

CASE STUDY

TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE TOOLS TO ADDRESS RADICALISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN BURKINA FASO

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BACKGROUND

Burkina Faso is a country facing a myriad of challenges. The country is typically recognized as an active arena for coups d'état and attempted coups d'état in West Africa.¹ In addition, the country is located in the Sahel region, which is now considered the epicenter of terrorism. In fact, in 2022, terrorism-related deaths in this region outnumbered the combined figures of those in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. Furthermore, according to 2023 data, deaths in the Sahel constituted 43% of the global total in 2022, compared with just 1% in 2007; Burkina Faso and Mali account for 72% of all these deaths.²

Burkina Faso had erstwhile been a stable country, but from 2015, there was an increase in intensity of terrorism-related activities. From the onset, the hotbed for violent extremism was in the north of the country. Recently, however, this has spread south and across the country. Radicalization and violent extremism combined with cross-border crime now pose a significant and growing threat to national and international security, with dire implications

for public safety, public health, democratic institutions, and economic stability across the globe.³ The precariousness of the situation in the Sahel is made still worse given that this region has the fastest population growth rate on the continent and is one of the poorest regions globally, entangled in the most fragile of environmental conditions.⁴

Roughly half of Burkina Faso's territory is outside government control and under the dominion of several extremist groups.⁵ In response to these challenges, the government adopted several measures to address the expansion of radicalism and violent extremism. These include the National Strategy for the Promotion of a Culture of Tolerance and Peace, the National Strategy for the Prevention of Radicalization, the Fight Against Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso 2021-2025, the Emergency Programme for the Sahel, the Platform for the Promotion of Peace through the US Agency for International Development/Partnerships for Peace, the G5 Sahel Women's Platform, Economic Opportunities for Youth Empowerment and Resilience to Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso, and the EU Pilot Project on Countering Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in the Sahel-Maghreb region.

Despite these efforts, radicalism and violent extremism continue to rise in Burkina Faso. Transitional justice tools are therefore proposed as an alternative response to radicalism and violent extremism in Burkina Faso, with the potential to address the root causes of the ongoing violence and extremism.

MAPPING THE FORMS OF EXTREMISM

Today, violent extremism and radicalism in Burkina Faso take many forms. However, this study sets out to identify the most prevalent of such forms, the first of which is religious extremism, commonly referred to as jihadist extremism. This form is rooted in religious ideology, and its proponents adopt extremist interpretations of religious beliefs to justify the use of violence. This is common to groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the Jamaat Nosrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).⁶ They carry out suicide attacks, bombings, and kidnappings targeted at both military personnel and civilians.

The Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation

In 2014, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience (ICSC) launched the Global Initiative for Justice, Truth and Reconciliation (GIJTR), a consortium of nine international organizations focused on offering holistic, integrative and multidisciplinary approaches to issues of truth, justice and reconciliation. GIJTR works primarily with local populations, civil society organizations, survivors and governments to develop transitional justice approaches that are victim-centered, collaborative, and support dignity, respect, inclusion, and transparency in societies emerging from conflict or periods of authoritarian rule. Since its founding, GIJTR has engaged 801 local civil society organizations; 78 countries; 43 publications; collection of over 8,000 narratives of human rights violations; and supported 588 civil society organizations dealing with human rights violations.

For more information, please visit [gijtr.org](https://www.gijtr.org).



Self-defense militias through the koglwego also provide another manifestation of radicalism and violent extremism in Burkina Faso. These groups are formed in response to growing insecurity, to protect local communities in some regions of the country. In most cases, the people no longer feel as if they are protected by the state. Consequently, they take on the responsibility of guaranteeing their own security.⁷ They are often accused of perpetrating acts of violence against civilians. For instance, farmer-grazer tensions between the Mossi and Fulani (or farmers and herders) communities have led to deadly confrontations in which the koglwego have reportedly killed dozens of civilians.⁸

Another form is cultural extremism. This comprises situations in which culture and traditions are viewed as threats to dignity and honor, as with descent-based slavery. Slavery is still practiced in Burkina Faso. However, some enslaved persons are now increasingly challenging their subjugation and slavery, resorting to violent and deadly confrontations with their masters to gain their freedom.⁹

DRIVERS CONTRIBUTING TO RADICALIZATION

Although the Libyan crisis—the political instability that rocked Libya following the ousting of long-time leader Muamar Ghaddafi—as a singular event massively contributed to the escalation of radicalism and violent extremism in the neighboring Sahel, several other local and national drivers account for same. After the removal of the Libyan strongman, the country lacked leadership and consequently fell into chaos. There was little to no order, and jihadist groups began using Libya as a base to launch attacks in the Sahel. There was also an exponential increase in arms transfer from the unstable and ungoverned Libya to the Sahel.¹⁰ The crisis also resulted in significant unemployment, forcing many Burkinabe living and working in Libya to return home and leading to poverty—a primary driver of radicalism and violent extremism, which will be discussed below.¹¹

The following paragraphs review the main drivers of radicalism and violent extremism in Burkina Faso.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL DRIVERS

According to the United Nations Development Programme Regional Bureau for Africa report *Journey to Extremism*, disenchantment with the government and socioeconomic hardship are the primary drivers of extremism, significantly more so than religious indoctrination.¹² Burkina Faso is one of the poorest countries in the world (ranked 184 out of 191 countries),¹³ with a high proportion of the population living in deep poverty. This is an avenue exploited by jihadist groups, which then offer “employment” opportunities to the jobless and poor youths. Some of these youths confided that they can be paid hundreds of thousands of francs simply for acting as spies against the army, by giving up their

locations and movements to the jihadists for ambush or the placement of landmines.

The impact of bad governance in driving radicalism and violent extremism is deep.¹⁴ It erodes the credibility of the government in the minds of the population. Several local conflicts are poorly addressed by administrative and judicial authorities, prompting local communities to take the lead and in most cases resulting in the formation of armed self-defense groups, largely motivated by an intense need for retaliation. Furthermore, given that about half of the country is beyond the control of the state, this creates a huge vacuum that needs to be filled. Self-defense groups therefore naturally offer protection within their various communities. Consequently, intercommunity massacres are increasingly common between the Mossi and the Fulani, who are frequently engaged in land disputes. One such incident with tragic consequences was the Mossi and Fulani conflict in Yirgou in the north-central region of Burkina Faso. This led to the deaths of hundreds of civilians, the majority of whom were Fulani.¹⁵

Beyond the economic hardships and frustrations, the interviews show, some of the extremist groups offer power, protection, and family as incentives to new recruits. For many youths who might have had family members unjustly suffer at the hands of the government or its armed forces or other extremist groups, joining an extremist group offers protection and the power to seek vengeance. Many young persons in disadvantaged neighborhoods, cities, villages, and peri-urban areas experience social exclusion and marginalization.¹⁶ These situations typically generate a feeling of isolation and invisibility, which is thoroughly exploited by the extremist groups who give these youth the sense of family they have been seeking—and the platform to make themselves heard.

Still, religion is not the main driver for radicalism and violent extremism, though it remains a crucial factor. Loada and Romaniuk term this machination as “Islam under threat.”¹⁷ This is a tool highly utilized by radical clergy, conveying the message that the global political and economic system discriminates against the Muslim world, which could overlap with personal or societal perceptions of discrimination. Most susceptible are persons who are subjected to persecution and humiliation on a regular basis, namely those who are most vulnerable to highly politicized and emotionally charged images of fellow Muslims suffering in their country or abroad. In a country where 63.8% of its population are Muslims,¹⁸ it is not hard to find an audience for such teachings. Moreover, with 2016 data showing that 70% of the adult population is illiterate,¹⁹ their susceptibility to such propaganda is worsened.

Conversely, proactive religious agendas are also significant in driving radicalism and violent extremism. Groups promoting such agendas try to impose their versions and interpretations of Islam, jihad, and similar themes on the local population, thus weakening traditional and more-moderate and tolerant religious structures and practices.²⁰ This provides a suitable stage for radicalism and violent extremism.

Quite similar is also the propaganda machinery driven by some radical Pan-Africanists who exploit the presence of foreign military troops on Burkinabe soil to pass out messages of neocolonialism and subjugation. Many view this as a disgrace to their governments and communities. An anti-French sentiment has been growing recently²¹ and is pushing many youths to radicalism and violent extremism as they join groups seeking to expel French forces.

Lastly, some forms of radicalism and violent extremism are linked to social stratification (castes). These are divisions prevalent in societies that distinguish between a category of men considered free and those subject to the authority of the former (castes). This is common with the Fulani, who

are seen as the “masters,” and the Rimaïbe, those seen as the “enslaved” people. It is also seen with Touareg (masters) and the Bellah (enslaved people), derived from a long history based on slaverylike practices and social hierarchies.²² Certain members of these so-called subjugated communities are violently challenging this social structure.

PROFILE OF COMMUNITIES AT RISK

In the current context of Burkina Faso, where terrorist groups control a large part of the country, it is difficult to draw up an exhaustive profile of communities at risk.²³ The Boucle du Mouhoun in the west, north-central, east, north, and Sahel areas of Burkina Faso are gradually being affected by the presence and activities of militant Islamist groups.²⁴ Moreover, jihadist groups have recently operated in Burkina Faso with relative ease, making the entire country at risk of violent and deadly attacks.²⁵ In May 2023, at least 33 people were killed when gunmen opened fire on vegetable farmers in the village of Youlou, in the Mouhoun province of the Boucle du Mouhoun region.²⁶ This region is also one of the poorest in the country.²⁷

The communities in the tri-border area and those along the 1,325-kilometer border with Mali, encompassing western provinces such as Kéné Dougou, Kossi and Yatenga, are particularly at risk.²⁸ The tri-border area covers the zone parts of northern Mali and a region of Burkina Faso and Niger known as Liptako-Gourma. The main communities are the provinces of Oudalan, Soum, and Séno, with which the other border communities in Mali and Niger account for nearly a quarter of all violent attacks linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel.²⁹ The main proponents of extremist violence in these communities include the remnants of the Burkinabe group, Ansaroul Islam, aligning with the JNIM coalition. Other groups are under the banner of the ISGS. The vulnerability of these communities is enhanced because of the limited state presence in these areas.

The northern regions of the country have experienced an increased intensity in extremist activities since 2022, when armed groups surrounded certain towns, such as Djibo, Sebba, and Titao, limiting civilian access to humanitarian assistance and essential services.³⁰ In April 2023, 44 civilians were killed by terrorist groups in the villages of Kourakou and Tondibi in northeast Burkina Faso, located in a region bordering Niger.³¹

Furthermore, north-central Burkina Faso is also now a risk zone, given the rapid escalation of extremist activities in the area. Recently, terrorists from the Macina Liberation Front, now part of the JNIM coalition, along with remnants of Ansaroul Islam, have pushed farther south into this more populated area.³² The five districts of this zone—Bam, Loroum, Namentenga, Sanmentenga, and Yatenga—saw just one violent incident in 2017 that was associated with militant Islamist organizations. However, it was projected that in 2022, there would be around 450 violent occurrences, or 16% of all Sahelian incidents, in this region.³³

Even in the capital city of Ouagadougou, terrorists have carried out several attacks. A notable instance was the 2016 hostage crisis in Splendid Hotel, which was a popular meeting place for Western diplomats. Security forces were able to free 126 hostages, but at least 29 persons were killed; Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for the attack.³⁴ In the southeast

and southwest, nearly all extremist episodes can be traced to JNIM. The predominantly vulnerable communities here are Gourma, Boulgou, and Koulpélogo, southeastern communities that are also key to gold-smuggling networks and criminal activity and networks that collaborate with JNIM. In the southwest, communities like Poni experience similar issues to their eastern counterparts, in addition to a growing gold-mining center. Some speculate that an increase in militant attacks might be linked to the desire of JNIM and affiliates to capture some of these revenues sourced in the area.³⁵

ANALYSIS OF THE MILITARY RESPONSE

Burkina Faso's national response to address radicalism and violent extremism is detailed in a strategy document—*National Strategy for the Prevention of Radicalisation and Countering Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso 2021 – 2025*. The country's overall response has been predominantly militaristic. In 2021, for instance, to combat terrorism, then-president Christian Kaboré issued a decree creating a new military entity, Forces spéciales. This Special Force was a classified faction of the military mandated to carry out national and international missions, with no criminal responsibility capable of arising from such missions.³⁶ Moreover, since 2009, French forces had been stationed in Burkina Faso in what was known as Operation Sabre. However, the mission's presence was formalized only in 2018, and it operated alongside other French missions in West Africa to eliminate jihadist leaders. Nonetheless, in January 2023, coup leaders called on France to withdraw this 400-man task force from Burkina Faso.³⁷

There has recently been widespread speculation that the current military government will look to partner with the Russian mercenary Wagner Group to address violent extremism in the country. Nevertheless, in April 2023, Burkinabé authorities declared a "general mobilization" of the military, ostensibly to stem the rise of violence and reclaim territory lost to armed Islamist groups.³⁸ As a result, 50,000 civilians have joined the *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* (VDP).³⁹ These VDPs are stationed in their residential communities, with the remainder alongside the country's Security and Defense Forces nationwide.⁴⁰

STRENGTHS

The military response to violent extremism and radicalism has had some successes, in particular somewhat lessening the capacity of extremist groups to launch attacks on civilian and military targets. This has also helped curtail some of their activities. French Special Forces in Burkina Faso help achieve some of these by targeting and eliminating some jihadist leaders. In addition, the army and its partners have carried out several hostage rescue operations against jihadists, quite notably during the 2016 attacks in the Splendid Hotel.

According to several interviews, the even more militaristic approach to addressing violent extremism is highly popular and welcome among the citizens. Under the current military regime, this is driving

a sense of patriotism among the population, who are beginning to trust their government. This support is evidenced by the increasing number of civilians willing to enlist in the VDP. Moreover, the government introduced a new tax that many thought would be problematic, but this has been readily accepted by the citizenry, according to interviews.⁴¹

WEAKNESSES

Despite the increased militarization of the state's approach to addressing radicalism and violent extremism in Burkina Faso, over a decade later, the threat remains. This militaristic response has clearly failed to address the root causes of extremism in the country. Rather, it has been more concerned with responding to manifestations of violent extremism in a seemingly never-ending cycle.

Moreover, this approach has meant that an increasing number of civilians are enlisted to serve as support forces to the army. These civilians are not adequately trained as the regular army, nor are they effectively equipped or supplied. As such, they do not present as dangerous opponents to extremist groups. This is leading to quick deaths for many of these civilians, as in April 2023, when 34 killed in a raid.⁴²

Moreover, the creation of the *Forces spéciales* posed a significant challenge to human rights protection. This faction of the army was allowed freedom in its activities with little to no accountability for their actions, so they could violate human rights with impunity throughout their missions. The number of civilians killed by the VDP or the army rose to 762 from January 2022 to August 2023.⁴³ Amnesty International reports that the VDP massacred at least 80 civilians in the town of Nouna in December 2022, in retaliation for an Islamist attack on a local gendarmerie post.⁴⁴

Lastly, the military response is preventing the allocation of resources to much needed developmental sectors and service delivery, toward financing the army. A military approach leads to an increased need for military financing, putting more strain on the already impoverished population and driving the country deeper into poverty.

THE DEGREE TO WHICH RESPONSES TO DATE HAVE BEEN FRAMED AS TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

The state's response to addressing radicalism and violent extremism in Burkina Faso cannot be explicitly framed as transitional justice to any significant degree. Much of the government rhetoric has circled on the idea that its main preoccupation is to restore security and restore stability,⁴⁵ after which it will hand over power to a civilian government, with liberty to pursue the goals of transitional justice and democracy in a then-conducive environment.

Before President Christian Kaboré was ousted by the coup, the government had initiated the *Programme d'urgence pour Le Sahel au Burkina Faso*.⁴⁶ This action plan detailed the

state's holistic approach, whose priorities were to improve on governance structures, improve socioeconomic development and living conditions (social justice), and build community resilience, all geared toward addressing radicalism and violent extremism and its root causes. This strategy could be framed as transitional justice, as it included elements of community dialogues and institutional reforms. However, the military orchestrated a coup based on its perceived ineffectiveness of this strategy. Thus, Selassie argues that in fragile situations where democratic institutions cannot work effectively, the military believes that it is best suited to manage the state⁴⁷ because of its self-perceived organizational structure, discipline, and cohesiveness—qualities that, it believes, make it better equipped to deal with crisis.⁴⁸

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACHES IN PREVENTING AND COUNTERING RADICALIZATION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

If properly exploited, community-based approaches can prove effective, inexpensive, and sustainable in addressing radicalism and violent extremism. Early detection and intervention is one such technique that communities could greatly enhance. Local community members are often the first to recognize signs of radicalism and extremism within their communities. These communities can then solicit the necessary assistance from the relevant state department. This is also true for identifying persons who need mental health and trauma support. These persons are vulnerable targets for extremist groups, who could easily radicalize them. Early detection within the community can ensure that these persons get the help they need. This can help build resilience, a sense of togetherness, and ultimately social cohesion, which can be crucial in addressing radical and violent extremism.

Furthermore, community leaders can provide leadership and direction, especially in the areas with no state presence. These traditional authorities are respected within the local population, and they can assist the state in local administration. Moreover, given their local standing, they can be used as effective agents of sensitization campaigns, mobilizing their local communities to shun radicalism and violent extremism. One traditional leader confided that the state needs to support traditional justice mechanisms and recognize them as formal agents of the state, encouraging them to engage in dialogue and mediation over inter- or intracommunity conflicts. This can curtail the escalation of such conflicts.

EXISTING TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE MECHANISMS THAT ADDRESS RADICALISM AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The state allows for traditional justice mechanisms to address local land conflicts that spur violent extremism. This was instituted by *Law No. 034-2009 / AN of 16 June 2009 on rural land tenure (RFR-2009)* in June 2009 to ensure access rural land investment promotion and sustainable management of natural resources. This law was created partly in response to the violent conflicts over land disputes and competition over natural resources. This law was a pacesetter in West Africa, as it rewrote “national legislation to reflect local realities and the collective will of all implicated actors—whether rural farmers, transhumant herders, women’s producer groups, customary land tenure authorities, or government officials.”⁴⁹ This allowed for broad and communal participation in policy making.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Burkina Faso is now a politically unstable country with the frequent coups and attempts, alongside several manifestations of violent extremism. The country has been driving more toward an overtly militarized approach to addressing these plaguing issues. This report shows that such an approach fails to address the root causes of the issues that drive radicalism and violent extremism yet exact a high human and financial cost on the Burkinabe people. Transitional justice tools are thus suggested as an alternative, which, if properly executed, can prove effective in addressing radicalism and violent extremism. The main initiatives in this context would consist of community dialogues and valorizing the role of traditional justice mechanisms. Based on this study, the following recommendations are made:

- The state should target initiatives at the social and economic inclusion of youth and women.
- The state should encourage intercommunity dialogue and communication between communities and security authorities.
- The state should commit to ensuring reparations for victims and justice for victims of human rights abuses.
- The state should promote the right to education (also adapted to the nomadic lifestyle of rural communities or other areas affected by communal violence, atrocities, and terrorist acts).

- Reform the governance of the security system, ensuring proper human rights education for the armed forces.
- Strengthen regional and international cooperation on radicalization and violent extremism with transnational dimensions.
- The state should be conscious of a human rights-based approach in formulating state policy.
- The state should commit to good governance, as the alternative is linked to several drivers of violent extremism and radicalism.

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