Persistent protests:
Everyday activism in Burkina Faso

By: Ernest Horsch

Even before large crowds chased President Blaise Compaoré from power in 2014, the people of Burkina Faso had a reputation for rebelliousness. A similar popular uprising toppled the country’s first president in 1966, trade unions subsequently blocked a ruling general’s attempt to impose a one-party state and for a brief four years in the 1980s Thomas Sankara’s revolutionary government overhauled a corrupt bureaucracy; inspiring ordinary people to transform their communities and audaciously challenging the dictates of France and other Western powers.

But the popular insurrection that removed Compaoré in October 2014 was a fresh reminder that ordinary citizens, sufficiently motivated and organised, can alter a nation’s political direction. The events resonated across West Africa where in several neighbouring countries tens of thousands are themselves mobilising with the aim of dislodging entrenched autocrats. Large street assemblies defending the rule of law against a leader trying to hang on by unconstitutional means eventually brought change and a legitimately elected government. However protests did not end there; sit-ins, marches, rallies, strikes and other agitation have remained constant features of everyday life since.

Grievances, Big and Small

The basic democratic thrust of the 2014 uprising has drawn a great deal of attention but focusing too narrowly on that triumph can obscure the reality that change is never straightforward. The process in Burkina Faso was prolonged and convoluted. Compaoré, following his 1987 military coup and assassination of San-
kara, managed to stay in power for more than a quarter of a century. He survived not simply through repression, but also by co-opting and dividing challengers.

Nonetheless, over time opposition grew. Professionals campaigned against corruption. Students outraged by killings of their comrades repeatedly mobilised. People across the country rose up in 1998-99 over the assassination of independent newspaper editor Norbert Zongo. Those actions had obvious political implications. Yet many more protests were driven by economic and social grievances. Organized labour repeatedly went on strike seeking higher salaries, an end to privatization and other material concerns. Merchants protested customs raids and arbitrary market regulations. Poor urban residents demonstrated against corrupt land allocations and municipal mismanagement. Youths, judges, police trainees, civil servants, and other social groups also aired their grievances in the streets.

Gradually, agitation became more national, breaking A robust civil society, albeit without common organisations or aims, began to emerge. Initially activists focused on their own specific interests but eventually many realized that lasting solutions would require basic political change. The 21 April Movement was founded in 2013 to improve agriculture, health, education and democratic rights. However negotiations for limited reforms proved impossible. Reflecting back in 2016 on the lack of space for dialogue, the group’s leader, Marcel Tankoano, noted that "since we could not have discussions with it, this regime had to go”.

Many of Marcel’s comrades in other groups reached a similar conclusion and decided to come together in an overtly political movement to remove this common obstacle. Once Compaoré was gone, however, their discontent lost a clear target. Activists still mobilized against the legacies of poor governance but the prote-
sts became more diffuse, with many having different targets, prompted by a wide array of grievances.

Since 2014, Burkina Faso has been roiled by hundreds of protests. Teachers, health care workers, civil servants and other employees have repeatedly gone on strike or staged sit-ins. Students in the secondary schools and at the main universities in Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso and Koudougou have walked out of their classrooms. Residents of local communities have mobilized against fraudulent land deals, high health costs and poor roads.

The government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who was elected in 2015, frequently laments the constant disruptions, but with a few exceptions has generally avoided responding with repression. The situation, as Burkinabé journalist, Jean Stéphane Ouédraogo put it in 2015, marks a "quasi-institutionalisation of governance by the streets".

**Drivers of Protest**

Popular expectations are high that advances will come not only in the political sphere, but also in economic and social conditions. Although the economy remains fragile, growth prospects are good, with International Monetary Fund projections for 2017–21 exceeding 6% annually. Yet growth by itself cannot quickly improve the lives of the more than 40% of Burkinabé who live in poverty, according to official estimates. Even those who live just above the poverty threshold face difficult conditions, given rising food and other consumer good prices, a scarcity of jobs and the country’s more erratic climate - marked by both uncertain rainfall and unexpected flooding. Dissatisfaction remains high and is made more acute by the visible contrast between the living standards of the elite and those of the vast majority.
Although Burkina Faso’s labour movement has historically been fragmented, comprising competing federations and autonomous unions, it remains the strongest and most structured social sector. The labour movement played a major role in the events of 2014 and remains very active. According to an estimate by the L’Observateur Paalga newspaper, public employees engaged in more than 80 strikes, sit-ins and other protests between January 2016 and November 2017.

Women are also in motion despite social constraints against their public participation. Just days before the anti-Compaoré insurrection, tens of thousands of women marched to defend the constitution. Marie Madeleine Somda, a central organiser of this unique women-only group - the Collectif des Femmes pour la Défense de la Constitution (Women’s Collective to Defend the Constitution) - explained that they founded their own organisation because in mixed associations “women don’t occupy leading responsibilities; they’re often in the second rank.” However some women do gain leadership roles in wider organisations. Blandine Sankara, a sister of the late president, is coordinator of the Collectif Citoyen pour l’Agro-écologie (Citizens Collective for Agro-Ecology), which in June 2018 mobilized hundreds of protesters against plans to promote genetically modified products.

Traditional social norms giving preference to (male) elders are also biased against young people. That reality was shaken up during the revolutionary era of the 1980s. It has since been eroded further by the sheer power of demographics: in 2015, 65.5% of all Burkinabè were under 25 according to United Nations data. While Burkina Faso has many older activists and party leaders with progressive outlooks - acquired during the turbulent 1980s - youth have been especially open to radical ideas and action. Most of those who gave their lives for the democratic movement in 2014 and 2015 were in their teens or twenties.

Youth are numerous in the ranks of the various parties and civil associations. One of the most influential activist groups of recent years, Balai Citoyen (Citizen’s Broom), besides upholding the example of Sankara - a hero to many young people - is led by the rapper Smockey and the reggae artist Sams’K Le Jah. Both are adept at appealing to Burkina Faso’s youth.

Although Facebook and similar sites are popular with better-off urban residents, Burkinabè youth are less likely to communicate using social media than elsewhere in the region. Overall internet access remains one of the world’s lowest, at under 4%. They are far more likely to use the text messaging functions of mobile phones to publicize and coordinate protests; the number of mobile phones increased nearly fifteen times between 2006 and 2015 to more than 14 million.

Navigating Turbulence

The persistence of popular agitation obliges activists and authorities alike to find ways to safely navigate the “new” Burkina Faso. For civil society and labour movements, their organizational fragmentation may not be a notable problem when dealing with local issues, such as removing a corrupt municipal councilor or highlighting shortages at a health clinic. But on national issues, it is a definite handicap, making it harder to pose clear demands and easier for authorities to ignore them or pit groups against one and other.

Lack of coordination also fosters indiscipline. While protests in Burkina Faso have largely been peaceful, outbreaks of violence have sometimes brought property damage, injury and on occasion death. Disruptive actions such as blocking major national highways or repeated civil service strikes also threaten to alienate potentially sympathetic sectors of the population.
Efforts to improve the organizational and technical skills of civil society groups may strengthen their ability to communicate, focus on their most essential demands and better use available institutional channels to seek redress. For that to happen, however, the authorities must become more receptive. Opinion surveys, conducted by the civil society managed Présimètre monitoring network, show that the government has acquired a reputation for promising much, but moving very slowly on delivery. Such failings can only increase public cynicism towards the political system, undercutting electoral participation and impelling some to explore violent alternatives.

In face of high public expectations, the authorities need to act more expeditiously on a variety of fronts: improving transparency and accountability in public affairs, ensuring that at least some high-profile cases against corrupt former officials and rights violators reach the courtroom, creating many more jobs for young people and addressing trade union demands more comprehensively.

Greater responsiveness at the top may help calm public agitation, but will not end it. Yet in all well-functioning democratic systems marches and demonstrations provide useful avenues for highlighting gaps and shortcomings, promoting wider citizen engagement and dissuading those in office from abusing their powers. As Smockey of Balai Citoyen commented shortly after the 2015 elections: "It's important to maintain some form of counter-power, to force the government to respect its commitments. If this balance is allowed to disappear, there will be a risk of the old ghosts coming back."

**Further Reading**


