

Book Reviews

Mathieu Hilgers/Jacinthe Mazzocchetti (eds.) (2010), *Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire: Le cas de Burkina Faso*, Paris: Karthala, ISBN 978-2-8111-0419-1 (Paperback), 313 pp.

It is a lucky moment for a reviewer when a book s/he is to review is highly relevant to his or her actual living situation. As I live in Burkina Faso, I was thrilled to get my hands on Hilgers and Mazzocchetti's book *Révoltes et oppositions dans un régime semi-autoritaire: Le cas de Burkina Faso*. Since the end of February 2011, the country has been in its most precarious state of the last ten years, partly inspired by the "Arab spring" movements. In reading this book, I thought I would gain new insights into the government's strategies of maintaining power and the reasons why the opposition cannot impose itself despite the people's manifold protests. However, not all my expectations were met.

The book does not discuss the question of whether Burkina Faso today, after 27 years under Blaise Compaoré, has a "semi-authoritarian" system; instead it takes this for granted. Based on this premise, the authors present various analyses of the opposition's character and limits, split up into three parts: The first one ("Opposition, tradition et changement social") deals with aspects of the social and historical background of Burkina Faso's political landscape (with contributions by Benoit Beucher, Marion Vaast, Arnaud Bieri, and Pierre-Joseph Laurent); the second part ("Ville et contestations") looks at the specificities of the urban context (with contributions by Alain Sanou, Alexandra Biehler and Emile Le Bris, and Jacky Bouju); and the third part covers several key groups that are leading and shaping the opposition movements ("Opposition et institutions", with articles by Jacinthe Mazzocchetti, Sabine Luning, Marie-Soleil Frère, and Augustin Loada). The analytical summaries that follow each part, (written by other eminent authors: Mahir Saul for the first part, Laurent Fourchard for the second, Sten Hagberg for the third), are very helpful. The book is introduced by two essays, one presenting the concept of the book and the other trying to circumscribe the political and economic background of Burkina's present-day society. Both of these essays are written by the editors.

As well balanced this conception of the book might seem at the outset (each of the three parts even has the same number of contributions), the omission of certain key topics is astonishing. First of all, the book, being published in a presidential election year, does not mention any developments related to this event. Even if the work's original deadline were to have

been at the beginning of the year (this fact is beyond my knowledge), it would have been meaningful to have discussed at least some of the new developments related to this election (the discussion on Article 37 of the constitution, the new electoral law, the newly designed opposition's character in comparison to the 2005 elections, etc.). However, the authors refer instead to the 2005 and 2007 elections; they also prefer in general to rely on examples – as expressive as they may be – that are rather outdated and go some 10 or even 15 years back. This can be understood in the case of the movements that followed the murder of investigative journalist Norbert Zongo in 1998 (Hilgers and Frère), but it is much harder to understand when it comes to the analysis of the urban opposition, like in the contributions on Bobo Dioulasso (Sanou's and Bouju's) and Ouagadougou (Biehler/Le Bris). There were also other urban rebellions that took place afterwards that are not mentioned (the 2008 "expensive life" protests, only superficially touched on in Loada's contribution) and that could have been considered especially significant with regards to some points raised in the book. For instance, when Hilgers and Mazzocchi state in their introductory essay (8) that growing violence in every new contestation movement is an expression of a rising political consciousness amongst the population (a conclusion that will most probably not be shared by every reader), they could have found much empirical support for this (or evidence against it) in the context of the events of spring 2008. Further, an analysis of these events could have added valuable insights to Jacky Bouju's interesting view that the lack of care for public space is an expression of the missing commitment to the municipal authorities (and to the democratic principle in general).

In addition to these missing events, some key actors are also not considered: For instance, the political parties do not seem worthy of having their own chapter, and only Loada mentions the army in his text (but does not go deeper into its role). Further, trade unions are mentioned only occasionally, and the churches are left out completely; whereas looking closely at the anti-corruption network REN-LAC (Réseau National de Lutte Anti-Corruption) (Luning) is certainly interesting, it cannot replace a thorough analysis of the landscape of Burkina's associations, particularly after the springing up of groups supporting the president such as the ABC (Amis de Blaise Compaoré) and FEDAP-BC (Fédération Associative pour la Paix et le Progrès avec Blaise Compaoré). If it is true, as Biehler and Le Bris state in their contribution (133), that the opposition in Burkina Faso since the 1970s has rested on three pillars – chieftaincy, the Catholic Church and the trade unions – the omission of at least two of the three groups seems rather puzzling.

The unbalanced conception of the book with many main actors only marginally analysed makes it difficult to recognize the reasons why the op-

position was weak, an opinion stated by nearly every author. In addition, the crucial lack of political concepts in the opposition movement is not mentioned anywhere. Even though several contributions allude to the methods used by the Compaoré system to weaken the opposition, nobody presents a convincing description, not to mention an explication, of how the system actually works. Loada comes closest to this, but he confines himself to statements made by the system's former third man, Salif Diallo, that reveal the rather Macchiavellian character of the system without saying how it actually succeeds. In the same logic, Loada too often limits himself by making allusions to money being thrown around and interventions being made without naming the persons he is referring to – a fact that does not help readers who are not initiated into the secrets of Burkina's political feuilleton.

Despite these critical remarks regarding Loada's article, it would nevertheless have been helpful if his contribution had been placed in the first part of the book. Even though the focus of the volume is clearly on oppositional movements, a deep analysis of how Burkina's political system works is crucially missing from the first part of the book.

In addition, some curious mistakes tend to further reduce the generally good impression of the book: mixing up Simon Compaoré (the capital's mayor) with François Compaoré (the president's influential younger brother) (6) is as irritating as mistakenly reporting the former weekly collective sport day under Sankara's revolutionary regime as being Friday instead of Tuesday (134).

So the close observer of Burkina Faso wonders still after having completed this book why, in spring 2011, there were riots by students, policemen, soldiers and businessmen nearly every day, why the government fell and the president took over the Ministry of Defence, and why the opposition was totally unable to profit from any of this. Hopefully the authors engaged in the book can in the next volume first identify the key actors and the current events and changes in order to present a well-thought-out reflection on how this "semi-authoritarian" government has managed to preserve its power.

- Andrea Reikat