

Epilogue:

Burkina Faso seen from below in early 2023

Sten Hagberg and Ludovic O. Kibora

The field research in Burkina Faso for this study on security from below was carried out on the basis of ethnographic investigations in a highly dynamic social context, and under ever changing political circumstances. The study followed up collaborative research carried out on socio-political transformations between 2014 and 2016 (Hagberg et al. 2017b, 2018) by a team of researchers, of what was later to become the research lab LACET (*Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Comparative, Engagée et Transnationale*). A main conclusion of the study of Burkinabe socio-political transformations was that security would be an increasingly important research theme in the years to come. Security was on everyone's minds: the security apparatus of the fallen regime, terrorist attacks both in Ouagadougou and in rural municipalities far off the main roads, the Malian crisis, the proliferation of armed robberies, the growth of self-defence movements, notably the Koglweogos, etc.

Hence, security and safety issues were a growing concern in the country, particularly after the Fall of Compaoré in October 2014. Some voices were raised indicating that Burkina Faso would not be a safe haven any longer. So, while Burkina Faso was in the midst of the one-year political transition in 2014–2015, terrorist attacks occurred in April and in October 2015. Just after the swearing-in of the democratically elected President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré and the appointment of his first government, the deadly and spectacular terrorist attack on Avenue Kwame Nkrumah in Ouagadougou took place on 15 January 2016 (Kibora 2019). The very same day two other attacks took place, including the hostage taking of the Australian Doctor Arthur Kenneth Elliott and his wife Jocelyn (Dr Elliott is still in hostage, but Ms. Elliott was released the following month in Niger). Since then, insecurity in the form of terrorist attacks has come to affect all regions of the country with almost daily attacks taking place somewhere in Burkina Faso. Over the last few years, the Liptako-Gourma region, that is the three-border zone of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, has become the main epicenter of killings and violences. Most attacks in Burkina Faso take place in the provinces of Soum, Louroum, and Sourou (Walther 2019: 22).

Many villages that were still accessible at the time of our joint fieldwork in 2018–2019 have nowadays become inaccessible. They are under the threat of armed terrorist groups that control a good part of the national territory and make traffic difficult on many roads. Some 40 percent of the Burkinabe territory today is estimated to be out of the control of the state. Large numbers of people have vacated the villages to become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs),

moving to the main towns and cities where there are still pockets of security. The Permanent Secretariat of the National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (*Secrétariat permanent du Conseil national de secours d'urgence et de réhabilitation*, SP/CONASUR), reported 1,882,391 IDPs as of 31/12/2022 in Burkina Faso (Lefaso.net 18/1/2023).

In early 2023, the permanent risk of terrorist attacks which impacts all areas of social life remains the main source of insecurity. In this context, people's perceptions and perspectives on security have changed over the years, and citizen initiatives are no longer the same as in 2018. In addition, having undergone two democratic elections (viz., 2015 and 2020) since the 2014 popular insurrection, Burkina Faso now sees a resurgence of coups d'état. The country saw two coups in 2022, one on 24 January and the other on 30 September. This political instability at the helm of the state also impacted security issues. To be sure, if there was no popular reaction to the army takeover in January 2022, in sharp contrast to the strong resistance that the September 2015 coup witnessed (Hagberg 2015, 2023; Hagberg et al. 2018), it is because the people were tired of suffering from insecurity and hoped that "unconstitutional changes" – hence, the coups – at the top echelons of the State would bring a solution to security issues. This is also related to the profound deception that people perceive in the so-called "electoral democracy," that is, the routine elections being organised and conducted, but with little effect on peoples' living conditions, let alone any guarantees of minimum security and safety. The evolution of the security situation has led to a redefinition of the relationship not only within and between the communities but also between the State and its traditional partners.

It thus becomes necessary to review certain themes analysed in our study with regard to the transformations that have taken place since then, such as the transformation of social bonds, those related to self-defence groups, the issue of food security in connection with the displacement of populations, and the geopolitical security situation, including the end of the French military presence. In the following, we exemplify how these challenges are perceived and experienced from below.

Social bonds

The legendary Burkinabe hospitality forms part of a set of cultural values and norms that are shared by all sociocultural groups or communities in the country. Admittedly, the notion of the "stranger" is social and performative (Amselle 1996; Hagberg 2000), but the security crisis has led to a stigmatisation of "the Other," as someone coming from elsewhere, "from far away" (Hagberg 2000). Drawing on his ethnographic research on farmer-herder conflicts in the Comoé Province, Hagberg pointed to the fact that Fulbe herders (as well as the herd-owners) were seen as guests/strangers (*dunan*) as long as they did not claim power or landed resources, because if they did so, they would be seen as *boyorojan*, i.e., "those coming from far away" (Hagberg 2000). Other peoples' perceptions

of Fulbe, whose mobility due to production activities leads them to crisscross villages and seek temporary or long-term places to settle, are increasingly negative and stigmatising. In Burkina Faso today, Fulbe are increasingly seen as “those coming from far away.” The “Fulbe question,” as it were, is accentuated and bogged down in local perceptions of “Fulbe=terrorist” at a level that raises fears of violent community conflicts. Admittedly, the characterisation of the terrorist has also evolved in Burkina Faso, since the earlier associations of 2016, of the attackers as being “Arabs” (Kibora 2019); yet, and although public opinion is now convinced of the presence of terrorists amongst each socio-cultural group in the country, the Fulbe remain at the heart of the main charges.

In our study, we highlight how the Fulbe community is “between a rock and a hard place,” that is, between terrorists, defence and security forces, and self-defence groups from whom they suffer violent actions. Fulbe are therefore “taken hostage” and find it difficult to clear themselves of accusations. So it is de facto that many individuals from this community are enrolled in “jihadist groups” and that one of Mali’s jihadist leaders, notably Hamadoun Kouffa, has clearly displayed his ambitions to defend this community and recover a territory that historically belonged to Fulbe by right: the Macina (Diallo and Dégorce 2019). The cross-border violence suffered by Fulbe in the neighboring countries, reinforces the feeling of communitarianism beyond national borders. During a press conference in January 2023, the Fulbe association called TEWTUGOL LAAWOL JAM (ATELJA) recognised that the Fulbe are “at the heart of all the debates.” They launched an appeal to “tous ces égarés qui ont pris les armes contre le Burkina Faso. Qu’ils soient de la communauté peule ou d’autres communautés” (Minute.bf 26/01/23 ; Lefaso.net 27/1/2023).

Originating from the Burkinabe regions of the North (Ouahigouya) and the Sahel (Dori), the Fulbe, whose main activity is marked by mobility and pastoralism, are nowadays looked at with heightened suspicion of terrorism in all regions and in every corner of Burkina Faso. In the beginning, some observers saw a “class struggle” which opposed Rimaïbe (Fulfulde speaking former captives of Fulbe) to Rimbe (Fulbe nobility), as a way to understand the security crisis in the Sahel (Hagberg et al. 2023b forthcoming). The complexity of the crisis and its spread across the country, no longer allows us to stick to such analyses only. The resurgence of old inter- and intra-community tensions, revenge and settling of scores, frustrations, injustices and impunity, all contribute to the worsening of the security crisis. Furthermore, we are witnessing an opportunistic exploitation of terrorism in all localities (Kibora et al. 2021). From some municipalities, reports indicate that when local politicians wanted to impose another mayor than the one who won municipal elections, some local actors tried to seek revenge for this overrule of electoral results, by making an appeal to terrorist groups and have them settle the issue. In another case, local politicians tried to impose a village chief in a village in the North, against the will of the most villagers, who in turn appointed their ‘own’ chief. Such cases illustrate how terrorist groups integrate into local politics. Hence, local actors might well consider arming them-

selves against the State and thus become allied to armed groups. Moreover, all those involved in illegal activities and smuggling (fuel, drugs, cigarettes, etc.), who are also doing businesses with terrorist groups are profiting from the crisis and such actors might find it in their interest, to intervene in order to prolong the crisis. In a nutshell, to ethnographically analyse local politics and trade networks is an urgent task to be carried out, albeit an increasingly difficult one.

Another important phenomenon reinforcing the breach of social bonds is the excessive circulation of fake news, most often manipulated through different social media platforms. The profuse circulation of audios and videos presents images or voices of “Fulbe terrorists.” Such publications contribute to the social divide and to the stigmatisation against the Fulbe community. For instance, in the municipality of Arbinda in northern Burkina Faso, when a local religious leader was shot dead in 2019 by terrorists who allegedly had “a Fulbe accent,” the closest collaborator of the victim, who was himself of Fulbe origin, was lynched by the mob. “Even myself, who was convinced that the old man had nothing to do with this assassination, I did not dare to oppose the unleashed crowd,” said an internally displaced person in Ouagadougou, a few years later (Hagberg et al. 2023b forthcoming).

More than inter-religious tensions, which are sporadic but real, the instrumental pitting of communities against each other has contributed to the growing number of home-grown terrorists. Escalating violence renders even endogenous mechanisms of social mediation inefficient and out of order. Citizen security initiatives may still be necessary because the armed forces are not suitable for rebuilding social bonds and rapport within communities. However, when these initiatives are exercised by armed civilians with the tacit recognition, not to mention acceptance, by public authorities, and in contexts where self-defence groups are sometimes accused of racial profiling and extrajudicial executions, matters become even more problematic.

Attacking the “Other” to ensure one’s own safety, and arming oneself to guard against possible attacks seem to be essential elements of community initiatives. This is in sharp contrast to the changes in behavior and attitudes that were observed at the time of our fieldwork in 2018–2019 and which focused mainly on strengthening social bonds, “the living together.” At that time, to a large extent, the enemy was considered to be someone coming from elsewhere.

Citizen initiatives and self-defence groups

During the fieldwork in 2018–2019, individual and collective citizen initiatives were noted in all 13 municipalities, and through various forms of expression. Beyond the change of behaviors and attitudes within communities to prevent the occurrence of a security crisis, the important element was the role, place, and authority of the self-defence groups. Today, the *Dozos* – the traditional brotherhoods of hunters – have added the fight against terrorism to their actions. The *Ruggas* that were initially associations of (Fulbe) herd-owners for the protection

of livestock, have also transformed into self-defence groups, given that pastoralism and livestock-keeping are central elements of the security crisis. And the Koglweogos whose spread is consecutive to the beginning of the security crisis and caught our attention (Kibora et al. 2018), are now turning into *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (VDP).

Our position is that no armed self-defence group can or should be allowed to replace the defence and security forces of the Burkinabe State. The risk of them turning into a militia is obvious. In early January 2019, the Koglweogos were accused of mass killings of members of the Fulbe community in response to the assassination of a traditional Moaga chief and six of his relatives in Yirgou in the Centre-Nord region of Burkina Faso, by terrorists who allegedly were identified as Fulbe.

This security crisis and its poor handling by the public authorities since 2016 is one of the fundamental causes of the exacerbation of the current situation. It appears from numerous analyses that approximately 90 percent of the terrorists are Burkinabe, as recently stated by the Chief of Defence Staff of the National Gendarmerie. This “endogenisation of the terrorist” has had effects on the social bonds. Yet rather than encouraging a top-down solution, we would like to suggest that this situation makes it even more urgent that endogenous responses to insecurity within villages and municipalities are implemented. Self-defence groups through spectacular actions are responsible for multiple abuses against populations. It is to compensate for the excesses of self-defence groups that the Burkinabe State has started to “supervise” them in its own way. To do this, it has adopted the Law establishing the VDPs. Adopted for the first time in 2020, under the regime of President Kaboré, this law was amended and re-adopted on 17 December 2022 by the Transitional Legislative Assembly, under the regime of Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who came to power in the coup in September 2022. This state intention to support citizens’ initiatives to security was confronted with deviations in the sense that the critique against the Koglweogos was transferred to a critique against the VDPs. As a matter of fact, the VDPs have absorbed many Koglweogos. This newly invented security structure of the Burkinabe State is nonetheless not immune to the agency of self-defence groups, such as the Dozos, the Ruggas, and the Koglweogos (Hagberg 2019). The establishment of the VDPs did not lead to the disappearance of other self-defence groups, but in order to benefit from the support of the State, they are “invited” to merge into the VDPs. In November 2022, the regime launched a call for recruitment of 50,000 VDPs throughout the territory. The popular enthusiasm was such that 90,000 new recruits were listed awaiting selection (RFI 27/11/2022). It is likely that those who will be best placed to be admitted are those who have had their experience in self-defence groups. Hence, we are witnessing how the State’s monopoly of the use of legitimate violence is nowadays outsourced to self-defence groups. At worst, this might well lead to a de facto “militiasation” of the Burkinabe state.

The massive enrolment of VDPs is a delicate subject. Either the VDPs will be insufficiently trained to deal with “heavily armed” terrorists, or the recognition of the VDPs as an integrated part of the State’s security structure will give power and authority to individuals who, under cover of the anointing of public authority, indulge in various abuses. On 30–31 December 2022, VDPs attacked neighbourhoods in the town of Nouna that were inhabited by Fulbe, as they were suspected of harbouring terrorists. 28 people were killed, and the government requested the population to remain calm (Lefaso.net 3/1/2023).

Another new phenomenon is the “feminisation of violence,” thereby recognising that gender-based violence is a reality in the context of insecurity. Our study shows that women experience increased insecurity due to the involvement of their children and their spouses which sets their living environment ablaze. Moreover, the disappearance of these spouses leads to many women becoming heads of their families. They are then forced to manage and feed their families alone. In field research carried out in 2021, we observed that even those men who are alive lose their sense of masculinity in situations of displacement, for having fled with wife and children (Hagberg et al. 2023b forthcoming). In addition to facing these charges, many women suffer from abuse and rape in areas with high insecurity.

In addition, more and more women join self-defence groups, especially the Koglweogos. At the same time, terrorist groups are full of women whose images have circulated in social media after terrorist attacks. Hence, women are no longer identified only as ‘victims of violence,’ as it were, but also as perpetrators of violence as they are oftentimes actively involved as well. Such a situation, if it continues, will have a real impact on sociability. In many Burkinabe communities the saying that “the woman is the home” is common. This means that in addition to being a “keeper of the house,” the basic education of children is incumbent on her. The social reproduction of violence is an important fact that needs to be questioned in such conditions.

Internally displaced persons and food security

Burkina Faso is a country whose populations depend primarily on agriculture, and where food security is a national concern. During fieldwork in 2018–2019, the reduction of fertile land, the land use within communities, and climatic variations, were presented as factors of food insecurity. Nowadays, the inability of people to exploit farmlands and pastoral areas is due to the “people of the bush” – a euphemism used to talk about terrorists – who control a large part of the national territory. Population displacements continue in Mouhoun, the West, the South-West, etc., that is, in those regions which have been the largest suppliers of cereals in Burkina Faso.

Food insecurity has therefore increased for rural people generally. But it is more crucial for the displaced people who have abandoned everything to find themselves in IDPs sites in urban areas. As the country has almost 1.9 million IDPs (Lefaso.net 18/1/2023), these people, who for the most part practiced

agriculture as their main activity, now live in a situation of vulnerability and precariousness. The often-periodic food insecurity in the Sahel due to climatic variations is nowadays aggravated by the security crisis.

[...] le 11 octobre 2022, le CONASUR indiquait que les besoins en vivres pour la prise en charge des personnes déplacées internes pour l'année 2022 ont été évalués à 504 000 tonnes alors que l'État ne disposait que de 82 000 tonnes. (Lefaso.net 18/1/2023)

Food prices volatility (Kibora 2015) make it difficult for many households to access basic necessities. That “everything is expensive” is nowadays justified by the security crisis. When we were conducting fieldwork in 2018–2019, the terrorist threat was one of the sources of insecurity among many others. In some areas, our interlocutors did not even mention the fear of a terrorist attack. Later, it imposed itself as the first, if not only, source of insecurity. As a reminder, this statement recorded in Djibasso in July 2018 poignantly anticipated what was to come: “Whether they attack people or not is only a question of time. When they are finished with our security forces, which is the first obstacle for them, our turn will come.” All other insecurities described in this study throughout, are now analysed in relation to the insecurity of being attacked, both from below and from above.

The complex nature of the security situation in Burkina Faso has placed all the indicators of human security (UNDP 1994) in red. Political instability at the highest level of the state (two coups d'état in less than nine months) adds to this complexity. However, we would like to underline that this situation is far from irreversible. Historically, in addition to being destructive for people and property, crises might also turn out to be moments of empowerment that determine the ability of people to surpass themselves, and to rebuild themselves differently. The 2014 popular insurrection gave people hope for building a “new Burkina Faso,” but the security crisis has put the country in a situation of doubt and uncertainty. Certainly “nothing will be as before,” to use the slogan that was current during the popular insurrection (Hagberg et al. 2017b), but far from being an irreversible disaster, this crisis may also, not the least because of the strong civic engagement and citizen initiatives, turn out to be the long-awaited opportunity to rebuild the Burkinabe state.

Geopolitics and citizen perspectives

Over the last few years, geopolitical developments have been dramatic in West Africa. The coup d'état in Mali in August 2020 that led to the fall of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, followed by a second one consolidating the new power with Colonel Assimi Goïta in May 2021, had important consequences for the entire region (Hagberg et al. 2023a forthcoming). In September 2021, Colonel Mamady Doumbouya overthrew President Alpha Condé in Guinea. And in 2002, as already discussed, the two Burkinabe coups d'état took place.

An undercurrent in these different military take-overs is a strong anti-imperialistic discourse, notably against France. Since 2021, the relations between the Mali's transition regime and France are deep-frozen, despite the fact that until recently France was a close ally in the fight against terrorism. Similarly, the current Burkinabe regime of Captain Ibrahim Traoré ended French military presence in the country in February 2023, at the same time as the country experienced severe security challenges. For instance, in February 2023, more than 50 military soldiers were killed in attacks on the road between Deou and Oursi in the Oudalan Province in the Sahel region.

To understand why the current Burkinabe regime has decided to end military cooperation with France, we must explore the strongly felt experience of colonial domination, which continues to exist in collective memory even today. Despite more than 60 years of political independence, citizens of Burkina Faso and other Francophone West African countries sense the geopolitical presence of France. The so-called *Françafrique* is alive in many parts of Africa, that is, in terms of the special relationships formed between France and African presidents. *Francafrigue* is the Empire that does not want to die, as poignantly put in a recent publication (Borrel et al. 2021). While many Burkinabe citizens are profoundly worried about rampant insecurities, many indeed support the idea of cutting the bonds with the former colonial power. In the shadows, the Russian military cooperation lurks in the background with promises of weapons and armaments.

Even though this study is based on fieldwork carried in 2018–19, it is safe to say that for ordinary citizens the most important thing is to see tangible differences in terms of security and safety in daily life, in their capacity to manage and pursue farming, trade, as well as to be able to move safely and freely between markets, cities and towns, and on roads. It is for this reason, that it is unfortunate that so much of the debate and diplomacy has been polarised between the so-called “international community,” (read: the EU and the USA) and West African “public opinion” (powerholders, activists, and urban residents alike). Burkinabe citizens living in municipalities across Burkina Faso are facing the terrorist threat onto their very skin; insecurity has become part of everyday life.

We would like to conclude that it is not due to any deep-felt sense of belonging or long-term historical ties to Russia that the Burkinabe today seek for new partners. It is instead related to the failure of the French military intervention in the Sahel, measured in terms of deteriorating insecurities, that has finally made people ready to search for sovereignty and freedom from French domination. In this vein, geopolitical developments are also part of citizen perceptions and perspectives on security and safety challenges in Burkina Faso.