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THE ARMY AND THE EXERCISE OF POWER IN BUKINA FASO

Lessons from the popular uprising on October 30th and 31st, 2014

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His latest book, *Droit, démocratie et développement en Afrique. Un parfum de jasmin souffle sur le Burkina Faso*, published by Harmattan in March 2014, deals with the thorny issue of democratic transition in Africa, particularly in Burkina Faso. It was received in Burkina Faso as prophetic when, just six months after publication, a popular uprising brought down Blaise Compaoré's authoritarian regime after 27 years in power.

In Burkina Faso an inextricable link exists between the army and the exercise of power. In the context of recent events, the role of the army is an essential element for understanding their causes as well as the issues surrounding the fall of the Blaise Compaoré regime and his subsequent flight from the country on October 31st.

The analysis proposed below may help shed some light on the process, explaining how the army succeeded in attaching itself to the nation and found a degree of balance in the period immediately before the reign of Compaoré. The autocratic drift that characterised the Compaoré era, who was

A combination of factors precipitated the fall of the regime: failed political programmes, the greed of the presidential clan, the growing indignation and exasperation in the population, the ambivalence of the army and the dissidence at the heart of the presidential party.

The continuation of the army at the head of the Burkina Faso state is not the product of direct domination but is rather the result of a process of the routinisation of charisma in the army.

From 1966 to 1982, the army did a better job than the civilians of identifying itself with the nation. Despite the shortcomings of these military regimes, the ills associated with the predatory state did not reach the alarming levels that they would with Compaoré when the countless political assassinations became a means of government.

Blaise Compaoré has managed to become a valued ally of France in the fight against terror in the sub-saharan region.

Since the coup d'état in 1966, Burkinabe civil society has not ceased to strengthen itself, with continual waves of new organisations being formed.

From now on, the citizen is keen to participate effectively and directly in the management of power and the taking of decisions. A great deal of public opinion considers that in spite of having a civilian head of state and another at the head of the Transitional National Council, the regime remains military in character.

With the current transition, it is the fourth time that the incapacity, failure, immaturity or squabbling between civilian elites has played into the hands of the army.

himself a soldier, was the cause of the weakening of his regime that had been in place for 27 years. During its last years, the combination of failed political programmes, the greed of the presidential clan, the growing indignation and exasperation in the population, the ambivalence of the army and the dissidence at the heart of the presidential party precipitated the fall of the regime. The domination of the army in the exercise of power in Burkina Faso almost without interruption since independence raises serious questions at a moment when a period of democratic transition is being promoted

From this point of view, the popular uprising of October

30th and 31st, 2014, that overturned the Blaise Compaoré regime is full of lessons. It illustrates to a remarkable degree the ambivalence of the army, which is capable of being, at once, a blindly coercive force and a liberating one. Strongly tied to the state and going as far as to identify itself with it, the army is capable of incarnating a “functionalism of the best” or a “functionalism of the worst” to quote Bourdieu when he presents the two current, competing interpretations of the state: that of the “divine state”, a sort of neutral place, a benevolent institution *par excellence*, responsible for achieving the public interest; and that of the “diabolical state” in the service of those who dominate, an instrument of enslavement *par excellence* of the weak by the powerful. Like the state, the identity of the army does not escape this kind of ambivalence between divinity and diabolism. The popular uprising of October 30th and 31st, 2014, reveals the specific nature of the army: the military organisation, the changes that affect it and the dysfunction that results from it.

The army and the exercise of power in Burkina Faso: an inextricable link

Since the independence of Burkina Faso in 1960, the power of the state, with two exceptions, has always been held by a soldier. Of the four republics the country has known and the equally (if not more important) number of exceptional

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regimes, only one civilian has exercised state power: Maurice Yaméogo from 1960 to 1966 (first republic). The second civilian to hold power is the current transitional president, Michel Kafando, in office since November 21st, 2014.

From 1966 until November 21st, 2014, six soldiers have risen to the top of the Burkinabe state: General Sangoulé Lamizana (1966-1980), Colonel Saye-Zerbo (1980-1982), Commandant Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo (1982-1983), Captain Thomas Sankara (1983-1987), Captain Blaise Compaoré (1987-2014), Lieutenant colonel Isaac Yacouba Zida (31 October 2014-21 November 2014). Therefore, the following question demands to be asked: how can we explain the succession of the military elite at the head of this state of “upright people”¹?

A process of routinisation of charisma at the heart of the Burkinabe army

The continuation of the army at the head of the Burkina Faso state is not the product of direct domination, of a mode of “functioning by coercion” (Benchemane, 1978), but is rather the result of a process of the routinisation of charisma in the

army. This was the case at least until the coup d’état in 1987 that ended in the assassination of Thomas Sankara and the arrival of Blaise Compaoré as head of state. The notion of the routinisation of charisma in the army should be interpreted here as a charisma that attaches itself not so much to the person or the soldier (the officer in this case), but to the post or the institution of the military itself.

Presently, we will examine the methods of the routinisation of charisma in the Burkinabe army:

- Under the military chiefs before Compaoré, the army didn’t work in an authoritarian manner;
- The army often intervened on the basis of the inability of the civil elites to embody the nation and its unity;
- The military chiefs prior to Compaoré did not favour their region of origin as the latter has in encouraging unprecedented local development in his native Ziniaré region (about forty kilometres to the north-east of the capital);
- The Burkinabe army is exemplified by its achievements in the two border conflicts with Mali (in 1974 and 1985).

From 1966 to 1982, under military chiefs such as General Sangoulé Lamizana and General Saye-Zerbo, the army did a better job than the civilians of identifying itself with the nation. Despite the shortcomings of these military regimes, the ills associated with the predatory state did not reach the

alarming levels that they would with Blaise Compaoré, notably including: corruption, “politics of the belly”, nepotism and assassinations of opposition politicians.

The 1966 to 1978 period was described as a “military democracy” by Jean Audibert (1978), who compared the administration of the country by General Lamizana to that of a “good father of the family”.

By way of example, the military coup d’état led by Colonel Saye-Zerbo in 1980 did not tarnish the image of General Lamizana nor that of the army and still less the leader of the coup. It may be said that this coup d’état was less directed against Lamizana than against the civilian political elites whose squabbling put national cohesion at risk, to the extent that one prelate, Cardinal Paul Zoungrana, greeted the coup d’état as a blessing from God (Somé, 2006). In sum, the military chiefs in question were able to enjoy a degree of charisma that has rained down on the military institution as a whole through what we have called, with Weber (1971), processes of routinisation.

The Sankarist years mark the change towards the routinisation of military charisma. Thomas Sankara himself had a certain charisma, but the political system put in place after the coup d’état of August 4th, 1983, was more like a military-civilian dictatorship embodied by the CDR (Comité de défense de la révolution), as illustrated by the sometimes abusive dismissals of officials, the imposition of grassroots sport on the citizens and obligatory Burkinabe consumption. Although the revolutionaries of the Sankarist era planned to train the military in their political and ideological plan -their slogan was, “a soldier without political training is a potential crimi-

1. Combining the two main languages of the country, Burkina Faso means “land of the upright people”.

nal”- it was under the Sankarist regime that the first political assassinations occurred, notably at the heart of the army.

Nevertheless the authoritarian excesses, the political crimes and bad governance attributed to the regimes prior to that of Blaise Compaoré, would reach, under his rule, unprecedented levels.

The Blaise Compaoré regime: a more or less normalised military autocracy.

The coup d'état in which Captain Compaoré overthrew Captain Thomas Sankara changed the image of the army. The Compaoré era marked the end of the routinisation of military charisma. The state began to implement a system of direct domination based on coercion using the army, and, one part of it in particular: the presidential guard regiment (RSP).

This is the period when repeated political assassinations began: first during the mentioned period of rectification (1987-1990) and then during the infamous decades of the pseudo-democratic era (1991-2014). At the heart of the army, this started with the foundational act of the assassination of the standing president, Thomas Sankara; a first in the country's history. Assassinations of other military personnel followed. Beyond the army, intellectuals and political elites were not spared: we can mention students, university lecturers, trade unionists, heads of political parties and so on. The most famous of these civilian victims being the journalist Norbert Zongo, managing editor of the newspaper *L'Indépendant* and symbol of the free, independent press (Bianchini, 2007), who was assassinated and burned in his vehicle along with other passengers on December 13th 1998, while he was investigating another murder: that of the chauffeur of Compaoré's brother. During the Compaoré era, the countless political assassinations became a means of government (Kiebré, 2014).

If, usually, as Max Weber reminds us, all dominance aspires to legitimacy, there are situations in which the pursuit of legitimacy is no longer necessary to remain in power. Such was the case with the Compaoré regime, which used trickery, corruption and coercion to maintain its hold. The Compaoré regime had a mixed-up logic of force, terror and impunity. The standard formula, often repeated by the supporters of the regime in the form of a threat addressed to all who oppose them is: “if you do, we'll get you and it will be as if nothing had happened”, implying that the settling of accounts with an opponent has impunity.

There is no risk in ascribing to the Compaoré regime the nature of the South American military governments of the 70s and 80s that employed the doctrine of national security. All the necessary characteristics are there: the development of a police state, the creation of a presidential guard regiment, terror, the primacy of intelligence over all other departments of the army, the upheaval of the military hierarchy and generalised insecurity for everyone, military and civilian.

The context of the international fight against terrorism has given the Burkinabe army a precious opportunity to confirm its central place in the exercise of power. Objectively or tactically, terrorism will serve as an alibi in the establishment of Western military bases in Africa and, in particular, Burkina Faso. The situation echoes the thesis of the shock doctrine: terrorism justifying a sort of military imperialism. An analogy may be drawn with the theses of Naomi Klein (2008) in which other types of disasters have justified the putting in place of ultra-liberal policies.

Blaise Compaoré has known how to use this to his advantage and has become a valued ally of France in the fight against terror in the sub-saharan region. With a need for a rapid intervention base, and, following the refusals of the heads of state of Mali and Niger, in 2010 Compaoré accepted the presence of a military base on the conditions that it remained secret, away from public eyes (about ten kilometres from the capital), and that the French army establish the Burkinabe anti-terrorist unit (Carayol, 2014).

Finally, the role of the Burkinabe army on the international scene is strengthened by its support for peacekeeping operations by sending soldiers to the various operation theatres in Africa in official, private or mercenary capacities (Henry, 2011).

The Compaoré regime instrumentalised the feeling of fear in order to govern.

Understanding the fall of the Blaise Compaoré regime

The failure of his political programme, “For a society of hope and progress”

Blaise Compaoré missed the historic opportunity to reconcile two temperaments of Burkinabe citizens: love of liberty and love of justice. The love of justice recalls the concept of “self-esteem” (*burkindlum*) that inhabits every Burkinabe citizen and which means that their reputation as “upright people” is not usurped.

Put simply, we can say that the Sankarist revolution brought a little justice and not enough liberty: in the last moments of the Thomas Sankara regime, feelings began to turn once again against the “military-civilian dictatorship” of the CDR. The “society of hope and progress” promised by Compaoré failed to achieve its objectives. The regime did not succeed in giving hope to a demotivated and desperate youth that, rightly or wrongly, has never ceased to see Thomas Sankara's death as an “assassination of hope”. It did not bring progress either, except that of an economic growth rate marred by the persistent poverty of the population (Ouédraogo, 2014). The permanent derogations of human rights, the political assassinations and the deepening of social inequalities all show that the regime of Compaoré gave Burkinabe citizens neither a sense of liberty nor a sense of justice.

The exasperation of the citizens, their indignation and the erosion of the feeling of fear

This regime instrumentalised the feeling of fear in order to govern. But over time the fear of death has begun to crumble at all levels, military as well as civilian. For the students, their insecurity overcame their fear, hence the famous war cry: *“a dead goat no longer fears the knife”*. The recoil from the feeling of fear in the face of repression is further verified by the popular uprising of October 30th and 31st, which created martyrs. In crystallising the exasperation of the citizens, the obstinacy surrounding the project of proposed constitutional revision to allow the president to stand for a new term in 2015, has liberated the desire to finish with the Compaoré era.

The rise to power of civil society

After the coup d'état against Maurice Yaméogo in 1966, in which the unions played a large part, Burkinabe civil society has not ceased to strengthen itself, with continual waves of new organisations being formed. Thus, following the assassination of the journalist Norbert Zongo at the end of the 90s we witnessed the arrival of: the *“Collectif des organisations démocratiques de masse et des partis politiques”* (Collective of Democratic Mass Organizations and Political Parties), the *Trop c'est trop* (*“Enough is enough”*) movement and the coordina-

The indignant anger of the Burkinabe citizen has still not decreased.

tion of Burkinabe intellectuals. These organisations have reinforced pre-existing ones, the *Mouvement Burkinabé des Droits de l'Homme et du Peuple* (MBDHP, the Burkinabe Movement for Human and Peoples' Rights) and the radical political opposition of which Joseph Ki-Zerbo was the figurehead. Fifteen years after the assassination of the journalist Norbert Zongo, civil society has not weakened, quite the contrary, it has been reinforced by the arrival of a new wave of organisations, for example: *le Balai citoyen* (*“the Citizen's Broom”*) and *le Collectif de la Coalition contre la Vie Chère* (CCVC, Grouping of the Coalition against the High Cost of Living).

The blind greed of the presidential clan

Faced with the desire of Compaoré to change the constitution in order to be able to stand for another term in 2015, the transitional president has spoken of myopia: the word is not strong enough, it would be more appropriate to speak of blindness. Blaise Compaoré and his entourage no longer see anything but their own illusions. And yet the facts were there, solid and undeniable: an anti-institutional mood thundering and growing, meetings that filled out municipal stadiums and marches that gathered thousands of demonstrators. The behaviour of Compaoré and his regime show us how ideas can be more stubborn than words. Only the logic of the predatory state, that is to say, the greed of leaders concerned with filling their pockets, can explain such blindness. As far as Blaise Compaoré himself is concerned, the fear of being brought before national or international justice during his mandate has further fed this blindness.

The dissidence at the heart of the majority party

Some of the leaders decided to jump the presidential ship in January 2014 after 26 years of loyal service. The reasons for their leaving the majority CDP party (Congress for Democracy and Progress) to form the MPP (People's Movement for Progress) are diversely interpreted: for some it is an eviction connected to the internal jostling for position within the former majority party. In terms of public opinion, many people doubt their sincerity, holding them responsible for the Compaoré regime thanks to which they have happily enriched themselves. It is not forgotten that just yesterday they were among the first supporters of constitutional revision. For others, on the other hand, this is a resurgence of lucidity and a position that is justified by their commitment to the good of the people. The dissidence at the heart of the majority party has weakened the Compaoré regime, on the one hand because those who resigned were followed by numerous militants who support their cause and on the other because they were welcomed into the opposition political party, whose ranks have swollen.

The army's ambivalence

The army as a political force is a double-edged sword. If the army -which is never neutral- is usually the armed wing of the governing minority, it can also, in certain circumstances, become the armed wing of the majority. The second case explains the important role the army played in the popular uprising of October 30th and 31st, 2014. Pierre Dabiez (1978) emphasises that *“all repressive missions have a politicising effect on the army, negatively, because of the hostility that its actions cause...positively because of the bias it introduces to its ranks”*. The bias of the army in favour of the people during the uprising was fatal for the Blaise Compaoré regime.

The stakes of the democratic transition

The handling of the mood of the Burkinabe citizen

The indignant anger of the Burkinabe citizen, born of 27 years of the Compaoré regime has still not decreased, as is witnessed by the anti-institutional mood palpable in the country. From now on, the citizen is keen to participate effectively and directly in the management of power and the taking of decisions. Since the start of the transition, countless directors general have been dismissed due to the pressure of the street and ministers have been driven out. They are often people of dubious reputation who are known to the public for having committed abuses with impunity under the Blaise Compaoré regime.

The restoration of trust between soldiers and civilians

The Burkinabe army today finds itself at a crossroads: the breakdown of a long process of routinisation of the function of the military by Compaoré has led to a feeling of fear

and distrust towards the army. Lieutenant-Colonel Zida's cession of the post of transitional president to a civilian just one month after the popular uprising that overthrew Blaise Compaoré is seen by some as the result of the pressure of the international community, notably ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States).

A great deal of public opinion considers that in spite of having a civilian head of state and another at the head of the Transitional National Council (CNT), the regime remains military in character. The key posts are in military hands: the prime minister, the minister of defence, the minister of territorial administration, the minister of agriculture and the minister of mines. And, if certain commentators are to be believed, while the military give the impression of having granted power to a civilian government, they hold the reins of its control. Insidiously, the military condemn this government to success. The failure of the policies of this new so-called civilian government will mean its disqualification and the resurgence of questions about the legitimacy of civilians taking power in the state.

In his article against the reclaiming of the uprising and the grabbing of ministerial posts by the army, A.K. Sango (2014) said the following: "Unfortunately, what we are living through today has been made possible with the blessing of civil actors -the leaders of the political parties and of civil society- because of their inability to put the public interest above personal ambition". With the current transition, several decades after the events of 1966, 1974 and 1980, it is the fourth time that the incapacity, failure, immaturity or squabbling between civilian elites has played into the hands of the army. 2015 and its upcoming elections looks like a pivotal period in which to mark a historic turning point and question the inseparable nature of the army and the exercise of power in Burkina Faso.

In Burkina Faso since the independence, the power of the state, with two exceptions, has always been held by a soldier.

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