



COUNTER COUP IN BURKINA FASO

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OCTOBER 2022





INTRODUCTION

A counter coup d'état started on 30 September 2022, which eventually led to the removal of Interim President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba from power. Damiba had risen to power in January 2022, after leading a coup to overthrow the elected government of Roch Marc Christian Kabore. This is the ninth coup since Burkina Faso's independence from France in 1960 and the third successful attempt in the last eight years. As at the submission of this briefing report, Captain Ibrahim Traore has taken over as interim leader.

BACKGROUND

In 2014, former President Blaise Compaore, after about 27 years in power (1987-2014), was forced to resign on October 31, 2014, with power initially moving to Lieutenant-Colonel Issac Yacouba Zida. Within three weeks, on 17 November 2014, the military junta appointed diplomat Michel Kafando to head a transitional government. Despite Kafando heading the government, Zida remained as the prime minister and asserted influence. However, the transitional government was able to conduct elections that led to Kabore's election in November 2015.

Kabore had been active in Burkinabe politics, serving in different ministerial positions before becoming prime minister in 1996. He held several positions supporting the president and joining the National Assembly, rising to the position of speaker of house in June 2002. Kabore only left the CDP (Compaore's party) in January 2014 and remained an active participant in opposition politics to Compaore till his resignation in October the same year. Kabore was elected in November 2015 as president with his own political party, the MPP, created after leaving the CDP.

It's worth stressing the fact that, the (about 13 months) transition that led to Kabore's election left the country divided following several dimensions. Indeed, at the end of the transition, the political class was divided, the security forces as a whole were divided and to some extent the society was divided. Unfortunately, President Kabore, during his first term (2015-2020) was unable to effectively deal with these fractures. These fractures are part of the challenges confronting Burkina Faso today.

In addition to the above, despite Kabore's goodwill, and the support that led to his re-election in 2020, his inability to address rising security concerns and growing corruption



scandals largely defined his term. Clashes between the army and jihadist fighters led to thousands of deaths and over a million displaced peoples. Following the Inata massacre on 24 November, nationwide civil and military outrage led to violent demonstrations in Ouagadougou on 22 January. Two days later, Kabore was forced to resign.

In February, Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was sworn in as president with a pledge to battle the Islamic terrorist groups. The Assise Nationale setup by President Damiba to decide on transitional key issues adopted 39 months as the duration of the transition, that the government will eventually set at 36 months before reducing it to 24 months under the pressure from ECOWAS. President Damiba promised Burkinabe, among other things, that they will observe substantial improvement in the security situation within 5 months.

As usual, international organisations condemned the coup and both West African and African blocs imposed sanctions on Burkina Faso.

WHAT LED TO THIS SITUATION?

Several factors contributed to the overthrow of Interim President Damiba on Friday, 30 September 2022. First and foremost is the inability of his government to prevent, as he promised when he took office, the worsening of the security situation in the country. Second, was the persistence of the above-mentioned unresolved internal fractions within the security architecture. Third, the loss of sympathy among a fraction of the public opinion with moves such as attempts to bring back Blaise Compaore (from his exile in Cote d'Ivoire) and the increase of ministers' salaries. Fourth, from the beginning, Interim President Damiba has been seen by part of the public opinion as a pawn of the French government and more likely to reinforce prior colonial arrangements. Fifth, and perhaps most pertinent to the young officers who carried out the coup, was an obsession with political power. The statement issued highlighted a concern that Damiba's occupation with remaining relevant in political structure meant that he was less likely to carry out reform.

Damiba has formally agreed to resign and has reportedly fled to Togo. He outlined seven conditions for stepping down which primarily sought to ensure the new junta remains committed to a return to civilian rule and his personal safety.



THE NEW LEADER

Ibrahim Traore is a 34-year-old captain and the interim leader of Burkina Faso. In March 2022, Damiba appointed him as Chief of Artillery of the Tenth Support and Command Regiment. He graduated top of his class from the University of Ouagadougou in 2006 with a degree in fundamental and applied geology. He joined the armed forces in 2009 and was recruited to the Georges Namoano Military Academy in 2010. The academy houses the commando training centre.

He has been involved in both coups this year (January and September 2022) and coordinated Damiba's removal. Unlike Damiba, who held the title of Lt-Colonel, Traore's more junior position might signify more support within the rank and file of the army and help ensure his stay in power. It also means that the more senior cadre of officers who serve with Damiba might find themselves out of power and position. His commitment to combat will no doubt endear him to his troops and present him as one of the rank and file who rose up the chain of command. Ultimately, however, there is likely to be more conflict and uncertainty in the country.

When reading through all the communiqués and statements made by the new Interim President and his spokesperson, few key messages clearly come out. First, the dissolution of all the transitional institutions. This might imply the possible change of members of such groups. Secondly, a change in the strategy of the fight against terrorism and, if necessary, engaging other partners for assistance. This might welcome by Burkinabe citizens but might also signal a willingness to use other means, such as Russian mercenaries who are active in neighbouring Mali. Thirdly, he does not want to remain as to be the interim president for a long time and would like elections to be held as soon as possible. This might be welcome by external stakeholders who have mandated an adherence to the July 2023 deadline for a return to civilian rule. Fourthly, a suspension of activities by political parties and civil society organizations – which is always a source of concern in any military rule and fifth, while Damiba has been seen as accommodating with ECOWAS, it is difficult to tell what this government thinks about the regional body.

LIKELY SCENARIOS

The first, and perhaps the ideal, scenario consists in re-establishing the constitutional order as quickly as possible. This will depend on the ability of the new leader (and his team) to reduce the tension within the security and defence forces, to have, with the change of strategy, quick wins in the fight against terrorism and get the transitional elections organized as soon as possible. In an interview on international media over the weekend, President Traore did not exclude the possibility of holding transitional elections before the 2 years period set by his predecessor.



The second scenario will consist in taking a bit more time, more than the two years agreed upon with ECOWAS by his predecessor, to hold the transitional elections. This will depend on the ability of the new leader to maintain a kind of peaceful atmosphere among the security and defence forces but not making progress in the fight against terrorism and so the need of longer time to be able to hold elections.

A third scenario will consist in the degradation of the security situation and another coup overthrowing Interim President Traore and his team. The likelihood of this scenario depends on the inability of the new leader to resolve the fractures between the security and defence forces and, hence, to progress in the fight against terrorism. Which will make it difficult to hold elections in reasonable delay and trigger reactions from other fractions within the security and defences forces.

A fourth scenario might see the rise of Russian influence in the region. Damiba's removal followed unease at his close relationship with the French government and saw citizens marching against French institutions after the coup. Noticeably, some of these protesters marched with Russian flags and insignia, showing a potential pivot to Russian allyship. The Russian private military contractor Wagner group has already been active in the region and welcomed the coup. Other military regimes in the region, such as the junta in Guinea led by Mamady Doumbouya and Mali led by Assimi Goïta, have already welcomed an increased relationship with Russia and a similar trend by Burkina Faso's new regime might see Russia become an even more influential player in West Africa. This comes with the repeated accusations of Russian links to misinformation and disinformation campaigns.

This brief is accurate as at 3 October 2022.

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Cover Image: Arise News



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