



Commentary

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## Burkina Faso: Safeguarding Elections amid Crisis

*As Burkina Faso's rural conflict rages, the country is also beset by urban unrest. In this excerpt from our Watch List 2020 for European policymakers, Crisis Group urges the EU and its member states to lend support to election preparations and encourage the government to devote energy to the crisis in the countryside.*

2019 was a bad year for Burkina Faso. Clashes between jihadists on one side and the state and ethnic vigilantes on the other took approximately 2,000 lives according to ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project), a six-fold increase over 2018. Security forces have been unable to stop the militants' advance on their own, relying more and more on vigilantes, or "self-defence" militias, as they call themselves, some of which are implicated in massacres. Fighting has created one of West Africa's most urgent humanitarian crises. As violence spreads from the country's north into the east and south west, it has displaced more than a half-million people, over thirteen times as many were displaced in 2018. Meanwhile, demonstrations, peaceful and otherwise, popped up across the country, especially in the capital Ouagadougou, as citizens lambasted the government for its failure to deliver socio-economic gains and its ineffective management of the conflict in the countryside.

At the outset of 2020, these problems, coupled with elite power struggles, threaten to derail the November legislative and presidential elections. In the run-up to polls, politicians are likely to seek alliances with vigilante groups whose local popularity and capacity to intimidate voters could influence results. Under tremendous strain, the authorities may be unable

or unwilling to organise credible elections. They should focus on providing security in rural areas, not only to ensure that balloting is timely and proceeds with minimal disruption, but also because restoring security in the countryside is key for longer-term stability. Despite the forthcoming campaign and vote, both government and opposition should remain focused on tackling a crisis that threatens the entire political system, and thus their respective interests.

### **To bolster security in Burkina Faso and maximise chances for a timely and peaceful vote, the EU and its member states should:**

- Help Burkinabé authorities develop a national plan to resolve communal disputes over land and natural resources, which fuel jihadist expansion; although a plan for such a sensitive issue is unlikely to be finalised and adopted before the elections, the government should not wait until after the vote to start.
- Increase humanitarian aid in cooperation with UN agencies and NGOs, especially in northern regions, where the number of displaced and food-insecure people is highest and where communal tensions could rise in overcrowded municipalities.

- Lead efforts, along with the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union (AU), to nudge the government and opposition toward dialogue, emphasising the need for all to agree on electoral preparations and the reduction of political violence, notably communal clashes.
- Support electoral preparations without losing sight of the importance of improving security in the countryside. The EU should learn from Mali's 2018 elections, when election deadlines monopolised the government's agenda and froze donor programs for months until a new president was sworn in.
- Press Burkinabé authorities to curb abuses by the armed forces and limit the involvement of self-defence groups (Koglweogo) in counter-insurgency efforts. Improving conditions of troops engaged near the combat zones would help. In return for increased material support from Europe, Ouagadougou should develop internal control mechanisms within defence and security forces to limit abuses.

## Spreading Rural Violence

Despite counter-insurgency operations in the north and east, jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso increased throughout 2019. Militants are attempting to break overstretched security forces by targeting police stations and military posts, ambushing transport convoys and blowing up bridges to cut off access to cities, while perpetrating atrocities against civilians. The death toll last year exceeded that in Mali, long regarded the Sahel's open sore. The crisis has led to the forced shutdown of over 2,000 schools. An estimated 1.2 million people need urgent humanitarian assistance. Authorities have extended a state of emergency in virtually all areas bordering Mali and Niger, calling on France and the regional G5 Sahel Joint Force, as well as ECOWAS partners, to provide additional support.

Jihadists are the main perpetrators of civilian killings, but state security forces and vigilantes are responsible for a major share. According to human rights organisations, the Burkinabé military has killed civilians during counter-insurgency operations, while allied vigilantes (together with mobs) massacred unarmed local communities from the Fulani ethnic group in Yirgou in January 2019 and Arbinda two months later. Often the precise causes of local violence are unclear, in part because of the lack of serious investigations.

The counter-insurgency campaign risks exacerbating the very factors – breakdowns in rural social cohesion amid disputes over land and other natural resources – that plunged the country into this predicament. Local authorities have come to seem ineffectual or even predatory as disputes multiply. Amid escalating banditry and other violence, “self-defence” militias like the Koglweogo have gained traction as an alternative provider of law and order. But the Koglweogo's attempts to take justice into their own hands have led to communal clashes, especially between them and the Fulani ethnic group, roiling already tense relations. The government should find a way to manage rural conflicts if it wants to reverse the rise of vigilantism.

As violence continues, particularly in the Sahel and Centre-North regions, where 65 per cent of 2019's fatalities occurred, civilians are fleeing to municipalities. Towns in these two regions now host over three quarters of the country's internally displaced people (IDPs) – and their resources are stretched to the limit. The EU should coordinate delivery of humanitarian aid to these vulnerable areas, lest the influx of displaced people itself precipitate further conflict.

## Social and Political Contestation

As the rural conflict rages, the country is also beset by urban unrest, with over 150 protests and riots last year. Trade unions voice discontent with precarious living conditions and lack of economic reform. Civil society organisations and opposition politicians blast the government's inefficiency in containing insecurity, singling out an attack on the military post in Koutougou that killed 24 soldiers, and another on Bongou gold mine employees heading to work. The main opposition party, Union pour le Progrès et le Changement, went so far as to call for the government's resignation after the Koutougou attack.

In the face of criticism, the government has increasingly resorted to repression. In June, it introduced legislation aimed at sanctioning acts it deems corrosive of armed forces' morale. Authorities arrested without warrant the activist Naïm Touré for "demoralising" soldiers via social media, before releasing him two days later. The authorities have temporarily suspended (so banned from conducting any political activity for three months) the Patriotic Front for Renewal, a small opposition party not represented in the National Assembly, for calling on the government to resign for failing to "secure

the nation". These and other government actions raise concerns that its campaign against jihadists will serve as a pretext for clamping down on all critical voices. Meanwhile, the ruling People's Movement for Progress has revived accusations against allies of the exiled former president, Blaise Compaoré, accusing them of plotting against the government.

President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré has made some attempts to build consensus, such as around the forthcoming elections, but these may be insufficient to guarantee a credible vote. In July, he launched a dialogue with opposition parties about how to address insecurity, reform the electoral code, set the electoral calendar, schedule a delayed referendum on constitutional reform and clarify voting rights for the Burkinabé diaspora. The ruling party and opposition reached consensus on security and election timing, giving rise to some optimism. But disagreements between the ruling party and opposition over a national reconciliation process, which would entail Compaoré's potential return to the country (Compaoré reportedly wants to retire in his native village), remain unresolved.

## Electoral Risks and Opportunities

Amid these tensions, President Kaboré's call in November on citizens to volunteer to join the army's counter-insurgency efforts could make matters worse. First, arming untrained civilians increases the risk of abuses. Secondly, civilian mobilisation could worsen already existing cleavages between local communities. A bill establishing National Defense Volunteers passed by the Burkina parliament on 21 January limits their armament and confines their role to defensive missions, but the state still lacks the capacity to efficiently monitor recruits and prevent abuses. Thirdly, it could fuel political tensions if parties – and notably

the ruling party – try to use these volunteers for political purposes. Dialogue on this specific issue is needed between the government and opposition to avoid this outcome, but is unlikely to take place while mistrust among political parties remains strong.

The EU, in concert with UNOWAS, ECOWAS and AU, should encourage the government and opposition to continue the political dialogue initiated this summer aimed at organising legitimate and peaceful elections in 2020. For now, the EU does not appear likely to deploy election observers. Yet an observation mission

could play a role in deterring violence around the election.

Even as election preparations proceed, the EU should encourage the government to devote energy to addressing the crisis in the countryside. The EU should learn from the experience of the 2018 Malian elections, when the race to meet election deadlines absorbed the entirety of the government's focus and halted international partners' cooperation programs for months. In particular, as a development actor, the EU should keep helping the government reduce

the risk of communal clashes in rural areas by promoting a new approach to governance. That includes supporting authorities to engage in land reforms and to promote specific forms of governance in nomadic areas. From a security perspective, the EU could increase its material support to improve the conditions of Burkinabé troops engaged on the front, but, in exchange, should encourage authorities to develop more robust and effective accountability mechanisms to limit defence and security forces' excessive use of force against civilians.