

Burkina Faso's Militarised Turn

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1. Introduction

Since 2022, Burkina Faso has experienced a profound transformation in its political and security architecture. Two successive coups, the collapse of civilian governance, and withdrawal from regional frameworks are often described as reactive responses to jihadist violence. Yet this interpretation misses the structural shift underway: the military is being repositioned as guarantor of security and as the central architect of state authority.

Under Captain Ibrahim Traoré, Burkina Faso's junta – a military governing council that seized power via coup and bypassed constitutional processes – has recast the political order around centralised rule, securitised nationalism, and a recalibration of international partnerships. This is

not merely a security-driven response to instability, but a broader redefinition of sovereignty.

This brief examines the institutional and geopolitical implications of this transformation, situating Burkina Faso's trajectory within wider Sahelian trends of regime resilience through militarised governance and strategic realignment.

2. Political Background and Institutional Disintegration

The volatility that characterises contemporary Burkina Faso is rooted in long-standing institutional fragility. The 2014 ousting of President Blaise Compaoré after a popular uprising created space for democratic experimentation. Yet from 2015, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré struggled to contain a rapidly expanding jihadist insurgency spilling over from Mali into Burkina Faso's northern and eastern regions.

By 2021, state capacity had eroded dramatically, with increasing attacks in the north and east, mass displacement, and rising public disillusionment with democracy. Against this backdrop, Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba seized power in January 2022, citing the government's failure to ensure security. Nine months later, Traoré deposed him, arguing that the junta's strategies mirrored those of civilian predecessors.

This second 2022 coup marked a turning point. Whereas Damiba maintained a nominal commitment to transitional governance, Traoré suspended constitutional processes outright and assumed full executive authority under a new transitional charter. The result was a more ideologically assertive form of governance, detached from liberal democratic norms. The regime now operates under a framework of 'permanent exception', defined as the indefinite suspension of constitutional order justified as necessity, which has institutionalised military rule as the default political order.

This trajectory aligns with the Sahelian "coup belt," stretching from Mali through Burkina Faso to Niger, where successive military takeovers have entrenched juntas as the dominant political actors. Analysts warn this reflects not isolated reversals but a systemic regional shift in governance, as militarised sovereignty substitutes for electoral legitimacy. Within this regional pattern, Burkina Faso is notable for how swiftly Traoré moved from seizing power to reshaping institutions and narratives of legitimacy.

3. Consolidating Military Authority

The consolidation of power under Traoré reflects more than a temporary coup response; it marks the embedding of militarisation as the organising principle of state authority. The deterioration of security between 2019 and 2022, which displaced millions and left much of the national territory outside government control, undermined confidence in civilian institutions and created space for the military to justify its intervention as a functional necessity.

Since assuming power, Traoré has extended military authority across government and society. Oversight institutions have been dismantled, regional administration and media brought under direct control, and civilian

auxiliaries such as the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* integrated into counterinsurgency operations.

These measures have blurred the distinction between state and para-military violence, embedding coercion into the everyday functioning of governance. With constitutional processes already suspended, the junta has sought to validate its grip on power through narratives of technocratic efficiency, national sovereignty, and postcolonial emancipation. Drawing on the symbolism of Thomas Sankara and championing anti-imperialist narratives, the junta casts its rule as a durable postcolonial alternative to democracy.

4. External Reorientation and Strategic Alliances

4.1. Withdrawal from ECOWAS and the Formation of the AES

In January 2024, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger jointly withdrew from ECOWAS, denouncing its sanctions regime and asserting sovereign autonomy. The three states had formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a mutual defence pact grounded in military sovereignty and non-interference. While presented as a security framework, the AES also functions as a political shield, insulating member regimes from international pressure and ECOWAS's democratic conditionalities.

4.2. Disengagement from Western Donors

Burkina Faso's decoupling from Western partners extends beyond military affairs to broader multilateral disengagement. Participation in African Union and UN-led dialogues has diminished, while EU and US engagement is largely restricted to humanitarian channels, following the suspension of security and development programmes after the 2022 coup. This withdrawal curtails access to budgetary support and training that once underpinned state capacity.

5. Alternate Perspectives and Anti-Western Legitimacy

Western narratives often depict Burkina Faso's political course as a straightforward democratic backslide, but this overlooks the structural grievances underpinning support for the junta. Traoré has cultivated an image of national liberation, presenting his government as a corrective to decades of perceived foreign exploitation. His popularity, particularly among youth, rests not only on ideological appeal but on policy actions designed to reposition sovereignty.

Pro-junta demonstrations are often cast as expressions of anti-imperial resistance, often invoking the symbolism of Sankara. This positioning resonates amid widespread frustration at France's neo colonial role, amplified by the failures of French counterterrorism operations and suspicions of tacit support for Damiba. Such grievances culminated in January 2023 when Traoré expelled French forces and suspended bilateral defence agreements—moves that were widely celebrated domestically as a restoration of national dignity.

Traoré's legitimacy is also being shaped by economic reforms that reinforce anti-Western rhetoric. The junta reversed a controversial pay rise

for senior officials, nationalised two major gold mines, and announced plans for a domestic gold refinery capable of processing up to 150 tonnes annually. Agricultural modernisation and local cotton processing have been prioritised, while consistently voicing scepticism of IMF and World Bank conditionalities. This rhetoric has fuelled popular perceptions that his government has rejected Western loans or freed the country from external debt. In reality, Burkina Faso continues to rely on outside financing, including a USD 302 million IMF programme approved in 2023, with external debt estimated at more than USD 5.6 billion in early 2025. Together, these policies and narratives strengthen the image of a regime charting an anti-Western, sovereignty-first path.

This discourse has been amplified by Russian-backed media such as RT and Sputnik Afrique, which portray Traoré as a regional stabiliser reclaiming political agency. Yet the coherence of this narrative obscures underlying contradictions. By anchoring legitimacy in sovereignty while sidelining inclusivity, the regime entrenches resource dependence (particularly on Russia for mining and security), deepens political exclusion, undermines rights protections, and leaves unresolved the structural drivers of instability.

6. Future Outlook: Trajectories for Burkina Faso

The instability wave illustrates how moments of political opening, from the fall of Compaoré to the brief democratic experiment under Kaboré, were quickly overtaken by escalating jihadist insurgency and successive coups. Today, the state faces a narrowed set of futures. Scenario A projects authoritarian resilience through militarised sovereignty; Scenario B allows for partial stabilisation under managed reform; Scenario C envisages a more fragile but genuine recovery; and Scenario D, a collapse into state fragmentation, remains a background risk rather than a forecasted course.

Burkina Faso's outlook remains fluid, shaped by the durability of Traoré's junta, the persistence of insurgencies, and the evolution of regional alliances. Historical experiences across the region show that such junctures can consolidate into long-lasting authoritarian orders (as in Mali), transition towards hybrid civilian–military arrangements (as in Niger's earlier experiment), or, under more exceptional conditions, produce pathways to stability (as in Ghana and Liberia).

Comparative cases suggest that without structural governance reform, Burkina Faso is more likely to replicate Mali's entrenched militarism than Ghana's path of gradual recovery.

Scenario A: Entrenched Militarism

Burkina Faso consolidates its sovereignty-first model, anchoring legitimacy in coercive governance and nationalist rhetoric. The AES matures as a regional bloc, providing political insulation from external democratic pressure while deepening alignment with Russia's Africa Corps. This mirrors Mali, where prolonged military dominance and Russian patronage have entrenched authoritarianism without reducing insurgent violence. Like Chad

under Idriss Déby, the regime's survival in Burkina Faso may be secured, but perpetuates high domestic insecurity and humanitarian strain.

Scenario B: Managed Transition

Regional and domestic pressures force the junta to pursue a phased political opening. This may resemble Niger's earlier civilian-military hybrids or Sudan's fragile transitional councils, combining controlled elections with continued military influence. Under this scenario, actors such as the African Union could incentivise reforms in exchange for gradual reintegration into ECOWAS. While power remains concentrated, this pathway permits a modest recovery of governance capacity and humanitarian access. As with Liberia's managed transition in the 2000s, stabilisation is possible, but democratic accountability remains superficial and dependent on sustained external pressure.

Scenario C: Gradual Return to Stability

A less probable but aspirational trajectory involves institutional recovery and regional reintegration by 2030. Economic reforms, including the nationalisation of mining, gold refinery projects, and investment in agriculture generates revenue that can be channelled into state-building. Unlike Entrenched Militarism, this path requires recalibrating foreign partnerships, avoiding overdependence on Russia and re-engaging with multilateral donors. It parallels Ghana's recovery from military authoritarianism in the early 1980s, where pragmatic economic adjustment and gradual political opening laid foundations for long-term stability. For Burkina Faso, this would require discipline within the junta and a shift from coercive rule to developmental governance.

Scenario D (Reference): State Fragmentation and Collapse

Although not a central forecast, the risk of collapse remains. A convergence of insurgent advances, elite fragmentation, and unchecked paramilitary abuses could push Burkina Faso toward breakdown akin to Somalia in the 1990s or Sudan's ongoing civil war. This would represent not just state failure but a regional security shock, destabilising an already fragile Sahel. While this is not the most likely outcome, its possibility indicates the fragility of the current order and the high stakes of governance choices over the next five years.

7. Conclusion

Burkina Faso's shift is more than a tactical response to jihadist violence; it reflects the emergence of a new political economy of militarised sovereignty in the central Sahel. What began as a reactive coup cycle has evolved into a redefined state order built on executive dominance, resource nationalism, and strategic disengagement from Western institutions. The AES and the pivot towards Russia signal a deliberate attempt to reshape internal governance and redirect external alignments.

Economic reforms, while symbolically significant, remain hampered by implementation challenges and growing dependencies on alternative partners. Meanwhile, the marginalisation of civilian institutions and the

indefinite suspension of elections restrict avenues for peaceful political contestation, heightening the danger of entrenched authoritarianism.

For the wider Sahel, Burkina Faso embodies a transformation in governance norms, where democracy is increasingly subordinated to military-led strategies of survival. International responses must grapple with the growth of military regimes in states that are actively rejecting Western paradigms and the declining resonance with liberal peacebuilding frameworks premised on conditionality. Without addressing the structural incentives that favour military intervention, authoritarian consolidation may become a persistent feature of Sahelian politics, reshaping the region's trajectory for the coming decade.

