BURKINA FASO: STATE AND RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN TURBULENT TIMES

Sebastian Elischer

AN OPEN RELIGIOUS PLAYING FIELD

For most of its modern history, Burkina Faso avoided intervening in the religious sphere.[1] According to its constitution, Burkina Faso is a secular state that protects religious freedom, and individuals can choose and change their religion freely. While its Christian minority dominated the state system and government, nonintervention by a largely Christian administration helped preserve a delicate sociopolitical balance and avoid Muslim-Christian antagonism. As a result, the state has largely avoided imposing institutional restrictions, such as registration requirements for places of worship, state licensing of preachers, or imposing state control of religious schools or curricula.[2] This gave religious institutions and movements widespread freedoms to operate.

1. The author thanks Dr. Alexander Stroh from the University of Bayreuth, Germany, Dr. Dan Eizenga from the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada, Dr. Frederick Madore, Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at the Center for African Studies at the University of Florida, and several analysts in Burkina Faso for their input. Given the sensitivity of the topic in Burkina Faso's current political climate, the local analysts remain anonymous. The author is solely responsibility for the content of this chapter.

2. Each year the government provides equal funding to Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and animistic communities. U.S. Department of State, *Burkina Faso 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*, 2018, https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/.

Part of the state's relaxed attitude toward religious regulation stemmed from the fact that until fairly recently, secular actors were the most potent threat to governmental authority. In the cities, civil society organizations and trade unions often defied state authority and overthrew governments. In rural areas, chiefs and local authorities positioned themselves as alternative power centers to the central government. The prevalence of secular opposition meant that the state paid less attention to challengers from the religious sphere.

However, over time, religious actors grew bolder in challenging state policies. This led to more concerted state efforts to regulate religious affairs and actors, though ultimately religious actors—both Christian and Muslim—undermined these attempts. According to survey data from Afrobarometer, 85.5 percent of overall respondents identified religion as very important in their life.[3] The importance of religion was significantly higher among Muslim respondents (87.3 percent) compared to Christian respondents (67.9 percent) in the same survey.

Moreover, religious organizations play an active social and political role. In the Christian sphere, the Catholic Church is intertwined with Burkina Faso's political elite, many of whom studied in the country's Catholic school network. This gives the church a privileged position. The Catholic Church withstood the state's brief attempts to weaken it and assert oversight of its school system because, as a longtime advocate of political reform, the church had credibility and legitimacy.

Muslim communities' relationship with the state has evolved very differently. Early on, the state sought to integrate Muslims and Muslim leaders into the state-run clientelistic business sector network. By making Muslim businessmen dependent on the government, the state hoped to ensure their deference, especially during politically sensitive periods. This dependence explains why Muslim political lobby groups and Islamic social movements have not posed

3. Afrobarometer Data, Burkina Faso, Round 5, 2011–2013, http://www.afrobarometer.org.

a threat to state authority for most of the country's modern history. The support of Muslim leadership, in turn, made any state intervention in Islamic affairs largely unnecessary. Since 2005, however, Muslims have become more politically vocal and organized. A new generation of young Muslim leaders has begun to question the political status quo, their historical marginalization, and the privileged position of the Catholic Church in Burkinabe politics. These shifts are creating new challenges for the Burkinabe state and the role of religion in society and politics.

Past studies discussing the potential for religious radicalization in the Sahel regarded Burkina Faso as an exceptionally peaceful country in an otherwise volatile neighborhood. Analysts stressed the country's long history of peaceful religious coexistence and argued that the potential for radicalization was marginal.[4] Recent events defy these expectations. Since January 2016, Burkina Faso has seen an escalation of jihadi-salafi violence. Jihadi groups with origins elsewhere in the region, such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al Mourabitoun, carried out the initial wave of attacks. Yet, by December 2016, a domestic jihadi-salafi group, Ansarul Islam, emerged in the north of the country. Ansarul Islam has caused unprecedented destruction in Burkina Faso's Sahel region,[5] leading to the displacement of thousands of people.[6] In 2018, several groups—Ansarul Islam, the Islamic State in the Greater

4. Augustin Loada and Peter Romaniuk, *Preventing Violent Extremism in Burkina Faso* (Goshen, IN: Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2014), http://um.dk/en/~/media/UM/English-site/Documents/Front-page/Preventing%20Violent%20Extremism%20English.pdf.

5. The Sahel region is an administrative province in the far north of Burkina Faso.

6. Philip Kleinfeld, "Burkina Faso, Part 1: Spreading Violence Triggers an 'Unprecedented' Crisis," *New Humanitarian*, April 17, 2019, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2019/04/17/spreading-violence-triggers-unprecedented-crisis-burkina-faso; Daniel Eizenga, "The Deteriorating Security Situation in Burkina Faso," *Bulletin FrancoPaix* 4, no. 3 (March 2019), https://dandurand.uqam.ca/publication/the-deteriorating-security-situation-in-burkina-faso/; "Burkina Faso: Atrocities by Armed Islamists, Security Forces," Human Rights Watch, March 22, 2019, https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/03/22/burkina-faso-atrocities-armed-islamists-security-forces.

Sahel (IS-GS), and the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM)—expanded their efforts and operations in the resource-rich eastern region.[7]

Burkina Faso is now echoing the experiences of other Sahel countries, where jihadi-salafi groups have become a permanent security challenge to the state and its citizens. The increase in terrorist activity has led to growing tensions between Christians and Muslims, as well as between Muslim communities and the state. This growing tension, combined with the state's historic absence from regulating the religious sphere, has undermined the states' ability to counter Burkina Faso's evolving jihadi-salafi threat.

Recent initiatives to establish state oversight mechanisms in religious affairs either lack the funding and organizational structure to be effective or were withdrawn due to Muslim protest. The failure of the state to impose state oversight mechanisms on religious practices means that the Islamic sphere remains vulnerable to the spread of jihadi-salafi ideology and recruitment, threatening not only affected Muslim communities but broader interreligious relations and the country's delicate sociopolitical balance.

BACKGROUND: RELIGION, POLITICS, AND THE STATE

France established the colony of Upper Volta on March 1, 1919, in the area that is today Burkina Faso. France imposed several reorganizations of the territory before Upper Volta achieved independence

7. The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara formed as a splinter from al Mourabitoun, an al Qaeda–affiliated militant organization. For details, see https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/islamic-state-greater-sahara#highlight_text_8340. The Group for Support of Islam and Muslims was formed by a merger between three existing jihadist organizations: Ansar al-Din; al Mourabitoun; and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's. JNIM also absorbed the Macina Liberation Front, an affiliate of Ansar al-Din in central Mali. For details, see https://www.csis.org/programs/transnational-threats-project/terrorism-backgrounders/jamaat-nasr-al-islam-wal-muslimin. For details on the increase of activities in the Est region, see "The Complex and Growing Threat of Militant Islamist Groups in the Sahel," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 15, 2019, https://africacenter.org/spotlight/the-complex-and-growing-threat-of-militant-islamist-groups-in-the-sahel/.

on August 5, 1960. On August 4, 1984, the country changed its name to Burkina Faso.

The religious makeup of Burkina Faso has changed dramatically since its independence. Most notably, both Christianity and Islam have grown substantially, primarily at the expense of the country's traditional religions.[8] The first religious census, undertaken in 1960, classified 27.5 percent of the population as Muslim, 3.8 percent as Christian, and 68.7 percent as practicing traditional African religions.[9] Today, the Burkinabe population is divided between Muslims (62 percent), Christians (22.5 percent), and Traditionalists (16 percent).[10] These numbers should be taken as rough proxies for the actual strength of each religious community.[11] Muslims dominate the northern, eastern, and western borders of Burkina Faso, whereas the majority of Christians reside in the center of the country. Still, each region is religiously mixed. Intermarriage between members of different religions is common. Further, there is mobility between different religions, as individuals switch back and forth, given the important role religious communities play in the provision of social services.[12]

Although in general there is no significant correlation between ethnic and religious identity, the Fulani are mostly Muslim. The Fulani are a minority in most regions but are the majority in the economically marginalized Sahel province. Numerous jihadi-salafi groups operating in the Sahel have pursued a strategy of developing ties to local ethnic groups. This was the case among the Tuareg in Mali and now appears to be happening among the Fulani as well.[13]

---

8. International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso: Preserving the Religious Balance* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2016), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-preserving-religious-balance.

9. Abdourahmane Idrissa, *Genealogies of a Non-Political Islam in the Sahel: The Burkina Case*, SSP Working Paper, no. 23 (2017): 4.

10. According to 2006 census. See also ibid., 5.

11. It is impossible to verify these numbers. Analysts and policymakers sometimes refer to different numbers, but these do not differ significantly from the 2006 census.

12. Various interview partners confirmed this to the author.

13. Katherine Zimmerman and Alix Halloran, "Warning from the Sahel: Al Qaeda's Resurgent Threat," Critical Threats Project, September 1, 2016, https://www

Overall, Burkina Faso displays considerable diversity among and within different religions.

Burkina Faso is considered one of the least developed countries in the world, according to the Human Development Index.[14] Its gross per capita income is $615, placing Burkina Faso well below the average for sub-Saharan Africa ($1,637). Literacy rates remain extremely low, with an average literacy rate of 28.7 percent of the population aged 15 and above. There are large disparities between urban and rural areas, which constrain access to education. Living conditions in rural areas are far worse than in the cities.[15] The economic situation of the Fulani is particularly dire. Fulani face discrimination at the state level, and many in the north lack access to state services.[16] While there is no link between the socioeconomic condition and the distribution of religious groups in Burkina Faso, some consider the socioeconomic and political position of the Fulani to be a key driver of the spread of jihadi terrorism.[17]

For Christians, Catholicism and Pentecostalism are the two numerically dominant churches in the country. Catholicism arrived in 1899 with French colonists, and the first Catholic school opened in 1906.[18] During the papacy of Pius XII, the Catholic Church opened its first vicariate in Ouagadougou. Today, there are 15 dio-

---

.criticalthreats.org/analysis/warning-from-the-sahel-al-qaedas-resurgent-threat; Emily Estelle, "How Ansar al Islam Gains Popular Support in Burkina Faso," Critical Threats Project, May 9, 2019, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/how-ansar-al-islam-gains-popular-support-in-burkina-faso.

14. In 2017 the Human Development Index ranked Burkina Faso 183th of 189 countries. It achieved similar rankings in the last twenty years (http://hdr.undp.org/en/composite/HDI).

15. Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2018 Country Report: Burkina Faso* (Gütersloh, Germany: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018), https://www.bti-project.org/fileadmin/files/BTI/Downloads/Reports/2018/pdf/BTI_2018_Burkina_Faso.pdf.

16. Estelle, "How Ansar al Islam Gains Support."

17. International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots of Jihadist Violence in Burkina Faso's North* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2017), https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/254-social-roots-jihadist-violence-burkina-fasos-north.

18. Fabienne Samson, "Islamic Studies—Muslim-Christian Relations in Burkina Faso," *Journal of the Oxford University History Society* (2013), www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t343/e0069.

ceses across the country. According to official sources within the church, there are around 3.7 million Catholics in Burkina Faso. The archbishop of Ouagadougou serves as the head of the church.

Among the various Pentecostal communities, the Assemblies of God is the most significant group. It entered Upper Volta in 1920[19] but was initially barred from establishing a presence in areas in which the Catholic Church was already present. The French colonial administrators saw the Protestant congregations as competitors and harmful to the administration's development efforts. According to local estimates, the Pentecostal communities today account for approximately 5 percent of the population.[20]

During the colonial period, the French enabled the Catholic Church to establish itself as the main provider of educational institutions. Members of the church enjoyed special privileges, including exemption from the *code de l'indigénat,* an inferior legal status for local populations. The years preceding and following independence in 1960 saw the rise of a small administrative elite who had been educated in Catholic schools. The first president, Maurice Yaméogo, is an important example. He was a graduate of the Catholic education system. Given the close proximity between the political and administrative elites and the Catholic Church, many, including Catholics themselves, view them as politically privileged and as the administrative elite of the country.[21]

Islam has had a well-established presence since the fifteenth century, when Christianity arrived in the area.[22] As in other West African nations, Sufism emerged as the dominant strand of Islam. The Tijaniyyah brotherhood—which has strong ties in Morocco, where its patron, Sidi Ahmed al-Tijani, is buried—is particularly prominent.

19. The founders are often referred to as "the Americans."
20. Cédric Mayrargue, *The Paradoxes of Pentecostalism in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Brussels: IFRI, 2008).
21. Analyse Sociétale Africaine, "L'église catholique au Burkina Faso," African Security Network (2017); Ismaila Kane, "'Les catholiques sont l'élite!': Représentations de l'espace par une minorité religieuse au Burkina Faso," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 50, no. 1 (2016): 65–86; Rahmane Idrissa, *The Politics of Islam in the Sahel: Between Persuasion and Violence* (London: Routledge, 2017).
22. Samson, "Islamic Studies."

Salafism also has a long history in the country and constitutes the second major doctrinal group within Islam. In 1958, the Union Culturelle Musulmane (UCM) opened a chapter in Ouagadougou. The UCM was led by foreign clerics and divided along those doctrinal lines. In 1962, Muslims formed the Communauté Musulmane de Haute-Volta (CMHV), which in 1984 became the Communauté Musulmane du Burkina Faso (CMBF). The CMHV formed with the explicit intention to build bridges between the Sufi brotherhoods, the salafi doctrine, and other Islamic schools of thought.

Throughout history, external forces, in particular Arab forces, exerted significant influence on Muslim dynamics within the country. Early on, salafi clerics established close and lasting ties with clerics in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere on the Arabian Peninsula.[23] Despite many well-intentioned attempts to bridge the doctrinal differences, and even though many Burkinabe Muslims frequently refuse to identify with a doctrine and regard themselves simply as Burkinabe or African Muslims,[24] the divisions between Sufis and salafis ultimately split the CMHV. In 1973, the Mouvement Sunnite, the salafi-led wing of the CMHV, broke away and formed its own association.[25]

A remarkable feature of Burkina's Islamic landscape is the high degree to which Muslims organize in different associations, representing various professional groups. In 2005, various Muslim leaders attempted to unite all Islamic groups under the roof of one organization and formed the Fédération des Associations Islamiques du Burkina (FAIB).[26]

---

23. Idrissa, *The Politics of Islam*. Early on, Sufis and salafis in Burkina worked toward a theological synthesis, which was not the case elsewhere.

24. Mara Vitale, "Trajectoires d'évolution de l'islam au Burkina Faso," *Cahier d'études Africaines* 206, no. 207 (2012): 1–19.

25. Muriel Gomez-Perez, "'Political' Islam in Senegal and Burkina Faso: Contrasting Approaches to Mobilization since the 1990s," *Mediterranean Politics* 22, no. 1 (2017): 176.

26. Oumarou Kanazoé, a wealthy salafi businessman with close links to President Compaoré, was the driving force behind its formation and its main financier. Since his death in 2011, the leadership rotates between the various factions and groups that make up the FAIB. See International Crisis Group, *Burkina Faso: Preserving the Religious Balance*.

Despite the phenomenal growth of Islam since the 1950s, Muslims remain underrepresented in the civil service and the political elites. Only one out of eight presidents was Muslim, while the other seven were Catholics. By contrast, Muslims are well represented in Burkina Faso's business sector.

For the better part of Burkina Faso's volatile political history, religious groups were bystanders in conflicts between secular forces. Since the early 1960s, various central governments have tried to impose authoritarian rule and state authority on its citizens. In the cities, the trade unions defied these attempts and fought for socioeconomic improvements for ordinary people.[27] In recent years, human rights groups joined the unions in their endeavor to create a political system that is responsive to citizen demands.[28] In the countryside, traditional authorities tried to undermine state authority.

Under President Yaméogo, the first president of Upper Volta, the political climate was shaped by purges within the government, the civil service, and the ruling party, as well as crackdowns on the opposition. In a move designed to consolidate the power of the central state at the expense of the countryside, Yaméogo stopped the disbursement of state funds to traditional leaders in rural areas. This move undermined the influential position of the traditional leaders, as they became unable to finance economic development projects in their respective areas.[29] Many of Yaméogo's victims joined trade unions, which became the home of the urban opposition.

Strikes and street protests led to growing polarization and political instability. On January 3, 1966, a general strike paralyzed the capital. The same day, Muslim lieutenant Sangoulé Lamizana declared himself to be in control of the country.[30] He refrained from

27. Pierre Englebert, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood in West Africa* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Ernest Harsch, *Burkina Faso: A History of Power, Protest, and Revolution* (London: Zed Books, 2017).

28. Craig Phelan, "Plus Ca Change: Trade Unions, the Military and Politics in Burkina Faso, 1966–2014," *Labor History* 57, no. 1 (2016): 107–125.

29. Claudette Savonnet-Guyot, *Etat et sociétés au Burkina: Essai sur le politique Africain* (Paris: Karthala, 1986).

30. Lamizana, the first and only Muslim president, remained in power between 1966 and 1980.

trying to impose state authority on the countryside and left nonstate actors to operate on their own. His attempts to restore civilian rule ultimately failed due to the high degree of political polarization among the political parties as well as between various civil society groups and the state.[31] A series of military coups in the 1980s ensued,[32] until Captain Thomas Sankara claimed power in August 1984. He initiated far-reaching changes to the relationship between the state and society.[33] Sankara's main goal was to expand territorial control and integrate the countryside into political decisionmaking at the center.

Through local committees for the defense of the revolution (CDRs),[34] the National Council for the Revolution (CNR) was able to penetrate large sections of the territory and thus expand state authority in areas that previously had been ruled by traditional leaders and other local elites. On October 15, 1987, Captain Blaise Compaoré, a leading figure within the CNR, overthrew Sankara.[35] Under his tenure from 1987 to 2014, the state continued to expand its presence across the territory, building on earlier attempts to establish state authority outside of the capital.[36] Although his regime survived multiparty elections and a number of other far-reaching institutional changes, waves of citizen and opposition protests challenged the regime.[37] Urban protests became particularly prominent after Norbert Zongo, the editor of an independent newspaper, was killed

31. Englebert, *Burkina Faso: Unsteady Statehood*, 46–55.

32. On November 25, 1980, Colonel Saye Zerbo overthrew his administration. Unable to consolidate his rule, Zerbo was overthrown on November 8, 1982, by Major Dr. Jean-Baptiste Ouedraogo.

33. The day of the coup, the new government renamed the country Burkina Faso or "land of integrity." The name change indicated the intention of Sankara's Conseil National de la Révolution (National Council of the Revolution) to eradicate corruption and to reform the political economy.

34. In French, *comités de defense de la revolution.*

35. Harsch, *Burkina Faso: A History.*

36. The trend is also visible in indicators measuring state capacity, such as the state fragility index. In 2006, Burkina Faso was ranked 30th, in 2019 it was ranked 47th. For details, see https://fragilestatesindex.org/.

37. Carlos Santiso and Augustin Loada, "Explaining the Unexpected: Electoral Reform and Democratic Governance in Burkina Faso," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 3 (2003): 395–419.

in December 1998.[38] In 2003, 2007, and 2011, there were several military mutinies that called for an end to corruption in the defense sector. These calls echoed the demands of secular civil society.[39] In 2014, Compaoré tried to circumvent the presidential term limit, which provoked a popular insurrection resulting in his downfall and free and fair elections in 2015.[40]

Compaoré's downfall had a dramatic impact on the state's ability to engage with jihadi insurgents. Jihadi-salafi groups had been active in a number of nearby Sahel countries for some time already, most notably in Mali. During the first half of 2012, jihadi insurgents had occupied the northern half of Mali's territory. The failure of the Malian armed forces to halt the jihadists' advances toward the Malian capital provoked a military intervention by France and the subsequent deployment of UN troops. Before, during, and after this Malian crisis, Compaoré and his confidants reached a tacit understanding with the jihadists. With this agreement, the jihadists would refrain from attacking Burkinabe territory and the Compaoré government would include the jihadists in negotiations with Mali and other West African states. But Compaoré's downfall and the dismissal of key administrators who engaged with jihadi-salafi leaders have narrowed Burkina Faso's options in dealing with the rise of jihadi-salafi violence and activity. There are no longer any established communication channels between the state and the jihadists, who now are operating in Burkina Faso. The removal of Compaoré's political network combined with the lack of steering capacity in the Islamic sphere together undermine the state's ability to weaken the Islamic insurgency. Counterterrorism operations and the deployment of the security services have not stabilized the jihadist-affected regions. Instead, arbitrary arrests by the Burkinabe

38. Harsch, *Burkina Faso: A History*.

39. Bettina Engels, "Political Transition in Burkina Faso: The Fall of Blaise Compaore," *Governance in Africa* 2, no. 1 (2015): 1–6; Maggie Dwyer, "Situating Soldiers' Demands: Mutinies and Protests in Burkina Faso," *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (2017): 219–234.

40. Daniel Eizenga, "Burkina Faso," in *Africa Yearbook: Politics, Economy and Society South of the Sahara in 2014*, ed. Sebastian Elischer, Rolf Hofmeier, Andreas Mehler, and Henning Melber (Boston: Brill, 2015), 48–55.

armed forces and violence by pro-state militias have alienated the rural areas from the capital and fomented jihadist recruitment among marginalized Muslim communities.[41]

DIVERGENT STRATEGIES FOR STATE MANAGEMENT OF RELIGION

The Burkinabe state maintains distinct and ever-changing relationships with its Christian and Muslim communities. Each relationship is informed by the community's history and its role in the state structure. The Catholic Church is the second most institutionalized entity after the state, which enabled it to become one of the most influential social actors despite the fact that it is a minority religion.[42] Catholic schools historically have served as Burkina Faso's training and recruitment ground for the national administrative elite.[43] Its privileged position and close ties with the state bureaucracy enabled the Church to take a visible stance against corruption and nepotism without having to fear any repercussions from the state.

During the general strike in January 1966, the church sided with the trade unions, helping remove the administration.[44] During the Lamizana period, the church advocated a return to constitutional rule. Lamizana's relationship with the church disintegrated for two reasons. First, his administration nationalized the Catholic primary schools. This policy dealt a huge blow to the church, as the primary schools served as the main vehicles for spreading the Christian faith. The church reacted by establishing the so-called Communautés chretiennes de base (Christian Lay Communities or

41. "Burkina Faso: Killings, Abuse in Sahel Conflict," Human Rights Watch, May 21, 2018, https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/21/burkina-faso-killings-abuse-sahel-conflict.

42. Ismaila Kane, "État et minorités religieuses: Les représentations des catholique au Burkina Faso et au Sénégal" (PhD diss., University of Ottawa, 2015).

43. Kane, "Les catholiques sont l'élite," 65–86.

44. René Otayek, "L'église catholique au Burkina Faso: Un contre-pouvoir à contre-temps de l'histoire," *Religion et Transition Démocratique En Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 221–258.

CCB). The CCB are local Catholic organizations that became the main drivers of missionary work across the country. The fact that the church withstood the state's attack on its infrastructure and managed to create alternative local structures to spread its faith demonstrated its strength and ability to maneuver around state policies when necessary.[45] This was the first time in Burkina's history that a government openly tried to undermine the influence of a religious group. Second, Lamizana established new and close relations with the Muslim world. Lamizana's turn to the Arab world in general—and Saudi Arabia in particular—mirrors the foreign policies of many francophone Muslim-majority countries in West Africa. African governments viewed the Arab world as an additional source for development assistance and a resource for Islamic education.[46]

By the mid-1970s, the church had become completely disillusioned with the Lamizana regime and, as a result, sermons became increasingly critical of the regime.[47] The Sankara government took a different approach. Despite his antireligious Marxist rhetoric, Sankara treated the Catholic Church more gently and respectfully than other social or religious groups. Several members of local CDRs served as members of the CCBs,[48] which was a powerful reminder of the close links between Catholicism and state power. Although the force and violence of the Sankara revolution turned the church silent vis-à-vis the government, the Sankara administration did not infringe on religious liberty or turn against the church. Instead, it maintained close contact with the church hierarchy. During the almost three decades of Compaoré, the church

45. Magloire Somé and Cecily Bennett, "Christian Base Communities in Burkina Faso: Between Church and Politics," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31, no. 3 (2001): 275–304. From the mid-1990s onward, the Burkinabe state returned the elementary schools to the Catholic Church in stages.

46. Roman Loimeier, *Islamic Reform and Political Change in Northern Nigeria* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997); Anthony Sylvester, *Arabs and Africans: Co-operation for Development* (London: Bodly Head, 1981).

47. Otayek, "L'église catholique," 221–258.

48. Kane, *État et minorités*.

reemerged as a careful yet persistent champion of human rights and political liberalization.[49]

Following the assassination of independent journalist Norbert Zongo, the Catholic Church participated in the commission investigating his murder.[50] Toward the end of the Compaoré regime, the church took a more outspoken stance against the government. In 2013, it refused to take its assigned seats in the senate—a new, second chamber that was approved by parliament but never created.[51] After Compaoré had declared his intention to amend Article 37 of the constitution, the presidential term limit, the church stated that the amendment would lead to divisions and political polarization. Its close-knit network of followers, long-established autonomy from the state, and often implicit but visible criticism of human rights abuses provided the Catholic Church with a high degree of legitimacy among those who led the insurrection against Compaoré in late October 2014.[52]

Until recently, and in stark contrast to the Catholic Church, the various Islamic communities remained relatively mute toward state authority. This silence is less surprising with regard to the Sufi communities, which historically have been accommodating of state power.[53] Yet, even the salafi community, organized in the Mouvement Sunnite, remained passive until recently. In contrast to Christians, Muslims lacked access to civil service positions and remained detached from the central government bureaucratic ma-

49. For example, in 1991 it joined other civil society organizations in their call for a national conference and expressed its disappointment after Compaoré's refusal to organize one.

50. Harsch, *Burkina Faso: A History*.

51. Pierre-François Naudé, "Burkina Faso: L'église boycottera le futur sénat," *Jeune Afrique*, September 17, 2013, https://www.jeuneafrique.com/168468/politique/burkina-faso-l-glise-boycottera-le-futur-s-nat/. The Compaoré government tried to create the senate, but people protested against it. The bill was withdrawn but not formally abandoned. The new government has not issued any statement about how it wants to move ahead. No one knows if the new government will create the new chamber or not. Chances are they will not pursue the upper chamber any further, but the project has not been formally abandoned.

52. See Eizenga, "Burkina Faso," 48–55.

53. Zidane Meriboute, *Islam's Fateful Path* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

chinery. However, the Muslim community found a niche for itself in the nascent private sector, like in many other African countries during that time.

The Lamizana administration fostered the Africanization of the country's business sector through preferred credits for domestic entrepreneurs. Although he did not explicitly target the Muslim community, it inadvertently spurred the rise of Muslim businesses in four sectors: transport, mining, tourism, and construction. At the same time, it made the Muslim entrepreneurial community part of the state-run clientelistic network and thus contingent on the goodwill of the incumbent. Having achieved the required financing from the banks, success in the four sectors became dependent on receiving licenses from the state, which enabled new enterprises to broaden their commercial activities. Receiving the necessary licenses required proximity to and support of those in power.[54]

Whereas their dominance in the educational sphere and their high degree of institutionalization enabled Catholics to help "make" and run the state, Muslims remained vulnerable to changes within the state-run clientelistic networks. Tacit cooperation with any administration thus became a necessity. By allowing the Mouvement Sunnite to break away from the CMHV and form its own association, Lamizana's regime further bolstered its support among the Muslim communities.[55] Like his decision to Africanize the economy, this move was not a deliberate strategy toward the Muslim community but part of his broader approach to allow societal groups to operate unhindered.

During and after the Sankara coup, soldiers damaged several mosques in the capital. Like Sankara, they viewed traditional and religious authority as obstacles to political and economic progress. The socialist, secular-modernist, and prodevelopment rhetoric of the Sankara government undermined Islam's standing in the country. Leading Islamic clerics remained docile in all matters sensitive to the

54. Harsch, *Burkina Faso: A History*.

55. Ousman Kobo, "The Development of Wahhabi Reforms in Ghana and Burkina Faso, 1960–1990: Elective Affinities between Western-Educated Muslims and Islamic Scholars," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51, no. 3 (2009): 502–532.

state because their well-being depended more on state support than the well-being of the Catholic Church.[56] This pattern remained in place during the 1990s. The Mouvement Sunnite did not condemn the murder of Zongo, for example, and—in line with the state-loyal groups of the CMBF—remained mute on most political matters.[57]

After the political liberalization of the early 1990s, students and civil servants became active in new Islamic associations that mobilized Muslims to participate in elections, though they did not endorse specific candidates. Beyond this, however, there was little or no explicit engagement with the Compaoré regime. Muslim clerics frequently called for peace and order but did not directly criticize the government.[58]

THE MALIAN CRISIS AND THE DOMESTICATION OF JIHADI-SALAFISM

Since January 2016, Burkina Faso has experienced an increasing number of jihadi-salafi attacks in the capital, the north, and more recently, the eastern region. The emergence and subsequent escalation of jihadi-salafi violence is partially linked to the ongoing conflict in Mali. However, it increasingly has taken on a domestic element. The Malian crisis started in early 2012, when a combination of secular Tuareg secessionists and jihadi-salafi groups conquered Mali's northern territory. The joint conquest soon resulted in the jihadi forces ousting the Tuareg secessionists from their positions and establishing jihadi rule across northern Mali.[59]

56. Idrissa, *The Politics of Islam*.
57. Gomez-Perez, "'Political' Islam."
58. A highly influential person in this regard was Oumarou Kanaozé, the former head of the Mouvement Sunnite, who helped found and subsequently headed the FAIB. Kanaozé was part of Compaoré's clientelistic business network, president of the Burkinabe Chamber of Commerce, and close supporter of the former president. See Frédérick Madore, "Rivalités et collaborations entre aînés et cadets sociaux dans les milieux associatifs islamiques en Côte d'Ivoire et au Burkina Faso (1970–2017)" (PhD diss., Université Laval, 2018), https://corpus.ulaval.ca/jspui/handle/20.500.11794/33246.
59. Derek Flood, "Between Islamization and Secession: The Contest for Northern Mali," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 7 (2012), https://ctc.usma.edu/between-islamization-and-secession-the-contest-for-northern-mali/.

The French military intervened in Mali in January 2013. The subsequent United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) initially established a modicum of stability. Yet, the security situation across Mali continued to deteriorate as violent groups proliferated and increased their attacks while widening their respective zones of influence across Mali. Groups that have long operated in Mali, including AQIM and al Mourabitoun,[60] were behind the high-profile attacks in Ouagadougou in January 2016 and March 2018.[61] In 2017, these and other regional jihadi forces merged into the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims.[62] In December 2016, the first homegrown jihadi-salafi organization, Ansarul Islam,[63] emerged in Soum, Burkina Faso's northernmost province.

Soum Province is one of the poorest regions in the country. Since independence, the lack of viable infrastructure has isolated the region from the rest of the country. Extremely harsh environmental conditions have worsened in recent years due to droughts, flash floods, wind, and wildfires. These crises have caused a decline in the already fragile living conditions for the region's population, which includes the largest concentration of ethnic Fulanis. The Fulanis now appear to be the primary recruitment base for various jihadi-salafi groups operating in the region, including JNIM and Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (IS-GS).[64]

Ansarul Islam's founder, Boureima Dicko, had joined Ansar Dine, a Malian jihadi organization that was a major player in the

60. Al Mourabitoun is a merger between the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa and Al-Mulathameen. Both groups have their origins in Mali, Mauritania, and other nations in North and West Africa.

61. Andrew Lebovich, "Mapping Armed Groups in Mali and the Sahel," European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019, https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/sahel_mapping.

62. Conor Gaffey, "African Jihadi Groups Unite and Pledge Allegiance to Al-Qaeda," *Newsweek*, March 3, 2017, https://www.newsweek.com/al-qaeda-groups-unite-sahel-563351.

63. In February 2018 the State Department classified Ansarul Islam as a terrorist organization.

64. Ansarul Islam's former leader, Boureima Dicko, at one point declared his intention to establish a Fulani caliphate. At the same time, the recruitment of the group is not confined to the Fulani community.

jihadi uprising in northern Mali, in 2012. The son of a Sufi imam, Dicko had been preaching in mosques and on the radio since 2009 and enjoyed considerable influence in his home region.[65] In 2013, he was arrested by the French military. In 2015, Dicko returned to Burkina Faso, where he declared his intention to create a Fulani caliphate. It is unknown how many fighters are in Ansarul Islam, but local analysts suggest that the organization does not have more than a few hundred men under its command.[66] According to the media, Boureima Dicko died in May 2017 after a confrontation between Ansarul Islam fighters and the French military. His brother, Jafar Dicko, took charge of Ansarul Islam.

Since December 2018, Burkina's eastern region has become another victim of jihadi attacks by Ansarul Islam, JNIM, and IS-GS. The eastern region is a trafficking hub for gold and contains many tourist attractions that create lucrative opportunities for insurgency groups to fund their operations. Hardening inequalities between multinational companies and Western tourists and the local population have provided a fertile ground for the recruitment of jihadi insurgents. The emergence of a jihadi narrative that legitimizes violence by referring to scripture and the need to fight economic injustice has aided in recruitment.[67] Since 2018, Catholic Churches have become a frequent target of attacks in the region. The explicit targeting of Christians has the potential to undermine decades of peaceful coexistence and intermixing between the two major religions.

Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project provide information about the number of fatalities and attacks by the outside jihadi groups (JNIM, JNIM affiliates, IS-GS) and Ansarul

65. International Crisis Group, *The Social Roots*.

66. Seidik Abba, "Jafar Dicko, le nouveau visage du djihadisme au Burkina Faso," *Le Monde*, December 21, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/12/21/jafar-dicko-le-nouveau-visage-du-djihadisme-au-burkina-faso_5232877_3212.html.

67. Ruth Maclean, "Kalashnikovs and No-Go Zones: East Burkina Faso Falls to Militants," *Guardian*, April 22, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/apr/22/kalashnikovs-and-no-go-zones-east-burkina-faso-falls-to-militants.

Islam. As of June 2019, the total number of fatalities in 2019 (133 fatalities) already supersedes the number of fatalities in 2018 (125 fatalities) and 2017 (28 fatalities). The number of fatalities caused by Ansarul Islam has grown steadily since its formation.[68] In 2018, the number of Ansarul Islam attacks, totaling 74, equaled the number of attacks by the jihadi groups with roots outside of Burkina Faso. The data illustrate the deteriorating security situation. In the North, the conflict between the security forces and Ansarul Islam led to the displacement of 100,000 people and the closure of more than 1,000 schools.[69]

The removal of President Compaoré's political network and the long-term failure of the Burkinabe state to engage with Islamic communities other than through clientelist linkages narrow the options of the state to resolve the conflict. In the aftermath of the jihadi occupation of northern Mali in 2012 and prior to the French intervention in January 2013, the Burkinabe government was the main driver behind the mediation attempts between jihadi-salafi groups and the Malian government. Thus, during the second half of 2012, Compaoré—a long-standing diplomatic dealmaker in the West African region[70]—served as the chief negotiator between the Malian government, the jihadi insurgents in Mali, and delegations of other West African nations. He treated Iyad Ag Ghali, the founder and leader of Ansar Dine in Mali,[71] and other jihadi insurgents with the same courtesy and attention as the other parties involved in the conflict. This provided the Malian insurgents with diplomatic clout and recognition. After the French had intervened militarily in

68. Ansarul Islam caused 32 fatalities in 2017, 74 fatalities in 2018, and 3 fatalities from January to May 2019. See https://www.acleddata.com.

69. Sophie Douce, "Au Burkina Faso, le difficile exil des rescapés du terrorisme," *Le Monde*, March 18, 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/03/18/au-burkina-faso-le-difficile-exil-des-rescapes-du-terrorisme_5437871_3212.html.

70. Peter Doerrie, "Burkina Faso: Blaise Compaoré and the Politics of Personal Enrichment," African Arguments, August 15, 2012, https://africanarguments.org/2012/08/15/burkina-faso-blaise-compaore-and-the-politics-of-personal-enrichment-by-peter-dorrie/.

71. The State Department designated Iyad Ag Ghali as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in February 2013.

Mali, Compaoré allowed Iyad Ag Ghali to use Ouagadougou as his base.[72]

The Burkinabe state further permitted jihadi-salafi groups to cross into northern Burkina Faso as long as they did not target the state.[73] This evidently benefited the jihadis, as Iyad Ag Ghali managed to form JNIM, a group that caused considerable destruction in Burkina Faso and elsewhere in the Sahel. The jihadi occupation of Mali's North partially explains Burkina Faso's policy of appeasement. The jihadi conquest demonstrated the dismal state of the Malian armed forces, with many Malian soldiers abandoning their units. The ability of the jihadis in northern Mali and the general unhappiness among the Burkinabe armed forces with their government might have led the Compaoré government to believe that their own security apparatus might be similarly unprepared to fight a jihadi insurgency. The months-long failure of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) between July and December 2012 ultimately triggered the French military intervention in January 2013. The intervention illustrated the dependency of the West African region on external military assistance.

Following their ousting from northern Mali, the jihadi insurgents required continued access to resources to regroup and shelter from the various military forces now operating across the Sahel, which they received by cooperating with Compaoré. The arrangement between the Burkinabe government and the jihadi forces was informal. Its implementation relied on a small number of individuals, including Djibril Bassolé, minister of security (2004–2007) and minister of foreign affairs (2011–2014); General Gilbert Diendéré, commander of the Compaoré presidential guard and leader of the unsuccessful countercoup against the interim government in September 2015; and Moustapha Limam Chafi, special council to

72. Nordic Africa Institute, *Rival Priorities in the Sahel: Finding the Balance between Security and Development*, Policy Note 3: 2018 (Sweden: Nordic Africa Institute, 2018), https://nai.uu.se/news/articles/2018/04/19/111116/.

73. Rinaldo Depagne, "Burkina Faso's Alarming Escalation of Jihadist Violence," International Crisis Group, March 5, 2018, https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/west-africa/burkina-faso/burkina-fasos-alarming-escalation-jihadist-violence.

Compaoré with close ties to jihadi groups in the Sahel.[74] The popular insurrection against Compaoré led to the imprisonment of these individuals and the disintegration of long-standing networks between the state and the jihadi forces.

Since the election of Roch Marc Kaboré in November 2015, Burkina Faso's approach toward the security crisis revolves around military confrontation with jihadists rather than negotiating with or co-opting members of the respective terrorist groups. This antagonized local stakeholders who share an affinity with certain aspects of jihadi ideology.[75] In addition, the Burkinabe state has done little to prevent the radicalization of the Muslim faithful. Dicko was able to preach unhindered for some time after his return from Mali and enjoyed some local support, although the security services were aware of the content of his sermons. Although his presence raised the concern of many in the North, the state had no legal basis to remove him from local radio or local mosques where he was preaching.[76] Moreover, the area around Soum lacked well-respected Islamic clerics, who could have questioned the theological basis on which he was operating. This suggests that there is a role for the state to establish some steering capacity in the religious sphere.

Several factors facilitated the formation of Ansarul Islam and allow for the continued presence of the various jihadi groups with roots elsewhere in the region: the influx of jihadi-salafi ideology, which provides a narrative justifying violence against the state and non-Muslims; deteriorating living conditions in an already marginalized area; porous borders with countries in which jihadi groups have been active for some time; the general lack of state authority on the countryside; and the inadequate response by the security forces to the security crisis in the northern and eastern parts of the

74. Ludovic Ouhonyioué Kibora and Mamadou Traore, *Towards Reforming the Burkinabé Security System* (Paris: Foundation pour la recherche stratégique, 2017).
75. Manni Crone, "The Rise of Jihadi Militancy in Burkina Faso," *Expanding Jihad* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2017), 23–34.
76. Morgane Le Cam, "Comment est né Ansaroul Islam, premier groupe djihadiste de l'histoire du Burkina Faso," *Le Monde Afrique*, April 11, 2017, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/04/11/comment-est-ne-ansaroul-islam-premier-groupe-djihadiste-de-l-histoire-du-burkina-faso_5109520_3212.html.

country. Counterterrorism operations in 2017 and 2018 resulted in extrajudicial killings, abuse of suspects in custody, and arbitrary arrests. Massacres by security forces and state-backed militias have led to local fear and resentment of the security forces and are additional drivers of jihadist recruitment in the countryside.[77]

THE (FAILED) IMPLEMENTATION OF RELIGIOUS REGULATION

The escalation of jihadi violence in the Sahel coincided with two state initiatives to impose state surveillance on religious activity. In 2015, the government created the National Observatory for Religious Affairs (ONAFAR),[78] which is tasked with analyzing how religious representatives appear and represent their theological convictions in the media.[79] ONAFAR itself does not have the authority to sanction individuals or their organizations, but it directs its findings to an organization that does: the Superior Council of Communication (CSC).[80] In addition, ONAFAR aims to provide the state bureaucracy with information about the content and the goals of different religious doctrines. One of the goals of this new body is to educate state administrators about ONAFAR's national leadership, which includes four Muslims as well as two Evangelical and two Catholic representatives. The leadership of the observatory likes to stress that its purpose is not to stigmatize the Islamic faith—a clear indication that many perceive ONAFAR as an entity targeting Islamic practice rather than an organization aiming to strengthen social cohesion. According to its own spokesperson, ONAFAR lacks the organizational structure and the funding necessary to impact the religious sphere.[81]

77. Human Rights Watch, "Burkina Faso: Killings."
78. In French, *Observatoire national des faits religieux*.
79. Nordic Africa Institute, *Rival Priorities*.
80. In French, Conseil supérieur de la communication.
81. Ismael Tiendrebeogo, "Nous vivons dans une bonne cohabitation interconfessionnelle au Burkina," *Le Pays*, July 14, 2016, http://lepays.bf/imam-ismael-tiendrebeogo-president-de-lonafar-vivons-bonne-cohabitation-interconfessionnelle-burkina/.

In addition to creating ONAFAR, the government tried to pass a draft bill to regulate religious organizations and practices. The bill sought to ensure that prayer services could only occur within buildings that are designated for prayer and that receive prior authorization by the state. It further included provisions banning building religious structures on public grounds, ostentatious displays of religious symbols in public, and public school officials from discussing their religious preferences. The draft bill was a major break from the previous engagement with religion where state authority refrained from regulating or intervening in religious spaces.

Many Muslims regarded the bill as punishing the Muslim community for the Ansarul Islam attacks and the growing concerns about the spread of Islamic radicalism. In particular, the Mouvement Sunnite criticized the bill's stipulation that prayer would have to take place in a building intended for prayer and that these buildings needed to gain state authorization. After the FAIB and many of its constituent member organizations expressed opposition, the government withdrew the bill.

Despite the opposition, polling data shows that a majority of Burkinabe citizens support the notion that the state should intervene in religious matters under certain conditions. According to data from Afrobarometer, 58 percent of Burkinabe citizens agreed that the government should have the power to regulate speech in places of worship, especially if preachers or congregants threaten public security. Only 39 percent agreed that the government should never limit what is said in a place of worship.[82] Among Catholics, the support for governmental restrictions is higher than among the general population: 69 percent of the Catholic respondents agreed that the government should have the right to regulate worship. Among Muslims the support for government regulations is lower, but it is still shared by a majority: 55.4 percent of the Muslim respondents agreed with state regulation of worship.

82. Afrobarometer Data, Burkina Faso, Round 7, 2016–2018, http://afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/analyse-online.

The fact the government withdrew the bill demonstrates that the new government is mindful of Muslims' concerns. At the same time, it demonstrates that Islamic organizations are capable of mobilizing successfully against state authority under certain conditions. Independent of the emergence of jihadi-salafi violence, Muslim groups—and conservative Sunni groups in particular—have become outspoken about their historical marginalization vis-à-vis the Christian community in the last decade. In part, this was due to the formation of the FAIB, which provided the Muslim community with more organizational power to channel their grievances, as well as the result of generational change. The younger generation of Muslims is no longer willing to accept their political marginalization vis-à-vis the privileged position of Catholics. Given the previously acquiescent position of the Muslim community toward state authority, this is a new development. It indicates that Muslim leaders are likely to protest any further state intrusion in Islamic affairs and are likely to scrutinize the country's political leadership in a more vocal and public manner than before.

CONCLUSION

Since independence, the Burkinabe state has refrained from subjecting religious activity to state authority. Despite constitutional provisions to restrict religious practice, and although a majority of citizens back regulatory mechanisms in the religious sphere in principle, recent state attempts to exercise state authority in the religious sphere have largely failed to regulate religious affairs. This is unlikely to change any time soon. The Catholic Church remains an influential social and political actor, while the Muslim community, and in particular the salafi community, has become more confident and outspoken advocates of their interests. Both religious communities enjoy considerable support among their followers, and their ability to derail legislation aimed at regulating religious affairs attests to their influence and strong position.

Compaoré's departure, followed by free and fair elections in 2015, has still not translated into economic gains and equality for most

Burkinabe citizens. As long as economic development stalls, religious communities are likely to maintain their distance from state authority. Continued socioeconomic deprivation will make it difficult for the state to generate trust and support for state actions. Especially among the Muslim community, this might lead to opposition to the state. The escalation and domestication of jihadi-salafi violence is likely to further complicate the relationship between the state and its religious communities, as well as between Christians and Muslims. The continued presence of Islamic radicals and future jihadi attacks on the Catholic community in the East have the potential to deepen the mistrust between Christians and Muslims and thus divide Burkinabe society.

Three factors will drive the future relationship between the state and religion. First is the ability of the new government to mediate between the two dominant religious groups. The newly created ONAFAR might prove to be a useful asset in this regard. If it manages to improve interreligious relations, it might help undermine domestic radicalization. The extent to which the new government is prepared to acknowledge and address the long-standing disparities of Muslims' access to state bureaucracy will matter both for Christian-Muslim relations and the relationship between the new government and the Muslim majority. This effort will need to include a commitment to economic development and economic opportunities, especially in marginalized regions that have become recruiting grounds for young disaffected Muslims.

Second, how the conflict in Mali is contained will impact security and Muslim communities in Burkina Faso. If the international community and the Malian government manage to contain the ongoing violence, it is reasonable to expect a weakening of jihadi-salafi violence in Burkina Faso. This might not occur in the same way for the insurgencies in the North and East, which have local roots and require a multifaceted strategy. The Burkinabe state currently lacks such a strategy.

Third, the failure of the current government to regulate religious practice reduces the options available to the government to undermine jihadi activities. The government now has to contain the

various jihadi groups with the help of the security services, whose course of action appears to have the opposite effect.

It seems unlikely that the Malian crisis or any of the other security crises involving jihadi-salafism in the region will end soon. Jihadi-salafism will remain Burkina Faso's main security challenge for years to come. The awakening of a political consciousness among Burkinabe Muslim community will produce more Muslim political activism. To ensure societal cohesion and to escape Mali's trajectory, the Burkinabe government needs to pursue a dual strategy. The government must remove jihadi radicals from the Islamic landscape and create a security environment in which the state rebuilds the trust of its citizens, regardless of religion. At the same time, the government needs to accept Muslim political activism as a new political reality and address legitimate Muslim grievances. Achieving these goals would require the government to seek the support of Muslim leaders. This is a challenge in a country where postindependence governments have failed to build meaningful links between the state and its Muslim community.