

The fall of Blaise Compaoré

by Anne Frintz

Le Monde Diplomatique, English edition, December 2014

Demonstrators kick out France's man in Africa

It was a swift victory for the protesters, but not enough. The Burkinabé feel they have been left behind in the country's economic growth, which according to the International Monetary Fund reached nearly 7% in 2013. The protesters attacked all the symbols of power that had existed for the past 27 years. They included residences of high-ranking officials, among them Assimi Kouanda, national executive secretary of the president's party, the Congress for Democracy and Progress; and François Compaoré, economic advisor to his brother Blaise and member of the board of agrifood companies both private and state-owned, known as "the little president".

Popular resentment of a corrupt ruling class and social inequalities also led to the sacking of a Ford concession in the capital and of a goldmine in Bissa, southwest of Ouagadougou, which received less press coverage. François Compaoré had interests in both. Since then, miners have gone on strike over working conditions and low wages, and in Ouagadougou, thousands of unemployed have demonstrated.

A group of street vendors said: "We want peace and health, cheaper medicines, schools, work for young people, trades, and apprenticeships. We can't see what Compaoré has done for us in the past 30 years." "I want change," said an 18-year-old who sells dress fabric in the main market. She believes the shortage of jobs for young graduates and the rise in food and oil prices are due to a lack of political will. Since 2013 she has taken part in all the demonstrations against constitutional tampering.

Social protest

Burkina Faso has a long tradition of social protest. In 1966 the Christian trade unionist Maurice Yaméogo, who became the first president of the country (then the Republic of Upper Volta) took austerity measures. He was the only civilian president, and was peacefully overthrown by a coalition of trade unions, tribal leaders and the Catholic clergy. In 1975 his successor, Lieutenant Colonel Sangoulé Lamizana, decided to set up a one-party system after 10 years in office, but was forced to back down by union-led protests. However, he remained in office until 1980.

Blaise Compaoré's reign began with murder. On 15 October 1987 he led a coup during which his comrade, Captain Thomas Sankara, who had set the country on course for "economic, political and social decolonisation", was murdered, with 13 others. According to a statement by Prince Johnson, a former Liberian warlord, during the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL), "Compaoré had him killed, with the approval of Houphouët-Boigny [then president of Côte d'Ivoire]". When Compaoré became head of state, he embraced economic liberalism and in 1990, after discussions with the IMF and the World Bank, privatised state enterprises, greatly enriching businessmen close to the regime. He followed this with a purge of Sankara's followers from the government and the army. The journalist Vincent Ouattara counted at least 50 deaths from 15 October 1987 to the presidential election in November 1988.

Three spontaneous popular revolts shook Compaoré's ageing and contested regime. In 1999-2000 there were massive demonstrations against the government's lack of accountability, triggered by the 1998 murder — as yet unsolved — of the journalist Norbert Zongo, while investigating a political assassination that involved the president's brother. In 2008 trade unions, student associations and human rights organisations joined in protests over the high cost of living. On 20 February 2011 a

student died after being beaten by police; a peaceful protest march was violently put down (at least three other people died from police bullets). Wanting to avoid Arab Spring contagion, the government claimed that the student had died from meningitis, but riots continued to shake a regime the International Crisis Group called “semi-authoritarian”, based on the military, a political party and the traditional chiefdoms.

Gradually people turned to economic issues with demands for plots of land, water, proper roads, better working and living conditions. Soldiers mutinied in protest against the unusual arrest of several officers who were used to impunity. They also protested about unpaid wages and worn-out uniforms. Compaoré gave in to all the mutineers’ demands but purged the army of rebellious elements. Civilians joined the protests, and in a few months got more than in the past 25 years. A new prime minister was appointed on 18 April 2011, and the university police force was abolished. But day-to-day living conditions remained difficult.

Young don’t want to vote

Blaise Compaoré was feared far more than he was loved. Turnout for presidential elections never reached more than 30%. “Young people in Burkina Faso are disconnected from politics because they are totally discouraged and disgusted. They believe that all politicians lie, and so prefer not to vote,” said Saran Sere, a member of the Political Opposition Coalition and leader of the Party for Development and Change. The first election under universal suffrage was in 1991, after President François Mitterrand’s speech that made French aid to African countries conditional on democratic reforms. Compaoré was voted in for a seven-year term with 80%: the same happened in 1998, 2005 and 2010.

Thanks to clientelism and corruption, and helped by a very divided opposition (70 parties), Compaoré was not challenged until the 2012 legislative election, when his opponent, Zéphirin Diabré of the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), took 19 of the 127 seats in the National Assembly. A former minister under Compaoré in the 1990s, Diabré became the leader of the opposition and called on people to demonstrate. But while he altered the political playing field he did little to hide his ultra-liberal leanings. “The UPC’s political plan depends on that of the donors,” he said in October.

Blaise Compaoré was the West’s “man in Africa”. After the death in 1993 of Houphouët-Boigny, Compaoré took over his role as defender of France’s interests in West Africa. He acted as mediator in crises in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Niger, Togo, Côte d’Ivoire, Guinea and Mali. According to revelations during the SCSL hearings, Compaoré and Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi helped Charles Taylor, then exiled in Burkina Faso, to prepare his bloody attack against the Liberian regime in 1989. In 2001 the UN accused Compaoré of trafficking in arms and diamonds to benefit UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola) (3). In 2002, Guillaume Soro and his New Forces launched their offensive against Abidjan from Burkina Faso, and triggered a civil war in Côte d’Ivoire that lasted until 2011.

Western fears of spreading unrest

In 2013, the crisis in Mali confirmed Compaoré’s influence in the Sahel, and also his role in the trafficking in that region. He was close to the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Tuareg, whom he later invited to Ouagadougou, but he also played an important role in providing information to the French and US intelligence services, making their agents welcome.

Despite that, Paris and Washington were not in favour of Compaoré remaining as head of state, fearing the social unrest might spread to other areas of a sub-region already destabilised by the crisis in Mali. On 7 October President François Hollande informed Compaoré that he would be wise to set an example by avoiding “the risks related to a non-consensual change to the constitution”, and provided him with a way out by guaranteeing French support if he wished to “place his experience and talents” at the disposal of the “international community”. During the 2014 US-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, Obama warned that “Africa doesn’t need strong men, it needs strong institutions.”

On 16 November, a fortnight after Compaoré's forced departure, Burkina Faso's political and military leaders, with the religious authorities and civil society organisations, signed a transition charter. They appointed a diplomat, Michel Kafando, 72, as interim president; he is to restore stability to the country before the November 2015 presidential and legislative elections. Kafando is the first civilian to hold this position since 1975, but he will have to work with a military man, Lieutenant Colonel Zida, as prime minister. The move has the backing of both the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union.

The revolt in Burkina Faso has already inflamed African social networks and should warn other leaders clinging to their posts. Ablassé Ouedraogo, the Burkinabé opposition leader and former minister of foreign affairs, has suggested adding a clause to the African Union charter limiting the number of presidential mandates. "If we had had such a clause, Burkina Faso probably would have avoided these two difficult weeks. The world has changed, Africa has changed, Africans have changed. Now African governments must change". At a meeting in Paris on 15 November, the heads of opposition parties from all over Africa issued a joint declaration demanding respect for the principles of the Union's founding texts, free elections and confirmation of the military's republican obligation.