

The fall of Burkina Faso's "strongman" could signal a new dawn for Africa's youth

With the fall of Burkina Faso's long-time leader Blaise Compaore, LSE's Bryant Koanda asks what is next for the rest of Africa's "strongmen"?

Many may have been caught by surprise by the mass uprising in Burkina Faso which led to the country's long-time President Blaise Compaore announcing his resignation on 31 October 2014.

Others may be wondering how a president has been unseated by popular protest in a country known for its stability, particularly as this is a rare occurrence in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2013, Compaore revealed his intention of clinging to power by modifying once again the 37th Article of his country's constitution which prevented him from seeking re-election in 2015.



The political opposition, boosted by Compaore's former allies (Rock Marc Christian Kabore, former President of the Parliament, Salif Diallo, former minister and Simon Compaore, former mayor of the capital Ouagadougou) who courageously resigned in January 2014 and joined the opposition, were determined to block him from moving forward with his plan which they described as a step back for democracy. However, none of the peaceful demonstrations organised and led by the opposition and the civil society seemed to have an impact on Mr Compaore's decision.

On 31 October, as MPs (**many of whom were alleged to have been paid off**) gathered to vote on the law modifying the country's constitution, the opposition and civil society called for a national street protest which escalated to such heights that Mr Compaore had no choice but to end his 27-year tenure as leader of Burkina Faso. It was the end for the President who apparently said in July 2013 that "**street protests have never had any effect on the implementation of a law in any given country**" and more recently that "**Africa needs strongmen to put in place strong institutions**", probably in response to President Barack Obama's 2009 comment that "**Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions.**"

Mr Compaore's name has been synonymous with controversy during his 27 years in power. Looking at his political record, he also appears to be a man of contrasts. Although Burkina Faso is near the bottom of the UN Human Development Index, he has overseen the development of necessary infrastructure such as roads, schools, universities, hospitals. Many rural areas now

have electricity and telecommunications links. Despite the recent global financial crisis and the limited resources of this landlocked country, the private sector has shown major improvement. Many foreign investors find the country economically attractive, partly due to its sustained political stability. However, Compaore has also left behind a country where corruption remains a challenge, where judicial power seems to be under obligation to obey orders from the executive power with a divided military and where democracy is nothing but an empty word.

Despite Compaore's efforts in the recent years to give himself a better international image by personally **helping to free Europeans who were kidnapped by extremist groups in Africa** and more importantly by becoming a **mediator in peace talks** in countries like Ivory Coast, Togo, and Mali, he was considered a **pyromaniac fireman** in several African countries. There are claims that rebel leaders who attacked Ivory Coast in 2002 received funding and training from Compaore's regime. Others accuse him of trading **weapons for diamonds** with former Angolan political and military leader Jonas Savimbi. He is also reputed to be a **mentor** of the former Liberian leader Charles Taylor convicted in 2013 by the Special Court for Sierra Leone for war crimes and sentenced **to serve 50 years in prison**. In Mali, many consider him as a supporter of the Tuareg separatist rebel groups in the North. Malian newspapers **support their claim** with the fact that many Tuareg rebels lived and regularly held meetings and press conferences in Ouagadougou.

Several African countries, with **leaders in a similar position** to Mr Compaore such as the Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, DR Congo, Cameroon, Chad and Equatorial Guinea, have no doubt been keenly observing the situation in Burkina Faso with interest for some months. With Burkinabes' finally standing up to their former leader, it would be interesting to see how the political situation in those countries will evolve if the slogan "*Enough is Enough*" recited by the young generation of Burkina Faso is echoed in other African countries where the implementation of true democracy remains a challenge. Thanks to major improvements in education, technology and social media, African youth now seems ready to take its destiny into its own hands, demanding change in Africa. Those who choose to ignore their demand could regret it.

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