

REPORT ON THE CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION IN BURKINA FASO DURING AUGUST 2002

The political activity during August 2002 slowed down, particularly because most of the politicians and members of the government were on holidays. The month was however marked by several events, among which:

- the organization of a national convention by the ruling party, the CDP, to learn lessons from its half-victory to the legislative of May 5, 2002 (57 seats out of 111, namely 51% of the votes, against 101 seats, namely 68% of the votes, five years ago)
- the commemoration of the 42nd anniversary of the independence of Burkina Faso
- and especially, the assassination of Dr. Balla Kéita, which completely has eclipsed the other political events.

Reactions to the assassination of the Ivorian political leader in Burkina Faso

In the past, Burkina Faso was known as a harbor of relative peace. Ouagadougou, the capital, was perceived as safe, in comparison with some of the cities of the neighboring countries. Unfortunately, the country has been nowadays affected by an alarming rise of criminality, particularly for three years. Criminals strike without distinction anonymous or poor citizens, or more fortunate citizens. Like the rise of corruption, the galloping criminality is modifying the situation of Burkina Faso to conform to that of the African countries in decay. Aware of the concern that gained the populations, the government tried to react by adopting in October 2001 a plan of fight against the insecurity. But the implementation of this plan has led to some violations of human rights, bringing about protests of human rights movements. In spite of their expeditious methods, the security forces that often lack of adequate means could not reverse the trend.

The last famous victim of this insecurity was Dr. Balla Kéita, a politician of Ivory Coast, who was for a long time a minister during the rule of former president Houphouët-Boigny. He was also a political adviser of former presidents Henri Konan Bédié (1993-1999) and Robert Guéi (1999- 2000), and was recently appointed as the Secretary-general of the UDPCI, the political party of former president Robert Guéi. During the political transition that led president Laurent Gbagbo to power two years ago, Dr. Balla Keita was seriously assaulted and injured by some militants of the ruling party of president Gbagbo. According to the Burkinabe authorities the Ivorian political leader had been "in voluntary exile" in Burkina for one year, fearing of his security. Unfortunately he was assassinated on August 1, 2002 in Ouagadougou.

Although Dr. Balla Kéita met a lot in Ouagadougou, people was surprised to learn that he was a political refugee in Burkina, as the political situation in Ivory Coast has calmed down. In addition, UDPCI, the party of which he was the Secretary-general, was at the moment of his assassination, represented in the government set up by the Ivorian president. Many interrogations remain when one knows that Dr. Balla Kéita was assassinated in an official residence supposed to be guarded by security forces. The political reactions in Burkina as well as in Ivory Coast were sharp, taking into account the fame of the victim. Everywhere, people hope that the Burkinabe judicial will be able to elucidate the crime.

For president Compaore, this assassination came at the worst period. Indeed, his government has been facing to a movement of protest against impunity created since the assassination of the journalist Norbert Zongo in December 1998. The president of this movement, Mr. Halidou Ouédraogo said in an interview that the assassination of Dr. Kéita was uncalled-for, and will be added in the political agenda of his movement. In an interview published in the governmental daily newspaper on August 6, the Minister of Interior made it clear that the crime could have been perpetrated or controlled from abroad: "I can simply tell you that the security branch of the police force had alerted us on the presence in Burkina of elements belonging to foreign services, in order to seek information or to even perpetrate attacks on people supposed to represent a threat for their regime. One of them who had been apprehended nevertheless was delivered up to officials of his country during February 2002 ". According to the leader-writer of the Burkinabe governmental daily newspaper, the assassination of Dr. Kéita was intended to destabilize Burkina, to cause a popular uprising comparable with that one which followed the assassination of the journalist Norbert Zongo four years ago. As far as his concerned, the Attorney General during a press conference did not exclude among his assumptions, the political track, taking into account the fact that the victim was a well-known politician.

Three weeks later, this assumption became the principal track retained by the police and legal authorities. During his second press conference on last 20 August, the Attorney General said that he had a "certainty" concerning the tracks being able to lead to the crime. Indeed, it is now formally established that before the commission of the murder, the embassy military attaché of Ivory Coast in Ouagadougou sent a letter to the Minister of Defense of his country that was published in a daily newspaper in Ivory Coast. In the letter it was question of making provisions, in particular to infiltrate agents of Ivory Coast in Burkina for the "destruction of Balled Kéita and other deserters". The Ivorian ministry of Defense, while recognizing the existence of the letter refuted the expression "destruction", estimating that the letter "had been withdrawn from his office to be handled". For the Burkinabe Attorney General this "Ivorian track" will be privileged to elucidate this crime. But one wonders if political and legal authorities of Ivory Coast will plainly cooperate with their Burkinabe counterparts.

The assassination of Dr. Kéita indeed intervenes in a context of political tension between Burkina and Ivory Coast, where live more than three million Burkinabe people. Several of these people are victims of police annoyances, of rackets, in spite of the principles established by regional organizations such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union, relating to freedom of movement of people and goods. These difficulties, for a long time, have poisoned the relations between the two countries, but they seem to have worsened these last months. President Laurent Gbagbo indeed suspects Burkina of sheltering Ivorian soldiers and opponents, and of seeking to destabilize his regime. In addition he reproached the Burkinabe president to support his main opponent, Dr. Alassane Ouattara, who was, for a long time denied the Ivorian nationality and considered as a Burkinabe, in order to prevent him from running for the presidential elections. Recently, during a meeting, the Ivorian Minister of Interior took it out on the ambassador of Burkina Faso. He blamed the Burkinabe authorities, saying that he knows that they are preparing actions of destabilization of his country by backing up some opponents. The Burkinabe government reacted by recalling the ambassador at the end of July. This shows that the relationship between Burkina and Ivory Coast worsened considerably.

Nevertheless, the governments of the two countries call for not over dramatize the situation. However, part of the media on both sides does the opposite by publishing incendiary articles. Some in Ivory Coast call the government to expel the Burkinabe people from the country, while others in Burkina Faso calls the authorities to react vigorously against the provocations and annoyances that Burkinabe people suffer in Ivory Coast. In that context, journalists become a scapegoat, particularly in Burkina Faso. The Ivorian correspondent of the AFP (French Agency Press) in Burkina, and a Burkinabe independent journalist were held for questioning by the Burkinabe police. Both were suspected to do intelligence work for Ivorian authorities. But no charge was retained against them. These interpellations caused the protests of several human rights movements and associations of journalists, who denounced the harassments against independent journalists, and amalgams and attacks against freedom of press by the Burkinabe authorities.

Beyond the bad relationships between the presidents of Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso, many voices appeal to reason. Indeed, the two countries should better concentrate their efforts on economic and social problems, instead of political disputes deriving from a lack of confidence between the two presidents. Otherwise, the people of the two countries bound by geographical, cultural, economic and human interdependences are likely to suffer from a possible confrontation, in particular the three million Burkinabe people living in Ivory Coast.