

# The Crisis in Burkina Faso and the Coup Belt

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**Abstract** Due to the military coups of recent years, the Sahel region has received some considerable attention in international media and political debates. However, we still know little about the ongoing disputes in the region. This article provides an overview of the current crisis in Burkina Faso, the Sahel state where the number of fatalities and internally displaced persons is by far the highest. The conflict is placed in the context of the country's recent political history and in the debate surrounding the “coup belt”.

**Keywords** Military coup · Burkina Faso · Africa · Authoritarian regime · Intra-state armed conflict

## Der „Putschgürtel“ und die Sicherheitskrise in Burkina Faso

**Zusammenfassung** Aufgrund der Militärputsche der letzten Jahre hat die Sahelregion einige Aufmerksamkeit in den internationalen Medien und politischen Debatten erfahren. Dennoch sind wenig Details über die andauernden Auseinandersetzungen in der Region bekannt. Der Beitrag gibt einen Überblick über die aktuelle Krise in Burkina Faso, dem Sahelstaat, in dem die Zahl der Todesopfer und Binnenvertriebenen derzeit mit Abstand am höchsten ist. Der Konflikt wird in die jüngere politische Geschichte des Landes und die Debatte um den „Putschgürtel“ eingeordnet.

**Schlüsselwörter** Militärputsch · Burkina Faso · Afrika · Autoritäre Regime · Innerstaatlicher bewaffneter Konflikt

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## 1 Introduction

In 2023, for the first time, a country other than Afghanistan or Iraq took the first rank of the Global Terrorism Index in the 13 years that the index covers: Burkina Faso saw an increase in deaths from terrorism by 68%, accounting for almost a quarter of all terrorist deaths globally – and that in a year when global deaths from terrorist attacks were on their highest level since 2017 (IEP 2024, p. 2). The Norwegian Refugee Council, the second year in a row, named Burkina Faso the world’s “most neglected crisis” (NRC 2024). The label is fitting, given that hardly anyone in Europe and North America is aware of the security crisis and intra-state armed conflict that has resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe in Burkina Faso for years. Indeed, the crisis in Burkina Faso and the neighbouring states of Mali and Niger has recently received some international media attention as a result of repeated military coups in the region. Apart from that this interest was rather short-term, the reports were, first and foremost, part of the current geopolitical framing related to the war in Ukraine (East-West conflict reloaded, in a way) and focused on the engagement of Russian Wagner mercenaries and, more recently, the “Africa Corps”. This framing helps little to understand the origins and dynamics of the conflicts, nor does it do justice to the humanitarian crises in and the significant differences between the “coup states” in the region.

In the following, I provide an overview of the current conflicts and the security crisis in Burkina Faso, and put them in the context of the country’s recent political history in order to understand how they came about. Emphasis is put on the implications the current situation has for civil society. I relate the coups and crisis in Burkina Faso to the regional context and the narrative of the “coup belt”.

## 2 The Current Security Crisis

Attacks by various armed groups, particularly Jihadist/Islamist groups, have been taking place in Burkina Faso for about 8 years. Attacks occur all over the country, with the exception of the capital, Ouagadougou. They target state institutions such as gendarmerie posts and municipal administrations, but also schools, churches, religious actors and entire villages as such. The attacks are directed at villages with the aim of spreading fear and terror as well as territorial control and demonstrating superiority over the state security forces; at vehicles and convoys with the aim of capturing material; at military facilities with the aim of obtaining military equipment and as a demonstration of power; as well as blocking transportation routes. Sexualised violence, particularly against women and girls, is widespread and systematic. The number and frequency of attacks by non-state groups and the number of fatalities has continued to rise even after two military coups that occurred in January and September 2022. The number of people killed by state and non-state armed groups in attacks, combats, and the “fight against terrorism” doubled in 2023. In the period of mid-September 2023 to mid-September 2024, 8461 fatalities were recorded (ACLED 2024a). Yet actual figures might be even higher, as not all attacks are documented and in some cases the number of victims among the population and

the state security forces might be higher than it is officially reported. Jihadist groups currently control an estimated up to 50% of the country's territory. As a result, more than 5700 schools and about 350 medical facilities are closed and, as of April 2024, over 2 million people are internally displaced, out of a population of 23.6 million (European Commission 2024).

The central actors in the armed conflict are jihadist armed groups, namely the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa al-Muslimeen, JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS Sahel). Their motivations and interests are unclear; the enforcement of Islam plays a role, but the terrorist violence cannot be reduced to religious motives. Ethnic instrumentalization is still weak compared to other conflict contexts, and the activities of the jihadist armed groups are perceived by the vast majority of people as terror and not as an expression of religion. In addition to the jihadist groups and the state armed forces, the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDP), a para-military civil defence force, is a principal armed actor in the conflict. The VDP have been created in 2020 under the government of Marc Christian Roch Kaboré, the President who was turned over by the first military coup in January 2022. The respective law voted by the Burkinabé Parliament on 21 January 2020 enables the government to financially and technically support "volunteers" that are supposed to protect their communities. This decision has been widely criticised, especially internationally but also by Burkinabé civil society organisations (Zutterling 2020).

The transitional government under Damiba, the General who led the January 2022 coup, recruited 50,000 VDPs; the current government added another 90,000 in 2023. This makes the VDP the largest armed force after the state military and the two jihadist armed groups, JNIM and IS Sahel. Yet there are doubts in how far the VDP contribute to improve the security situation or rather turn out to be themselves another threat to security. The VDP operate at least partially outside of state control. Civilians are regularly killed as suspected terrorists during operations by the military and the VDP to combat jihadist armed groups. Comprehensive and reliable data on this is almost impossible to collect; however, there are numerous reports from local and international organisations (ACLEDD 2024b; HRW 2024; ICG 2023).

### 3 Origins of the Crisis

The main structural causes for the persistence of the conflict lie in the extensive poverty and lack of prospects of the largely young population as well as the perception of state institutions as absent, inefficient and as vehicles through which elites appropriate and redistribute resources. This is not recent but rooted in colonialism, and in the political history of the country after formal decolonialisation. There were spill-over effects from the regional crises, namely in Mali, in the second half of the 2010s; however, the members of the armed groups are currently predominantly people from Burkina Faso. The strengthening of the non-state armed groups in the second half of the 2010s can to some extent also be traced back to a power vacuum following the end of Blaise Compaoré's regime.

Blaise Compaoré became president by a coup in October 1987 (the coup that killed his famous predecessor Thomas Sankara, “Africa’s Che”) and then stayed in power for 27 years until on 31 October 2014, he was turned over after mass protests (Chouli 2015; Engels 2018a; Zeilig 2017). Eventually, the military forced him to announce his resignation. Former diplomat Michel Kafando was appointed transitional president. He immediately appointed a senior military officer, lieutenant-colonel Yacouba Isaac Zida, vice commander of the presidential guard RSP, as prime minister. Many activists were disappointed. They felt that the military had “stolen” the revolution (Engels 2018b). The chairman of the largest Burkinabé human rights organisation *Mouvement burkinabé des droits de l’homme et de peuple*, declared at a press conference on 2 November 2014 (Lefaso.net 2014) that the army had conducted a coup d’état. This “paves the way for anti-democratic activities, as the history of our country has taught us”. The most recent events prove him right.

On 16 September 2015, the RSP, led by its commander, General Gilbert Diendéré, launched a coup d’état against the transitional government. The trade unions declared a general strike and virtually all civil society groups mobilised to resist the coup. Six days later, on 23 September, Diendéré forfeited. Presidential elections were held on 29 November 2015, with Roch winning. He was the chairman of the *Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès* (MPP), a political party founded in January 2014 by politicians who quit Compaoré’s *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (CDP). According to civil society groups, the transition ultimately amounted to one faction within the CDP succeeding against another.

The Roch government has considerably curtailed liberties and tried to restrict the activities of social movements and critical civil society. In relation to the security crisis, which actually started during Roch’s first term as President (2015–2019), basic civil rights – namely, freedom of assembly, of expression and of the press – have been considerably restricted by the state authorities. In June 2019, the country’s criminal code was amended by the adoption of a new law that, through article 312-11, criminalises any acts that may “demoralise” the state security forces “by whatever means”. Human rights organisations have noted that this means they are not supposed to investigate possible human rights violations by the state security forces or publish reports and photographs referring to it, and so on. They also complain that the law is used frequently to intimidate and persecute human rights activists, journalists and bloggers.

A wave of protests against France’s presence in West Africa emerged in November 2021, when people in several towns blocked the passage of a French military convoy from Côte d’Ivoire through Burkina Faso to Niger. The Burkinabé army used tear gas against the demonstrations, the French army fired warning shots. On 20 November 2021, the authorities suspended mobile internet provision in the country for one week as a reaction to the protests. On 27 November 2021, the anti-riot unit of the national police used tear gas to dissolve a demonstration in the capital, Ouagadougou, against the inability of the government to deal with the increasing insecurity and attacks by non-state armed groups. On 10 January 2022, mobile internet provision was cut again, due to “security reasons”. The suspension of mobile internet to hamper protests was a key action taken by the Kaboré government aimed at the social movements – those organisations that led the insurrection of 30–31 October 2014,

enforced the overthrow of Blaise Compaoré and thus paved the way for Kaboré and his companions.

The right of assembly has been restricted by the authorities following the state of emergency declared on 31 December 2018, implemented because of the increase in terrorist attacks. The state of emergency is frequently used to ban, often at short notice, activities by the trade unions and social movement organisations. Activists feel that they have been denounced as terrorists and they feel threatened both by terrorist groups and by the state security forces.

#### 4 A Coup to Fight Terrorism?

On 24 January 2022, a military coup removed president Roch and replaced his government by a military junta (Mouvement patriotique pour la sauvegarde et la restauration, MPSR) led by one of the country's highest military ranks, lieutenant-colonel Paul-Henri Sandogo Damiba. Given that people in the country felt that the Roch government proved incapable to deal with the security crisis, it is hardly surprising that many principally agreed to the coup, or at least did not oppose it. In light of that, the government used the terrorist threat to curtail civil liberties and restrict the activities of the social movements and critical civil society, it is likewise not surprising that these organisations did not mobilise resistance against the coup, as they successfully did in September 2015 (Engels 2022).

Eight months later, on 30 September 2022, lower ranks led by captain Ibrahim Traoré staged a coup against Damiba. The number of jihadist attacks effectively even had increased within the past six months, despite Damiba's announcement to make the "fight against terrorism" the top priority of the transitional government. The second military coup within one year did not come as a surprise. Frustration within the army about the lack of success in the fight against the jihadist groups is ever-present. Lower ranks since long have been feeling ignored by the military leadership. In contrast to the January coup, the one of 30 September was a typical "coup from below" (Kandeh 2004) committed by lower ranks who do not see any chance to prevail within the army. Traoré supported Damiba's coup in January and was a member of the MPSR from the beginning. The new junta calls itself MPSR2.

Following the coup of 30 September 2022, the "transition phase" was supposed to end by July 2024, when elections were to be held and a civilian government formed. In late May 2024, Traoré, unsurprisingly, announced that the military transitional government would be extended by 60 months. In the new transitional assembly, unlike before, there are no longer any guaranteed seats for political parties, instead, "patriotism" is to be the selection criterion for members of the assembly.

The government of Traoré and his MPSR2, which has now been in office for 2 years, is characterised by its foreign policy of turning away from France and its domestic policy of repression of civil society. Criticism of French influence in West Africa is not new and has increased significantly in the last decade. There have been continuous protests in the region for several years against the colonially created currency, the CFA franc (Taylor 2019; Sylla 2021), as well as against the French military presence.

France started to intervene in Mali in early 2013; by mid-2014, the intervention was transformed to “Opération Barkhane”, a military operation that included all French troops in the region under a joint commando. Though often, at least by European militaries, considered a success, there is hardly any doubt that “counterterrorism” intervention has not led to more security – not even if security is defined in narrow conventional terms, not to speak of human security (Lacher 2021). French troops officially left Burkina Faso in February 2023, being kicked out by the current government. Subsequently, France suspended all its development aid and budget support operations with Niger and Burkina Faso. It had already done so for Mali in November 2022. This has disastrous consequences for artists and students, among others. For example, students who already had visa and mobility grants confirmed to pursue their studies in France, at the end of August 2023 received an email from the French ministry of Foreign Affairs informing them that their grants had been withdrawn: “I regret to inform you that we are cancelling our support for your stay in France; all Campus France services are cancelled (airfare, allowances, and health insurance)” (Le Nevé 2023). On 13 September 2023, according to the French unions of arts and culture, their members received a message from the regional directorates for culture asking them to “suspend all cooperation with the following countries until further notice: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso” (Africanews 2023). In this light, it is hardly surprising that anger against France is rising steadily. The anti-French sentiment is further fuelled by rumours of French military cooperation with the neighbouring states of Benin and Côte d’Ivoire. Traoré accuses France of striving to destabilise the region and Burkina Faso in particular, through this cooperation.

Regional stability was set on fire by a coup in Niger on 26 July 2023. Military governments of Burkina Faso and Mali declared their support for General Abdourahamane Tiani, President of Niger since the coup, and his government in the event of an ECOWAS intervention. The threat of a regional war in August and September 2023 was averted. However, West African states seem to have split: Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have withdrawn from ECOWAS and created a new alliance, the “Alliance of Sahel States”. The alliance “G5 Sahel” of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania, that from 2017 onwards had set up a joint military force of 5000 military and police forces to fight terrorism and organised crime, has been dissolved in December 2023, after Mali dropped out in 2022, followed by Burkina Faso and Niger in 2023.

## 5 Repression Against Civil Society

Repression against civil society organisations and independent media has even worsened since the coup in September 2022. Broadcasting of Radio Oméga, the most important independent radio station in the country, was banned from 10 August to 11 September 2023 because the station had broadcast an interview with a representative of a civil society group that spoke out against the coup in Niger of July 2023. In December 2022 and March 2023, the French broadcasters RFI and France24 were suspended; in April 2024, French journalists were expelled (RSF 2023; Nantulya 2023). Likewise, in April 2024, programmes of Voice of America and BBC Africa

were temporarily suspended following the broadcast of news stories about a Human Rights Watch report accusing the Burkinabé army of abuses against civilians. In June and July 2024, four journalists were abducted and conscripted to the state security forces and the VDP (RSF 2024).

A broad alliance of organisations has prepared a public gathering on the anniversary of the popular uprising on 31 October 2023. The meeting was cancelled on short notice for security reasons and at the insistence of the mayor of Ouagadougou and the national government. Under the policy of “general mobilisation” of 13 April 2023, the transitional government has empowered itself to requisite people and goods for the fight against the jihadist groups. It applied the decree on 4 and 5 November, when the security forces informed by letter or phone call twelve journalists and representatives of civil society organisations and trade unions that they will be conscripted to participate in counter-terrorism operations across the country (HRW 2023b). On 6 December 2023, three of those affected, two members of the civil society group Balai Citoyen and a journalist, were upheld by the administrative court, which declared the forced recruitment unlawful. Another human rights activist who was conscripted in early November, was abducted on 1 December when he tried to renew his passport at the respective authority in Ouagadougou (Amnesty International 2023b). This list could be continued, including family members of trade unionists and civil society activists.

## 6 The African “Coup Belt”?

The recent coups in Burkina Faso are part of a series of military coups in Western and Central Africa. The coup in Niger in July 2023 was the 7th military coup in the region within three years. It followed a first coup in Mali in August 2020 and a second one nine months later in May 2021, followed by one in Chad in April 2021, in Guinea in September 2021, and then two in Burkina Faso in 2022. The “Coup belt” has become a popular term for this in European and North American media: “Coast to coast, a corridor of coups”, titled the *New York Times*, “a domino chain of countries ruled by leaders who seized power by force, fuelling instability and presenting a conundrum for the United States” (Walsh 2023). “The world’s longest continuous stretch of land under military rule [...] stretches over 3500 kilometres, from the Atlantic in the west to the Red Sea in the east”, according to the Swiss *WoZ* (Ehrich 2024). Someone has even created a Wikipedia entry on it: “a modern geopolitical concept and neologism to describe the region of Western Africa, Central Africa and the Sahel that has a high prevalence of coups d’état” (Wikipedia n.d.). Though one may wonder about what is conceptual about this neologism; the geopolitical, at least, is obvious: “a conundrum for the United States”, according to the *NY Times*; “with the coup in Niger, Europe and the United States are losing their last reliable partner in the Sahel as Russia’s influence is growing”, predicates *Der Spiegel* (Gebauer et al. 2023).

The dominant framing of Western media reporting about the recent coups is indeed a geopolitical one, classifying African politics into the current remake of the East-West conflict. The key point of reference appears to be the Russian Wagner



Group. Wagner mercenaries have been deployed to three countries on the continent: the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, and Libya. Human rights organisations have documented severe human rights violations, including killing and torture, committed by Wagner personnel particularly in CAR and Mali (Amnesty International 2023a; HRW 2022, 2023a). The head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, died in a plane crash in August 2023. As a consequence, Russia's Ministry of Defence, from December 2023, set up a new unit directly subordinate to it. The "Africa Corps"<sup>1</sup> consists of more than 2000 regular army personnel and mercenaries, many of whom were previously in the Wagner Group. 100 soldiers of this unit have arrived in Burkina Faso in February 2024, according to media reports, for the personal protection of Traoré. According to Africa Corps' telegram channel, another 200 soldiers are supposed to be deployed.

When it comes to popular support of Wagner and Russia in West Africa, the few existing reports rely mainly on reports by European and North American media (see, for example, the references given in Stanyard et al. 2023, p. 88). More systematic data are missing; yet it might be premature to infer from photos and videos circulating in (social) media that popular support for the deployment of Russian soldiers and mercenaries would be serious, comprehensive and widespread. According to the Mali-Mètre, a survey by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, indeed more than 80% of the people in Mali are satisfied with Mali's cooperation with Russia; whereas also 80% are strongly in favour of the withdrawal of the United Nations peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (FES 2024). Under no circumstances can the survey data from Mali be used to draw conclusions about Burkina Faso or other countries: Likewise, more than 80% of Malians state that they feel that the situation in the country has improved within the last 12 months, which certainly would not be the case in Burkina Faso. Still, given the persistent threat of non-state, often jihadist armed groups in the region, and the feeling that many people have that their governments cannot contain them, Wagner and the "Africa Corps" may indicate hope for some. The Russian flag may also be considered an expression of the critical stance towards the influence of France, and particularly the French military presence in the region. Media report that "in Niger, pro-coup demonstrators assembled waving Russian flags and chanting 'down with France'" (Malik 2023). Indeed, the Russian flag in some places has become an emblem for the rejection of France's influence. Yet the framing of "France (the 'West') vs. Russia" reflects the proclivities of European media, their political discourses and geopolitical interests rather than a serious analysis of the recent conflicts in West Africa (Engels 2023; Harrison 2023).

Opposition to France's influence in Western Africa has been growing steadily during the last years. The recent coups, however, are not a result of this; nor are they an expression of the region's or certain states' orientation towards Russia, despite the widespread geopolitical framing in European and Northern American media. The coups demonstrate, first and foremost, the role national armies play in many African states since formal decolonialisation: the historical entanglement of the military and politics. Coups typically result from frustrations, cleavages, and power

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<sup>1</sup> The name refers to the "German Africa Corps" (Deutsches Afrikakorps) of the German Wehrmacht (1941–1943).



struggles within the state security forces. Second, the coups point at the question of the legitimacy of elected governments. Media reporting steadily outline those coups toppled elected Presidents (except for those cases of course when a coup was launched against a military junta), and the principal claim raised by the international community in situations of coups is a schedule to organise elections. As opposed to this, in Mali, the majority of respondents in the Mali-Mètre survey did not mind that the elections from February 2024 have been postponed to an indefinite date (FES 2024).

In a system where access to political offices depends on personal wealth and clientelist relations, where “regimes in power [...] use state power to choose their own opponents in elections” (Zeilig and Sylla 2023), and where security in parts of the country is so fragile that electoral offices cannot open, voters are threatened, or ballots cannot be transported to the counting point, elections are not necessarily at the top of everyone’s agenda. For many people facing the very difficult conditions of living and working, it might be more obvious to assess the legitimacy of a government by the price of bread and fuel, by their chance to access their agricultural fields without being attacked by an armed group, or by the chance of their children to find a job when they graduate from school or university.

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