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## Burkina Faso: Casting a shadow over the polls? The role of vigilante groups in the 2020 elections

On 22 November 2020, Burkina Faso will hold joint presidential and legislative elections. The Burkinabe will cast their votes amid the twin pressures of increasing activity by both armed groups and community-based self-defence groups such as the koglweogos, the dozos and the rougas. This policy brief scrutinises the risks of election-related violence by vigilante groups and suggests ways in which such risks could be reduced – particularly in light of the eroding capacity of the Burkinabe state and the growing political influence and social control wielded by vigilantes in the hinterlands. The Burkinabe political class should properly deal with the country's simmering vigilante problem as it not only carries the seeds of electoral violence but also could pose a threat to the country's nascent democracy.

### Background

On 22 November 2020, the Burkinabe will go to the polls to elect the next president and the 127 members of the national assembly. Although largescale electoral violence has never been common in Burkina Faso, this year the Burkinabe will be casting their votes amid the twin pressures of growing jihadi insurgency and increasing non-state security initiatives. Although vigilantism is not a new phenomenon in Burkina Faso, the emergence and expansion of the koglweogos have put a spotlight on the issue of informal security initiatives. The koglweogos, the dozos, the rougas and the new state-sanctioned 'volunteers for the defence of the homeland' have become the main perpetrators of violence in Burkina Faso. While advocates of vigilante groups have called for their incorporation into formal security structures, their opponents simply see their (re)-emergence as antithetical to the rule of law.

Beyond the ongoing public debate, the central government in Ouagadougou has favoured an unofficial collaborative relationship with self-defence groups. It tolerates and views vigilantism as a 'cheap form of law enforcement in remote areas'<sup>1</sup> but does not hesitate to resort to official institutions to keep vigilante activities under (relative) state control. While vigilantes have frequently sought to distance themselves from the 'dirt of politics',<sup>2</sup> there is a tension between their willingness to set up as independent local security structures and central government's attempts to keep them under the state's influence. Beyond this

- 1 Pratten, D. and Sen, A. (2007) *Global Vigilantes: Anthropological Perspectives on Justice and Violence*. London, Hurst.
- 2 Hagberg, S. (2019) 'Performing tradition while doing politics: a comparative study of the Dozos and Koglweogos self-defense movements in Burkina Faso', *African Studies Review* 62, no. 1: 173–93.

tension, the emergence and expansion of these irregular local forces keeps out of sight another looming threat to Burkina Faso's emergent democracy: political vigilantism and the associated destruction of properties, gross human rights violations and loss of lives.

This policy brief aims to assess the risks of election-related violence by vigilante groups. As the central government in Ouagadougou seems to be overwhelmed by the ongoing rural insurgency, vigilante groups have popped up and have been acting as surrogates in the provision of everyday security in rural areas. These groups can constitute a force for good, as they can help to contain violence and extend the reach of the state in peripheral zones often untouched by national affairs. However, in fragile settings like Burkina Faso, these groups are not immune from partisan politics and can easily morph into uncontrollable militias. This brief scrutinises the rising political influence of vigilante groups, and the (destabilising) role they are likely to play in the upcoming general elections. Accordingly, I will suggest ways in which Burkinabe stakeholders and their international counterparts can minimise and avert risks of election-related violence by vigilante groups.

## On Burkina Faso's electoral process

In Burkina Faso, the president is elected by absolute majority popular vote in two rounds (if needed). Members of the national assembly are directly elected to a five-year term under a proportional representation system. In the 2015 legislative elections, the ruling party won just 55 of the 127 seats and had to form a coalition in order to rule. Of the 99 parties that had fought the contest, 14 managed to win seats. Patronage networks still remain a core feature of politics in Burkina Faso.<sup>3</sup> In a close race, if the result of the election

3 Kouléga, J.N. (2013) *Le Burkina Faso de 1991 à nos jours: entre stabilité politique et illusionnisme démocratique*. Science politique. Universit  Montesquieu – Bordeaux IV.

were to be indecisive, political entrepreneurs might be tempted to use other means, including violence, to influence the contest.

This year, elections take place in a context of the state's weakening administrative capacity as well as the erosion of social cohesion.<sup>4</sup> The ongoing insurgency has seriously exposed deficiencies in the government's capacity and resilience. Despite ongoing counter-insurgency operations and the development projects initiated in 2017, the central government has largely been unable to improve security nor has it effectively re-deployed services in areas where state presence has been nominal – and the chances of doing either of those before November are slim. Worse still, civilians have fled their municipalities as a result of the mounting and indiscriminate violence in Burkina Faso's centre-north, northern and eastern provinces. The two major plans devised by the independent electoral commission to allow internally displaced persons to cast their votes clearly indicate that the upcoming elections will not be national in scope; some areas in eastern and northern Burkina Faso may be excluded, which could result in electoral disputes. Excluding a municipality from the voting process means depriving a party of its stronghold – hence the necessity of finding a consensus before redefining the electoral map.

Moreover, the current security landscape does not contribute to dissipating risks of election-related violence. Following the ousting of Compaore's regime and the loss of the state monopoly over peacekeeping in under-policed rural areas, alternative security arrangements have (re)-emerged. Apart from the dozos,<sup>5</sup> who have prevailed in western Burkina Faso,

4 Herv  Lankaonde, W. (2020) *Burkina Faso's rocky road to democratic consolidation*. CRU Policy Brief. The Hague: Clingendael Institute. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/burkina-faso-rocky-road-democratic-consolidation>.

5 The Dozo are a transnational brotherhood of traditional hunters living in Burkina Faso, C te d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Beyond their hunter-gatherer, herbalist or diviner identity, over the last decades Dozo have also come to assume a security role in some rural areas.

the kogllewo self-defence movement, which has emerged over recent years, mainly operates in the eastern, central and northern provinces. Acting simultaneously as police and judges, the kogllewos have incurred the wrath of law professionals and human rights organisations. In municipalities where they have taken hold, another vigilante group known as the rougas, and dominated by the Fulani ethnic group, has emerged in eastern and northern Burkina Faso to counter kogllewo activities by dealing specifically with cattle theft and extortion that pastoralist communities often experience. Vigilante groups are not only growing but also characterised by rivalries that have occasionally proved deadly in some areas.<sup>6</sup>

Although it is the increasing crime and banditry in the hinterlands that has pushed local communities to take the law into their own hands, the (re)-emergence of vigilantism also remains tied to the expanding security industry. Groups like the kogllewos mostly live on fines imposed on thieves that they capture while conducting their operations. Most of the vigilante groups have also been privatising their services.<sup>7</sup> For instance, with the retreat of the state in some mining sites, it is not uncommon to see the dozos or the kogllewos being employed as security forces in those areas in exchange for monetary benefits. As some analysts have highlighted, the processes of institutionalisation and bureaucratisation which some vigilante groups have embarked upon requires substantial finance, forcing them to resort to donations from wealthy traders and to align themselves with powerful local elites to benefit from existing patronage networks.

## Two sides of the same coin

Vigilantism and party politics are intertwined in Burkina Faso. Even if vigilantes have portrayed themselves as apolitical, it should be emphasised that such portrayals co-exist with their entanglement in national political processes.<sup>8</sup> Although the loyalty of vigilante groups towards the political class fluctuates, most leaders of these groups have often allied themselves with strong men in central government. Under Compaore's rule, these groups were part of a (informal) network on which government relied to neutralise rivals and maintain a semblance of peace and cohesion in rural areas. Until October 2014, most vigilante leaders had supported the then-ruling *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (CDP). With the collapse of the CDP, they switched their allegiance to Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's *Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès* (MPP). This proximity has allowed them to make the most of material benefits coming from the ruling administration's entourage and the private sector.<sup>9</sup> In addition to securing the loyalty of the dozos who, for a while, were part of the CDP's network, the current ruling party has also allowed the expansion of kogllewos as a way to counter the activities of the former.

Despite the documented human rights violations perpetrated by some vigilantes, most political parties have refrained from calling for their dissolution – at least publicly. These groups have managed to build a strong social base in rural areas and could serve as reliable powerbrokers for political actors. It should be recalled that when the debate about the legality of the kogllewos was making headlines in the newspapers in 2016, with some segments of the judiciary and the civil society calling for its suppression, the then-Minister of Security Simon Compaore and current chairman of the ruling party discarded such an option.

6 Dofini, R. (2018) Commune de Karangasso-Vigué: Après le drame, l'heure est aux discours d'apaisement. *Lefaso.net*, 15 September. Available at <https://bit.ly/2Nhazx6> [Last accessed 26 April 2020]

7 Leclercq, S. and Matagne, G. (2020) "With or Without You": the governance of (local) security and the Kogllewo movement in Burkina Faso', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, 9(1), p.4. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.5334/sta.716>.

8 Hagberg, S. (2019) 'Performing tradition while doing politics: a comparative study of the Dozos and Kogllewos self-defense movements in Burkina Faso', *op. cit.*

9 International Crisis Group (2020) 'Burkina Faso: stopping the spiral of violence', *Africa Report* N°287.

Instead, stressing the limited power of the state, he favoured a strict state monitoring of vigilante activities. Despite occasionally taking a hard stance on these groups, Simon Compaore managed to cultivate a pragmatic and cordial relationship with the group, hence his nickname ‘father of the koglweogos’. Beyond the case of koglweogos, other senior political actors from the former ruling party, namely the CDP, have strong connections with the dozos.<sup>10</sup> Far from constituting an autonomous entity, vigilante groups should be viewed as the instruments of elite power pacts.

This is not a new development. The central government in Ouagadougou has always ruled over its hinterlands through a patchwork of informal institutions, namely traditional authorities. To operate and thrive in a given locality, vigilante groups need the backing of traditional rulers and notables. While the dozos remain a highly decentralised institution, the koglweogos are a hierarchical organisation strongly linked to the traditional chieftaincy institution. For instance, in some areas, it is common for the village chief to also be the local leader of the koglweogos. Where their actions are supported by traditional rulers, the koglweogos have been able to consolidate their legitimacy, benefit from patronage resources and emerge as critical governance actors in controlling or limiting violence. Not losing sight of the crucial role of the ‘crowned heads’ (i.e. traditional rulers) in local and national politics in Burkina Faso, politicians will manoeuvre to get their backing and, indirectly, that of vigilante groups to augment their chances of ruling.

## The role of vigilantes in the electoral process

Vigilante groups are among actors that will be significant in the upcoming election. How they will contribute and what role they will play remain the Gordian knot to untie, as the Burkinabe government has not

yet officially communicated on the issue. Vigilantes in general, and more specifically the koglweogos, enjoy widespread support in the ruling party’s electoral strongholds and this puts the government in a delicate situation when they commit abuses and largescale massacres, as they did in Yirgou, Arbinda and Barga. Burkina Faso’s electoral map does not indicate any specific area of contention, but given the current volatile security landscape, electoral disputes will revolve around access to constituencies in northern and eastern Burkina Faso. In some of these municipalities, access to electoral constituencies will depend on the scope and strength of each politician’s network. Within the political class, there are some concerns that vigilantes could be exploited by the hardline wing of the ruling party to secure electoral gains.<sup>11</sup> This could push other parties from the political opposition to mobilise the rivals of the koglweogos in the Great West, namely the dozos.

Vigilante groups could fan the flames of electoral disputes and violence. As local governance actors, vigilante groups contribute to ensuring social control and could be seen by the political class as reliable power brokers to be mobilised in local communities. By taking on the mantle of foot soldiers for political parties, vigilantes are likely to disrupt the electoral process, for example through voter suppression and intimidation in some districts. Although largescale electoral violence has not very often occurred in Burkina Faso, it should be remembered that the 2016 local elections resulted in a bloodbath in some municipalities, leading to postponement of the election. Vigilantes were not at the forefront of that deadly episode but with their increasing political influence at local level, politicians might not go shy from using their services if violence were to be used as an electoral strategy in November 2020.

Fundamentally, vigilante security is exclusionary and tends to identify certain segments of society as undesirable. Members of vigilante groups often share the

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10 Hagberg, S. (2019), *op.cit.*

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11 International Crisis Group (2020) *op.cit.*

same ethnic or political identity as well the same collective interests. In the 2015 general elections there were some attempts by politicians to instrumentalise ethnicity and religion for electoral purposes. But these attempts did not thrive. However, this time, the eroding social cohesion could contribute to resurrecting ethno-regional cleavages and create a favourable soil for identity politics. Despite the heterogeneity that characterises them, the koglwéogos are viewed by other local self-defence groups, namely the dozos, as contributing to expansion of the hegemony of the Mossi that represents almost 50% of the population.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, if vigilantes were to align themselves with political entrepreneurs during the campaign, this would give an ethnic dimension to the process in a country where ethnicity does not fundamentally define voting patterns. This will leave no room for dissenting voices and opinions in ethnically mixed villages where vigilantes' electoral preference and that of local communities are not necessarily congruent. Whatever happens, politicians should bear in mind that if vigilantism can contribute to electoral victories, it can also pave the way to defeats and even undermine the country's nascent democracy.

## Conclusion

This year's national elections take place in a context marked by the proliferation and expansion of vigilante groups, namely the dozos, koglwéogos and rougas. Already coping with a patchwork of malevolent non-state armed actors, vigilante groups constitute another problem for the current administration. At times, vigilante groups have contributed to enhancing security and undertaking dispute resolution in their communities. At other times, they have created a security dilemma and contributed to exacerbating tensions between communities in rural areas. In fact, what began as the protection of local communities against banditry and

crime, and lauded at the time as a viable answer to instability, has slowly been morphing into identity-based vigilantism with the tragedies associated with it.

As the country heads towards the November general elections, the political class should take Burkina Faso's vigilante problem seriously. Disbanding vigilante groups, as some political commentators have suggested, could backfire. Worse, it could trigger a rural popular uprising given vigilantes' embeddedness within local communities and the legitimacy they enjoy in rural areas. Protests linked to the arrest of one of the koglwéogos leaders in the city of Boulsa in the framework of the Yirgou massacre, gives an advance taste of what could happen should this group be dissolved. Instead of dissolving them, the ruling coalition and the political opposition should open discussions on vigilante groups, and both should pledge not to resort to such actors for electoral purposes. This clause should be part of a general code of conduct for political parties with strong penalties for the perpetration of electoral violence. In this regard, the international community could exercise coercive diplomacy through the Burkinabe political class.

With less than seven months until the elections, central government has no more time to initiate reforms. It must rather invest its efforts in promoting a peaceful climate. From this perspective, the government should initiate a dialogue gathering electoral stakeholders such as political parties, civil society organisations, the defence and security forces, traditional rulers as well as self-defence groups to create an agreement on the prevailing rules of the game. Such a dialogue could serve as the basis for initiating a mediation process to solve local conflicts, which have been exacerbated by community-based armed groups. Vigilante groups have thrived on local conflicts in eastern and northern Burkina Faso and resolving most of those before the elections could prove to be beneficial for the country. Additionally, civil society organisations should undertake civic education activities in the aforementioned administrative regions.

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12 Hagberg, S. (2019) *op.cit.*





Finally, it should be highlighted that Burkina Faso's vigilante issue will persist beyond November's general elections. Rather than giving free rein to these groups as the current state of affairs seems to reveal, the next administration should consider absorbing these groups into state institutions. There has been ongoing debate about implementing the 2016 law on neighbourhood police, which defines the modalities of citizen

participation in the implementation of community policing. Placing vigilantes under the responsibility of the national police would constitute a big gain in resolving the issue. Assuming that vigilante groups will not go away once the threat justifying their existence is over, could be a deadly mistake. These groups have already left a long-term legacy that could turn sour for Burkina Faso's democratic experiment.

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