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THE ISLAMIST INSURGENCY AND MILITARY TAKEOVER IN BURKINA FASO

THE CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES

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Burkina Faso is a West African country with a turbulent history. The country attained independence from the French in 1960 but the State structure inherited by President Maurice Yaméogo was feeble. The reach of the State institutions was limited to the capital and few other towns. The country experienced its first military takeover in 1996 and this set the precedent for all Heads of State until 2015 to have been in the armed forces before attaining the office. The Burkinabè largely recall the brief revolutionary rule of Thomas Sankara – who was ousted and killed in a military coup in 1987 – with fondness and nostalgia. Blaise Compaoré took over the Presidency and ruled the country for the next 27 years in a semi-authoritarian manner. His rule was marred by sporadic bursts of social and political unrest. Eventually in 2014 when Compaoré attempted to amend the constitution to extend his 27-year rule, Burkinabès took to the streets in unprecedented numbers and Compaoré was forced to resign.

A transitional government was established and elections were held in 2015 wherein Roch Marc Christian Kaboré emerged victorious. During the rule of President Kaboré, the security in Burkina Faso continued to deteriorate due to the increasing influence of armed jihadist groups and the public grew disillusioned with his leadership despite his electoral legitimacy. In November 2021, protesters called for his resignation. Widespread discontent continued and Kaboré was deposed in a military coup in late January 2022. The paper aims to critically analyse the events leading up to the coup, the political developments in the country since then and places them in the wider context of the security threats faced by Sahelian States.

Jihadists in the Sahel

Islamist terrorism in the Sahel is largely a foreign export. It came to the region following the brutal decade long civil war which culminated in the near decimation of the Islamist rebel group GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat). This led the group to look for safe havens to the south of Algeria and it expanded to Mali during the early 21st century. The GSPC pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda in 2006 and was officially renamed AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).

The Tuareg ethnic population native to northern Mali are traditionally nomadic people and the ethnic group has historically been alienated and marginalised by the ruling elites in their capital, Bamako. The Tuaregs had also been hired as mercenaries by Libyan dictator Mu'ammār Al-Qadhafī and his downfall in 2011 forced many Tuareg mercenaries to return to their homeland. This coupled with the political crisis in Mali emerging at the end of Amadou Toumani Touré's presidential mandate encouraged a Tuareg Separatist rebellion.

The jihadists already present in the region either identified with the Tuareg cause or saw an opportunity to take advantage of their fight to settle more permanently in the region, and so they fought alongside the separatists. The collaborating forces of the jihadists and separatists soon overwhelmed and chased away the Malian Army. In April 2012 the coalition occupied the whole of northern Mali to declare the independence of the Azawad State. However, the Jihadists and the Tuareg separatists failed to agree on a vision for the newly born state and the coalition fell to infighting, leading to the separatists being expelled from the major northern cities which were seized by the, at that point, ex-coalition.

The Jihadists continued their advance towards the densely populated southern region of Mali and the fall of the Malian government at the hands of the Jihadists appeared to be a plausible outcome of the conflict. The fall of the central Malian town of Konna in early 2013 was the last straw for the government which then formally sought France's assistance. French forces were hurriedly deployed as a part of Operation Serval and managed to push back the jihadists deep into the northern desert.

As the jihadists fought the international (predominantly French) forces in Mali, they once again looked for refuge in the neighbouring States to avoid confrontation with the international forces. They largely found this refuge in the States of Burkina Faso and Niger. There exists documented evidence of a mutual understanding between the jihadists and Burkinabè President Blaise Compaoré in which the jihadists did not target Burkina Faso in return for refuge. This understanding reportedly fell apart after the overthrow of Compaoré during the popular uprising of 2014.

The initial indifference and covert support of the jihadists by the Compaoré regime and the presence of Burkinabè fighters among the jihadists in Mali helped the jihadists entrench

themselves in the Burkinabè society, especially in the rural regions in the north where the jihadists had first arrived. After the fall of Compaoré, Burkina Faso became a legitimate target for the Islamists to spread their ideology. Furthermore, social and ethnic dynamics and the lack of the presence of the State in Burkina Faso's rural society provided the Islamists with endemic fault lines to exploit. Their ambitions have since grown: Burkina Faso has become a theatre of combat where the aim is to expel government forces from rural areas and to impose Islamic law.

Jihadists in Burkina Faso

In recent decades, Burkina Faso has increasingly witnessed conflicts between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists over land as farmers have expanded to hitherto uncultivated lands as the population have risen. This trend has been intensified by the acidification of the Sahel because of climate change. The Fulani ethnic group is the largest ethnic minority in Burkina Faso. Not unlike the Tuareg in Mali, they are traditionally nomadic pastoralists who have been marginalised by the State. The State institutions, largely based in Ouagadougou have been dominated by the Mossi, the ethnic majority in Burkina Faso. The privatisation of protected areas and hunting reserves in eastern Burkina in the 1990s either led to the eviction of local communities or limited their access to these important spaces. This policy has been detrimental to the livelihoods of farmers, herders, fishermen and hunters alike; many hunters have become poachers, and some have turned to banditry.

The jihadists have capitalised on all these factors and established a strong foothold in northern Burkina Faso. The jihadists have also instrumentalised the suffering of these marginalised communities and have used them for recruitment. Unsurprisingly, the Fulani have been a major source of recruits for the jihadists. The supposed predominance of Fulani jihadists is less a reflection of this community's support for global jihad than of the particular exposure of Fulani herders and landowners to injustices and their relative underrepresentation in State institutions.

The first confirmed attack by jihadists in Burkina Faso took place in October 2015. In January 2016, terrorists opened fire and killed 30 customers in Splendid Hotel and Cappuccino coffee shop

in Ouagadougou and since then the threat has grown with an increase in the intensity and frequency of such incidents. According to the UNHCR, by the end of 2021, more than 1.5 million of the 20 million inhabitants of Burkina Faso had been displaced from their homes due to the conflict. The security forces of the State have been unable to appropriately respond to the threat and the State's presence has been reduced to key towns and cities.

The Threat of Self-Defense Militias

The State's presence in the countryside was often negligible with the increasing threat of robbery, many communities formed armed self-defence groups to protect themselves. When the Jihadist threat emerged, the State increasingly started relying on these self-defence groups for fighting them due to its own inability to do so. It encouraged the formation of these self-defence groups which usually emerged along ethnic lines. The most notable of these groups are the Koglweogo.

In the short run, this may have helped fight the Jihadists but it has ended up exacerbating the conflict. The State has little control over the activities of these armed militias which commit abuses against communities often associated with the bandits and jihadists which in turn push these communities towards the jihadists and help their cause. Additionally, Burkina Faso's security forces have themselves been implicated in the extrajudicial killings of civilians which allows the extremists to earn recruits and further polarises the society.

The Coup

Owing to the dire security situation in Burkina Faso, many citizens gradually lost faith in the democratic regime of President Kaboré. In 2014, 24% told pollsters from Afrobarometer that they approved of the army running the country. By 2018: almost 50% of Burkinabès supported the military rule. The nation saw protests calling for the President's resignation in November 2021. On 11 January 2022, the eight soldiers were arrested by the security forces for allegedly plotting a coup against the government.

On 23 January 2022, a Sunday, gunfire was echoed from several armies based in Ouagadougou. Outside the Sangoulé Lamizana military camp in central Ouagadougou, a soldier spoke to a reporter stating a list of demands in what appeared to be a mutiny. The demands of the mutineers included the replacement of Burkina Faso's army chief and intelligence chief, greater resources for the military campaign against Islamist militants and improved medical care for soldiers wounded in the fight.

The defence minister addressed the nation stating that the unrest was confined to a few barracks and that the government had reached out to the mutinying soldiers to learn their demands.

In the latter hours of Sunday, sporadic gunfire could be heard near President Kaboré's house. This suggests that the security forces were divided among different factions supporting or attempting to oust the President. After daybreak, several armoured vehicles from the presidential convoy were found abandoned near the house, some of them covered in bullet holes. Then came reports that some soldiers had taken the President into custody, pressuring him to resign.

The next evening, on Monday the 24th of January, uniformed men armed with guns who identified themselves as the MPSR (Patriotic Movement for Preservation and Restoration), announced that Kaboré had been deposed from his position as President. The officers cited Kaboré's inability to manage the Islamist crisis as the reason for his forced deposition. The country's constitution was suspended, and its borders were closed.

The military junta was led by Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the former commander of one of the country's three military regions. Colonel Damiba had previously received training by the American military and had published a book in 2021 criticising the President's response to the Islamist insurgency. The coup was largely met with jubilation from the Burkinabè who took to the streets to celebrate the President's ouster.

The Aftermath

The coup was condemned by the ECOWAS and African Union both of which suspended Burkina Faso, demanded a release of the detained president and urged for a swift return to civilian rule.

On the 31st of January, exactly a week after the coup the military junta issued a “fundamental act” that lifted the suspension of the constitution. The Junta announced the establishment of a transitional government with Colonel Damiba as the president of Burkina Faso, Head of State, and supreme commander of armed forces.

After extensive deliberation, ECOWAS and the African Union refrained from imposing sanctions on Burkina Faso. The cooperation on the part of the junta with the ECOWAS and the AU, and the reinstatement of the constitution may have prevented the imposition of sanctions.

On 1 March 2022, the national conference in Burkina Faso adopted a charter that allows the military government to lead a three-year transition.

On 26 April 2022, it was reported that community leaders and fighters from different armed groups had begun talks with the endorsement of the military junta. The government ensured that no form of dialogue was being pursued with those identified as terrorists.

By the beginning of May it was clear that the coup did not bring about a quick fix to the jihadist threat that was endorsed by its proponents. The attacks by the insurgents have increased by 23 percent in the five months since the coup, compared with the five months before the coup. Thousands protested in Ouagadougou on 1 May, reportedly against the junta’s ineffectiveness in fighting the insurgents and their encroachment on civil liberties. The nadir for the State forces came when about a hundred civilians were slaughtered by armed insurgents in the village of Seytenga in Northern Burkina Faso on the 11th of June. The military police at Seytenga were attacked three days prior to the horrific massacre. In the attack, the military forces were overwhelmed, and 11 military police were killed. This had led to a post being abandoned which set the scene for the massacre on 11 May.

In response to the massacre at Seytenga the government on 21 May announced two “large military interest zones” in the northern and southeast regions of the country which civilians were asked to evacuate. The “military interest zone” includes the northern province of Soum where the latest

massacre had occurred. There was little information from the government about the proposed duration of the exile and or where the war-ravaged civilians of the areas were to go. Three days later it was announced that civilians had fourteen days to evacuate the regions.



Source: <https://www.africanews.com/2022/06/13/dozens-feared-dead-in-burkina-faso-attacks/>

Conclusion

The military junta's rise to power may have been illegitimate for the international community but they had, by and large, the Burkinabè people's support. Any attempt to alienate the country and coerce the junta to hand over power to a civilian government before the stated timeline, such as sanctions, was likely to detrimentally affect the already suffering Burkinabé population. The handing over of power to the military was also hoped to alleviate the grievances of the military which would help boost their morale in the fight against the insurgents. It was suggested that it was best to adopt a wait-and-see approach vis-a-vis the military junta in Burkina Faso.

ECOWAS and African Union's decision to refrain from sanctioning the military junta post the coup reflected this approach.

However, the recent surge in attacks against the civilian and military personnel, especially the massacre in Seytenga, is bound to diminish the support for the junta. Military regimes established through coups are highly prone to counter-coups and internal disturbances in the absence of any long-standing institutional structures. This is even more true in situations of crisis where the legitimacy of the regime is at stake.

Therefore, it would not be surprising for the current regime to attack to annihilate the insurgents without paying much attention to the detrimental effects of the fighting on the civilian population. This is exactly what seems to be happening with the proposed evacuation plans for the “military interest zones”. Major clashes between the insurgents and the security forces are likely and conflict can be expected to get bloodier.

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