

Military launches coup amid mass protests in Burkina Faso

By Antoine Lerougetel
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The army staged a coup in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, on Thursday after mass protests on Tuesday against plans by the land-locked West African country's president, Blaise Compaoré, to change the constitution so he could continue for another term in office.

Compaoré had seized power in a military coup on October 15, 1987, during which the Castroite President Thomas Sankara was murdered. Compaoré has enjoyed the support of Paris and Washington. Under his presidency, Burkina Faso has worked closely to support French military interventions in Ivory Coast in 2011 and the ongoing war in Mali.

He has served as Burkina Faso's head of state for 27 years, including two seven-year terms as president and then two five-year terms, the second of which is drawing to a close.

On Thursday, apparently with the connivance of the army, hundreds of demonstrators invaded and sacked the parliament where, that day, deputies were due to vote the extension of Compaoré's eligibility for the presidency. The crowd went on to take over the main TV and radio building.

After the toppling of Compaoré, who has fled to the French-installed regime of Alassane Ouattara in Ivory Coast, a brief power struggle ensued within the army. On Saturday, it designated as interim president a close confidante of Compaoré, Colonel Isaac Yacouba Zida, the second in command of the presidential guard.

He declared, "I now assume... the responsibilities of head of the transition and of head of state to assure the continuation of the state" and a "smooth democratic transition."

Meeting at 1 p.m. during a Saturday calm, the official pro-imperialist opposition, known as the "Leader of the Opposition", an umbrella for several parties and civic

groups, having met with the French ambassador on Thursday, called for a rally on Sunday morning in order to head off the mass rejection of military rule and claim its own participation in the coup.

Its statement reads, "Unanimously the participants reaffirmed the need for unity ... the victory of the popular insurrection belongs to the people and consequently the management of the transition belongs legitimately to it and should not be confiscated by the army." However, it goes on to pledge its continued support for French and US imperialism: "The consultation reaffirmed the democratic and civilian character that this transition must have so as to enable Burkina Faso to honour its regional and international commitments."

This is in line with the position of the French government, which has called for "calm" in Burkina Faso.

The US government issued a statement declaring, "We call on all sides, including the security forces, to stop violence and return to the peaceful process [built] on hard-won democratic progress."

Protesters opposed to the army coup gathered on Sunday on the Place de la Nation (Nation Square) in Ouagadougou and reportedly denounced the army chief of staff. *Le Monde* quoted protesters who asked: "In whose hands exactly is our country? These soldiers who have taken power, who are they exactly? We don't know if they're Blaise Compaoré's people, we don't know what they want."

One protester, Désiré, said: "Everyone is disappointed ... We don't get it ... It's the same system that they want to preserve and we're fed up, all the youth are fed up. We don't just want the president to go but also the whole system."

Yesterday night, the army stormed the Place de la

Nation, blockaded the square, and took national television off the air. They also held closed-door meetings with the opposition leaders.

The army and the bourgeois opposition are both seeking to crush mass anger against Burkina Faso's discredited neo-colonialist regime, working closely with the imperialist powers.

This is the latest in a series of protests against Compaoré's rule and the high cost of living that were brutally repressed in 2007 and again in 2011, during the revolutionary upsurge of the working class in Egypt and Tunisia. The former French possession, with a population of 17 million, is one of the poorest countries in the world. It was colonized by France in 1896 and hosts a French military base for operations across the region.

The "Leader of the Opposition" spokesman Zéphirin Diabré is a sitting deputy and current minister of trade and industry. He worked as CEO of the Africa and Middle East division of French energy multinational Areva from 2006 to 2011, a post he left in order to "become a consultant in the sphere of financing of mining". He has been chairman of the UPC (Union for Progress and Change) party since 2012.

Imperialism's nervousness at a possible "African Spring" and fear of popular revolts against its client regimes is expressed in a letter sent to Compaoré by French President Hollande, dated October 7 and published by *Jeune Afrique* on October 30. In the letter, Hollande pleaded with him not to try to cling to power and thereby provoke a revolt that would destabilise the region and France's capacity to maintain control of the region's resources, notably the uranium mined by the French company Areva in the Sahel.

Hollande advised his friend "Blaise" not to take "the risk of a non-consensual constitutional change". The letter thanked him for "Burkina Faso's commitment to the restoration of stability in Mali, and your support in the dialogue carried out in Algiers [which] should, we hope, lead to a peace agreement between the government and the armed groups."

Hollande added, "the contribution of Mali's neighbours in the MINUSMA [United Nation's mission for the stabilisation of Mali, led by the French] is indispensable ... The commitment of the Burkinabé contingent and its knowledge of the terrain is precious."

As a sweetener for Compaoré, if he agreed to resign without a fuss Hollande promised him a lucrative diplomatic sinecure: "You would be able then to count on France to support you, if you wanted to put your experience and talents at the disposal of the international community."

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