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Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland and Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso

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Abstract

In response to the security vacuum and the limited effectiveness of military intervention in the fight against violent extremism, Burkina Faso has opted for a strategy based on citizen participation through the creation of Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). Since 2022, this initiative has become the cornerstone of the national security strategy. This article aims to analyse the need for strategic anticipation in managing the evolving role of the VDP. To this end, a structural constructivist approach was employed to understand the role of VDPs in combating violent extremism. The study is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary research. A total of 59 stakeholders, including representatives from public institutions, media professionals, research institutions, community and religious leaders, teacher-researchers, and a select group of the public, were interviewed. The information gathered was presented in verbatim form and subjected to content analysis. It has become clear that, while VDPs have played a crucial role in strengthening community security and supporting conventional forces, their long-term trajectory remains uncertain. Their growing presence raises essential political and social questions, including the risks of inter-community violence and the erosion of state legitimacy. The article argues that Burkina Faso needs to rethink the future of VDPs as part of a broader strategy of post-violent extremism governance. Drawing on community security models and post-crisis reintegration frameworks, the article emphasises the importance of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), as well as socio-economic support mechanisms, in the context of reintegration, to prevent long-term instability.

Keywords: Violent Extremism, Self-Defence Groups, Citizen Participation, Security, Governance, Stabilisation.

Introduction

For more than a decade, Burkina Faso has been confronted with the phenomenon of violent extremism, which began following the ousting of President Blaise Compaoré, who is often said to have concluded an informal non-aggression pact with Malian armed groups (Beevor, 2022). The spread of violent extremism in Burkina Faso has prompted the army to develop strategies to deal with it. The army, which was originally structured to address conventional international or interstate conflicts, now faces an unconventional challenge that persists despite ongoing efforts. To effectively combat the phenomenon of violent extremism in Burkina Faso, the issue of citizen participation (Saidou, 2019) poses a significant challenge. It is increasingly highlighted, reinforcing the idea that security is everyone's business, including the population (Malochet, 2021: 42). In Burkina Faso, the involvement of self-defence groups and Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP²) in the fight against violent extremism is a significant illustration of this approach to civic engagement (Zutterling, 2020).

This citizen involvement reflects the experience of South-East Asia, where authorities have also called on citizens to participate in the fight against Maoist groups (Frenkiel, 2022). The strategic involvement of VDPs in the fight against violent extremism means that we now have to consider the future of VDPs in a post-violent extremism phase. A hypothetical return to a situation of lasting peace would inevitably raise questions about their future, including disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration/reinsertion. So, what role could be given to VDPs when the phenomenon approaches a possible end to the crisis? This is the context for this article, which looks at how VDPs can be managed in the aftermath of violent extremism, focusing on two fundamental aspects: their inclusion in a disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process tailored to their status as auxiliaries to the army, and the implementation of structural measures that could guarantee the consolidation of peace and social reconstruction.

From a theoretical perspective, the article employs Bourdieu's structuralist constructivist approach (1987) as a framework for interpreting the dynamics of social positioning, the reproduction of power relationships, and the internalisation of structures of domination. This approach enables the analysis

² The Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) are a supplementary force of the Burkinabe army, formed in 2019 to combat jihadist insurgents alongside the country's defence and security forces.
<https://www.crisisgroup.org/fr/africa/sahel/burkina-faso/burkina-faso/313-armed-les-civils-au-prix-de-la-cohesion-sociale>, consulted on 10 June 2025.

of how VDPs are both the product of an unstable social and security context and, simultaneously, actors who transform that context. It refers to how their role is constructed, perceived, and legitimised by the state, local communities and social dynamics in a context marked by insecurity.

The limitations of the existing literature on analysing this phenomenon justify the adoption of a theoretical position based on structuralist constructivism. Indeed, the research conducted on DDR in sub-Saharan Africa remains primarily focused on ex-combatants from armed rebellions to the detriment of self-defence forces created by the state (Bangura, 2023). Similarly, few studies link DDR issues with long-term structural reforms, which are crucial if conflict recurrence is to be avoided (Sharif, 2018). This article, therefore, proposes a contribution that considers the future of VDP not simply as a question of post-violent extremism management, but as an issue of structural transformation of Burkina Faso's social and political order.

From a methodological perspective, the study aimed to be explanatory rather than statistical. As a result, a variety of stakeholders from different social strata were interviewed. These included (i) 11 actors from public institutions (Military Tribunal, Ministry of Territorial Administration, Decentralisation and Security, Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, Ministry of Defence and Veterans); (ii) 02 media professionals (Chaîne Oméga TV Burkina Faso); (iii) 09 actors from research institutions (Centre National d'Études Stratégiques (CNES), Centre d'Analyse et d'Alerte Précoce, Centre pour la Gouvernance Démocratique (CGD)); (iv) 15 actors from civil society organisations (CSOs); (v) 05 community and religious leaders; and (vi) 07 teacher-researchers. This list of stakeholders was supplemented by ten people selected at random. The primary data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide. The collected comments were processed, presented in verbatim form, and then analysed for content. The data was supplemented by documentary evidence.

After discussing the origins of the Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP) as auxiliaries to the army, the article examines the post-extremism stabilisation mechanisms that could be envisioned. It then reviews post-crisis structural actions, focusing on transitional justice, decentralisation policies and socio-economic reintegration initiatives.

Sociography of Self-Defence Groups

The state's incentive to involve civilians in the quest for security is not limited to crime or political dissent (Quidelleur, 2023). The use of auxiliaries can be observed in various aspects of military strategies. This is the case with self-defence groups, which fall into the category of Local Security Initiatives (LSIs³) (Diallo, 2020). As Soré et al (2021) point out, self-defence groups can be considered as “vigilantes”. From a theoretical point of view, according to Ray (2007), vigilantism involves an organised attempt by a group of ordinary citizens to maintain order and enforce norms on behalf of their communities, often using violence, and in the perceived absence of state action by the police or the judiciary. Ray (2007) acknowledges that vigilantism is an ideal-typical definition which, from a Weberian perspective, allows for considerable empirical variation. Five propositions emerge from their book, *Global Vigilantes* (Fourchard, 2018), which emphasise the particular historical and cultural roots of the various forms of this phenomenon in localised contexts (i) the practices of vigilante groups often appear legitimate in the eyes of the local communities in which they are deployed, and most often have a moral dimension; (ii) these practices can produce forms of inclusion and exclusion of citizens from very diverse registers; (iii) relations with state agents are made up of multiple forms of negotiation, compromise and conflict; (iv) vigilantism is a cheap form of law enforcement (v).

From Pratten and Sen's (2007) classification, the second and third propositions typically refer to self-defence groups in Burkina Faso, which have legitimacy in the eyes of the communities they defend, or are sometimes formed based on identity, and are therefore vulnerable to marginalisation or exclusion. Some communities, therefore, are more willing to be “patriots” allied with the state. This theoretical position is reflected in the testimony of one interviewee:

“The Koglweogo enjoy implicit recognition within certain communities, and they exercise an authority that sometimes goes beyond the formal framework. Their position gives them significant power to act, but also exposes them to abuses, particularly when they come to target, based on widespread suspicion, groups perceived as “other”, in particular the Peulh, whom they sometimes equate with terrorists.”⁴

³ Local security initiatives (LSIs) are endogenous instruments put in place by local people to deal with the various forms of insecurity, in collaboration with the security forces.

(https://www.diplomatie.be/oda/44335_PROGDESCR_BKF1803111_03_IdentReport_2018-05-24_000_20180524155653.pdf, consulted on 10 June 2025).

⁴ Interviewee, Ouagadougou, June 2023.

Another interviewee gives a concrete illustration of these dynamics:

“On the night of 31 December 2018 to 1 January 2019, an armed group arrived in a village in central Burkina Faso. They killed the village chief, a Moaga, and then left. The next day, the villagers mobilised and set fire to all the concessions belonging to the Peulhs. Dozens of Fulani were killed. This was in Yirgou. The attack was carried out by the Koglweogo, a Mossi self-defence group, because they believed that the Peulhs were responsible for the assassination of the chief and his son. Perhaps those who attacked were indeed Peulhs, but it was not the Peulh villagers who were responsible. Even if all the attackers were Peulhs, can we still punish an entire community? This collective logic of revenge has contributed to the radicalisation of some Peulh, who feel that they are being targeted not for their actions, but for their identity.”⁵

While all have suffered violence, the production and reinforcement of identity regimes is to the detriment of those populations who are assimilated to allies of the jihadists (Quidelleur, 2023: 43). Training or supporting self-defence groups addresses the limitations states face in counter-terrorist operations (Pellerin, 2022, p. 11). As a result, combating violent extremism by supporting these groups is a practical and potentially effective approach in the short term. To paraphrase Ntuda Ebodé et al. (2017), when considering local dynamics, it is essential to recognise that self-defence groups deployed in insecure areas significantly fill a gap in community security. The short-term effectiveness of these groups should be weighed alongside their potential medium- and long-term consequences (Pellerin, 2022, p. 11).

In Burkina Faso, the phenomenon of self-defence groups has gradually come to the fore in the public debate, against a backdrop of growing insecurity in recent years. However, this phenomenon, and local security initiatives more broadly, are not new to Burkina Faso. These initiatives are part of national and even regional historical trajectories of co-production of security between local and national actors (Tisseron, 2021). As Tisseron (2021) points out, the relationship between the state and local security initiatives has been far from linear and antagonistic. The main self-defence groups include the Koglweogo. Koglweogo emerged in the 1990s or 2000s, in a context of burgeoning informal and local security initiatives that took various forms (private security, self-defence associations, hunters' associations) (Tisseron, 2021). The name Koglweogo is evocative of what these groups see as their mission and role. The word Koglweogo comes from one of the most widely spoken

⁵ Interviewee, Ouagadougou, June 2023.

languages in Burkina Faso, Mossi, and means “protect the bush”. The word is made up of (kogl) “protect” or “watch over” and (weogo) “territory” (Soré et al., 2021). The Koglweogo define themselves as ‘Watchers’.

During the 2000s, rural insecurity increased in Burkina Faso, particularly in the East and Centre-North regions, where numerous gangs specialising in cattle rustling and road cutters operate. Insecurity has grown to the point where certain roads, particularly in the east, are no longer used, and people in certain regions have begun to demand the possibility of ensuring their security (ICG, 2023). Thus, in 2003, aware of the limitations of the state in ensuring security throughout the country, the authorities encouraged the adoption of the concept of community policing (Soré et al., 2021), which was operationally translated in 2010 into local security initiatives (ILS) designed to provide information to the police and gendarmerie forces. However, due to institutional delays, budgetary constraints and the popular uprising of 2014, the initiative was paralysed. It was in this context that the inhabitants of Bogandé (East region) demonstrated in March 2014 to demand the re-establishment of local security committees, a consultation body between the security services and the local population (ICG, 2023). In many parts of the country, village communities, such as the Koglweogo, were established to address the worsening insecurity resulting from the collapse and subsequent overthrow of Blaise Compaoré's regime in October 2014 (ICG, 2020). The Koglweogo has helped to make rural areas safer and has considerably reduced banditry; citizens do not deny its effectiveness, as acknowledged by the authorities and the defence and security forces (Soré et al., 2021, p. 128). The Koglweogo emerged in a context where the population felt left behind in the fight against insecurity and crime, prompting them to prioritise their security (Quidelleur & Dupuy, 2018). As a result, in 2017, when the Koglweogo noticed the expansion of violent extremist groups that had extended their actions from the Sahel region to those of the North and Centre-North, they became involved in the fight against this new threat that the army was unable to contain (Quidelleur & Dupuy, 2018).

In this dynamic, where security is becoming an emergency, “proximity” means that the state must negotiate its commitment, i.e., its form, nature, and extent, with local authorities. In this case, each player is expected to contribute to the system (Roché, 2004: 49). This approach has transformed the koglweogo into a legal partner of the defence and security forces, helping to fill a growing security vacuum. However, it should be noted that ‘the absence of the state (Rouban, 1994) does not mean that a vacuum exists in its place’. Local life can suffer from under-administration while remaining characterised by often latent and disguised greed, conflict and negotiation between different

authorities, clans and factions. This means that the study of local politics and powers cannot be reduced to “formal” institutions but must also take into account all the “public spaces” and “positions of authority” (Bierschenk & De Sardan, 1997).

The Koglweogo's effectiveness could be undermined by cultural considerations relating to its composition. Although security is a collective concern, the absence of certain socio-cultural groups, such as the Fulani, is perceived in some respects as marginalisation, which could undermine security measures. One interviewee expressed his dismay in these terms: “The Fulani community is excluded from self-defence groups; they are perceived as violent extremists, but not all Fulani are terrorists.”⁶ An analysis of documentary resources reveals that this suspicion of the Fulani is inherited from institutional and colonial memories in Burkina Faso (Quidelleur, 2023: 43). The colonial administration had always been suspicious of populations such as the Fulani, who were perceived as nomads with limited integration into the modern state and prone to insurrection. This is what Boilley (2019) has described as the “inherited marginalisation” of the Tuareg in Mali. To provide a better framework for the formation and modus operandi of self-defence groups, normative provisions were put in place, leading to an evolution of the Koglweogo towards new forms of formal defence groups known as Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP).

Involvement of VDPs in the Fight Against Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) were established by Act No. 002-2020/AN of January 6, which establishes a framework for volunteers to defend the homeland. VDPs are civilians recruited as ‘auxiliaries to the defence and security forces (FDS), trained, equipped and supervised by the Ministry of Defence’ (ICG, 2023) to voluntarily serve the security interests of their village or area of residence (LeFaso.Net, 2020). This initiative comes in response to the multiplicity of deadly attacks that have led to the death of many civilians, in particular the attack on 6 November 2019 (Zutterling, 2020) against a convoy transporting Burkinabe workers to a mining site operated by the Canadian company SEMAFO (Magnan, 2019). This attack prompted reflection on the mobilisation and arming of civilians to strengthen the fight against extremist attacks, as one interviewee told us: “The attack in Tapoa province not only motivated civilians but also led them to put pressure on the government to accept that they take up arms to fight alongside the FDS against violent extremist groups in order to protect their villages, since the army was not able to be

⁶ Interview in Burkina Faso, June 2023.

everywhere on the territory.”⁷ In the aftermath of this tragedy, the Burkina Faso government launched a mobilisation programme to recruit volunteers to defend areas under threat⁸. Volunteers must “be able to respond to the first attacks until the defence and security forces arrive.”⁹ For President Traoré, ‘the challenge of manpower is the most important’, as is the reconquest of the territory, which is a priority. For this reason, the use of VDPs is one of the measures to support the FDS in meeting the security challenge facing Burkina Faso. Still referred to as army auxiliaries, VDPs are under the authority of the Army Chief of Staff through the commanders of the three military regions. Although the VDPs contribute to the collective security effort, the central government organises, supervises and regulates this “continuum” in order to subordinate them to its services (Malochet, Ocqueteau, 2020). Membership in the VDP involves a 14-day training course that focuses on weapons handling and discipline, culminating in the issuance of an AK-47 automatic rifle to each volunteer.

Setting up the VDPs has enabled the authorities to supervise and use the self-defence groups that emerged in 2013, before the first extremist attacks. The state provides financial support of 200,000 CFA francs for each group of volunteers formed per village. Each volunteer is entitled to a permanent disability bonus and a lump-sum death benefit (LeFaso.Net, 2020). However, since the beginning of 2021, the VDPs have found themselves on the front line against violent extremist groups, while the defence and security forces have limited their sorties, despite a resumption of military operations from May 2021 (Pellerin, 2022). This situation has led to widespread dissatisfaction among groups of VDPs, who denounce the State's abandonment of them and openly threaten to lay down their arms permanently (Pellerin, 2022). These recriminations, which are exacerbated by criticism of the implementation of VDPs, are likely to undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of this security mechanism.

Although the VDP initiative was well received by most of the population, some politicians and international observers felt that the law establishing the VDP could exacerbate communal violence, facilitate atrocities and even further undermine the legitimate authority of the state (Zutterling, 2020). As one interviewee put it: “The initiative taken by the State is dangerous. The state should have gone for mass recruitment of soldiers and taken the time to train them before arming them to reconquer the

⁷ Interview with a respondent in Burkina Faso, June 2023.

⁸ Presidency of Faso, Message to the nation from the President of Faso following the deadly attack on a convoy of the mining company SEMAFO SA, Official publication, 8 November 2019, <https://www.presidenceufaso.bf/message-a-la-nation-du-president-du-faso-suite-a-lattaque-meurtriere-dun-convoy-de-la-societe-miniére-semafo-sa/>, consulted on 30 July 2024.

⁹ National Assembly of Burkina Faso, summary record of the plenary session of Tuesday 21 January 2020, Official publication, 21 January 2020.

territory. These civilians are new targets for violent extremist groups; they do not know war.”¹⁰ This statement echoes what ACLED researcher Nsaibia Henri said: ‘Militant groups, the Islamic State of the Great Sahara in particular, now seem to preventively target villages that sign up to the volunteer programme’ (Mednick, 2020). Another interviewee points out that: “VDPs are used as cannon fodder; unfortunately, the facts bear this out. They have very little training and are easy targets for violent extremist groups.”¹¹

In the same vein, local organisations such as the Collectif contre l'Impunité et la Stigmatisation des Communautés (CISC) (Collective against Impunity and the Stigmatisation of Communities) and human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch (HRW) are concerned about the consequences that Law No. 002-2020/AN of 21/01/2020 could have on social peace in Burkina Faso. These non-governmental organisations claim that arming civilians after just 14 days' training opens the door to more inter-community violence and the use of weapons to settle local conflicts. With the rise of violent extremism and the violation of human rights, civil society organisations (CSOs), in particular the Commission Nationale des Droits Humains (CNDH) and the NGO Center for Civilians in Conflict in the Sahel (CIVIC Sahel), have formed a consortium to advocate for greater protection of civilians and respect for human rights by revising Law No. 002-2020/AN establishing Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP) (CNDH, 2022).

This law, which was revised and adopted on 17 December 2022¹², aims to provide a better framework for volunteer missions and to guarantee respect for human rights, while taking into account the recommendations made by CSOs. The revised law has enabled the expansion of VDP¹³ activities at the national level, which were previously concentrated in communes and villages. VDPs can now be recruited at the village, commune, and national levels, based on a renewable one-year contract, which would allow VDPs who wish to do so to end their involvement after 14 months. It would appear that the mobilisation of citizens through VDPs to combat the phenomenon of violent extremism refers to the work of Houte (2013), who shows that the civic imaginary of order does not disappear and that this new security dynamic reveals new figures of “citizen-police officers” who re-emerge according to the times, particularly in times of security crisis.

¹⁰ Interview with a respondent in Burkina Faso, June 2023.

¹¹ Interviewee, Ouagadougou, July 2023.

¹² https://lefaso.net/spip.php?id_article=118221&page=web-tv-video, consulted on 8 August 2024.

¹³ Read the law no. 2022 of 07 December 2022 on the care and protection of victims on official business or their dependants, <https://sgg.gouv.bj/doc/loi-2022-28/>, consulted on 8 August 2024.

However, the principle that law and order is a matter for professional forces and the reserved domain of public power has taken root (Houte, 2013; 2015) and reflects the Weberian conception of the state as the holder of a monopoly on legitimate violence. In the case of VDPs in Burkina Faso, these volunteers play a whole part in what Pellerin (2022) calls the “co-production of security”. As a result, as Ocqueteau (2004) points out, this frame of reference reflects profound changes in the management of public order, which is similar to the case in Burkina Faso, where citizen mobilisation helps to combat the phenomenon of violent extremism. In the same vein, Roché (2004) speaks of “the demonopolisation of regalian functions”. Thus, the idea that security is a collective good (Goerl, 1998) that is the exclusive responsibility of government and justifies its monopoly appears historically dated and empirically outdated. As a result, the participatory mechanisms instituted reveal a certain continuity in the configuration of the State, since they do not fundamentally call into question the foundations of a security management model in which the State remains the leading player (Malochet, 2021).

Considering the reconfiguration of the state and referring to Fourchard (2018) on the subject of vigilantism, we realise that his observations apply a fortiori to the case of Burkina Faso: citizens' contributions to order are by no means reducible to a symptom of a weak state or a one-sided process of privatisation of the state. The involvement of civilians, particularly volunteers, as auxiliaries to the army, to fight alongside the forces of defence and law and order, is a credible option. However, the question that needs to be asked is whether there are any plans to disarm and reintegrate volunteers once their mission has been accomplished, if not once the extremist hydra has been defeated. This approach could prevent Burkina Faso from having to deal with armed civilians who could become predatory organisations, as was the case in Nigeria with the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF), which used its privileged status and relative impunity for criminal purposes, particularly drug trafficking and the sale of stolen goods (ICG, 2017).

Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR): Post-Extremism Stabilization Lever of VDP

Volunteers for the Defence of the Fatherland (VDP) in the fight against violent extremism are not simply isolated actors but evolve in a dynamic social environment. To use Bourdieu's (1987) terms, this social field is marked by power relationships, historical structures and differentiated positions. Through their commitment to the defence and security forces, which can be seen as a response to security constraints on the one hand, and their integration into the security field on the other, PWVs develop a distinct habitus. They can be perceived as resources that, if not correctly managed, could become 'prey' and likely generate new violence. To avoid this potential drift of VDPs, it is essential to transform their habitus and position within structures through appropriate institutional mechanisms. The case of Sierra Leone is illustrative in this respect. After the armed conflict of 1991-2002, which was marked by extreme violence perpetrated by armed factions, in particular the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) (Okolie-Osemene, 2021), disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants were seen as vital actions to strengthen the commitment to peace (Solomon, Ginifer, 2008). These actions were aimed at disrupting the social ties between ex-combatants to prevent their rearmament, making civilian and economic opportunities more attractive and restoring the State's exclusive monopoly of force and security.

In the case of Burkina Faso, it would therefore be crucial to adopt a Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programme tailored to the specific needs of VDPs that takes into account the symbolic and social capital they acquired during the fight against violent extremism. This programme should offer vocational training, psychosocial support and economic opportunities, while promoting inclusive national communication to enhance the image of the 'warrior' VDP towards that of 'peace builder'. To gain a better understanding of the complex social dynamics underlying the involvement of VDPs and to devise more effective reintegration strategies, it would be important to apply a sociological approach based on Bourdieu's structuralist constructivism (1987), according to which social practices result from the dialectical interaction between the objective structures of the field and the agents' embodied dispositions, known as habitus, which guide their perception and action in the social world.

The DDR process is a crucial element of the security context in Burkina Faso. It is viewed as an essential strategy for transitioning out of post-violent extremism, aimed at reducing violence and

fostering sustainable peace. This approach not only strengthens security and social cohesion but also ensures a sustainable transition to a peaceful environment following the resolution of violent extremism. The same applies to their social reintegration, which represents a major societal challenge for the years to come and a crucial issue for the State (Euvrard, 2021). In this context, it is the State's responsibility to ensure the absorption of VDPs when their involvement is no longer required, once the phenomenon of violent extremism has been brought under control. As Olinga (2011) points out, the stabilisation of a country requires “peace-finality”.

DDR programmes must be progressive and extend over several months to ensure that all those involved in the fight against violent extremism, including displaced persons, have been identified and will follow the rehabilitation process. A balance needs to be struck between supporting the specific needs of ex-combatants and the needs of the wider community to avoid resentment. As one interviewee put it:

“The DDR process cannot be dissociated from transitional justice. Certain VDPs implicated in exactions must be brought to justice before, if necessary, being rehabilitated. A specific mechanism must be set up to deal with the humanitarian liabilities associated with DDR.”¹⁴

DDR processes are crucial in the pursuit of lasting peace following a societal breakdown. They are also factors in local development. In short, the transformation of the habitus of VDPs and the reconfiguration of their assets in a pacified social field could be sine qua non conditions for guaranteeing lasting peace in Burkina Faso after the eradication of violent extremism.

Structural Actions in the Aftermath of Violent Extremism

Volunteers for Homeland Defence (VDP) play an important role in the fight against violent extremism. However, their involvement also presents complex challenges, such as human rights violations (ADF, 2024). To ensure long-term stability and prevent future cycles of violence, integrated structural actions are crucial for the absorption of VDP in a context of post-violent extremism. These actions, which are diverse and varied, include transitional justice mechanisms, decentralisation policies and socio-economic reintegration (Oumarou, 2022).

¹⁴ Interview, Burkina Faso 2023.

Transitional justice mechanisms are based on an approach of reconstruction and reconciliation (Hourquebie, 2015), particularly in countries that have experienced a societal fracture, such as Burkina Faso, which is faced with the phenomenon of violent extremism. They are established in response to national and international requirements linked to rebuilding the rule of law, promoting human rights, establishing fair justice and consolidating peace, while combating impunity. The implementation of these mechanisms requires a delicate balance between the need for justice and the need to preserve peace. It is essential to avoid judicial demands hampering the stabilisation process, while rejecting blanket amnesties that could compromise the search for truth and accountability (Olinga, 2011). Furthermore, transitional justice mechanisms must be set within an appropriate timeframe, ensuring that peace agreements are not reduced to mere circumstantial or disproportionate declarations. To ensure a comprehensive and coherent response to the challenges posed by the involvement of VDPs in the fight against violent extremism, transitional justice must be seen as complementary to other jurisdictional frameworks, whether local, national, regional or international (Hourquebie, 2015). The transitional justice process is established to reveal, understand, and document the history of past violations, thereby rebuilding national identity and social cohesion at the community level. As one interviewee put it: “For lasting stabilisation after violent extremism, all aspects of transitional justice must be taken into account. For example, the VDP is accused of numerous wrongdoings. As a result, for there to be cohesion at the community level, the communities need to be aware that justice has been done, so a reconciliation mechanism is needed.”¹⁵

Setting up a transitional justice mechanism is an essential lever that includes mechanisms for repentance and collective acknowledgement of wrongs. In addition to these mechanisms, public policy responses are becoming a necessity for the absorption of VDP. This involves creating economic opportunities, such as redistributing land, improving basic social services through access to water for agriculture, integrating new pastoral policies, and training in forest resource value chains (Koffi, 2022). In addition, strengthening literacy systems and implementing empowerment programmes through job creation, particularly in rural areas, are priorities. Sustainable stabilisation after violent extremism also depends on decentralisation policies. It is up to the State of Burkina Faso to provide municipalities with greater resources and prerogatives in order to encourage a local development dynamic. Alongside the State, local authorities must play an active role in implementing these policies.

¹⁵ Interview, Burkina Faso 2023.

Conclusion

Faced with security challenges in Burkina Faso, communities have organised themselves into self-defence groups called ‘Koglweogo’. The State has institutionalised this community initiative through the creation of Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). This article shows that this approach, centred on citizen participation, has proved pragmatic in the fight against violent extremism. These VDPs, auxiliaries to the army, have been tasked with fighting alongside the Defence and Security Forces, not only to help restore stability but also to protect their territory. This mobilisation of committed citizens with deep roots in their communities has led to collective and endogenous ownership of the fight against violent extremism.

However, despite its relevance, this approach raises several significant concerns. In addition to the inadequacy of the institutional framework in which VDPs operate, which exposes them to greater risks and abuses, this initiative raises challenges related to character checks on recruits and their training, as well as the risks of social fragmentation and human rights violations. Their status as auxiliaries engaged in national security functions requires appropriate training, focusing on ethics, human rights, international humanitarian law and the fundamental principles of the rule of law. It is therefore essential to institutionalise a permanent system of enhanced training, in conjunction with structures for the defence and protection of human rights.

At the same time, an independent control, monitoring, and accountability mechanism must be established, involving civil society organisations, judicial authorities, and community representatives. Such a mechanism would enable the prevention of abuses of power and harm to civilians. The introduction of a clear and binding code of ethics for all VDPs, with open complaint channels to the public, is also necessary to provide a legal framework for VDP actions and ensure their legitimacy.

The long-term commitment of VDPs in a post-violent extremism phase may require a strategic redefinition of their role. Rather than being directly involved in military operations, they could be refocused on community watch, surveillance and reporting to the regular forces. This would limit the militarisation of communities while consolidating cooperation between local populations and defence and security forces.

In addition, a structured disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme would remain essential in the post-violent extremism period. This DDR strategy should be accompanied by

vocational retraining programmes (agriculture, crafts, private security, administration), socio-economic integration initiatives and vocational training. In addition, to facilitate the reintegration of VDPs, official recognition of service rendered, through decorations, ceremonies or social benefits, would facilitate their return to civilian life. The same applies to the creation of frameworks for community dialogue, which would promote reconciliation and the inclusion of VDPs in communities.

Ultimately, strengthening local governance of security remains a crucial prerequisite for the success of this strategy. Local authorities need to be equipped with the necessary resources and prerogatives to collaborate with local communities and drive inclusive security and integrated development.

In conclusion, while the VDP initiative responds to a contextual need, its long-term viability will depend on its ability to form part of a comprehensive approach that combines institutional reform, community security, compliance with legal standards, and socio-economic reintegration. Without a rigorous framework, this strategy could paradoxically become a factor of lasting instability.

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