

The Causes of Burkina Faso's Coup D'état Plague

Amanda Blewett

The University of Oklahoma

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Dr. Daniel Mains

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A *coup d'état* is a sudden military takeover of the government promising a better life for the country's citizens and a transition of political power. Forty African countries have experienced over two hundred (both successful and failed) coup d'états in total with more than thirty leaders killed (Kazeem, 2017). One country in particular, Burkina Faso, tops all the others with an impressive ten coup attempts since its independence in 1960. Other countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Mali follow closely behind, but why are so many in Northern Sub-Saharan Africa unable to maintain a stable government? Some theories suggest that the cause of military coups is the lack of a stable democracy, however, there has been a rise in unrest in democratic nations in the past few decades as well. In a report prepared for the U.S. Department of Defense in 1983, researchers hoped to predict which Sub-Saharan countries were likely to have military coups based on previous patterns. In one of their studies, they compared many different factors and narrowed the five main causes to: social mobilization in regards to labor in agriculture, the size of interest groups, government economic performance based on balance of trade, political party fractionalization, and the amount of foreign aid/support from its ex-colonial metropole. Three of these causes are consistent with the "deep-rooted fragility" theory: social mobilization, balance of trade, and foreign aid (Barka & Ncube, 2012, p.8). This deep-rooted fragility is a mixture of the social climate left behind by the country's former colonial power and the economic pressures of a local and global trade market presence. Burkina Faso's weak French community and gold mining industry holds the traits of many of its neighbors and demonstrates what ultimately leads to a country's neverending plague of military coup d'états. Therefore, the causes of the military coups in Burkina Faso represent the causes throughout Sub-Saharan Africa.

Colonization and Economy of Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole was colonized and built into what it is today by Europe. A majority of west Africa was controlled by France, with all but three of its colonies geographically located south of the Sahara. Between 1830 and 1900, France conquered as much of Africa as it could without British opposition in an attempt to create a new French-state. In 1895, the French West Africa federation was founded, consisting of Burkina Faso (Upper Volta at the time), Benin (Dahomey), Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea (French Guinea), Mali (French Sudan), Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal ("France in", n.d., para. 1). In each colony, a Cercle system was instantiated, which involved a few French officers (or commanders) with authority over several appointed African cantons (or village chiefs) who managed thousands of people at a time (para. 4). The parameters and leaders of these Cercles were reorganized frequently, which arguably, may have caused a confusion in control and a familiarity in unstable conditions. In the early 20th century, France's colonial assimilation promised citizenship to those who could become "French" (para. 21). To gain the rights of a French citizen, Natives must improve their standards of living, adopt the French language, and convert to Christianity. It wasn't until 1956 that France started to back out of Africa, starting with Morocco and ending with Djibouti in 1977. Leaving the colonies with a broken government and natives with lost identities, France's impact in Africa created an uphill battle to stability.

The economy in Sub-Saharan Africa has been declining since 1974. With a current GDP less than what Jeff Bezos makes in a year ("World Integrated", 2018), many civilians are living in poverty. A majority of its exports are raw materials, meaning as soon as the resource is harvested or mined or killed, it's packed up and sent to another country, with little to no time for manufacturing to increase value. Africans have such a sense of urgency to recover their

economic deficit, they barely have time to manage the exports they ship out. Each country in Sub-Saharan Africa focuses on different raw materials to produce, meaning different industries to navigate throughout the continent. The confusion of different economies and the urgency to recover from the deficit puts a stress on many government officials across the nation.

Colonization and Economy of Burkina Faso (Upper Volta)

Burkina Faso (also known as the French Upper Volta) is characterized greatly by the mark left behind by its colonizer. With over nine different ethnic groups and more than four separate religions, Burkina Faso's social climate is a "recipe for disaster", but it wasn't always like this. The Upper Volta territory was previously dominated by the Mossi kingdom, a fierce people who defended their religion and community from the Muslims up north. France, upon discovery of the vast land, established a protectorate over the empire in 1896 during Europe's Scramble for Africa. In 1897, the colonial power began to annex native tribes of their lands and administer "cercles" throughout the area, including parts of present-day Mali (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019). It wasn't until the territory was separated and reinstated as Upper Volta that it was officially named a constituent of the French West Africa foundation in 1919 ("Burkina Faso", 2018). The colony was split apart again to build other neighboring countries in 1932 and then re-established as a territory with its own assembly in 1947 (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2019). Finally, in 1957, Upper Volta was allowed elections for executive councils, leading to an eventual civil call for independence in 1960. The rocky road to independence resulted in a very confused nation that knew they wanted freedom, but didn't know how to keep it. The myriad of breaking and putting back together of the Upper Volta region resulted in a conglomerate of ethnic groups and religions: the "perfect ingredients" for social mistrust and civil unrest.

Burkina Faso's economy and both its presence in the local and global trade market has placed another significant stress on its stability. With a majority of its population living in rural areas, agriculture and livestock raising are seen to be the principal source of revenue for a common Burkinabé. In fact, Burkina's main exports include cotton, gold, livestock, sugar, fruit, and zinc ("The Observatory", n.d.). The growing arid land and severe droughts, however, have led the country to depend on its mineral exploitation for national wealth. Considering mining can only be performed in certain areas, many Burkinabé men migrate to neighboring countries to find work or any source of income. This dependence on migration has hurt Burkina's economic growth in two ways. First, when working males travel to Mali or the Ivory Coast, they never return and reduce the labor force (Kraus, 2000). Second, while the migrants' intentions are to send remittances, the presence of conflict in those neighboring countries has made it difficult for them to find employment—and also cuts off the already dwindling path to the sea—meaning double the loss.

In the mid 1980s, Burkina Faso opened its resources to foreign privatization in hopes to bring in investments and eventual revenue to the state. For a while, gold brought hope to the country as the demand and value for it increased worldwide, and many farmers turned to small-scale mining (Côte, 2014, p. 125). This small-scale mining was state mandated, but as the government began to notice fraud and a loss of benefits, it decided to give mining rights to the industry abroad. Easier access to Burkina's gold led to lower prices across the globe and even less benefits, resulting in the closure of the biggest gold mine in 1999 (p. 130). It wasn't until after many years of high living costs and low wages that the Burkina Faso government decided to reopen its biggest gold mine in 2010 and hope for a better outcome from the global mineral trade. As of today, Burkina depends on the stability of local and global trade, as the economic

pressures that affect the Burkinabé are worsened by the outside stimulus of changes in the market.

Military Coups in Burkina Faso (Upper Volta) and their Causes

With the economic and social climate defined, the causes of each military coup throughout Burkina Faso's history can be explained. Before Upper Volta had completely gained its freedom, Maurice Yameogo, a man severely opposed by many different political parties, was elected president. This was still under French jurisdiction, but they did not see an issue with the representative and were just happy to see their colony practice a democratic election of some kind. Upon receiving his new powers in 1958, President Yameogo disassembled the parliament, then created a new one consisting of members from his own party only—a single party system. Throughout his presidency, Yameogo made it his personal goal to build Upper Volta's economy, as it was one of the weakest in the world (Speirs, 1991, p. 89). He reached out to France for aid and agricultural assistance, and as much as it increased the productivity of exports, the balance of trade was still negative ("The World", 2019). He received grants from neighboring Ghana and the Central Bank of West African States, but Upper Volta only plunged further into deficit when the French troops pulled out in 1961, as the price for UV's own military was drastic. President Yameogo's last effort at financial stability was his austerity plans to increase taxes and reduce salaries for all civilians (including soldiers), a move that resulted in loss of support and protests throughout the country in 1965. Yameogo respectfully handed over the power to lieutenant-colonel Sangoule Lamizana and his army in 1966. Throughout his presidency, M.Y. reached out for ex-colonial aid and had a low economic performance based on balance of trade, both of which were mentioned in the U.S. Department of Defense analysis. Although this coup was relatively peaceful, the uprising was indirectly caused by a mixture of France's leftover

control in the Upper Volta finances and President Maurice Yameogo's inability to maintain the economic deficit.

Lieutenant-colonel Sangoule Lamizana came to power at the same time the population felt discontent with a civilian government. The president attempted to amend the constitution and bring back an elected parliament twice, but was met with resistance from trade unions and other civilians unhappy with Upper Volta's economic position (Speirs, 1991, p. 93). A severe drought and desertification hurt the country's agriculture more than it already was and Lamizana wasn't doing enough to fix it. Although he won re-election in 1978, the president was ousted in Upper Volta's second military coup by Colonel Saye Zerbo (with help from Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaoré) in 1980—another coup resulting from a disappointing economic performance (Johnson, 1983, p. 41).

In a span of seven years, four more military coups (failed and successful) occurred one after the other. As President Zerbo grew more autocratic by banning marches and angered trade unions by enforcing mandatory military service, he was greeted with severe opposition (Sawo, 2017, p. 7). In 1982, less than two years after his inauguration, Zerbo was overthrown by his own military he used to overthrow the last president. The size of the trade union is consistent with the factor in the U.S. DOD analysis of the size of interest groups. Major Dr. Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo was appointed the next president of Upper Volta, and he promised a “cleansing” of the former military regime and an eventual replacement of civilian government (p. 8). Jean-Baptiste's regime, however, enforced *more* oppressive policies and also fell short of the economic expectations just as his predecessors did. In the midst of his reign, one coup attempt failed at bringing back the Zerbo regime. After this, the army was split into factions, one side for Ouédraogo and the other for socialist Prime Minister Thomas Sankara, resulting in the latter's

expulsion from his duties (p. 9). This fractionalization, as well as the failed economic performance, are two factors mentioned in the U.S. DOD analysis. In 1983, as the factors predicted, a military coup led by no President Thomas Sankara ousted President Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo from his seat.

The Sankara regime was one of the most significant in history as he happened to be the most popular national leader of the Upper Volta region. President Thomas Sankara grew up in the “social injustice” of French neo-colonialism, and believed that France was “directly responsible for the unfair social system” and that it was their duty to resolve the poverty that they created (Wilkins, 1989, p. 376). In order to rid Upper Volta of its colonial past, Sankara renamed the country *Burkina Faso*, meaning “land of the upright men”. The president’s passions included fitness, feminism, and fairness, which were all seemingly good passions, but were not shared by many interest groups in Burkina. Sankara’s stubborn resistance to any foreign aid showed to be economically draining, as he spent more on public reform than on actually ridding the country of poverty. (p. 385). His outspokenness and economic failures were what ultimately led to the 1987 military coup that killed T.S. and placed his long time best friend, Blaise Compaoré, at the seat of power. President Thomas Sankara’s obsession with ridding Burkina Faso of anything French and his inability to improve his economic performance further proves the deep-rooted fragility theory.

Blaise Compaoré knew that in order to actually succeed as a president, he would need to make some serious political and economic changes that his predecessors were unable to do. He combined a democratic regime with repression to ensure the stability that would keep him in power. He rewrote the constitution for presidents to have 7 year terms to enact a multi-party system and was re-elected with no competition in both 1991 and 1998 (Sawo, 2017, p. 12). Just a

year later, however, economic grievances and strikes broke out after the closure of the state's biggest gold mine and conflicts in neighboring countries began to affect Burkina Faso's standards of living. Without the ability to work within the country, or outside of the country, Burkinabé began to grow restless. President Compaoré foiled an attempted coup in 2004 and jailed the army captain in charge of it, just before winning the election for his third term in office in 2005. Protests and strikes over higher living costs and lower wages began to get violent, as even soldiers weren't getting paid. Instead of focusing on the economic issues at hand, Compaoré attempted to mediate crisis and border disputes with Burkina Faso's neighbors (Adibe, 2015, p. 80). It wasn't until 2014, when B.C. proposed a constitutional amendment to extend his term, that protests developed and the military drove him out of office. They placed Michel Kafando as an interim president until the 2015 election where Roch Marc Christian Kabore won and became the first president of Burkina Faso to not be put in power directly from a coup. A couple failed coups had been attempted in 2015 and 2016, but Kabore was still re-elected in the recent 2020 election. Although the people of Burkina showed democratic consciousness when protesting Compaoré's terms, the presence of the military coups after his presidency and the ideology that there will always be someone who wants the power to do a better job illustrates that the country is not quite as stable as it seems (p. 81). All of the coups involved in Compaoré's take down were caused by his focus on foreign relations (the opposite of Sankara and irrelevant to the necessities of the nation) and his lack of focus on the people's need for higher wages in an economy that requires higher living costs. Therefore, even in the most recent of uprisings, the DOD report still correctly hypothesized the consistent factors for causes of military coups.

Although a few of these military coups throughout history were personally motivated, the overall goals were for the betterment of Burkina Faso and its people. Each president had trouble increasing the country's economic performance and were unable to remove the effects of decades long French colonialism. Furthermore, "citizens that are often victims of injustice... are likely more welcoming to regime change" (Kazeem, 2017). The people of Burkina Faso have endured poverty and social inequality since their independence and have a right to be unhappy with the efforts of their presidents after a period of time. France left this Upper Volta region underdeveloped and it still is today with one of the lowest GDP per capita in the world ("The Observatory", n.d.). This mixture of an initial broken identity and dying economy has proven to be a disaster, stability-wise for the entire country. The report for the U.S. Department of Defense furthers that theory and accepts that those two factors are greatly involved in the start of a military coup, and until the Burkinabé feel content with their place in society, they may never stop.

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Thomas Sankara was a very interesting guy and way ahead of his time. I wish I had been able to write more about him, but that would have gone off topic. If interested, I recommend reading the Michael Wilkins article about Sankara's effect on Burkina Faso, as I thoroughly enjoyed it.