

Burkina Faso at crossroads

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Dusty road in Ouagadougou, Kadiogo, Burkina Faso, 2010.
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Context

Long spared by the Sahel's jihadi groups, Burkina Faso is now confronted with increasingly frequent and lethal attacks in its northern and eastern provinces. Whereas the armed forces have launched some operations to contain the jihadi incursion, there has also been a spontaneous proliferation of vigilantes to counter bandits in the hinterlands. This policy brief aims to examine the latent informalization of the state security apparatus and its impact on the political trajectory of the country. By resorting to the 'rule standardization'¹ thesis, I argue that while the pluralization of security institutions may apparently provide the biggest opportunity for Burkina Faso to contain the jihadi incursion, any failure from the government to keep this patchwork of (new) security providers under tight control is likely to contribute to the country's political fragmentation. This will constitute a blow to the resilience that the 'land of honest men' has shown until now and add Burkina Faso to the list of Africa's fragile states.

Navigating in a Volatile Geostrategic Environment

Landlocked and located in the heart of West Africa, Burkina Faso remains vulnerable to political, economic and social shifts of its six neighbors namely Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Togo. For a while, political analysts used to refer to this country as an 'island of stability' as it was insulated from the fragmented coalition of the Sahel jihadi groups. Since the end of the 1990s, the state retreat in northern Mali has contributed to the emergence of hybrid governance structures in this part of the Malian territory opening the door to foreign radical religious doctrines and practices. In 2012, this situation reached a peak as the National Move-

ment for the Liberation of Azawad, which had taken control of the northern cities of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu attempted to secede from Mali. Taking profit of the chaos, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its offshoots managed to hijack the political agenda initially put forward by the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad to impose a sharia-based social order in the aforementioned cities. The January 2013 hasty military intervention launched by French and Chadian forces help Mali to preserve its territorial integrity though disseminating the jihadi groups throughout the Sahel.

Part of the current instability in Burkina Faso results from the spillover of the Malian conflict. Since 2015, attacks claimed by the Islamic State in the greater Sahara, the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims, and Ansarul Islam have targeted state symbols, traditional leaders and civilians it suspected as informants in the border areas with Mali and Niger. Despite the government's effort to contain the escalating violence², jihadi groups have shown incredible resilience turning Burkina Faso's eastern provinces into another front. Contrary to northern Burkina Faso, in the east, attacks are reported to be carried out by 'unidentified armed men'. In a region notorious for banditry, the possibility that bandits turned jihadists are behind these scenes of desolation is not to be ruled out³. Yet, the modus operandi of the attacks is jihadi-like; perpetrators use improvised explosive devices and mostly target state symbols and traditional rulers.

Yet, to portray Burkina Faso's current crisis as only resulting from the Malian quagmire would obscure the local grievances on which its homegrown jihadi groups have relied to recruit. For a while, the central government in Ouagadougou has neglected its Sahelian regions in terms of infrastructures and development projects. State agents who have been posted in these provinces did not do enough to mitigate the local

perception of the government as being distant and corrupt-ed⁴. Oftentimes, they have been perceived as foreigners trying to enrich themselves instead of providing basic social services to local population resulting in the erosion of state legitimacy and authority in remote areas. Through propaganda and unconventional preaches, leaders of jihadi groups managed to question the state legitimacy and that of its intermediaries. The targeted assassination of religious and traditional rulers testify of the limits of the 'rule by intermediaries' in the hinterlands.

In addition to local grievances, other domestic factors are to be considered in the current instability in Burkina Faso. As one researcher nicely put it, 'the fact that Burkina Faso [was] spared jihadist terrorism [...] did not imply that jihadist groups were not present before'⁵. Burkina Faso appeared on the radar of jihadi groups at a time when it was experimenting a tumultuous political transition. On 31 October 2014, following a popular uprising, President Compaoré fled into exile after a twenty-seven year rule. The regime change contributed to the breakdown of the routinized security structures it had set up. Compaoré's fall also marked a major shift in Burkina Faso's foreign

policy doctrine towards its subregional neighborhood. From being a regional broker negotiating with jihadi groups, it started assuming a proactive role in the

fight against terrorism along its external partners like France and the United States and within multinational coalition forces. By ending the politics of neutrality towards the Sahel's jihadi groups, the 2015 post-transitional government turned Burkina Faso into a convenient target.

To mitigate the risks associated with the jihadi incursion, Burkina Faso has been active in ad hoc multilateral initiatives (the Liptako-Gourma Authority and the Accra Initiative) and institutionalized multinational coalitions like the G5 Sahel joint forces. Without denying the necessity of establishing a common West African security architecture to confront some of the crosscutting threats in the region, Burkina Faso should start by putting its own house in order to win the low-intensity warfare it is waging against the jihadi groups. Therefore, the government should not only initiate the reform of the security sector but also take convincing measures to curb the expanding role of vigilante groups.

Bye Bye Praetorians! Hello Vigilantes!

On 16 September 2015, Compaoré's Regiment of Presidential Security was making the headlines. On that day, the regiment had staged a coup against President Michel Kafando's provisional government. The head of the junta General Gilbert Diendéré allegedly declared that the regiment decided to take action to prevent the fragmentation of Burkina Faso due to the [looming] insecurity during the [2015] pre-elections⁶. However, under domestic and international pressures, the provisional government was restored. The coup leader and some of regiment soldiers who participated in the coup were arrested by the gendarmerie and their unit dissolved, disarmed and dispersed to the other units of the regular armed forces. This tumultuous transitional period testifies of the regiment's central role in the 'garrison state'⁷ put into place by Blaise Compaoré.

A presidential decree in 1995 created the Regiment of Presidential Security with the core mandate to protect the state institutions, the President of the Republic and any person designated him. The regiment also controlled the intelligence

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sector and was entrusted with delicate missions in the West Africa sub-region. Portrayed by analysts as an 'army within an army', the regiment was a key

dispositive in the consolidation of Compaoré's rule⁸. It was made up of nearly 1300 soldiers and was functioning with its own codes, budget and equipment⁹. The largesse that the regiment owed to its collusion with Compaoré's regime created frustration within the ranks of the regular army. Relying on a divide and rule strategy, President Compaoré was able to domesticate the praetorian behavior that has characterized the Burkinabe armed forces since independence, saving his regime from potential coups and at least three mutiny episodes in 1999, 2006 and 2014 respectively.

Most analysts see the current instability in Burkina as resulting from the security void left by the disbandment of the Regiment of Presidential Security. Trained for counterterrorist operations, the regiment was dismantled with no operational unit to substitute it. This contributed to the weakening of the intelligence services, which, for decades, had been under the responsibility of Gen. Gilbert Diendéré. Given the impressive network of informants it had built within and outside Burkina Faso, no serious analyst will deny that the regiment could have

been precious in the fight against terrorism. However, when assessing its capabilities, one should note that the rule by silence and myth were the hallmark of Compaoré's regime. The Regiment of Presidential Security was acting more like a palace guard and a political police than a republican unit as most of its elements had never left the presidential palace until the dissolution of the unit.

One of the takeaways from the 2015 coup is that it highlighted the deep fractures within the Burkinabe defense and security forces. Healing this wound should be part of any attempt to build professional and republican security and defense forces. Given the current security pressures that President Kaboré's regime is facing, it may privilege short-term military objectives over the long-term outcomes of a reformed security apparatus. Another concern is that Compaoré's *fin de règne* has been followed by the emergence and expansion of vigilante groups.

Containing the Vigilante Groups

Historically, local security initiatives have always been part of the Burkinabe security sector. Like some of its neighbors, in Burkina Faso, state security agents have coexisted with non-state security providers like the *dozos*, which enjoy a high record of legitimacy in rural areas. If their activities were initially confined to traditional rituals, the boom of the private security market in West Africa in the 1980's-90's altered their status and roles. Moreover, under the charismatic Thomas Sankara's regime, local security initiatives were strongly encouraged. It was under this logic that it established the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution endowed with administrative, economic and judicial responsibilities. Despite their accomplishment, the inability of Sankara's regime to keep the committees under control contributed to tarnishing the image of the Burkinabe short-lived revolutionary experiment. Recently, there has been some attempt to resuscitate these 'revolutionary' security structures to fight insecurity. In February 2019, the local press reported the inaugural ceremony for the establishment of the Committees of the Defense of the Republic¹⁰. If this event passed largely unnoticed, the activities of the *Koglwéogo* have been polemical.

Mostly composed of farmers and local business owners and backed by traditional rulers, the *koglwéogo* emerged in the national scene in 2014 with the aim of providing security in rural and suburban areas. Assuming unofficial police roles, they arrest,

try and punish thieves. Since their creation, the *Koglwéogo* has claimed some victories. Though figures are not available, they are credited with the decreasing rate of criminality rate in rural areas. Consequently, rural populations have shown sympathy towards the *koglwéogo* portraying them as efficient contrary to the remote, complex and expensive official law enforcement agencies. However, the brutal interrogation techniques used by the militia has been denounced by human rights organizations and lawyers who regard the emergence of this vigilante group as another index of the abuse of human rights. Their concern is well founded if one adds to the list of reported abuses the 46 Fulani who were killed in north central Burkina Faso after jihadists attacked the town of Yirgou.

So far the government has taken an ambivalent stance on the *koglwéogo* dossier. On many occasions, it exhorted this vigilante group to cooperate with the police despite the fact that no legal basis for such collaboration exists. The former minister of interior and current chairman of the ruling party, Simon Compaoré, stressed the necessity of the *Koglwéogo* given Burkina Faso's limited power projection. However, if the government were perceived by some communities to be colluding with the *koglwéogo*, this could create a security dilemma encouraging the proliferation of vigilante groups. In a country where resource conflicts frequently oppose herders to pastoralists, the proliferation of vigilante groups is likely to give an ethnic coloration to the crisis. Though the *Koglwéogo* claim to be "apolitical", they are not immune from political instrumentalization, especially in the framework of the upcoming 2020 presidential elections.

What is next for Burkina Faso?

The four-year low intensity warfare that the jihadi insurgencies have been waging against Burkina Faso has put the country's security apparatus and the resilience of the local population to the test. Since late 2016, these attacks have uprooted nearly 83,000 people from their homes; nearly 1135 schools have closed and around 105,000 people have no access to medical care in the areas affected by terrorism¹¹. Local livelihoods have been disrupted especially for communities which used to live on tourism. Consequently, the humanitarian community is appealing for US\$ 100 million to assist 1.2 million people affected by terror attacks.

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On the national level, a series of initiatives were taken. The government not only declared the state of emer-

gency in fourteen of the country's 45 provinces under attacks, but also increased the budget allocated to the defense and security forces¹². In January 2019, the government decided to provide financial aid to civil servants and bonuses to soldiers deployed in the war zone. More importantly, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré reshuffled the military hierarchy. The changes took place after new appointments in the Ministries of Defence and Security, respectively headed by Moumina Chériff Sy and Ousséni Compaoré.

Despite the unravelling of public authority, there seems to be no minimal consensus within the political class on the current terror attacks. On the reasons why Burkina Faso is under the firing line of jihadi insurgents, the government constantly points out the (in)visible hand of former President Blaise Compaoré. Throughout Burkina Faso's political history, moments of rupture have always been coped with compromise and dialogue. More than winning a war, for a country which struggled to exist as an independent state, the jihadi threat constitutes a strong reminder of the need to consolidate its nation building project.

[1] Balthasar, D. 2015. From Hybridity to Standardization: Rethinking State-Making in Contexts of Fragility, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 9:1, 26-47, DOI:10.1080/17502977.2015.993502

[2] After a series of attacks, the Burkinabe government established the 'Emergency Program for the Sahel' to respond to the political and social challenges that have resulted from violent extremism and terrorism. With a total budget of approximately \$ 835 million dollars, the program aims to support socio-economic development, public security and defense, and local and governance and infrastructure.

[3] Nsiabia, H. 2019. 'Insecurity in Southwestern Burkina Faso in the Context of an Expanding Insurgency', *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, <https://www.acledata.com/2019/01/17/insecurity-in-southwestern-burkina-faso-in-the-context-of-an-expanding-insurgency/>

[4] International Crisis Group. 2017. 'The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North', *Africa Report N°254*, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north>

[5] Crone, M. 2017. 'The Rise of Jihadi Militancy in Burkina Faso' in *Expanding Jihad: How Al-Qaeda and Islamic State find new battlefields*, edited by Mona Kanwal Sheikh, Danish Institute for International Studies, pp. 23-33, http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/1127389/2017_DIIS_Bog_Expanding_Jihad_FINAL.pdf

[6] Roger, B. 2015. "Exclusif-Général Gilbert Diendéré: 'Nous sommes passés à l'acte pour empêcher la destabilisation du Burkina'", *Jeune Afrique*, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/265138/politique/exclusif-general-gilbert-diendere-sommes-passees-a-lacte-empêcher-destabilisation-burkina/>

[7] The concept of the 'Garrison state' was coined by the American political scientist and sociologist Harold Lasswell to point out the ascent of the specialists on violence to positions of political power meaning the dominance of the garrison state over the civilian state.

[8] Sampana, L. 2013. *Le contrôle semi-démocratique des Forces de Défense et de Sécurité en Afrique de l'Ouest : cas du Burkina Faso et du Sénégal*, thèse de doctorat en sciences politiques, Département des sciences politiques et sociales, Université de Namur.

[9] Kindo, N. 2019. « Général Pingrenoma Zagré : 'Mon autorité n'était pas reconnue au RSP' », *Burkina 24*, <https://burkina24.com/2019/02/26/general-pingrenoma-zagre-mon-autorite-netait-pas-reconnue-au-rsp/>

[10] Boureïma. 2019. « Situation Sécuritaire au Burkina Faso: les CDR officiellement installé à Ouagadougou », *Wakat Séra*, <https://www.wakatsera.com/situation-securitaire-au-burkina-linstallation-des-cdr-officiellement-lancee-a-ouagadougou/>

[11] United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2019. "Burkina Faso: Overview of the Humanitarian Situation", <https://www.unocha.org/west-and-central-africa-rowca/burkina-faso>

[12] Ouédraogo, H. 2018. « Loi de finance 2019: les budgets consacrés à la sécurité et à la défense ont été revus à la hausse », *Les échos du Faso*, <http://lesechosdufaso.net/loi-de-finance-2019-budgets-consacres-a-securite-a-defense-ont-ete-revus-a-hausse/>

About

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