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31 January 2025

NGO Report on the People's Republic of Burkina Faso for the 143rd Session of the Human Rights Committee / Rapport des ONG sur la République populaire du Burkina Faso pour la 143^{ème} session du Comité des droits de l'homme

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Introduction

1. The Centre for Voters Initiative & Action presents this report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee ahead of the 143rd Session for the review of Burkina Faso. The Centre is a non-governmental organisation based in the Americas with an international focus. The Centre acknowledges there can be no secure tomorrow

without ensuring civil societies have knowledge to vote, participate, and engage with the democratic processes.

2. The Centre works with multiple international mechanisms to convey dialogue, conduct research, and bring awareness to the thematic issues of electoral engagement around the world. We closely follow and participate in the United Nations human rights mechanisms in Geneva and abroad, including the Human Rights Committee, to promote civil society participation in the public affairs process.
3. The Centre submits this ahead of the second periodic review of Burkina Faso under the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights. Recognising the complex nature of the recent challenges Burkina Faso faces, the Centre hopes to provide valuable information to the Committee regarding the State's compliance with issues exacerbating in compliance under Article 25. Indeed, this report is focused on the scope of Article 25, and we encourage Committee members to understand the nature of civic education as a tool to combat this contemporary turmoil; hopefully, the Committee will find this report valuable.
4. This petition is centred on three specific violations: (1) political violence resulting in the reduction of democratic participation, including the current lack of elections due to the military state; (2) a lack of robust civic education initiatives; and (3) gender inequalities preventing female engagement and political success.

Political Violence Resulting in the Reduction of Participation in the Democratic Process

Targeted Violence and Intimidation at the Ballot Box

5. In Burkina Faso, the threat of violence remains a persistent threat to full participation in the public affairs process. On 22 November 2020, Burkina Faso was facing a Presidential election; however, violence was a primary factor for keeping voters away from the polls.¹ Fears of attacks by militant groups prevented voting from many parts of Burkina Faso, due to violence linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Group.²
6. The Centre would like to note that, despite elections prevailing in 2020 in Burkina Faso, two polling stations in the capital of Ouagadougou did not open, according to Halidou Ouedraogo, the president of Codel, which is a local organisation which monitors elections. Furthermore, polling centres in the Centre North, Sahel, and East regions did not even open, having to close due to fears of attacks. In some towns, voting was not even a possibility at all for civil society: in Bartiebourgou and Tin Akoff, 14 soldiers were killed in an ambush by the Islamic state ahead of election day.³

¹ Sam Mednick. "Burkina Faso votes amid ongoing extremist violence, threats", Associated Press, 22 November 2020, <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/world/polls-open-in-burkina-faso-for-election-marred-by-violence/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

7. Despite ongoing threats of violence, Burkina Faso did indeed choose to hold elections on 22 November 2020; for this resilience, the government should be commended.⁴ However, the threat of attacks by extremists stifled a significant amount of civil society turnout due to security concerns. If voters in Burkina Faso are not able to properly participate in the civic process, experts have suggested that populations may not even accept the results as legitimate, as they had not had a true say in the process due to the marginalisation of their votes through the threat of violence.
8. No votes were expected to be cast in up to 20% of the country, where large areas of territory remain outside the government's control, and the threat of violence is deeply ingrained into the political culture of Burkina Faso.⁵ If one fifth of a nation is not able to vote, indeed, the true representation of Burkina Faso citizens by their government will not be representative of the civil society, and their Article 25 rights will undoubtedly be undermined.
9. Indeed, violence has displaced more than 1,000,000 persons in Burkina Faso and stifled roughly 166,000 new voters from being able to register, according to Burkina Faso's election officials.⁶ Not only is violence undermining the electoral process, but also the culture of political participation in the State; if civil society is not even able to think about engaging through registering to vote, Burkina Faso will see a significant decline in political participation as a result of violence. Furthermore, a new change to Haiti's electoral code from 2020 indicates that election results may be deemed valid, even if persons cannot vote in certain parts of the country due to threats of violence.

Terrorists in Voter Intimidation

10. Terror has prevailed in Burkina Faso, even above democracy. As a result of the 2022 coup, the transfer of power in Burkina Faso has been transferred to military officials. The military "Transition President", Ibrahim Traoré, has promised to keep his predecessor's commitment to hold elections in July 2024.⁷ However, despite these promises, the military coup has held onto power to this day; as of September 2023, the elections have been postponed by the junta indefinitely.
11. The intertwined nature of military and civil society has deeply instilled the cultures of fear and threats of violence to the democratic process for citizens of Burkina Faso;

⁴ Kindly refer to the Al Jazeera article explaining the resilience of Burkina Faso in holding elections:

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/22/polls-open-in-burkina-faso-for-election-marred-by-violence/>.

⁵ Grégoire Sauvage. "Burkina Faso holds presidential poll in 'a climate of fear' amid jihadist attacks", *France24*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201119-burkina-faso-presidential-election-security-fear-nostalgia/>.

⁶ Sam Mednick. "Burkina Faso's displaced numbers swell amid jihadi violence", *Associated Press*, 8 May 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/ouagadougou-africa-violence-burkina-faso-c0c2ad02dabd67eec1c022f8962185f9/>.

⁷ Mark Banchereau. "Burkina Faso junta extends its transition term by 5 years", *Associated Press*, 25 May 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/burkina-faso-military-junta-transition-election-coup-aa6f41f810c4d173748564b9c1f1acec/>.

militant Islamist groups under the contemporary government have been responsible for a lot of political violence in at least 36 Burkinabe towns, according to reports, and further led to at least 15 civil society groups being barred in Burkina Faso in an attempt to limit dissent.

12. In Burkina Faso, the military leader has announced his plan to continue to remain in office for another five years, pushing back the supposed elections from July 2024 to 2029, or beyond.⁸ Indeed, 60 months from the proposed 2 July 2024 date is unacceptable, and prevents Burkina Faso civil society from having a true voice in the actions of their government and ability to participate in the public life for at least, if not more than, five years.⁹

13. This could not be a clearer violation of the rights of civil society in Burkina Faso under Article 25: not only are they unable to vote due to the ever-present threat of military-sanctioned violence from the government, but also the lack of elections to even reform the political system. In Burkina Faso's current state of political affairs, it is highly dubious to even consider it a State party of the Covenant.

Given the alarming nature of the political rights being undermined by the Burkina Faso government – especially concerning the lack of elections because of the military ruling powers and the ever-present threat of violence in the political process – the Committee should enquire when Burkina Faso will hold elections.

Furthermore, the Committee should ask what measures are being taken to reduce state-sanctioned violence over the electoral processes, ensure polling centres are safe and accessible, and should demand the immediate holding of elections with no intertwined violence.

The Committee should also recognise that, even when Burkina Faso may hold elections, it will face the same barriers stifling voter turnout as a result of oppression sanctioned by militant violence. The Committee should demand that the government develop a comprehensive action plan ahead of its proposed elections to detail how the State party plans to combat the previous turmoil which has undermined elections.

Lack of Robust Civic Education Initiatives

Substantial School Centre Closures

14. Burkina Faso is facing one of the worst internal displacement crises in the world fuelled by various causes including but not limited to socio-political instability, lack of resources, and the growing role of non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Over two million people are internally displaced, and the amount of people who need

⁸ "Burkina Faso: Conflict and Military Rule", *Congressional Research Service*, 28 September 2023, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10434/>.

⁹ Ibid.

humanitarian assistance has grown by 35%. Also, refugee flows, mostly from Mali, contribute to regional instability and displacement. The Sahel, Centre-North, North, East, Boucle du Mouhoun, South-West, Hauts-Bassins, Centre-East, Centre-West, Centre, and Cascades regions are the areas most impacted by the displacement and the ongoing conflict.¹⁰

15. The security situation and subsequent mass displacement have negatively impacted education in the region contributing to the closure of 6,149 schools affecting the education of nearly one million boys and girls and 31,000 teachers across Burkina Faso.¹¹ Roughly three out of four displaced children have no access to education.¹²
16. Although the Burkina Faso government has taken steps to promote education through the Presidential Initiative for Quality Education for All, which offers innovation-free education, there is still a lack of educational infrastructure that prevents accessible schooling.¹³ As a by-product of school closures, attendance and overall school completion are very low with 72% of 15-24-year-olds having not completed primary education in Burkina Faso (2018).¹⁴
17. Internal displacement has been largely concentrated in urban areas leading to overpopulation of cities, specifically Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, which hold 46.4% and 15.4% of the total urban population respectively.¹⁵ With this, in rural areas across the countries, schools have been forgotten and students are left without access to any schooling within a large radius.
18. The role of COVID-19 cannot be understated when it comes to looking at school closures in Burkina Faso. The pandemic causes mass panic and school closures which will have generational impacts on children who lost access to education for three to four years contributing to terrorist recruitment, poverty, and crime in Burkina Faso.
19. Jihadist violence is a primary cause of school closures contributing to teacher intimidation, the burning of schools, and damaged networks of travel to attend school.¹⁶ As the role of NSAGs continues to rise in Burkina Faso, the amount of

¹⁰ Information derived from the UNHCR Report on Burkina Faso:

<https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/burkina-faso/>.

¹¹ "Burkina Faso: New academic year starts with one million children out of school due to ongoing violence and insecurity", UNICEF, 2 October 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/burkina-faso-new-academic-year-starts-one-million-children-out-school-due-ongoing/>.

¹² "Burkina Faso: The children who fear school", <https://www.nrc.no/shorthand/stories/burkina-faso---the-children-who-fear-school/index.html>.

¹³ "Burkina Faso adopts Presidential Initiative for Quality Education for All", 21 June 2024, https://www.panapress.com/Burkina-Faso-adopts-Presidential-a_630769599-lang2.html.

¹⁴ Kindly refer to the National Education Profile as of 2018 on Burkina Faso, classified as "low income" by *The World Bank*, https://www.epdc.org/sites/default/files/documents/EPDC_NEP_2018_Burkinafaso.pdf.

¹⁵ Information from UN Habitat page on Burkina Faso: <https://unhabitat.org/burkina-faso/>.

¹⁶ Kaamil Ahmed. "'We would turn up to find books on fire': the teachers risking kidnap and death to keep Burkina Faso's schools open", *The Guardian*, 10 January 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2025/jan/10/we-would-turn-up-to-find-books-on-fire-the-teachers-risking-kidnap-and-death-to-keep-burkina-fasos-schools-open/>.

school closures will only continue to rise proportionally as the infrastructure, teachers, and transportation networks are all threatened by groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State Sahel Province.

It is a fundamental right for children to have access to education, and the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso has contributed to mass school closures resulting in millions of students lacking access to education contributing to cycles of poverty, violence, and instability.

To address these problems, the Committee must press Burkina Faso to raise the annual expenditure on education from 5.27% (2022) to 7.25% directing funding to building new schools, re-opening old schools, and ensuring that their Presidential decrees on compulsory education from ages 6 to 15 remain a possibility for all in Burkina Faso. In addition, Burkina Faso must work to securitise the education sector making it a priority for protection in their battle against NSAGs. Additionally, the State must work to expand access to post-secondary education with less than 10% of Burkinabe people attending university. Without educational infrastructure, the ability for Burkinabe children to escape their environment becomes functionally impossible.

Low Teacher Attrition Rates

20. Burkina Faso has low teacher attrition rates which contributes to a lack of quality education as it costs money to continually rehire and retrain new teachers as well as leading to instability in the classroom. Specifically, attrition varies widely based on parameters like education level, gender, geographic region, conflict incidence, and more. A comprehensive study from the Centre for Global Development found that from 2015-2019, about 12 percent of teachers left the workforce. In addition, female teachers have 11 percent lower odds of staying in the workforce, teachers with university-level education are 20 percent more likely to leave the workforce, and administrators have higher retention.¹⁷ The study also found that there was a relationship between urbanicity and leaving the teaching profession.

21. Low teacher attrition uniquely matters in low-income developing countries because recruitment and consistency are hard to come by, so teacher shortages compound and create large-class sizes and limited resources which have led to only one in three early primary students in Burkina Faso having met what is considered minimum proficiency level in the language of instruction, only one in five students can count more than 80 (a skill usually gained by the second grade of schooling), and in both language and math, students in Burkina Faso performed slightly lower than the mean across the countries in the study.¹⁸

The Burkina Faso government must enhance its efforts to retain its teachers by strengthening monetary incentives like in Namibia, creating opportunities for

¹⁷ Biniam Bedasso and Amina Mendez Acosta. "The Teachers Who Leave: Teacher Attrition in Burkina Faso", *Centre for Global Development*, July 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/teachers-who-leave-teacher-attrition-burkina-faso.pdf>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

professional development, and heightening overall teacher satisfaction with material benefit packages that reward long tenures within the public education sector. Without long-term retention, Burkina Faso will continue to suffer from inadequate and inaccessible education due to mass teacher shortages as well as low-quality teachers.

The Committee should enquire what measures Burkina Faso is taking to increase education programmes, and should emphasise the role of education in cultivating a more actively engaged civil society in the public and political life.

Adult Literacy Rates

22. While a substantial amount of research into the Burkinabe education system has been targeted at youth, it must also be considered that the adult literacy rate sits at 33% with 12,781,990 million adults lacking literacy skills.¹⁹ Being illiterate has numerous negative implications including a heightened risk of oppression, decreased social mobility, and loss of social and technological innovation. While the government of Burkina Faso must prioritise the next generation, the current one cannot be left to the wayside to suffer.

23. There is also a clear gender imbalance with females making up 58.3% of the illiterate population which necessitates action to centre equity and allow women to gain more education so they can better advocate for themselves.²⁰ Without proper knowledge or ability to read, they have limited power to enact change in their communities. Knowledge is power, and men in the adult sphere are disproportionately more literate, therefore they have more power.

The Burkinabe government must create educational literacy initiatives targeted to adults, specifically female adults, so they can better advocate for themselves and advance within society. It is a fundamental right that men and women be equal, the discrepancies in adult literacy make it so men can wield disproportionate power.

Lack of Political Participation Due to Insufficient Civic Education

24. While the deployment of the ACTE Africa project and the recent decree that mandates civic education in the Burkina Faso curriculum starting from the 2024-2025 school year has bolstered civic education, there is still room for improvement.²¹ The implementation of the new policy is vague with the guidelines being inaccessible to the public. In addition, the policy specifies that it only be applied to post-primary education. The Centre contends that expanding the civics curriculum will be beneficial, as (1) most students only attend primary school and (2) making civics a foundational concept can better build a stable, democratic society. As addressed

¹⁹ UNESCO Country Profile on Burkina Faso:

<https://www.uil.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/files/2022/03/GAL%20Country%20profile%20-%20Burkina%20Faso.pdf>.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "Burkina Faso introduces civic education into curriculum", 4 September 2024, <https://apanews.net/burkina-faso-introduces-civic-education-into-curriculum/>.

above, while access to both schools and teachers is an independent prerequisite to robust civic education, Burkina Faso must also refine and prioritise civic education within its curriculum. This will increase the amount of people who know their rights, their systems of governance, and incentivise increased participation.

25. Proper civic engagement can only occur when the population is properly educated on their rights in a proper democracy. In other States, surveys have found that those who are educated on mechanisms for engaging with the political process are more likely to express their engagement in the civic process later in life.

26. Civic engagement ties directly with the viability of a democracy: without proper education, people are misguided on their rights in the respective State, which therefore allows States to exploit the people. Without the education they need, Burkina Faso will continue to not recognise their proper rights as granted in the Covenant. Forming a strong democracy needs educated people, and proper education would greatly increase civic engagement in Burkina Faso.

The Committee should note how the lack of civic education exacerbates political instability and low voter participation. We urge the Committee to press the State of Burkina Faso on implementing a more robust civic education curriculum expanded to primary schools with guidelines and universal curriculum, allowing for future increased compliance under Article 25. In particular, the Committee should note the possibility of civic education in cultivating a more prosperous tomorrow for the youth of today, and should emphasise the role of civic education in combatting the current turmoil seen.

Gender Inequalities Preventing Female Engagement and Political Success

Female Representation in Politics

27. Whilst women make up a little over 50% of the population boasting 11.56 million people to men's 11.47 million, they only make up 18.3% of the legislature in Burkina Faso.²² There are 71 members of Parliament, 13 of whom are women.²³ Due to this, men have a disproportionate influence on politics necessitating policies that ensure women gain office more.

28. The government has taken steps to empower female political representation, specifically through a law requiring all political parties to have a minimum of 30% of candidates of both sexes in the list of candidates competing for election. While this law in theory would promote more female representation, its impact has been minimal.²⁴ There are numerous problems including a lack of an effective enforcement mechanism, guidelines on financial benefits of meeting the quota, a

²² Statistics from Arron O'Neill as of 15 January 2025, focused on Burkina Faso's population by numbers: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/967799/total-population-of-burkina-faso-by-gender/>.

²³ Global data on national parliaments focusing on Burkina Faso: <https://data.ipu.org/parliament/BF/BF-LC01/data-on-women/>.

²⁴ Kindly refer to "Gender Quotas and Representation – Burkina Faso", <https://tsep.africa.ufl.edu/gender-quotas-and-representation/burkina-faso/>.

lack of electability, and not applying to appointed positions. While a necessary first step, the government of Burkina Faso must revisit policies to enhance female representation in Parliament.

29. Equal representation for women and men is enshrined in every human rights doctrine. Increased female representation prompts more legislative action on women's issues with developing countries with a larger share of female parliamentarians being more likely to pass comprehensive policies on sexual harassment, rape, divorce, and domestic violence.

The lack of proportional female representation in the Burkinabe Parliament decreases efforts targeted to women and gives men a disproportionate say in political decision-making. Whilst the 30% candidate list quote is a necessary start, the Burkina Faso government must set a quota of 30% for political offices and positions themselves to ensure that women on the candidate lists are able to be elected, rather than simply just running for office.

We urge the Committee to ask what measures the Burkina Faso government is taking to achieve these aims outlined in quotas, and urge the actual implementation of quotas rather than just their use in symbolic nature.

Child Marriage as a Catalyst for Perpetuating Cycles of Misrepresentation

30. Burkina Faso is one of the ten worst countries for child marriage in the world. There are 2.8 million married underage girls, of which 548,200 were married before the age of 15, and the prevalence rate of child marriage among girls stands at 52%.²⁵ Child marriage also disproportionately affects girls, with only 4% of boys being married off before 18.²⁶ Child marriage has long-term impacts on a female's mental and physical health as well as levels of education and civic engagement. Child marriage is often a parental decision steeped in cultural tradition to protect the honour of a family and control the destiny of a daughter.
31. Bad cultural practices, like the litho, which is a practice where girls are exchanged for marriage, Pog-lenga which leads other family members to become extra brides largely against their will, and abduction in which young girls are kidnapped and forced into marriages, all perpetuate the harmful practices of child marriage.
32. Child marriage only amplifies gender inequality; the addition of more and more children into the State, who are even more likely to continue the process of inequality, further exacerbate the situation. Child marriage prevents children from going to school; women are forced to stay at home and perform household activities rather than educating themselves.

²⁵ Information from *Plan International Burkina Faso*: "The fight to end child marriage", 26 September 2024, <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/en/blog/plan-international-burkina-faso-the-fight-to-end-child-marriage/>.

²⁶ "Child Marriage Laws: Burkina Faso in a Regional Context", World Policy Centre, https://www.worldpolicycenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/Child%20marriage%20toolkit%20Burkina%20Faso_WORLD%20Policy%20Analysis%20Center.pdf.

Conclusion

33. In conclusion, the human rights situation in Burkina Faso as it pertains to civic participation remains deeply troubling. The Centre hopes the Committee has found this report valuable and will reflect its findings in the concluding observations. As outlined in this report, the Centre strongly advocates for comprehensive reforms aimed at ensuring free and fair elections, enhancing civic education, and strengthening political participation, particularly for marginalised groups.
34. In particular, the Committee should focus its dialogue with Burkina Faso on the persistent threats of political violence that have suppressed democratic participation, the lack of robust civic education initiatives that hinder long-term engagement, and the gender disparities that prevent women from fully participating in governance. These three issues fundamentally undermine the Article 25 rights of Burkinabe civil society and pose a serious threat to the future of democracy in the country. Addressing these concerns is essential to ensuring the civil society of Burkina Faso can pursue their realisation of rights to participate in the political and public affairs processes to the fullest extent possible.
35. This submission may be published on the OHCHR website or any other places necessary. For any enquiries regarding this submission, please contact primary contributors of this report: Mr. Samad QURASHI, Executive Director of the Centre, at squraishi@cvia.ch; and Global Affairs staff member Mr. Nikhil Daniel at ndaniel@cvia.ch.