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# Policy Brief

## **Military Coups and Their Implications on Burkina Faso's Democratisation Process**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Burkina Faso has not been spared by the waves of unconstitutional changes of governments (UCGs) that has plagued the African continent since the 1960s. 2022 has seen the Burkinabe military return to the highest level of state institutions with two overthrows within the year. A look at Burkina Faso's history shows that the country has yet to learn its lessons, evident by the series of coups that have failed to set the country on the path of development and democratisation. Successive coups and military rules have not only blown the country's stability, but have also jeopardised the building of its state and the vitalisation of democratic processes considerably. Intervening outside of informed and tailor-made frames would make responses to the current political and security upheavals ineffective in the case of Burkina Faso. Therefore, understanding the why and how of the almost cyclical coups in Burkina Faso would help national, regional, and continental bodies deal with Burkina Faso more effectively, and help them plan for similar interventions in the continent. In light of this, understanding the coups in Burkina Faso and how they affected the country's democratisation process since 1966 would serve as a metric that could help solve the problem in Burkina Faso, and help deal with similar issues elsewhere in Africa.



## Key Points

- The failure to address the lasting patronage system and lack of unity within the army leads to the spiral of coups in Burkina Faso.
- The succession of coups and subsequent military rules since 1966 have hampered Burkina Faso's state-building and its vitalisation of democratic processes, putting the country's precarious social stability at stake.
- The recent coups have made matters worse, reviving long-lasting fragmentations within the army and straining Burkina Faso's relationships with regional, continental, and Western countries (France and the United States) amid re-emerging West versus East geopolitical struggles.
- Comprehending the machinery of coups in Burkina Faso would simultaneously help regional and continental bodies (ECOWAS and the AU) better understand the Burkinabe concern and address similar cases.





# Introduction

The African continent has been witnessing waves of unconstitutional changes of governments (UCGs). Military coups proper<sup>1</sup> have been chief among the perpetration modes<sup>2</sup> and have since evolved on the continent since the 1960s. The first generation was portrayed as “corrective coups” aimed at rectifying the States’ trajectories to the advantage of the former masters and foot soldiers (the military) during the 1960s-1980s.<sup>3</sup> Military self-arrogated the right to intervene whenever the government failed to meet their expectations under the following: crises (Togo, 1963), reforms with limited impacts (Ghana, 1966), and revamping revolutionary movements (Burkina Faso, 1984). Coups in Togo (1963), Algeria (1965), and Nigeria (1966) were labelled as “coups 1.0”<sup>4</sup>. The second wave (2.0) emerged in the 1990s as the Cold War ended and saw the military acting on one-party and autocratic systems weakened by the dislocation of the so-called eastern communist bloc.<sup>5</sup> This birthed a momentum (Mali 1991), that propagated a “fair coups” mindset. It also gave birth to the tendency of “coup proofing” as power tenants sought to protect themselves either through reforms of the security forces or limiting their firepower and capabilities (poor training).<sup>6</sup>

As for the third surge (3.0), the continent has been enduring since 2019 in the cases of Sudan-2019, Guinea-2021, Mali-2020, and Burkina Faso-2022. It also includes attempts in Niger-2021 and Guinea Bissau-2022. These coups and attempts appear as multifaceted in West Africa, particularly, carrying an atavism that underpins the idea that protecting the State from itself remains a military duty.<sup>7</sup> Among the third surge of coups in West Africa Burkina Faso stands out among the champions.<sup>8</sup> The long-lasting unresolved causes which include: nurtured patronage system within

- 1 Military coups proper represent coups where members of the army depose a democratically elected incumbent and set a military led government.
- 2 Dersso, SA (2016, June). Unconstitutional Changes of Government and Unconstitutional Practices in Africa. Summary paper from the program on African peace missions. African Politics, African Peace.
- 3 Boisvert M-A & Al. (2022 January-February). Coups d’État en Afrique : le retour de l’uniforme en politique. BulletinFrancoPaix. Volume 7, N°1-2.
- 4 Boisvert M-A & Al. (2022 January-February). Coups d’État en Afrique : le retour de l’uniforme en politique. BulletinFrancoPaix. Volume 7, N°1-2.
- 5 Boisvert M-A & Al. (2022 January-February). Ibid.
- 6 Boisvert M-A & Al. (2022 January-February). Coups d’État en Afrique : le retour de l’uniforme en politique. BulletinFrancoPaix. Volume 7, N°1-2.
- 7 Boisvert M-A & Al. (2022 January-February). Ibid.
- 8 Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

the military and civilian elites, widespread anger over the State's failure to respond to basic social needs, and the current security quagmire, cooked the Molotov cocktail of the 2022 coups. The failure to address the causes mentioned above forges a gearing system that, in turn, gives birth to periodical coups. Hence, comprehending the why and how of quasi-cyclical coups in Burkina Faso would help national authorities, and both regional and continental bodies effectively respond to the coup challenge in Burkina Faso and also inform similar interventions on the continent. Such an approach is justifiable as the search for adequate responses to UCGs broadly became bold on African policy-makers' (the African Union and RECS especially) agendas.

The first and second generations (1.0 and 2.0) of coups the continent experienced resulted in the depositions of weakened autocratic governments replaced by either foot soldiers of former colonisers (Togo, 1963), or the establishment of military governments who portrayed themselves as revolutionary (Burkina Faso, 1983). Although democratisation kicked off in the aftermath of coups 1.0, it was however nipped by a long tendency of coup-proofing and illegal power capture, as partisan competition (multi-party systems and elections)

was blown up. Most African countries that had undergone coups saw their socioeconomic progress hampered as development became the least of their priorities. The nurtured weaknesses (socioeconomic and military concerns) begotten by the two generations of coups, in combination with emerging security threats, led to the outbreak of coup 3.0. It is these weaknesses in combination with emerging security threats that have manifested in Burkina Faso since January 2022.

This brief therefore, scrutinises coups in Burkina Faso and their implications for the Burkinabe democratisation process since the 1960s to map out the key elements that could help address the Burkinabe concerns and ease responses to identical cases throughout the continent.



# An Overview of Coups D'états in Burkina Faso

## Coups 1.0 from the 1960s to the 1980s

Burkina Faso has neither witnessed any peaceful transfer of power nor appropriate power transition from civilian rule to another. The country has undergone a long series of successful and failed coups that have considerably limited its potential to build a democratic and socioeconomic sustainable State. 1966 was the spark of the Burkinabe coup epidemic as the military, led by General (Gen.) Aboubakar Sangoulé Lamizana seized power by taking advantage of the widespread strikes and riots over late President Maurice Yaméogo's mismanagement of public resources and austere economic programme.<sup>9</sup> The unpreparedness of Gen. Aboubakar Sangoulé Lamizana's junta to muddle through the ported economic dearth led, in 1974, to a deep political crisis. This in turn birthed a constitutional vacuum where the Burkinabe constitution

was suspended, and the parliament dissolved.

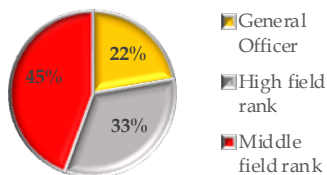
As the crisis prolonged, the 1980s were marred by a series of coups. Gen. Lamizana was deposed by the Military Recovery Committee for the National Progress (CMRPN-French acronym) of Colonel (Col.) Saye Zerbo in 1980. Col. Saye Zerbo was, in turn, overthrown by the Council of Popular Salvation (CSP-French acronym) chaired by Commandant (Cdt.) Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo in 1982. Cdt. Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo's rule was epiphenomenal, given that he was overthrown by his Prime Minister, Captain (Capt.) Thomas Sankara, in 1983. The latter sought a revamp of the then unstable revolution. The apparent side of the coin showed that Sankara's revolution was popularly accepted. However, internal contestations led by "betrayed" individuals and groups (military and civilians alike) perceiving Sankara's so-called endogeneity-driven initiatives as discrepant from the local realities coloured the hidden side.<sup>10</sup> He was ousted and assassinated in 1987 by his deputy, Capt—Blaise Compaoré,

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank. (2017). Burkina Faso: Priorities for poverty reduction and shared prosperity. Systematic country diagnostic. Retrieved from <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/950551492526646036/pdf/SCD-Final-april-10-FINAL-002-de-002-04132017.pdf>

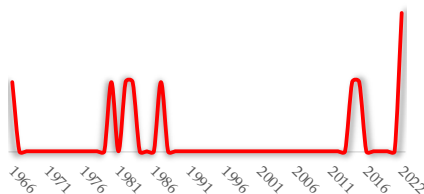
<sup>10</sup> Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

closing the chapter of coup 1.0 in Burkina Faso. Compaoré set a 27-year military rule, the longest ever experienced by Burkina Faso. It ended in 2014 as unrest ousted him over the blurry constitutional amendments he introduced to maintain his grip on power. This in turn put Burkina Faso back into the spiral of coups.

The long and autocratic 27-year rule of Compaoré somehow spared Burkina Faso from coup 2.0 that troubled a range of African countries such as Côte d'Ivoire-2002, Guinea- 2008, Madagascar-2009, and Niger-2010. Although Gen. Gilbert Diendéré attempted a coup against the transitional government established following Compaoré's fall, it would be difficult to place it among coups 2.0, as it had little effect on the conduct of President Kafando's transition.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the succession of coups in 2022- respectively led by Lieutenant-Colonel (Lt-Col.) Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba and Capt. Ibrahim Traoré- is worth close attention considering the country's recent history. These coups mark Burkina Faso's return to coups and military rules, and positioned it among the coup 3.0 champions blowing over the continent since 2019.



**Figure 2:** Profiles of coups instigators in Burkina Faso  
**Data source:** BBC. Burkina Faso Profile-Timeline.  
**Visual:** Author



**Figure 1:** Coups' evolvement in Burkina Faso from 1966 to 2022  
**Data source:** BBC. Burkina Faso Profile-Timeline.  
**Visual:** Author

Taking stock of Burkinabe's long history of coups reveals that all the coups the country underwent carried and still carry a corrective nature, given that successive juntas have sought to correct the political and economic wrongs of their predecessors. The profiles of leaders, mostly field rank officers (45% of coups instigators in Burkina Faso), underline that coups in Burkina Faso are

<sup>11</sup> France24. (September 2, 2019). Burkina Faso jails two generals over failed 2015 coup. Retrieved from <https://www.france24.com/en/20190902-burkina-faso-jails-two-generals-failed-2015-coup-bassole-diendere>

mainly symptomatic of discords among the military and the lack of trustworthy leadership. This also denotes the poor discipline within the Burkina army that translates into a disconnect between general and field rank officers.

The country's recent coup (3.0), followed a similar trend. However, many observers believe that Col. Damiba and Capt. Traoré's (current head of State) ruling styles contrast with precedent coup plotters, given they are highly educated and can garner support and manipulate popular opinion in political turmoil and security quagmire. Their coup is equally a symptom of the long indiscipline and fracture within the army.<sup>12</sup>

## Coups' Implications for Burkina Faso's Democratisation Process

Coups have considerably affected Burkina Faso in several aspects. The building process of State institutions and the vitalisation of democracy have been at stake since 1966.<sup>13</sup>

Building democracy implies making a safe and stable environment for public businesses. In contrast, securing power by all means becomes the norm in a coup-torn society. Hence, attention is directed towards irrelevant matters.<sup>14</sup> Ineffective putsch perpetrators, while enjoying the authority and power that comes with their newfound position, tend to act in a manner that no longer conforms with the constitution and law. As a result of this, critical institutions (the parliament and political parties) are kept out from the management of public affairs.<sup>15</sup> As institutions are now in hibernation, the room is no longer made for democratic debates on genuine issues, including protecting human rights, ensuring social cohesion and partisan fair competitions (electoral races). Therefore, priorities regarding constructing a democratic State tend to be neglected. Such neglect has been common in Burkina Faso since 1966.

Putsches in Burkina Faso have also undermined the country's capacity to handle contemporary security threats, violent extremism and organised crime. Long-

<sup>12</sup> Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

<sup>13</sup> BTI. (2022). Burkina Faso. Country report. Page 4.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

lasting fragmentations within the army have been worsening along coups. Looking at the coup trend in Burkina Faso, it is understandable that deceived hopes of better wages and operational capacities among the military cadets not only births grievances that deepen the gap between troops and high-rank officers, but also leads to the formation of factions within the army according to who holds power. Therefore, whenever the military seizes power, risks of weaponised dialogue become higher as factions watch out for coup leaders and acquainted troops. Any misperceived decision or action the leaders take becomes an excellent reason to resort to the use of weapons.

The 27 years of coup-proofing President Compaoré utilised to maintain his grip on power underpinned divides within the Burkinabe army. The transformation of the RSP into an isolated army within the national army with heavy firepower, better equipment and training, fostered a patronage system among soldiers. Cadets acquainted with the RSP command would receive better treatments and advantages.<sup>16</sup> Some were never sent to battlefields or risky missions owing

to their linkages with Generals, high-ranked officers and/or officials in ruling circles.<sup>17</sup> Such discrimination and negligence weakened other sections of the Burkinabe army and left them powerless in the face of the violent extremism menace.

As such, nurturing a patronage system within the army and the political arena may explain why Burkina Faso has been dragged into multiple spirals of coups, especially in the 1980s and 2022. Responding to the current intertwined security threats, violent extremism, and organised crime would be daunting if power struggles remain the norm within the army. Thus, coup plotters using insecurity to justify the unlawful assumption of power might be understandable, but such justifications generally remain fallacies and a means to manipulate the populace.

Burkina Faso needs new leaders who would show strong and trustworthy leadership to convince soldiers to eliminate unnecessary power struggles and re-centre themselves on burning priorities.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

# Burkina Faso At Crossroads: Strained Between Security Emergencies, Socioeconomic and Political Stabilisation Needs.

While the military was busy with politics and power struggles in Ouagadougou, extremist groups gained ground in northern Burkina Faso. Main cities, including Djibo (Soum province), have been under humanitarian and security blockades since February 2022. Several attacks against military and civilian convoys have been registered in the region, with assaults on the Djibo-Bouzanga axis being the deadliest. In August and September 2022, attacks killed 15 Burkinabe militaries and 35 civilians in two separate attacks. Suppose the latter attacks (associated with thoughtless political decisions) precipitated Lt-Col. Damiba's fall, the truth is that the military has been impotent in coping with violent extremism since 2015.<sup>18</sup> The persistence of deadly attacks in northern and eastern Burkina Faso, and the shift of extremist groups from sporadic attacks to complete control of terrains has strengthened

their power in the country as these groups are said to be controlling 40% of the Burkinabe territory. This is worsened with loosened criminal groups backing up or competing with terrorist groups in northern Burkina Faso. Furthermore, coups in Burkina Faso have considerable consequences on regional security, particularly for West African coastal countries. As terrorist and criminal groups gain terrain, Burkina Faso no longer constitutes a buffer zone, paving the way for terrorist incursions throughout the region.

Risks of communal clashes over rules that apply to managing scarce natural resources rise as the flow of internally displaced persons (IDPs) intensifies towards new havens.<sup>19</sup> Lands are especially at stake, with 80% of the Burkinabe being involved in subsistence farming.<sup>20</sup> Likewise,

18 (E.g. inviting the contumacy condemned President Compaoré to Ouagadougou, clientelist appointment acquaintances in strategic positions)

19 IOM. (November 2022). Burkina Faso Country Profile. Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. Retrieved from <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/burkina-faso>

20 AGOA. (2021). Country Info: Burkina Faso. Trade profiles. Retrieved from <https://agoa.info/profiles/burkina-faso.html>

the issue of the marginalised Fulani community arises as their anger against the central government makes them more receptive to jihadist discourses.<sup>21</sup> The status quo strains inter-community interactions, with Fulani being perceived as terrorists rather than a vulnerable community undergoing the same terrifying assaults.

Parallel to the expectations of efficient responses to the protracted security quagmire and its begotten shortcomings, addressing the COVID-19 aftermath and drawbacks of recent coups within the security forces will undoubtedly drive the immediate social demands for a stable and fair Burkinabe State.

However, disputes between Burkina Faso and ECOWAS over the length and conduct of its transition to a democratic state have risen in combination with tension rising between Burkina Faso and Western States (the United States and France), about its potential relationship with Russia and the eventual role it played in the recent September coup. This fact might have fostered Burkina Faso's (inevitable) removal by the United States from the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)

in January 2023.<sup>22</sup> In addition, West versus East geopolitical struggles amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict do not spare Burkina Faso, although the country's diversified cooperation with Russia dates back to the 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

Capt. Traoré and his junta, faced with such a huge task of navigating the Burkinabe boat through muddy waters, should show a strong sense of wisdom in resolving the urgent challenges in the country. The urgent challenges would then be about defusing internal tensions (within the military and the citizenry) to break long-lasting coups and riot cycles, and to work towards returning Burkina Faso to its constitutional order. Building solid relationships with regional, continental and international partners would also be necessary, as responding to immediate security threats requires thorough coordination.

21 Interview with a Sahel security expert on November 7, 2022, via Whatsapp.

22 AGOA. (2021). "US to remove Burkina Faso from AGOA effective January 1 2023: White House". Retrieved from <https://agoa.info/profiles/burkina-faso.html>

23 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. (2023). Burkina Faso. Retrieved from [https://mid.ru/en/maps/bf/?TSPD\\_101\\_R0=08765fb817ab2000e8f-fa260e31c010ce876742b6eca1f953f-c68b774dcd1d8492dabe16056ccae708d-7c120b214300087d4f8d7407305f35d-c9a926a5176f1467a74e0908fc01e1281feb4f-227d29a80ef93f86e33b1ba32eab-2095cacf4b48](https://mid.ru/en/maps/bf/?TSPD_101_R0=08765fb817ab2000e8f-fa260e31c010ce876742b6eca1f953f-c68b774dcd1d8492dabe16056ccae708d-7c120b214300087d4f8d7407305f35d-c9a926a5176f1467a74e0908fc01e1281feb4f-227d29a80ef93f86e33b1ba32eab-2095cacf4b48)



# Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

## Conclusion

The spiral of coups in Burkina Faso results from a combination of factors that include unresolved structural concerns and nurtured divides among the military. The country is yet to meet basic needs as public services remain poor. If soldiers are always cheered after coups d'états, it sets a bad antecedent. The truth however is that people acclaim change, not necessarily coups. In addition, relationships between successive rulers (military or civilian) and military high-ranked officers neglecting their subalterns, incites division within the army and propagates clannish culture irrespective of who shares the cake. Therefore, the troops' frustrations over the lack of adequate equipment and losses on the battlefield, combined with popular resentments, constantly put Burkinabe rulers at risk. The 27-year tendency of coup-proofing, which President Compaoré heavily relied on, has neither been of help to Burkina Faso's forces. Firepower and capacity building were overbalanced to the advantage of the republican guard, which, to some extent, explains the current impotent military response to the security challenges. The democratisation process of Burkina Faso is then kept on hold as insecurity and military rule persist.

COVID-19 aftermath and rising tensions with external partners further strain Burkina Faso. Wisdom should prevail as Capt. Traoré and his junta navigate through finding appropriate approaches to stabilise Burkina Faso.

## Policy Recommendations

- In the short term, Capt. Traoré should strive to right the wrongs within the army, which includes defusing tensions immediately with Damiba's supporters, uniting and appropriately equipping the military. Frank talks and fair decisions while appointing the transitional government, for example, would help set the ball rolling in the right direction.
- Gathering all the vital internal forces to re-strategize on solutions in Burkina Faso would not only shape the country's future but also highly

contribute to breaking the chain of instability that has been binding hopes. Inclusive and participatory assizes openly addressing existing divides would be a good starting point.

- Albeit securing Burkina Faso remains a national prerogative, Capt. Traoré should highly mobilise support from sub-regional, regional, and continental bodies and mechanisms (the Accra Initiative and ECOWAS mainly as the G5 became dormant) regarding the magnitude and transnational nature of the security challenges Burkina Faso is undergoing.
- ECOWAS and the AU should support national initiatives and apply context-driven policies, as nurturing strained relationships with Burkina Faso would not effectively resolve the country's challenges. They should also map out the lessons from the Burkinabe case to inform similar interventions.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Moussa SOUMAHORO is a Peace and Security Governance Analyst from Côte d'Ivoire. He worked as a researcher at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies from 2018 to 2022. He also worked as a programme assistant at Interpeace, and a consultant for the Country Risks and Vulnerabilities Assessment project supporting the ECOWAS Early Warning System. His areas of interest are conflict analysis, transnational organised crime and African Peace and Security Governance. Moussa has a Master's degree in conflict and peace management from the Centre for Research and Action for Peace, University in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and several certifications in conflict prevention/analysis, DDR and project management from the KAIPTC, UNITAR and the ITC-ILO.



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