

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Legitimising regimes and legalising self-defence groups: the case of Burkina Faso's VDPs

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Abstract

The formalisation of informal security-providers has important consequences for citizenship, the rule of law, and human rights. We examine these policies in Burkina Faso, where formalisation has led to concerns about vigilante justice and ethnic targeting. Although African governments' reliance on informal security provision is well-documented, less is known about the origins of formalisation policies. To advance theory-building in this domain, this paper examines the political logic of empowering self-defence groups through the study of Burkina Faso's 2022 junta government, with comparisons to two prior regimes. We argue that formalisation is not only a mechanism for overcoming vexing security challenges, but is a tool used by leaders to build legitimacy and strengthen the regime's grip on power. In doing so, the article contributes insights into the origins of governmental policies towards self-defence groups, with implications for the study of political legitimacy, security provision and citizen-state relations.

Keywords: Legitimacy; formalisation; authoritarianism; self-defence groups; Burkina Faso

Introduction

Armed groups of civilians, self-organised to protect their local communities, are a feature of countries throughout the world. Vigilance Committees patrol Northern Cameroon to prevent crime and attacks by Boko Haram (Edongo & Elom 2019). *Sungusungu* groups in Tanzania determine and enact punishments against suspected thieves or bandits (Heald 2006). In Somalia, pastoral communities created local militias to protect their communities and agricultural assets from Al-Shabaab (Ibrahim Shire 2022). Given their proliferation, the governments of some countries have banned, attempted to dismantle, or refused to formally recognise these groups, in an effort to prevent human rights abuses related to vigilante justice and challenges to their monopoly on

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violence.¹ For example, the Malian state withdrew its support for the *Dan Na Ambassagou* dozo (hunters' guild) group following attacks on civilians (Bruijne 2022), and has attempted to weaken the 'Sons of the Land' (Ganda Iso) militia (Boisvert 2015: 279). The federal government of Nigeria has officially banned self-defence groups (SDGs), even as Nigerian state governments increasingly recognise them as partners in security provision (Agboga 2021). This is similarly the case in Kenya, where socially embedded and ethnically rooted armed civilian groups were banned in an effort to prevent armed civilians from implementing their norms of justice and penal violence (LeBas 2013). Yet elsewhere, including the focal country for this article – Burkina Faso – governments have integrated these SDGs through formalisation policies.

The formalisation of informal security-providers has important consequences for citizenship, the rule of law and human rights. It empowers local militias that have limited professional training with the right to exercise violence in the name of the state. In Burkina Faso, this has led to opposition from marginalised communities that are targeted by or particularly vulnerable to vigilante justice strategies, and concerns about human rights abuses (International Crisis Group 2020; Lankoandé 2020). On the other hand, many citizens perceive SDGs as filling a gap in access to security provision (Idrissa 2019; Leclercq & Matagne 2020); formalising them can inspire greater confidence in the responsiveness of the leadership to citizens' needs.

In this article, we argue and show that the formalisation of informal security providers is a mechanism used by leaders to build legitimacy and strengthen the regime's grip on power in the absence of democratic legitimacy. Authoritarians pursue legitimacy to increase regime stability (Gerschewski 2013); formalisation is a tool in the authoritarian toolkit intended not only to overcome vexing security challenges, but to legitimise the regime in the eyes of citizens. We examine the political logic of empowering SDGs through the case of Burkina Faso's junta leader Ibrahim Traoré. Comparisons to the two prior regimes, democratically elected President Kaboré and military leader Lieutenant-colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, highlight the distinctiveness of the legitimacy-building strategy employed by Traoré. The comparison of three regimes within the same country in a short time (2015–2024) allows us to hold constant other attributes that might impact formalisation outcomes, such as the structure of the security sector.

This article contributes new insights into the origins of governmental policies towards SDGs. Although there are many documented cases of states providing official recognitions and status for armed civilian groups (Schneckener 2017), the determinants of such policies are not well understood. It is often assumed that the state's inability to protect its citizens or low state capacity drives these decisions, but our approach highlights the differences in three regimes' policies towards SDGs, even as state capacity remained constant. In this paper we seek to advance theory-building efforts in this domain with new analysis of the internal politics of governmental decision-making in Burkina Faso. In contrast to scholarship focused on how these armed civilian groups mobilise (Stringham & Forney 2017) and generate their own legitimacy (Grätz 2007; Hagberg 2019), we explore the origins of government policies towards them. In doing so, we reveal how even SDGs with community roots

are constructed by state policies. This contributes to our understanding of hybrid authority in modern African states and state–society relations in the context of the Sahel conflicts.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we introduce our theoretical framework for studying security formalisation, by bridging scholarship on state formation, legitimacy and political institutions. Next, we introduce the case of SDGs in Burkina Faso. This is followed by a description of how the Traoré regime formulated its policies towards armed civilian groups to build its legitimacy, as a government led by a political newcomer, lacking democratic mandate. A comparison to the previous two regimes helps illuminate the dynamics at play. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of this case for understanding what drives formalisation policies.

Theory

Why do governments give formal status to armed civilian groups in the context of security crises, given the potential for human rights abuses and challenges to the rule of state law? To answer this question, we draw on scholarship describing broad processes of state formation in times of war before connecting the rulers' decisions to engage with SDGs to their more immediate needs to develop or maintain popular legitimacy.

The idea that 'war makes the state' by building its capacity to tax, protect and provide services for citizens is a foundational theory of state formation (Tilly 1993). Viewed from the perspective of historical studies of the state, the formalisation of informal security providers is a process of modern state formation. For example, revenue ratchet effects theories describe how war increases the state's fiscal capacity, as citizens seeking protection tolerate greater taxation and the administrative machinery grows (Campbell 1993). Cross-national studies of this mechanism in African countries have found some support for the revenue ratchet effect (Thies 2007). Classic state-building models also describe parallel 'security ratchet effect' processes, in which conflict provokes the expansion of the state security apparatus, permanently shifting the state's post-war capacity. Wars generate opportunities and demands on the state to neutralise rivals to the state's provision of security, professionalise militias, or disarm civilian groups (Tilly 1985, 1993). These approaches suggest that when rulers successfully partner with armed groups, they can neutralise them as competitors or alternatives to the state's authority, therefore ratcheting up the state's monopoly on violence – even after the end of a conflict. State-building models view governmental attempts to incorporate rival security providers through formalisation processes, such as training or legally empowering militias or local SDGs, as efforts to strengthen the state's legitimate authority. However, ignoring or only partially co-opting armed civilian groups presents risks because they can become a threat to the state and the populations.

When states recognise security institutions that were informal, having not been created or previously codified by the state, they engage in a process of state building through formalisation. Also known as the 'officialization' or 'legalization' of militias (Schneckener 2017), this is one of a suite of

formalisation processes designed to build state authority and/or capacity. For example, governments formalise informal property rights in order to replace alternatives to state authority, extract revenue and extend their control over both natural resources and citizens (Honig 2022). Regulating informal economic activities (Côte & Korf 2018) and expanding the statutory systems of identity cards (Bowles 2023), or population censuses (Lee & Zhang 2017) are similarly all mechanisms that states employ to increase their capacity both to extract from domestic populations and to serve them. In the vein of these other forms of formalisation, government attempts to codify, professionalise and integrate non-state security providers are best understood as processes of building state capacity.

The formative theories of the state thus anticipate that conflict drives state formation when mercenaries become militaries. As the state incorporates or defeats alternative security providers, the state's monopoly on the *legitimate* use of violence should grow. For Weber (1918: 82), this is a process of 'political expropriation' in which the rulers expropriate the administrative and coercive roles of private actors. The assumption that the legitimacy of rulers grows during this process of state formation is implicit in these approaches; yet case study analysis of the connections between legitimacy and the decision to formalise SDGs remains limited.

We follow the definition of legitimacy as 'the recognition of a state and its government as rightful by its population' (Jackson & Rosberg 1984: 177). Sources of legitimacy can be divided into two categories: input or output-oriented legitimisation (Scharpf 1999). Input (or 'process-based') legitimacy derives from citizens' participation in the construction of the government and governance. Democratic elections are, therefore, a key mechanism for the development of input legitimacy, but other processes of involving citizens in governance are also a foundation for input legitimacy (Strebel *et al.* 2019). Popular support and mass mobilisation during a coup d'état can also be a source of input legitimacy for a regime – in that moment. By contrast, colonial rule, imposed upon citizens without their participation, represents a lack of input legitimacy. Output legitimacy or 'performance-based legitimacy', on the other hand, is tied to citizens' satisfaction with what the government has done. The government is legitimate because it has fulfilled citizens' needs, regardless of the processes (or 'inputs') involved. In an example of performance-based legitimacy, government effectiveness at delivering services has been shown to increase legitimating beliefs (Levi & Sacks 2009).

Regimes may draw their legitimacy from inputs, outputs, or both. With neither input nor output legitimacy, leaders struggle to gain the compliance from citizens necessary for the basic functions of governance, leaving repression as the main strategy to maintain their regime's stability. However, as Gerschewski (2013) argued, repression alone is too costly to be sustainable, such that authoritarians also seek popular legitimacy. To stay in power, rulers pursue legitimacy, whether it be founded on inputs or outputs. It follows that a government which lacks input legitimacy from constitutionalism and democratic processes must rely on performance-based legitimisation, as Mandefro (2016) describes of leadership in non-democratic Ethiopia. There, the ruling EPRDF

party leaned more heavily into performance-based justifications for its rule in the context of weakened democratic procedures and citizen participation.

Yet rulers may also use engagement with socially embedded local actors for input legitimacy. While participatory political processes are one avenue for building such legitimacy, emphasising or creating connections with actors who citizens perceive to be more accessible or indigenous than government elites can also increase the state's legitimacy, even without changes in their performance. A common example of such engagement as a foundation for the government's legitimacy is a regime's recognition of and reference to traditional leaders (Rouveroy van Nieuwaal 1996). Such practices have origins in colonial regimes' attempts to build their legitimacy (Mashele 2004; Williams 2010). For example, Englebert (2000) argues that the Tswana traditional institutions generate a basis for the rightful authority of the Botswana state. Similarly, Hayward & Dumbuya (1983) describe leaders, including Guinea's Sekou Touré, using references to powerful chiefs to strengthen their regimes' legitimacy.

Thus, we build upon the state formation literature with particular attention to the role of legitimacy in rulers' decisions to formalise SDGs. Integrating non-state security providers into the state's regime is an established tool for building the state's monopoly of authority over violence, a process defined as 'state making' through 'eliminating or neutralizing their rivals inside those territories' (Tilly 1985: 181). Yet less is understood about the internal politics of such formalisation processes or why some regimes choose to use this tool while others do not. The case of Burkina Faso's SDGs suggests how the need to shore up legitimacy shapes these decisions.

Background on SDGs in Burkina Faso

In 2015, West African Sahel region rapidly shifted from a zone of inter-ethnic stability to conflict (Idrissa 2019; Théroux-Bénoni *et al.* 2019; Ariotti & Fridy 2020). Hundreds of thousands of citizens from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso were displaced due to jihadist and intercommunal violence. In response to this security crisis, many citizens turned to armed security providers for protection. Groups that draw upon and adapt the concept of hunters' associations from West African kingdoms have been active in the region's contemporary conflicts (Hagberg & Ouattara 2010). In Burkina Faso, SDGs known as *koglweogo*, *rouga*, *tin kubi u gogu* and *dozo*, among others, gained increasing prominence in response to the patterns of jihadist and intercommunal conflict plaguing much of the Sahel zone (Lankoandé 2020; Frowd 2022). These groups drew on coethnic ties, spiritual practices and traditional institutions to self-organise. Many benefitted from popular support and social ties within their local communities. Scholars described these SDGs' processes of building legitimacy through reference to cultural tradition (Hagberg 2019) and their legitimacy among citizens (Leclercq & Matagne 2020). However, SDGs were not universally popular. While 83% of Afrobarometer (2024) respondents reported that SDGs were good for the country in 2019, ethnic Fulani were significantly less likely to express support, consistent with their experiences of being targeted by SDGs and being accused of supporting terrorism (Honig 2024).

Burkina Faso's SDGs were implicated in a variety of activities related to security and justice (Quidelleur 2022). This includes village patrols to protect communities from violent attacks, kidnappings and cattle rustling. SDGs also investigated petty crimes and land disputes in response to citizen complaints, then issued punishments or fines. In addition, SDGs provided protection from road attacks and banditry for traders seeking to transport their goods (Honig 2024). Some SDGs extracted informal taxes for security provision, including through protection rackets at small-scale gold mining sites (Théroux-Bénoni *et al.* 2019).

As citizens began relying on these SDGs for their security provision, the government of Burkina Faso attempted to professionalise them with a 2020 bill recognising community militias as Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland or 'VDPs' (*Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie*). The new policy allowed SDGs to enter a contract with the state, in which they would be 'constrained to collaboration' with the government's security forces and promised 'obedience to the military's authority' (Assemblée Nationale 2020). In exchange, SDGs that opted to become VDPs were entitled to government funding, light arms, health protections and a two-week training course.² Although the VDP policy was voted unanimously by parliament, it was controversial, with serious concerns about empowering groups involved in vigilante justice and/or indiscriminate violence (Kalfelis 2021; Tisseron 2021). The controversies over SDGs make it possible to identify three positions. First, those who believed that these groups were necessary and legitimate, then those who believed that they must be dissolved and that the state must assume a monopoly on security, and, finally, those who proposed to maintain but supervise them (Compaoré & Bojsen 2020).

An in-depth analysis of the regime of Captain Ibrahim Traoré illustrates how regimes use SDG formalisation policies to build legitimacy. Following the fall of Blaise Compaoré's 27-year regime in October 2014, a transitional government was formed before elections that brought President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré to office in 2015. These elections and his November 2020 re-election were largely perceived to be free and fair, despite the disenfranchisement of voters in zones of displacement and conflict. However, Kaboré did not complete his second term (Saidou & Bertrand 2022). A military junta led by Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba took over on 24 January 2022. Eight months later, a relative newcomer within the military establishment, Ibrahim Traoré, organised a second coup. Although little changed in the capacity of the state or military resources during this time, the Damiba and Kaboré regimes made meaningfully different decisions about the government's engagements with SDGs, suggesting that governments formalise armed civilians when they have limited alternative options for legitimacy-building.

Self-Defence Groups and the Quest for Legitimacy in the Traoré Regime

Captain Ibrahim Traoré came to power through a coup d'état that overthrew Lieutenant-Colonel Damiba on 30 September 2022. As with the coup that

ended President Kaboré's regime in January 2022, there was no resistance against the putsch (Bertrand & Dipama 2024). On the contrary, protests were organised by young people in several cities across the country to support Captain Traoré. Such pro-coup protests were similarly a characteristic of the coups in Mali and Niger, in which coup supporters signalled their endorsement of the new leadership and hope that someone new would bring positive change. When Damiba refused to resign, these protests helped to shift the balance of power in favour of Traoré (Oulon 2023: 28–38). The mobilisation of many young people in the political and economic capitals of the country, Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, signalled popular support for Traoré, forcing Damiba to leave the country.

Building input legitimacy was a challenge from the start for Captain Traoré. While protests with a few thousand supporters could stop traffic, they were not a sufficient source of legitimacy to sustain his regime. Having come to power through a coup, he could not draw on legitimacy from elections, constitutionalism or international recognition. Given the absence of electoral consent, his government faced limited diplomatic ties and was suspended from ECOWAS. The new regime's concern about this lack of input legitimacy is evidenced by his attempts to 'restore' the constitution, despite being in violation of its basic premises (Traoré 2022a, 2022b, 2022c).³ On 14 and 15 October 2022, he organised a meeting of national political actors ('Assises nationales'), who officially named him as the head of state (Eboulé 2022). At this date, Traoré had committed to a July 2024 timeline for elections, as established under Damiba's transition. However, by September 2023, he was publicly stating that the constitution needed to be changed, as the 'current text doesn't permit peaceful progress' and that elections were not a priority without first improving security (Africa24 2023).

In addition, Traoré lacked the dense political networks with territorial reach of his predecessors. While Damiba did not have input legitimacy from elections and constitutionalism, he had been a regime insider within former President Blaise Compaoré's regime, including as a member of Compaoré's elite security unit (News Wires 2022).⁴ Although Compaoré's 27-year rule ended with a popular uprising in 2014, the elite political class and patronage networks from his *Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progress* (CDP) party remained. Unlike the Traoré coup, the Damiba coup was led by a familiar face within the country and military. These political networks were similarly a source of legitimacy in the electoral regime preceding Traoré, as President Kaboré had historically been a major figure in political life in the country. Kaboré was a CDP prime minister, president of the National Assembly and party president before resigning in 2014 to create an opposition party with other former CDP leaders (Andrews & Honig 2019). By contrast, when Traoré came to power, he became the youngest head of state in the world and was a political novice.

Without electoral legitimacy or political networks to draw upon, the Traoré regime instead focused on different channels for building its legitimacy. Empowering SDGs and expanding the existing VDP programme were the cornerstone of his regime. When Traoré took power in 2022, the VDP

programme had been in existence since 2020 and allowed local SDGs to register as VDPs to access light arms and small stipends. Yet the VDPs regularly complained about lack of support and governmental neglect despite their significant contributions and casualties in battles. The Traoré regime transformed the role of VDPs by launching the recruitment of 50,000 volunteer fighters across the country. While previous regimes permitted existing community groups to register, the Traoré policy was to create new VDP groups. He did so by initiating a campaign in October 2022 to encourage citizens of all social classes to enlist. According to Colonel Boukaré Zoungrana, minister of security at this time, the role of VDP will be to ‘support the army in the struggle against terrorism’ (Editorial Africanews 2022).

The Traoré regime established four main legal measures on VDPs. The first was adopted by the Council of Ministers on 16 November 2022. It modified the existing statutes to create national-level VDPs in addition to the VDPs recruited at the local level. It also attached its coordinating unit, the Patriotic Watch and Defence Brigade (BVDP), to the General Staff of the Armed Forces. This decision reinforced the inclusion of the VDPs into military administrative structure. It represented an important step in the formalisation of the VDPs. The second measure was the creation on 11 January 2023 of the Patriotic Support Fund to increase the budget for VDP training and equipment. The Patriotic Support Fund allocated 106 billion CFA (US\$174 million) for that year, including 36 billion CFA (US\$59 million) of VDP salary (Monteau 2023). Then, on 25 January 2023, the government established a new decree providing enhanced financial and in-kind benefits to VDPs. One year later, 10 January 2024, the regime announced a new policy with further increases in salaries and benefits for the civilian fighters. Combined, these four policies significantly strengthened the state’s ties with the SDGs.

The Traoré regime thus made the VDP strategic actors in the fight against insecurity. As a result of its policies, their numbers increased and their benefits greatly improved. These changes to the financial and social support of VDPs represent a dramatic difference from the policies of the previous regimes. As an illustration, in the policy adopted in 2020, VDPs benefited from a monthly payment of 25,000 F CFA (US\$41) while under Traoré, this amount first increased by 240% to 60,000 F CFA (US\$98). In addition, in the event of permanent disability, the bonus granted to VDPs increased from 25,000 F CFA to 30,000 F CFA (US\$49). Other new advantages included a monthly allowance of 2000 F CFA for medical care, a daily food bonus of 1500 F CFA during training and a daily food allowance of 1500 F CFA for national VDPs deployed in operations alongside security forces. Traoré’s January 2024 policy raised VDP salaries by an additional 33%, to 80,000 F CFA per month, in addition to other benefits.⁵

Traoré’s approach was not without controversy (International Crisis Group 2023). Civil society actors and the international community intensified their concerns about arming civilians when the junta leader raised the status of VDPs. Some civil society actors such as the Collective Against Impunity and Stigmatization of Communities (CISC) and the Burkinabè Movement for Human and People’s Rights (MBDHP) warned that this massive recruitment

could lead to human rights violations or community conflicts (CISC & MBDHP 2023). Some international partners, including France, voiced reservations and refused to assist in equipping the VDPs. Côte d'Ivoire, for example, gave military support to Burkina Faso to secure the border between the two countries, with the condition that the weapons would not be put in the hands of the VDP (Africa Intelligence 2023). Even when VDPs were accused of having committed summary executions against Fulani in January 2023 in the Nouna locality (France24 2023), the Traoré regime stood firm in its policy of empowering SDGs.

Formalising and empowering SDGs became a tool of legitimacy-building for his authoritarian regime for two key reasons. First, it connected the Traoré regime to a source of legitimacy in the national collective memory, Captain Thomas Sankara. Second, it helped increase the regime's territorial reach and ties with rural citizens. Next, we consider each of these legitimacy-building components in turn.

Traoré's policies in relation to SDGs were designed to help establish his links to national hero Sankara, believed by many citizens to be the last legitimate leader. Sankara has an extremely powerful legacy in the collective memory of Burkinabes, despite (or perhaps because of) his short four-year reign. Sankara came to power through a military coup in 1983 and was assassinated in 1987, during the coup that started Compaoré's rule (1987–2014). Sankara's regime is fondly remembered for its attention to anti-imperialism, self-sufficiency and social egalitarianism. He symbolically embodied much of his stated ideology, wearing clothing made from locally grown and woven cotton and opting to ride a bicycle while prohibiting the government from spending taxpayer money on luxury cars. Traoré's VDP policy was presented to the public as a continuation of Sankara's practice of building village-level security and governance units. The Sankara government created a system of village level 'Committees for the Defence of the Revolution' (CDR), which linked village committees to the regime. The committees were involved in local public goods provision, including some basic security initiatives, road building and forestry (Peterson 2021: 116). When Traoré initiated his VDP recruitment campaign, enlistment became a sign of political commitment and rallying around his regime. Several political figures volunteered to enrol, including the leader of the Sankarist party and former minister, Bénéwendé Sankara.

In expanding the government's recognition of armed civilian groups and increasing their pay, Traoré advanced a coherent approach to endogenous development grounded in grassroots, popular participation that echoed the Sankara regime. Other Traoré initiatives reinforced the point that he designed his VDP policy to establish his legitimacy as Sankara's successor. This includes renouncing his head of state salary to keep his captain's salary, reducing Ministerial salaries that had been inflated under Damiba's regime (Fatchina 2022), and cutting all civil servant salaries by 1% in January 2024, reminiscent of Sankara's policies of limiting the salaries of governmental elites and himself. Traoré similarly established economic policies to reinforce the connection to Sankara, including his programme of Community Entrepreneurship, designed to increase the 'direct participation of the Burkinabè in major projects of

the country' (APEC 2023). The programme's website juxtaposed photographs of Captain Traoré and Captain Thomas Sankara in matching red berets, leaving no as ambiguity about the regime's attempts to highlight its connection to legacy of Sankara.

Traoré's VDP policy is also consistent with the regime's foreign policy, when understood in the frame of building his legitimacy as the contemporary embodiment of the most legitimate leader in the nation's collective memory. Traoré gained power by positioning himself as independent of the country's former coloniser, unlike the previous junta and two electoral regimes. During the coup, he accused Damiba of being supported by France (Oulon 2023: 35). On 1 October 2022, his second lieutenant Jean Baptiste Kaboré announced on national television: 'Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba is said to have taken refuge within the French base in Kamboinsin with a view to planning a counter-offensive and sowing trouble within the defence and security forces. This follows our firm desire to reach out to other partners ready to help us in our fight against terrorism' (Oulon 2023: 34). Correspondingly, in the days following Traoré's coup, the French embassy and cultural centres were targeted by protesters loyal to the new regime. Furthermore, when the new regime met with the French ambassador on 29 November 2022, their main request was for arms for VDPs, according to the Traoré regime's own reports on social media.⁶

Traoré invested in the VDP policy and framed this within a self-sufficient, anti-imperialist approach, while expelling France, distancing the regime from Western influence, and increasing ties with Russia. When he cut government salaries, he connected this to the imperative of being less reliant on foreign aid. Traoré justified his policies as: 'These decisions aim to break the first chains of slavery, imperialism, neocolonialism. Because, as they say, you cannot hope to find your lost object by calling on the person who stole it for help' (Traoré 2024). In early 2024, Burkina Faso announced its exit from ECOWAS, received a gift of 25,000 tons of wheat from Russia (Booty 2024) and celebrated the re-opening of the Russian embassy after 32 years of closure. When international partners expressed concerns about arming civilian groups and made their military aid conditional upon it not being used for VDPs, the Traoré regime responded by framing it within his legitimacy-building approach. In his speech before the UN General Assembly on 23 September 2023, Bassolma Bazié, minister of public service, declared: 'These [VDPs] are the Patriots that certain heads of state of ECOWAS and the African Union, using the instrumentalization of capitalist imperialist powers, are trying to make the international community believe that they are militias: this is the shameless lie of State!' (Lefaso.net 2023). The regime used anti-VDP attitudes from Western actors to justify its shift towards Russia. Distancing the country from France and expanding its reliance on armed civilian groups were consistent with a broader sovereignty focused and Sankarist narrative.

The second major legitimacy-building function of the empowerment of VDPs was to increase the regime's territorial reach. Unlike the previous two regimes, Traoré was a young political outsider. He was not part of the entrenched political networks that connected Ouagadougou with the majority

rural population. Yet his VDP policy helped build these networks. By recruiting, paying, and arming young men in all corners of the country, he gained new supporters. The Traoré regime's approach was not merely to provide existing community defence groups with recognition and status, but also to provide jobs to youths in the country. The repeated increases of VDPs salaries during his regime helped build this national support base. When the regime launched its recruitment campaign for 50,000 new VDPs, it was reported to have received 90,000 applications (Jeune Afrique 2022), suggesting both the popularity of the policy and popular interest in the employment opportunity.

The Traoré VDP policy also built the regime's connection with traditional authorities, village chiefs and political brokerage networks founded on traditional institutions. Many of the armed groups of civilians in Burkina are rooted in community institutions and draw upon tradition (Honig 2024). The VDP policy recognised the locally developed *Koglweogo* and *Dozo* groups that function with the consent and support of village chiefs. In some cases, traditional authorities actively recruited members and, in others, these traditional authorities were members of SDGs themselves. They also raised funds for the VDPs and provided their popular legitimacy to support them (AIB 2023; Honig 2024). As VDPs are intimately linked to the traditional power structures in rural areas (Soré 2019), empowering the VDPs paid homage to these structures.⁷ Whereas 75% of Afrobarometer respondents expressed trust in traditional leaders in a survey between 20 September and 12 October 2022, 55% reported trust in the president. The Traoré VDP policy thus courted the support of popular rural elites connected to the armed civilian groups. The VDP policy was an opportunity to increase the regime's territorial reach.

Comparisons to Damiba and Kaboré

Traoré attempted to build his legitimacy by setting himself apart from his predecessors. His VDP policies helped develop his image as a war leader who used grassroots, anti-imperialist vision to mobilise the people, following the Sankara model. Compared to his predecessors, the Damiba and Kaboré regimes, the Traoré regime showed the most commitment to empowering VDPs and improving their working conditions. The differences among the three regimes' approaches to SDG formalisation reflect their regime foundations.

President Kaboré (November 2015–January 2022)

Roch Kaboré derived input legitimacy from his elections in November 2015 and November 2020 as president of Faso and his compliance with constitutional processes, despite the weakness of his output legitimacy.⁸ Kaboré's performance was generally considered unsatisfactory in terms of governance and the fight against terrorism (Laoundiki 2020). Indeed, it is widely perceived that terrorism took root under his regime because his government failed to respond effectively (International Crisis Group 2020). From the start of his regime, there was a high degree of popular support for SDGs and increasing proliferation of these groups. Among the three positions on SDGs described

earlier (Compaoré & Bojsen 2020), the Kaboré regime practiced the third, attempting to supervise them as opposed to seeking to undermine or empower them. In November 2016, his government adopted a decree on community policing whose objective was to channel citizen participation in security (Saidou 2020). In 2017, Kaboré initiated a reform of the security sector, which led to the adoption of a National Security Policy but did not provide any clear guidelines on the roles of armed civilians (Saidou 2020). Nevertheless, starting in 2018, citizens and civil society groups began to mobilise for greater citizen involvement, framed as ‘popular resistance’, in the face of increasing insecurity. This includes the Popular Resistance Movement led by Ali Nana, created in Bam province (Laoundiki 2019). *Balai Citoyen* (Citizens’ Broom), an influential civil society group that rallied citizens against Compaoré’s attempted terms limits contraventions in 2014, also advocated for citizen militias following the model of Sankara’s CDRs (Laoundiki 2018).

This pressure from civil society organisations and local populations who wanted new ways to ensure their safety pushed the Kaboré regime to pass the VDP law in 2020. The law was passed unanimously, following a major loss of civilian lives during an attack on a mining convoy in the East. However, the regime’s implementation was gradual due to ministerial delays and policy coordination issues, in addition to the lack of equipment. A year after the adoption of the law, many VDPs complained about the delay in their financial support (Tisseron 2021: 23–25). As part of the development of the National Security Policy, debates were organised in 2021 in each of the regions on status of the VDPs. Despite popular demand for enhanced support for the VDPs, the policy remained unchanged until the end of the Kaboré regime in January 2022.

Although the Kaboré regime had adopted the law on the VDP, it did not make it a key tool of its political legitimisation. This regime was marked by its prudence and moderation in its use of armed civilians. For example, in one interview, the Minister of Security explained that the Government observed caution due to concerns about groups that called themselves VDP without being recruited and trained by the Army (Ouédraogo 2021). There were also multiple examples of the Kaboré government attempting to sanction SDGs for violations of due process, including a heated stand-off when 10 Koglweogo were imprisoned in Fada N’Gourma (AIB 2016). The Kaboré regime was also far more responsive to pressure from civil society groups focused on human rights who investigated alleged abuses by VDPs, relative to the subsequent regimes (e.g. CNDH 2021). Nevertheless, faced with the population’s demand for self-defence, the Kaboré regime did establish two laws to recognise armed citizen groups, through community policing and VDP units. However, aware of the risks posed by such a measure, the regime was cautious in its implementation.

Kaboré did not ground his legitimacy-building efforts in his engagement with the VDP. Indeed, Kaboré had constitutional legitimacy from the reasonably free and fair elections in 2015 and 2020. Despite the increasing conflict, VDPs were not a major theme of his electoral campaign speeches in either election. Instead, for Kaboré, elections were the key mechanism of political

legitimation. Correspondingly, he insisted that the timetable for the 2020 elections be respected at a time when political actors, such as the National assembly, were calling for a postponement of the elections due to insecurity (Samboé 2020). This was understood as an expression of his attachment to democratic procedures for legitimising power as opposed to electoral manipulation, as the insecure areas were not in opposition strongholds. In addition, he was the head of the dominant party which had thousands of activists throughout the country. While his management of insecurity during his first mandate somewhat eroded his popular support, after his re-election in 2020 and his installation by the Constitutional Council, Kaboré had solid democratic legitimacy, despite the crisis context in which the elections were held. His main challenger, Eddie Komboïgo, expressed some reservations about the organisation of the elections, but ended up accepting the results (Kaboré 2020). Moreover, following the 2020 elections, the main opposition party, the UPC of Zéphirin Diabré, joined forces with him to form a government. This alliance weakened the political opposition and strengthened Kaboré's input legitimacy. In addition, Kaboré was recognised by regional leaders and international organisations, unlike his successors Damiba and Traoré.

The Kaboré regime was cautious about recruiting and equipping the VDPs. It was attentive to the risks of recognising SDGs and had other avenues for establishing legitimacy that were not available to the Traoré junta. Instead, the Kaboré policy on VDPs was based on pragmatic logic and awareness of the difficulties the army encountered in ensuring security. In short, the Kaboré regime relied more heavily on constitutional processes and responsiveness to human rights concerns in establishing its legitimacy than Traoré.

Lieutenant Colonel Damiba (January–September 2022)

Although the Damiba regime also represented a rupture from democratic input legitimacy, his regime did not engage with the VDP as Traoré's did. Instead, his defence strategy followed the model of former President Compaoré and drew upon legitimacy from his long-standing political networks as a CDP elite. Many believe that the Compaoré regime negotiated with armed Jihadist groups active in the region, and that these deals ended with the fall of the Compaoré regime, leading to an increase in violence (Elischer 2021). Damiba's security approach echoed the regime he was embedded in for decades. He was supported by CDP loyalists, including the contemporary CDP party leader, Eddie Komboïgo (Baki 2022). He also appointed leaders from the Compaoré regime, such as naming former minister of defence, Yéro Boly, as minister of reconciliation. While Traoré's regime leaned on the VDPs to draw on the legitimacy of the Sankara regime, Damiba drew upon the networks and model created by Compaoré.

Damiba came to power at a moment of extreme frustration with the Kaboré regime and hope that a military leader could better respond to the security crisis than civilian rule. By December 2019, 51% of respondents were expressing support for military rule in the Afrobarometer survey, compared to only 35% when Kaboré was elected in 2015 (R6 Afrobarometer) and 24%

prior to the security crisis in 2012 (R5). Frustrations within the military against Kaboré were extremely high following an attack in Inata in which 55 soldiers were killed; reports described soldiers in extreme hardship conditions, without food. Damiba's coup was greeted with scenes of jubilation and, unlike the 2015 aborted putsch (Saidou 2018), there was limited popular resistance against the military's attempts to take power.

The Damiba regime's security policy was characterised by its call for dialogue with armed combatants, not increased engagement with VDPs. His policy reflected a political approach as well as military action, arguing that the best strategy to restore peace was to reconcile political actors and engage in dialogue with armed groups (Douce 2022). In his public address on 1 April 2022, Damiba defined his approach as follows: 'This is a combination of civil actions and military actions that will mobilise and involve important players in the life of our communities. The aim is to create bridges to allow those who, through naivety, greed, constraint, or a desire for revenge, have been drawn into an extremist spiral, which will bring them neither salvation nor the glory of heroes'. While negotiating with armed groups followed the CDP model, the culture of dialogue is also well-anchored in Burkinabe society (Sawadogo 2018).

The VDP were a lower priority for Damiba and functioned as under the Kaboré regime; in neither case were they at the heart of the regime's security strategy. In his four public addresses,⁹ Damiba at times acknowledged and praised the VDP, while also expressing his scepticism of them. In his last speech, he stated: the '(...) VDP, despite their bravery, have sometimes been used or manipulated for revenge at the community level'. Relatedly, the reforms passed during his reign did not significantly transform the number of VDPs or their remuneration but attempted to ensure better coordination of VDP actions at the national level. The Damiba regime created the Patriotic Watch and Defence Brigade (BVDP) attached to the National Theater Operations Command (COTN) on 22 June 2022. It also modified the status of the VDP to account for this change in command. However, the regime did not increase their numbers, equipment or material support.

Damiba's security approach emphasised national unity, reconciliation and dialogue as the only way to ensure the return of peace. Accordingly, he called on local communities to meet with the fighters and organised a meeting among former presidents, including Compaoré who had been convicted by the courts. In his speeches, his focus was on such exchanges, not on the integration SDGs (Damiba 2022). In a public address on 4 September 2022, he stated: 'In view of the results we have already achieved, it turns out that this initiative of reaching out to our brothers is very promising. I would like to invite all the fighters of armed groups who, out of fear or distrust, hesitate yet to lay down their arms, to trust the State and follow the example of their comrades of yesterday who had the courage to take the plunge' (Damiba 2022).

These statements were accompanied by official actions, including a decree establishing Local Dialogue Committees for the Restoration of Peace. These local committees were designed to feature six key resources persons for the

area and one representative of the state, all named by the government and integrated into a national coordination committee. Their stated purpose was to conduct dialogues with armed groups, increase trust in the reconciliation process and report the results. They recognised local negotiations that had previously been occurring without official support. For example, in one set of meetings between 15 jihadists and 12 local community members in Nassoumbou in the Sahel Region, an agreement was made for a ceasefire that allowed farmers to return to their village fields in exchange for leaders complying with certain Sharia edicts (Mednick 2022). Following his call, several local leaders met with fighters to encourage them to lay down their arms.

Damiba's dialogue strategy divided public opinion but was anchored in his CDP networks. His policy was widely criticised in the media for revealing the weakness of the military regime and for permitting impunity of the combatants (Sibzabda 2022). At the same time, the regime's meetings with Compaoré also raised popular scepticism, with civil society actors, including *Le Balai Citoyen* (2022), accusing Damiba of using insecurity to restore supporters of the Compaoré regime.

Although Damiba was a military leader who also came to power through a coup, he relied on different sources of legitimacy and policies for engaging with VDPs than Traoré. The VDP embodied the mobilisation of populations to fight armed groups and were a military solution, but Damiba opted against attempting to build legitimacy through integrating VDPs into his regime. His strategy was different from that of Kaboré who refused any official dialogue with armed groups and from that of Traoré who emphasised community-based military action. Rather than making VDPs the tools of its legitimisation, Damiba invested in dialogue and political solutions through long-standing CDP brokerage networks.

The Traoré regime's empowerment of the VDPs thus represents a rupture from both Kaboré and Damiba's approaches. To mobilise support and mark the break with Kaboré and Damiba, Traoré forged an image of a war leader and man on the ground. His symbolic acts helped reinforce this. On 31 December 2022, he addressed the nation in combat gear in Solenzo, a town which had just been liberated by the army from the control of armed groups (Ouedraogo 2022). In November 2023, Traoré provided each minister with a weapon to defend themselves if necessary (Courrier Confidentiel 2023). On 18 November 2023, he received a VDP wounded in combat in audience at the presidency (Sidwaya 2023). Traoré promoted the VDP as the embodiment of the people's commitment to defend the homeland and wrest its sovereignty.

The enthusiasm generated by the recruitment of the VDPs was an attempt to build and demonstrate the social base of the regime throughout the territory. The regime framed the successful recruitment of over 50,000 new VDPs as an indicator of citizens' support for his regime, despite not having legitimacy from elections or international recognition. They emphasised how the expansion of the VDP programme was inspired by the ideas of former President Sankara, notably the fight against foreign domination and for endogenous development. The VDP were the symbol of this political orientation, which put the people at the heart of public policies. In Traoré's message

of 11 December 2022, he declared: ‘Stay confident, stay united, stay mobilised behind the defence and security forces, stay united and mobilised behind our valiant VDP, and there is hope, because we will not give up. No, we will go to the end of this fight for the total independence of our homeland’ (Traoré 2022b). Traoré’s emphasis on domestic human resources to respond to conflict justified his expulsion of French soldiers who had been in the country since the Compaoré regime (Afrique Media 2023).

Conclusions

The empowerment and formalisation of armed civilian groups is not a foregone conclusion in contexts of limited military capacity to stop a protracted conflict. Traoré might have increased the funding, recruitment and weaponry of the army instead of allocating scarce funds for the salaries of armed civilians who had two weeks of military training. He might have deepened the regime’s ties with longstanding Western military partners with bases in the region. Or he could have followed the approaches of Presidents Kaboré and Damiba, who cautiously engaged with the SDGs. Instead, he forged a different path designed to build the regime’s legitimacy by expanding its territorial base and linking the regime to a national hero. In this article, we have drawn on the comparison of three Burkinabè regimes in one decade to argue that understanding the Traoré regime’s integration of SDGs requires attention to its need to build legitimacy.

The findings of this case study apply beyond Burkina Faso. They highlight how authoritarian regimes seek to build legitimacy and that even consecutive military juntas in the same country may have different approaches to doing so. For theoretical approaches to formalisation, they indicate two ways in which empowering an informal civilian project might connect to the regime’s legitimacy: by expanding its territorial reach and referencing national images of legitimate authority. For studies of SDGs, they emphasise the importance of strategic policy decisions and a regime’s political calculations. Despite the similarities in the structural conditions and constraints of the three regimes, they implemented different approaches in relation to armed civilians, showing that integrating these groups is one of multiple legitimacy-building strategies in conflict settings. As a result, whether a regime relies on them may have more to do with their quest for legitimacy than their quest for security.

Competing interests. None.

Notes

1. Ignoring and informally engaging with such groups are other common strategies.
2. By comparison, military training is a minimum of 18 months.
3. The MPSR founding charter lifts the suspension of the constitution, with the exceptions of the constitutional rules that are contrary to their charter. The Transitional Charter similarly upholds the 1991 constitution, with the exception of any rules that are ‘incompatible with the transition’.
4. Damiba was member of Compaoré’s Presidential Security Regime (RSP) from 2003 to 2011 and trained at the Georges Namoano military academy in Pô with many other RSP members.

5. The January 2024 decree also includes significant increases in burial costs and life insurance, while ceasing support payments for gas and basic materials to VDP groups, stating that the groups 'would need to count on the support of local populations and would need to self-organise contributions among VDPs to assure their functioning'. Arrêté 2024-00059, Ouagadougou 10 January 2024.
6. The official Primature du Burkina Faso Facebook account released meeting photos and reported that the government told their partners to focus on the aspirations of the Burkinabè people by 'aiding in popular resistance in furnishing weapons and ammunition and in the financial support of the brave [VDP] fighters'.
7. This contrasts with the Sankara regime, which was hostile to traditional authorities. The Traoré regime did not emphasise the role of traditional leaders in its VDP policy.
8. His vote share in these elections was 53.46% and 57.74%, respectively, with his party obtaining parliamentary majorities of 55 (in 2015) and 56 (in 2020) of 127 deputies.
9. His public addresses dated 27 January, 16 February, 1 April and 4 September 2022.

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Cite this article: Saidou AK, Honig L (2025). Legitimising regimes and legalising self-defence groups: the case of Burkina Faso's VDPs. *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 1-21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X25000011>