrests and open allegations may alienate or radicalise groups of voters and politicians.
- CDP has a history of semi-authoritarian rule under Compaoré's leadership, and some of its members are now suspected of complicity with the coup-makers. Nevertheless, CDP's post-coup official line, which in-

cludes commitment to the electoral process and acceptance of the legal procedures leading to the exclusion of some candidates, should be encouraged to avoid further polarisation of the electorate.

- The role of the ECOWAS mediators created uncertainty among those opposing the military coup. The joint leadership of GISAT-BF by the UN, AU and ECOWAS should be emphasised and encouraged during the remainder of the transition process. This requires clearer coordination and communication among these organisations.

## Burkina Faso | history timeline

**1960** After more than six decades of French colonial rule, Upper Volta attains full independence.



**1983** Leftist radical Thomas Sankara seizes presidential power in a military coup.

**1984** President Sankara changes the country's name to Burkina Faso, "Land of the upright people."



**1987** Sankara is killed in a coup d'état. His deputy and close friend Compaoré takes power.

*Compaoré secures his position through semi-authoritarian rule and concentrates military force in the RSP.*

**1998** Journalist Norbert Zongo is assassinated after starting to investigate a murder with links to Compaoré's family. His assassination triggers public protests.



**2011** In the wake of the Arab Spring, the military and police mutiny, accompanied by widespread popular protests. A riot forces Compaoré to leave Ouagadougou temporarily, but after negotiations and concessions he manages to return.

**2014 October** Demonstrations and popular uprisings, prompted by Compaoré's attempts to change the constitution, quickly spread to other cities



in Burkina Faso. Compaoré is forced to resign and flee the country.

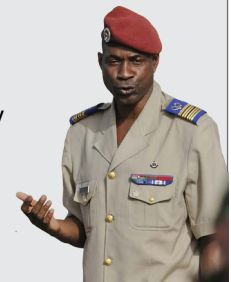
**2014 November** National and international negotiations result in a charter that constitutes a transitional government with responsibility for setting the path towards free and fair elections within a year.

**2015 July 13<sup>th</sup>:** The ECOWAS Community Court of Justice, to which CDP representatives and opponents of the new electoral code had submitted a plea in April, states that the new regulations are a "violation of the right of free participation to elections". Supporters of the previous regime claim a victory, while the government promises to modify the electoral code as requested.

**2015 July 17<sup>th</sup>:** President Kafando confirms Zida as prime minister, but assumes the functions of minister of defense (previously held by Zida). He scolds elements of the army for "perturbing peace in Burkina Faso". Some days later, he announces a reshuffling of the government.

**2015 September 14<sup>th</sup>:** The Commission for national reconciliation and reforms presents its final report. It recommends investigations about recent and ancient political crimes, the adoption of a new constitution, and the dissolution of the Presidential Guard.

**2015 September 16<sup>th</sup>:** With less than a month to go before the elections, the RSP under the leadership of Gilbert Diendéré attempts a military coup, temporarily ousting interim President Kafando and Prime Minister Zida. Within a few weeks, Diendéré surrenders in response to strong international pressure and lack of popular support.



**2015 November 29<sup>th</sup>:** General elections are scheduled to take place.





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NAI POLICY NOTES is a series of short briefs on policy issues relevant to Africa today, intended for policy and decision makers in aid agencies, ministries of foreign affairs, development organisations, NGOs and the media. They aim to inform public debate and to generate input into the sphere of policymaking.

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