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**Escalating  
Conflicts  
in  
BURKINA FASO**

**Alex Thurston**

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## About the Author

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# Abbreviations

ANR	Agence Nationale de Renseignement/National Intelligence Agency
AQIM	Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb
CDP	Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès/Congress for Democracy and Progress
Fedap-BC	Fédération associative pour la paix et le progrès avec Blaise Compaoré/Associative Federation for Peace with Blaise Compaoré
ISGS	Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
JNIM	Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-I-Muslimin/Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims
MPP	Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès/People's Movement for Progress
MUJWA	Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa
ODP-MT	Organisation pour la Démocratie Populaire – Mouvement du Travail/Organization for Popular Democracy – Labor Movement
ODJ	Organisation Démocratique de Jeunesse/Democratic Youth Organization
RSP	Régiment de la Sécurité Présidentielle/Presidential Security Regiment

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In October 2014, a popular uprising in Burkina Faso precipitated a military coup against twenty-seven-year incumbent Blaise Compaoré. After a fourteen-month transition, a failed coup in September 2015, and a presidential election the following month, President Roch Kaboré took office in December 2015. The euphoria of the Burkinabè revolution, however, has largely faded: in June 2019, a national opinion poll showed that out of approximately 3,000 respondents, nearly two-thirds expressed a desire for Compaoré's return. The same respondents voiced sweeping dissatisfaction with his successors' performance on virtually every major issue facing the country, ranging from the reform of health services to the management of the mining sector.<sup>2</sup> In the Burkinabè press, commentators regularly voice a sense that the country is adrift, lacking an identity or a vision for the future – a sentiment shared by many of the journalists and civil society members interviewed for this report. Despite current and projected macro-economic growth of 6% per year,<sup>3</sup> the Burkinabè population is frustrated.

The major cause of unease among Burkinabè citizens is the rapidly escalating insecurity in the country, a crisis that came on so suddenly that even expert observers were caught off guard.<sup>4</sup> The violence initially focused on the security forces, but the targets soon broadened to include a range of civilians, including individuals and groups targeted along ethnic and even religious lines. The perpetrators of unlawful violence are plural: bandits, jihadists,<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the following people who graciously and generously helped with the research for this report or who provided feedback on earlier drafts: Inoussa Baguian, Eloïse Bertrand, Daniel Eizenga, Pierre Englebert, Philippe Frowd, Koudbi Kaboré, Frédérick Madore, Lassane Ouedraogo, Zacharia Tiemtoré, and all of those who agreed to be interviewed. Any mistakes of fact or interpretation are, of course, the sole responsibility of the author.

<sup>2</sup> Author's notes from a presentation conducted by the Centre pour la gouvernance démocratique, Présimètre, and Diakonia, "Dialogue démocratique sur les résultats du sondage d'opinion 'Présimètre' du premier semestre de l'année 2019," Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019. The percentage favoring Compaoré's return grew from 58% in December 2018 to 67% in June 2019.

<sup>3</sup> The World Bank, "The World Bank in Burkina Faso: Overview," <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/burkinafaso/overview>, accessed 10 September 2019.

<sup>4</sup> As recently as 2014, two experts concluded, "Burkina Faso is vulnerable to violent extremism, but the threat is not imminent." Augustin Loada and Peter Romaniuk, "Preventing Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso: Toward National Resilience Amid Regional Instability," Global Center on Cooperative Security June 2014, p. ix, <https://www.globalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/BF-Assessment-Eng-with-logos-low-res.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Burkinabè authorities tend to use the term "terrorists," rather than jihadists.

community-based militias, and the security forces themselves. In the north and the east of the country, jihadist insurgencies have touched off complex and self-reinforcing dynamics; in particular, the security forces' response has inadvertently boosted jihadist mobilization, while an atmosphere of targeted assassinations and community-level reprisals has fed growing inter-ethnic tensions. These trends loosely resemble patterns across the border in central Mali, and understanding Burkina Faso's insecurity requires attention to both local and regional contexts.

Yet the physical insecurity in the country's peripheries (and, sometimes, at the center) is only part of a larger and essentially political crisis.

This report argues that Burkina Faso is in the midst of a competition for power between the state, or rather one rump segment of Compaoré's old personalist ruling network, and various emergent alternative power structures; this competition is both a driver and a result of the present insecurity. These alternative structures include not just the jihadists, but also the Koglweogo militia; what might be called the "critical left"; and various private business interests. Additionally, paralleling growing anti-French sentiments elsewhere in West Africa, Burkinabè interlocutors also expressed frustration with what they see as renewed French hegemony in Burkina Faso, a degree of French domination some Burkinabè feel has not been seen since the colonial period; one youth activist pointed out that Burkina Faso's first President Maurice Yaméogo refused to give the French the kind of basing privileges that they enjoy today.<sup>6</sup> No less a figure than Defense Minister Chérif Sy has publicly questioned France's role in Burkina Faso and the Sahel.

In June 2019, he told a journalist, "They've got maybe 4,000 men in the region, they have all the military and technological resources, so I'm surprised they haven't been able to eradicate this band of terrorists. We ask ourselves a lot [of] questions: if they really wanted to, they could have beaten them, so do they have another agenda?"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Ouiry Sanou, Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Allison, "I Question France's Motives, Says Burkina Faso's Defence Minister," *Mail & Guardian*, 4 June 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-06-04-00-i-question-frances-motives-says-burkina-fasos-defence-minister>. See also "Terrorisme au Burkina Faso: Pourquoi? Que Faire?" Institut Free Afrik, December 2018, pp. 34-35.

The Burkinabè state is not going anywhere – but there is an open question of how and to what extent the state will accommodate the explicit and tacit challenges to its authority. Some of the state’s challengers deny that they have political projects at all, but the challenges are real all the same.

Meanwhile, the present crisis has exposed the diminished security and intelligence capabilities that followed Compaoré’s fall, but also the reality that the state would likely never have had the capacity to respond effectively to a full-blown jihadist insurgency. Under Compaoré, the security and intelligence services were long oriented toward the suppression of political dissent rather than the conduct of domestic counterinsurgency. Layers of state weakness, with new problems compounding older vulnerabilities, have permitted the emergence of a multi-faceted power struggle.

This power struggle intersects with rapid social change. Long-standing mechanisms of inter-ethnic and inter-religious cooperation are under strain, as are traditional hierarchies within different parts of Burkinabè society. In multiple domains, Burkinabè elites and intellectuals complain of what they see as a rising “incivisme,”<sup>8</sup> or “incivility” – a discourse that reflects anxieties about the potential unraveling of social fabrics. These anxieties are more serious than the run-of-the-mill griping that one finds around the world as elders lament the alleged unruliness of the youth. Rather, those who decry “incivisme” worry that political crises are turning into social ones. In a 2018 essay, one writer lamented, “We rudely and proudly insult the head of State, the ministers of the Republic, the leader of the political opposition, the leaders of the political parties and the civil society organizations, the opinion leaders, the journalists, the press outlets, the labor leaders, the deputies, the mayors – in a word, our leaders. We insult ourselves in front of our children...We justify the unjustifiable in the presence of our children and other children.”<sup>9</sup> Anxieties about “incivisme” are, in part, a way of expressing strong pessimism about the trajectory of the country. There is a sense that

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Soumaila Sana, “Sa majesté Kupiendieli, 31e roi du Gulmu : « La situation de deux chefs à Diabo est un défi à ma personne »,” *Le Faso*, 8 December 2017, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article80884>.

<sup>9</sup> Elhadji Boubacar, “Développement de l’incivisme au Burkina Faso: La jeunesse à l’école des adultes,” *Le Pays*, 13 February 2018, <http://lepays.bf/developpement-de-lincivisme-burkina-faso-jeunesse-a-lecole-adultes/>.

“incivisme” and “insecurité” are intertwined social forces that are undermining societies and communities.

The state now confronts, and sometimes seeks to coopt, the emerging alternative power structures in the country and the society. Yet neither a straightforward reassertion of state authority nor the pursuit of “good governance” will suffice to address the root causes of physical insecurity and social anxiety in the country. Rather, durable security and stability would require a new, more accountable and less hierarchical mode of political authority; the empowerment of citizens to more fully control their country’s natural resources; and a way to reassure Burkinabè citizens that their country’s prospects are bright. Whether the authorities have the desire or the incentives to make such changes is another question. A country long known for its social cohesion now risks growing fragmentation.

# The Regional Context: The Destabilization of Libya and Mali, and the Late Compaoré Regime's Policies Toward Jihadists

In interviews, Burkinabè journalists, civil society members, and think tank analysts often placed Burkina Faso's present insecurity into a wider regional context. In particular, interlocutors advanced two explanations: first, that the Libyan revolution of 2011 touched off a wider domino effect spurring one Sahelian crisis after another, eventually reaching Burkina Faso; and second, that the Compaoré regime formerly maintained tacit accords with jihadists, allowing jihadists to use the country as a "rear base" or "sanctuary" and leading them to attack Burkina Faso once their "patron" had left power.<sup>10</sup> This latter, Compaoré-centric explanation is extremely widespread and has been voiced by none other than current President Kaboré.

In one 2018 interview, Kaboré asserted that after he took office, "intermediaries" for jihadists visited him to "demand all-wheel-drive vehicles promised by President Compaoré...I told them to go see [him] in Abidjan [where Compaoré is in exile]"; this incident and others have been cited as proof that Compaoré had colluded with jihadists for many years. In the same interview, Kaboré said that Compaoré "does nothing to dissuade his associates" from financing terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso; Kaboré pointed specifically to Compaoré's associates Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi (see below) and Alizéta Ouédraogo as potential terrorist financiers.<sup>11</sup> Another senior member of the ruling party, speaking in a personal capacity, added that according to his sources, under Compaoré the jihadists had deposited "arms caches almost everywhere in Burkina."<sup>12</sup> Such allegations have a wider, regional context, given that many Sahelian

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<sup>10</sup> Such phrases recurred in interviews with Burkinabè interlocutors in Ouagadougou in June 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Pascal Airault, "Roch Kaboré: «Le Burkina Faso n'a pas de problème interreligieux. Mais il y a des minorités illuminées»,*" L'Opinion*, 11 July 2018, <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/roch-kabore-burkina-faso-n-a-pas-probleme-interreligieux-il-y-a-154698>.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Moussa Boly, Ouagadougou, 13 June 2019.

elites assert that other regional governments – particularly Algeria and Mauritania – also have “deals” with jihadists.

This dual explanation, pinning responsibility on the Libyan collapse and the Compaoré regime, contains substantial elements of truth but also needs to be nuanced considerably.

To begin with the Libyan revolution and its domino effect, the analytical challenge here involves balancing between the regional and local factors involved in any given Sahelian conflict. For example, it is true that returnees from Libya played prominent roles in the northern Malian uprising of 2012, but there was also deeper context for that uprising: the history of prior rebellions in northern Mali as well as the long history of antagonism and tension between segments of the northern population and the central state in Bamako.

When considering Burkina Faso’s jihadist insurgencies, especially the one in northern Burkina Faso, the influence of Mali’s crisis from 2012 is unmistakable: the key Burkinabè jihadist personality Ibrahim “Malam” Dicko spent time with jihadists in northern Mali before launching his own movement, Ansaroul Islam (“Defenders of Islam”). Ansaroul Islam also has strong ties to the central Malian jihadist leader Amadou Kouffa. Nevertheless, as International Crisis Group and other observers have emphasized, the violence in Burkina Faso has localized, “social roots” that are just as important for understanding the situation there.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, the jihadist insurgency in the north began as a non-violent social movement that then evolved in response to the rapidly shifting political environment around it, activating old and new tensions. As Nicolas Hubert observes, “The propagation of violence in Burkina Faso cannot truly be understood without taking into consideration the evolution of the Malian conflict, the land and environmental issues specific to the Burkinabè context, and the stigmatizations and exclusions practiced by the central authority against populations and regions considered peripheral.”<sup>14</sup> Burkina Faso’s crisis is not simply an aftershock of the regional earthquake that began with the Libyan revolution.

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<sup>13</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North,” 12 October 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/file/5272/download?token=NlozsYDD>.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Hubert, “Burkina Faso: Un terreau pour la propagation du conflit Malien?” Centre FrancoPaix, July 2019, p. 7, [https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019\\_07\\_N-Hubert\\_Burkina-Faso.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0TMDtBYIN1hFic4R3zAAD93MC9BbmT8YITLFYo52yc\\_8ckHNGNk1UQzC4](https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/2019_07_N-Hubert_Burkina-Faso.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0TMDtBYIN1hFic4R3zAAD93MC9BbmT8YITLFYo52yc_8ckHNGNk1UQzC4).

In terms of Compaoré's relationships with jihadists, the picture is even more complex. On the one hand, it is undeniable that Compaoré and his senior advisors, particularly Djibril Bassolé, Gilbert Diendéré (see below), and Mauritanian national Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi, played the roles of mediators and intermediaries with al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the northern Mali-based jihadist-leaning movement Ansar al-Din ("Defenders of the Religion"). Beginning in 2009, Ould Chafi negotiated directly with AQIM's Saharan field commanders to arrange ransoms for Western hostages the group had seized. On a broader level, as one interlocutor insightfully argued, the role of figures such as Ould Chafi illustrated broader tendencies in how the Compaoré network did business – Compaoré was surrounded by various "shadow persons" who handled their portfolios in an ad-hoc and seemingly self-interested manner,<sup>15</sup> sometimes drawing objections from other West African governments.

During the 2012 rebellion in Mali, which Ansar al-Din soon came to dominate, Compaoré's government not only arranged at least one hostage release but also sought to negotiate a wider political settlement between Ansar al-Din and the Malian government. That effort involved a face-to-face meeting between Bassolé and Ansar al-Din's leader Iyad ag Ghali in August 2012,<sup>16</sup> as well as several meetings between Compaoré and senior Ansar al-Din officials in Ouagadougou in late 2012. Such known contacts are part of the basis for the recurring complaint today, among some elites in Burkina Faso, that Compaoré hosted jihadists in luxury hotels in plain sight.

On the other hand, the mere fact of proven contacts between Compaoré's team and jihadists does not point to the existence of a full-blown non-aggression pact between Compaoré and AQIM. As one Burkinabè journalist argued, "the ingredients [for a security crisis] were already there" during Compaoré's time.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, by 2009 some of Compaoré's senior security officials were complaining to American diplomats that AQIM had begun to infiltrate communities in northern Burkina Faso. Already by that time, Burkinabè security officials feared

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<sup>15</sup> Telephone interview with Zacharia Tiemtoré, 25 July 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Nossiter, "Burkina Faso Official Goes to Northern Mali in Effort to Avert War," *New York Times*, 7 August 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/world/africa/burkina-faso-official-visits-mali-in-effort-to-avert-war.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=4CBA975A3C833B381AED1AD9DFDAB23B&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Germain Nama, Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019.

that they lacked the capacity to prevent AQIM from gaining a foothold there;<sup>18</sup> AQIM also kidnapped a Burkinabè-born woman and her Italian husband in Mauritania in 2009.

Amid the Malian crisis of 2012, moreover, Compaoré's efforts to mediate a political solution for northern Mali centered on Ansar al-Din rather than on AQIM. The version of Ansar al-Din that existed in 2012, it is worth emphasizing, was a fundamentally different organization than Ansar al-Din as reconstituted after the French intervention in northern Mali in January 2013. Through 2012, Ansar al-Din contained two major wings: one comprising hardened jihadists, but the other including prominent northern Malian politicians, especially from the Tuareg elite of the Kidal region. It was with these politicians that Compaoré and Bassolé negotiated, repeatedly trying to convince them to cut ties with AQIM and reach an accord with the Malian government. It is doubtful that Compaoré viewed these negotiations as a means of cutting a deal with hardcore jihadists.

Finally, one can also point out that several Sahelian states were targeted, or targeted anew, by AQIM after those countries' militaries participated in France's Operation Serval – in other words, well before Compaoré's fall in 2014. The International Crisis Group's Rinaldo Depagne has argued that amid the Malian crisis of 2012-2013, Compaoré "revised his strategy, slowly switching from arrangements with armed groups to more direct military intervention... This may have put Burkina Faso in some jihadists' firing line."<sup>19</sup> It seems likely that Burkina Faso would have been targeted by AQIM even if Compaoré had not fallen from power.

This is not to say that Compaoré's fall had no impact on the state's ability to respond to AQIM, Ansar al-Din, and their Burkinabè allies. Rather, a more complex understanding is required: Compaoré's fall did not just bring the end of certain relationships between Burkinabè authorities and AQIM, it also dismantled key structures that the departing president had used to manage the country at both a security and a political level. In the eyes of some interlocutors, in fact,

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<sup>18</sup> U.S. Embassy Ouagadougou, "Burkina Faso: MOD Discusses Wide Range of Regional Security Issues with CDA," leaked cable 09OUAGADOUGOU1136, 8 December 2009, [https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09OUAGADOUGOU1136\\_a.html](https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09OUAGADOUGOU1136_a.html).

<sup>19</sup> Rinaldo Depagne, "Burkina Faso's Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence," International Crisis Group, 5 March 2018, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-fasos-alarming-escalation-jihadist-violence>.



the revolution “deconstructed” the authoritarian system that had helped make Burkina Faso difficult for jihadists to systematically infiltrate in the first place.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Thomas Ouédraogo, Ouagadougou, 13 June 2019.

# The Fragmentation of a Political and Security Network

Blaise Compaoré came to power in 1987 in a bloody coup against his predecessor and former companion, the revolutionary military dictator Thomas Sankara (in power 1983-1987). Compaoré coopted elements of Sankara's coalition, but also reoriented state policy in a direction that was more palatable to the Western governments and international financial institutions that had been highly skeptical about Sankara's leftist socioeconomic program.

Compaoré's system was less a faceless state bureaucracy than it was a network of key personalities; some interlocutors argued that it was, above all, this network's failings – a lack of structural consolidation, state-building, and planning for a long-term, post-Compaoré future – that left Burkina Faso vulnerable to a scenario like the present crisis.<sup>21</sup> The roots of this personalization of the state date to Compaoré's arrival, which compounded earlier limitations in Burkinabè state-building. Upon coming to power, Compaoré quickly marginalized some of his partners in the 1987 coup; two senior officers, Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani and Henri Zongo, were executed after allegedly participating in what the regime described as a coup attempt in 1989. Then, appropriating existing Communist and labor union structures, Compaoré built a mass political party: the Organisation pour la Démocratie Populaire – Mouvement du Travail (Organization for Popular Democracy – Labor Movement, ODP-MT). Quickly shedding its Communist ideology, the ODP-MT came to favor the free market.

Compaoré then succeeded at navigating the pressures for democratization and liberalization that swept Africa as the Cold War wound down, pressures that led to the overthrow of military rulers in neighboring Mali and Niger. Like some other autocrats in the region, Compaoré organized presidential elections – in Burkina Faso's case, in 1991 and 1998 – and then dominated them amid opposition boycotts, low turnout, and an atmosphere of intimidation against dissidents. The ODP-MT dominated in the legislature, for example winning seventy-eight of 107 seats in the 1992 legislative elections

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<sup>21</sup> Telephone interview with Z. Tiemtoré.

(with a further six seats going to allied parties).<sup>22</sup> In 1996, the ODP-MT transformed into the Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (Congress for Democracy and Progress, CDP). Compaoré and his allies monopolized the political scene, with effects that have continued up through the present. As Dan Eizenga has written, “Despite the democratic transitions celebrated in the Sahel during the 1990s, the same indefatigable political elite class dominates politics in the Sahel as does the resilience of authoritarian politics.”<sup>23</sup> As discussed below, Burkina’s current president, Roch Kaboré, is an archetypal representation of this kind of continuity.

By the late 1990s, substantial opposition had arisen to Compaoré’s rule. A turning point came with the December 1998 assassination of the investigative journalist Norbert Zongo. Shot and killed along with his brother, a colleague, and a driver, Zongo’s death appeared connected to his ongoing series of reports about the disappearance of a driver who had worked for Compaoré’s brother François. For many Burkinabé, Zongo’s murder came to symbolize the corruption and authoritarianism of the regime. At the same time, discontent was mounting within the country and within the military. Serious mutinies occurred in 1999, 2006, and 2011, sometimes intersecting with widespread civilian protests. The 2011 unrest, which was particularly severe, drew in multiple sectors of society: soldiers, students, labor unions, and others – what some detractors saw as a country-wide display of “incivisme.” In the charged atmosphere, Compaoré’s authority was openly questioned: “Soldiers throughout the country expressed more loyalty towards each other than to their commanding officers or the head of state.”<sup>24</sup> The crisis prompted a slate of tax reductions as well as a cabinet reshuffle, with Compaoré himself taking the defense portfolio.<sup>25</sup> Popular anger toward the regime, however, did not immediately handicap its political survival: faced with the prospect of term limits in 2005, Compaoré and his supporters argued that a constitutional amendment from 2000 imposing limits did not apply to him retroactively. He won handily in both the 2005 and 2010 elections.

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<sup>22</sup> Issa Cissé, “Histoire du Burkina Faso de 1960 à nos jours” in *Le Burkina Faso passé et présent*, edited by Hamidou Diallo and Moussa Willy Bantenga, 353-394 (Ouagadougou: P.U.O., 2015), pp. 384-385.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Eizenga, “The Deteriorating Security Situation in Burkina Faso,” *Bulletin FrancoPaix* 4:3 (March 2019): 1-5, p. 1, [https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Bulletin-FrancoPaix-vol-4\\_no-3\\_EN.pdf](https://dandurand.uqam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Bulletin-FrancoPaix-vol-4_no-3_EN.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> Maggie Dwyer, *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2017), p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Cissé, “Histoire du Burkina Faso,” pp. 389-390.

In 2012-2014, fault lines widened within Compaoré's elite network, especially on the civilian side. In the security sphere, Compaoré relied on Diendéré to manage the powerful Presidential Security Regiment (French acronym RSP) and on Bassolé to manage the gendarmerie and take on key ministerial portfolios (Interior, Foreign Affairs). Yet even with these close allies there were limitations: Bassolé had limited influence in formal politics, and even with Diendéré, "the man of the shadows" who was at the center of "all the plots,"<sup>26</sup> there may have been some mistrust between him and Compaoré.<sup>27</sup> The civilian side of the network proved even more difficult to keep intact. At the CDP's general congress in March 2012, longtime party leader Roch Kaboré and his allies were pushed aside in favor of Compaoré's chief of staff, Assimi Kouanda;<sup>28</sup> Kaboré stepped down as president of the National Assembly, and Simon Compaoré (no relation to the president) ended his tenure as mayor of Ouagadougou.

These party heavyweights felt that they were being marginalized by the machinations of Compaoré's brother François; the latter was widely seen as the patron of the "Associative Federation for Peace with Blaise Compaoré" (French acronym Fedap-BC). Initially a parallel structure to CDP, in 2012 Fedap-BC mounted what one politician later called a "hostile takeover" of the party. The losing faction in this power struggle – notably Kaboré and Simon Compaoré – ultimately broke with the CDP in January 2014 to create a new opposition party, the People's Movement for Progress (French acronym MPP). Another key architect of the MPP was Blaise Compaoré's estranged former ally Salif Diallo, whose own rivalry with François had led to his political marginalization in 2008 after a quarter-century at Compaoré's side.<sup>29</sup> Amid waves of popular protest against the president, major politicians were now lining up against him, sometimes joining in the popular revival of Sankara's memory and using that memory as a cudgel against the embattled president.

Part of the intra-regime shifts in the early 2010s involved an increase in nepotism and cronyism. It is unclear whether this dynamic was

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with G. Nama.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with T. Ouédraogo.

<sup>28</sup> "Burkina Faso : Assimi Kouanda, le choix de Compaoré," *Jeune Afrique*, 21 March 2012, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/142462/politique/burkina-faso-assimi-kouanda-le-choix-de-compaor/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Burkina : Salif Diallo, un homme politique habile et pragmatique," *Jeune Afrique*, 20 August 2017, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/467227/politique/burkina-salif-diallo-un-homme-politique-habile-et-pragmatique/>.

driven by Compaoré or whether it flourished because he was indifferent. None of this is to say that Burkinabè politics were meritocratic in the 1990s and 2000s, but there does seem to have been a shift in the early 2010s to a situation where the professional politicians (such as Kaboré and Diallo) were being marginalized in favor of people whose claims to influence rested on family ties rather than political skill. For example, one rising political star in the late Compaoré period was Gilbert Diendéré's wife Fatoumata Diallo Diendéré, a CDP parliamentary deputy, whom one interlocutor referred to as "her husband's brain" and the true politician of that family.<sup>30</sup> Not coincidentally, it was these ultra-loyalists of Compaoré who would later be accused of acting as the key plotters in the failed coup of September 2015.<sup>31</sup>

In 2014, popular anger against Compaoré surged anew as the president once again confronted the possibility of term limits. Unlike in 2005, the presidency could not plausibly argue that term limits did not apply; now, the issue was repealing Article 37 of the Constitution in order to allow Compaoré to run in elections scheduled for 2015. On October 21, 2014, the presidency directed the National Assembly to consider modifying the constitution; the move provoked massive street protests, partly organized by civil society movements such as Balai Citoyen, the Front de Résistance citoyenne, and others. The conflict came to a head on October 30, as demonstrators burned the National Assembly to prevent the body from voting to repeal Article 37; notably, demonstrators also attacked the homes of Compaoré's remaining political allies, including François Compaoré, Alizéta Gando, Assimi Kouanda, and Soungalo Ouattara.<sup>32</sup> The next day, Compaoré resigned and was "exfiltrated" to Cote d'Ivoire by French forces. Throughout these events, opposition politicians followed rather than led the flow of popular mobilization, but undoubtedly part of the reason Compaoré fell so quickly was that he had already lost significant segments of the political elite, especially those in the recently formed MPP.

Initially, Army Chief of Staff General Honoré Traoré announced that he was in charge, but he was soon sidelined by the deputy

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with G. Nama.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin Roger, "Burkina : Eddie Komboïgo et la belle-fille du général Diendéré ont été remis en liberté provisoire," *Jeune Afrique*, 30 May 2016, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/329709/politique/burkina-eddie-komboïgo-belle-fille-general-diendere-ont-ete-remis-liberte-provisoire/>.

<sup>32</sup> Sten Hagberg, Ludovic Kibora, Fatoumata Ouattara and Adjara Konkobo, "Au cœur de la révolution Burkinabe," *Anthropologie & développement* No. 42-43 (2015): 199-224, p. 216.

commander of the RSP, Colonel Yacouba Isaac Zida. The latter's takeover was made possible by the RSP's superior equipment and training, as well as by Zida's popularity with ordinary soldiers and by his position as a "consensual figure of authority among army men."<sup>33</sup> Exactly what transpired among the senior security personnel during this critical period in late October and early November 2014 is unclear; Zida has said that he urged his superior, Diendéré, to ask Compaoré to step down, but Zida has also denied that Diendéré ordered him to take power and sideline Traoré.<sup>34</sup> Significantly, Zida and Diendéré are from the same village – Yako, in the North Region, which was also the birthplace of Sankara.

In any case, Zida and Diendéré soon found themselves on opposite sides of fundamental political questions, especially involving the RSP's future. Zida's tenure as head of state was brief – on November 18, he stepped aside in favor of a civilian, former Foreign Affairs Minister and United Nations Representative Michel Kafando. However, Zida then became Kafando's prime minister, leading to widespread feelings in Burkina Faso that the military had preserved a strong grip on the country's politics. Despite coming from the ranks of the RSP, Zida ultimately signed on to a decision to dissolve the Regiment in September 2015 – a decision that prompted an RSP-led coup that removed Kafando and Zida from power for approximately six days. The face of the coup was Diendéré, who headed the short-lived "Conseil national pour la démocratie (National Council for Democracy)."

Diendéré described the coup as a response to the upcoming presidential elections, objecting in particular to "the electoral code, which excludes a certain number of personalities."<sup>35</sup> This language suggests that another factor motivating the coup may have been the transitional authorities' September 10 decision to block Bassolé's presidential candidacy; amid the coup, Bassolé "made what many

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<sup>33</sup> Virgile Dall'Armellina, "'People Don't Trust Him': Uncertainty Surrounds Colonel in Control of Burkina Faso," VICE News, 3 November 2014, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yw4j8w/people-dont-trust-him-uncertainty-surrounds-colonel-in-control-of-burkina-faso](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/yw4j8w/people-dont-trust-him-uncertainty-surrounds-colonel-in-control-of-burkina-faso).

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin Roger, "Yacouba Isaac Zida : « Si je dois rentrer au Burkina pour être candidat en 2020, je serai prêt à affronter tous les risques », " *Jeune Afrique*, 17 June 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/788560/politique/yacouba-isaac-zida-si-je-veux-rentreer-au-burkina-pour-etre-candidat-en-2020-je-serai-pret-a-affronter-tous-les-risques/>.

<sup>35</sup> Olivier Rogez, "Gilbert Diendéré sur RFI: « Je n'ai pas appelé Blaise Compaoré », " RFI, 17 September 2015, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150917-gilbert-diendere-rfi-burkina-faso-coup-etat-kafando-transition-elections-zida>. See also Lougri Dimtalba "Burkina Faso: Texte de la déclaration du 'Conseil National pour la Démocratie'," Agence Anadolu, 17 September 2015, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/politique/burkina-faso-texte-de-la-declaration-du-conseil-national-pour-la-democratie/119274>.

saw as an ambiguous declaration on Facebook,” declining to explicitly denounce the takeover.<sup>36</sup> The coup thus appeared as both an effort at self-preservation by the RSP and as an attempted counter-revolution by Compaoré’s ultra-loyalists, although Diendéré denied that Compaoré had ordered the coup.<sup>37</sup> Allegations that ultra-loyalists were working with jihadists already surfaced amid the coup; the transitional government accused Bassolé of receiving backing from Ivoirian politicians and Malian jihadists.<sup>38</sup>

The army and the gendarmerie soon reversed the coup and reinstated Kafando and Zida, allowing the dismantling of the RSP to go forward; the resistance to the coup came particularly from junior officers, implying wider generational splits within the armed forces.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Diendéré and Bassolé were arrested. Their trial became a central political issue in the country, and in September 2019 they were sentenced to twenty-year and ten-year prison terms respectively. Diendéré’s defense consisted of the argument that he “neither commanded, nor planned, nor organized, nor executed” the coup, but rather took charge of it after junior RSP officers acted on their own.<sup>40</sup> The coup, the counter-coup, the trial, and the sentencing all reflect a broader issue of contention surrounding Burkinabè politics in the aftermath of Compaoré’s fall: as several analysts wrote in 2015, “the current debate on the national political scene is between exclusion and inclusion,”<sup>41</sup> and in different ways that debate has continued through the time of writing.

Although Zida was restored to power along with Kafando, Zida’s political fortunes soon declined as well. After elections in November 2015, Kaboré took office the next month. Although some observers argue that Kaboré won in part due to Zida’s support, the two men were at odds soon after the inauguration; in January 2016, Zida traveled to Canada and refused an order from Kaboré to return home. Zida remains in exile in Canada, but still politically active and potentially cultivating presidential ambitions.

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<sup>36</sup> Sten Hagberg, “‘Thousands of New Sankaras’: Resistance and Struggle in Burkina Faso,” *Africa Spectrum* 3 (2015): 109-121, p. 112.

<sup>37</sup> Rogez, “Gilbert Diendéré sur RFI.”

<sup>38</sup> Hagberg, “‘Thousands of New Sankaras’,” p. 114.

<sup>39</sup> Abdoul Karim Saidou, “Burkina Faso : où en est la réforme de l’armée, deux ans après l’insurrection populaire ?” GRIP, 12 January 2017, p. 8, [https://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES\\_ANALYSE/2017/NA\\_2017-01-12\\_FR\\_AK-SAIDOU.pdf](https://www.grip.org/sites/grip.org/files/NOTES_ANALYSE/2017/NA_2017-01-12_FR_AK-SAIDOU.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> Nadoun Coulibaly, “Burkina : Gilbert Diendéré nie être le cerveau du putsch manqué et charge Isaac Zida,” *Jeune Afrique*, 26 November 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/672504/politique/burkina-gilbert-diendere-nie-etre-le-cerveau-du-putsch-manque-et-charge-isaac-zida/>.

<sup>41</sup> Hagberg et al., “Au cœur de la révolution Burkinabe,” p. 219.

The combination of the revolution and the failed coup left the security forces and intelligence services greatly weakened. This weakness was due to both individual and organizational gaps; with Bassolé and Diendéré in prison, and with Zida in exile, the key managers of the security forces from Compaoré's time were now absent. Some observers have gone even further in arguing that the problem is not just lack of capacity, but active efforts by former and disgruntled soldiers to provoke insecurity in the country: such observers have pointed to the over 500 soldiers dismissed after the 2011 mutinies, as well as former RSP members without a home after the 2015 disbanding of their regiment, as potential participants in banditry and terrorism.<sup>42</sup> One of the starkest expressions of this line of argument has come from the journalist Joe Penney, who not only views former RSP elements' participation in jihadism as likely, but also sees that situation as an unintended consequence of U.S. support to the Compaoré regime amid the War on Terror: "The insecurity that Burkina Faso is experiencing today appears to be proof that support for an elite unit that works for a corrupt dictator can lead to more terrorism and insecurity."<sup>43</sup> Yet in the view of this analyst, the evidence base remains too thin to reach a definitive conclusion about the various serious allegations now directed at Diendéré, Bassolé, and former RSP members.

Meanwhile, reforms of the military and the intelligence services have been halting. In the words of the scholar Abdoul Karim Saidou, Burkina Faso has a "political army" whose "depoliticization appears as a fundamental issue in the process of change launched by the revolution." Yet, Saidou adds, reform efforts under Kaboré have "not yet interrogated the foundations of the defense doctrine inherited from the Compaoré regime."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the military has been allowed substantial control over the reform process, reflecting senior officers' "reticence to open the field of defense to civilian control" – or even to include junior officers' voices.<sup>45</sup> There are, moreover, multi-sided rivalries throughout the security forces: quarrels between police and gendarmes, gendarmes and soldiers, and between "clans" within the army. The dispersal of the former RSP throughout the army has also fostered conflicts, because many of these former RSP

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<sup>42</sup> Depagne, "Burkina Faso's Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence." See also Saidou, "Burkina Faso : où en est la réforme de l'armée," p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> Joe Penney, "Blowback in Africa: How America's Counterterror Strategy Helped Destabilize Burkina Faso," *The Intercept*, 22 November 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/11/22/burkina-faso-us-relations/>.

<sup>44</sup> Saidou, "Burkina Faso : où en est la réforme de l'armée," p. 2.

<sup>45</sup> Saidou, "Burkina Faso : où en est la réforme de l'armée," p. 6.

members do not feel themselves to be truly part of the army.<sup>46</sup> Anti-corruption officials even speculate that corruption within the security forces may be allowing jihadists to pay bribes that allow them to move freely in the country.<sup>47</sup>

Among the reforms to the security services was the transitional government's creation of the Agence Nationale de Renseignement (National Intelligence Agency, ANR) in October 2015.<sup>48</sup> After Kaboré took office, the ANR was headed by one of his allies, the gendarmerie's Colonel François Ouédraogo.<sup>49</sup> In June 2018, the National Assembly allocated additional funding for the ANR,<sup>50</sup> but successive terrorist attacks in the capital as well as severe insecurity in the north and east have shown the new unit's limitations,<sup>51</sup> as well as the limitations of the security forces more broadly. As one senior politician said, "We are not used to this type of war...it's something that surprised us."<sup>52</sup>

By the time insecurity began to really accelerate in Burkina Faso, Kaboré presided over the remnants of Compaoré's network, but this was now a network that paled in comparison to its former reach and strength. This weakness helps explain why authorities' initial reaction to the jihadist insurgency in the north was, in the words of one journalist, "very timid"; the same journalist further argues that had authorities acted swiftly and decisively in early 2016, a time when locals were already observing "bizarre movements" in the north and east, the authorities might have contained the incipient crisis. Kaboré was later criticized for keeping the defense portfolio for himself for too long, then for appointing a technocrat to the post, before eventually installing a former journalist and seasoned politician with extensive contacts throughout the military hierarchy (Chérif Sy, former head of the National Transition Council after Compaoré's fall).<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Ladji Bama, Ouagadougou, 12 June 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with two RENLAC officials, Ouagadougou, 13 June 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Government of Burkina Faso, "DECRET N°2015-1150/PRES-TRANS du 16 octobre 2015 portant création d'une Agence Nationale de Renseignement (ANR)."

<sup>49</sup> "Burkina : objectif juin 2017 pour l'Agence nationale de renseignement," *Jeune Afrique*, 1 July 2016, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/336844/politique/burkina-objectif-juin-2017-lagence-nationale-de-renseignement/>.

<sup>50</sup> Moussa Diallo, "Renseignement au Burkina : L'Assemblée nationale adopte une nouvelle loi pour renforcer l'efficacité du système," *Le Faso*, 4 June 2018, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article83784>.

<sup>51</sup> "Terrorisme au Burkina Faso: Pourquoi? Que Faire?" pp. 38-40.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with M. Boly.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with L. Bama.

In a political sense, Kaboré also had fewer tools to work with than Compaoré had possessed even a few years earlier. As one prominent civil society member argues, it was Compaoré's "former companions" who took over after his fall, but "with much less professionalism."<sup>54</sup> Salif Diallo's death in August 2017 both symbolized and accelerated the passing of the old order; one anonymous European diplomat told *Jeune Afrique* that "after Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaoré, I think that he is the third emblematic personage who left his imprint on political life in Burkina Faso."<sup>55</sup> The architect of both the CDP and the MPP, Diallo had a unique degree of expertise in managing Burkina Faso's ruling parties, as well as a vast address book of contacts throughout the country and a reputation as the "kingmaker" who controlled many crucial appointments.<sup>56</sup> At the time of his death, he was president of the National Assembly.

Several interviewees said bluntly that Simon Compaoré, now head of the MPP, does not possess the same degree of political savvy that Diallo had, which has meant that there is now "indiscipline" and "lack of motivation" in the party – problems that Kaboré, as president, no longer has the bandwidth to address.<sup>57</sup> And even MPP leaders have said that Diallo's replacement as head of the National Assembly, Kaboré's ally Alassane Bala Sakandé, lacks Diallo's experience.<sup>58</sup>

Here it is worth recalling that the MPP, in the words of one Burkinabè journalist, is not "a party of conviction" – it formed rapidly and in a chaotic context as a vehicle for Blaise Compaoré's political rivals.<sup>59</sup> Kaboré, meanwhile, cannot simply replicate the vast network of power that Compaoré controlled, the breadth of which was perhaps fully visible only to Compaoré himself and perhaps a few other intimates; even when Kaboré had a central role in that network, he interfaced primarily with his "counterparts" in the realm of formal politics. The network Kaboré now possesses does not have the same "density" and "quality" as the one Compaoré had.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Christian Zougmore, Ouagadougou, 11 June 2019.

<sup>55</sup> "Burkina : Salif Diallo, un homme politique habile et pragmatique."

<sup>56</sup> Interview with G. Nama.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with G. Nama.

<sup>58</sup> Benjamin Roger, "Burkina Faso : Sakandé prend ses marques à l'Assemblée," *Jeune Afrique*, 13 February 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/526878/politique/burkina-faso-sakande-prend-ses-marques-a-l-assemblee/>.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with G. Nama, Ouagadougou.

<sup>60</sup> Telephone interview with Z. Tiemtoré.



The MPP is already preparing for the 2020 elections. When Kaboré reshuffled his cabinet in January 2019, the move partly reflected popular frustration with insecurity, but it also reflected a shift in the MPP's thinking: some of the major departures were MPP heavyweights, such as Simon Compaoré and Smaila Ouédraogo. This move may have been simultaneously intended to free up Kaboré's hand to assemble a more inclusive cabinet – including, notably, a prime minister from the former ruling CDP – and to free up the MPP leaders to devote themselves more fully to planning the 2020 campaign.<sup>61</sup> Whether a truly national and inclusive 2020 election is possible, however, remains to be seen – violence in the north and east may prevent voting in some areas.

Amid fragmentation and turmoil in national politics, the political landscape has also shifted at the local level – including in the restive north, one of two epicenters of insecurity in Burkina Faso. Before turning to look at the jihadist presence in the north and the east, the other epicenter of insecurity, the next section first examines political developments in these key zones.

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<sup>61</sup> Karim Badolo, “«Un réarmement moral et tactique», Dr Thomas Ouédraogo du CGD,” Sidwaya, 24 January 2019, <https://www.sidwaya.info/blog/2019/01/24/un-rearmement-moral-et-tactique-dr-thomas-ouedraogo-du-cgd/>.

## Shifting Politics in the North and East

The “grand north” – comprising the North and Sahel Regions – has long suffered from substantial neglect, particularly in the Sahel. According to many observers, the Compaoré regime considered such zones remote, useless, and expensive to develop; sending functionaries to the north was a punishment.<sup>62</sup> Compaoré had a political and intelligence network in the north that involved a wide spectrum of people, and it was this network that gave his regime some political strength there, in contrast to the MPP’s relative lack of a network in the north.<sup>63</sup> Yet there were major gaps even during Compaoré’s time. Although the president and his team were skilled at balancing ministerial appointments among figures from different regions and different ethnic groups, Compaoré’s partners in the Sahel did not necessarily represent the interests and perspectives of the local population there.<sup>64</sup> Amid a broader disconnect between rulers and the ruled under Compaoré, the gap may have been particularly severe in the Sahel; according to anti-corruption officials, residents of the Sahel have long had to pay if they want to receive any state services.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, the most prominent northern politicians have tended to come from Ouahigouya, the administrative center of the North Region, and not from the Sahel. Salif Diallo and several of his successors, including current National Assembly President Sakandé, are all from Ouahigouya.

In terms of Kaboré’s management of the north, Salif Diallo’s death may have had a particular impact on the presidency’s and the MPP’s ability to create and sustain political networks in the region. Diallo, who was ethnically Peul, was a “cross-cutting personality” in the north, someone from the noble family of Yatenga but also a figure with wide credibility among grassroots political activists in the CDP

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with C. Zougmoré.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Koudbi Kaboré, Ouagadougou, 11 June 2019; interview with Abdoulaye Diallo, Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019. Major figures from Compaoré’s time, such as the former CDP heavyweight and former Minister of Mines Kader Cissé, still preserve some influence in the Sahel, although Cissé among others may eventually face legal proceedings. See Michel Nana, “Région de l’Est: « Les terroristes exploitaient l’or », selon Oumarou Idani, ministre des Mines et des carrières,” *Le Pays*, 6 May 2019, <http://lepays.bf/region-de-lest-les-terroristes-exploitaient-lor-selonoumarou-idani-ministre-des-mines-et-des-carrieres/>.

<sup>64</sup> Telephone interview with Z. Tiemtoré.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with two RENLAC officials.

and later the MPP.<sup>66</sup> One MPP leader from the north described Diallo as a “political animal” and a brilliant strategic thinker whose death has left a crucial void.<sup>67</sup> Potential successors exist – one is Diallo’s ally Smaila Ouédraogo, who served as minister of health and then as minister of youth in one of Kaboré’s earlier governments – but so far no one has filled the void left by Diallo. Ouédraogo’s dismissal from government amid the January 2019 cabinet reshuffle also raised eyebrows, with some observers hypothesizing that Diallo’s network was being purged.<sup>68</sup>

One should not overstate Diallo’s influence in the grand north: even under Compaoré, figures such as Hama Arba Diallo (1939-2014) represented pockets of opposition. Diallo was elected as mayor of Dori, the capital of Sahel Region, in 2006, to the chagrin of Compaoré’s CDP.<sup>69</sup> He then won election to the National Assembly in 2007 and 2012 on the ticket of the Party for Democracy and Socialism, representing Séno Province in Sahel Region; he also placed second in the 2010 presidential election.<sup>70</sup> Yet the CDP had means of undermining opposition figures in the north: when Arba Diallo became mayor of Dori in 2006, one journalist observed, “With its 85 councilors, the CDP was not able to keep the mayoralty, but it is a number sufficient for provoking a blockage of the works of the municipal council.” And although Arba Diallo had the critical support of the Emir of Dori,<sup>71</sup> at other times the CDP’s interests aligned with the interests of Peul leaders at the top of the social hierarchy.

These Peul leaders or nobles are hereditary elites but have sometimes fared poorly in open elections where former slaves and marginalized social categories have the demographic weight: yet the nobility often successfully appealed to the ruling CDP to impose nobles as candidates, and even when nobles lost elections, they could attempt to sabotage the workings of elected municipal councils to the extent

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with anonymous Burkinabè scholar, Ouagadougou, June 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Interview with M. Boly.

<sup>68</sup> “Smaila Ouédraogo, nouveau secrétaire permanent du CNLS-IST,” Kaceto, 4 April 2019, <https://www.kaceto.net/spip.php?article6397>.

<sup>69</sup> Newton Ahmed Barry, “Arba Diallo, nouveau maire de Dori...,” *Le Faso/L’Événement*, 1 August 2006, [https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article15449&fbclid=IwAR1D\\_ETMTdyxL7nbanSseyXG6HVSHgNEC7R3yAbKa2qosCRVOqsB058cSM4](https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article15449&fbclid=IwAR1D_ETMTdyxL7nbanSseyXG6HVSHgNEC7R3yAbKa2qosCRVOqsB058cSM4).

<sup>70</sup> Lawrence Rupley, Lamissa Bangali, and Boureima Diamitani, *Historical Dictionary of Burkina Faso*, Third Edition (Lanham, Toronto, and Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013), p. 57. See also Rémi Carayol, “Hama Arba Diallo, figure de la gauche burkinabè, est décédé,” *Jeune Afrique*, 1 October 2014, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/43265/politique/hama-arba-diallo-figure-de-la-gauche-burkinab-est-d-c-d/>.

<sup>71</sup> Barry, “Arba Diallo, nouveau maire de Dori...”

that re-run elections would be held.<sup>72</sup> Political tensions in the Sahel thus long predate the current conflict. It is possible that some of the current wave of kidnappings and murders of local officials in the Sahel are instances of score-settling rather than straightforward jihadist violence against the state.<sup>73</sup>

Hierarchies have also been disrupted in the East, here involving not just elected politicians but also customary chiefs. One major chief whose authority has been openly challenged is the chief of Fada N’Gourma, administrative center of the East Region. Kupiendiéli the 31<sup>st</sup>, known as the King of Gulmu, is supposed to select new sub-chiefs whenever a vacancy occurs, choosing from among several candidates. “For me,” the king said in a 2017 interview, “my choice is the only one and it is definitive.”<sup>74</sup> Conflicts over succession had broken into the open by the early 2000s, however. For example, in Diabo, a son of a deceased chief refused to accept being passed over in 2004.<sup>75</sup> Such conflicts then reverberated down the hierarchy. The conflicts seem to have intensified after the 2014 uprising – the King of Gulmu was particularly close to Compaoré, and the latter’s overthrow weakened the king’s power further.

For example, in 2015, the chief of Saatenga village in the Diabo commune died, and the king’s designated choice of successor – a retired RSP soldier named Abdoul Kader Zoétyenga – was contested by a self-proclaimed chief who in turn had the backing of the self-proclaimed chief of Diabo as well as the support, allegedly, of a major local businessman. In December 2016, their respective supporters clashed violently.<sup>76</sup> The king openly deplored the situation but also admitted he had few tools with which to block the “challenge to my person.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Koudbi Kaboré, Ouagadougou, 12 June 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with K. Kaboré, 12 June 2019.

<sup>74</sup> Sana, “Sa majesté Kupiendieli, 31e roi du Gulmu.”

<sup>75</sup> “Burkina Faso: Diabo : 2 bonnets rouges pour 1 trône,” *Observateur Paalga*, 19 November 2004, <https://fr.allafrica.com/stories/200411190510.html>. See also “Diabo : crise au sein de la Chefferie coutumière,” *Le Faso*, 27 September 2004, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article4143>.

<sup>76</sup> <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:b-G48HzeBtoJ:www.sidwaya.bf/m-14523-conflit-de-chefferie-a-saatenga-deux-bonnets-pour-un-village.html+&cd=11&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us&client=safari>.

<sup>77</sup> Sana, “Sa majesté Kupiendieli, 31e roi du Gulmu.”



Some analysts have concluded that the tensions within the chiefly hierarchy have helped to facilitate jihadist mobilization in the east, with some disgruntled would-be chiefs throwing their support to the jihadist cause.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Interview with Luc Damiba, Ouagadougou, 15 June 2019.

# Jihadist Mobilization in Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso has become a home to localized jihadist outfits as well as a site where regional jihadist actors project influence. The key jihadist organizations in the country are Ansaroul Islam and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

Ansaroul Islam emerged in 2016 under the leadership of Ibrahim “Malam” Dicko (Malam, from the Arabic *mu’allim*, means “teacher”). Originally from Soum Province in Burkina Faso’s Sahel Region, Dicko had been a popular radio preacher and the leader of a charitable and activist network called al-Irchad (“Guidance”). One interlocutor recounted that Dicko’s preaching began as an essentially political message that concentrated on telling northerners that the state had forgotten and abandoned them; “the question of Islam only came after.”<sup>79</sup> Initially, Dicko had a significant degree of support from local elites; one northern politician, who knew Dicko personally, described him as “a very serious and calm boy [who] let himself be tempted by the money” that jihadists offered him.<sup>80</sup> By 2012 at the latest, Dicko was being courted by Iyad ag Ghali and Amadou Kouffa, the two most infamous jihadist leaders in Mali today. Dicko spent a period of time between 2013 and 2015 in northern Mali and in a Malian prison before returning home; back in Soum, he faced rising tensions with the political and religious elite. In 2016, he found himself repudiated by the Emir of Djibo and the city’s imam (to whose daughter he had been married);<sup>81</sup> by this time, local elites understood that by supporting Dicko, “they had fallen into a trap.”<sup>82</sup> Dicko’s anti-Sufi preaching had also alienated the influential Sufi orders in the region.<sup>83</sup> Within Al-Irchad, Dicko’s jihadist leanings became a source of division. When Ansaroul Islam began its campaign of systematic violence, Dicko’s followers targeted some Al-Irchad leaders and members who opposed the violence; in November 2016, for example, assassins killed Amadou Boli, “allegedly number two in the Al-Irchad network, an individual who may have known too much

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with A. Diallo.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with M. Boly.

<sup>81</sup> International Crisis Group, “The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso’s North,” 12 October 2017, p. 4, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/254-the-social-roots-of-jihadist-violence-in-burkina-faso-s-north.pdf>.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with K. Kaboré, 11 June 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with anonymous Burkinabè scholar.

about the network's activities [and therefore could] constitute a threat."<sup>84</sup> Ibrahim Dicko reportedly died in May 2017, perhaps succumbing to chronic illness and starvation while fleeing pursuit by French counterterrorism forces.<sup>85</sup> His passing dealt a blow, although not a fatal one, to Ansaroul Islam. Dicko was apparently succeeded by his brother Ja'far, but many analysts view the latter as less charismatic and effective.

Some analysts understand Ansaroul Islam as more or less an extension of JNIM. The researcher Mahamadou Savadogo calls JNIM the "leader...around which gravitates Ansaroul Islam (what remains of the group after the death of Malam Dicko) and the small groups of traffickers and delinquents who were pirating and controlling the gray economy in the Sahel well before the arrival of JNIM."<sup>86</sup> In this understanding, jihadism in northern Burkina Faso represents a pact between longtime jihadists and local criminals; one interlocutor cited, as one reason among several for the rising insecurity, a reaction of traffickers (of drugs and contraband) to perceived threats against their interests.<sup>87</sup> This pact not only facilitates violence against the security forces, but also allows for the development of protection networks that in turn facilitate recruitment: for example, jihadists can credibly promise protection to herders and their animals.<sup>88</sup>

The phenomenon of jihadism in the north also has highly local aspects related to the social fabric of northern Burkina Faso. In a 2017 report, International Crisis Group identified intra-ethnic, meaning intra-Peul, tensions as drivers of recruitment to Ansaroul Islam. Arguing that "Ansarul Islam is at least as much a social uprising as it is a religious movement" and that it "expresses the grievances of a silent majority that holds neither political power nor religious authority,"<sup>89</sup> International Crisis Group foregrounded Ibrahim Dicko's appeal to the Rimaïbé, or formerly enslaved constituencies within Peul society.<sup>90</sup> In recent decades, Rimaïbé self-assertion has grown

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<sup>84</sup> Héni Nsaibia, "Burkina Faso: The Jihadist Threat Continuously Rising in the Far North – A New Ansar Dine Branch in Gestation, Ansaroul Islam?" MENASTREAM, 3 January 2017, <http://menastream.com/burkina-faso-jihadist-threat-north/>. See also International Crisis Group, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence," p. 4, footnote 23; Boli was also known as Hamadoun Tamboura and Hamadoun Boly.

<sup>85</sup> Seidik Abba, "Jafar Dicko, le nouveau visage du djihadisme au Burkina Faso," *Le Monde*, 21 December 2017, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/12/21/jafar-dicko-le-nouveau-visage-du-djihadisme-au-burkina-faso\\_5232877\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/12/21/jafar-dicko-le-nouveau-visage-du-djihadisme-au-burkina-faso_5232877_3212.html).

<sup>86</sup> Savadogo, "Note d'analyse de la situation sécuritaire au Burkina Faso," p. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with A. Diallo. See also "Terrorisme au Burkina Faso: Pourquoi? Que Faire?" pp. 26-28

<sup>88</sup> Interview with anonymous Burkinabè analyst.

<sup>89</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence," p. i.

<sup>90</sup> International Crisis Group, "The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence," p. 5.

as Rimaïbé increasingly take on leadership roles in the economic and political spheres,<sup>91</sup> but Rimaïbé frustration also persists. Other interlocutors mentioned the stigmatization that blacksmiths (*forgerons*, a distinct socio-professional category or “caste”) suffer: one Burkinabè researcher mentioned an incident in Gorom-Gorom in 2015, where a *forgeron* was designated as a temporary imam while the main imam was traveling, but half the congregation refused to pray behind the *forgeron*.<sup>92</sup> All of these factors help explain why the north’s emirs and imams have often been reticent to put themselves at the center of denouncing and opposing Ansaroul Islam: in doing so they would be courting their own deaths and exposing their declining influence over their former subjects and constituents.<sup>93</sup>

Highlighting these intra-Peul tensions and hyper-local recruitment dynamics is a vital corrective to narratives that portrays all jihadist activities as manifestations of a single global conspiracy. Nevertheless, some Burkinabè interlocutors cautioned against laying too much emphasis on the “Peul factor” in Ansaroul Islam. These interlocutors note that the group – as well as jihadism in Burkina Faso more broadly – is a multi-ethnic phenomenon. Other interlocutors stressed that intra-Peul dynamics have shifted considerably in recent generations, and that the differences between Rimaïbé and others are not as stark as they used to be.<sup>94</sup> Among the non-ethnic factors in driving jihadism in the north, one historian mentioned a widely shared “sentiment of frustration, humiliation, and hatred of the West.” There is a feeling, the historian said, that the West imposes its culture on Muslim zones (through, for example, promotion of homosexuality). Moreover, there is a feeling that the West controls national rulers all while acting with rank hypocrisy regarding democracy, accepting only outcomes that the West prefers – and rejecting the electoral victories of forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Viewed in this light, the historian said, the struggle in the north is not merely a military one but also a cultural and ideological one.<sup>95</sup> Another well-informed observer noted that throughout the West African Sahel, states have not taken into account the extent to which “modernization” disrupted nomadic life – in this context, the

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with anonymous Burkinabè scholar.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with K. Kaboré, 12 June 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with A. Diallo; interview with Aboubacar Doukouré, Ouagadougou, 15 June 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with M. Boly.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with anonymous Burkinabè scholar.

interlocutor continued, herders will be attracted to anyone who proposes a utopian vision and an alternative to the existing order.<sup>96</sup>

The presence of foreign forces in Burkina Faso might also drive some recruitment to jihadism; in any case, jihadists have made anti-French rhetoric a key part of their messaging.<sup>97</sup>

For its part, ISGS is an outgrowth of a Mali-centric jihadist organization, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), which itself emerged in 2011 as a splinter group of AQIM. During the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali, MUJWA came to control the northeastern Malian city of Gao. MUJWA also recruited heavily among the Peul, with many young Peul joining MUJWA to seek protection against current or anticipated attacks on their communities and their herds by other ethnicities, including the Tuareg. MUJWA's Peul recruitment extended beyond the Gao Region and into parts of central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, and western Niger. Chased out of Gao by French forces in 2013, MUJWA reinvented itself as a regional strike force, joining with the dissident AQIM field commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar to organize spectacular attacks in Niger, Mali, and elsewhere. In 2015, as Belmokhtar was moving toward a rapprochement with AQIM, one of MUJWA's senior leaders, Adnan Abu al-Walid al-Sahrawi, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. Rejected by Belmokhtar, al-Sahrawi rebranded his forces as ISGS. Unlike the al-Qa'ida versus Islamic State competition in the Middle East or Afghanistan, however, ISGS has maintained relatively good relations with AQIM; in recent years observers have even suggested that ISGS and AQIM's subsidiary JNIM coordinate some of their activities.

ISGS has based itself in the borderlands of northeastern Mali (particularly the Ménaka Region) and western Niger. Most famously, ISGS ambushed a patrol of American and Nigerien soldiers in October 2017. Beginning in 2018, however, a combined anti-ISGS offensive by French counterterrorism forces and two Malian pro-government militias began to disrupt some of ISGS's activities in this border region. One unintended consequence was to push ISGS to explore opportunities further south, namely in eastern Burkina Faso, where ISGS established itself as the leading jihadist force.<sup>98</sup> ISGS and its

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Alidou Ilboudo, Ouagadougou, 15 June 2019.

<sup>97</sup> "Terrorisme au Burkina Faso: Pourquoi? Que Faire?" p. 34.

<sup>98</sup> Savadogo, "Note d'analyse de la situation sécuritaire au Burkina Faso," p. 2.

antecedents had carried out sporadic attacks in Burkina Faso beginning with a 2015 kidnapping of a Romanian security officer at a mining project in Tambao, Ouadalan Province,<sup>99</sup> but 2018 brought a more vigorous ISGS presence in the country. The Burkinabè military offensives in the north, meanwhile, pushed some of the northern jihadists into the east.<sup>100</sup> In September 2018, the analyst Hèni Nsaibia wrote, “The East ha[s] become a point of convergence for elements of ISGS and Ansaroul Islam, as well as a local component reportedly composed of sons of the customary chieftaincy...a hybridized militant group is engendering a nascent micro-insurgency.”<sup>101</sup>

Jihadist violence in Burkina Faso has taken three primary forms. First, there have been spectacular attacks in Ouagadougou; such attacks are authored by AQIM/JNIM and its subsidiaries, occur in an explicitly regional context, and target foreigners and symbols of state power. These incidents include the January 2016 assault on the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino restaurant, an August 2017 attack at the Aziz Istanbul restaurant, and the March 2018 targeting of the Burkinabè military headquarters and the French Embassy. Although rare, such attacks are highly disruptive and embarrassing for the state.

Second, there are the recurring micro-attacks in the north and east of the country. This violence initially focused on state agents and representatives, especially the security forces; state agents continue to constitute between approximately 50% and 80% of jihadists’ targets.<sup>102</sup> In the north, violence against local officials has sometimes been quite specifically targeted, suggesting that the authors of these violent acts know their victims well. The message to many mayors and imams has been clear: leave or die. For example, the deputy mayor of Deou town in Ouadalan Province told journalists that jihadists had stolen his cattle and explicitly instructed the shepherd to tell the deputy mayor to vacate the area.<sup>103</sup> By 2019, the violence had broadened to include multiple other kinds of civilian targets as

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<sup>99</sup> Mathieu Bonkougou, “Gunmen Kidnap Romanian from Burkina Faso Mine near Mali Border,” Reuters, 4 April 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-burkina-kidnapping/gunmen-kidnap-romanian-from-burkina-faso-mine-near-mali-border-idUSKBN0MV01Y20150404>.

<sup>100</sup> Interview with L. Damiba.

<sup>101</sup> Hèni Nsaibia, “The Fledgling Insurgency in Burkina’s East,” Armed Conflict Location a& Event Data Project, 20 September 2018, <https://www.acleddata.com/2018/09/20/the-fledgling-insurgency-in-burkinas-east/>.

<sup>102</sup> “Terrorisme au Burkina Faso: Pourquoi? Que Faire?” p. 14; Savadogo, “Note d’analyse de la situation sécuritaire au Burkina Faso,” p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> Brahim Ouedraogo, “In Heart of West Africa, Burkina Faso Faces Rising Extremism,” Associated Press, 15 August 2018, <https://apnews.com/b9535fd2b0f247388df1b9cddac8ba7d>.

well, including chiefs and Christian leaders and congregants. Some interlocutors felt that the jihadists were deliberately attempting to tear at the fabric of Burkinabè society, first by stoking inter-ethnic tensions and then by driving a wedge between Christians and Muslims. Beginning in April 2019, Catholic and Protestant churches were attacked in locales such as Silgadji, Kongonssi, and Toulfé.<sup>104</sup>

As the researcher Louis Audet-Gosselin has observed, jihadist targeting of Christians – and particularly Catholics – may represent another means of striking at the state. In the Sahel Region, Audet-Gosselin writes, the Catholic community “is in large part composed of functionaries originally from other regions. Thus the community is perceived locally as foreign and as closely associated with the State, making Catholics targets for armed groups determined to undermine any competing authority.”<sup>105</sup> For the moment, Christians have not responded with reprisal violence against Muslims: one Catholic leader said that Catholics feel no “sentiment of vengeance,” and that in any case the perpetrators of church attacks strike and then melt away, leaving no one to punish.<sup>106</sup> Prominent Muslim leaders, in the north and nationally, have also moved quickly to call on ordinary Muslims not to fall into the trap of seeing the conflict in Muslim-Christian terms.<sup>107</sup>

Third, jihadists have cultivated political sway in some rural localities. As Savadogo remarks, “The terrorist groups’ strategy, which consists in not interesting themselves in the large cities but rather in intervening in rural zones, is accompanied by a mode of recruitment that is more and more local, especially in their comfort zones.”<sup>108</sup> Another analyst added that although major jihadists can be identified, local recruitment helps jihadist networks cultivate supporters who can do important logistical tasks or intelligence gathering without being detected – indeed, in contrast to widespread assumptions that jihadists are primarily interested in recruiting fighters, much of their recruitment in eastern Burkina Faso concentrates on filling non-combat roles. Such recruits, and a growing pool of fighters in training, come from multiple social categories: the economically, politically,

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<sup>104</sup> A.K., “Burkina Faso : dans le centre-nord, la situation sécuritaire reste préoccupante,” *Sahélien*, 16 June 2019, <https://sahelien.com/burkina-faso-dans-le-centre-nord-la-situation-securitaire-inquiete/>.

<sup>105</sup> Louis Audet Gosselin, “Comment s’expliquent les attaques contre la communauté chrétienne au Burkina Faso ?” *The Conversation*, 1 July 2019, <https://theconversation.com/comment-sexpliquent-les-attaques-contre-la-communaute-chretienne-au-burkina-faso-118751>.

<sup>106</sup> Interview with anonymous Catholic leader, Ouagadougou, June 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with A. Ilboudo.

<sup>108</sup> Savadogo, “Note d’analyse de la situation sécuritaire au Burkina Faso,” p. 3.

and ethnically marginalized; the disenfranchised artisanal miners (see below); and the “power-bearers,” including members of chiefly families and municipal councils.<sup>109</sup>

The spread of “rural jihadism” in Burkina Faso reflects trends in Mali, Nigeria, and beyond, with jihadists having learned that it is much easier for them to exercise sway over peripheries than it is to hold large towns.<sup>110</sup> For context, the East and the Sahel have the largest landmass of any of Burkina Faso’s regions: the East comprises nearly 47,000 square kilometers, and the Sahel over 35,000, out of the country’s total 274,200 square kilometer landmass. The East and the Sahel also have the lowest population density of any region, with approximately 30 inhabitants per square kilometer in the East and approximately 27 per square kilometer in the Sahel, per the 2011 census. By focusing on particular strategic targets, for example the vicinities of Arbinda and Tongomayel in the north, jihadists are able to disrupt security force operations by cutting off important routes or at least rendering them highly dangerous; Arbinda and Tongomayel, for example, lie on a strategic route between Dori (capital of the Sahel Region) and Djibo (capital of Soum Province in the Sahel Region).<sup>111</sup>

In the East Region, and particularly in the province of Komondjari and in the forest reserve of Pama,<sup>112</sup> jihadists have found opportunities to both win local support and impose coercive control. These opportunities center on the region’s resources, including gold mines and hunting concessions; jihadists have channeled popular anger over the expropriation of such resources by the state and by private companies.<sup>113</sup> A 2019 report by *The Guardian’s* Ruth Maclean focused on the town of Bartiébougou, Komondjari Province, describing de facto jihadist control that included enforcement of jihadists’ version of public morality (head coverings for women, compulsory mosque attendance for Muslims, bans on prostitution and alcohol, etc.). The same report detailed the incentives that jihadists offered those who cooperated: salaries for certain local

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<sup>109</sup> Interview with L. Damiba.

<sup>110</sup> Jean-Hervé Jezequel and Vincent Foucher, “Forced out of Towns in the Sahel, Africa’s Jihadists Go Rural,” International Crisis Group, 11 January 2017, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/mali/forced-out-towns-sahel-africas-jihadists-go-rural>.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with K. Kaboré, 12 June 2012.

<sup>112</sup> Célian Macé, “Dans l’est du Burkina Faso, un nouveau foyer pour le jihad ?,” *Libération*, 3 December 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/12/03/dans-l-est-du-burkina-faso-un-nouveau-foyer-pour-le-jihad\\_1695777](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/12/03/dans-l-est-du-burkina-faso-un-nouveau-foyer-pour-le-jihad_1695777).

<sup>113</sup> Philip Kleinfeld, “In Eastern Burkina Faso, Local Grievances Help Militancy Take Root,” *The New Humanitarian*, 15 January 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/01/15/eastern-burkina-faso-local-grievances-help-militancy-take-root>.

partners, bonuses for people who participated in attacks, the expulsion of foreigners from mines, and so forth.<sup>114</sup> As Audet-Gosselin adds, jihadists in the east have seemed less eager than their counterparts in the north to attack Christians<sup>115</sup> – perhaps because jihadists in the east calculated that according Christians some tolerance would actually boost the jihadist project’s overall prospects for success.

Jihadist control comes at a steep price, including the closures of schools in many areas (ninety-two schools had been closed in the east by December 2018).<sup>116</sup> Meanwhile, although many agents of the state and local political authorities have been chased out, some services are still tolerated. For example, one veterinarian from the local animal resources service went to the village of Kompienbiga, responding to local appeals for help amid an epizootic. Near Kompienbiga, which has been the site of numerous attacks,<sup>117</sup> he was halted by armed men: they interrogated him, demanding to know whether he was part of the security forces, and searched his belongings thoroughly, but took neither his medical supplies nor the cash (at least 30,000 FCFA) he had with him.<sup>118</sup> By combining a discriminating form of coercion with an ability to distribute payments and revitalize some sectors of the local economy, and by selectively tolerating some state services, jihadists have won a significant degree of local control in parts of the east.

Yet the conflict in the east has also had wide-ranging effects on the regional economy and on the daily lives of people even outside the main zones of jihadist control and activity: tourism has flatlined, recreational hunting has fallen off, many herders have fled, and agricultural development efforts (by local and international agencies) have been constrained. A Burkinabè journalist who traveled through the east in February 2019 observed that “the population of the East Region has become hostage to an asymmetric war.”<sup>119</sup> Journalists

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<sup>114</sup> Ruth Maclean, “Kalashnikovs and No-Go Zones: East Burkina Faso Falls to Militants,” *The Guardian*, 22 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/apr/22/kalashnikovs-and-no-go-zones-east-burkina-faso-falls-to-militants>.

<sup>115</sup> Audet Gosselin, “Comment s’expliquent les attaques contre la communauté chrétienne au Burkina Faso?”

<sup>116</sup> Macé, “Dans l’est du Burkina Faso, un nouveau foyer pour le jihad ?”

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, Fergus Kelley, “‘Terrorist Attack’ on Burkina Faso Forces in Kompienbiga,” *The Defense Post*, 31 January 2019, <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/01/31/burkina-faso-terrorist-attack-kompienbiga-kompienbiga/>.

<sup>118</sup> Alassane Neya, “Attaques terroristes à l’Est du Burkina: A la rencontre d’une population courageuse,” *Sidwaya*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.sidwaya.info/carrefour/2019/03/25/attaques-terroristes-a-lest-du-burkina-a-la-rencontre-dune-population-courageuse/>.

<sup>119</sup> Neya, “Attaques terroristes à l’Est du Burkina.”

have even pointed to possible signs of jihadist influence in Fada N’Gourma itself, noting that in 2018 the city’s “local authorities... buckled under the pressure and closed five popular bars ‘for security reasons’.”<sup>120</sup> When a new military governor for the East Region took office in May 2019, authorities sought to project optimism about the region’s trajectory – but he affirmed that “the struggle against insecurity and the promotion of social cohesion” were his overriding priorities.<sup>121</sup>

In the north, jihadists have also imposed some control, at a steep cost to the local population. The violence in the north has precipitated a humanitarian crisis involving extensive displacement and growing food insecurity.<sup>122</sup> By May 2019, over 170,000 people were internally displaced and approximately 900,000 people needed some type of humanitarian assistance; of those, over 560,000 were in the north.<sup>123</sup> Meanwhile, nearly 1,100 schools had been closed, affecting almost 150,000 pupils.<sup>124</sup> In an atmosphere of violence, displacement, and disruption, jihadists have reshaped daily life in some parts of the north, but in doing so they may have sacrificed some of the initial sympathy that Ansaroul Islam enjoyed among locals who saw them, at first, as a voice for justice. One expert explained that the more local communities have come to understand jihadists’ vision of Islam, the less they like it – for example, jihadists’ bans on football and music are not what local Muslims want. In this context, both the FDS and the jihadists can come to be seen as oppressors.<sup>125</sup>

The military’s counter-jihadist efforts have been heavy-handed to the point of being counterproductive: civilians frequently describe abuses and humiliation they have suffered at the hands of the security

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<sup>120</sup> Patrick Fort, “Jihadism Entrenches Itself in Burkina Faso with Bullets and Bribes,” AFP, 7 December 2018, <https://news.yahoo.com/jihadism-entrenches-itself-burkina-faso-bullets-bribes-142648946.html>.

<sup>121</sup> “Burkina Faso: le nouveau gouverneur de la région de l’Est prend ses fonctions,” RFI, 22 May 2019, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20190522-installation-nouveau-gouverneur-region-est-burkina>.

<sup>122</sup> Famine Early Warning Systems Network, “Key Message Update April-May 2019,” April 2019, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Burkina%20Faso%20-%20Key%20Message%20Update\\_%20Wed%2C%202019-04-24.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Burkina%20Faso%20-%20Key%20Message%20Update_%20Wed%2C%202019-04-24.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Burkina Faso Humanitarian Snapshot,” 7 May 2019, [https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20190512\\_ApercuHumanitaire\\_EN\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20190512_ApercuHumanitaire_EN_FINAL.pdf). See also Philip Kleinfeld, “Burkina Faso, Part 1: Spreading Violence Triggers an ‘Unprecedented’ Crisis,” *The New Humanitarian*, 17 April 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/04/17/spreading-violence-triggers-unprecedented-crisis-burkina-faso>.

<sup>124</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, “Burkina Faso Humanitarian Snapshot.”

<sup>125</sup> Interview with K. Kaboré, 11 June.

forces.<sup>126</sup> A key cause of the heavy-handedness is lack of means,<sup>127</sup> which inhibits proper intelligence-gathering.<sup>128</sup> It also appears that relatively few soldiers speak Fulfulde, the Peul language, a deficit that inhibits efforts to build trust. Instead of carefully ferreting out jihadists and their supporters, soldiers arrive in a village and ask the local community to denounce terrorists, a practice that opens the door to score-settling and inaccurate information.<sup>129</sup> Another basic problem in the north is homonyms: in one village, the security forces might find multiple individuals with the same name, and moreover people in the Sahel often lack national identification cards, complicating the problem of identifying individual jihadists.<sup>130</sup> More broadly, some observers feel that the FDS has never been prepared, physically or psychologically, for asymmetric warfare and counterterrorism; their role was always to protect the regime, and intelligence-gathering was long focused on targeting the political opposition, civil society, and labor unions, rather than on breaking up groups such as Ansaroul Islam or ISGS.<sup>131</sup> The consequence, then, is a habit of lashing out blindly. Ironically, the now-disbanded RSP could have been a strong contender to spearhead a more effective counterterrorism campaign, although the RSP's deep politicization might have undermined that effort.

Military operations have produced some successes against jihadists, but have also created an atmosphere of restriction for ordinary citizens: in September 2018, for example, the governor of the East Region banned nighttime travel between towns,<sup>132</sup> as well as any use of motorbikes at night.<sup>133</sup> Such restrictions not only disrupt ordinary citizens' lives, they also exacerbate the increasingly difficulty of access to information. In June 2019, parliamentarians voted massively to approve a new law imposing long prison sentences and

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<sup>126</sup> Sten Hagberg, Ludovic O. Kibora, Sidi Barry, Yacouba Cissao, Siaka Gnessi, Amado Kaboré, Bintou Koné, and Mariatou Zongo, "Sécurité par le bas: Perceptions et perspectives citoyennes des défis de sécurité au Burkina Faso," Uppsala University, January 2019, pp. 47-49.

<sup>127</sup> "Terrorisme au Burkina Faso: Pourquoi? Que Faire?" pp. 37-39.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Wilfried Bakouan, Ouagadougou, 10 June 2019.

<sup>129</sup> Some interlocutors disagree with this depiction, to varying degrees. One Christian leader argued that the security forces do not act blindly in identifying suspected jihadists, but rather use phone intercepts or other intelligence. The same leader, however, noted that various populations in the north are obliged to collaborate with jihadists under threat of violence. Interview with anonymous Christian leader, Ouagadougou, June 2019.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with C. Zougmore.

<sup>131</sup> Interview with C. Zougmore.

<sup>132</sup> "Burkina : les autorités confrontées à un nouveau défi sécuritaire dans l'Est," *Jeune Afrique*, 19 September 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/631985/politique/burkina-les-autorites-confrontees-a-un-nouveau-defi-securitaire-dans-lest/>.

<sup>133</sup> "Le Burkina Faso interdit la circulation des motos la nuit dans l'Est," RFI, 19 September 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180919-burkina-faso-interdiction-motos-region-est-securite-terrorisme>.

large fines on journalists whose work could be construed as demoralizing the security forces or undermining public order.<sup>134</sup> Yet whatever demoralization exists likely has much more to do with the material conditions of soldiers than with what journalists report: soldiers on the frontlines often receive no combat pay, and there is little support for the families of fallen soldiers.<sup>135</sup> The police and the gendarmes, too, are often ill-equipped; one observer said that at the peripheries of the country, one can find posts with ten men but only five weapons.<sup>136</sup> Meanwhile, senior officers “live in opulence while the soldiers don’t have arms.”<sup>137</sup>

Meanwhile, there are fears that eastern Burkina Faso is becoming a passageway for the spread of jihadism to coastal West Africa, specifically Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Several interlocutors pointed to a May 2019 kidnapping in northern Benin,<sup>138</sup> and the likely overland transfer of the hostages through Burkina Faso to Mali, as evidence of the ability of multiple jihadist groups to work together.<sup>139</sup> Burkinabè authorities have stated that when they arrested a jihadist commander named Oumarou Diallo in the east in April 2019, they discovered that he had contacts in Togo, Benin, and Ghana, implying that there are already jihadist cells in those countries.<sup>140</sup> The east, meanwhile, remains connected to the north through family, ethnic, commercial, and longstanding historical ties.<sup>141</sup> A jihadist corridor of sorts is emerging.

The jihadists, meanwhile, are not the only alternative political force in the north and east. There, and indeed throughout much of the country, community-based protection groups have also arisen. The most prominent of these is the Koglweogo (“Guardians of the Forest” in the Mossi people’s Mooré language), whose relationship to the Mossi and Gourmantché chieftancies raises important questions about both old and new power structures in Burkina Faso.

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<sup>134</sup> Ruth Maclean and Oumar Zombre, “Burkina Faso Tightens Press Freedom Amid Security Crisis,” *The Guardian*, 14 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/14/burkina-faso-tightens-press-freedom-amid-security-crisis>.

<sup>135</sup> Interview with a Burkinabè journalist, Ouagadougou, June 2019.

<sup>136</sup> Interview with C. Zougmoré.

<sup>137</sup> Interview with two RENLAC officials.

<sup>138</sup> “Two French Tourists Kidnapped, Local Guide Killed in Benin,” France24/AFP, 5 May 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190505-two-french-tourists-kidnapped-local-guide-killed-pendjari-benin-safari>.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with W. Bakouan.

<sup>140</sup> Natasha Booty, “Le Burkina Faso en guerre contre les djihadistes,” BBC News, 5 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-48435070>.

<sup>141</sup> Interview with A. Ilboudo; interview with A. Doukouré.

# Hereditary Chiefs and the Koglweogo

The Koglweogo have emerged as the most powerful community-based militia in Burkina Faso. Although they are not the only militia in the country, they are the most prominent, the most widespread, and the best organized; additionally, unlike the initiation-based hunters' societies known as dozos, the Koglweogo are relatively open to new members.<sup>142</sup> The Koglweogo are predominately Mossi, but they have Gourmantché and even Peul members.<sup>143</sup> Their primary zone of influence is eastern and central Burkina Faso,<sup>144</sup> notably in the countryside and on the outskirts of cities.<sup>145</sup> As of late 2018, the Koglweogo claimed to have 20,000 fighters.<sup>146</sup> They are not formally involved in counter-terrorism, but rather consider themselves primarily an anti-banditry and anti-criminality organization.<sup>147</sup>

The formation of the Koglweogo is often dated to 2013-2015,<sup>148</sup> but the roots of the phenomenon extend further back in time, even to the 1990s.<sup>149</sup> The Koglweogo's architects also drew on community self-defense experiences from neighboring countries, particularly Cote d'Ivoire.<sup>150</sup>

Thus the Koglweogo should not be understood merely as a reaction to the 2014 insurrection's aftermath. Rather, the Koglweogo emerged in a context of rising banditry, especially thefts of livestock and blatant predation against markets and traders. Such banditry had already appeared in the decade before Compaoré's fall, and in parts of the east there had been endemic highway robbery, especially near the borders with Togo and Niger, for thirty years.<sup>151</sup> The problem of

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with W. Bakouan.

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Ladjji Bama, Ouagadougou, 12 June 2019.

<sup>144</sup> Mahamadou Savadogo, "Analyse de la situation sécuritaire - Burkina Faso," slide 14.

<sup>145</sup> Romane Da Cunha Dupuy and Tanguy Quidelleur, "Mouvement d'autodéfense au Burkina Faso : Diffusion et structuration des groupes Koglweogo," NORLA, November 2018, p. 5, [https://www.noria-research.com/app/uploads/2018/11/NORIA\\_\\_publi\\_nov\\_2018\\_FR-1.pdf](https://www.noria-research.com/app/uploads/2018/11/NORIA__publi_nov_2018_FR-1.pdf).

<sup>146</sup> Célian Macé, "Dans l'est du Burkina Faso, un nouveau foyer pour le jihad ?" *Libération*, 3 December 2018, [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/12/03/dans-l-est-du-burkina-faso-un-nouveau-foyer-pour-le-jihad\\_1695777](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2018/12/03/dans-l-est-du-burkina-faso-un-nouveau-foyer-pour-le-jihad_1695777).

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Samir Abdulkarim, Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019.

<sup>148</sup> A spokesman for the movement, Samir Abdulkarim, dated the formation to 2013. Interview in Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Valentine Van Vyve, "Koglweogo: Miroir d'une faillite d'Etat," *La Libre*, 2018, Chapter 1, <https://dossiers.lalibre.be/koglweogo/chapitre1.php>.

<sup>150</sup> Patrice Kouraogo and Amado Kabore, "Les groupes d'auto-défense « KOGL-WEOGO » au Burkina Faso," African Security Sector Network, December 2016, pp. 2-3.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Issa Napon, Ouagadougou, 10 June 2019.

banditry accelerated after the mutinies and protests of 2011 left the security forces somewhat weakened. In that atmosphere, there were attacks on livestock markets “in broad daylight.” Attacks grew so bad and so brazen that even major towns and livestock markets, such as Fada, were attacked, and the police and gendarmes could not react decisively.<sup>152</sup> Even when communities caught suspected bandits and took them to the police or the gendarmes, the suspects would often go free, leading communities to conclude that there was complicity between law enforcement and criminals. Community members also resented the financial burdens that the legal system could impose on victims, who were often told to shoulder the costs of their own transportation and evidence-gathering. Vigilantism represented not just a response to the security forces’ impotence against bandits, but also an alternative mode of justice where the burden of proof was differently weighted.<sup>153</sup> Feeling abandoned and unprotected by the state, local vigilantes took matters into their own hands. As one Koglweogo official from the East said in a 2019 interview,

I can assure you that at the moment when robbery was dictating the law in the East Region, people could not make trips peacefully in the countries bordering the East Region of Burkina. The robbers were our brothers and the Koglweogo were needed so that one could discover that it was our own brothers with whom we lived day by day, who were traumatizing us. I think that the coming of the Koglweogo contributed to reducing armed robbery in Burkina.<sup>154</sup>

Often armed with locally crafted hunting rifles,<sup>155</sup> the Koglweogo nevertheless constitute a serious paramilitary force.

The Koglweogo have had ambivalent relations with the state. A Koglweogo spokesman said that the most negative reaction to their project came from the transitional government of 2014-2015, but that matters have improved somewhat under the Kaboré administration.<sup>156</sup> According to one journalist, the authorities resent the presence of the Koglweogo but also recognize that they cannot

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<sup>152</sup> Interview with L. Damiba.

<sup>153</sup> Interview with W. Bakouan.

<sup>154</sup> S. S., “Moussa Thiombiano alias Django, responsable des Koglweogo de l’Est : « Le ministère de la Sécurité n’a pas joué son rôle ... »,” *Le Faso*, 22 January 2019, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article87611>.

<sup>155</sup> Yaya Boudani, “Burkina Faso: qui sont les Koglweogo, ces milices rurales?” *RFI*, 18 March 2016, <http://www.rfi.fr/hebdo/20160318-burkina-faso-koglweogo-milices-populaires-associations>.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with S. Abdulkarim.

get rid of them overnight.<sup>157</sup> Former Minister of State for Territorial Administration and Internal Security Simon Compaoré has been simultaneously hailed as “father of the Koglweogo”<sup>158</sup> and denounced as an enemy of the group. Koglweogo leaders have complained that under both Simon Compaoré and his successors, the Ministry of Internal Security “has not played its role, which was to supervise the different Koglweogo self-defense groups, at least by designating an official in each region and province.”<sup>159</sup> The Koglweogo seem to want official state recognition and backing, especially a direct link to the presidency, but without absorption into some other security force such as the “police de proximité” – when that idea was floated, Koglweogo leaders opposed it.<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, as several experts have written, “While claiming to be ‘apolitical’ the Koglweogo groups politicize themselves by enlarging their discourse to [include] other claims. These are different according to local particularities but the implementation of security and the public beatings they inflict on delinquents belong to a repertoire of action aiming to criticize the State and engage public opinion.”<sup>161</sup> There are concerns, as the 2020 elections approach that politicians will increasingly cater to the Koglweogo in zones where the vigilantes dominate.

The Koglweogo have been accused of perpetrating abuses against those they detain; their “justice” is, for their critics, rough and sometimes arbitrary. Acting simultaneously as police and judges, the Koglweogo have frequently inflicted severe beatings on captured suspects.<sup>162</sup> Koglweogo leaders tend to dismiss such allegations or to blame them on alleged infiltrators and saboteurs.<sup>163</sup> Yet the alleged abuses have provoked severe controversy in some localities: In January 2018, Koglweogo fighters in the vicinity of Karankasso-Vigué, southwestern Burkina Faso, were accused of stripping a woman naked after she allegedly stole a mobile phone (the Koglweogo leadership denied that the group had done any such

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<sup>157</sup> Interview with W. Bakouan.

<sup>158</sup> Dupuy and Quidelleur, “Mouvement d’autodéfense au Burkina Faso,” p. 8.

<sup>159</sup> S. S., “Moussa Thiombiano alias Django, responsable des Koglweogo de l’Est.”

<sup>160</sup> Lacina Teguera, “Kombissiri : Les Koglweogo refusent d’adhérer à la police de proximité,” *Le Pays*, 5 December 2016, <http://lepays.bf/kombissiri-koglweogo-refusent-dadherer-a-police-de-proximite/>.

<sup>161</sup> Dupuy and Quidelleur, “Mouvement d’autodéfense au Burkina Faso,” p. 6.

<sup>162</sup> Van Vyve, “Koglweogo: Miroir d’une faillite d’Etat.”

<sup>163</sup> Mathias Bazie, “Burkina: Il faut dire aux malfrats que «si les sévices» sont interdits, «le vol» l’est plus (Chef Koglweogo),” *WakatSéra*, 10 February 2018, <https://www.wakatsera.com/burkina-il-faut-dire-aux-malfrats-que-si-les-sevices-sont-interdits-le-vol-lest-plus-chef-koglweogo/>.

thing).<sup>164</sup> The incident contributed to serious tensions around the presence and role of the Koglweogo in the west, where at least one governor (in Hauts-Bassins Region) had already banned the group. After the incident with the woman, dozo hunters declared that they did not want the Koglweogo in Karankasso-Vigué or anywhere else in the west.<sup>165</sup>

The Koglweogo recruit especially among farmers, herders, and merchants,<sup>166</sup> but it is not simply a movement of ordinary people. The Koglweogo have strong ties to parts of the chiefly hierarchy, especially the Mossi chiefs. Their official patron is the Naba Sonré, from the chiefly family of Dassamkandé (sometimes rendered Rassamkandé), a village in the Centre-Sud Region. The Koglweogo have even been officially received at the palace of the paramount Mossi chief, the Mogho Naba.<sup>167</sup>

Understanding why the chiefs have backed the Koglweogo requires some political context. The fall of Compaoré intensified the challenges that have long haunted Burkina Faso's customary chiefs. The chiefs' fortunes have fluctuated throughout the postcolonial period; for example, under the country's first president, Maurice Yaméogo, the government decided in the early 1960s that deceased chiefs would not be replaced, that their state subsidies would be cut, and that village chiefs would henceforth be elected.<sup>168</sup> As Pierre Englebert comments, "The early independent state of President Yaméogo was still insecure, run as it was by 'modernized' Mossi elites who were both afraid of their potential submission to chiefs and eager to show their independence from them."<sup>169</sup> The chiefs were again targeted under Sankara's revolutionary government, which viewed chiefs as "feudal" and attempted to use a 1984 land reform to break the chiefs' power. After Sankara's overthrow, however,

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<sup>164</sup> Armand Kinda, "Affaire koglweogo à Karangasso Vigué : «Si quelqu'un a dénudé sa femme, qu'il le dise au lieu d'accuser les Koglweogo », Rasankande Naba Sonré, Chef des Koglweogo," Infowakat, 10 February 2018, <https://infowakat.net/affaire-koglweogo-a-karangasso-vigue-quelquun-a-denude-femme-quit-dise-lieu-daccuser-koglweogo-rasankande-naba-sonre-chef-kog/>.

<sup>165</sup> Romuald Dofini, "Grand Ouest du Burkina : Le chef des dozo, Aly Konaté, toujours opposé à l'installation des koglweogo," *Le Faso*, 5 February 2018, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article81786>.

<sup>166</sup> Dupuy and Quidelleur, "Mouvement d'autodéfense au Burkina Faso," p. 5.

<sup>167</sup> Tambi Serge Pacôme Zongo, "Moogho Naaba Baongho: Les Koglweogos y étaient pour la présentation des voeux (...)," *Le Faso*, [https://lefaso.net/spip.php?page=web-tv-video&id\\_article=81913&rubrique460](https://lefaso.net/spip.php?page=web-tv-video&id_article=81913&rubrique460).

<sup>168</sup> Issa Cissé, "Histoire du Burkina Faso de 1960 à nos jours," p. 359.

<sup>169</sup> Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996), p. 123.

“land reform remained a dead letter, and the ethnic authorities gradually regained their earlier prerogatives.”<sup>170</sup>

The chiefs largely enjoyed good working relations with Compaoré. Yet even under Compaoré’s rule, problems were accumulating for chiefs, including the above-mentioned competition within chiefly families over succession – competitions that challenge the authority not just of individual chiefs but also of the larger hierarchies to which they belong. The country’s paramount chief, the Ouagadougou-based Mogho Naba (since 1982, Baongo II), has largely preserved his authority and political influence – amid the September 2015 coup, the Mogho Naba was credited with helping to broker the return of civilian rule.<sup>171</sup> Other chiefs, however, have had difficulty navigating recent political cycles, and both the rising popular discontent since 2011 and the revolutionary and post-revolutionary phases have sown divisions among the chiefs and between certain chiefs and their subjects.<sup>172</sup> Some of them have lost credibility in the eyes of some subjects over their ties with Compaoré and their reluctance to back the revolution. Chiefs have also found that amid the present crisis, their public entreaties for peace often go unheeded. In February 2019, following the killings in and around Yirgou (see below), the Dima Sonré of Boussouma, a senior Mossi chief, held a “day of pardon” in an effort to ameliorate relations between the Mossi and the Peul in the Center North. Many Peul, however, felt that the gesture had little effect.<sup>173</sup> In this context where chiefly authority is vulnerable, supporting the Koglweogo can boost such authority – and opposing the Koglweogo can lead to popular backlash against chiefs, as the chief of Fada has found.<sup>174</sup>

The Yirgou incident, meanwhile, points to wider inter-ethnic tensions, especially in the Center-North Region – inter-ethnic tensions that have drawn in the largely Mossi Koglweogo.<sup>175</sup> On the night of December 31, 2018-January 1, 2019, assailants killed Yirgou village’s Mossi chief, his son, and four other people. From there, reprisals followed, targeting nearby Peul communities in Center-North and

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<sup>170</sup> Englebert, *Burkina Faso*, p. 125.

<sup>171</sup> “Mogho Naba: Burkina Faso’s Mediator Monarch,” BBC News, 23 September 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-34340704>.

<sup>172</sup> Telephone interview with Z. Tiemtoré.

<sup>173</sup> A.K., “Burkina Faso : dans le centre-nord, la situation sécuritaire reste préoccupante.”

<sup>174</sup> Interview with L. Damiba.

<sup>175</sup> Philip Kleinfeld, “Burkina Faso, Part 2: Communities Buckle as Conflict Ripples through the Sahel,” *The New Humanitarian*, 18 April 2019, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/special-report/2019/04/18/burkina-faso-part-2-communities-buckle-conflict-ripples-through-sahel>.

Sahel. At least forty-nine people were killed, and many more were displaced.<sup>176</sup> Accounts diverge about the Koglweogo's role in the reprisals: most journalists and human rights investigators have concluded that the Koglweogo were the primary authors of the massacres against the Peul, while the Koglweogo have insisted that they were not involved in an organized fashion in the reprisal violence, but rather were drawn in because the slain chief's son was a member of their organization; the Koglweogo have also argued that members of the wider Peul community around Yirgou were complicit in the killings of the chief and others.<sup>177</sup> The Koglweogo leader Moussa Thiombiano called the incident at Yirgou "truly deplorable," and called on state authorities to mediate so as to prevent further ethnic conflict.<sup>178</sup> The inter-ethnic conflict extends beyond the Koglweogo and beyond Mossi-Peul tensions: for example, in March-April 2019, the assassination of an ethnically Fulse religious leader in Arbinda town led to reprisals that caused sixty deaths, primarily among Peul.<sup>179</sup> No sanctions have been handed down in connection with the incident. Meanwhile, the presence of the Koglweogo elevates an already high temperature in a sensitive region.

The Koglweogo are not going away any time soon – they fulfill a genuine and important security need for many communities, and as such they are unlikely to fade until the state or some other actor takes over that role. Yet the Koglweogo have also grown beyond their initial purpose, taking on political influence and exacerbating inter-communal tensions.

The next section considers one final current competing for influence in the country: what might be called the Burkinabè "critical left," who played massive roles in the fall of Compaoré but whose place in post-Compaoré politics has been more constrained and ambivalent.

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<sup>176</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Burkina Faso: Affrontements intercommunautaires Update," 10 January 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Update%20affrontements%20intercommunautaires.pdf>.

<sup>177</sup> Interview with S. Abdulkarim, Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019.

<sup>178</sup> S. S., "Moussa Thiombiano alias Django, responsable des Koglweogo de l'Est : « Le ministère de la Sécurité n'a pas joué son rôle ... », " Le Faso, 22 January 2019, <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article87611>.

<sup>179</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Burkina Faso: Armed attacks in Arbinda Flash Update No. 2," 16 April 2019, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Arbinda%20Flash%20Update%202%20-%20EN.pdf>.

## The Critical Left

In the years since Compaoré's fall, the left has been in a complicated position in Burkina Faso. On the one hand, as Sten Hagberg has argued, "Popular resistance and revolutionary struggle are crucial to Burkinabè political culture."<sup>180</sup> Burkina Faso has a long legacy of revolutionary activity dating back to the time of Thomas Sankara's rule from 1983-1987. Many Burkinabè citizens continue to take inspiration from Sankara's dream of an economically independent and equitable Burkina Faso where youth, women, and other marginalized groups could find dignity and prominence within the society. The fall of Compaoré brought a further revival of Sankarism, with renewed investigations into his death and renewed interest in his legacy. Popular mobilization was key not just to the 2014 revolution, but also to the reversal of the 2015 coup. As Hagberg notes, such mobilizations reflect not just revolutionary legacies but also generational shifts, as young Burkinabè populate and lead relatively recent creations, such as Balai Citoyen and the Front de résistance citoyenne.<sup>181</sup>

On the other hand, these movements had more success – and a more central role – in overthrowing Compaoré than they have had in building a new national order. From the perspective of the critical left, the 2014 uprising remains incomplete – or, more dramatically, the activists say that the spirit of the uprising was betrayed by what followed. The popular insurrection, one activist said, was "cut short by a coup d'état" – in other words, the military intervention against Compaoré in October 2014 – and "there was not a true change," because essentially the same ruling class remained in power.<sup>182</sup>

Moreover, viewed in a certain light, the two leading candidates in the 2015 elections were not transformational figures but instead representatives of the ancient regime: the MPP's candidate Roch Kaboré, as noted above, was a key member of Compaoré's political machine until 2012 and only left Compaoré's CDP in 2014 (although one should note that Kaboré began his political career as a Communist). As one group of analysts has commented, "The

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<sup>180</sup> Hagberg, "'Thousands of New Sankaras'," p. 110.

<sup>181</sup> Hagberg, "'Thousands of New Sankaras'," p. 116.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with O. Sanou, Ouagadougou, 14 June 2019. Such sentiments are not confined to revolutionaries: one prominent leader of an organization largely made up of well-educated, Francophone Muslims said "it's as though nothing has moved." Interview with Ilboudo.

difference between the CDP and the MPP is ultimately a question of timing”<sup>183</sup> – that is, the MPP’s founders left the CDP just before Compaoré’s system collapsed. The other leading candidate in 2015, Zéphirin Diabré, left Compaoré’s machine much earlier, in 1997, but prior to that time had served in Compaoré’s government in multiple ministerial positions and had twice been elected as a parliamentary deputy. More broadly, both candidates fit a wider profile of the contemporary elite Sahelian politician: a French-educated technocrat who parlayed economic expertise (in Kaboré’s case, in the banking sector; in Diabré’s case, in the management department of the University of Ouagadougou and then in the private sector) into a political career. Neither candidate, moreover, promised a fundamental reimagining of Burkina Faso’s economy; in 2013, Diabré had said, “I am neither afraid nor ashamed to say that I am a neoliberal.”<sup>184</sup>

If a core demand among left activists is a more equitable distribution of the country’s resources, and therefore a new system of economic management, that dream’s realization appears remote. Meanwhile, anti-corruption activists argue that corruption temporarily receded in 2015 as key players adjusted to the post-Compaoré environment and as some arrests occurred, but that corruption then resurged starting in 2016 as those same players realized that systematic accountability was not forthcoming.<sup>185</sup>

The demand for accountability, redistribution, and greater sharing of economic resources and profits emerged strongly in the late Compaoré period and has continued to sound in the post-Compaoré era. These demands intersect in complex and unclear ways with the insecurity in the north and the east.

For example, one highly contested sector is gold mining. Burkina Faso is in the middle tier of the world’s gold-producing countries, ranking twenty-first in 2017 according to one list.<sup>186</sup> Gold mining has

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<sup>183</sup> Hagberg et al., “Au cœur de la révolution Burkinabe,” p. 219.

<sup>184</sup> Abdou Zoure, “Zéphirin Diabré : « Je n’ai ni peur ni honte de dire que je suis néolibéral »,” *Burkina24*, 25 July 2013, <https://www.burkina24.com/2013/07/25/zephirin-diabre-je-nai-ni-peur-ni-honte-de-dire-que-je-suis-neoliberal/>; see also Brian Peterson, “After the Coup in Burkina Faso: Unity, Justice, and Dismantling the Compaoré System,” *African Arguments*, 25 September 2015, <https://africanarguments.org/2015/09/25/after-the-coup-in-burkina-faso-unity-justice-and-dismantling-the-compaore-system/>.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with two RENLAC officials.

<sup>186</sup> Amarendra Dhiraj, “The World’s Largest Gold Producing Countries, 2018 Rankings,” *CEOWorld Magazine*, 14 June 2018, <https://ceoworld.biz/2018/06/14/the-worlds-largest-gold-producing-countries-2018-rankings/>.

expanded rapidly in Burkina Faso over the past decade, growing from 5.5 tons in 2008 to an estimated 55 tons in 2018.<sup>187</sup> In the first quarter of 2018, three of West Africa's top ten most productive gold mines were in Burkina Faso.<sup>188</sup> As of 2018, the Essakan site was the most productive gold mine in Burkina Faso.<sup>189</sup> Essakan is located approximately forty kilometers east of Gorom-Gorom, the capital of Ouadalan Province. The mine is 90% owned by IAMGOLD, and 10% owned by the government. Commercial production started there in 2010.<sup>190</sup> Yet "less than half of IAMGOLD's two thousand Burkinabe employees are from the Essakane province [sic], and only 16% originate from the nearby villages (368 jobs for 16,000 displaced people)."<sup>191</sup> By 2012, youth in the region were protesting against Essakan, demanding the attention of local and national authorities; the Compaoré administration responded with some development initiatives in Dori, but areas such as Yagha and Ouadalan continued to suffer neglect. The post-Compaoré period has brought continued complaints and periodic demonstrations, partly because the more open political atmosphere allows for freer expression of long-held grievances.<sup>192</sup>

Part of the context for local grievances against multinational mining companies is that the gold rush has brought widespread artisanal mining activity – a situation that has created significant tensions at several sites. One example of these dynamics is the village of Pousghin, in Plateau-Central Region. Gold was found there in 2002, but shortly before Compaoré's fall in 2014 the artisanal miners at the site were expelled in favor of West African Resources, an Australian mining company. Amid the revolution, the artisanal miners returned but were shortly expelled again by the Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité (Republican Security Company), a division of the national police. "According to local people, many artisanal miners who lived and worked on the site lost more or less everything. Local inhabitants' claim that the market was intentionally burnt down, bicycles and

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<sup>187</sup> Tim Cocks and Ange Aboa, "Burkina Faso Expects Record 55 Tonnes of Gold in 2018 – Minister," Reuters, 16 February 2018, <https://af.reuters.com/article/investingNews/idAFKCN1G014M-OZABS>.

<sup>188</sup> CSA Global, "West African Gold Mines: Quarterly Summary to 31 March 2018," 2018, p. 1, <https://www.csaglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/CSA-West-African-Gold-Mines.pdf>.

<sup>189</sup> CSA Global, "West African Gold Mines," p. 1.

<sup>190</sup> IAMGOLD, "Essakane Gold Mine, Burkina Faso," <http://www.iamgold.com/English/operations/operating-mines/essakane-gold-mine-burkina-faso/default.aspx>; accessed 7 July 2019.

<sup>191</sup> Julie Snorek, "Attempting Social Responsibility at Iamgold's Mine, Burkina Faso," 25 June 2017, <https://ejatlas.org/conflict/gold-and-water-rush-in-burkina-fasos-essakane-mine>.

<sup>192</sup> Interview with K. Kaboré, 11 June 2019.

motorbikes destroyed, etc.”<sup>193</sup> At another level, artisanal mining also generates a set of socioeconomic problems and tensions, feeding prostitution, drug use, and environmental destruction in an already resource-stressed landscape;<sup>194</sup> in general, popular perceptions of artisanal mining are divided between those who welcome its economic benefits and those who see it as a source of insecurity.<sup>195</sup>

One of the country’s activist organizations, the Organisation Démocratique de Jeunesse (ODJ), has taken a leading role in organizing protests by villagers and artisanal miners against large mining companies,<sup>196</sup> with ODJ denouncing what it calls “colonial enclaves” where mining companies dictate decisions to locals and even to the national state.<sup>197</sup> For ODJ, this work is part of a wider “anti-imperialist” project – they consider Burkina Faso “a neo-colonial country,” subordinated to outside and especially French interests in the political, security, and economic spheres.<sup>198</sup>

The left activists’ position is precarious, however, and not just in a rhetorical sense but also in a physical sense. The severe pressures that activists face are illustrated by incidents such as the May 2019 deaths of two ODJ members in Yagha Province, Sahel Region. The ODJ’s Yagha section President Fahadou Cissé and the section’s Treasurer Hama Balima were shot dead while heading to Yagha’s capital Sebba for a meeting with Yagha’s high commissioner.<sup>199</sup> The ODJ and its allies had so many enemies that they refused to rule out any suspects, even the authorities themselves: speaking at a press conference in July, labor activist Bassolma Bazie castigated the authorities for not conducting autopsies of the two ODJ deceased, and called for the punishment and denunciation of “summary executions and score-settlings under the cover of the fight against terrorism.”<sup>200</sup> For the moment, however, the two deaths show that

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<sup>193</sup> Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse au Burkina Faso, “The Struggle against Sanbrado Gold Mining in Burkina Faso,” translated by Bettina Engels, *Review of African Political Economy*, 5 June 2019, <https://roape.net/2019/06/05/the-struggle-against-sanbrado-gold-mining-in-burkina-faso/>.

<sup>194</sup> Interview with anonymous Burkinabè scholar.

<sup>195</sup> Hagberg et al., “Sécurité par le bas,” 42.

<sup>196</sup> Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse au Burkina Faso, “The Struggle against Sanbrado Gold Mining in Burkina Faso.”

<sup>197</sup> Interview with O. Sanou.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with O. Sanou.

<sup>199</sup> Organisation Démocratique de la Jeunesse au Burkina Faso, “Necrologie,” June 2019, <https://www.odj-burkina.org/index.php/fr/80-general/130-necrologie>.

<sup>200</sup> “Assassinat des deux membres de l’ODJ: ‘Plus jamais ces types d’assassinat dans notre pays’ selon BAZIE Bassolma,” *Gulmu Info*, 8 July 2019, <https://gulmu.info/assassinat-des-deux-membres-de-lodj-plus-jamais-ces-types-dassassinat-dans-notre-pays-selon-bazie-bassolma/>.



being a Burkinabè activist and critic has, once again, become a dangerous affair.

A core dilemma for activists, meanwhile, is that while the grievances they respond to are widespread, the sympathies of the larger population are fluid. As noted above, a June 2019 opinion poll showed that roughly two-thirds of respondents favored Compaoré's return.

The realities of post-Compaoré Burkina Faso have fallen far short of many citizens' expectations. This dynamic gives the activists ammunition for their argument that much more radical change is needed – but the same dynamic also gives ammunition to those who say that the country has had too much change. The question of a clear national identity and trajectory here comes once again to the fore.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed primarily to Burkinabè authorities, and secondarily to French authorities:

1. In the counter-jihadism fight, work to replace a cycle of panic and denial with a cycle of restraint and accountability:

As numerous analysts have argued, the “security forces must be discerning in their approach – particularly when trying to root out Ansaroul Islam – and avoid abuses that can turn the population against them and drive members of the communities living in the border areas to join the extremist group.”<sup>201</sup> Yet the behaviors of officers and soldiers on the frontlines are shaped by incentives and signals coming from the highest levels of the Burkinabè government and military as well as from French officials. Both Burkinabè and French leaders should avoid pressuring subordinates to generate short-term counter-terrorism “successes,” pressures that too often lead to body counts and collective punishment. These authorities should also avoid framing the conflict as one of widespread ideological “radicalization,” a framing that can lead to stigmatization of broad populations. Rather, Burkinabè and French authorities should work to ensure that units on the frontlines are well-equipped, confident, cautious, transparent, and communicative vis-à-vis locals; part of this effort could involve systematic recruitment campaigns among underrepresented groups, as well as training for soldiers who do not speak Fulfulde or other relevant languages. Authorities should simultaneously work to enforce accountability for individuals in the chain of command who siphon funds from security budgets or who commit human rights violations.

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<sup>201</sup> William Assanvo, “Security Alone Won’t Save Burkina Faso from Extremism,” Institute for Security Studies, 11 April 2017, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/security-alone-wont-save-burkina-faso-from-extremism>. See also Human Rights Watch, “Burkina Faso: Respect Rights During Counterinsurgency Operation,” 22 May 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/22/burkina-faso-respect-rights-during-counterinsurgency-operation>.

2. Broker a short-term agreement with the Koglweogo to formalize their security role, and seek a long-term agreement to phase them out.

In the short term, it would be better for the country's rulers to accept an agreement that formalizes the Koglweogo's security role, even if that agreement is dictated more by the Koglweogo than by the authorities, than to allow the status quo to persist. If such an agreement allows the Koglweogo to keep much of their independence, it should nevertheless accelerate and mandate efforts to end human rights abuses and reprisal violence by the Koglweogo. State authorities should seek to ensure that the Koglweogo's role is limited to anti-banditry patrols; this would mean ending the Koglweogo's roles in counter-jihadism, pronouncement of sentences against suspected criminals, or inter-communal disputes. Authorities could also give Koglweogo members access to training with the security forces or with civil society groups, some of which has already begun. In the short term but especially in the long term, authorities must demonstrate to the Koglweogo and to their home communities that the state is committed to ending the factors that gave rise to the Koglweogo in the first place: widespread banditry and theft, the unreliability of the gendarmes and the police in dealing with suspected criminals, and the overall failure of the state to secure rural areas and urban peripheries. Ultimately, the state should seek to convince the Koglweogo's leaders that the state can guarantee security and thus obviate the need for continued community mobilization.

3. Restore a sense of national sovereignty and popular ownership of the country:

There are repeated refrains in the Burkinabè press, in opinion polls, and in other venues (including in the interviews for this report) – that Burkina Faso and its citizens have lost both control of their country and a sense of direction and purpose. Burkinabè authorities should ensure that in the economic sphere, any further expropriation of artisanal mining sites, ordinary hunters' terrain, or other sites is conducted in a transparent manner and with full compensation for the displaced and the affected. In the political sphere, authorities should make policymaking transparent and inclusive, taking the demands of ordinary citizens

and revolutionaries forces seriously. In the security sphere, both the Burkinabè and the French authorities should demonstrate that Burkina Faso controls its own destiny, and that French counterterrorism efforts do not trump national sovereignty.



## CONCLUSION

Burkina Faso's security challenges are trending in the wrong direction, raising serious questions about the country's future prospects and about the potential for violence – jihadist, criminal, and inter-communal – to spread into new areas of the greater Sahel as well as the West African coastal countries.

The causes of the crisis are multi-faceted, ranging from ultra-local issues of social change and disrupted hierarchies in the north and east of the country, to national-level dilemmas regarding policy-making and sovereignty, to regional-level trends related to the ongoing aftereffects and unintended consequences of the 2011 revolution in Libya and the 2012 rebellion in northern Mali.

Reversing the negative trends at work in Burkina Faso will likewise require substantial changes at all of these levels, a process that will require a more inclusive and transformative framework for governance, counterterrorism, community defense, and policy-making.

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