

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of grey dots of varying sizes, with several dots highlighted in red. The dots are arranged in a pattern that roughly outlines the map of Africa.

## Power to Protest Presidencies?

### Lessons Learned from the Successful Mobilization and Diverging Effects of Popular Uprisings in Senegal and Burkina Faso

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- Since 1997, seventeen African heads of state tried to amend the constitution to expand their term in office when they reached the maximum duration. Most of those attempts to undermine democratic principles happened through institutional means i. e. under a »democratic disguise« and led to popular uprisings.
- In Burkina Faso and Senegal similar constellations have led to massive uprisings in the run-up to the voting of the National Assembly that hindered both amendments to pass. New leaders from the music and media scene animated the youth to protest and the media to report about their struggle, hence putting pressure on the government to respond.
- On the other hand, there are also numerous differences in the development and outcome of both protest movements: Despite the mobilization, the Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade ran for office in the following presidential elections following the legitimization of his candidature by the Constitutional Council on 27 January 2012. After repressive counteractions by a well-equipped and trained riot police, this day marked the last joint protest event as opposition parties started campaigning and movement leaders called for voting.
- In Burkina Faso, the temporal concurrence of a military split, the division of the ruling party, and an unconstitutional term bid provoked an opportunity for the Burkinabe to get finally rid of an unpopular president. A strong anti-presidential front of civic and political opposition that is highly politicized due to a culture of contestation resulted in a clear-cut strategy against Compaoré's candidature. Compaoré faced a lower legitimization from the beginning in 1987 when he overthrew former president Thomas Sankara.
- Besides a different democratic history and culture, institutional settings mattered significantly. For future mobilizations to come those pro-democracy movements raise self-confidence. Because if (young) people do not see prospects for change, frustration can turn into the rejection of democratic governance.

Massive popular uprisings in Senegal in 2011 as well as in Burkina Faso in 2013 have hindered democratic reversions that the two respective presidents were trying to push through: Abdoulaye Wade, president of Senegal since 2000, had announced constitutional changes to expand his term and to create a vice-president position foreseen for his unpopular son Karim. Blaise Compaoré had announced the creation of a costly Senate in Burkina Faso whose members would have been appointed by himself and his intention to run again after already 27 years in office. Such changes would have strengthened the already far-reaching power of both presidents and the oligarchic character of their ruling. Unlike the so called »Arab Spring« struggles for democracy south of the Sahara have gained less attention. Different to the uprisings in Northern Africa, new pro-democracy movements with strong leaders – *Y'en a marre* in Senegal and *Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso – were at the forefront of those struggles in West Africa. Alongside them were trade unions, human rights organizations, political parties, student associations, and women movements leading to massive uprising. Activists in both states faced high rates of repression, executed in Senegal by a well-equipped and trained police and in Burkina Faso by the presidential guard *Régiment de sécurité présidentielle* (RSP) together with the regular army. Both movements reported cooptation efforts, attempts at intimidation, and violent suppression. According to Amnesty International, during the amendment struggles in Burkina Faso, at least eleven people were killed and more than 200 injured. The firing of ammunition in central Dakar resulted in several deaths and numerous casualties in Senegal, in addition protest leaders were unjustifiably arrested. But contrarily to the Senegalese uprising, the mobilization in Burkina Faso endured. The Burkinabe people put constant and non-governable pressure on Compaoré as an anti-Compaoré front that forced him to resign on 31 October 2014. In Dakar, in turn, Wade reran for office but lost the elections to his opponent Macky Sall who received a majority of 65,8 percent votes on 25 March.

## Term Amend Struggles in Africa

34 out of 48 constitutions in Africa contain limitations for presidential terms, either by restricting the age of the ruling president or his/her term in office to predominantly two terms per five to seven years (Database

of the Constitutions of Sub-Saharan Africa DCSSA). Even if term limits are not a one-way street to consolidated democracy, they prevent autocratic outcomes such as the personalization of power, especially where other counter balances are weak. National assemblies as legislative bodies often do not control the government but rather are dominated by the majority government. This in turn is based on the unequal funding of governmental parties and those of the opposition. But among those states with term limits, term amendment bids by incumbent presidents revealed to become the norm: Over the last twenty years, 17 heads of state, when they had reached the maximal tenure, tried to rule longer than foreseen by the constitution.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly enough, those attempts to undermine democratic principles happened through institutional means either by parliamentary voting or by referendum, so presidents cover their autocratic governance in a democratic coat. Institutionally speaking, democratization in Africa has advanced since 1990s: Multiparty-systems have been installed, media freedom has risen, and civil society organizations have spread in many African states. However, politics are still decided by overpowered presidents who desperately cling to power. Because democratic constitutions are first and foremost written rules for a society that only prevail if respected by the rulers – and controlled by the ruled. As it is not only the majority of presidents that try to change the constitution, but rather the majority of people that try to resist these changes. In 10 out of those 17 attempts, strong protest followed the presidential announcements.<sup>2</sup> The Burkinabe and Senegalese uprisings are two impressive examples.

## Burkina Faso and Senegal – »To Candidate or Not?«

The two West African states seem similar at first with the same presidential system introduced by the French, comparable constitutional laws, similar term attempts by

1. Burkina Faso (1997), Namibia (1999), Guinea (2001), Zambia (2001), Togo (2002), Malawi (2002), Gabon (2003), Chad (2005), Uganda (2005), Nigeria (2006), Cameroon (2008), Niger (2009), Senegal (2012), Burkina Faso (2014), Burundi (2015), Ruanda (2015), Congo-Brazzaville (2016), DR Congo (2016).

2. Zambia (2001), Malawi (2002), Gabon (2003), Nigeria (2006), Cameroon (2008), Niger (2009), Senegal (2012), Burkina Faso (2014), Burundi (2015), Ruanda (2015), Congo-Brazzaville (2016), and DR Congo (2016), protest erupted related to the term amendment according to the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD) on Africa.

### Presidential Term Limits in Senegal and Burkina Faso

The Senegalese constitution limits the presidential term to two subsequent periods of five years. This law was passed in 2001 under the rule of Abdoulaye Wade. Before, the duration had varied between four to seven years since the adoption of the Constitution in 1960. In 2008, the tenure was extended to seven years. On 20 March 2016, a constitutional referendum passed that newly bound the age of the ruling president to a maximum age of 75 years and the term itself to five years, even if the latter will not be applied for the incumbent president Macky Sall.

In Burkinabe constitution, adopted under Compaoré in 1991, Art. 37 limits presidential term to two successive mandates, each of five years. The Burkinabe constitution allows two ways to amend constitutional law, either by a 3/4 majoritarian vote of the members of parliament, or by popular referendum if this majority cannot be reached. Under Compaoré, the constitution changed several times, mainly in his personal interest. Since March 2016, a commission drafted a new constitution in which it is foreseen that presidential term limits are part of the intrinsic unchangeable democratic elements. Further, constitutional changes require now a 4/5 legislative majority.

their former presidents, and even likewise new movements dominating the media coverage. But after successful mobilizations in the run-up to the announced constitutional changes, the uprising led to diverting outcomes – in Burkina Faso to the resignation of Blaise Compaoré and in Senegal to the candidature of Abdoulaye Wade.

In Senegal, on the voting day of the National Assembly on 23 June 2011, numerous organizations called for gatherings and named themselves thereafter *Mouvement du 23 Juin* (M23). M23 loosely united civil society organizations as *Rencontre Africaine pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme* (RADDHO), new youth movements as *Y'en a marre*, and opposition parties. The latter lost their prospect to rule as Wade gave preferences to family members. Their alliance built on three joint objectives to hinder the constitutional amendment, to prevent autocratic ruling, and to resist bad governance. But the strength of this broad anti-government frame became the weakness of M23. The motivations were too diverse and leaders constantly competed over discourse priority and media visibility. After the formally legitimate but politically influenced decision of the Constitutional Council on 27 January 2012<sup>3</sup>, the movement split. Those opposition parties that had a genuine chance to be elected started campaigning. *Y'en a marre*, which had followed a double strategy to get rid of Wade by electoral or contentious manner from the beginning,

3. To no one's surprise, the five members appointed by the president himself had chosen in his favor. This falls in line with judgements of other constitutional bodies in the region backing mainly governmental politics.

started to call for voters' registration. Activists who decided to keep on the street protest were repressed easily by well-equipped and trained policemen. Trade unions in contrast were mainly absent in the struggles. Due to a divide-and-rule strategy under Wade, unions split into 18 confederations. Additionally, Wade privileged some of their interests and as they understand themselves mainly as representatives of corporatist particular interests, only individual members took part in the resistance against his rule.

Those protest choices were based on former experiences of democratic turnovers, the last in 2000 when Abdou Diouf from the socialist party handed over power to Abdoulaye Wade from the liberal party and hence respecting the electoral results. Consequently, to overthrow Wade by electoral means has been one option alongside contestation. In addition, disruptive protest tactics are not perceived as parts of repertoires of contention influenced by the opinion of Muslim brotherhoods that until today comments Senegalese politics. Even if their electoral preferences are no longer decisive, their legitimation counts. Further, Senegalese political culture is predominantly influenced by compromises. This culture of compromise mirrored the *Assises Nationales* that took place from 1 June 2008 until 24 May 2009, a series of public debates among civic and political leaders of the opposition that led to the publication of consensual declarations.

The political history of Burkina Faso is by contrast marked by contestation, ranging from struggles for jus-

tice since the 1990s to protests against increasing living costs in the 2000s until recent strikes against austerity. Burkinabe civil society, youth, and trade union scene is highly politicized. People are often active in several organizations, so that especially Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulasso and Koudougou function as urban centers of face-to-face networks that can be reactivated at any time. Mainly two organizations, that in turn lead two protest coalitions, are working as long-term powerful anti-Compaoré opponents – the leftist powerful trade union confederation *Confédération Générale du Travail du Burkina* (CGT-B) and the human rights organization *Mouvement Burkinabé pour des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples* (MBDHP). In the aftermath of the assassination of journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998, they united with other civil society organizations and opposition parties to denounce the impunity as a collective for democracy, named thereafter *Collectif des organisations démocratiques de masse et de partis politiques* (CODMPP). Later, when living costs rose constantly, they formed a second alliance to condemn the neoliberal agenda of Compaoré in the *Coalition contre la vie chère* (CCVC). They mostly understand their role well beyond workers' rights, so that on 29 October 2014 trade unions called for a general strike, showing their capability to block the national economy. Based on those former struggles hundreds of thousands took to the streets and gathered on the main squares on the run-up to the voting day. During this eventful protest period between 27 and 31 October, people dispersed to occupy and block urban areas. At first it seemed unlikely that the constitutional changes would pass, lacking the majority of votes by the ruling party. But statements of members of the opposition and their secret accommodation pointed out that Compaoré aimed to push his amendments through.

*Balai Citoyen* stood in the forefront of media attention for putting the term bid on the top of their struggles, different to the established Compaoré-front whose claims went beyond a political changeover, whereas the *alternance*, the handover of power to a successor, stood in the foreground of the new leaders. Both sides perceived this varying strategy as an ideological gap that hindered a close alliance and still lasts to this day. By 31 October 2014, the situation for Compaoré seemed no longer under his control when people burned down the National Assembly, private houses of his family clan, and looted shops. He escaped to

Ivory Coast where he has stayed until now. Afterwards a transitional government was installed of civil society organizations, political parties, and army officers. But on 16 September 2015, less than a month before the elections should have taken place, members of the *Régiment de sécurité présidentielle* (RSP) under General Gilbert Diendéré staged a military coup. For a second time, the Burkinabe people resisted massively and combined with pressures from the African Union, the RSP handed back power. On 29 November 2015, presidential elections were held and Roch Marc Kaboré of the *Mouvement du peuple pour le progrès* (MPP) received 53,5 percent of the votes.

Besides protest culture, repression was more difficult to execute in Burkina Faso. The widespread protest space of Burkina's enlarged capital made it more difficult to repress dispersed people that follow an »ants-strategy«. By contrast, centralized Dakar that is bounded by the sea and only accessible by certain main roads can be easily controlled. In addition, the repression capability of Compaoré declined during the uprisings, when parts of the Burkinabe army refused to shoot into the crowds who mainly resisted non-violently. Already in 2011, parts of the army revolted against their working conditions compared to the privileges of the RSP. Such a split in the military heavily impacted the presidential decisions.

## Role of New Movements – How to Get (Young) People to Take to the Streets

The motivational background of the uprisings in West Africa is exemplary for an African youth: Less than a fifth of the Burkinabe citizens were born before Compaoré took power in 1987. This young generation perceives politics as a corrupt and clientelistic system that is inaccessible for them and their demands, so that even new leaders stress not to be »political« as it sounds like an insult. This generation is often trapped between family expectations and high rates of unemployment. Despite being better educated than their parents, the increasing demand of labor force stands in contrast to a decline of jobs. And those who find a job need to share their income with relatives, so that a middle class income quickly turns into poverty. These economic frustrations of the young generation often transform into democratic frustrations as democratization did not fulfill

the advertised promises of social mobility and wealth. In contrast, both presidents have mismanaged in as much as predominantly their entourage benefited economically whereas the population has suffered within their daily needs. At the same time, this generation is well informed about living, working, and political conditions of others. Due to the dispersal of mobile phones and access to internet, at least in urban centers, young people are better connected than any generation before and have easier access to information. More than 60 percent of the Burkinabe population have mobile phones, in Senegal more than 80 persons out of 100 use cell phones. This has helped significantly to activate personal networks and coordinate protest strategies while facing repression.

The mobilization potential of the youth is high but can be influenced in one direction or another. New leaders turned their frustration into hope and political engagement is pictured as creative collective action that can be equally joyful. Those movements offered their young constituency a platform to express their demands, exchange their visions of democracy, and feel considered as citizens. Political parties in turn seem inaccessible as active participation requires a certain knowledge and official position, while non-governmental organizations are perceived as respondents of donor interests. Towards the run-up to election dates of amendments in both, mobilization has been at its highest peak. The expanded term ambitions unite different protest groups spatially, temporarily, and content-related to intense eventful protest periods of several days that put pressure on presidents to respond. The first row of the term amendment struggles was occupied by newly created movements – *Y'en a marre* in Senegal and *Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso inspired by the former. Different to opposition parties that are often unsuccessful in mobilizing their potential voters, their leaders successfully mobilized the people despite facing the same hurdles such as very limited financial resources, weak organizational structures, and an overpowering opponent.

In contrast to the uprisings in North Africa, both movements were dominated by strong leadership. Coming from the music and media scene, the leaders were well-known beforehand and merchandized their collective identity comparable to a pop star movement by selling t-shirts, releasing protest songs, and using catchy

phrases and symbols such as the closed fist by *Balai Citoyen* or crossed arms by *Y'en a marre*. Also, they used a rather simplistic language. Right at the start, after first impressive public protest events, newspapers such as the daily journal *Le Quotidien* stated that »Y'en a marre takes the power« shortly after on 21 Mars 2011. Established leaders of civil society were dissatisfied by the media coverage that focused on these new movements in general and their charismatic leaders in particular. Until today, their relation is marked by a fight over discourse priority and personal vanities. Supported by individual members from the *Association des Journalistes Burkinabés* (AJB) and the previous success of *Y'en a marre*, *Balai Citoyen* received a comparable high visibility in the national and most notable international media coverage. For many leaders of non-governmental organizations *Balai Citoyen* wrongly earned the credits for mobilization.

The power of the uprisings stand in sharp contrast to the weak democratic institutions. The judiciary often functions more as a confirming body of governmental politics than as a watchdog. Decisions of constitutional courts or councils are mostly in line with governmental interests because judges are often entitled by the presidents themselves.

The electoral results after the uprisings confirm the weakness of the elections. In both states, parts of the former clan of the respective president have been elected by majority vote. Macky Sall was president of the National Assembly under Wade until 2008 when Sall summoned Karim Wade to the parliament due to corruption charges. Only then, Sall left the *Parti Démocratique Sénégalais* (PDS) and Wade's circle. In Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Kaboré quit the political party of Compaoré, *Congrès pour la démocratie et le progrès* (CDP), as late as in January 2014 when he newly created the MPP with 75 members of the governmental party. The electoral campaign in the aftermath of the uprisings – in Senegal in the spring of 2012 and in Burkina Faso in the fall of 2015 – rotated personages rather than programs. Demands of the protestors were not met or plans executed how youth unemployment could be solved. Leaders of the new movements in both countries refused to campaign, understanding their role outside of the formalized system. But both movements mobilized to first register and secondly vote in the presidential elections.

## Outlook – Beyond New Presidencies

The biased media coverage is already casting its shadows. Quickly after the uprisings, first rumors spread about external funding from European NGOs or foreign embassies that endure even today. Movements can learn from ethical guidelines of classical civil society to apply democratic principles by shifting leadership, electing leaders, reporting transparently about funding, and disclosing their alliances. The newly released website of *Y'en a marre* partly responds to these demands.

If presidents change, the system stays. Preventing term amendments firstly hinders oligarchic ruling but does not change institutions profoundly. The parliamentary elections in Senegal that were held on 30 July 2017 illustrate this. In the run-up to elections, missing voters' registrations and cards were reported, among them the leaders of *Y'en a marre* who had no access to voting. In addition, Wade as head of the party coalition *Coalition gagnante Wattu Senegaal* once more climbed the political stage and gained the second highest score of 16,7 percent of the votes. The ruling coalition under Sall won the majority with 49,5 percent of the votes. It seems that despite rising political consciousness, people do not punish governments by the ballot boxes.

Apart from the political dimensions, the violent repressions need to be cleared to restore rule of law. In particular in Burkina Faso, the numerous crimes of the RSP and political crimes under Compaoré should be investigated intensively. Problematic in this regard is that Compaoré shortly after fleeing to Ivory Coast received the Ivorian citizenship that enables him to bypass prosecution as the files of Norbert Zongo and Thomas Sankara are reopened. But Burkina moved forward when on 6 December 2015 Gilbert Dienderé, who led the coup

in 2014, was accused of murdering Sankara together with several members of the RSP.

In the comparative perspective a more general challenge of democratization becomes obvious. In Senegal, people have experienced governmental takeovers by elections, so that they followed a double strategy to get rid of Wade either by contentious or electoral means. Besides, Senegal has a culture aiming at compromises rather than conflict. The same problematic is visible regarding the self-understanding of actors: Trade unions in Senegal focus on particular interest and civil society on executing projects, often responding to calls for tender by donors. In Burkina Faso, in turn, trade unions, civil society organizations, and political parties benefited from experiences of joint struggles, knowing how to defer their individual for collective interests.

Further, institutional settings mattered. The legitimation by the Constitutional Council in Senegal can be proclaimed as the demobilizing moment where the loose protest alliance of M23 split. Those political parties and candidates that have seen a chance to win the elections, concentrated on the upcoming elections. Combined with repression executed by a prepared riot police, the movement leaders had difficulties maintaining the high mobilization against the candidature of Wade.

Social media channels and cultural events such as the festival *Ciné Droit Libre* in Ouagadougou enable an exchange between the artistic leaders of *Balai Citoyen* and *Y'en a marre*. Movements can learn from each other, well beyond national borders or continents. *Lutte pour le Changement* (LUCHA) in DR Congo are among the most prominent examples that learned from *Y'en a marre*. Those pro-democracy movements raise self-confidence for future mobilizations to come. Because if (young) people do not see prospects for change, frustration can turn into the rejection of democratic governance.



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