



## NOTES FROM OUAGADOUGOU IN MARCH 2024... AND A FEW THOUGHTS AS WELL

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As a firm, STRATEGIES! has been tracking and analyzing trends in the Sahel for the past 3-4 years, so a trip to any country in the region is always an exciting moment to touch and feel its reality.

This is in addition to the fact that “le pays des hommes intègres” home to two of Africa’s most extraordinary men, Thomas Sankara and Francis Diébédo Kéré, is always a favorite place to visit.

So a week in Ouaga with my colleague Franck Essi, even in this moment of military rule, a form of government I always view with skepticism and trepidation, is always a delight. This trip was no exception and as concerns the current governance of Burkina Faso, it was a moment to question presumptions and invite new questions for reflection.

Please note, these are my observations, not in any way a statistical analysis. I am putting them down and sharing, because they can stimulate directions for information gathering, analysis and perhaps even decision-making for both STRATEGIES! and others who analyze and work in the Sahel.

## A few observations

**Support for the current military government is real in numerous segments of Burkinabe society.** While I have absolutely no numbers to gauge the representation of this in the overall population, discussions with people from the very poor to the upper middle class show there is genuine support for the current military regime. This support is due to four key elements, proving the old saying that perception is reality.

- **Perceived improvement of the security situation**

The military government has banned unofficial communication on violent incidents in the conflict zones so reports from these regions are limited. While statistics from sources such as ACLED show only a very slight decrease (0,9%) in violent incidents and deaths throughout the Sahel between March 2023 and March 2024, and the number of deaths due to political violence actually doubled in 2023 in Burkina Faso (<https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/>), the imminent threat of armed groups at the doors of Ouagadougou seems to have been deterred. For some inhabitants of the city, this, along with anecdotes of formerly displaced people returning to their villages is proof that the security situation is improving. Burkinabe are also actively contributing financially to the "Patriotic Fund" for the defense of the nation and over 90 000 volunteers are reported to have registered to go to the front and join the army in defending the nation.

It is important to note here that both the supporters of the military regime and those who are its strong critics believe that the ruptured military ties with Western Allies have enabled Burkina Faso to further develop military cooperation with countries such as Russia and China that have increased access to both arms, technology such as drones and munitions, thus vastly improving the army's ability to fight the armed groups. This is an element that continues to strongly fuel anti-western sentiment. Burkina, contrary to some of its AES (Alliance des États du Sahel) partners has opted not to include Wagner troops as part of its partnership with Russia.

- **Perceived fight against corruption**

The military government has carried out several highly publicized actions of fighting against corruption such as asking a corrupt public contractor to rebuild a road the contractor had been paid for, but had not delivered. These types of highly publicized actions give citizens the impression corruption is being addressed. The fact that these flash-in-the-pan events do not address the systemic and institutional issues that cause corruption and that the junta itself has suspended public contracting procedures and is awarding no contest contracts is hazy in the minds of some, and brushed off by supporters who for the moment continue to give the regime the benefit of the doubt. The regime justifies no contest contracts as a way to procure arms quickly to address the security situation as well as pressing development needs.

- **Perceived effort in development projects**

Despite the focus on military spending, the government is making an effort to continue some development projects and appears to have strong priorities to deliver on development objectives. This will to seek solutions to development challenges is not lost on the population, especially regime supporters.

- **Perceived increase in sovereignty**

Perhaps the most important factor influencing the popularity of the current Burkina Government and of the AES regimes as a whole, with the Sahel and throughout Africa, is the perception that they have increased agency and sovereignty with regard to former colonial and other Western powers. Just this week, young Africans cheered again as Mali severed military ties with the United States. Slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, unfair trade and unequal partnerships have left a very large segment of the African population with centuries of collective memory of the West as an unjust, unfair and often violent partner.

Throughout African history, leaders who have achieved any degree of independence from Western powers have been lauded. The current Burkina Regime is seen as achieving this independence to the benefit of the Burkinabe people. It is also a regime highly skilled at messaging and campaigning on this position of sovereignty and independence. Once again, even regime critics, give them credit for having improved sovereignty.

Questions to Burkinabe I spoke to on lack of transparency regarding the new partnerships with Russia and others as well as the absence of channels and mechanisms to consult with citizens before taking such decisions, were shrugged off by all except regime critics who are already asking those questions in the public space and paying a very high price for it.

For most people I spoke with, the honeymoon phase with the military government is still ongoing even if it is waning with time. Almost everyone acknowledges varying levels of discomfort with some regime actions and decisions, but most, after recalling the failures of governance over the last 30 years, are still willing to give the regime the benefit of the doubt.

## What is troubling...

**Human rights violations.** Every Burkinabe I spoke with, acknowledged and condemned the human rights violations by the military regime in terms of restriction of information and communication, arbitrary arrests often in violation of court decisions, and most notably, forced conscription as punishment for criticizing the regime.

While regime supporters muttered some weak justifications, they immediately acknowledged that these violations were unnecessary and had to come to an end quickly. Regime critics which I found in civil society, trade unions and ordinary Burkinabe, remain committed to making their voices heard in order to build a just, fair society where rights are respected.

However, they described a climate where they need to be extremely careful of their actions and pronouncements to avoid arrest and forced conscription. They cited comrades, including persons over 60 years old who have been sent to the battle front after criticizing regime actions and condemned the current atmosphere as one where despite the formidable opportunity of political transition and the opportunity of increased sovereignty:

- There is very little ideological and conceptual thinking to actually design a society that meets these objectives and corresponds to the needs and wants of Burkinabe.
- Little has been learned from past failures and whether it be on issues of security or development, the solutions provided by the regime are superficial and showy, rather than systemic and sustainable.
- The regression in respect for fundamental rights, will be the ultimate failure of the regime.
- The opportunity to educate citizens on their rich political history, their rights and obligations as citizens is being missed.
- The opportunity to constructively engage citizens who have good will towards the regime as well as competencies, ideas and resources to contribute to building the nation is not only being missed, but has regressed greatly in comparison to other key moments in Burkinabe political history.
- Weakening key pillars of governance such as opposition parties, trade unions and other civil society organizations also weakens key principles of governance such as transparency, accountability, debate, inclusion, and creativity, thus weakening governance as a whole.

**Fear is real.** Even for supporters of the regime, there is some hesitancy in speaking openly about the political situation and even more so about the security situation. The presence of the army in the streets, while reassuring to some, is clearly a source of anxiety and fear as there are multiple stories of trigger-happy young soldiers and arbitrary violence against innocent civilians.

**Lack of transparency and arbitrary decision-making.** One of the most disturbing elements is the lack of communication, discussion and transparency in taking decisions that impact the lives of millions of Burkinabe. There are few visible mechanisms of consultation for taking major decisions such as the withdrawal from ECOWAS and the creation of AES.

The implications of such decisions on cross-border trade, the economy, social relationships in a region where family members are often dispersed across several countries, etc. are not debated or discussed and citizens seem to be on their own in finding solutions to eventual barriers to trade and travel. Even those who support these decisions find it disconcerting that they are not discussed and are imposed from one day to the next.

## Why it is important to continue and even intensify engagement with the Sahel countries

UNHCR estimates that about 17 million people in the Sahel, 20% of the populations of Burkina, Mali and Niger, will need protection and humanitarian aid in 2024. These persons are subject to all other multiple and complex crises associated to conflict including gender-based violence, food insecurity, malnutrition and a sharp increase in the precariousness of education, healthcare and employment.

All three countries above are among the 20 poorest countries in the world and Central Sahel is today the largest conflict-ridden region in the world run by military governments. Central Sahel now leads the world's terrorist regions, accounting for 43% of all deaths from terrorist attacks.

The instability of the Sahel is impacting trade routes throughout Africa and threatens the stability of both the coastal West African countries and its North African neighbors. Global trade and migration are also negatively impacted as illegal minerals, drugs and humans are trafficked across this transit route to Europe. The Sahel is crucial for Africa and crucial for the world.

Engaging with the Sahel is of capital importance because there are humans in danger, whose continued insecurity will further impact the lives of many more humans.

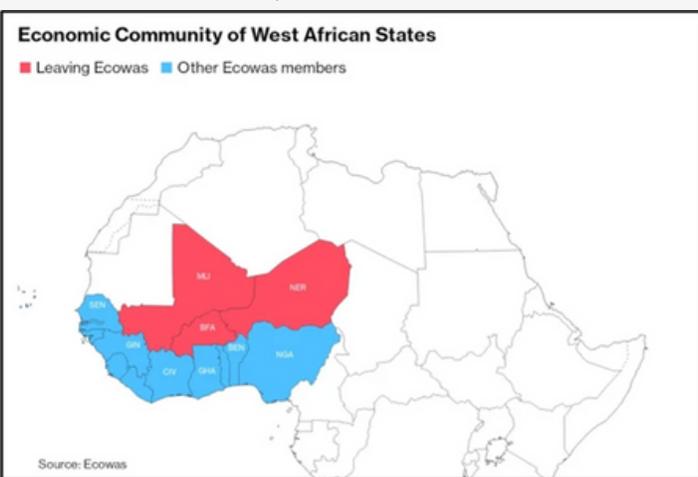
## Which Way Forward?

Establishing rights-based, democratic governance that delivers for citizens may seem quite far-fetched at the moment, but it remains the goal towards which all key stakeholders must work, this includes:

- ECOWAS
- AES
- Western Technical and Financial Partners
- National Stakeholders: Government, rights-based NGOs, trade unions, religious and traditional leaders

## The ECOWAS-AES Equation – Building on the Pan-African Argument

In terms of trade and travel, West Africa is among Africa’s most well-integrated regions. The three AES countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger) are all landlocked (See the map below) and have traditionally used the coastal countries, notably Ghana, Togo, and Benin for access to maritime trade routes. In the past three years as tensions rose between ECOWAS and the AES countries, Guinea which is under military rule, but has not joined AES, stepped in to increase access to the sea for these countries. Land trade between Côte d’Ivoire, the largest economy in Francophone West Africa, and all three AES countries, is centuries old.



During this visit to Ouagadougou, I observed the usual large trading trucks with Côte d’Ivoire license plates on the streets and the Burkinabe trader sitting next to me on the plane reported that after a few initial hiccups in 2022, he was doing business as usual between Ghana, Côte d’Ivoire, Benin and Burkina.

Families are widespread throughout the region maintaining strong ties even as they reside in different countries. Religion, tradition and ethnicities cannot be separated by political decisions taken by AES and ECOWAS.

Source: ECOWAS / Bloomberg

ECOWAS has announced that the withdrawal of AES countries pronounced in January 2024 requires a year to go into effect. However, ECOWAS appears to have taken few initiatives to actually rebuild relations and trust to bring the AES countries back into the fold or to build a strategic partnership with AES as a regional body. One, the other or both are crucial for the region.

Attitudes and entry points will both be important for ECOWAS if it wants to maintain its lead as the main regional body for West Africa and initiate dialogue with the AES countries.

### Attitudes

- **Leadership:** ECOWAS should take the lead and the higher ground. Playing tit-for-tat with the AES countries has been unproductive to date.
- **Eye-level Cooperation:** ECOWAS cannot be condescending and must meet the AES countries as equals.
- **Methodical:** Relationships severed cannot be repaired in a snap or with superficial action. They need a plan that progressively restores trust and lays the ground for working together.

**Entry Points**

ECOWAS has multiple entry points to rebuild ties with the AES countries. It is important that it plays to its strengths and uses economic and social entry points as a foundation for, or in tandem with, political entry points. Ideas could include:

- **Regional trade and economic platforms** to enhance cross-border trade and improve economic performance for all. This would enable private sector, women and youth actors to come into play.
- **Religious and social channels.** Bringing together religious leaders and communities across borders will build on commonalities and illustrate the need for regional cohesion.
- **Political fundamentals.** Open discussion on the political fundamentals for Africans today would be a means to bring together actors such as political parties, trade unions and civil society to build on shared principles such as Pan-Africanism, sovereignty and fundamental rights. Issues of common preoccupation such as security, youth employment and access to basic services could also be pertinent. Local and regional governments, particularly those at the borders should be key actors here. Once again women and youth can play important roles. Such discussion can precede or be held on the sidelines of meetings and discussions between governments.

## Western Technical and Financial Partners

Most western countries have opted to keep partnership channels open in the AES countries by maintaining their development cooperation which they have labelled technical rather than political. This is a good thing as it maintains good will and keeps the channels open for further engagement.

As they plan further engagement, Western Countries may want to consider the following:

**Building channels for more sincere dialogue focused on development priorities.** Much of the “dialogue” between Western countries and the AES countries since 2021 has taken the form of public posturing on both sides. Knowledge and resources for development is the competitive advantage the West has over other world powers in the region. It is urgent for Western partners to be able to discuss development needs and objectives with the AES governments, away from the media limelight. To build these channels may require one or more of the following:

- The traditional back-door diplomacy;

- Delivery of humanitarian assistance as a doorway to discuss more systemic and longer-term development needs;
- Working from the bottom-up, starting with local and regional governments to bring the conversation to the national level;
- Where the civic space allows, strengthening the capacity of citizen interest groups (farmers' associations, business associations, sectoral youth associations and professional bodies) to formulate the systemic issues they are facing and initiate dialogue with government at all levels.

**Developing a rights-based approach with economic, political and social groups is key to attaining specific development goals.** All the AES governments are feeling the pressure to deliver on development goals. This is an opening to engage with them and to build channels and platforms between the government and the key groups it needs to succeed in development. While this is difficult and perhaps even dangerous ground, it is ground that must be trod if development cooperation wants to contribute to bringing back democratic governance to these countries.

Each situation must be studied carefully and the “do no harm” principle applied, but development cooperation must improve its competencies in rights-based approaches, adapt them to specific situations in the Sahel and move forward in helping build the relationship between the governed and their government.

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My additional suggestions are a repeat from my last blog after a visit to Ouagadougou in October 2023, the full text of which can be found here ([A glimpse behind the curtain of transition by Kah Walla](#))

I have repeated the suggestions below:

**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 sensitivities 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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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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