

Burkina Faso

Ethnicity in Burkina Faso

Group selection

Although Burkina Faso is an ethnically very heterogeneous country (with about 60 different ethnic groups), ethnicity has not played a significant role in the country's political life since independence, according to the definition used here. To the author's knowledge, there has been no significant political interest group organized along ethnic lines and no political discrimination of any particular ethnic group.

It is true that the Mossi, the country's by far largest ethnic group (making up about half of the whole population, depending on the data source), has been the dominating group in Burkina Faso's political history (also in the precolonial era)^(357; 358). During most of the time after independence, Burkina Faso was ruled by Mossi presidents⁽³⁵⁹⁾. There have also been ethno-regional voting patterns in earlier multiparty elections (e.g. 1970 and 1978) with certain parties having their strongholds in particular regions, and certain regions or ethnic groups voting mainly for "their own" candidate⁽³⁶⁰⁾. However, these structures were not enduring and disbanded increasingly - also due to the ongoing fusions and new formations of parties⁽³⁶¹⁾.

Furthermore, the Mossi are far from being one politically coherent group. There are significant divisions between them, regionally but also between "traditional" and "modernized" Mossi elites⁽³⁶²⁾. Characteristically, it has been Mossi presidents (Yaméogo, Sankara) who have shown the greatest vigor in trying to deprive the ethnic Mossi hierarchy (the traditional chiefs) from their power^(363; 364). Hence, the Mossi elites in power cannot be seen as agents of ethnic power or domination. As a result, since independence, Mossi ethnicity has not played a significant role in Burkina Faso's political life, and the Mossi identity of politicians is not evidence of any ethnic politics nor of the "mossification" of the state⁽³⁶⁵⁾. Likewise, when members of the Samo group (e.g. General Lamizana) occupied dominant positions in the state apparatus between 1966 and 1970, the group (and its region) was not privileged in any way⁽³⁶⁶⁾.

Observers also mention the integrative culture of the Mossi⁽³⁶⁷⁾ and the lack of any significant ethno-regional discrepancies regarding economic development⁽³⁶⁸⁾ as factors that contribute to the absence of a politicization of ethnicity in Burkina Faso. Overall, all sources agree in Burkina Faso's uniqueness as it does not suffer from ethnic

³⁵⁷ [Boudon, 1997]

³⁵⁸ [Schmitz, 1990]

³⁵⁹ [Englebert, 1996]

³⁶⁰ [Schmitz, 1990]

³⁶¹ [Schmitz, 1990]

³⁶² [Englebert, 1996]

³⁶³ [Englebert, 1996]

³⁶⁴ [Schmitz, 1990]

³⁶⁵ [Englebert, 1996]

³⁶⁶ [Schmitz, 1990]

³⁶⁷ [Englebert, 1996]

³⁶⁸ [Badini, 1996]

(or religious) conflicts nor interethnic struggle over the access to the central state (369; 370; 371; 372). It has even been argued that ethnic dynamics are disconnected from national and regional politics (373).

It is of course far from sure that this interethnic “calm” will continue in the future. One of the imminent dangers, for instance, might be the ongoing massive migration of the Mossi from their overpopulated regions to the fertile territories of other ethnic groups (in the West and Southwest). This agricultural "colonization" of the West and Southwest could lead to ethnic tensions and the emergence of ethno-political identities in the future - especially if fertile soil becomes scarce because of drought (374).

However, at the present time - relying on the evidence presented above - it can be said that according to the definition used here, ethnicity has not played a significant role in the political life of Burkina Faso since independence.

2006-2009 All sources consulted (375; 376; 377; 378; 379) agree in that ethnicity still does not play any significant role in Burkina Faso’s national politics (apart from incidents of ethnic strife at the local level). According to the Bertelsmann Country Report of 2008 (380), the absence of ethnicity as a political instrument has always been the strength of Burkinabé politics. The government also remains ethnically inclusive (381). A quantitative study on voters’ party preferences based on individual-level survey data revealed that in contrast to other African countries examined, ethnicity does not constitute a significant factor in Burkina Faso’s party system. Instead, the crucial factors to explain vote choices seem to be region, formal education, (dis-)satisfaction with the incumbent government, democratic attitudes, and habitat (rural/urban) (382). Also, the leadership circles of all relevant parties are composed of people from various ethnic groups (and regions) (383, 17). Ethnic mobilization occurs, but it is not a significant factor for political success (384, 23).

Overall, the picture drawn in the comments above still holds true for the last 4 years and, therefore, Burkina Faso continues to be coded with "ethnicity not relevant".

2010-2013 Just as in the previous coding period, political contest does not appear to be structured along ethnic lines. All sources indicate that ethnicity is not important when it comes to cabinet appointments or recruitment into the administration more generally (385, 386). Interethnic relations are mostly “amicable” and lack political salience (387; 388). Nonetheless, interethnic clashes over the ownership and/or use of land are quite frequent. These conflicts tend to pit Fulani herders in search of grazing ground for their cattle against farmers from other groups, who want to cultivate land (389). However, these incidents do not appear to lead to significant ethnic mobilization, at least not in the national political arena (ibid.).

In the 2010 elections, President Blaise Compaoré won yet another term in office by a landslide. While the opposition alleged the

³⁶⁹ [Badini, 1996]

³⁷⁰ [Boudon, 1997]

³⁷¹ [Englebert, 1996]

³⁷⁴ [Englebert, 1996]

³⁷⁵ [Stroh, 2010]

³⁷⁶ [Basedau Stroh, 2009]

³⁷⁷ [US State Department, 2005–2013]

³⁷⁸ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006–2012]

³⁷⁹ [Freedom House, 2006–2009]

³⁸⁵ [US State Department, 2005–2013]

³⁸⁶ [Freedom House, 2006–2009]

³⁸⁷ [Freedom House, 2006–2009]

³⁸⁸ [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006–2012]

³⁸⁹ [US State Department, 2005–2013]

incumbent regime of fraud, more important reasons included the fragmented opposition itself, Compaoré's effective use of patronage strategies, as well as the fact that the regime party (Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, CDP) is the only political force capable of operating a well-oiled campaign machinery (³⁹⁰).

³⁹⁰ [Freedom House, 2006–2009]

In 2011, mutinies within the country's security apparatus and large-scale protests erupted after a teenager died in police custody under dubious circumstances (³⁹¹).

³⁹¹ [BBC, 2011]

Compaoré's term limit expires as of 2015. Yet the Burkinabè president appears willing to hold a referendum about extending his term limit, which would allow him to run for another five-year spell in office (³⁹²). Compaoré's announcement caused many previous loyalists to defect from the CDP and spurred mass protests in Ouagadougou (*ibid.*; ³⁹³). Whether the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections remains peaceful and whether a politicization of ethnicity can be avoided remains to be seen.

³⁹² [Baily, 2014]

³⁹³ [Boisbouvier Carayol, 2014]

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Political status of ethnic groups in Burkina Faso

From 1960 until 2013

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Gur	0.67	IRRELEVANT



Figure 94: Political status of ethnic groups in Burkina Faso during 1960-2013.

Conflicts in Burkina Faso

Starting on 1985-12-25

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Burkina Faso	Government of Mali		1985-12-25			

Starting on 1987-10-15

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Burkina Faso	Popular Front		1987-10-15			