

REGIME STABILITY, POLITICAL LIBERALIZATION, AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION IN THE SAHEL

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Today, virtually all African regimes participate in the core rituals of democracy through the political institutions of multi-party elections. However, the degree of substantive political competition varies noticeably from country to country. As was the case in much of sub-Saharan Africa, the countries of the Francophone Sahel embarked on liberalizing political transitions during the 1990s. Yet, the outcomes of these transition differ greatly within the sub-region where some countries became more democratic, others staunchly authoritarian, and still others experienced regime breakdown.

During eighteen consecutive months (June 2014 – December 2015) I conducted fieldwork split between Burkina Faso, Chad, and Senegal, seeking to explain differences in the political trajectories of these three countries.

Sahelian countries face endemic structural challenges to political stability. Taken together they are considered amongst the least developed countries on earth. Their regimes struggle to control demographic change, drug and arms trafficking, and in some cases deep social cleavages. More recently, significant pressures on regime stability emerged as a result of the 2011 fall of the Qaddafi regime in Libya, the rise of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the 2012 state collapse in Mali, and the spread of Boko Haram. Given these challenges, how have certain regimes remained stable and engaged in political liberalization, while in others regimes broke down or became increasingly authoritarian?

My dissertation examines how regimes respond to social pressures resulting in political liberalization in certain cases, but the persistence of authoritarian practices in others. Through a comparative framework and fieldwork in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Senegal, my research seeks to systematically analyze the interactive and reciprocal effects of institutional reform and social pressures on each country's political development and



how these effects shape the prospects for political stability in each case.

This past year, I completed my research in N'Djamena, Chad where I worked alongside a team of university student researchers based at a local civil society organization, *Le Comité de Suivi de l'Appel à la Paix et à la Réconciliation* (CSAPR). I then returned to Dakar, Senegal where I conducted numerous interviews with elite actors to better understand differences in the country's institutional development and state-society relations. Finally, I arrived in Burkina Faso a little more than one month before the former presidential guard led a coup—which ultimately failed—against the transitional government only three weeks before presidential and legislative elections were scheduled to take place in October 2015.

While the results of my dissertation research remain preliminary, the hundreds of interviews I have conducted and documents I have collected across the three countries suggest that three important factors—civil-military relations, the

development of civil liberties, and political party institutions—can help to explain differences in the political trajectories of these three countries and perhaps others. My dissertation and fieldwork remain indebted to the invaluable advice and support of faculty at the Center for African Studies, contacts in Burkina Faso, Chad and Senegal, and the engaging community of scholars who compose the Sahel Research Group at the University of Florida.

Daniel Eizenga is a PhD candidate in political science and a former FLAS fellow (Arabic, 2010-2012). Funding for his dissertation research was provided by the UF Office of Research, the Center for African Studies, the Department of Political Science, and the Minerva Research Initiative.