



# **"THEY CAN'T BE WORSE THAN THE LAST LOT"**

The Burkina Faso Coup and Sahel  
Stability:  
An Updated Horizon Scanning Report

# Summary

- Five months have passed since the Burkina Faso Coup that brought the current Junta to power.
- The Junta has "run" on a platform of restoring order to the state that has been wracked by VEO activity.
- Instead the situation has continued to deteriorate. The exact death toll remains unknown but is reliably estimated to in the thousands. It is further estimated by ECOWAS that the state only controls 60% of the country.
- The Junta has continued to follow a securitised approach to the problem. Most recently it has ordered civilians to leave their homes in the North and South-East of the country it has declared "militarised zones." Its current CVE messaging strategy is undeclared.
- At the same time, some regional officials suggest that the junta remains open to Russian security assistance, while some Burkinabe civil society movements (such as the Coalition of African Patriots of Burkina Faso) have publicly called for France to withdraw and be replaced by Russian forces. They perceive Russia as having achieved CVE successes across the continent (despite significant evidence to the contrary).
- Assessments for the short, medium and long-term are as follows:
  - **Short** (next few months) - The situation on the ground is likely to continue to deteriorate. Coupled with the Kremlin's desire to expand its influence in Africa to continue providing diplomatic cover for its continued war of aggression in Ukraine, means there is a realistic possibility that the junta will reach out to the Kremlin (specifically its Wagner PMC network) for assistance.
  - **Medium** (the end of 2022) - The continued securitisation of the conflict, and the poor track record of the Wagner network, means it is highly likely that, at best, the conflict will remain frozen or deteriorate further. There is also a realistic possibility the heavy-handed security approach will increase VE recruitment.
  - **Long** (post 2022) - If current trends remain unchanged, there is a realistic possibility that VEs will become entrenched in the North and East of the country. In this case it is highly likely that VEs will become an alternate security and services provider (building their legitimacy and driving further recruitment), as well as acting as cross-border sanctuaries for VEs in neighboring Niger and Mali that could significantly destabilise the wider region. Alongside this, Russian influence on the continent will continue to grow as its Wagner PMC Network is utilised for security and repression purposes.
- A more holistic approach is needed to tackle VE messaging and discourage malign state influence through building resilience via local credible partners.

# Background

## There has been a string of coups in the region since 2021

- In September 2021 soldiers in Guinea announced that they had removed President Alpha Condé from office.
- Less than five months later, in Burkina Faso, the military proclaimed the overthrow of head of state Roch Kaboré.
- In Mali there have been two coups in less than a year:
  - Army officers deposed President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020.
  - Then, in May 2021 there was a second takeover to reassert control over the transition and later set out plans to stay in power for almost five more years. Expected elections have been "postponed".
- The 1st of February 2022 an attempted coup in Guinea-Bassu left several attackers dead.

## This marks a trend of democratic backsliding across Africa as a whole

- There are now fewer democracies in Africa than 20 years ago.
- In Southern and East Africa, continued persecution of political opposition and civil society activists in Zimbabwe, and similar worrying patterns in Tanzania since 2016, have seriously diminished citizen participation in politics and governance, and also stymied prospects for much needed reforms.
- In Ethiopia, the Abiy regime has been accused of war crimes and potential crimes against humanity in the Tigrayan region.
- In January 2022 the military in Sudan took full control of the government.
- At the same time, multiple governments across the continent have begun investing in digital surveillance technologies.
  - "Remote-control hacking" enables governments to access files on targeted laptops. They also log keystrokes and passwords as a means to turn on webcams and microphones.
  - The Bulgarian-based surveillance firm Circles, an affiliate of the NSO Group, which developed the infamous Pegasus software, provides spyware technology to countries as a means to exploit faults in telecom systems, that have been purchased by governments in Botswana, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

# Background

## Explaining the coups

### 1) Climate change and demographic growth

- These factors put an increasing pressure on existing resources, including land and government services.
- Labour is plentiful but a significant lack of education and investment means there are few opportunities for the growing young population.
- This has led to a drift into crime and extremism across the region, particularly among pastoralist communities who lose their livelihoods and face persecution, becoming a source of recruitment for VEOs (as with the Fulani in Burkina Faso). Perpetuating further persecution, further recruitment and further instability.

### 2) A lack of basic security

- Large sections of northern and eastern Mali are ruled by jihadists who have been pushing into northern Burkina Faso and Niger since 2012.
- The accompanying attacks have been steadily increasing, as have their death tolls.
- Limited resources and the lack of progress have embittered civilian population and large sections of the military.
- The coup in Burkina Faso was mainly a response to the continuing jihadist insurgency in the north (which is believed to have killed up to 2000 people in 2021 alone) that the putschists claimed the government did little to stop. The breaking point was an attack in Dec 2021 that left 44 military officers dead, allegedly their position had been without ammunition or food supplies for weeks.

### 3) Corruption

- Blatant corruption undermines local governments' abilities to provide basic services and basic security to the population, which leads to their delegitimation.
- In the aftermath of the Burkina Faso coup one civilian commented "at least they can't be as bad as the last lot".
- In doing so it further undermines local faith in democratic institutions and the international partners will seek to shore up these governments.

# Background

## Explaining the coups

### 4) Disillusionment with international partners

- The association of international partners with corrupt governments and lack of progress in the fight against the jihadist insurgencies has led to a steep decline in their popularity.
  - In 2012 when the French first began their mission in the Sahel, entering the capital of Mali (Bamako) after driving back a jihadist attack, they were greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm.
  - Now, Civilian protests have appeared carrying placards reading “death to France and her allies”. While in the aftermath of the Burkina Faso coup, citizens were seen waving Russian flags and burning French ones.
- This disillusionment is in part exacerbated by Russian disinformation operations and sanctions against the putschists, requiring them to intensify anti-French rhetoric to create a scapegoat.

# Impact of the coup five months on

## Securitisation over legitimate insurgency factors

- All insurgencies have a bedrock of legitimate grievance that must be addressed. You cannot kill your way out of an insurgency; proper COIN requires trust building, good governance, and capacity building (including local resilience).
- All the states in the Sahel region share common factors that feed instability:
  - Corruption.
  - Poor economic prospects.
  - Poor rural-urban connections
    - These have created delayed response times to insurgent attacks and further add to a sense of neglect in the rural periphery.
    - "Self-defence forces", who have become prominent in the rural areas, have been accused of leading ethnically-motivated reprisal attacks.
  - Large quantities of mineral wealth which can be easily exported to international markets; assisting insurgency financing and exacerbating corruption.
- The Burkinabe Junta has continually prioritised military operations over CVE measures such as good governance and resilience building to VE messaging. This has not yielded strategic results and there is a realistic possibility it is contributing to the continual decline of the security situation.
  - Since the military coup in Burkina Faso, nearly 700 attacks have taken place in the country, resulting in the death of more than 400 people, an increase of 40% compared to the same period last year.
  - Multiple human rights organisations have expressed concern that the Junta's forces and local defence militias routinely target the Fulani group. Evidence suggests this group are a prime target for VE recruitment; further abuses mean it is likely there will be increases in VE recruitment among the Fulani.
  - According to Auguste Denise (Burkina Faso's former Defence Minister) the securitised approach is driving "polarized identities, a militarization of local communities, and the normalization of violence as a political tool."
  - Most recently the Junta has declared large areas in the North and South-East as 'special military zones' spanning 2000 and 11,000 square kilometers-displacing the populations from their homes, with no revealed plans on where they will be resettled. It is likely that these displaced persons (a large portion of them Fulani) will become a target for VE recruitment. It is also highly likely the displacement will put strain on existing humanitarian structures and drive ethnic conflict.

# Impact of the coup five months on

## Growth of Kremlin influence

**The lack of legitimate governance and securitisation of the region's conflict has created difficulties for potential local and particularly western partners as they struggle to associate with illegitimate governments, particularly if such governments attempt to consolidate power through repression.**

- Already Burkina Faso (alongside Mali and Guinea), has been suspended Economic community of West African States (ECOWAS) who have further debated applying sanctions to the Burkinabe Junta.
- The concern is that in doing so it is likely that Burkina Faso's capabilities will be weakened – further fueling instability – and add tension to their alliances.
- Meanwhile, anti-French/anti-western sentiment has continued to grow within Burkina Faso and across the wider region.
  - In the initial aftermath of the coup, crowds appeared in the capital burning French flags and carrying placards calling for 'death to France and her allies.'
  - Kémi Séba, a leading anti-colonial figure in Francophone Africa, has proven increasingly popular in Burkina Faso and the wider region over the past two years.
  - Jeffrey Smith, founding director of Vanguard Africa, a non-profit dedicated to free and fair elections in Africa, said that Putin's invasion of Ukraine has increased anti-Western sentiment in Africa. Many Africans believe that the West's condemnation of the invasion is hypocritical in the context of Libya, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

**The above factors has created the potential for the Kremlin to extend their influence in the region through these governments**

- Russian intervention in Africa often focuses on resource-rich countries in dire need of military help where Western influence is waning or absent.
- Russian help comes in the form of military advisers, weapons or mercenaries, paid for with cash or mining concessions for gold, diamonds and other resources.
- Initial calls in in Burkina Faso for a military partnership with Russia have been growing:
  - The celebrations in appreciation for the new military junta included Russian flags and cries of "We want a partnership with Russia!" and "Long live Russia!"
  - The Wagner Network was reported to be active in the country after the coup.
  - Since then, Social media has seen repeated videos of crowds waving Russian flags (though it is unconfirmed if these videos are recent).

# Impact of the coups five months on

- It is reported that in the aftermath of Russia's stalling offensives in Ukraine, the Kremlin is seeking to 'double down' in Africa. The Wagner Network is highly likely to be the most prominent tool for this in both kinetic security and information warfare operations. Although it is almost certain the Kremlin will rely on 'in house' information operations to cultivate sentiment (see below).
- The Kremlin continues to engage in information operations to undermine Western influence in the region and promote Russia as a better security guarantor.
  - Russia's propaganda apparatus has already had significant practice in this through their operations in the Central African Republic (CAR).
  - Recurrent themes are the legacies of colonialism and supposed European restrictions on African self-determination.
  - In the aftermath of the French withdrawal of Mali, French intelligence provided footage of men believed to be from the Wagner Network creating a false-flag mass grave using real bodies near a French base. It is highly likely that similar operations in Mali (where Wagner Network has a more prominent presence) will be highlighted and broadcasted into Burkina Faso to continue to foment distrust against the West.
  - As Russia's invasion of Ukraine begins to impact on global food supplies; jeopardising African states, it has engaged in a disinformation campaign to blame shortages on the West.

**If the current trends are not slowed or reversed it is likely that coups will spread in parallel with jihadist threats into the West African coastal states, and will be accompanied by increases in Russian influence and, in the long-term, Chinese ascendancy on the continent as well.**

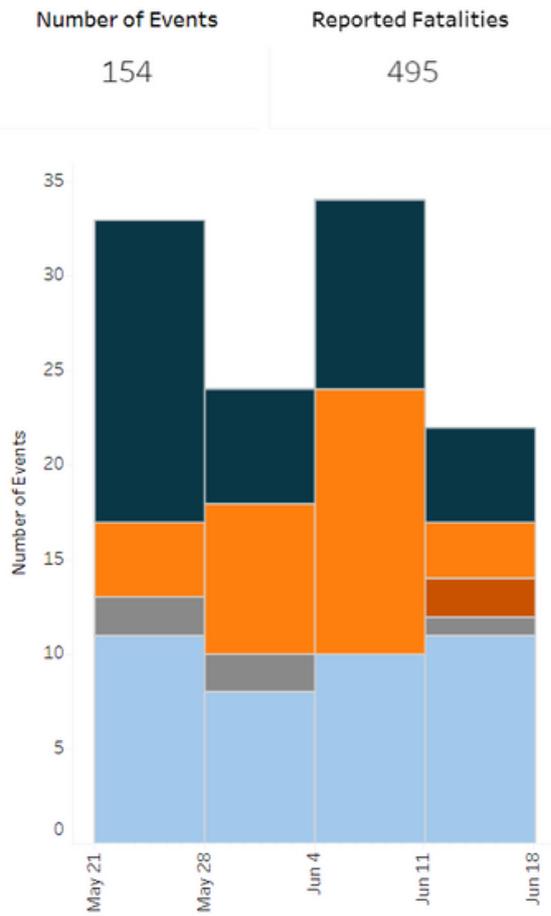
# Annex A: Supporting data

## Key Figures

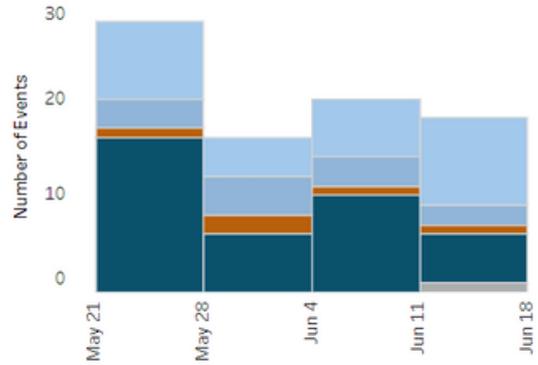
Number of Events	Reported Fatalities
154	495

Political Violence Sub-event type

(Multiple values)



## Political Violence Battles, Explosions/Remote Violence, Violence Against Civilians, and Mob Violence



- Mob violence
- Armed clash
- Remote explosive/landmine/IED
- Abduction/forced disappearance
- Attack

Data provided by ACLE

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