

## A long journey to democracy, lessons from October 2014 events in Burkina Faso

*Interview translated from French by Barthelemy Bazemo, AFJN Policy analyst*

Burkina Faso has recently been in the spotlight following the popular uprisings of October 31, 2014, that forced President Blaise Compaoré out of office after 27 years of iron-fist rule; this is indeed a real milestone in the democratic process in a country classified as one of the poorest in the world. Given the historic importance of this victory and its possible domino effect on African democracy, ***Africa Faith and Justice Network*** in collaboration with the ***Advocacy Network for Africa*** reached out to Simon Compaoré, a seasoned politician on the political scene of Burkina Faso. He was for over fifteen years the mayor of Ouagadougou, the capital city and a former senior member of the executive committee of the former ruling party of Blaise Compaoré, the Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP).

On January 4, 2014, Simon Compaoré alongside seventy five influential officials resigned from the ruling party to protest against the amendment of Article 37 of the Constitution that limits presidential terms to two. They have since founded a party, the People's Movement for Progress (PMP) of which he is the second vice-president in charge of foreign affairs. Below is an in-depth analysis of the political situation and the ground work that finally dislodged one of Africa's top five longest-serving rulers.

*Hello Mr. Mayor. The purpose of this interview is to get an in-depth analysis of the recent events that shook Burkina Faso at the end of October 2014, namely the popular uprisings that forced President Blaise Compaoré out of office. What is your take on the events, the context, causes and the possible outcome out of the current political stalemate?*

***Simon Compaoré:*** First and foremost, let me take this opportunity to thank the government and the people of United States for their support during these difficult moments in our country's history. We equally express our heartfelt gratitude to the Advocacy Network for Africa (ADNA) for taking a keen interest in African issues and most importantly in the ongoing situation of Burkina Faso (BF). The popular uprisings of October 30 and 31, 2014 are historic and have tremendously impacted our minds. African politics are not static and these events are part of history in the making. We are witnessing change taking place on the continent. The case of Burkina Faso is a perfect illustration. Wherever regimes exert oppression and repression on their peoples, they tend to resist and fight back. Since the time President Blaise Compaoré assumed

power from October 15, 1987 to the ill-fated day of October 31, 2014, he remained the sole man in command for 27 years and 15 days.

People quickly realized that Compaoré's regime did not assume power to serve their best interests but to perpetuate the rule of a clan. Everything was staged to praise him; we were part of the scam. With time we came to our senses to realize the evil plans we contributed to. In a suitable way, we resigned from the ruling party on January 4, 2014 to protest against the self-perpetuating rule and life presidency. We were well aware of the lack of democratic space, freedom of expression and the ongoing marginalization of young people who represent over 70% of the population. Leaders across Africa should take note that they run a serious risk whenever they fail to address the grievances of their youths. Unfortunately Blaise Compaoré learned it the hard way.

*Most experts attributed the success of the popular uprisings to the impressive and skillful mobilization of the people by the opposition parties. What is your comment on that? What is the secret of your success?*

*Simon Compaoré:* (Laughs...). A well-known English saying has it that "where there is a will, there is a way". Believing in oneself is the ground to move mountains. The gross abuses of the Compaoré's regime could not go unnoticed. People resisted his rule. In a united front, both political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) worked together and finally the miracle happened. On all fronts, youths and women played a leading role; they led the way, erected barricades in the city and the streets of Ouagadougou and stormed the National Assembly in the morning of October 30, 2014.

In the same vein, all young people under 27 years of age had known only one single president, Blaise Compaoré; they had enough of him and everyone else as well. This conjunction of circumstances called for change. The same need for change was being drummed by political parties, various religious affiliations and traditional paramount chiefs. All these reasons coupled with the determination of the youth drove the protesters to face the impressive killing machine of guns, tanks, weapons and any other arsenal of repression.

*In the wake of President Blaise Compaoré's resignation on October 31, 2014, a transitional government was set up and tasked with the enormous responsibility of reconciling the nation and of holding credible and fair elections. What assessment can you already make of its few months in office?*

*Simon Compaoré:* First it should be noted that right after the events, the people of Burkina Faso came together to draft a charter that paved the way for the establishment of the transitional institutions. With the help of the international community, all the stakeholders chose Michel Kafando as both the president of Burkina Faso and of the transitional government, appointed Isaac Yacouba Zida as prime minister and finally the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legislative body.

All this was done in the shortest possible time and saved the country from harmful situations as observed elsewhere on the continent. We are indeed grateful to God for protecting our country from the spectrum of chaos. The transitional government (TG) is expected to deliver on the agenda within one year.

Firstly, the TG must restore confidence so as to rekindle people's trust in the institutions of the Republic, and in its justice system. It must importantly organize credible, fair and transparent elections whose legitimacy comes from the people themselves. Finally, it must restore justice, fight against impunity (for instance, re-open pending cases of economic crimes and violent crimes), and gross abuses of human rights which have long been a source of dissatisfaction leveled against the past regime. Today (January 6, 2015), President Kafando had his first official meeting with all the political parties and the civil society organizations (CSOs) to fine tune and define the key steps of the electoral process.

As for the actual management of political issues by the new team, I am of those who advocate for more understanding vis-à-vis the incumbent cabinet for the simple reason that the Prime Minister and the majority of the elected officials (especially in the NTC) have never been part of any official government. There will certainly be mistakes but we trust that everything will be fine.

The elections are scheduled to take place in October 2015, and hopes are high that they will hopefully result in the choice of a democratically elected president and an assembly of legislative representatives elected by universal suffrage. All this will create the conditions for a return to normal constitutional life, pave the way for the resumption of our economic activity, wealth creation and the equitable distribution of national resources.

*The long term rule of African leaders, the problem of democratic governance and particularly the amendment of constitutional term limits have been at the heart of public debate all over Africa. Do you think that these recent events in Burkina Faso now known under the sobriquet of "Black Spring" will have a domino effect on the continent?*

*Simon Compaoré:* We must remain modest. But after all, what happened in Burkina Faso is a confirmation that nothing will ever be the same again. This is an illustration of the ability of the people to rebel against dictatorship. This probably took by surprise the international community or people with a distorted perception that Africans are happy-go-lucky slaves, who, despite the oppression and repression agree to be led by autocratic presidents who hold the reins of power

for 10 , 20, 30 years or more. The case of Burkina Faso sends a strong message to all heads of state who still try to hang on there, that nothing will ever be the same again.

As the saying goes: “the same causes always produce the same effects”. All dictators on the continent have no better legacy. Personally I condemn life presidency. That is why I call on all democrats and progressives to join in the fight for constitutional term limits in Africa. This is an irony of some sort that time is a bad counselor and one who hangs on to power, over time fails to resist the temptations and corrupting lure of power. Long-term rules have disastrous consequences for the people. Only the respect of the rules of constitutional democracy can guarantee real stability in our countries.

The change that occurred in Burkina Faso will definitely impact many countries that find themselves in a similar stalemate. Obviously many heads of state across Africa closely followed the outcome of the political crisis in Burkina Faso. We are fortunate because the expected change did take place with minimal casualties. And this is food for thought to many life presidents in Africa. The fact remains that people in Burkina Faso forced President Compaoré and his entourage to flee for the reasons we all know. Whoever across the continent fails to heed the aspirations of their people will go down the same way. People make history and whatever the degree of repression, the people will always be the winners.

*The youth is undoubtedly hailed as the star of the past events, giving glimmers of hope to democratic processes on the continent. If by any chance, the youth which represents over 50% of the population, entrusts you with the responsibility to preside over the destiny of the country in October 2015, which policies or program will you put in place to reduce unemployment, and especially correct the mistakes of the past?*

**Simon Compaoré:** Thanks for this extremely important question. On April 5 and 6, 2014, the People's Movement for Progress (PMP) had its first congress to define its political program. This manifesto gives the overall orientation of our political agenda. We draw our ideology and political strategy from the mainstream social democracy. Here are the three essential components of our political agenda:

The first basic principle of social democracy is the firm belief in the democratic rule. The PMP values and stands for democracy as the best form of political organization that befits our country. We want an elective and participatory democracy that elects its representatives and gives them the responsibility of public office. Through elections, elected officials are endorsed to hold public office.

With regard to our economic policy framework, the PMP favors a market economy regulated to deal with abuses of the monopoly of the international financial system. It is of utmost importance to create a balance between the labor forces and the financial system for a sound management of our economy.

We believe that the productive forces of the nation need our support and protection against an international system that swallows up the weakest. The state will define the rules of the economic game to bolster the creation of wealth. The final principle of our political orientation pertains to the rules of an equitable distribution of our national wealth, namely to set up a framework to monitor the fair distribution of the dividends of the economic growth.

The PMP will devote a special attention to the plight of young people who represent over 70% of the population. Job creation for young people remains our top priority. We're already working at it to find the best ways to reduce unemployment. A well known maxim from our homeland has it that "it is the hunchback who knows where his hump is." Throughout the 45 provinces of Burkina, we've given instructions to young people to participate in the brainstorming process with concrete proposals toward our final party policy framework.

We equally value the contribution of women, a significant stratum of our nation. Harnessing their potential would be an added value to bolster wealth creation and improve the economic and social development of Burkina Faso. To this end, there is a need to intensify literacy programs and improve the overall education system. We also plan to boost livestock and agricultural sector. We intend to restructure the gold industry that already generates significant foreign currency but unfortunately it is monopolized by large corporations to the detriment of locals. In short, we will put a special emphasis on sound economic governance in the management of contracts and concessions. In the long term, we aim to establish social justice in business management so that the turnover from the exploitation of national resources may power the development of villages, municipalities, provinces and regions across the country.

*How would you assess the level of your relationships with the main strategic partners of Burkina Faso, such as Ivory Coast, France and the US? What is the configuration of the political parties in BF ahead of the elections of November 2015? And finally, what are the sources of funding for the PMP?*

*Simon Compaoré:* Our party was born in extremely difficult conditions. Even our friends in Burkina Faso were deterred by the former regime from helping us. We started with our own means. To prepare our congress, each senior official was asked to contribute the amount of \$ 400; the other members contributed \$ 100. We made an appeal to all those who believe in a better future to give us their trust. We did work in the past under Blaise Compaoré; we are well aware of the abuses and errors of his regime. We tendered our resignation in January 2014 with the view of correcting the missteps. And we've vowed to do things differently. Some people positively responded to our appeal and continue to support our campaign. So far we have no help from international donors; if you are able to help us, we will be very happy ... (laughs).

As for our relationships with the major partners of Burkina, I can unequivocally affirm that we are in good terms with them. They have all got diplomatic representations in our country and we

are in contact with their respective ambassadors. We do share our views whenever necessary. For instance, the US ambassador paid us a visit in our office to compare notes on our future plans. We also have regular meetings with the ambassadors of France and, European Union etc

In regard to the configuration of political parties in the country, one could classify them into two main categories: Liberal parties with the most representative being the Union for Progress and Change (UPC) of Zephirin Diabré and the African Democratic Rally - Alliance for Democracy and Federation (ADR-ADF) currently weakened because of their support to the deposed president Blaise Compaoré. The other parties which can be classified progressive parties are the People's Movement for Progress (PMP) and the "Sankarist" parties drawing their inspiration from the legacy of Thomas Sankara (for instance, the Union for Rebirth - Sankarist Movement or UNIR-MS of Benewende Stanislas Sankara, the Party for Democracy and Socialism/Metba or PDS/Metba) of the late Arba Diallo currently led by Professor Etienne Traoré). The last category is a coalition of new and small parties predominantly headed by young politicians. All the parties collaborate together to address the challenges of the electoral process and of our country at large.

*The United States policy agenda toward the continent of Africa is largely influenced by its campaign and fight against international terrorism. In the past, The US Government had close ties with the Compaoré regime; now that he is no longer in charge, what is your party's standpoint on the security architecture in the Great Sahel Region?*

*Simon Compaoré:* We cannot stress enough the importance of both domestic and regional security. It is tremendously vital for our economy and the social well-being of our people. We will honor all international commitments Burkina Faso duly signed. We will even go a step further to improve relations with countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU), Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS) and the African Union. We will make our contribution alongside the United States and the European Union to fight against the forces of evil like Boko Haram and AQIM (al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). We believe that it is consistent with the strategic interests of our country and key for our survival.

There is a growing interdependence between countries in the world to the extent that we are bound to work together. That is why whenever there is unrest in any neighboring country; it should be of utmost concern to us. Our army is already involved in peace support operations in the sub-region; if ever we assume public office, we will invest more resources to improve our contribution toward achieving lasting international peace.

*In the same vein, are you of the opinion that peace and security are the fruits of justice, fairness and transparency in the management of political affairs contrary to the vision that promotes the strength of the biceps or the power of the gun?*

*Simon Compaoré:* It is a self-evident truth and I fully share your view. We look forward to putting an emphasis on justice, truth and reconciliation. When some eat and others go hungry, one cannot prevent revolutions from happening. We should do everything possible so that injustice does not become the cause of social unrest and insecurity in our countries as Boko Haram and the like seem to indicate.

*Which African countries do you believe could be models of inspiration for you on issues pertaining to governance?*

*Simon Compaoré:* In terms of political governance, Ghana is a good example for us; the country has consistently respected democratic change in the devolution of political power. We believe it owes its political stability and social cohesion to the strict respect of the rule of law. Right after the creation of our party, we sent a delegation for a study tour to Ghana to learn the best lessons of management of political affairs. And we are confident that this can also be achieved in our country.

On the economic side, Rwanda is a success story particularly in the field of participatory democracy. The contribution of every citizen is highly valued and encouraged. This model brings to the fore the homegrown capabilities instead of always depending on foreign aid. We can do a lot with our own means. We will equally draw from the best lessons of the 1983 revolution which is part of national heritage. Accountability in the management of our national resources is crucial for winning public trust. The world is changing and our communities demand transparency in the management of our institutions

*The popular uprisings as a whole were successful; what are your expectations of the African Diaspora and advocacy groups like ADNA to accompany Burkina Faso in its search for a true democracy?*

*Simon Compaoré:* Thank you for this important question. We lacked your support at some point in our struggle. This is equally valid for all countries living in similar situations. Your involvement came much later. We believe it is time to challenge the African Heads of State on issues of democratic governance and the rule of law. Organizations such ADNA and the Diaspora have clout to step up pressure against African rulers without facing major threats, compared to those who live in our countries.

The Diaspora and CSOs must continually pay a close look at African politics. Your voices must be heard before the situation gets out of hand. This will send a clear message to our governments

that they are being monitored both inside and outside the country. We value your support for the democratization of our countries across the continent. Do not be afraid to criticize our leaders especially when their management of public affairs is disastrous. In the case of Blaise, the lack of constructive critique of his regime made him believe that he was an irreproachable demigod and he could abuse his people as he saw fit.

Thank you to all of you who contributed to the victory of our people. ....