

# 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. There has not been evidence of a significant political interest group that is organized along ethnic lines nor has there been political discrimination of any particular ethnic group.

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) <sup>(604, 605)</sup>. During most of the time after independence, Burkina Faso was ruled by Mossi presidents <sup>(606)</sup>. 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 <sup>(607)</sup>. However, these structures were not enduring and disbanded increasingly - also due to the ongoing fusions and new formations of parties <sup>(608)</sup>.

Furthermore, the Mossi are far from being one politically coherent group. There are significant divisions between them, regionally but also between "traditional" and "modernised" Mossi elites <sup>(609)</sup>. Characteristically, it has been Mossi presidents (Yameogo, Sankara) who have shown the greatest vigour in trying to deprive the ethnic Mossi hierarchy (the traditional chiefs) from their power <sup>(610, 611)</sup>. 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 <sup>(612)</sup>. 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 <sup>(613)</sup>.

Observers also mention the integrative culture of the Mossi <sup>(614)</sup> and the lack of any significant ethno-regional discrepancies regarding economic development <sup>(615)</sup> as factors that contribute to the absence of a politicisation of ethnicity in Burkina Faso. Overall, all sources agree in Burkina Faso's uniqueness as it does not suffer from ethnic

<sup>604</sup> [Boudon, 1997]

<sup>605</sup> [Schmitz, 1990]

<sup>606</sup> [Englebert, 1996]

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<sup>614</sup> [Englebert, 1996]

<sup>615</sup> [Badini, 1996]

(or religious) conflicts nor inter-ethnic struggle over the access to the central state (<sup>616</sup>; <sup>617</sup>; <sup>618</sup>; <sup>619</sup>). It has even been argued that ethnic dynamics are disconnected from national and regional politics (<sup>620</sup>).

It is of course far from sure that this inter-ethnic “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 “colonisation” 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 (<sup>621</sup>).

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.

All sources consulted (<sup>622</sup>; <sup>623</sup>; <sup>624</sup>; <sup>625</sup>; <sup>626</sup>) agree in that ethnicity 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 (see reference above), the absence of ethnicity as a political instrument has always been the strength of Burkinabe politics. The government also remains ethnically inclusive (<sup>627</sup>). 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) (<sup>628</sup>). Also, the leadership circles of all relevant parties are composed of people from various ethnic groups (and regions) (<sup>629</sup>, 17). Ethnic mobilization occurs, but it is not a significant factor for political success (<sup>630</sup>, 23).

Inter-ethnic relations are mostly “amicable” and lack political salience (<sup>631</sup>; <sup>632</sup>). Nonetheless, inter-ethnic 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 (<sup>633</sup>). 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 Compaore won yet another term in office by a landslide. While the opposition alleged the incumbent regime of fraud, more important reasons included the fragmented opposition itself, Compaore’s effective use of patronage strategies, as well as the fact that the regime party (Congres pour la Democratie et le Progres, CDP) is the only political force capable of operating a well-oiled campaign machinery (<sup>634</sup>).

In 2011, mutinies within the country’s security apparatus and large-scale protests erupted after a teenager died in police custody under dubious circumstances (*ibid.*; <sup>635</sup>).

Compaore’s term limit expired as of 2015. Yet the Burkinabe

<sup>616</sup> [Badini, 1996]

<sup>617</sup> [Boudon, 1997]

<sup>618</sup> [Englebert, 1996]

<sup>621</sup> [Englebert, 1996]

<sup>622</sup> [Stroh, 2010]

<sup>623</sup> [Basedau Stroh, 2009]

<sup>624</sup> [U.S. Department of State, 2006–2009]

<sup>625</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2006–2010]

<sup>626</sup> [Freedom House, 2006–2009]

<sup>631</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>632</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012]

<sup>633</sup> [U.S. Department of State, 2011]

<sup>634</sup> [Freedom House, 2011]

<sup>635</sup> [BBC, 2011]

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 (<sup>636</sup>). Compare's announcement caused many previous loyalists to defect from the CDP and spurred mass protests in Ouagadougou (ibid.; <sup>637</sup>). Whether the run-up to the 2015 presidential elections remains peaceful and whether a politicisation of ethnicity can be avoided remains to be seen.

Compaore resigned on October 31st 2014 following large-scale protests against his leadership, in the context of a potential referendum which would have enabled himself to run for another term as president (<sup>638</sup>, 2). These protests are typically associated with growing discontent towards the elite-dominated political system, and they were cross-ethnic in nature (<sup>639</sup>, 4). His resignation followed a period of unrest, with an Interim government unsupported by the Presidential Guard, whose coup against the interim government represented the sixth since independence (<sup>640</sup>). The election held in 2015 was therefore the first in decades that a leader was chosen without military intervention. Elitism, bureaucracy and coup-instability have been the core themes of Burkinabe politics, rather than ethnic or religious cleavages - this election also reflected a move towards a more civilian-led politics and away from the status quo (<sup>641</sup>). Roche Kabore from the newly created "Mouvement du peuple pour le progres (MPP)" was elected, who had previously been Prime Minister and a member of the CDP party. Kabore had support from all regions, and although he was part of the old bureaucracy, his determination to represent all parts of society under democracy was, at least superficially, unprecedented. He won (53.5% vote share) against Zephirin Diabre of the UPC (29.7% vote share), who had also left the CDP party to form his own, but with no evidence of ethnic, religious or regional affiliation. The other parties such as the Party for Democracy and Socialism (Parti pour la democratie et le socialisme); and Union for Rebirth/Sankarist Movement (Union pour la renaissance/Mouvement Sankariste), were key players in inciting protest as opposition figures in 2014, but also had not large success in the elections and are ideological more in terms of economic beliefs rather than ethnic division (<sup>642</sup>; <sup>643</sup>).

This notwithstanding, there have been some reports that suggest religion is becoming more politically salient: Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attacks against foreign nationals in Ouagadougou in January 2016. which allegedly led to heightened tensions between Christians and Muslims (<sup>644</sup>). This cleavage could become salient in the future, as Muslims, although counting for 60% of the population, are underrepresented in government in terms of strict proportionality. That being said, there is no explicit discrimination against them, and the political party system is not streamlined along religious or ethnic lines (<sup>645</sup>). It seems that religion and ethnicity remain irrelevant for political mobilization or choice in Burkina Faso, although the potential for religion to become significant, particularly in regions near the bordering Sahel region, should not be underestimated.

<sup>636</sup> [Baily, 2014]

<sup>637</sup> [Boisbouvier Carayol, 2014]

<sup>638</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

<sup>639</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

<sup>640</sup> [Reuters, 2015]

<sup>641</sup> [Peterson, 2015]

<sup>642</sup> [IRB, 2015]

<sup>644</sup> [The Guardian, 2016]

<sup>645</sup> [International Crisis Group, 2016]

Yet, as of 2017, it remains the case that ethnicity is not significant for political mobilization or choice in Burkina Faso (<sup>646</sup>; <sup>647</sup>; <sup>648</sup>).

<sup>646</sup> [Freedom House, 2016]

<sup>647</sup> [Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016]

<sup>648</sup> [U.S. Department of State, 2016]

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## *Political status of ethnic groups in Burkina Faso*

*From 1960 until 2017*

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Gur	0.67	IRRELEVANT



Figure 109: Political status of ethnic groups in Burkina Faso during 1960-2017.

## *Conflicts in Burkina Faso*

*Starting on 1985-12-24*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Burkina Faso	Government of Mali		1985-12-24			

*Starting on 1987-10-14*

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Burkina Faso	Popular Front		1987-10-14			