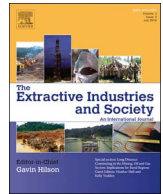




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

# The Extractive Industries and Society

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/exis](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/exis)

Original article

## Nothing will be as before: Shifting political opportunity structures in protests against gold mining in Burkina Faso

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Extractivism  
Conflict  
Protest  
Political opportunity structures  
Scale  
Burkina Faso

### ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explore what enables mining-related protests in the affected localities to become manifest. In an empirical analysis of three local conflicts over gold mining in Burkina Faso it is demonstrated how shifting political-institutional conditions on the national scale have fostered the eruption of protests at various mining localities within the country. Theoretically, the analysis is based on a contentious politics perspective, notably the concept of political opportunity structures. It is demonstrated that and through which mechanisms the overthrow of the long-standing president Blaise Compaoré at the end of October 2014 enabled the protests on the local scale. Three mechanisms are revealed. The analysis is built on primary data gathered in field research conducted between 2015 and 2017, including 70 semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observations and document analysis.

### 1. Introduction

Industrial mining is booming. Worldwide, this boom is being accompanied by conflicts and the mobilisation of civic actors (Bebbington and Bury, 2013; Bebbington et al., 2008; Bush, 2004; Hilson, 2002; Özkaynak and Rodríguez-Labajos, 2012). These conflicts are about ecological issues, the distribution of profits and taxes from the extractive sector, human rights, competition for land use and territorial claims, collective identity formed around categories such as indigeneity, ethnicity and nationality, and the representation and interpretation of culture in development policy and development discourse (Arellano-Yanguas, 2012; Escobar, 1995; Perreault, 2013). Such conflicts are sparked by specific mining projects, but often reach beyond the local disputes in the contested locations to other scales (local, national, transnational, international).

Studies that take the scalar aspects of conflicts over mining into account mostly analyse how protest movements adjust the framing of their claims according to the scale they address (Haarstad and Fløysand, 2007), the scale they claim for decision-making (Dietz, 2017; Urkidi, 2011), and how protest actors use multi-scalar networking as a resource (Anyidoho and Crawford, 2014). In so doing, these studies focus on the output dimension of protests against mining, namely the factors that facilitate a protest's success. This article, by contrast, seeks to explore the factors that enable the occurrence of mining-related protests in affected localities. In an empirical analysis of conflicts over gold mining in Burkina Faso—one of the sub-Saharan countries where the extractive

sector is currently growing the fastest (Gongo and Bax, 2016)—it is demonstrated that shifting political-institutional conditions at the national scale have fostered the eruption of protests at various mining localities in the country. Theoretically, the analysis is based on a contentious politics perspective, notably the concept of political opportunity structures (Tarrow, 1998; Meyer, 2004).

The article is structured as follows. In the next section, the concept of political opportunity structures is presented. Subsequently, the national political context is introduced, which in Burkina Faso has a substantial impact on conflicts at the specific mining sites. This is followed by a presentation of the historical development, regulation and economic significance of the mining sector in Burkina Faso, and how artisanal gold mining is practiced there. Three examples from different mining localities are analysed: a concession area for artisanal gold mining (of the Burkinabé company SOMIKA in Yagha Province) as well as two industrial gold mines run by transnational companies (the Karma mine in Yatenga Province and the Bissa mine in Bam Province). It is demonstrated that the overthrow of the long-standing president Blaise Compaoré at the end of October 2014, as a key shift in the political opportunity structures at the national scale, enabled the protests in all three cases. Three mechanisms through which this occurred are revealed. First, mass mobilisation in the cities created a mood of “everything can be achieved by the power of the people” and “nothing will be as before”, which stimulated mobilisation in the mining provinces. Second, promptly after the fall of Compaoré, many local authorities and state security forces abandoned their posts out of fear of being targeted

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<sup>1</sup> [www.land-conflicts.net](http://www.land-conflicts.net), [www.mining-conflicts-burkina.net](http://www.mining-conflicts-burkina.net).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2018.01.001>

Received 13 June 2017; Received in revised form 10 January 2018; Accepted 10 January 2018  
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by local uprisings, which opened up a window of opportunity for protest, including looting and the re-occupation of land in some cases. Third, since the regime change, spaces of liberty for civil society organisations have been widened, fostering mobilisation at the local scale in the mining areas.

## 2. Political opportunity structures

The approach of political opportunity structures within contentious politics research emphasises that protest cannot be understood by focusing solely on the internal structures, interests, capacities and resources of the actors involved. Explanations of collective action must take into account the context in which protest actors develop and act, as actors do not choose their objectives and methods of protest in a social and political vacuum; rather, they are influenced by a range of contextual conditions, such as the openness or closedness of political institutions, the existence of (potential) allies, the disunity of political elites, and the government's capacity for repression (Kitschelt, 1986; Meyer, 2004; Tarrow, 1996; Tilly, 1978). This does not mean that protest actors have no command over their autonomous agency, but that their agency can best be understood as linked to their specific context.

According to Tarrow (1998), political opportunity structures are “consistent—but not necessarily formal, permanent or national—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure” (Tarrow, 1998, 19–20). They can also be temporary or short-lived, such as when specific events open up a “window of opportunity” that can be used strategically by oppositional actors to advance protest mobilisation and claim-making.

A central argument within the concept of political opportunity structures is that people engage in social mobilisation and political protest if patterns of favouring and hindering factors shift, and that they use a specific protest repertoire strategically and thus create new opportunities for potential future collective action. Tarrow (1998) emphasises that political opportunity structures are created, disputed and shifted by actors and are continually produced and reproduced in the interaction of protest actors with their adversaries. Through collective action, protestors create and change political opportunity structures and improve the conditions for their protest (or in the worst case, for their opponents). Tarrow describes these processes as “protest cycles”.

Political opportunity structures—in particular those created by political regimes, by existing institutions in terms of the articulation of interests and the exertion of influence, as well as by available technology—also have an impact on actors' choice of strategies and means of protest. This is best described as a combination of internal and external conditions: radical forms of protest usually first come into use if they resonate with at least a section of the movement, while at the same time the political opportunity structures (such as regime type and the ability of the state to repress) allow them to be used (Della Porta, 1995, 196). Boudreau (1996, 181–186) has argued that the combination of democratic institutions and relative prosperity makes forms of protest that conform to the existing institutions more likely, such as (approved) demonstrations. On the other hand, more closed political systems combined with relative poverty demand more confrontational and non-institutionalised repertoires, which may present an entirely rational means of fulfilling needs and generating resources, for example the acquisition of resources through plundering and land occupation: “Some forms of direct action may offer an alternative to protest despite apparently robust civil opportunities precisely because they address member needs in the process of struggle. Land occupations, factory seizures, and storehouse raids all generate resources that can sustain the mass base” (Boudreau, 1996, 183). This corresponds to comprehensive critiques of the distinction between “greed” and “grievance”, a claim first made by Collier and Hoeffler (2001), that insurgencies are driven either by political demands or by economic aspirations (for the critical

debate, see Korf, 2005; Watts, 2007).

## 3. Methodology

The empirical material for the case studies was collected during several research stays in March, September and December 2015; March, April and September 2016; and March and September–October 2017. In total, I carried out around 70 semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions in Ouagadougou, at six industrial mining locations (five gold mines and one zinc mine) and numerous artisanal gold mining sites. Interview partners included representatives of ministries and subordinate authorities, local state and traditional authorities, non-governmental organisations and social movements, unions and local civil society initiatives, mining companies and their lobby organisations, as well as village residents and people involved in informal artisanal mining (*orpailleurs*). Interviewees were selected to include a wide range of civil society organisations which, in one way or another, engage in mining issues; several major mining companies, in particular those who witnessed local conflicts at their sites; and almost all relevant state agencies. The interviews focused on the “mining boom” (Chouli, 2014) that Burkina Faso has experienced from the late 2000s onwards, its drivers and economic, social and ecological impacts; on the reform of the mining law, which was passed by the transitional government in June 2015, and on the subsequent processes of its implementation; on civil society activities regarding mining policy; and on the emergence, causes of and actors in local conflicts at the mining sites. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted in French, except for one which was held in English. Focus group discussions were conducted in a mix of French and the local language Mooré (with translation to French). Interviews were complemented by numerous informal conversations, observations at the locations and participation in the meetings and mobilisation events of the social movements. At six industrial mining locations (the gold mines Bissa, Essakane, Youga, Taparko and Karma, as well as the zinc mine Perkoa) we used a standardised questionnaire to survey 60–65 residents at each location about the impacts of mining.<sup>2</sup> In addition to primary data, secondary sources were analysed, including reports, mainly from the Burkinabé press, and documents from international organisations (such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank), think tanks, the national mining ministry and related agencies, the EITI, mining companies, trade unions and NGOs.

## 4. Political transition in Burkina Faso

While conflicts over the expansion of industrial mining in Burkina Faso are predominantly manifested at the local scale in the areas affected by mining, they are substantially driven by political and social developments at the national scale, most notably the overthrow of the long-time president Blaise Compaoré in 2014 and the phase of political transition that followed. Compaoré, who came to power through a coup d'état in 1987, during which his predecessor Thomas Sankara was killed, was the president of Burkina Faso for 27 years. After years of ever-growing pressure from extra-parliamentary opposition, the military and ultimately also from within his own party, mass protests finally forced him to resign at the end of October 2014. The catalyst was Compaoré's attempt during the 2015 presidential elections to use a constitutional referendum to gain a renewed candidacy and thus potentially enable a further term in office (cf. in detail Bonnacase, 2015; Chouli, 2015; Engels, 2017a; Frère and Englebert, 2015). His forced resignation by no means occurred randomly, but was the result of two

<sup>2</sup>I am very grateful to Mohamed Dagano and Desiré Nikiema for conducting the questionnaire survey. Many thanks go to Atossa Pandazmapoo and Christian Sonntag for providing the maps. I also particularly wish like to thank Kristina Dietz, Franza Drechsel, Hermann Moussa Konkobo, Lore Raport, Ouiry Sanou and André Tibiri for supporting my research through their invaluable patience and confidence.

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