Self-Defence Movements in Burkina Faso: Diffusion and Structuration of Koglweogo Groups

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ABSTRACT:

In the midst of a political transition since the popular revolution of 2014, Burkina Faso has known a collapse of security in the context of the threatening Islamist movement in the country’s North. Considering this socio-political upheaval, self-defence groups known as Koglweogo, “bush guardians”, have appeared in 2015. The movement has spread in large parts of the country and is infamous for the violent punishments it inflicts on presumed thieves and outlaws. This article delves on the genesis of this galaxy of armed groups which have entitled themselves to security agendas in the name of lawfulness.

INTRODUCTION

Overlooking the large Charles de Gaulle avenue which crosses Ouagadougou and where thousands transit each day, a large advertisement billboard claims in capital letters: “Political Violence Insurance: Terrorism, Looting, Vandalism, Mutiny, Strikes, Uprisings, Popular Movements – To face instability, secure your business «. This type of advertisement is typical of the social environment in Burkina Faso since 2014, undergoing a complex political transition tainted by violent episodes. The popular uprisings of October 30 and 31 2014 ended the regime of President Blaise Compaoré after twenty-seven years in power and left a void filled by opposition parties, unions, associations or activists, gathered around a common agenda based on a push for political change. The departure of “Beau Blaise” did not happen without violence. On the one hand, protesters suffered large-scale repression1, regard-

1. The different protests of 2014 may have led to the death of at least 24 people and 600 wounded. http://lefaso.net/spip.php?article61980.
less of the refusal of part of the army to shoot at civilians. On the other hand, the collapse of the networks of power as well as their extent led to a weakening of the security apparatus with still tangible effects. The fall of the regime led to a new episode of political crisis in September 2015: the failed coup of General Gilbert Diendéré against the transitional government. This General was one of the key assets of the Compaoré regime and the former chief of the feared Presidential Security Regiment (Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle, RSP). Although he no longer was the personal army chief of staff of the President, he kept a real influence on the military apparatus, on intelligence services, on the political realm and more generally on the Sahel region. Proclaimed new Head of State on television, General Diendéré was deposed several days later after popular protests, negotiations with members of the transitional government and an intervention from the loyalist army leading to the rendition of the RSP. President Michel Kafando was reinstated and Gilbert Diendéré was arrested. This episode led to an increased dislocation of the Burkinabe security apparatus and to the elimination of the RSP. In reaction to these brutal changes, a reform of security forces was then implemented by the government. It is in this context, characterized by a heightened sense of insecurity – fed by apparent divisions within the security apparatus – and political reorganizations that the Koglweogo self-defence groups appear. From 2015 onwards, Burkinabe people wishing to protect their property and cattle organise and arm themselves in order to take their defence in their own hands, particularly in the rural and peri-urban zones. They call themselves “Koglweogo”, “bush guardians” in Mooré, the language of the majoritarian Mossi group.

Historically, local security initiatives have always been part of the Burkinabe landscape, under local organisations such as hunter associations, village structures or political groups. The relationship between these groups and the State are often far from antagonistic. Indeed, they have always benefitted from a certain autonomy, allowing the State’s police force to govern by interim in the zones where access is difficult. This is for example the case of traditional Dozo hunters, or of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (Comités de Défense de la Révolution, CDR) during the regime of Thomas Sankara.

In past years, this trend is also found in the State’s attempt to create a proximity Police force made of “ordinary” citizens, chosen in each community. This project has since then been abandoned. However, since 2014, in a context of political and social crisis, these self-defence groups are symptomatic of the absence of the State and the lack of public services. They present themselves as the answer to the lack of judiciary procedures in the many cases of theft or armed robbery that anger the population. Thus, the Koglweogo have formed rather independently from the State, by adopting a critical discourse towards it, denouncing its inaction and publicly claiming to be “apolitical”. They showcase

2. Blaise Compaoré was indeed known for having strong networks in the entire sub-region by maintaining a continuous dialogue with groups considered as rebel or terrorist. A policy which is said to have preserved Burkina Faso from terrorist attacks until his departure.

3. The Dozo are a transnational brotherhood of traditional hunters present in West Africa. They also take on security prerogatives on top of their traditional roles in a rural environment.

4. During the 1983 revolution, influenced by a Marxist-Leninist doctrine, Thomas Sankara’s presidency implemented a de-centralisation of security policies, notably by delegating some peace keeping functions to populations. Thus, Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (Comités de la Défense de la Révolution (CDR) were created.
THE INFLUENCE OF MILITARY ACTORS IN BURKINA FASO’S POLITICAL ARENA (1960 - 2018)

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themselves mainly through the control of penal procedures, often very violently: use of torture and degrading treatment – such as sequestration of suspected criminals leading at times to their deaths. This has been criticised by human rights advocates.

Even though these groups are violent and take over some of the State’s prerogatives, they continuously play an important role in the political and social landscape in Burkina Faso, and seek to extend this to the rest of the country. Based on fieldwork carried out in 2017 in Burkina Faso, this analysis seeks to focus on the workings of the mobilisation of these groups, the conditions and limitations of their proliferation. By considering the Koglweogo as a social movement, this article demonstrated that it transforms through local particularities and the trajectories of the individuals that make it. Born out of true social and security distress, this self-defence movement is rationalising and professionalising. Observing it “from the bottom-up” allows a finer analysis of how populations live through these current social and political changes.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A POPULAR MOBILISATION

These groups are mainly formed on a small scale, from individual initiatives, before they are generally structured by political entrepreneurs or members of local elites (traders, politicians, customary chiefs, etc.) The countryside or the peri-urban zones, lacking police stations, are coveted zones for the work of these self-defence groups who live there. The grassroots volunteers are mainly local farmers, cattle herders (or both) and small shop owners. The latter justify their engagement with moral reasons, they share a common discourse which pushed them to act, that of an experience of theft or violence lived by them or a close one. The first groups form on the basis of a common network of acquaintances in the neighbourhoods or villages.

The patronage of local elites and customary chiefs also play a role by favouring the constitution of inter-acquaintances networks, which facilitates the engagement of first members. Enrolment is presented by these groups as a form of civic action which is upheld by popular support: “Koglweogo are all the population, when the police is a ministry. Everyone must be Koglweogo, everyone is a citizen (...) Koglweogo is the population mobilising for its security”. Its violence and staging are thus set within a discourse on class and a rhetoric on action, “here we do, we do not talk”. The revolutionary imaginary (the icon Thomas Sankara or even the martyrs of the 2014 popular insurrection) is also mobilised and provides a reference framework for group members. From local meetings, assemblies then take place at the regional and national levels. They allow for the networking of Koglweogo from different communities, for the creation of new groups, for the harmonisation of discourses and practices and for media visibility. Group members have political claims such as the security of property and people, but also allow for non-security claims to emerge such as water sanitation or road sealing. The media allows them to pass these messages and shed light on local

5. This study was mainly carried out in the suburbs of Ouagadougou, in the Bobo dioulasso region in the West, as well as around Fada N’Gourma in the East (semi-directed interviews in French or with the help of an interpreter).

peoples’ claims, notably in the countryside. Whilst affirming that they are “apolitical”, Koglweogo groups politicise by enlarging their discourse to other claims. These differ according to local particularities but the staging of security and public punishment inflicted to outlaws belong to a repertoire of action seeking to criticise the State and alert public opinion.

**THE CONDITIONS OF TERRITORIAL EXPANSION; INSECURITY AND THE NEED FOR A FAST AND REMEDIAL JUSTICE**

The Koglweogo’s aim to differentiate themselves from security forces and State representatives are appealing. As for many self-defence or vigilantes’ groups, they showcase themselves as individuals of the people, close to them, and able to immediately answer to the demands of locals on small offences. Koglweogo claim to only treat cases of theft (cattle, mobile phones, motorbikes, etc.). One of their discursive strategies consists in rejecting the bureaucratic weight of the judiciary administration and administrative acts judged as socially discriminating as they are written in complex terms, inaccessible for inhabitants of rural zones who are not all schooled. In opposition, Koglweogo prone simplicity: an individual can easily file a “complaint” at the Koglweogo headquarters and the presumed thief is tracked down as soon as the complaint is deemed serious enough. One of the first measures implemented by different groups has institutionalised around summary trials, taking place publicly and often leading to physical punishments.

This argument on transparency, coupled with efficiency, produces the adhesion of part of the population to these groups, as declared by a leader of a group in the suburbs of Ouagadougou: “Anyone considered as a thief will be punished. He must be tied down, punished, quibbled, amended, that’s it”. Through this mobilisation for security, it is also important to underline the sudden downgrading, the social and physical violence that can represent theft for people living under difficult conditions: heads of cattle represent a hefty investment for agro-pastoral farmers who at times take years to own them, they cannot hope for a State compensation or theft insurance. On the other hand, Koglweogo ensure that the plaintiff is reimbursed by the aggressor once captured. This remedial justice make their strength. Beyond the material reparation it is also the visibility of the punishment and its systematic aspect which gives the impression that the accused has been “truly” punished, thus contributing to a positive popular representation of these groups. A rapid procedure stemming from a justice presented as just and close to the people thus sets them apart from a state system perceived as inefficient and incomprehensible. Beyond taking control of the penal procedure, they also self-attribute certain functions of the monopoly of legitimate violence of the State by doing random road checks of goods and cattle, by collecting taxes and fines, or by making judicial decisions.

Finally, the proximity with inhabitants is materialised by the physical occupation of local places. Within villages, the more active members of the groups are known to all, as
well as the location of their headquarters which everyone can point to. Groups patrol regularly in the villages and are visible and recognisable by their uniforms, locally handcrafted by each group and closely matched to police uniforms. Thus, paradoxically, they showcase a willingness to distance themselves from State institutions by being close to the people, whilst searching to distinguish themselves from the people by using these attributes on a local scale.

THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF THE STATE

The Burkinabe State and political environments have always maintained a certain ambiguity with these self-defence groups, a situation which has favoured their prosperity. From 2015 onwards, in a context of political transition and terrorist attacks, central powers first positively welcome the rise of these initiatives which ensure security, or at least strive to do so. As the municipal elections of 2016 drew nearer, political forces could not afford to alienate these groups very popular in the countryside. Koglweogo have rapidly become an electoral stake and have regularly been spoken about positively by the authorities. The former Minister for Security, Simon Compaoré, was even nicknamed the “father of Koglweogo” for a while. The ambiguity is also fed by self-defence groups, in the business and political worlds whose relations with local initiatives remain opaque.
Certain groups indeed make the most of the material means coming from the power’s entourage and the private sector, as mentioned by a Koglweogo near the capital: “traders also give us money for us to exist. They by us motorbikes for example, a big business owner gave us three last time. He owns a business, but he is also in banking”. In another community in the centre of the country, the Mayor of a village called upon the local group to ensure security during public gatherings. As explained by the Koglweogo chief: “We also get work thanks to the Mayor, who calls us to secure the places when there aren’t enough policemen. This can be during ceremonies or festivities. If there is a ceremony, we will secure the gear for example. The Mayor can give up to 3000 francs to each person per day. He wants to make our life better and he is sure that there won’t be any problems”. Thus, for certain groups, this engagement is above all a commercial practice of peace keeping closer to private security activities than to citizen self-defence. Local authorities treat these self-defence initiatives with pragmatism, even though these are not effectively recognised by central authorities as legal. The movement is deeply grounded in local structures and participates in political life, as it has become an indispensable actor in future electoral stakes. Finally, their capacity to act will also depend on the way in which they interact with authorities and security forces, notably the tolerance that they will demonstrate. The intensity of relations with security forces vary depending on communities and their degree of presence. It is not rare that Koglweogo and police forces agree and cooperate on certain cases. Koglweogo can also be arrested and jailed when authorities feel that they went too far.

Koglweogo also work at gathering a symbolic capital which would match their self-designation as “bush guardians” or “environment protectors”. They appear as guarantors of general interest and produce a universalist and citizen discourse. Their discourses evoking values of discipline, honour and sacrifice reinforce the group cohesion and mark their domination over the rest of the population. These discourses also aim at reassuring the State in terms of their seriousness and open the door for a collaboration. Koglweogo thus place themselves more as captors of State resources rather than fighters, even if this can vary according to local specificities.

THE LIMITATIONS OF EXPANSION: RESISTANCE, COMPETITION AND LOCAL PARTICULARITIES

Even though their grassroots identity is a resource, Koglweogo do not represent a homogenous entity and the movement is not accepted in a uniformly throughout the country. For example, at the end of May 2017, during two days, Koglweogo members and the population of Thiago (located in the West) confronted, leading to the death of six people. Koglweogo from a neighbouring village came to claim an unpaid fine, which was judged too high by the inhabitants of Tialgo. The self-defence group thus faced a refusal from the Tialgo community to submit to their authority and thus recognize their legitimacy. This bloody episode reveals the tensions that can stem out of the expansion of certain Koglweogo in the West.

of the country. It also reveals that these localised groups feel comfortable enough to intervene in large geographical zones. These violent behaviours with local populations add on to the tensions with the Dozo groups already ensuring security activities in the Western part of Burkina Faso. The competition between the latter and the newly arrived has exacerbated, thus leading to sporadic confrontations. Official authorities have been forced to react by prohibiting the activities linked to Koglweogo in the zone.

By clashing with local particularities, the Koglweogo movement seems to move away from national unification. Locally groups organise and underline their particularity and identity, as for Fada N’Gourma in the East of the country. This zone, historically occupied by the Gourmantché community, showcases a distinct culture from the Mossi. Since the end of 2016, self-defence groups have gathered in the “Tin Kubi u gogu” association, which means “let’s protect the city”

8. The Great-West zone in Burkina Faso has known intense ethnic tensions between “indigenous” who represent a plurality of ethnic groups, and the Mossi. Indeed, the communities in the West have known a strong migration of Mossi farmer-herders since the 1970s. These typical population movements of agricultural pioneer fronts, thus have created new neighbourhoods in the peripheries of initial villages, or even new villages almost exclusively Mossi in the communities where they were considered as “guests”. This migratory movement, which has accelerated, has thus deeply marked the West of the country, to the point that the Mossi are now a majority in certain communities. This change in the demographic relation has led communities which felt “at home” to become minorities and led to many conflicts, especially land related ones.
in Gourmantché. They insist to be called this way in their language. This group is powerful in a region which was until then known for its banditry and road theft. Furthermore, the chief who appears as the most legitimate is from this zone, the famous “Django”. The change of name of the association reveals a strive for emancipation and autonomy from the “Koglweogo central power” in construction, and renders less probable a national self-defence union under the same Koglweogo “unit”. The evolution of Koglweogo thus demonstrate the impossibility to be a homogenous and monolithic block for such a movement. Koglweogo institutions are based on pre-existing administrative sections and socio-political logics.

CONCLUSION

The violent and ritualised behaviours of Koglweogo groups are now common in large parts of the country. In the rural zones, which have faced insecurity, many testimonies seem to point to an improvement of the situation and to a feeling of reduced insecurity. However, the Koglweogo movement, from the “thief hunts” that it leads and the integration of former outlaws in its ranks, is welcomed in different ways within society. The proliferation of self-defence groups also feeds on more latent conflicts. Thus, we can witness the reappearance of oppositions between communities in discourses, between “indigenous” and “newly arrived”, between centre and periphery, between the rural and urban worlds, or between social classes. Finally, in the light of upcoming elections (the Presidential elections in 2020) the question of the insertion of these armed groups in the democratic game remains unanswered.