Bulletin
FrancoPaix

The Deteriorating Security Situation in Burkina Faso

By Daniel Eizenga

Executive summary

• Already three months into 2019, disturbing reports of intercommunal violence in central Mali and in north central Burkina Faso underscore the tragic reality that the Sahel remains locked in crisis.

• The increased activities of violent actors have rightly raised alarm among regional government officials who believe that the situation may worsen or even begin to destabilize the coastal countries along the Gulf of Guinea.

• After several years of international and regional interventions, why have these efforts failed to end violence in the Sahel? What are the roots of this interminable crisis plaguing communities previously considered tolerant and peaceful?

• The security situation in Burkina Faso has been deteriorating gradually in recent years due to many factors, but among the most important are a lack of effective security policies, resources and personnel, a variety of social griev-

ances and local politics in the outlying regions that have been most affected by the insecurity, and the persistence of criminal and insurgent groups seeking to exploit these dynamics.

• 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.

• This has led to political systems which are unable to effectively address the socio-political grievances of Sahelian citizens and allows for the perpetuation of the violence in the region and a growing disillusionment that typifies much of Sahelian politics today.

• A hard look must also be taken at the international partners purportedly "advancing stability" and "political legitimacy" in the Sahel.

Photo : MINUSMA

« As part of the "Global War on Terror", Sahelian elites and their international counterparts have cast the leaders of these destabilizing insurgencies as purveyors of radical Islamist ideology. This politicized message has captured the attention of residents in Ouagadougou, Paris, and Washington D.C. ».

Already three months into 2019, disturbing reports of intercommunal violence in central Mali and in north central Burkina Faso underscore the tragic reality that the Sahel remains locked in crisis. Burkina Faso, in particular, displays worrying signs of rapidly deteriorating security. After roughly seven years of coordinated international and regional efforts to restore peace in the Sahel, a new status quo may be emerging: a cycle of perpetual war of insurgency and counter-insurgency. Reflecting on a short research trip to Ouagadougou during February 2019, I offer some thoughts in the paragraphs below.

An Interminable Crisis or a New Politics?

It was just over seven years ago, on March 21, 2012, that Captain Amadou Sanogo led the coup that ousted Amadou Toumani Touré from power in Mali. Though only one of many influential events, ultimately the subsequent and concomitant security and political crises instigated a French military intervention, a UN peacekeeping mission, and the creation of the Sahel G5 regional joint-force. Each of these interventions continues today in some shape or form, and yet, recent events indicate a worsening state of insecurity. The increased activities of violent actors have rightly raised alarm among regional government officials who believe that the situation may worsen or even begin to destabilize the coastal countries along the Gulf of Guinea.

These fears are not unwarranted. Since the initial insurgency in Mali's north, several new small and rural insurgencies,

comprised of various armed groups, have engaged in acts of deadly violence in Central Mali and have significantly worsened security in Burkina Faso and Niger. Taken together with the insurgent activities of Boko Haram and their humanitarian impact on the Lake Chad Basin, this violence and insecurity, which spans a geographic area roughly the size of Western Europe, should raise alarm. This is especially the case because these insurgencies have emerged despite—perhaps even in response to—the significant efforts of regional and international actors to reestablish stability and restore peace.

Why have these efforts failed to end violence in the Sahel? What are the roots of this interminable crisis plaguing communities previously considered tolerant and peaceful? There is a wide range of possible explanations from which to choose, many of which include an analysis rooted in political economy, governance failures and the inability of the state to effectively adjudicate grievances among different communities.[1] Additionally, and as part of the "Global War on Terror," Sahelian elites and their international counterparts have cast the leaders of these destabilizing insurgencies as purveyors of radical Islamist ideology. This politicized message has captured the attention of residents in Ouagadougou, Paris, and Washington D.C.

Taken together and working in tandem, these explanations

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[1] See for example: Craven-Matthews & Englebert (2018), Sandor (2017) and Bleck & Michelitch (2015).

blend the political and economic interests of elite transnational groups that take advantage of this new political status quo characterized by permanent crisis.[2] Faced with these present circumstances, and at times confronting desperation, individuals find themselves more willing to engage in the organized armed rebellions that perpetuate the spread of insurgency and fuel the cyclical processes that reinforce this new politics and the violence which sustains it.

In the last several months, Burkina Faso has experienced a marked increase in violent events, garnering attention from local and international media and prompting significant government action. These violent events range from complex attacks targeting high level officials, to ethnic clashes and generalized banditry. As Burkina Faso has been central to the decision-making processes behind the Sahel G5 and other regional efforts to confront and halt the regional insurgency crisis, it presents a case within which we observe this new politics and its cycle violence and insurgency at work.

« The Burkinabè government's recent decision to enact a state of emergency in many of the border regions, initially intended to reinforce and reestablish their security, may ultimately have the opposite effect if the government is unable to ensure the professionalism of its security forces through the provision of the necessary resources and training to effectively perform their duties ».

The Current Crisis in Burkina Faso

Several recent events have rekindled the focus on the deteriorating security situation in Burkina Faso. Increasingly frequent attacks by "jihadists" or "terrorists," the onset and spread of ethnic clashes across the country, and growing banditry and vigilantism can be counted amongst the violent events recently experienced by the country. In contrast, in 2012, Burkina Faso welcomed thousands of refugees from northern Mali, and even after the popular insurrection which ousted Blaise Compaoré from power in 2014, the country remained relatively stable and peaceful. Indeed, the elections which took place at the end of 2015 are considered by several as the most competitive, free and fair in the country's history. Security in the country has been steadily declining since 2015, however, following the advent of "violent extremism" in the country's north. By 2017, most international observers and Burkinabè security officials placed the majority of the blame for such insecurity on a small armed group, known as Ansarul Islam. At the

time, Ansarul Islam was led by Malam Ibrahim Dicko, who had been influenced by armed groups in central and northern Mali. The story behind Ansarul Islam and its emergence in the region weaved together a narrative of local politics, social grievances and a radical or a jihadist Islamist ideology, predictably described as terrorism by Burkinabè authorities and their western security partners. It was also conveniently viewed and described by analysts, Burkinabè citizens and officials as a "northern problem" and was considered a byproduct of events in Mali that necessitated limited concern for the rest of Burkina Faso.[3]

However, today in 2019, the government has significantly changed its tune as it confronts strengthening insurgencies in the country's northern, eastern, and southwestern regions. As of the first few months of 2019, some estimates suggest that more than 70 000 people have fled violence in Burkina Faso's northern and eastern regions. Even before the beginning of 2019, Burkinabè President Roch Kaboré announced that provinces in seven of the country's thirteen administrative regions would fall under a state of emergency due to the increasing prevalence of small-scale violent attacks that were targeting security forces, government officials, schools and civilians. The vast majority of the provinces affected by the state of emergency fall along the country's borders with Mali and Niger, but already during 2019, significant violence has occurred in north central Burkina Faso. Under increasing public pressure and disapproval over the government's handling of the insecurity, Kaboré dismissed his Prime Minister and national security team, naming a new Minister of Defense and new leadership at the head of the national military. So far, the state of emergency has done little to deter violent attacks in the northern or eastern regions of Burkina Faso. Attacks continue to occur in some form almost daily in these regions capturing the attention of the UN Security Council. Allegedly both state security forces and "terrorist" groups have engaged in extra-judicial executions of civilians and improvised explosive devices have claimed a growing number of lives from the security forces, particularly in the country's east.

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[2] For more on these dynamics and specifically how they play out in Mali through counterterrorism and peacekeeping see: Charbonneau (2017).

[3] Interviews conducted by the author in June 2017 in Ouagadougou and Dori.

Can Burkina Remain Upright?

The security situation in Burkina Faso has been deteriorating gradually in recent years due to many factors, but among the most important are a lack of effective security policies, resources and personnel, a variety of social grievances and local politics in the outlying regions that have been most affected by the insecurity, and the persistence of criminal and insurgent groups seeking to exploit these dynamics. Generally speaking, the types of near daily violent events that have come to characterize the regions bordering Niger and Mali—from the tri-border area known as Liptako-Gourma to the eastern regions—seem unlikely to spread throughout the country. However, the recent and unprecedented communal violence in Yirgou and other clashes in southwestern Burkina Faso are extremely worrying. The events in Yirgou highlight how strongly charged and intensified intercommunal relations have become, particularly concerning the Peulh community. Following an attack by an armed group at the beginning of January this year, at least seven people, including the local Mossi chief, were left dead. Local militiamen—known as Koglweogo—led reprisal attacks against nearby Peulh encampments. Officially, these events resulted in 49 casualties, but other local estimates place the death toll over 70 and perhaps as high as 200. The scale of these intercommunal retaliatory attacks is unheard of in Burkinabè society, and may suggest that a larger failing of the security forces to effectively prevent violence within susceptible communities has become a concern for the entire country.

The Burkinabè and regional governments must productively and proactively address the current stigmatization and marginalization of specific groups. Some media outlets and public figures have placed undue blame on certain communities, primarily the Peulh, for terrorist attacks and violence that have been perpetrated in the areas near the borders with Mali and Niger. This blame has led many in the general public to stigmatize members of these groups, at times even suggesting that they are part of larger terrorist networks or in some way directly linked to terrorism in Burkina Faso. This type of stigmatization can quickly exacerbate latent tensions between groups that results in the kind of communal violence seen in Yirgou this past January. If these forms of violence become more common in Burkina Faso or its neighbors, the ability of criminal and violent extremist actors to exploit the situation to their benefit will only grow and further perpetuate the cycle of insurgency playing out in this fragile region today.

Finally, if the state of emergency declared in Burkina Faso has not completely deterred violent actors, it has certainly emboldened the government to use its security forces more aggressively in these regions. At the beginning of February, the government claimed to have "neutralized" 146 terrorists in the north of the country in the departments of Kain, Banh and Bomboro, each located in the north of Burkina Faso across the border from central Mali. Presented as a welcome victory and successful counterattack after months of setbacks, the new defense leadership used the occasion to affirm complete support of the "forces d'ordre" and zero tolerance for those connected to terrorist activities. These statements highlight the government's increasingly politicized and problematic approach to the growing insecurity. Several organizations, including the prominent *Mouvement Burkinabè des Droits de l'Homme et du Peuple* (MBDHP), have since claimed that during this operation, at least 60 civilians were summarily executed by security forces and that there were multiple incidents of abuse. Such claims are not new and will no doubt feed ongoing grievances against the government and its agents.

This is perhaps the most worrying aspect for the future in Burkina Faso, and more broadly in the region. Governance, particularly as it concerns the professionalism of the security forces and their responsibility to uphold human rights, must play a larger part in resolving the various conflicts that comprise the crises in the Sahel today. If security forces begin targeting civilians or are unable to contain vigilante retaliation between different communities, then the current situation in Burkina Faso, the broader Sahel region and potentially in the Gulf of Guinea to the south risks deteriorating further and rapidly. The Burkinabè government's recent decision to enact a state of emergency in many of the border regions, initially intended to reinforce and reestablish their security, may ultimately have the opposite effect if the government is unable to ensure the professionalism of its security forces through the provision of the necessary resources and training to effectively perform their duties. The increased presence of security forces can just as easily erode trust between local communities vis-à-vis abusive state actors as it can improve security.

The Post-Colonial State and the Stability of Perpetual War

The professionalism of state security forces is still only one piece of a much larger and problematic set of factors leading to the insurgencies we see in the region today. More broadly, the failing of the post-colonial African state is at the root of the governance problems experienced across the Sahel. This failing is accompanied by the empty promises of political reform that elites championed during the decades of democratization and which today ring hollow on

the ears of Sahelian citizens. Instead of ushering in popular and strong political institutions capable of effectively aggregating the will of the people and equitably disaggregating that will across society, democratization in the Sahel, and the political institutions therein, appear to be the latest casualties to the neo-patrimonial clientelism that has continually eroded the legitimacy of governing institutions within the post-colonial African state. Political elites have repeatedly proven capable and willing to enrich themselves at the expense of the people they serve. 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.[4] This has led to political systems which are unable to effectively address the socio-political grievances of Sahelian citizens and allows for the perpetuation of the violence in the region and a growing disillusionment that typifies much of Sahelian politics today.

A hard look must also be taken at the international partners purportedly "advancing stability" and "political legitimacy" in the Sahel. Is it surprising that France, given its colonial legacy and its geo-political interests in containing migration flows, has invested so heavily in maintaining stability in the region? Is it surprising that new rebellions, led by disaffected, dissatisfied, and disillusioned citizens taking up arms and hoping for a better political system from which to advance their lives, are delegitimized and relegated as "terrorist groups" by more powerful elite and international actors? Is it surprising that such international actors promote the perception of these rebellions as juxtaposed in civilizational conflict steeped in unequivocal morality, the war between liberal democratic capitalists and backward Islamic extremists? Ultimately, transnational elites networks continue to profit from these broken political systems, in spite, or perhaps because, of the insecurity that in turn reinforces the inequalities and injustices experienced by citizens of these "democratic" states. These relations, combined with the manipulation and mischaracterization of the political and security crises by international actors for their own interests, only serves to further contribute to the spread of violence in this fragile region. Until these politics shift away from the legitimation of violence and towards the equitable representation of interests outside of elite political networks, the daily lives of ordinary Sahelian citizens will likely remain fraught with uncertainty and the threat of insecurity.

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[4] See Eizenga (Forthcoming) for a longer empirically based discussion of these dynamics.

News and announcements

• The editor-in-chief of *Afrique Contemporaine*, an academic journal of the French Development Agency (AFD), recently resigned due to the suspension sine die of a special issue devoted to Mali, edited by Bruno Charbonneau and composed of several articles by researchers from the Mali Project of the Centre FrancoPaix. Several press articles concerning the suspension of this special issue in this journal were published in March. Find a summary of this case in Le Monde. An op-ed of European, African and North American academics for the independence of research was published in the same newspaper. You can find the complete list of signatories here.

• Le Monde published an excerpt from this special issue written by Bruno Charbonneau, entitled "Making Peace in Mali: The Limits of Counter-Terrorism Effort". He also spoke to Oxford Research Group for a wide ranging interview on the French military intervention in Mali and the peacekeeping initiative.

• Daniel Eizenga published "The State of Secularism in Chadian Higher Education: Testing Perceived Ties to Violent Extremism", published on Resolve Network, March 12th.

• Niagalé Bagayoko spoke to VOA Afrique on March 25th, regarding the Ogossagou massacre in Mali, and on the same topic with Radio Algérie 3 on March 31st.

• The annual conference of the International Studies Association (ISA) was held March 27th-30th in Toronto, Canada. Bruno Charbonneau presented "Counterinsurgency Politics at the Security-Development Nexus", Maxime Ricard, "The Collective Response to the "Microbes Crisis" in Abobo, Abidjan: Negotiating Urban Order After the War", and Adib Bencherif, "Beyond the Crime-terror Nexus: The Crime-terror Assembly in Sahel", as well as "Rhetoric Strategies in the Malian Conflict: Polyphonic Use of the Fight Against Terrorism".

• On March 19th, the University of Ottawa's School of Political Studies, in partnership with the Centre FrancoPaix, organized a roundtable discussion on security issues in the Sahel region, entitled "The Sahel: from Mali's conflict to regional insecurity". Bruno Charbonneau and Daniel Eizenga participated.

• The conference on "Mali and the future of the Sahelian States" took place on Thursday 21 March and proposed a contextualization and relevant analysis of the G5 Sahel region, the dynamics underlying these territories and the problems faced with deteriorating situations. The three speakers, Bruno Charbonneau, Jonathan Sears and Daniel Eizenga, shared the results of their research but also their experiences in the field. Find some pictures of the event here.

Photo : MINUSMA

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