Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has become a stark symbol of worsening security trends in West Africa's Sahel region. Since 2016, Islamist insurgent groups have asserted control over parts of the country and carried out terrorist attacks in the capital, Ouagadougou. Some have ties to the conflict in neighboring Mali, and to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State. The government has struggled to counter insurgent gains despite international backing and military aid, while state security forces and militia groups have been implicated in severe human rights abuses. The conflict has crippled health and education systems in parts of the country and deepened food insecurity. Over a million Burkinabè were internally displaced as of late 2020, nearly double the number a year earlier, according to U.N. data. The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought new health and economic hardships.
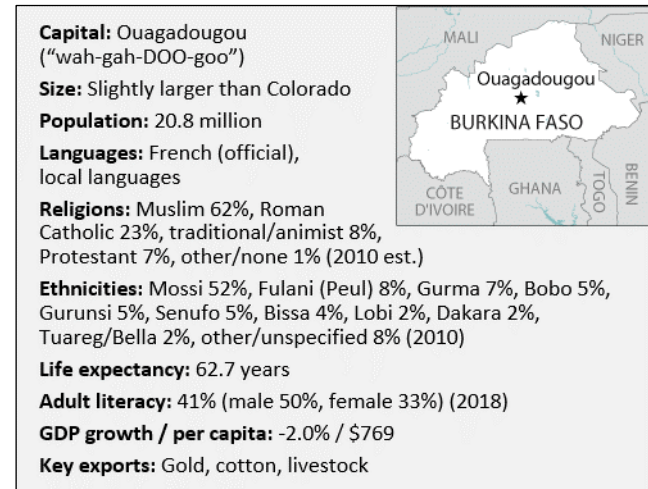
President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was reelected in November 2020 to a second five-year term. Security threats prevented polling stations from opening in multiple districts, and opposition leaders initially decried the results as fraudulent. Despite a comfortable margin of victory, Kaboré appears likely to face ongoing public demands for greater security, job creation, governance reforms, and accountability. Opposition presidential candidates called for peace talks with jihadist groups, which Kaboré opposes—as does France, the country's most significant external counterterrorism partner.

Kaboré's first election to the presidency in 2015 capped a yearlong political transition that began when protesters, backed by some military commanders, ousted semi-authoritarian President Blaise Compaoré. A towering figure in West African politics, Compaoré had come to power in a 1987 coup; his latest attempt to evade term limits by changing the constitution sparked the protests that unseated him. In mid-2015, a counter-coup by Compaoré loyalists nearly derailed the civilian-led transitional government, but protesters and conventional army units ultimately induced the coup leaders to stand down.

Terrorism and Insurgency

In January 2016, gunmen opened fire at a Ouagadougou hotel and coffee shop popular with foreigners, killing 30 people including an American. An Islamist insurgency known as Ansarul Islam emerged in the rural north around the same time, targeting schools, local officials, and individuals accused of collaborating with the state. Attacks escalated in 2017 after the terrorist groups that had claimed the Ouagadougou attack—Algerian-origin Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Al Murabitoun, an offshoot—merged with two Mali-based groups to form the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims (aka JNIM). In 2018, JNIM clamed a complex assault on the national military headquarters and the French embassy in the capital. U.N. sanctions investigators report that JNIM and Ansarul Islam are separate groups that are mutually supportive.

Figure 1. Burkina Faso at a Glance

Capital: Ouagadougou ("wah-gah-DOO-goo")
Size: Slightly larger than Colorado
Population: 20.8 million
Languages: French (official), local languages
Religions: Muslim 62%, Roman Catholic 23%, traditional/animist 8%, Protestant 7%, other/none 1% (2010 est.)
Ethnicities: Mossi 52%, Fulani (Peul) 8%, Gurma 7%, Bobo 5%, Gurunsi 5%, Senufo 5%, Bissa 4%, Lobi 2%, Dakara 2%, Tuareg/Bella 2%, other/unspecified 8% (2010)
Life expectancy: 62.7 years
Adult literacy: 41% (male 50%, female 33%) (2018)
GDP growth / per capita: -2.0% / $769
Key exports: Gold, cotton, livestock

Sources: CIA *World Factbook* and IMF; 2020 estimates unless noted.

The conflict has primarily affected the north and east, with signs of spillover into the countries of coastal West Africa, to the south. Local security forces and civilians have been the primary victims of insurgent violence. In the north, Ansarul Islam and JNIM have exploited ethnic tensions and perceptions of state neglect, as well as grievances over corruption, patronage politics, social stratification, and land disputes. The east is a stronghold of the Islamic State-Greater Sahara (IS-GS), which first emerged as an AQIM splinter faction and has reportedly cultivated ties with local criminal networks. IS-GS notably claimed the October 2017 deadly ambush of U.S. troops in nearby Niger. Islamic State propaganda has claimed IS-GS attacks as the work of its Nigerian-origin affiliate, the Islamic State-West Africa Province; per U.N. investigators, the two affiliates have a "logistical relationship" but remain "operationally distinct."

Several factors may explain why conflict spread so quickly in Burkina Faso despite a history of religious and ethnic tolerance. Minority Christian dominance of the civil service and political class had reportedly spurred sectarian tensions. Mali-based insurgents appear to have lent support to Burkinabè allies, and have long threatened to attack countries, such as Burkina Faso, that contribute troops to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali. Compaoré's ouster in 2014, and the decision to dissolve his elite presidential guard after the 2015 coup attempt, arguably disrupted the security apparatus, which in any case had little prior combat experience. These events may also have interrupted backchannel communications between Islamist militants and Burkinabè security officials. Compaoré hosted talks with Malian armed groups in 2012, and his associates participated in reputedly lucrative hostage negotiations.

Five years into the conflict, state counterinsurgency tactics also appear to be driving insurgent recruitment and violence

in some areas. Human rights groups and journalists have reported extrajudicial killings and torture by state security forces, militias known as *koglweogos* ("guardians of the bush"), and state-recruited "volunteer" fighters. Officials have pledged to investigate, but few (if any) commanders appear to have faced repercussions. Abuses have reportedly particularly targeted members of the minority ethnic Fulani (alt. Peul) community, who are Muslim and traditionally livestock herders. Several Islamist armed factions, including Ansarul Islam, were founded by Fulani individuals, and Fulanis are often accused of colluding with militants. Perceived collective punishment may, in turn, further erode state legitimacy and prompt communities to turn to armed groups for protection and/or revenge.

Rights advocates have raised concerns with legislation enacted in 2019 that bars citizens from publishing or circulating information on terrorist attacks or military operations without government authorization, and criminalizes reports that could "demoralize" the armed forces. Legal fears and other threats have reportedly induced local journalists and activists to self-censor.

Regional Initiatives. Burkina Faso and other member states of the G5 Sahel (Mali, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger) have pursued joint counterterrorism efforts in border areas. Donors—including the United States, the European Union, and Arab Gulf states—have provided support, but not at the scale that G5 states have solicited, and regional forces have struggled to coordinate operations effectively. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to which most, but not all, G5 Sahel countries belong, has pledged to increase participation in regional security efforts, as has the African Union. Some Burkinabè officials and G5 Sahel representatives have also sought new counterterrorism support from Russia in recent years.

French Military Operations. Burkina Faso is within the scope of Operation Barkhane, a regional counterterrorism mission that France launched in 2014 after intervening militarily in Mali. The U.S. Defense Department provides logistical and intelligence support, as authorized by Congress under 10 U.S.C. §331. In 2019, French forces intervened in Burkina Faso to free two French hostages who had been kidnapped in Benin and were expected to be handed to JNIM. The French soldiers, two of whom were killed in the operation, also freed a South Korean and an unidentified American hostage whose existence had not been reported. France has expanded its military cooperation with Burkina Faso at President Kaboré's request. At the same time, the former colonial power's prominence has sparked local criticism, including from some state officials.

Politics

The 2015 general elections produced Burkina Faso's first ever electoral transfer of power. President Kaboré was reelected in 2020 with 58% of the vote against 12 other candidates, a margin large enough to avert a run-off. His People's Movement for Progress (MPP) party won 56 out of 127 seats in simultaneous legislative elections, with allied parties winning enough seats for a majority coalition. Eddie Komboïgo of the former ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) came in second in the presidential race, possibly reflecting Compaoré's enduring influence as well as popular nostalgia for a more peaceful era.

Opposition candidates conceded to Kaboré despite initially rejecting the 2020 election results as "riddled with fraud." Polling stations did not operate in about a fifth of the country due to security threats, affecting some 300,000 voters out of 6.5 million who registered. Local civil society observers noted some procedural problems and voter disenfranchisement in conflict-affected areas, but expressed satisfaction with the election process overall.

The Economy

Landlocked with a largely agrarian workforce, Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries. Food insecurity is widespread, and remittances from Burkinabè workers in wealthier Côte d'Ivoire are a lifeline for many. The government relies largely on exports of cotton and gold for tax revenues and foreign exchange, but global prices are volatile. Annual economic growth averaged nearly 6% between 2015 and 2019, but the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic—including domestic lockdown measures in early 2020 and the global economic slowdown—are expected to produce a contraction in 2020. The State Department's *Investment Climate Statement* reports that Burkina Faso "welcomes foreign investment" but notes a weak judiciary, corruption, and "lack of an effective separation of powers."

U.S. Policy and Aid

U.S. engagement has focused on regional security, development, and humanitarian relief efforts. The State Department characterizes bilateral relations as "excellent, thanks in part to strong U.S. support during the 2014-2015 political transition." U.S. officials and some Members of Congress have nonetheless expressed growing concern over reports of abuses by state security forces.

In August 2020, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) signed a five-year, $450 million compact to enhance Burkina Faso's electrical power sector. (This is the country's second MCC compact to date.) The State Department and USAID separately allocated an estimated $50 million in FY2020 bilateral aid for Burkina Faso (not counting food or emergency humanitarian aid), largely for health and development activities. In line with its global aid budget proposals, the Trump Administration requested to decrease such funds to $30 million in FY2021. Burkina Faso also receives aid through regional and global programs, including Sahel-focused development initiatives.

The above figures do not include substantial counter-terrorism assistance provided by the Defense Department under its global train-and-equip authority (10 U.S.C. §333), and by the State Department under the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Partnership (TSCTP). In July 2020, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Tibor Nagy asserted that "U.S. security assistance cannot continue without action" by Burkinabè authorities to address human rights concerns. The concrete implications, beyond legally required human rights vetting at the unit and individual level, remain uncertain. The FY2021 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 6395) would require a "plan to address gross violations of human rights and civilian harm" in Burkina Faso and three other Sahel countries.

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