



BURKINA FASO: A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE CURTAIN OF TRANSITION

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From the 16th to the 19th of October 2023, my colleague Aurelie Majo and I from our firm, STRATEGIES!, had the privilege of facilitating a workshop for parliamentarians from the public accounts and/or finance committees of five West African and one Central African country.

The workshop was organized by the GIZ Regional Program on Good Financial Governance in Africa – Legislative Oversight Component, in support of its partner, AFROPAC, specifically the West African branch WAAPAC.

The technical workshop went extremely well and all participants greatly benefitted from having their capacity built on the role of parliaments in public financemanagement in their respective countries. The workshop also provided an enormous opportunity to get a glimpse of what is happening in the political transitions currently underway in West and CentralAfrica as the participant countries included regularly elected parliaments – Cote d’Ivoire and Benin; as well as nominated transition parliaments: Chad, Mali, Guinea and host country Burkina Faso. Interacting with the key transition actors that are transition parliamentarians and discussing quite frankly about their ongoing transitions, enabled us to get a glimpse of certain key elements of these unique political moments. This commentary focuses on the West African countries: Mali, Guinea, and Burkina Faso. The Chadian experience seems to be different from those in West Africa.

It is important to note that parliamentarians at the workshop constitute a rather specific group. Being from the public accounts and/or finance committees within their parliaments, they are somewhat of an “elite” group in most countries. Observations below should be read through this lens.

General comments:

- Transition is actively ongoing in all the countries and is following specific steps. Parliamentarians were able to specify not only steps concerning themselves, but also those concerning the executive and the judiciary. Guinea for example, is working closely with ECOWAS on its transition path.
- Parliamentarians are actively involved in reforming laws as a whole and for this group, the legal framework governing public financial management (PFM).
- For all of the countries there is a true fundamental questioning of how to enable governance in their countries to better respond to the needs of citizens and how to increase transparency, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in public financial management.
- The general sentiment seemed to be that deadlines and calendars on getting back to civilian rule are less important than getting the transition “right”. Many parliamentarians spoke of building a framework such that a coup d’état would never again occur in their country.
- Contrary to our fears as facilitators, there was never a moment where one sensed a divide between the transition and the non-transition countries. Exchanges were open and frank. Parliamentarians were equally willing to learn from one another no matter their country of origin. West African pride was very present in the room with no perceptible tension or animosity between countries.
- All the parliamentarians, including the ones from non-transition countries (a little wistfully sometimes), were able to see transition as an opportunity to strengthen governance in general and PFM in particular.

- In all the transition countries there is complexity. Portions of the population who totally support the military rulers, portions that are hopeful for improved governance, but are wary of the violent and arbitrary nature of military regimes, portions that are against the coup d'état – some of whom were part of the previous regime, some of whom were not.
- In all of the countries there is some fear and anxiety about criticizing or even questioning the military rulers and the decisions they make about the transition. For some of these parliamentarians however, they were nominated in trust by the military rulers, so they are best placed to make suggestions for improvement and to point out when things are going wrong.

Some strengths/achievements/encouraging signs of the transitions.

- In the nominated parliaments in all three countries there was some consultation with civil society, professional bodies, political parties and other key stakeholders before the nominations. In the finance commissions we worked with, we noted:
 - A marked difference in age – the parliamentarians from the transition countries were on average 10 - 15 years younger than those from the non-transition countries and very likely than parliamentarians they replaced in their countries.
 - There was a very high level of competence in each of the delegations with numerous finance professionals (chartered accountants, civil servants from the financeministry, financial consultants, etc.).
 - There was a definite intention to take gender into account. All the transition countries had highly competent, vocal women in the delegation, some of whom spoke of the importance of gender equity in the reforms currently underway. The Malian delegation had a majority of women spanning a wide age range.

- Parliamentarians from all of the delegations were extremely engaged and attentive.

This was most likely due to:

- The methodology used which dispensed with all parliamentary protocol and intentionally enabled open discussion about the coup d'états and transitions.
 - Almost all the resource persons were African and some were from the region.
 - The fact that all exercises and discussions were contextualized, enabling participants to analyze the content provided through the prism of their realities.
 - Chatham House rules were adopted to enable people speak freely.
 - There was consensus on the basic principles of the role of parliament in PFM as well as on the fact that no parliament fulfills these basic principles entirely. In depth discussions then focused on the path and steps each parliamentary committee should take to improve its implementation of these principles. There was no "judgement" of a parliament and participants felt free to admit and address their shortcomings.
- All the parliamentarians, including those from the non-transition countries identified an overly powerful executive as the key obstacle to effectively carrying out their parliamentary role for PFM.
 - There are some cases where public audit committees/finance committees have been able to audit and publicly question the expenditures of the current military presidencies. The committee from Guinea shared the experience of having recently carried out such a high profile, highly publicized audit.
 - While the term "democracy" was not frequently used during the four days, there was unambiguous and complete adherence to democratic principles. All the parliamentarians agreed that the stakes for them are to build citizen-centered governance, ensure effective and efficient use of public finances, ensure transparency and accountability of public funds.

Concerns/weaknesses/challenges

- All of the transitions are struggling with the tension between bringing the entire country together under a common vision of change and respect for fundamental human rights including the right to free speech. There is a low level of tolerance for dissenting voices. This is clearly decreasing the quality of analysis and reflection in these countries at a time when they are dealing with highly complex challenges.
- There is a strong sentiment even amongst these parliamentarians that you can somehow put a pause on fundamental human rights, solve key national problems, then come back to human rights at some later point. Yet in the discussions with the parliamentarians and when asked specific questions about violence and rights violations, it becomes evident that the possibility of the transition military regimes installing themselves as long-term dictatorships is very real.
- None of the transitions seems to have a highly effective strategy unit that is thinking through the different streams of work and truly developing a concept of “African Style. Democracy/Governance”.
- There is high tension between short term results to meet the expectations of the population and long-term goals that most of the regimes are already feeling. However, there does not seem to be in depth strategic thinking to develop approaches that resolve or attenuate this tension. On the contrary, some of the executives are taking erratic decisions that have clearly not considered all parameters, under this pressure.
- There is a strong deficit of technical know-how throughout the transition institutions. Often experienced civil servants, parliamentarians, and others have been replaced and have taken with them institutional knowledge and history. Transitions also require new skills that are difficult to identify and to acquire. None of the countries seem to be fully aware of, much less addressing this challenge.

Thoughts and Approaches for African Institutions

- **Engage more deeply and more meaningfully** - The coup d'états have occurred and the transitions are here. These transitions are a very real opportunity for these countries to build the foundation for democratic, citizen-centered governance. However, the threat of them slipping into military autocracies is also very real. Deep, meaningful and technically useful engagement with these countries will help them seize the opportunity rather than slip into the threat.
- **Stand clearly for fundamental human rights and for the various African Charters** – This is a moment for African institutions to reiterate and stand firmly for the principles and values which are explicit in the African charters, for both transition and non-transition countries. The reasons announced by all the coup leaders was the violation of these principles by the regimes they overthrew. African institutions should seize this moment to bring all key stakeholders together, especially ordinary African citizens, around these principles and think through how they can be better implemented and governments held accountable. If African institutions do not address the perception of a lack of adherence to fundamental principles by their leadership, they will lose the little credibility they have left with Africans. Engaging with the transition countries actually gives African institutions the opportunity to address this fundamental rift.
- **Provide technical expertise** – The vast majority of African countries are struggling with issues of national and sectoral governance both big and small. At the same time, the quantity and quality of African expertise worldwide has never been so strong. It is important for African institutions to position themselves to mobilize African expertise from across the globe to assist their member states to find solutions to the complex challenges they face. Beyond, declarations and communiques, African countries are in dire need of proactive continental and regional leadership at a technical and practical level to address the challenges they face.

- **Activate regional institutions beyond the executive** – The military rulers are the most challenging stakeholders to engage with. However, it is possible and potentially productive to engage with other stakeholders such as parliamentarians, line ministries, local governments, grassroots organizations, trade unions, professional associations and civil society organizations. All of these are entry points for engaging with the transition countries. Providing support to other stakeholders is most likely quite beneficial to balancing the power of the executive in this transition period.

Reflections and approaches to development cooperation

1. Strengthen and deepen engagement

- Development cooperation programs are still present in most of the transition countries. However, most programs are in somewhat of a holding mode, unsure of how to engage. In conditions where the fundamental human rights situation permits, development cooperation programs should consider strengthening and deepening engagement with technical line ministries. In transition governments, these line ministries are seeking short term wins, even as they carry out reforms. Engaging to help them analyze these strategies so that short term wins are not detrimental to longer term reforms provides an entry point. Engaging with line ministries to provide services to other stakeholders in the sector may also be an entry point.
- In the area of governance, several transition governments have signed on to a road map with ECOWAS. It will be important to examine these road maps and determine if there are areas that provide entry points for capacity building and technical assistance in the areas of the fundamental reforms underway.

2. Put African expertise in play

Most development cooperation agencies have considerable African expertise within their staff and/or with their consultant and NGO partners. Given the political sensitivi-

ties in transition countries, this is a moment for development cooperation to put the African expertise within their organizations into play. Both engagement and technical discussions are more likely to be frank and to be able to address sensitive/important issues linked to human rights, governance, etc. if they are led by Africans with the expertise to do so.

Development cooperation can also create the much needed space and bring together the expertise to develop the much talked about “African-Style Democracy and Governance”. A lot of work has been done on key pillars of this by African experts, but this transition moment provides the opportunity to bring it all together in specific, practical contexts.

3. Start small, find the right actors and grow

With the wide variety of actors and opinions within these transitions, it is important to engage, but with caution and progressively. By definition, situations change rapidly in transitions. While it is important to engage, it is also important to do so with the right partners and even the right individuals which will help further democratic, rights-based foundations within these countries. Development cooperation programs must increase their capacity to do due diligence and to carry out proper analysis of the environment and key actors.

4. Increase collaboration between diplomatic, military and development cooperation

In the sensitive transition context, it is extremely important for countries to align their different forms of cooperation and for these to inform one another. Information gathering and analysis across sectors is key to identifying opportunities and actors to engage with in the fluid transition moment. It is also important to maintain coherence and avoid faux pas in order to keep communication lines open and to carry out meaningful, impactful program work.

5. Keep political declarations minimal in public, yet meaningful behind closed doors

The military governments in all transition countries are quite adept at riding and playing with the public opinion wave that carried them into office. It is important for western

countries at this moment to keep political and other declarations in public to a minimum, while engaging in frank, sometimes difficult discussions behind closed doors. The delicate balance to be maintained is that of engaging in a manner that reinforces fundamental rights and democratic rule, without providing fodder for anti-western propaganda.

6. Build capacity and train staff for this transition moment

The skills for political sensitivity, political analysis, and diplomatic yet difficult discussions that are needed to do even purely technical work in the transition period are generally not readily available in development cooperation teams. It will be important to assess the needs of staff and determine various methods to build the capacities for this specific moment and for the future as these transitions are likely to impact development cooperation work in the long term.

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