Trust and mistrust in COVID-19 politics: the shattered hopes of civil society engagement in Burkina Faso

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In a democratic setting, civil society is considered to be one of the forces capable of checking on the government especially when it comes to issues that concern the public at large. The political history of Burkina Faso is replete with situations of civil society groupings confronting the governments be they democratic or authoritarian. So, at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 in Burkina Faso one expected civil society organizations to live up to the challenges of the day by checking on the actions of President Kabore government. However, this did not happen. Hence, the following research question: Why was the Burkina Faso civil society inactive during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis? Using elite interviewing techniques, I found out that low awareness of the COVID-19 threat within large swaths of the population and among members of civil society organizations accounted for the inaction of the most vocal civil society members during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis since the latter did not consider the COVID-19 pandemic issue as a political question deserving great attention. This has strong implications in terms of public trust. More precisely, it means that in Burkina Faso contrary to what the democracy promotion literature may have said on the virtues of civil society one cannot always trust civil society members to check on the government even in time of emergency such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Further research may therefore help to better understand civil society-government relations in Burkina Faso.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic, Burkina Faso, trust, democracy, civil society

Introduction

In March 2020 a member of the Burkina parliament was reported to have died of COVID-19. However, the investigative press—mainly *Courrier Confidentiel* and *Le Reporter*—found out that this was untrue since the house of the deceased member of parliament had not been subject to the precautionary care measures as edited by the ministry of health to help control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Bama, 2020a). For instance, the family members of the late member of parliament were not quarantined, nor was the whole household disinfected. Most surprising of all, nowhere did the term "COVID-19" appear on her medical bulletin.

This puzzling situation led the National Assembly to cross-examine the then health minister, and during this cross-examination the latter stuck to the official information published one month earlier (Bama, 2020b). In the wake of this, a great number of activists took to the streets of social media to bombard the health minister and her staff with questions and insults, some of them so virulent that she felt obliged to check the information her ministerial

cabinet had given her about the circumstances surrounding the death of the member of parliament. It was only at that time that she realized that she had unwillingly lied to the National Assembly, or to quote her very words, she had been misled to lie to the legislative body of her country (Bama, 2020b). Then swallowing her pride, she received the investigative journalists in her office and apologized (Bama, 2020b). But this is just one of the many facets of the COVID-19 saga in Burkina Faso, although it was the most publicized, mainly because of the political status of the actors involved.

The mis/management of the COVID-19 crisis in Burkina Faso has broader implications for political trust and for civil society engagement in particular. My research design seeks to explain why Burkina's civil society was inactive during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis despite a legacy of organized protest, and explore what this inaction implies in terms of trust in the public institutions of Burkina Faso.

As the COVID-19 crisis was unfolding, analysts expected the vibrant Burkinabè civil society to flex its muscles and engage President Kabore's government on various issues related to the management of this crisis such as the management of the COVID-19 related funds, the inability of the national health care system to cope with the pandemic, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the population, the closure of public spaces and schools, the quarantine of the major cities, so and so forth. Instead, with the exception of the street vendors' protest in Ouagadougou and a few middle-class civil servants complaining about the situation in newspapers, the Burkina Faso civil society remained almost inactive, and did not challenge any governmental decision in a very significant way as it used to do even if there was a lot to say about the inefficiency of government's pandemic response.

Naturally, one expected the civil society organizations which used to be vocal and engaged in the past to act as a counter power to the government, that is to say to speak out, all the more so as with the passage of time it became obvious that the financial opportunity structure would change with additional international aid flowing in (Bazoun, 2020). Civil society vigilance was all the more required as it is commonsensical to everybody that the socio-political system of Burkina Faso is essentially neo-patrimonial (Bayart, 1989).

However, this did not happen. Hence, this research question: Why was the Burkina Faso civil society inactive during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis? My research has found that low awareness of the COVID-19 threat among the population and the major civil society leaders led the Burkina civil society organizations to turn a blind eye to the government's decisions about the management of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. And this inaction has had strong implications in terms of political trust.

In this COVID-19 saga in Burkina Faso there is no doubt that members of civil society—such as the cyber activists in the case involving the minister of health—played a great role in unraveling some parts of the COVID-19 intrigue. To understand what underpins this sort of civil society activism in Burkina Faso, it seems necessary to look back to the past socio-political life of this West African country located in the heart of the Sahel zone. Thus, after giving an overview of the scientific literature about civil society engagement in Burkina Faso, I will go on to the present the concepts and methodology used, and finally the findings of my research.

Understanding the vibrancy of the Burkina civil society—A historical and sociological perspective

From the political science perspective, there are very few experts (Baglione, 2015) about civil society engagement in Burkina Faso. To the best of my knowledge, only three great Africanists took interest in analyzing and systematically studying the engagement of civil society in Burkina Faso, and all of them seem to belong to the same school, to wit, a school that highlights the confrontational and political aspects of this engagement.

To begin with, there is this article written by Professor Augustin Marie Gervais Loada and published in the prestigious French speaking Black Africa focused magazine called *Politique Africaine*. According to Professor Loada, Burkina Faso can boast of having a vibrant civil society, and this since the 1960's. In fact, even if Burkina Faso was subject to a sort of political instability marked by numerous coups d'Etat and military rule as many African countries were in the post-independence period, one may argue that there was plenty room for a vibrant civil society in this Sahelian African country. For instance, it is noteworthy to remember that Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) was one of the first African countries to oust its president after massive street demonstrations that lasted for days. In fact, in 1966 long before the 1990 democratization wave swept across the African continent the first president Maurice Yameogo was forced out of power after days of mass protests led by civil society organizations such as trade unions, students' associations, etc. who were protesting against the regime's mismanagement of public funds. As a matter of fact, after a luxurious wedding ceremony and a costly honeymoon in Copa Cabana in Brazil, president Yameogo realized that the state coffers were empty and therefore decided to reduce the salaries of the civil servants. In addition, the powerful local Roman Catholic Church leadership resented the president's divorce from his first wife. With his decision to remarry, he declared a war on two fronts, a war which he would eventually lose on January 3rd, 1966.

A military transition replaced him. However, in 1970 the military junta decided to organize a presidential election, of which the incumbent president was a candidate. The rationale behind this unusual move was that General Lamizana wanted to boost the legitimacy of his autocratic regime. Much to everyone's surprise, the latter had to face a runoff with a civilian as a rival candidate. In the end, General Lamizana won this presidential election, but the lesson drawn was that the ruling military was not all powerful and could be caught off their guard, with the dynamism of the trade unions, the religious organizations, the political parties of the country capable of saying no to the ruling military junta. At that time, some Africanists wondered how a poor country like Burkina Faso could afford the luxury of democracy, on a continent where coups d'Etat and civil wars were commonplace (Loada, 1999).

After almost 15 years in power, General Lamizana's regime collapsed and a new military junta came to power. The 1980 coup d'Etat of Colonel Saye Zerbo opened a period of great political instability during which leftist and rightist politically minded organizations would fight for power. The struggle for power would eventually result in the 1983 Sankara revolution that lasted for 4 years. Civil society organizations really had

a hard time with the 1983 revolutionaries. For instance, the freedom of the press was seriously curbed with some journals having their headquarters burned (Loada, 1999). But, the trade union organizations were the ones which bore the brunt of the revolutionary anger (Loada, 1999) since they were accused by the revolutionary regime of being the puppet of the international imperialism. For example, in 1984 thousands of primary school teachers were sacked by the government accusing them of having participated in an unauthorized strike. In addition, the traditional chiefs and religious leaders were ostracized. In the eyes of the revolutionaries, leaders of civil society organizations were not patriots, but mere instruments in the hands of outside powers. Consequently, the 1983 revolutionaries believed that for a better development and faster progress of the country refractory civil society forces should be excluded from the management of the public affairs.

On October 15th, 1987 Thomas Sankara died in a military coup which brought Blaise Compaoré, then second in command, to power. The new military regime decided to improve civil society-government relations. In fact, it set out to undo what the 1983 revolutionaries did. For instance, the dismissed school teachers were reintegrated, the various bans on the freedom of the press lifted, the harassment against the traditional chiefs and religious leaders stopped. The latter were even acknowledged as full partners in the management of the political business. This reversal strategy was reinforced and consolidated with the adoption of the 1991 Constitution which clearly stated that the freedom of expression was now the cornerstone of Burkina political life. From then on civil society organizations were no longer to be forced out of the socio-political landscape of the country. This period can therefore be considered as a sort of "Arab Spring" for civil society organizations in Burkina Faso.

However, this argument should be qualified since it is common knowledge that the Compaore regime was in essence autocratic. In fact, the desire of this autocratic regime to control civil society organizations led to a sort of polarization of the associational landscape in Burkina Faso (Loada, 1999). In theory and on paper, civil society organizations were free, but the real picture was rather gray since Blaise Compaore and his regime managed to not only control the actions of the civil society organizations such as the traditional chiefs and the religious leaders who were grateful to the new government for having saved them from the claws of the 1983 revolution (Loada, 1999), but also ostracize or crush civil society organizations that were not supportive to the government. A strong strategy of clientelism was therefore devised to attract members of less confrontational civil society (Loada, 1999). Of course, not all of the civil society organizations saw their leaders lured into the Compaore regime's trap. For instance, left wing trade unions such as la Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina (CGTB), l'Association nationale des étudiants burkinabè (ANEB), or the more liberal organization of le Mouvement burkinabé des droits de l'homme et des peuples (MBDHP) refused to bow down to the autocratic regime and adopted a much more confrontational stance against the government (Loada, 1999).

The same polarization applied to the press which was highly divided during the Compaore era. In fact, if on the one hand the Compaore regime could boast of having some newspapers under its control, on the other hand there was this investigative press that was very critical to the government (Loada, 1999). The most illustrative example of this critically minded press was the journal L'Indépendant of Norbert Zongo, whose assassination in 1998 triggered massive demonstrations that shook the Compaore regime to its roots.

Ernest Harsch and Steg Hagberg are the other two scholars who detail the "politics of the streets" (Harsch, 1999) of the confrontational branch of the Burkina civil society during the massive demonstrations that ensued from Norbert Zongo's assassination. Ernst Harsch began by presenting the socio-political context that led to the massive demonstrations in Burkina Faso in the aftermath of Norbert Zongo's death. In fact, Norbert Zongo's death took place in a context of a "long list of similar killings and disappearances under Compaoré's government, despite the formal trappings of constitutional democracy" (Harsch, 1999). The MBDHP, a civil society organization focused on the defense and promotion of the respect of human rights in Burkina Faso, "tallied 101 people believed to have been the victims of police or other politically motivated killings between 1989 and February 1999" (Harsch, 1999). The victims were mainly "prominent opposition political figures and intellectuals, but mostly student demonstrators, villagers involved in local disputes, soldiers viewed as security threats, motorists who failed to stop at police checkpoints, and others who happened to run afoul of the authorities or of those in uniform" (Harsch, 1999). Ernst Harsh asserted that none of the above mentioned victims was ever "brought to trial" and found guilty. All these killings were arbitrary, which means that the killings took place without a due process of the law.

In addition to this context of rampant repression, the Compaoré's regime was corrupt. Business malpractices, numerous cases of self-enrichment, "overt displays of wealth," "dubious dealings of government officials and (the ruling party) leaders (…)" (Harsch, 1999) were commonplace to such an extent that they "have stirred much public anger" (Harsch, 1999) even though one could acknowledge that corruption "(had) not reached a sufficient scale to seriously disrupt the economy or cause a major concern within the business community (…)" (Harsch, 1999) as had been the case in Zaire under Mobutu's rule. And it is important to note that there were strong "links of solidarity that bind together (the) political-business elite" (Harsch, 1999). For instance, two business tycoons—one of whom was the mother-in-law of President Compaoré's younger brother—"tried to get Norbert Zongo to drop his investigations into the death of François Compaoré's driver (…)" (Harsch, 1999). It is needless to say that none of those actors of corruption was ever brought to justice. Consequently, an atmosphere of "impunity enjoyed by the authorities over human rights violations (and economic scandals)" (Harsch, 1999) prevailed.

It was against this background of generalized corruption and impunity that street demonstrations started in December 1998 in the aftermath of Norbert Zongo's death. These demonstrations were mainly urban-based in the sense that they rarely reached the villages of the country. One may say that they barely went beyond the outskirts of major towns such as Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. They also involved urban youth, mainly "students

and other youths, but soon salaried employees, professionals, street vendors (…)" (Harsch, 1999). These protests came in various forms of rallies, marches, sit-ins, tract releases, "villes mortes" protests, etc. (Harsch, 1999). The umbrella movement that was in charge of coordinating these protests was called *Collectif d'organisations démocratiques de masse et de partis politiques*, regrouping 47 opposition political parties and civil society organizations such as "women's associations, media and lawyers' groups, student formations, trade unions and numerous other societal organizations" (Harsch, 1999). Most of the time these protests were intended to be peaceful, but violence would sometimes break out even though the police forces were said to have shown restraint, especially when some leading figures of ruling party "encouraged the formation of armed party gangs and irregular militias, which displayed particular brutality toward protesters, leading to some reported deaths" (Harsch, 1999).

Sten Hagberg has provided a very interesting ethnographical analysis of the "politics of the streets" that ensued from Norbert Zongo's death. He has highlighted two main aspects of the Burkina civil insurgency in the 2000's. First, demonstrators placed a special focus on ethics in Burkina domestic politics. By rejecting the prevailing "culture of impunity" (Hagberg, 2002), they were sending a clear message to the political elite that certain misdemeanors should not be accepted. By so doing, they were redrawing the ethical boundaries of the public sphere that should not only exclude repression and impunity in politics, but also include some "commonly shared and morally loaded ideas of how to practice politics (in Burkina Faso)" (Hagberg, 2002). They wanted an end to "the very acts of the political power-holders that demonstrate the moral erosion" (Hagberg, 2002).

That is the reason why one may argue that they were in fact trying to set new sources of political legitimacy in Burkina Faso, hence the naming of and reference to two political figures Thomas Sankara and Norbert Zongo as inspiring role models for the Burkina Faso youth (Hagberg, 2002). This clearly refers to political symbolism. As Hagberg (2002) contended in his ethnographical article on Burkina civil insurgency in the 2000's, "Norbert Zongo represented something more than the content of his articles; for many people, he came to symbolize the courage to speak out and tell the truth, a virtue celebrated in principle but much rarely translated into practice". By choosing these two figures as their icons, the demonstrators were in fact using "the discourse on truth and courage (since Thomas Sankara and Norbert Zongo are believed to have stood for truth and the dignity of the masses) to urge President Compaoré to take action" (Hagberg, 2002).

Extraversion is no doubt the second aspect of the Burkina civil insurgency in the 2000's. Reacting to the dependency theories that highlight the marginalization of the African continent Jean-François Bayart, a French political scientist (Africanist), coined the concept of extraversion to emphasize the fact that being weak does not necessarily mean being passive. In his classical book on African politics, *L'Etat en Afrique: La Politique du Ventre*, he strongly argued that dependency is the main mode of action that African societies and elites have been using when interacting with the outside world (Bayart, 1989). He asserted that in order to conquer or to consolidate their political power African elites do not hesitate to resort to outside help in terms of political, economic and military resources (1989).

This is exactly what happened during the socio-political crisis following Norbert Zongo's assassination. In effect, both opposing sides tried to mobilize support on the international stage. For instance, the presidential side called in a renown French lawyer Maitre Olivier Sur to defend President Compaoré's younger brother while on the side of the civil society a then famous French journalist Robert Ménard of *Reporters Sans Frontières* came to offer his help to unravel the truth about Norbert Zongo's death (Hagberg, 2002). Finally, one should not forget to mention the influence of international aid donors during the Burkina civil insurgency. For instance, "some of the major donor institutions (including the United States of America, Denmark, Austria, and even France) expressed their concern about Zongo's death and other rights violations" (Hagberg, 2002). And as Burkina Faso is an aid dependent country, the influence of "major donor institutions" was all the more evident during this crisis. In a nutshell, one may argue that through the process of extraversion Burkina national politics got linked up with global processes during the civil insurgency of the 2000's (Hagberg, 2002).

To sum up, one may contend that Africanist scholarship on civil society engagement in Burkina Faso has highlighted three main points. Firstly, the Burkinabè civil society has always been polarized since independence in the 1960's. That is why one can easily perceive that the Burkina Faso associational landscape was and is still divided into two main parts: the pro-government associations which are supportive to the regime in power, and the other associations which are in large part very critical to the government. The domestic politics of Burkina Faso has largely been shaped and rocked by this polarization which sometimes has produced serious insurrectionary clashes such as the one in 2014. Secondly, whether pro-government or confrontational civil society associations have always be linked up with the external world through various means such as international aid and consultancy activities. Finally, historians and political scientists have paid great attention only to the confrontational aspects of the civil society engagement in Burkina Faso. Little effort has been made to understand why in certain situations of national interest civil society organizations, especially those who are really confrontational, have not been active as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Delving into this untouched subject will be the core of my article. However, before anything it seems convenient to not only describe and operationalize the concepts that I have used, but also present the methodology used.

Concepts and methodology

Civil society

A Hegelian inspired conception considers civil society not only as "the sphere of relations between the family and the state, (but also) a place where mutual needs are met and contractual terms defined" (LeVan, 2011). From the Hegelian perspective, civil society and state are "intertwined rather than inherently independent (…)" (LeVan, 2011). Still building on Hegel's views about civil society, Darren Kew and Chris Kwaja define civil society as "an arena of public activity outside of the state, but organically tied to it, and playing a mediating role between the state and the individual

arenas" (2018). In Hegelian terms, civil society is presented as "the Middle Sphere" (Kew and Kwaja, 2018) where the state and the individual arenas meet. But, it is the Tocquevillian conception of civil society which seems to have found the favors with the democratization literature.

From the Tocquevillian perspective, the concept of civil society refers to all forms of organizations which are not part of the state, but are active in the political public sphere. A Tocquevillian definition of civil society lays an emphasis on the following aspects. As a matter of fact, it presents civil society as "the realm of private voluntary associations, from neighborhood committees to interest groups to philanthropic enterprises of all sorts (…)" (Foley and Edwards, 1996). The specificity of these associations is that they tend to "foster patterns of civility in the actions of citizens in a democratic polity" (Foley and Edwards, 1996). It does not matter very much how autonomous these associations are vis-à-vis the state.

Building on his own travel experiences in America, Tocqueville has asserted that it is this civil society which is the real engine of the American democracy locomotive. He has therefore conceived civil society as something distinct from and independent of the political body, the state, even though its activity mainly concerns the public sphere (LeVan, 2011). Being distinct does not necessarily mean being autonomous since the main purpose of civil society, in the eyes of the Tocquevillans, is not to conquer political power, but to "foster patterns of civility" (Foley and Edwards, 1996) in the state. The independence of civil society does not necessarily entail that voluntary associations should always oppose the state; it simply means that they can serve as a counterweight to the state whenever the political situation requires it. For instance, if the state becomes authoritarian and starts curbing the basic civic rights of the citizens, it is the unfortunate duty of civil society organizations, even the pro government ones, to oppose. Consequently, one may argue that Foley and Edwards's distinction of two kinds of civil society—Civil Society I fostering civility in a democratic setting; and Civil Society II resisting the state—does not seem to be very significant since talking about civil society implies, to some extent, analyzing the two distinct characteristics of civil society organizations. It therefore goes without saying that the Tocquevillian conception of civil society, which has come to prevail within the democratization literature, is mainly governance focused.

In the 1990s, in the aftermath of the end of communism in Eastern and Central Europe a conventional view of civil society came into being. This conventional view has presented civil society as a "set of organizations (…)" (Kasfir, 1998) which displays specific characteristics. First, they should not be engaged in political activities, meaning that their goal should not be to conquer the state power. Second, they should not only be separated from and independent of the state, but also display some civic behavior (Kasfir, 1998). Finally, the conventional view lays a special focus on the ability of civil society organizations to challenge the state, thereby highlighting the confrontational aspects of civil society (Kasfir, 1998). It is only when civil society organizations display these three characteristics that the proponents of the conventional view of civil society can consider them worthwhile in terms of their ability to promote democracy (Kasfir, 1998).

When applied to the African context, the main disadvantage of this conventional view of civil society is that it excludes "much, probably most, public associational life" (Kasfir, 1998). For example, it does not take into account most of what scholars consider to be parts of the core of civil society in Africa. These include ethnic based associations (often called hometown associations), community development groups, self-help groups, front groups for government, state-run mobilization programs, professional associations for government workers, etc. (LeVan, 2011) that do not display confrontational aspects.

For the Burkina Faso context during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, I have adopted a more holistic approach that has allowed me to use a conception of civil society that encompasses almost all the actors of the associational landscape carrying out "public political non-state activity occurring between government and family" (Kasfir, 1998). This means that concretely speaking I have paid equal attention to both confrontational and non-confrontational civil society organizations in my research.

In Burkina Faso as elsewhere in Africa, the confrontational components of civil society are the most visible even though quantitatively speaking they are the minority. Based on data drawn the 2014 insurrectionary experience of the country and the most recent political events, one may argue that the number of the most vocal of the confrontational civil society organizations is not >20. These civil society associations are mainly politically oriented, and they tend to resist the state.

However, those associations that tend to support the state are much more development focused, providing health care and other services that the state cannot, and they are greater in number. One government official, who supervises the activities of health focused associations, has recently said that there are more than 23 organizations of various kinds focused on development and controlled by the state. For example, to fight the spread of the COVID-19 the state has largely channeled its funds through these development focused organizations that it controls. It is needless to say these organizations are also the flag bearers of the government COVID-19 related policies. The main instruction these associations got from the government was to raise the awareness of the population concerning the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby facilitating the implementation of the various health-related and COVID-19 specific decisions that the government has taken.

Political trust

Trust is a very slippery concept to define. Warren (2018) has defined trust as a particular type of relationship existing between two individuals, or between an individual and entities. "By trust", he wrote, "I mean an individual's judgment that another person, whether acting as an individual, a member of a group, or within an institutional role, is both motivated and competent to act in the individual's interests and will do so without overseeing or monitoring". There are a lot of types of trust. However, the type of trust which concerns my research topic is what Mark Warren (2018) has labeled "institutional trust". For Mark Warren (2018) trusting a particular institution simply means trusting the person or people holding "an office defined by the rules that comprise the institution". He has gone on to distinguish two types of

institutional trust: first-order institutional trust and second-order institutional trust.

Broadly speaking, the first-order institutional trust concerns "those parts of government with missions to provide (common goods)" (Warren, 2018). In a well-functioning democracy, citizens expect to be "treated impartially and fairly, just like any other citizen. They should be able to demand and receive equitable treatment and support from public entities. In all such cases, we view those with roles in these parts of government as holding a public trust" (Warren, 2018).

The second-order institutional trust concerns "political institutions such as legislatures" (Warren, 2018) whose role is to resolve conflicts within the political entity. However, it is common knowledge that the "interests between the institution and citizens do not necessarily align" (Warren, 2018). That is the reason why, at least theoretically, it is expected that citizens display "engaged distrust" (Warren, 2018) toward these political institutions, "using their powers of talking, advocating and voting to ensure that political bargains and compromises are as close to their interests as possible" (Warren, 2018).

In my work, I have chosen to extend the conception of the second-order institutional trust to the executive branch of the Burkina political body. In fact, it is the executive branch (the government) that has devised and monitored all the anti COVID-19 pandemic measures. Except a fact-finding mission carried out by a group of members of parliament and the cross-examination of the then health minister, the legislative body did not play a very significant role. It is the government, through its ministry of health and the public agency called CORUS,[1] which has played a leading role in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Burkina Faso. It is therefore understandable that my analysis of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis should be focused on the political trust in the executive branch. In other words, I have tried to see to what extent civil society organizations (both confrontational and non-confrontational) have displayed "engaged distrust" (Warren, 2018) toward the government during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To measure this political trust, I am going to use the Afrobarometer data.

My hypothesis

So, my hypothesis can be stated as follows: low awareness of the COVID-19 threat within the Burkinabe population and among members of civil society organizations can account for the inaction of the civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these organizations considered the COVID-19 as a routine matter that should be managed by the government. Furthermore, it has not been seen as a political issue deserving greater attention. Understanding the perception among civil society activists of the COVID-19 pandemic is the key to uncovering what underpins the civil society inaction during the COVID-19 pandemic. This inaction has had some implications in terms of institutional trust.

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1 CORUS = Centre des Opérations et des Réponses aux Urgences Sanitaires. CORUS is the government agency in charge of managing public health related emergencies.

Methodology

As regards methodology, I have used elite interviewing as the main technical tool to uncover the "attitudes, values and beliefs (…)" of the Burkinabè civil society leaders and health care bureaucrats and practitioners concerning the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Burkina Faso. The chosen area is Ouagadougou, the capital city where the main decision makers live and work, a kind of a local Washington, D.C. Random sampling is the sampling method used, which means that I have interviewed almost anyone at hand provided that the latter's profile is the right one. In this way, one may argue that my sampling method is also purposive since I have selected "individuals on the basis of certain characteristics…" (Mosley, 2013).

Concerning the validity of my research design and conduct, I may say that I have paid attention to the socio-political context in which I have conducted my research project, which has always helped me "check the validity …." (Mosley, 2013) of the answers of the respondents as my "research project progresses" (Mosley, 2013), all the more so as I can boast of being knowledgeable about the socio-political context of Burkina Faso. Finally, I have considered "how well interview participants' accounts fit with journalistic accounts of the (COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Burkina Faso)" (Mosley, 2013).

To ensure that the data collected are reliable, I have always asked for a permission to record the interview, though in certain cases the respondents have declined the request. Even in this case, I have taken sufficient notes and used a lot of probes to make sure that the information collected can be relied on. In addition, I have used the "triangulation strategy to compare the answers received (…)" (Mosley, 2013). It is worth noting that prior to interviewing, I have read the local press extensively. In addition, I have also been observing the associational landscape of Burkina Faso since the 2014 civil insurgency that toppled the Compaore regime. These different techniques have been combined so as to strengthen the validity of the elite interviewing technique that has been used.

The shattered hopes of the Burkinabè civil society engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the implications thereof in terms of political trust

Like any other country where the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, there was a sort of obsessive fear nearing a massive panic in Burkina Faso in March 2020 (Hervé, 2020; Lafrance and Marbot, 2020). According to one respondent, this was largely due to the impact of media reports about the COVID-19 related death tolls in western countries. Unconsciously, the health officials came to believe that if the situation was bad in developed countries, then with the poorly equipped and ill-prepared healthcare system one should expect the worst to happen in Burkina (Lafrance et al., 2021). That is the main rationale behind the long list of precautionary measures hastily copied from the West and China: curfews, quarantines of major cities, closures of schools, churches and marketplaces, ban on rallies, etc.

However, with the passage of time the worst expected failed to materialize since the COVID-19 related statistics did not raise much alarm even though there were some victims, some of whom were due more to the bad quality of the health care service provided than the COVID-19 disease itself (Bazoun, 2020; Hervé, 2020). All in all, everyone started to relax when it became evident that the COVID-19 pandemic was not more frightening than anything else.

The other good news is that the local scientific community has proven to be dynamic with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. In collaboration with western laboratories, research institutes and medical centers, Burkinabè scientists and medical practitioners managed to show their potential. In fact, according all the respondents a lot of activities such as conferences, surveys, tests on the local medicine etc. were organized to the great satisfaction of the majority of the stakeholders. As a result, the government went on to revise its initial position on the COVID-19. In addition, it is difficult to argue that the lack of scientific knowledge about the COVID-19 is the reason for the inaction of civil society during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Burkina.

The third and the last piece of good news is about the generosity of the international donors. All the respondents agreed that, though timid at the beginning, international aid was crucial in the fight against the COVID-19 in Burkina Faso. For example, various elements such as medical equipment, reagents, face masks for the medical personnel were made available thanks to foreign aid. Two respondents acknowledged that the lack of reagent was so crucial at the beginning that health officials could not but have one laboratory ready for anti-COVID tests. Needless to say that this problem got solved when international donors started writing checks to the government. In a nutshell, foreign aid came from various sources such as bilateral donors such as France, the United States of America, etc., multilateral institutions such as the African Union, the World Health Organization, and individuals such as the Chinese entrepreneur Jack Ma.

However, the bad news is that the vast majority of the population—especially in Ouagadougou—remained indifferent to all the COVID-19 saga in Burkina Faso. In other words, there was a low public awareness of the threat that COVID-19 represented. The best indicator of this situation is no doubt the fact that only a very small portion of the population got vaccinated, although according to one respondent 95% of the population had contracted the virus, but in most cases they did not get sick. In other words, few people bothered about getting vaccinated despite the fact that the anti-COVID-19 vaccines were free.

Undoubtedly, this low public awareness is the reason for the inaction of the Burkina civil society, especially the more confrontational one. By inaction, I do not mean that civil society organizations did not organize anything during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. What I mean is that they did not undertake the sort of activity which questioned the governmental decisions in such a way that the government was obliged to revise them, even though one may mention the resignation of the boss of the public agency in charge of the management of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. This resignation seems to have been caused much more by bureaucratic infighting than anything else related to civil society engagement directed toward demanding more accountability in public agencies.

This inaction is all the more surprising as it is commonly known within civil society circles that most of the governmental decisions to fight the COVID-19 were not context based, but instead were copied straight from the western countries and China on the assumption that what was successful outside would be efficient inside. According to one respondent, this form of mimetism did not facilitate their sensitization campaigns since very large swaths of the population did not show a particular interest in any anti-COVID-19 campaigns. Some people were even aggressive to anti-COVID-19 campaigners. In effect, there was very little popular trust in the anti-COVID-19 measures taken by the government.

Since civil society leaders are rational beings and keen observers of the socio-political situation of the country, they did not think it worth engaging any form of confrontation with the government. However, there were many possible bones of contention which civil society organizations could have picked up against the government. For instance, one can mention the alleged mismanagement of the COVID-19 related funds. Furthermore, there were some cases of misinformation and other malpractices. In addition, the anti-COVID-19 measures had a serious impact on the economy.

Anyway, the whole attitude of the civil society leadership was all the more surprising as what was at stake was the survival of the population. What could have been expected from the protest-prone civil society associations was a sort of "engaged distrust" (Warren, 2018) vis-à-vis the government, to wit, "citizens using their powers of talking, advocating and voting to ensure that political (and managerial) bargains and compromises are as close to their interests as possible" (Warren, 2018). This did not happen at the crucial times of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and this is what I have termed the shattered hopes of the Burkinabè civil society engagement.

These shattered hopes of the Burkinabè civil society engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis have had some implications in terms of institutional trust. The latter is defined by Warren (2018) as the fact of "trusting an institution", that is to say, "trusting a person who holds an office defined by the rules that comprise the institution" (Warren, 2018). Institutional trust is important for democracy because "without trust in institutions, not only is mass democracy unworkable but also most of those features of the developed democracies that citizens take for granted: personal security and freedom, welfare supports and protections, banking and pensions, extensive economic divisions of labor that generate wealthy societies, and on" (Warren, 2018). There are two types of institutional trust: the first-order institutional trust and the second-order institutional trust (Warren, 2018). The former refers to trust in public agencies while the latter alludes to the trust in political bodies such as the legislatures and the executive (Warren, 2018).

Contrary to the 2018 Afrobarometer findings which put a score of more than 40% of second-order institutional trust for some governmental agencies in Burkina Faso, I have found that the popular trust in public agencies (the health care system in this article) was very low during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Burkina Faso. This weak second-order institutional trust has something to do with the fact that both the government and the public administration are pregnant with various forms

of neopatrimonialism such clientelism, corruption, fraud, rent-seeking, etc. The governmental anti-corruption body has just published the findings of its most recent investigations which clearly state that the COVID-19 related funds have not been properly managed. This weak second-order institutional trust could have spurred the civil society organizations to be vigilant and engage in a form of distrust that could have pushed the government to show less mimetism, and be more sensitive to the interests of the populations. One may therefore argue that the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is a sort of missed opportunity for the Burkina Faso civil society organizations to act for more accountability in the management of public affairs.

The study of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis in Burkina Faso has also revealed that government remains a strong actor of the associational landscape. In addition to its classical role of creating "the institutional framework, the space in which the groups and associations of civil society take shape and carry out their activities" (Rosenblum and Lesch, 2011), the Burkina government is also the sponsor of at least three umbrella civil society organizations which have been used as the main channel for the implementation of the anti-COVID-19 measures among the populations. These umbrella civil society groups worked as organizations in charge of "state run mobilization programs" (LeVan, 2011) during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Their duty mainly consisted in organizing sensitization campaigns, distributing face masks and the anti-COVID-19 gel, etc.

These government-sponsored associations are less likely to be confrontational, Obadare, that is to say that the probability of their showing some "engaged distrust" toward the government is very low. Democracy promotion proponents will be less optimistic when they come to know that these pro-government associations are greater in number than the confrontational ones (Warren, 2011; Obadare, 2011). However, this does not mean that the government being the civil society patron is not a good thing. But, in a socio-political context rampant with clientelism, rent-seeking and corruption, one may wonder if government-sponsored associational landscape can be as conducive to democracy as Tocqueville thought of American civil society associations in the nineteenth century.

The great influence of international donors is another issue when it comes to analyzing the role of civil society in terms of democracy promotion. African civil society organizations have always benefitted big largesses from the donor community since the latter believes that supporting civil society will foster democracy in autocratic regimes and promote development (Kasfir, 1998). It has therefore come as little surprise that international donors did not hesitate to support the anti-COVID-19 activities of civil society organizations. Official statistics have shown that anti-COVID-19 foreign aid amounted to more than 10 billion of the local currency. This donors' influence may have some implications in terms of governance and democracy promotion since certain donors are believed to have their own hidden agendas that may be detrimental to the formation of a pro-democracy civil society associations (Kasfir, 1998). Anyway, the vast number of international donors has not, according to many respondents, made the appropriation of foreign aid easy, even though things have gradually improved with the passage of time.

Conclusion

Burkina Faso registered its first COVID-19 case in March 2020. On account of the potential threat of the COVID-19 virus, the historical record of Burkina civil society as a vibrant one, and the socio-political life pregnant with neopatrimonialism, one expected the civil society organizations to be vigilant, vocal and even vociferous against any missteps taken the government. However, this did not happen. In fact on the whole the Burkinabè civil society organizations have kept a low profile during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

I chose to examine why the leaders of Burkina civil society organizations decided to remain quiet in the face of the COVID-19 threat. To do so, I undertook a qualitative research based on elite interviewing; prior to conducting my interviews I read the local press and have also been observing the Burkina associational landscape since 2014.

My analysis of the various data collected indicated that the very reason for the civil society inaction during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is the low awareness of the COVID-19 threat among the population, especially in Ouagadougou. I did not take the current djihadist insurgency as an independent variable since the consensus among the ruling elite is that despite the insecurity issue the government must keep the social services working. This inaction has nonetheless had some implications in terms of political trust. In fact, the second-order institutional trust is weak, which could have spurred civil society organizations to protest. However, there has been very little protest because of rational calculations of civil society leaders who have noticed that social mobilization costs may be high with this low public awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic threat. This has led me to wonder whether, in absence of "engaged distrust" (Warren, 2018) on ordinary issues involving the survival of the population, one can consider the Burkina civil society groups to be capable of promoting mass democracy (Warren, 2018).

Nota bene

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants as verbal informed consent was considered to be acceptable in accordance with local and institutional regulations. As the Université Thomas Sankara does not yet have an official ethics committee or review board, the author provided confirmation from the institution's Department of Law and Political Science that the research adhered to all relevant ethical standards.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary

material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required from the participants as verbal informed consent was considered to be acceptable in accordance with local and institutional regulations. As the Université Thomas Sankara does not yet have an official Ethics Committee or Review Board, the author provided confirmation from the institution's Department of Law and Political Science that the research adhered to all relevant ethical standards.

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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