

Burkina Faso elections, another box to check

By Rida Lyammouri

Key points

- The first nine months of 2020 saw unprecedented violence in Burkina Faso, mostly attributed to al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliated groups. There has also been a notable increase in violence by self-defense armed groups and state security forces.
- Security forces and affiliated self-defense groups remain the preferred targets for jihadist groups. Simultaneously, civilians remain the main victims of the ongoing crisis in Burkina Faso.
- In addition to fatalities, access to education has worsened in 2020.
- Changing the electoral code to exclude people in conflict zones from voting is a reflection of state failure to deliver to those affected the most by existing grievances against the state. This situation will complicate the task ahead for the new government.
- Current president, Roch Kaboré faces well-known and experienced politicians with close ties to his deposed predecessor Blaise Compaoré. It remains to be seen how the memory of the previous regime will affect those that led the 2014 revolution.
- ‘Force majeure’, the law passed on August 25, excludes part of the Burkinabe people from the elections, which may continue to undermine state legitimacy and further divide Burkinabe society. Also, the incumbent government may benefit from the fact that some people in unstable regions won’t be able to vote.
- Interviewees from self-defense groups agreed that ethnic affiliation has a significant influence when it comes to choosing political leaders and/or political parties.
- The threat of violence and attacks by VEOs against voting offices, elections officials, and politicians is clear. What remains unclear is the role the self-defense groups Koglweogo and VDP may or may not play in enabling political parties to reach communities, and/or influence and/or intimidate the voters, and to use traditional chiefs to support the ruling party to secure political gains.

INTRODUCTION

In October 2014, Burkina Faso entered a new era when a social uprising resulted in the overthrow after 27 years of President Blaise Compaoré. The uprising was triggered by Compaoré's attempt to amend the constitution so he could run for another term. In late 2015, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected and sworn as a new president with high hopes for a new Burkina Faso. Corruption, democratic reforms, poverty, and economic development dominated President Kaboré's inauguration speech. However, priorities changed quickly because of the deteriorating security situation and gradual spread of violence. Consequently, and at an unprecedented pace, Burkina Faso became mired in the worst humanitarian crisis in West Africa and maybe in the world.

The humanitarian and security situation in Burkina Faso became catastrophic in 2019. Worse, 2020 is on track to surpass 2019 according to available data for the first nine months of the year¹. Furthermore, the months leading up to elections in November 2020 also saw increasing human rights violations². While violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are seen as the main perpetrators, state security forces and affiliated self-defense groups have also contributed to growing civilian casualties. Subsequently, relationships between communities reached all time lows, and state legitimacy in conflict zones has declined, even becoming non-existent in certain areas.

This policy paper analyses the violence during the first nine months of 2020 and provides an overview in advance of the November 22 elections. In addition, the paper unpacks concerns raised about the role of state affiliated self-defense groups during the elections, based on interviews with members of the Koglweogo and volontaire pour la défense de la patrie (VDP).

VIOLENT NINE MONTHS: JAN – SEPT 2020

Violence and insecurity in general, in addition to the humanitarian crisis, are the leading concerns for Burkina Faso's government and its international partners. Turmoil in the West African Sahel has been growing for almost a decade, with Burkina Faso at the heart of it since the regime change in 2014. In the last two years, the Burkinabe government and its regional and international partners have faced a worsening multidimensional conflict. Multiple drivers have pushed the country to an unprecedented level of violence and humanitarian crisis. Poverty and state incapability to provide adequate basic services has led to a decline in state legitimacy, mostly among the population in rural areas affected by the ongoing conflict. Instability has been triggered by the emergence of armed groups, notably jihadist groups (also referred to as VEOs). Most of the current violence is attributed to al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliated groups. However, 2020 has also seen notable increases in violence by armed self-defense groups and state security forces.

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project, reported fatalities in the first nine months of 2020 exceeded 2000, which represents around 91% of the fatalities registered during 2019 and surpassed each of the past five years. The Sahel region of Burkina Faso registered more than 50% of the fatalities this year, making it the most hit by violence, followed by the Center-Nord, Est, Nord, and Boucle du Mouhoun regions. Jihadist groups, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimeen (JNIM) and Islamic State in Grand Sahara (ISGS), are considered to be responsible for half of the fatalities through attacks against state forces, affiliated self-defense groups, and civilians perceived as opposed to their ideology and accused of collaborating with the state. In addition to human casualties, schools continued to be targeted in the first nine months of 2020, matching or surpassing 2019 in this respect. In its May 2020 report, Human Rights Watch (HRW) counted 126 attacks and armed threats against teachers, students, and schools by jihadist groups in 2020, in addition to 222 education workers who were victims of the attacks³.

1. Luengo-Cabrera, José (September 9, 2020), "Sahel: Violence and Displacement," https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1303684306032877568?s=20

2. Dufka, Corinne (June 29, 2020), "Sahel : Les Atrocités Commises par des Militaires Favorisent le Recrutement par les Groupes Armés," https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/06/29/sahel-les-atrocites-commises-par-des-militaires-favorisent-le-recrutement-par-les-groupes-armes_6044601_3212.html.

3. Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Burkina Faso: Armed Islamists Attack Education," May 26, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/26/burkina-faso-armed-islamists-attack-education>; See also: Human Rights Watch (HRW), "Their War Against Education," May 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/burkinafaso0520_web.pdf

Consequently, the Burkinabe government has closed around 2500 schools, depriving about 350,000 students of education⁴. Almost all schools attacked are located in the Sahel, Est, and Centre-Nord regions⁵.

Historically, Burkina Faso's central governments have relied on traditional authorities and local elected officials to govern difficult to reach areas. However, this local infrastructure has been regularly targeted by VOEs since 2015. This has continued in 2020 throughout northern and eastern regions of Burkina Faso. A number of traditional leaders, elected officials, and civil servants have been assassinated by JNIM and ISGS in Burkina Faso, and also in neighboring countries Mali and Niger. Fearing for their safety and with lack of protection from the state, targeted authorities are forced to flee their home areas supposed to provide some sort of public services. This has left communities remaining in conflict zones exposed to VEOs, and in some cases forced to negotiate co-existence with VEOs. In June/July 2020, reports started to emerge about JNIM engaged in reconciliation efforts and dialogue with traditional authorities in parts of Mali bordering Burkina Faso. Though to lesser extent, this has also been observed across the borders in Burkina Faso, but has not gained momentum as it did in Mali.

Burkinabe security forces have been accused multiple times this year of committing atrocities against civilians seen as collaborating with or sympathetic to jihadist groups⁶. Communal and self-defense groups, Koglweogo and VDP, also contribute to the violence by clashing with jihadist groups and targeting civilians accused of collaboration with VEOs⁷. Both self-defense groups act as security and law providers in areas where the state is absent, and often arrest and target civilians based on their ethnic affiliations and on unfounded accusations

4. Ibid

5. Luengo-Cabrera , José (August 20, 2020), "Attacks on Schools by Attributed Perpetrator," https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1293498289019654145

6. Dufka, Corinne (June 29, 2020), "Sahel : Les Atrocités Commises par des Militaires Favorisent le Recrutement par les Groupes Armés," https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/06/29/sahel-les-atrocites-commises-par-des-militaires-favorisent-le-recrutement-par-les-groupes-armes_6044601_3212.html.

7. Douce, Sophie (March 10, 2020), "La Tuerie Perpétrée dans le Nord du Burkina Faso Attise les Tensions Communautaires," https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/03/10/la-tuerie-perpetree-dans-le-nord-du-burkina-faso-attise-les-tensions-communautaires_6032519_3212.html; see also: Sophie Douce (February 4, 2020), "Au Burkina Faso, les Peuls Victimes d'une Stigmatisation Meurtrièr," https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/02/04/au-burkina-faso-les-peuls-victimes-d'une-stigmatisation-meurtriere_5418966_3212.html

of supporting VEOs. On the other hand, communities hosting self-defense groups risk being targeted by jihadist groups.

The impact of ongoing violence is clear and cannot be ignored. Jihadist groups are preventing thousands of civilians from access to education by threatening and intimidating students, parents, and teachers, while schools are damaged. In 2020, conflict affected areas in the Nord, Est, and Sahel regions are seeing alarming human rights violations based on ethnicity. Perpetrators are not only jihadist groups but also state security forces and ethnic based self-defense groups. This undermines the state's legitimacy and efforts to re-establish trust between state agencies and local populations. Simultaneously, jihadist groups will continue to exploit such broken relationships to seek legitimacy among communities suffering from the actions of state security forces and acts of abuse by affiliated armed groups.

The number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has increased sharply since September 2019, surpassing one million in July 2020. This trend is a direct result of the violence described in the previous section and because of the violence over the border in central Mali. The situation is labeled critical, catastrophic, and serious in terms of the correlation between violence and displacement in the Sahel region, Centre-Nord region, and Nord region respectively⁸⁹. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that 15% of the population, or 3 million people, are food insecure¹⁰.

The numbers from the first nine months of 2020 demonstrate the alarming security and humanitarian conditions in Burkina Faso. In this catastrophic situation, the country is entering the presidential and legislative elections.

8. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), "Burkina Faso Humanitarian Snapshot," August 28, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bfa_humanitarian_overview_18082020_eng.pdf.

9. Luengo-Cabrera, José (September 2020), "Sahel: Reported Fatalities (January – September 2020)," https://twitter.com/J_LuengoCabrera/status/1317144448413958145?s=20

10. OCHA, "Burkina Faso Humanitarian Snapshot," August 28, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bfa_humanitarian_overview_18082020_eng.pdf.

ELECTIONS: OLD FACES AND ROCH KABORÉ

The Nov. 22 elections are being overshadowed by the security and humanitarian situation in Burkina Faso. The elections most likely will take place despite the ongoing challenges. The Burkinabe government and international community cannot allow this event to be a source of further destabilization.

Current president Roch Kaboré might seem likely to be re-elected, though other candidates are trying to make their cases. The list of candidates includes in large part those who were part of the ousted regime of Compaoré. About half of the 14 presidential candidates previously held positions when Compaoré was president. Unlike in 2015, President Kaboré faces more experienced political parties and candidates. These candidates are not holding back and not trying to hide their nostalgia for the Compaoré regime, with particular reference to stability during his era¹¹. It is unclear how this will resonate with a Burkinabe population that revolted in 2014 with the hope of seeing a new Burkina Faso.

The issue of social inequality has also been raised. An independent candidate labeled the requirement for a high fee to be deposited as part of the application to run for presidency as an act of discrimination and inequality against ordinary Burkinabe interested in running for the presidency¹². He stated that such requirement demonstrates that running for presidency is reserved to a limited social class¹³. This sentiment was shared by Abdoulaye Soma, a candidate who denounced these measures, saying that a new or independent candidate does not have to face these obstacles to challenge for the highest government office in the country¹⁴. In addition, only few of the 143 political parties have the means to challenge for seats¹⁵.

11. Alex Thurston, "Burkina Faso's Presidential Elections: Key Candidates," Sahel Blog (blog), September 24, 2020, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2020/09/24/burkina-fasos-presidential-elections-key-candidates/>.

12. Yaya Boudani (September 29, 2020), "Burkina Faso: Des Candidats à La Présidentielle Protestent Contre Des Conditions «Discriminatoires», "<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200929-burkina-faso-candidats-pr%C3%A9sidentielle-conditions-discriminatoires>.

13. Yaya Boudani (September 29, 2020), "Burkina Faso: Des Candidats à La Présidentielle Protestent Contre Des Conditions «Discriminatoires», "<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200929-burkina-faso-candidats-pr%C3%A9sidentielle-conditions-discriminatoires>.

14. Ibid.

15. Centre for Democracy and Development (October 19, 2020), "Polls in Peril? West Africa's 2020-Elections," <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Polls-in-Peril-West-Africas-2020-elections.pdf>.

The Main Candidates and their Relationship to the Former Compaoré Regime

Roch Marc Christian Kaboré (63)

Current president and a member of the People's Movement for Progress Party (MPP). In November 2015, he won the election from the first round with 53.5% of the vote against 29% for Zephirin Diabré¹⁶. Kabore's first term has been challenging especially because of the instability and insecurity caused mainly by the Jihadist armed groups in the north and eastern parts of the country. Kaboré was also part of the former Compaoré regime, holding different ministerial positions, and was prime minister from 1994-1996. Kaboré served as President of the Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP) before he left and founded his current party in January 2014.

Zephirin Diabré (61)

The president of the Union for Progress and Change (UPC), Burkina Faso's main opposition party he was nominated on July 25 as a candidate in the upcoming election¹⁷. Diabré came in second place in the 2015 election to current President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. He was a Minister of Commerce, Industry, and Mines from 1992 to 1994. From 1996-1997 he was the president of the economic and social council. He founded UPC in 2011.

Yacouba Isaac Zida (54)

The candidate of the Patriotic Movement for Salvation (MPS). Zida announced his candidacy on September 25¹⁸. He has been in exile in Canada since 2016 and is subject to an arrest warrant for "desertion in peacetime and refusal to obey" and corruption, but he promised to be back during the election campaign regardless¹⁹. Zida promises to establish security and

16. Cyril Bensimon, "Au Burkina Faso, l'ex-dauphin de Blaise Compaoré remporte largement l'élection présidentielle," Le Monde.fr, December 1, 2015, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/12/01/au-burkina-faso-l-ex-dauphin-de-blaise-compaore-remporte-largement-l-election-presidentielle_4821271_3212.html.

17. Le Monde, "Burkina: L'opposant Zéphirin Diabré Investi Candidat à La Présidentielle," July 25, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/07/25/burkina-l-opposant-zephirin-diabre-investi-candidat-a-la-presidentielle_6047287_3212.html.

18. Glez, Damien (September 17, 2020), "Burkina : Yacouba Isaac Zida Candidat Par Contumace ?," <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1045967/politique/burkina-yacouba-isaac-zida-candidat-par-contumace/>.

19. Roger, Benjamin (February 21, 2020), "Yacouba Isaac Zida : « Je vais rentrer au Burkina Faso pour me mettre au service du peuple », "<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/900029/politique/yacouba-isaac-zida-je-vais-reentrer-au-burkina-faso-pour-me-mettre-au-service-du-peuple/>.

stability in Burkina Faso in six months and return internally displaced people to their homes within twelve months if elected president²⁰. Zida was a lieutenant colonel and second-in-command of the Presidential Security Regiment. He seized power for three weeks in November 2014 after the removal of Compaoré, before handing power to Michel Kafando under pressure from political parties, the international community, and civil society. Zida played a role in the transitional government as prime minister.

Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo (66)

He was selected as a candidate for the Agir Ensemble (Act Together) movement on September 6²¹. For Ouédraogo, peace, security, and national reconciliation are among his top objectives if he wins the presidency²². Former prime minister in 1996-2000, he has also been president of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Gilbert Noël Ouédraogo (52)

He is the leader of the Alliance for Democracy and Federation – African Democratic Rally, and announced his candidacy on April 1, 2019²³. He is known along with his party for formerly being close to Compaoré. In 2014, Ouédraogo backed and lobbied for the amendment to the constitution that would have allowed Compaoré to stay in power²⁴. He was not allowed to run for the 2015 election under a law banning Compaoré's associates from running.

Eddie Komboïgo (56)

President of the ruling Congress for Democracy and Progress (CDP), a party founded by Compaoré himself. Komboïgo was selected as a party candidate on July 26, 2020²⁵. Komboïgo led the CDP during the post-Compaoré era and was banned from the 2015

elections because of law preventing Compaoré's close associates from running for power. Compaoré, the honorary president of the CDP, who lives in exile in Ivory Coast, has validated Komboïgo's candidacy, which hints at the lasting link Komboïgo still has with the deposed president²⁶.

Tahirou Barry

He is the candidate of the Movement for Change and Renaissance (MCR, Mouvement pour le Changement et la Renaissance) party and announced his candidacy on June 27, 2020. He was third in the 2015 presidential election, and was a minister in Kaboré's first government. Barry's plan of change is based on education to form a new elite: he plans to use 30% of the national budget for education²⁷.

Excluded by 'Force Majeure'

Violence and insecurity in Burkina Faso that affect the lives of millions of civilians are also now undermining the elections. Nearly a fifth (17.4%) of the electoral communes in Burkina Faso were labeled unsafe for registration to take place, and thus, around 400,000 people could not register to vote on November 22²⁸. Most of the communes where registration was not done are in the most insecure northern and eastern regions of the country. However, the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) announced that anyone who voted in the 2015 election will be able to vote on November 22, and that 2.3 million new voters have been added to the list while some IDPs are registered in host communities²⁹.

The election will still be held on November 22 regardless of the failure to register some voters. The ongoing conflict is considered an acceptable reason to cancel voter registration, and a bill was passed by the parliament on August 25 approving 'force majeure', and therefore

20. Ibid.
21. Boudani, Yaya (September 6, 2020), "Burkina Faso: Agir Ensemble Investit Kadré Desiré Ouedraogo Candidat à La Présidentielle," <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200906-burkina-agir-ensemble-investit-kadr%C3%A9-%C3%A9sir%C3%A9-ouedraogo-candidat-%C3%A0-la-pr%C3%A9sidentielle>.

22. Touré, Haoua (October 1, 2020), "Election Présidentielle de 2020 Au Burkina : Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo Représentera Le Mouvement « Agir Ensemble », <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article99144>.

23. Jeune Afrique, "Burkina Faso : Gilbert Noël Ouédraogo investi candidat à la présidentielle de 2020 – Jeune Afrique," JeuneAfrique.com (blog), April 1, 2019, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/756713/politique/burkina-faso-un-ancien-partisan-de-blaise-compaore-investi-candidat-a-la-pr%C3%A9sidentielle-de-2020/>.

24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.

26. Le Monde, "Au Burkina, Eddie Komboïgo Investi Candidat à La Présidentielle Par l'ex-Parti de Compaoré," July 27, 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/07/27/au-burkina-eddie-komboigo-investi-candidat-a-la-pr%C3%A9sidentielle-par-l-ex-parti-de-compaore_6047386_3212.html.

27. Dofini, Romuald (June 29, 2020), "Burkina Faso : Le Candidat Du MCR, Tahirou Barry, Dévoile Les Grands Axes De Son Programme Pour La Présidentielle de 2020," <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article97720>.

28. Wilkins, Henry (October 6, 2020), "Surrounded by War, Burkinabe Civilians Have Votes Taken Away | Burkina Faso | Al Jazeera," <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/6/amid-insecurity-voters-cannot-register-for-burkina-faso-polls>.

29. Ibid.

justifying the suspension of voter registration in conflict areas, covering at least 18% of the national territory³⁰.

The new electoral code is controversial and provoked concerns among different people, including members of the council who voted for it. A deputy stated “that he voted yes not because of his deep conviction, but the law is a consensus between the political class, and then all deputies can do is vote yes”³¹. Another deputy member from the ruling party stated that voting for the law was to ensure “the continuity of the institutions”³². A group of citizens requested the constitutional council to declare the new electoral code as unconstitutional³³. For them, the modification to the electoral code violated the ECOWAS protocol on democracy and good governance. Moreover, the group also recalled the African Court of Justice and Human Right’s statement that any modification of an electoral code six months before the election without the consent of the majority is a criminal offense related to unconstitutional change of government. Thus, to them, the law passed on August 25 excludes part of the Burkinabe people, which may continue to undermine state legitimacy and further divide Burkinabe society.

The law may also increase the gap between the political class and young people, and thus lead to a low turnout. Indeed, there may be a lot of absentees for this election, especially among the youth. The total of potential voters registered, according to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES)³⁴ is estimated to be 6,490,926. In June, CENI reported only 20% of registered voters are below the age of 25³⁵. Furthermore, the 18-35 age group is not represented in the government and makes up only 11% of members of parliament. Thus, this law is expected to increase the frustration of young people with the state

30. Ibrahim Maïga & Habibou Souley Bako (November 10), “Lessons from Mali as Burkina and Niger Head for the Polls,” <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/lessons-from-mali-as-burkina-and-niger-head-for-the-polls>

31. Edouard Kamboissoa Samboé (August 25, 2020), “Assemblée Nationale : Les Députés Adoptent Le Code Électoral Modifié,” <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article9889>

32. Ibid.

33. LeFaso.net (September 29, 2020), “Burkina Faso : Des citoyens interpellent le Conseil constitutionnel sur les risques et dangers du nouveau Code électoral” <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article99615>.

34. International Foundation for Electoral Violence (IFES) (November 17, 2020), “Elections in Burkina Faso: 2020 General Elections,” https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/ifes_faqs_elections_in_burkina_faso_2020_general_elections_november_2020.pdf

35. Douce, Sophie (July 07, 2020), “«C'est Pire Qu'avant» : Désenchantée, La Jeunesse Burkinabée s'enrôle Peu Sur Les Listes Électorales,” https://www.lemonde.fr/afrigue/article/2020/07/20/c-est-pire-qu'avant-desenchantee-la-jeunesse-burkinabee-s-enrole-peu-sur-les-listes-electorales_6046733_3212.html.

and political elites. This frustration was evident during a press conference on September 29, 2020, about the constitutional change, a participant labeled the law as “the consecration of national cowardice ... How come a few terrorists that move from east to west through the Sahel and the Nord regions prevent a country of 20 million from organizing the elections”. He further stated that this “bricolage juridique” will have a negative consequence on the harmony of the country and Burkina Faso as a nation³⁶.

Preventing some municipalities from voting may have increased the grievances and frustration of the people, especially in regions where the state is struggling to govern effectively and fairly, and to provide access to basic services. The law has undermined the election as it affects equal participation and the right to political representation for all citizens. Communities in conflict areas are suffering from security measures and instability, and in some case are victims of stigmatization, which has led to atrocities by the state and self-defense groups.

Will the New Law Serve Kaboré?

The incumbent government may benefit from the fact that some people in unstable regions won’t vote. Polls organized by the Center for Democratic Governance (CDG), a Burkinabe think tank, show that people in the excluded areas are the most dissatisfied with the government’s ability to maintain security, and that 63% of the whole population is dissatisfied by the performance of the president³⁷. The current government’s development and security programs have been put in question as they have failed to deliver the intended results, especially the \$810 million Emergency Programme for the Burkinabe Sahel that President Kaboré launched in 2017 to stimulate development in the region³⁸. Furthermore, in 2015, candidates close to President Compaoré were not allowed to take part in the election; thus, candidates including Eddie Komboïgo, and Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo, in addition to the 2015 runner-up Zéphirin Diabré may prevent the current president from winning in the first round in the coming election. Therefore, the electorate may be divided by these four candidates.

36. LeFaso.net (September 29, 2020), “Burkina Faso : Des citoyens interpellent le Conseil constitutionnel sur les risques et dangers du nouveau Code électoral” <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article99615>.

37. “SONDAGE PRESIMETRE JUIN 2020.Pdf,” accessed October 20, 2020, <https://www.presimetre.bf/sites/default/files/etudes-doc/SONDAGE%20PRESIMETRE%20JUIN%202020.pdf>.

38. West Africa Insight. Polls in Peril? West Africa’s 2020 elections. vol 6. no.6 2020

VIGILANTE GROUPS

An Electoral Role as well?

"We will have an influence wherever we are because we already have a weight in securing our villages and communities. But we do not play politics, we will not force anyone to vote for someone against their choice"³⁹, Koglweogo and VDP Members.

"As long as terrorism threatens our survival and the state is unable to protect us, we will be an integral part of any government's policies"⁴⁰, Koglweogo and VDP Members.

The November 22 national elections take place in a context marked by the increased importance and expansion of vigilante groups, namely the Koglweogo and the newly formed VDP. Representatives of both groups stated in interviews conducted in August 2020 that they are apolitical, and their objective is to secure areas [where they are present] and to help establish peace in the country. Simultaneously, they also pointed out that each member is free to support a candidate or a political party of their own choice. One of the key criticisms of Koglweogo and VDP is that they are ethnically based and don't necessarily represent all communities. Participants in the interviews agreed that ethnic affiliation has a significant influence when it comes to choosing the political leader and/or political party. When asked if presidential and parliamentary candidates would use ethnic affiliation to generate support, the answer was automatic: "Of course, ethnic affiliation matters. We have parents who are running in the different elections, we are not forcing our communities, but the majority of our votes will go to these people. They know our realities and our challenges and will therefore know how to defend them for us"⁴¹.

"We are generally made up of clans from different villages. Each clan of course could support a candidate according to ethnic affinity, but we do not force anyone, and that is not our mission"⁴², Koglweogo and VDP Members.

Simultaneously, VDP and Koglweogo have already committed to assist in securing the elections. "We are monitoring the situation closely, and we will denounce any irregularities in our municipalities. If people, try to manipulate the transparency of the elections we will stand against that and not allow it. We will not give the opportunity to people to come to mess-up with elections in our communes. We have already assured the police and the gendarmerie that we will help them in this regard"⁴³. These vigilante groups are perceived as an instrument for political parties, especially the ruling party, to possibly influence the elections. Voting in some places will rely on political parties' capacities to reach electoral constituencies, and access to influential traditional authorities, who have very close relationships with VDP and Koglweogo.

This strategic move will go unchallenged since VDP and Koglweogo are almost the only dominant armed groups in northern and eastern Burkina, other than VEOs. The threat of violence and attacks by VEOs against voting offices, elections officials, and politicians is clear. Burkinabe authorities have confirmed multiple threats by gunmen in parts of the Sahel, Cascades, and Nord regions⁴⁴. All these regions are known to have VEOs present, and violence by these groups is expected to undermine the election. However, what remains unclear is the role Koglweogo and VDP may or may not play in enabling political parties to reach communities, and/or influence and/or intimidate the voters, and to use traditional chiefs to support the ruling party to secure political victory. The Dozos self-defense group, also known as traditional hunters, is also present, but more in western Burkina Faso⁴⁵ where they demonstrated and expressed support to political parties and candidates⁴⁶ where VDP and Koglweogo are not known to have strong presence. As a result, it is unlikely these groups will engage in violence against each other. Still, with the already eroded social cohesion in the country, any further armed mobilization of vigilante groups as a tool for electoral gain could make

43. Interviews with Koglweogo and VDP members in Centre-Nord and Sahel Regions, Burkina Faso, August – September 2020.

44. Burkina Faso government statement author was able to access, November 12, 2020.

45. Hagberg, Sten (March 2019). "Performing tradition while doing politics: a comparative study of the Dozos and Koglweogos self-defense movements in Burkina Faso", African Studies Review, Volume 62, Number 1, pp. 173–193

46. Douce, Sophie (November 18, 2020). "Elections au Burkina Faso : en « zone rouge », une campagne sous le signe de la menace terroriste," https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/11/18/elections-au-burkina-faso-en-zone-rouge-une-campagne-sous-le-signe-de-la-menace-terroriste_6060192_3212.html

39. Interviews with Koglweogo and VDP members in Centre-Nord and Sahel Regions, Burkina Faso, August – September 2020.

40. Ibid.

41. Interviews with Koglweogo and VDP members in Centre-Nord and Sahel Regions, Burkina Faso, August – September 2020.

42. Ibid.

the situation worse, and create opportunities for VEOs to exploit. Inclusive dialogue ahead of the elections, and during and after them, between different political leaders and parties, vigilante groups, and traditional authorities is paramount to avoid further escalation.

International stakeholders demonstrated a great deal of interest in the role of self-defense groups in the elections. However, their role is much more important when it comes to security, state legitimacy, and inter-community tensions beyond election times. Their creation is approved by central government, while the selection and recruitment of new members, especially among VDP, remains unclear and lacks transparency. In the perfect world, recruitment should not be based on religion and/or ethnicity and should be inclusive, but this does not appear to be the case on the ground. It is difficult, sometimes impossible to monitor and control vigilante groups' actions on the ground, and in areas where the state already has no presence. In unstable areas where state forces are present, they operate and sometimes conduct joint operations with these vigilante groups. If state forces support and align themselves with ethnic-based groups, this undermines their legitimacy among communities less represented among those vigilante groups. While this is a concern during the elections, it's more problematic in the long-term to stabilize the country, to delegitimize VEOs, and to gain the trust of local population in conflict affected areas.

Reliance on VDP and Koglweogo is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, even if there are changes and shifts in power. The need of vigilante groups gives them legitimacy and credibility, and reason to continue to exist. This could be summarized by a VDP member: "Koglweogo and VDP are everywhere, Centre-Nord, Nord, Est, and Sahel. Wherever there is a need for security we will be there, we will assist the state. As a reminder, we act legitimately in the territory because the state has passed the law to allow us to act everywhere against bandits."⁴⁷ With different regimes, they always align themselves with those in power and make themselves useful to big men in the central government.⁴⁸ For instance, the Compaoré regime used them to maintain peace and cohesion in rural areas, and once it was overthrown they switched alliance to the

current Kaboré regime.⁴⁹ Strategically, Koglweogo and VDP can use their relationship with political parties and leaders so the latter can not only help them defend their existence, but also provide protection against dissolution and avoid being held accountable for atrocities they might have committed, and are likely to commit.

CONCLUSION

There is a legitimate and genuine concern about the upcoming elections in Burkina Faso. The current situation hints at possible spoilers, mainly VEOs through attacks against polling stations and convoys related to the elections. Security reinforcements by state forces and vigilante groups are increasing to secure areas where voting has not been canceled, but this is unlikely to deter VEOs. The exclusion of certain municipalities does not also necessarily mean that the other municipalities will be safe for candidates and voters. Thus, the state should work to guarantee their safety. The self-defense groups can be used to contribute to securing the election, but this needs to be planned cautiously with the state to ensure they do not play a negative role in the election, in order to avoid further escalation. While vigilante groups' existence seems necessary, their influence should be controlled and limited and operated within a well-defined framework.

"Politicians promises? There isn't any promises right now, but any future government should consider us. When we have insecurity problem solved, weapons will be returned to the state and we will return to the field [farming] and to our routine, then we will talk about political promises."⁵⁰ Koglweogo and VDP members

Excluding the participation of certain communities from opportunities to vote is understandable, but also costly. Communities that are left out are those with existing grievances due to the absence of functioning state institutions, public services, and reliable and fair security forces. While current president Kaboré was given the benefit of the doubt after the historical uprising, the next government will be challenged by the public opinion and will be expected to bring the country out of the current

47. Ibid.

48. Hagberg, Sten (March 2019). "Performing tradition while doing politics: a comparative study of the Dozos and Koglweogos self-defense movements in Burkina Faso", African Studies Review, Volume 62, Number 1, pp. 173–193

49. Wendyam Hervé Lankoandé (May 2020). "Burkina Faso: Casting a shadow over the polls? The role of vigilante groups in the 2020 elections." Clingendael Institute.

50. Interviews with Koglweogo and VDP members in Centre-Nord and Sahel Regions, Burkina Faso, August – September 2020.

crisis. Securing the rural areas and places where armed groups have proliferated will be and should be the main goal in short- and mid-term. Simultaneously, focus should also be on addressing, with international support, the current humanitarian crisis in the short-term but more importantly, create an environment and have mid- and long-term strategies for IDPs to return to their homes. Delays for communities to return, and abandoned homes and villages will continue to create the void VEOs have been aiming for.

The main candidates are politicians who held significant positions during the former President Compaoré's time, challenging current president Kaboré. The election will go ahead, and a president will be elected, hopefully in one round. However, a "successful election" as it will be labeled by national, regional, and international actors will not resolve Burkina Faso's crisis. Presidential and parliamentary elections will be another box checked, at least.

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Rida Lyammouri is a Senior Fellow at the Policy Center for the New South. His research activities focus on geopolitics and international relations in the West African Sahel, a region he has worked on for about a decade, including in the field. He has extensive experience supporting both governmental and non-governmental organizations in the areas of international development, security, countering violent extremism and terrorism, preventing conflicts, ensuring humanitarian access, and migration. Mr Lyammouri has contributed to over 200 in-depth research and analysis reports aiming at building deeper understanding of regional and domestic challenges. He is often asked by various stakeholders to provide policy recommendations on how to address a range of security, economic, and political challenges related to the West African Sahel. Mr Lyammouri has also given presentations as an expert at various conferences in the US, Europe, and Africa. Mr Lyammouri holds a Master's in Public Policy with an emphasis on National Security from the School of Policy, Government, and International Affairs at George Mason University.

About the Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South: A public good for strengthening public policy. The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank tasked with the mission of contributing to the improvement of international, economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and Africa as integral parts of the Global South.

The PCNS advocates the concept of an open, responsible and proactive « new South »; a South that defines its own narratives, as well as the mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, within the framework of an open relationship with the rest of the world. Through its work, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give experts from the South a voice in the geopolitical developments that concern them. This positioning, based on dialogue and partnerships, consists in cultivating African expertise and excellence, capable of contributing to the diagnosis and solutions to African challenges.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author.



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