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# The Politics of Burkina Faso

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## Introduction

Burkina Faso, a landlocked state in the heart of West Africa, stands at a crossroads defined by its tumultuous political history, rich cultural tapestry, and persistent quest for stability and self-determination. From its days as the French colony of Upper Volta to its post-independence journey as Burkina Faso, the nation has navigated a complex interplay of military rule, popular uprisings, experimentation with democracy, and the ever-present challenge of security threats. The politics of Burkina Faso both reflect and inform the struggles and aspirations of its people—a dynamic that continues to shape the country's present and its uncertain future.

Understanding the political system of Burkina Faso requires not only a grasp of its formal constitutional arrangements but also a deep appreciation for the ways in which power has historically shifted between civilian and military actors. The repeated cycles of coups d'état serve as a stark reminder that the consolidation of democratic institutions remains an ongoing struggle. The legacy of leaders like Maurice Yaméogo, Thomas Sankara, and Blaise Compaoré—each emblematic of pivotal eras in Burkinabé politics—illustrates how varied, and sometimes volatile, the pathways toward governance have been.

Yet, the story of Burkina Faso is not solely defined by the actions of its politicians and generals. Civil society, trade unions, and grassroots movements have played vital roles in advocating for change and demanding accountability. These forces reached a dramatic crescendo in the 2014 uprising, when mass protests forced Compaoré to relinquish power after 27 years of rule, signalling both the strength and vulnerability of collective activism amid state repression. However, the post-uprising period has shown that democratic gains can be fragile, especially in the face of external threats and internal divisions.

Today, Burkina Faso finds itself grappling with an urgent security crisis that has displaced millions and undermined the authority of the central government across large portions of the territory. The insurgency—fuelled by jihadist groups, intercommunal violence, and regional instability—has provided the military with recurring justifications to seize power, most recently through the coups of 2022. With Captain Ibrahim Traoré at the helm of a military junta and constitutional norms repeatedly sidelined, questions of legitimacy, governance, and the prospects for a return to civilian rule have grown only more pressing.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive and accessible guide to the politics and political system of Burkina Faso. Through a detailed exploration of the country's history, constitutional framework, institutions, political actors, security challenges, and

international relations, readers will gain a nuanced understanding of the forces shaping one of West Africa's most politically dynamic nations. The aim is not only to inform but also to encourage critical reflection on the challenges and opportunities facing Burkina Faso in its ongoing journey towards stability, justice, and democracy.

Whether you are a student of African politics, a policy practitioner, a member of the Burkinabé diaspora, or simply a curious reader, this guide invites you to delve into the rich and often contentious story of Burkina Faso's politics. In tracing its evolution from colony to independent republic—through revolutionary dreams, authoritarian entrenchments, and the current era of military dominance—this book provides both context and insight into a country whose political future is as fraught as it is full of possibility.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Geography and People of Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso, a country whose name fittingly translates to "Land of Incorruptible People," is situated in the heart of West Africa. It is a landlocked nation, sharing borders with six neighbors: Mali to the north and west, Niger to the northeast, Benin to the southeast, and Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire to the south. This position, far from any coastline, has historically influenced its development and connectivity, relying heavily on its neighbors for access to global trade routes. The country covers an area of approximately 274,200 square kilometers (about 105,870 square miles).

The landscape of Burkina Faso is primarily a vast, gently undulating plateau. This plateau, largely made up of a lateritic layer of rock, is incised by the tributaries that form the Volta River system in Ghana: the Black Volta (Mouhoun), the Red Volta (Nazinon), and the White Volta (Nakambé). While the terrain is generally flat, there are some isolated hills scattered across the plateau, remnants of ancient rock formations. In the southwestern part of the country, the landscape shifts, featuring a sandstone massif with steeper cliffs and the highest point in the country, Tena Kourou, reaching 747 meters (around 2,451 feet) above sea level.

The climate is predominantly tropical with two distinct seasons: a rainy season and a dry season. The amount of rainfall decreases as you move from the south to the north. The southern part, considered the Sudanian zone, receives more rainfall, supporting a savanna landscape with scattered forests and denser vegetation along riverbeds. As you move northward into the Sudan-Sahelian zone, the rainfall decreases, and the vegetation becomes sparser. The northernmost part of the country is the Sahelian zone, a semi-arid steppe bordering the Sahara Desert, characterized by lower rainfall and higher temperatures. The dry season is marked by the Harmattan, a hot, dry wind blowing from the Sahara. This seasonal variation significantly impacts agriculture, which is a cornerstone of the Burkinabé economy.

Despite the arid conditions in the north, Burkina Faso does possess natural resources. Gold is the most significant, making the country a notable gold producer in Africa. Other mineral resources include manganese, limestone, and zinc, with potential reserves of diamonds and bauxite. The extraction of these minerals plays a crucial role in the national economy, contributing significantly to government revenue and exports. However, the exploitation of these resources also presents challenges related to governance and potential environmental impact.

The people of Burkina Faso, known as Burkinabè, are a diverse population belonging

to two major West African cultural groups: the Gur (Voltaic) and the Mandé. The Gur group is more numerous and includes the Mossi people, who constitute the largest ethnic group, making up about half of the total population. The Mossi are historically significant, having established powerful kingdoms in the region centuries ago. Other notable ethnic groups include the Fulani (Peul), Gurunsi, Senufo, Bobo, and Tuareg, among others. While French is the official language, spoken by a limited segment of the population, numerous indigenous languages are widely used, with Mooré, the language of the Mossi, being the most spoken.

The majority of the population is concentrated in the south and central parts of the country, where rainfall is more reliable for agriculture. This has led to a higher population density in these areas. Significant numbers of Burkinabè also migrate to neighboring countries, particularly Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, for seasonal agricultural work, a practice influenced by economic factors and environmental conditions like drought.

Religious affiliations in Burkina Faso are diverse, with a significant Muslim population, followed by Christians (primarily Roman Catholics) and adherents of traditional African religions. The country is constitutionally secular, and while the introduction of Islam was historically met with resistance from Mossi rulers, there has generally been interfaith coexistence.

Education levels in Burkina Faso remain relatively low, with a substantial portion of the population lacking formal schooling. While primary education is free, it is not compulsory, and access can be limited, particularly for nomadic populations. The capital city, Ouagadougou, located in the center of the country, serves as the political and administrative hub and is the residence of the traditional leader of the Mossi, the Mogho Naba. Other important urban centers include Bobo-Dioulasso in the west, historically a major economic center due to its location on the railway line to Côte d'Ivoire.

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