Security as a campaign issue: programmatic mobilization in Burkina Faso’s 2020 elections

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ABSTRACT
Despite recent research suggesting that African parties engage with substantive issues more than was previously thought, the nature of issue mobilization and the drivers of programmatic appeals on the continent remain under-explored. This article analyses how presidential candidates addressed the issue of security during the 2020 election campaign in Burkina Faso – a country faced by a growing armed insurgency since 2016 – in order to understand the nature of these substantive appeals. Based upon the analysis of candidates’ manifestos, Facebook pages, media appearances, as well as direct observation of campaign meetings held in the thirteen regional capitals, we find that the crisis context favoured the mobilization of substantive issues related to security during the campaign. Furthermore, though all candidates addressed security in valence terms, opposition candidates also claimed controversial sub-issues in an attempt to use a broader range of campaign strategies than the incumbent. Finally, a specific question (whether to negotiate with armed groups or not) became a salient programmatic cleavage during the campaign, which can be explained by strategic choices made by opposition parties and the incumbent that contributed to the emergence of credible, coherent, and polarized policy options, providing real programmatic substance to the electoral campaign.

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Introduction
“Together, let’s save the Faso!” proclaimed a poster. “Building a secure Burkina together” promised another. In Burkina Faso, presidential and legislative elections were held on 22 November 2020 amidst threats of terrorist attacks and as armed groups controlled parts of the national territory. This contrasted sharply with the previous elections, held in 2015 after the ousting of long-standing president Blaise Compaoré: the first competitive polls in decades, these had raised hopes for the country’s democratic future. Yet, these hopes were dampened by the dramatic spread of
“jihadist” attacks across the country, and finally crushed in January 2022 when the military deposed the civilian regime in a coup.

Between 2016 and 2020, Burkina Faso experienced 1,567 attacks perpetrated by groups affiliated to Al-Qaida and the Islamic State, 600 of which occurred in 2020 alone. The insurgency killed nearly 5,000 people and led to the forced displacement of five percent of the population. This security crisis figured prominently in political debates surrounding the 2020 elections. The National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) was unable to undertake voter registration in 22 municipalities out of 351 because of insecurity. At least 300,000 voters were disenfranchised – either because they were displaced or because their polling station remained closed due to security threats. The government had anticipated this scenario by adopting legislation allowing results to be upheld even if polling could not go ahead in parts of the country. In some regions, campaigning was restricted to urban centres as it was deemed too dangerous to venture into rural areas where insurgents operated. Party manifestoes, campaign billboards, and public debates gave prominence to security issues.

This article analyses how presidential candidates mobilized around the security question(s) during the 2020 campaign, demonstrates that political parties and candidates engaged with substantive issues more than is generally assumed, and explains the emergence of an unexpected programmatic cleavage between security policy options.

Though electoral mobilization in Africa has long been predominantly analysed in non-programmatic terms – for example with a focus on ethno-clientelist appeals – recent work has shown that parties and candidates do talk about issues meaningfully. Jaimie Bleck and Nicolas van de Walle demonstrated that political parties engage with substantive issues during campaigns, while Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch, and Justin Willis argued that clientelist and programmatic appeals can co-exist, as candidates call upon different moral registers depending upon their audience. Carl LeVan found that the 2015 presidential campaign in Nigeria revolved around substantive issues such as the economy, corruption, and insecurity, while land issues are regularly addressed by candidates in Uganda and Tanzania.

However, the fact that candidates talk about substantive issues does not necessarily mean they make programmatic appeals. As Bleck and van de Walle argued, issue mobilization tends to be done through valence appeals rather than distinctive positions: candidates agree on the necessity to pursue a certain policy, and try to convince voters that they are the best placed to implement it, therefore not creating programmatic cleavages. Indeed, Herbert Kitschelt and Yi-ting Wang remind us that programmatic politics require parties to have coherent, salient, and credible policy positions, but also “enough political ‘polarization’ for parties to take opposite positions on relevant issues”. Bleck and van de Walle have also pointed out how parties tended to leave some important issues “unclaimed” despite their appeal among voters, arguing that this was due to these parties’ inexperience, similar backgrounds, and undefined constituencies. LeVan similarly found that during Nigeria’s 2015 elections, social issues were mostly ignored by the main candidates.

What drives parties and candidates’ choice to make policy appeals or not, and in what circumstances programmatic cleavages emerge, remain largely unanswered questions. Urbanization and the growth of a wealthy middle class have been expected to foster a rise of programmatic appeals, yet Noah Nathan argues that in reality, Ghanaian parties experiencing these dynamics continued to cater to patronage-seeking voters.
rather than shifting to programmatic appeals. Previous research has shown that opposition parties tend to make more policy claims because they have less to lose, while incumbent can rely on state resources to support patronage-based campaigning.\textsuperscript{13} Small parties in dominant party systems are more likely to make niche appeals to minority constituents.\textsuperscript{14} Why programmatic cleavages emerge in some settings and not others remains unclear.

In this article, we contribute to these enquiries through an in-depth analysis of how candidates in a particular election mobilized around a single issue of concern. The 2020 elections in Burkina Faso provided a suitable case study. Despite unequal resources between the incumbent, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, and his challengers – which made his re-election likely – the elections were competitive. The presence of a healthy press and vocal civil society fostered a lively electoral campaign. Clientelism is undeniably an important feature of Burkinabè elections.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, this does not generally preclude candidates from also engaging in substantive issues. Burkina Faso is also a comparatively under-studied case in the field of African studies.

We focus on the specific but multi-pronged issue of (in)security, which was ranked as a top priority of concern by 56% of Burkinabè citizens in 2019.\textsuperscript{16} “Security” can have a broad meaning, both in the literature and for voters.\textsuperscript{17} Our focus here (as was that of the candidates during the campaign) is on the ongoing armed insurgency, the consequent rise of insecurity across the country, and the government’s response to this crisis. We analyse how candidates address this security crisis in broad terms, as well as how they discuss more specific sub-issues that have dominated the political debates on the crisis in recent years. These include the creation of self-defence groups, the increased ethnic tensions and stigmatization of certain groups, the alleged abuses committed by security forces in their anti-terrorist operations, and the presence of foreign troops.

Disaggregating the topic of security as such allows us to demonstrate that candidates can use both valence appeals and distinct positions, and that traditionally unclaimed issues can become claimed – and even form the basis of political cleavages – in a context of crisis. In doing so, this article contributes to a growing debate over the nature of electoral mobilization and programmatic politics in sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.\textsuperscript{18}

This article is structured in the following manner. After describing our methodology, we place the 2020 Burkinabè elections in context. Our analysis of presidential candidates’ campaigning around this topic is then laid out in three parts. First, we show that all candidates used valence appeals regarding the security crisis in broad terms. Second, we argue that opposition candidates did claim controversial sub-issues, fuelling policy discussions during the campaign. Finally, we analyse why a particular issue (negotiating (or not) with armed groups) unexpectedly fostered a programmatic cleavage during the election. A brief conclusion summarizes our findings.

**Methodology**

This article is based upon qualitative research conducted during the official campaign period in Burkina Faso, running from 30 October to 21 November 2020. We combined discourse analysis and observation. This combination of sources, including a variety of campaign materials and mediums, allows us to paint a full picture of candidates’ mobilization strategies, from the programmatically detailed but little-circulated manifestoes to the more influential, but vaguer campaign rallies.
First, we analysed all 13 candidates’ campaign manifesto, focusing on the sections addressing (in)security issues and related themes, such as national cohesion or reconciliation. Second, we analysed how candidates addressed these issues on traditional media – focusing on “Un candidat, un programme”, an in-depth interview of each candidate broadcast on the public channel Radiodiffusion-Télévision du Burkina (RTB) between 7 and 19 November 2020, and the public debate broadcast by the private television channel BF1 on 15 November 2020 involving seven candidates – and on social media – focusing on Facebook, the social media platform most widely used in Burkina Faso, by collecting security-related posts on candidates’ official page. Third, we observed the campaign meetings of all candidates in the thirteen regional capitals: Banfora, Bobo-Dioulasso, Dédougou, Dori, Fada N’Gourma, Gaoua, Kaya, Koudougou, Manga, Ouagadougou, Ouahigouya, Tenkodogo, and Ziniaré. This allowed us to collect data on whether and how security issues were addressed by the candidate and other speakers at these campaign events. Finally, we observed the campaign posters displayed in the main streets of the capital, Ouagadougou.

This data was collected with support from research assistants and reported into templates created for each type of source, allowing for a systematic process. These reports were then categorized (type of source, candidate, and, for campaign meetings, location) and “coded” thematically by the authors, using a combination of manual methods and a Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QSR NVivo 12). This involved some binary coding (was security addressed or not?) and thematic coding. This allowed us to identify patterns in terms of what issues were addressed more than others, what type of candidates adopted which types of strategies, what mediums were used to address different types of issues, and to interpret these patterns. The methods and data used for this article are further detailed in an online appendix (see Supplemental File).

Burkina Faso’s 2020 elections in context

Burkina Faso’s recent political history has involved a popular insurrection that ousted long-standing President Blaise Compaoré in 2014, the spread of “jihadist” armed violence across the country since 2016, and most recently a coup d’état that deposed President Kaboré in January 2022.

The 2020 elections were the second national polls held since Compaoré’s ousting in 2014. In power since 1987, he had survived the political liberalization epitomized by the creation of the Fourth Republic in 1991. His semi-authoritarian regime, in which formally democratic institutions coexisted with authoritarian practices, was characterized by a hegemonic ruling party, the Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP), weak opposition parties, and uncompetitive elections. Yet, his latest attempt to amend constitutional term limits prompted unprecedented resistance, leading to his resignation in October 2014 and a one-year political transition. General elections were held in November 2015, bringing to power a former cadre of Compaoré’s CDP who had defected to the opposition shortly before the insurrection, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré of the Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès (MPP), and forced the CDP and its former main opponent, the Union pour le Progrès et le Changement (UPC) to cohabit in the political opposition.

Historically, electoral mobilization in Burkina Faso has been largely driven by vote-buying, clientelism, and personal proximity, rather than programmatic politics. Most
parties adopt an official ideology, creating a real (if not very electorally salient) cleavage between those espousing social democracy (e.g. CDP, MPP and “Sankarist” parties25) and those promoting liberalism (e.g. UPC, ADF/RDA), though in practice, the positions of parties and candidates are rarely distinguishable on ideological grounds.26 Inter-party alliances regularly cut across this cleavage, both among the political majority and in the opposition,27 and the largest parties are considered catch-all parties.28 The MPP inherited many of the advantages of the one-party dominant system crafted during Compaoré’s tenure, including local structures – which shifted from the CDP to the MPP – and access to state resources, with small parties gravitating around it.

The campaign messaging of the ruling party (previously the CDP, then the MPP) has tended to focus on inaugurating or promising developmental projects, drawing on large resources and the control of state institutions.29 Meanwhile, opposition parties, with fewer resources to spend, often talked about historical or moral values, and craft messages of political renewal and change.30 While campaigning for legislative elections heavily revolves around local ties and clientelist appeals, the presidential campaign – a two-round majority system – usually involves some substantive issue mobilization, combined with clientelist appeals.

Thirteen candidates competed in the 2020 presidential election, including Kaboré, who ran for a second term. While Kaboré enjoyed an incumbency advantage, the election was – to some extent – more competitive than the 2015 polls. Two prominent opposition candidates were challenging his re-election: Zéphirin Diabré of the UPC, the runner-up in the 2015 elections, and Eddie Komboïgo of the CDP. A controversial lustration law adopted by the transition authorities had barred Compaoré’s old party from fielding a presidential candidate in 2015, but the CDP had still retained a sizable parliamentary group in the National Assembly. This time, the CDP was able to fully participate in the election. With Compaoré himself still in neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire, and some of his closest allies in prison for their role in an attempted coup in 2015, CDP elites saw the 2020 elections as an opportunity to regain power, avoid further legal troubles, and ensure their political survival. For the MPP and its allies, a return of the CDP was perceived as a threat to their own future and safety.

Other candidates included old political figures of the Compaoré era such as Ablassé Ouédraogo (a former minister who joined the opposition in 2011 and ran for President in 2015) and Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo31 (who served as Prime Minister in the 1990s, and failed to obtain the CDP ticket in 2020). Yacouba Isaac Zida, a military figure who served as Prime Minister during the 2014–2015 political transition and has been in exile in Canada since 2017 when corruption charges were levied against him, ran in absentia on behalf of the Mouvement Patriotique pour le Salut (MPS). A few political newcomers also participated in the election, such as Yéli Monique Kam of the Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Burkina (MRB), the only female candidate. Kaboré was comfortably re-elected in the first round, while Komboïgo’s CDP supplanted the UPC as the main opposition party (Table 1).

While in previous elections it was not uncommon for major presidential candidates to produce a campaign manifesto, in 2022 all thirteen candidates published a political programme addressing major aspects of concern to voters. The security crisis, in particular, had become an issue of national interest, illustrated by anti-government protests denouncing Kaboré’s handling of the security issue in 2019. Considering the President’s prerogative in the matters of national security and territorial integrity,
popular expectations were high regarding this issue. We now analyse how this issue was addressed during the presidential campaign.

Security as a valence issue

During the 2020 campaign, the theme of (in)security was given a prominent position in all presidential aspirants’ manifestos. The topic was also addressed in the quasi-totality of campaign meetings observed, with the exception of a few “proximity campaign” events focused on very local issues. Security also featured prominently in most candidates’ Facebook page, especially among front-runners: a third of posts by CDP’s Komboïgo, and a quarter of those by incumbent Kaboré, addressed security.

From a wide angle, the security crisis was treated as a valence issue. Candidates’ analysis of the problem fell into an incumbent/opposition cleavage consisting (for the opposition) in blaming the “poor governance” of the incumbent, Kaboré, or (for the latter) in shifting the blame to the previous regime dominated by Komboïgo’s CDP. Manifestos and campaign promises offered a broad consensus centred around strengthening the capacity of security forces. One of the key ways candidates attempted to distinguish themselves was by highlighting their personal qualities that would allow them to better implement these vague promises.

All candidates talked about the security crisis in pessimistic terms, acknowledging the dire reality faced by populations. “The country is plunging into an abyss”, Barry claimed in his manifesto, while Diabré’s main campaign slogan was “Save the Faso”. A few candidates analysed the factors driving the crisis. Small candidates were more prone to addressing root causes. Some argued that regional disparities were fostering frustrations and fuelling instability: Gilbert Ouédraogo stated in his manifesto that “it is no coincidence that the East and the Sahel, which are among the least developed regions in Burkina Faso, are among the most unstable regions in terms of security”. These disparities are particularly salient in the Sahel, which prompted several candidates to reaffirm this region’s belonging to Burkina Faso.

### Table 1. Results of the 2020 presidential elections in Burkina Faso.

| Name                  | Political party                                      | First round |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Tahirou Barry         | Mouvement pour la Changement et la Renaissance (MCR)  | 62,231      |
| Zéphirin Diabré       | Union pour le Progrès et le Changement (UPC)         | 354,988     |
| Ambroise Farama       | Organisation des Peuples Africains – Burkina Faso (OPA-BF) | 25,916     |
| Roch M. C. Kaboré     | Mouvement du Peuple pour le Progrès (MPP)            | 1,645,229   |
| Yéli Monique Kam       | Mouvement pour la Renaissance du Burkina (MRB)       | 15,322      |
| Eddie Komboïgo        | Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (CDP)       | 442,693     |
| Ablassé Ouédraogo     | Le Faso Autrement                                   | 51,461      |
| N. Ouédraogo          | Démocratique Africain (ADF-RDA)                     | 95,661      |
| Kadré                 | Agir Ensemble                                       | 20,068      |
| D. Ouédraogo          | Vision Burkina – Parti Pacifiste                    | 40,724      |
| Do P. K. Sessouma     | Soleil d’Avenir (SA)                                | 6,442       |
| Abdoulaye Soma        | Independent                                          | 43,537      |
| Aimé                  | Démocratique Africain (ADF-RDA)                     | 1.81        |
| C. Tasselbedo         | Mouvement Patriotique pour le Salut (MPS)            | 0.91        |
| Yacouba I. Zida       | Mouvement Patriotique pour le Salut (MPS)            | 0.54        |

Note: Total number of valid votes: 2,849,535. Turnout: 50.22%. Source: Constitutional Council of Burkina Faso.
One small candidate, Ambroise Farama, had a distinctive position and offered an alternative diagnostic of the security crisis in anti-imperialist terms, blaming “foreign powers” for “financing terrorism” and nurturing it through arm sales.

Prominent opposition candidates such as Diabré and Komboïgo focused more on the incumbent’s inability to solve the security crisis, rather than on its root causes. Diabré’s manifesto denounced the MPP’s “chaotic” and “incompetent” government, and portrayed the incumbent, Kaboré, as “the first and greatest handicap in the fight against insecurity”. During his campaign meetings across the country, Komboïgo repeatedly denounced the government’s incapacity to identify attackers and effectively respond to the insurgency.

In contrast, the incumbent Kaboré rarely addressed the causes of insecurity. This was absent from his manifesto. On the few occasions he discussed those during campaign meetings, he suggested the armed insurgency was the result of political manoeuvres to make his presidency fail. During these rallies, local figures and campaign operatives also spoke out to shift the blame away from the President and his current government.

When it came to campaign promises about responding to the crisis, most candidates found consensus on two broad themes. On the one hand, all candidates committed to strengthening the capacity of security forces, though the approaches and logic behind it sometimes differed. The incumbent, Kaboré, argued that the army’s lack of training and equipment was due to the previous regime, who favoured an elite unit loyal to Compaoré (the Régiment de Sécurité Présidentielle, disbanded after they attempted a coup against the transition authorities in September 2015) to the detriment of the rest of the army. In his manifesto, Kaboré committed to increasing the number of troops and providing them with more material means and more training.

Most of his opponents made similarly vague commitments in this regard, with a few exceptions. One of the main opposition candidates, Diabré, provided a more specific plan, which included the recruitment of 30,000 reservists the first year, and an increase to the defence and security budget to reach 3% of the GDP in 2022. Barry also included a precise financial commitment in his manifesto but without specifying how this would be mobilized or spent. Soma suggested making military service compulsory for all young Burkinabe.

In line with this general valence approach to the theme of security, most candidates attempted to convince voters that their personal qualities made them a good fit to solve the crisis. The most prominent dimension candidates highlighted during their campaign was their professional expertise. Zida’s campaign team promoted his military background as a source of relevant expertise. He himself argued that he had personal experience in the field of military intelligence during a TV interview. His party’s president, Augustin Loada, further said during a campaign meeting in the capital: “We know that the first concern of Burkinabè people is security, and Zida, as a soldier, is the ideal candidate to bring a solution to this issue”. Independent candidate Aimé Claude Tassembedo, who has never served in the military but studied in a prestigious military school – the Kadiogo military prytaneum – stated during a TV interview: “I am a prytaneum alumnus. As such, I am particularly interested in the military question. It is part of my life story”.

Other candidates used their international career as a source of legitimacy. Diabré, who worked as Deputy Director of the United Nations’ Development Programme (UNDP), said during a meeting: “I spent some time at the United Nations, and I
think that weapons only cannot win against terrorism.” Ablassé Ouédraogo also highlighted his professional background as a negotiation expert to criticize the government’s position. Kam, the only female candidate, built her legitimacy stating: “I am a mother, I approach the issue of security as a mother.” In a meeting, she further spoke of the security crisis in similar terms: “We know that our children are dying because of terrorists sowing insecurity” and asked voters to elect her because “[she] know[s] the pain of a mother who loses her child.”

Our research shows that, as expected, the topic of security was addressed by all candidates and was a key issue during the campaign. It also confirms existing theories that valence appeals were prominent, with candidates mostly committing to similar policies (increasing the resources allocated to fighting the insurgency) and presenting themselves as the best suited to carry it out (based upon their professional or personal background). The topic of security was also used in an attempt to discredit adversaries: opposition candidates largely criticized Kaboré’s inability to manage the crisis, tapping into popular frustrations, while the government shifted that blame to their predecessor and main challenger (the CDP).

The claiming of controversial issues by opposition parties

We observed that while the incumbent predominantly used valence appeals, opposition candidates also tackled important and controversial issues related to the security crisis. These include military cooperation with France; the role of ethnic self-defence groups and civilian auxiliaries; human rights abuses committed by security forces; and discrimination against the Peul community.

The role of France in the Sahel has been the subject of controversies. The French army has several military bases across the region, including one in Burkina Faso since 2010. The Barkhane force, launched in 2014, has operated in Burkina Faso several times upon requests from the Burkinabé government. A section of public opinion is critical of these foreign interventions, illustrated by protests against terrorism and the presence of Barkhane in the country, only a year before the elections. Despite the controversy, this remains a sensitive topic that candidates rarely address in their manifestoes or campaign speeches.

Yet, several opposition candidates did raise this issue during the campaign, with distinct motivations and positions. Farama, a leftist candidate whose programme defended a “revolutionary state” and pledged to dismantle the “neo-colonial state”, took a clear position in favour of the withdrawal of foreign military bases from the country. He portrayed terrorism as a consequence of Western imperialism and believed that only a sovereign approach could help curbing it. Barry, a more moderate candidate, also insisted on endogenous solutions and showed his scepticism toward international cooperation in this area. In the same vein, Ablassé Ouédraogo advocated a security policy “specific to us and not turned towards the outside”. Diabré, one of President Kaboré’s main challengers, was more nuanced and “realistic” and argued that the country’s strategic autonomy must be considered over the long term. While he found it “embarrassing” that the former colonial power was assisting Burkina Faso militarily, he did not envisage an immediate withdrawal of foreign soldiers from the Sahel.

Another controversial issue has been that of the role and actions of Koglweogo vigilante groups and the Homeland Defence Volunteers (Volontaire pour la Défense
The Koglweogo (meaning “guardians of the bush” in Mooré) are self-organized groups that emerged in the 2000s as a way to respond to growing insecurity in rural and semi-urban areas, and to the State’s inability to tackle it.\textsuperscript{55} The majority of Koglweogo members belong to the Moaga ethnic group, the largest in the country. Kaboré’s government allowed their expansion across the country and cultivated good relationships with their leaders and the traditional chieftaincy backing them, raising fears that these groups could be used to fuel electoral violence.\textsuperscript{56} Their modes of operation have raised debates on human rights and social cohesion.\textsuperscript{57} Meanwhile, the VDP are groups of citizens recruited and trained by the army since 2019 to assist in the defence of their territory and to act as security auxiliaries.

Zida, the only candidate with a military background, took the strongest position on this issue. While accepting the principle of citizen participation in security efforts, his manifesto clearly gave the state’s security forces a monopoly on arms and pledged the suppression of vigilante groups and militias.\textsuperscript{58} Other opposition candidates made more moderate propositions, focusing on a reorientation of the missions of the vigilante groups to gathering intelligence, securing economic sites, and protecting the environment.\textsuperscript{59} These weak positions illustrate the sensitivity of this issue: while their actions were seen by some stakeholders as a threat to national cohesion – illustrated by accusations from Peul citizens in the East region that they were excluded from joining the VDP\textsuperscript{60} – these groups enjoyed undeniable popularity among rural populations – the bulk of the voters – as they were perceived as more effective than security forces.\textsuperscript{61}

A third controversial issue seized by some opposition candidates was the alleged abuses committed by security forces in the name of fighting terrorism, an almost taboo topic in public debate. The army has been accused on several occasions by national and foreign human rights organizations of abuses against civilians, including cases of arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial killings, and torture.\textsuperscript{62} Farama discussed on TV the alleged abuses by the army and committed to stop and sanction any violations.\textsuperscript{63} In his manifesto, Diabré defended a reform of the military justice system in order to “subject the military to the rules of criminal law” and tackle human rights violations by the army.\textsuperscript{64}

A fourth issue related to those of self-defence groups and abuses by security forces is that of ethnic stigmatization, particularly against the Peul community, which has long complained of discrimination.\textsuperscript{65} Since the start of the insurgency, Peul citizens have been perceived as complicit with armed groups, and have suffered from arbitrary arrests, ostracization, and collective punishments. The most significant incident of the sort occurred in January 2019 in the village of Yirgou, when, in reprisal for the assassination of the village chief by unknown assailants, the local Koglweogo carried out a massacre of Peul inhabitants, killing up to 216 people.\textsuperscript{66}

Most opposition candidates recognized and denounced the existence of stigma against the Peul community. Farama, who as a lawyer represents the families of the Yirgou victims, pledged to protect any threatened community and to fight stigmatization\textsuperscript{67} – though his campaign discourses were noticeably more moderate than his past declarations as the families’ lawyer, in which he claimed the massacre amounted to a “genocide”.\textsuperscript{68} Sessouma criticized the state’s abandonment of the Sahel region and denounced the marginalization of the Peul, and pledged that the Yirgou killing would not go unpunished and that the families of the victims would be compensated.\textsuperscript{69} Komboïgo promised that “no Peul would be stigmatized”.\textsuperscript{70} Moreover, members of the
Peul community were visible and took to the stage at certain meetings, such as those of Komboïgo and Diabré.71

Beyond these positions, some candidates advocated a paradigmatic shift in the management of ethnic diversity, challenging the universalist ideals entrenched among Francophone African elites. For example, Diabré proposed the creation of a border guard corps whose members would be recruited from among the local populations,72 in a departure from the current recruiting model done on a purely national basis. Similarly, Kadré D. Ouédraogo called for building security governance based on “local perspectives”.73 Sessouma’s manifesto included a rotation of power between regions,74 while Soma suggested his government would count thirteen ministers, each hailing from one of the country’s thirteen regions.75 These small candidates injected innovative ideas for deep structural reforms of the institutions as an attempt to respond to the feeling of frustration seen as fuelling the rise of violent extremism.

Our research thus shows that controversial issues, while ignored by the incumbent, have been claimed by opposition candidates during the electoral campaign. Unsurprisingly, small candidates, who were unlikely to win, seized on the most sensitive topics (e.g. human rights abuses committed by security forces) and made the boldest proposals. Sessouma ran on a particularly unconventional platform built upon pacifiﬁsm, and promising the dismantling of the army and the reallocation of the military budget to social programmes and development projects.76 These candidates have less to lose by making bold propositions – as they have no realistic prospect of gaining power – and thus attempt to distinguish themselves with niche appeals. More serious challengers, such as Diabré and Komboïgo, had to be more pragmatic and, therefore, more moderate. Still, they did address some of these issues – as opposed to President Kaboré. Opposition parties are unable to rely on clientelist appeals and therefore have an interest in addressing issues that resonate with citizens.

The campaign medium used by these candidates to claim these issues is significant, however: they overwhelmingly addressed these topics either in their manifesto – whose audience is extremely limited – and during TV debates and interviews – where journalists played a part in raising these topics. During campaign meetings, candidates tended to focus on valence appeals (with the exception of one unexpected hot topic we will turn to next: whether to negotiate with armed groups). This suggests that the targeted audience of these appeals was rather the urban, educated intelligentsia – more likely to read manifestos and watch political programmes on TV – than poorer voters in either rural or (peri-)urban areas. This echoes previous research showing that parties and candidates can use different types of appeals targeted to different types of audiences, and combine a mix of strategies,77 but also shows that it is opposition parties who tend to use such versatile approaches, while the incumbent mostly relies on non-programmatic appeals (either clientelist or valence ones) to retain votes.

**Negotiating with armed groups? The emergence of a programmatic cleavage**

One security-related question sparked the greatest controversy in the election campaign: to negotiate with “terrorists”, or not. This issue must be analysed taking into consideration the evolution of state responses to political Salafism in Burkina Faso. As described by Sebastian Elischer, during his presidency, Compaoré made concessions to external jihadi organizations based and active in neighbouring Mali and
ignored the rise of radical preachers establishing a presence in the country from 2009 onwards. With Compaoré and key figures of his inner circle either in exile or in prison after 2014–2015, the quid-pro-quo with armed groups based in Mali fell through, while a homegrown jihadi Salafi group (Ansarul Islam) became active at the end of 2016. The election of Kaboré coincided with the onset of attacks on Burkinabè territory, resulting in a strategic shift away from tolerating domestic jihadi Salafism to a militaristic approach of indiscriminate repression (despite a very slow and incremental reform of the overall defence and security apparatus). Though the circumstances faced by Compaoré’s CDP before 2014 and Kaboré’s MPP from 2016 differed significantly, this shift in state response constituted an important policy difference that could be attributed to – and claimed by – these political parties.

Still, the centrality of this question during the campaign was unexpected, as this issue originally did not feature prominently in public debates or electoral manifestos. The CDP’s Komboïgo was the only candidate to include an explicit position on this issue in his electoral platform: “Weapons alone will not be able to defeat terrorism. This is why all avenues must be explored, including negotiating with rebel groups so as to achieve disarming them and reinserting them into society”. Contrary to other sensitive topics, Komboïgo raised this particular issue during campaign meetings. This prompted other candidates to respond, while the media played an important part in making it a central issue in electoral debates. The issue of negotiations created a clear-cut programmatic cleavage between, on the one hand, the incumbent (Kaboré), and, on the other, his major opponents (Komboïgo and Diabré) as well as smaller candidates. Only a few minor candidates remained ambivalent and offered cautious commitments to explore “all options on the table”. Komboïgo, the CDP candidate, regularly raised this talking point in his campaign meetings and on TV, arguing that negotiating was not “a sign of weakness” but rather “diplomacy”. Though he reassured voters that the country’s territorial sovereignty and secular nature would not be up for discussion, Komboïgo committed to “identify[ing] what the terrorists want and their needs in order to find common ground”. To succeed in the negotiations, he recommended involving former President Blaise Compaoré – who has extensive experience acting as mediator across West Africa. Komboïgo’s strategy consisted of connecting the issues of security and reconciliation, and highlighting the role Compaoré could play in such negotiations. He was also trying to tap into popular frustrations with the deteriorating security context, and the nostalgia for the former regime exhibited by part of the population.

Other opposition candidates had not included this issue in their political programme, but took a decisive stand in favour of negotiations during the campaign. Diabré, the other main challenger to Kaboré’s re-election, stated that “weapons alone cannot fight terrorism; we need new ideas, new strategies, and to be smart”. In another meeting, he claimed that “all wars end with discussions, with negotiations” and that should he be elected, he would “ask to meet the boss of those who cause troubles to find out what they want and to get it over with”. Alassé Ouédraogo, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs during Compaoré’s regime and took part in the mediation efforts he led, also defended the negotiations. He framed it as part of national reconciliation, a “prerequisite for security”, and proposed to organize an “inclusive national conference, with all Burkinabè, including terrorists”. Sessouma proposed a precise timetable by committing to securing the country in 18 months. Kam intended to
set up a “chamber of the wise” made up of legal figures in order to negotiate peace with the armed groups.  

On the contrary, Kaboré reaffirmed his opposition to any form of negotiation in all his public positions. He was the only candidate to defend this hard line on the topic. Though he was open to setting up programmes aimed at de-radicalizing Burkinabè youth involved in armed groups, he repeatedly excluded any negotiation with the leaders of these groups. In some meetings, Kaboré criticized his opponents defending the negotiations, presenting them as possible collaborators of armed groups: “Those who say that if they gain power they will negotiate with the terrorists know the terrorists, they are friends.” Since taking power, Kaboré has always accused former President Compaoré and his allies of being complicit with armed groups. Refusing to negotiate with armed groups can be analysed through the prism of his conflicting relationship with Compaoré, especially as the latter’s capacity to negotiate with armed groups in the region is widely recognized. It was also in line with Kaboré’s existing strategy to respond to the crisis: a firm, militaristic approach (though after the elections, Prime Minister Christophe Dabiré stated that negotiation was not excluded).

The programmatic cleavage that emerged over the issue of negotiations noticeably created a fracture line between the incumbent and the opposition, rather than reflecting ideological differences. Kaboré’s MPP and Komboïgo’s CDP have similar historical roots – the MPP’s elite having served for many years as CDP cadres during Compaoré’s regime – and share a social-democratic party line. Furthermore, candidates’ position on the negotiation issue did not always fit with other parts of their agenda, particularly around military cooperation, both with neighbouring countries and with France. France has repeatedly rejected the idea of negotiations with armed groups in Mali. Komboïgo and Diabré defended the negotiation option, but paradoxically did not advocate for a shift in diplomatic strategies. On the other hand, anti-imperialist candidate Farama, a strong critic of French interventionism in the region, was among the few candidates who did not seize this issue.

The negotiation issue constituted a clear programmatic cleavage between the incumbent and the opposition – something that had not emerged in previous elections in Burkina Faso. The security crisis made security-related issues salient in campaign debates and led candidates to address these issues. The CDP made the strategic choice to raise the question of negotiations and to take a policy position markedly different from the government’s existing approach, drawing upon its previous government experience – under Compaoré – to build legitimacy for their strategy as well as for their ability to carry it out. This issue became polarizing because the incumbent chose to address this issue as well – contrary to other controversial topics which they ignored. Kaboré and his party, the MPP, responded by taking a position clearly distinct from the CDP, aligned with the militaristic approach they were already implementing. Most other candidates then seized on the issue, siding with the CDP and thus contributing to the clear-cut cleavage between the incumbent and the opposition – though without the same credibility as the CDP.

Conclusion

The 2020 electoral campaign in Burkina Faso provided an opportunity to analyse how candidates mobilized around a particularly salient issue – that of security. The campaign was marked by an unprecedented discussion of important issues and policy
options, that in turn fed political debates beyond the election and influenced governmental action.

Our research consolidates the increasingly accepted view that African elections can be “rich in policy discussions and issues appeals”⁹⁵ Yet, we refine our collective understanding of the nature of this type of appeals, and move beyond the valence vs unclaimed issue dichotomy introduced by Bleck and van de Walle. Our first finding is that the same campaign issue can be mobilized in different ways by parties and candidates. In Burkina Faso’s 2020 elections, all presidential candidates addressed the issue of security using valence appeals. They tended to agree on a general diagnostic and overall need to allocate more resources to address the crisis, and attempted to convince voters that they were the best placed to do it based upon their professional and personal credentials.

Yet, disaggregating this issue allows us to paint a more complex picture, and to identify diverging strategies by different parties. We find that the incumbent appears more prone to leaving controversial sub-issues “unclaimed”, as their incumbent status and access to state resources allow them to rely on clientelist and valence appeals more effectively than the opposition. In contrast, opposition parties seize these sensitive issues to feed public debates and gain credibility – confirming a trend previously highlighted by other scholars.⁹⁶ Minor parties are able to make bolder proposal as they attempt to make niche appeals to voters, and have less to lose than bigger challengers. This shows that sensitive issues that resonate with voters can be used by candidates in mobilizing voters, which was previously illustrated in other cases such as Uganda and Tanzania.⁹⁷

Our research also highlights an interesting case of substantive appeals leading to the emergence of a programmatic cleavage as different candidates make distinct, alternative, and credible policy proposals. Such a cleavage emerged during Burkina Faso’s electoral campaign around the question of negotiating with armed groups or not. Contrary to other issues which were “claimed” by opposition parties but failed to create a cleavage, that question was picked up by the incumbent as well as opposition candidates (with clearly opposed positions), and was addressed using both more exclusive and more popular campaign mediums: candidates spoke about this issue not only in TV interviews (where journalists played a part in steering the political debate) but also in campaign rallies across the country. The fact that an opposition party (the CDP) proposed a policy option clearly different from the government’s existing approach (negotiating with armed groups), concerning an issue of top concern to voters (the security crisis), and with sufficient credibility to carry out this policy (based upon the CDP’s own track-record when in government) made this issue different from others, and explains the emergence of a programmatic cleavage. It was therefore a combination of context and parties’ strategic choices that enabled this cleavage to emerge and become salient during the campaign.

Our research cannot establish to what extent this cleavage influenced voters’ behaviour.⁹⁸ We know security was the top concern among Burkinabè citizens, and can therefore assume it was significant in the political debate. The CDP’s strategy to campaign on their negotiation policy did not prove successful, as Kaboré was re-elected. This contrasts with the All Progressives Congress (APC)’s 2015 electoral victory against incumbent Goodluck Jonathan in Nigeria, which LeVan attributes to their successful mobilization of economic issues during the campaign. But beyond the electoral impact of programmatic campaigning, the Burkinabè case also raises further questions
about the longer-term impact of this issue mobilization on government policies. The CDP remained in the opposition, but the other main challenger (the UPC) joined the ruling coalition after the 2020 elections, with Zéphirin Diabré appointed as State Minister for Reconciliation, while the government indicated a policy shift and opened the door to negotiations. These findings nuance and expand our understanding of electoral campaigns and party strategies in Burkina Faso and across sub-Saharan Africa, and suggest programmatic politics remain an under-estimated feature of electoral politics on the continent.

Notes

1. Figures obtained from ACLED (see Raleigh et al., “Introducing ACLED”) and the UNHCR (https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/bfa).
2. “Burkina/Elections.”
3. Figures shared by the CENI’s President on television on election day.
4. Kramon, Money for Votes; Koter, Beyond Ethnic Politics.
5. Bleck and van de Walle, Electoral Politics in Africa.
6. Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis, The Moral Economy of Elections.
7. LeVan, Contemporary Nigerian Politics.
8. Meinert and Kjær, “Land Belongs to the People of Uganda”; Schlimmer, “Talking ‘Land Grabs’ Is Talking Politics.”
9. Bleck and van de Walle, “Valence Issues in African Elections.”
10. Kitschelt and Wang, “Programmatic Parties and Party Systems.”
11. Bleck and van de Walle, “Parties and Issues in Francophone West Africa.”
12. LeVan, Contemporary Nigerian Politics, 97–9.
13. Bleck and van de Walle, Electoral Politics in Africa, 214; LeVan, Contemporary Nigerian Politics, 103.
14. Greene, “A Resource Theory of Single-Party Dominance.”
15. Kibora, “Corruption, clientélisme et démocratie locale.”
16. Afrobarometer data, Round 8, Burkina Faso, 2019.
17. Hagberg et al., Sécurité Par Le Bas.
18. Cheeseman and Paget, “Programmatic Politics in Comparative Perspective”; Elischer, “Measuring and Comparing Party Ideology.”
19. Saidou, “Jeunes et Réseaux Sociaux.”
20. Loada, “Blaise Compaoré.”
21. Hilgers and Mazzocchetti, Révoltes et oppositions; Harsch, Burkina Faso.
22. Bertrand, “Nothing Will Be as Before?”
23. Ariotti, “Election note.”
24. Stroh, “The Power of Proximity”; Kibora, “Corruption, clientélisme et démocratie locale au Burkina Faso”; Hagberg, “The Rise and Fall of a Political Party.”
25. “Sankarist” parties claim the legacy of former President Thomas Sankara, who led a revolutionary regime from 1983 to 1987 before being assassinated during a coup organized by Blaise Compaoré.
26. CGD, “Partis et Système de Partis Politiques au Burkina Faso”; Harsch, Burkina Faso, 135–7; Stroh, “Traces of Socialism in Burkina Faso’s Party System.”
27. Natielse, “Le Système Partisan Burkinabé Post-Insurrection,” 15.
28. Elischer, Political Parties in Africa, 208–10.
29. Harsch, Burkina Faso, 133.
30. Hagberg, “The Rise and Fall of a Political Party”; Bertrand, “The Role of Opposition Parties in Hybrid Regimes,” 144.
31. No relation. Ouédraogo is a common surname in Burkina Faso, illustrated by the fact that three candidates have this patronym. To avoid confusion, we systematically include the first name of these candidates throughout the article.
32. Barry, manifesto, 3.
33. “Faso” is officially used to designate the republican form of the state, and commonly used to refer to the country.
34. G. Ouédraogo, manifesto, 20.
35. Diabré, campaign meeting, Dori, November 4, 2020.
36. Diabré, manifesto, 82.
37. Kaboré, campaign meeting Dori, November 4, 2020.
38. See Sampana, “La Démilitarisation paradoxale du pouvoir.”
39. Diabré, manifesto, 97–8.
40. Barry, manifesto, 1.
41. Soma, campaign meeting, Ouahigouya, November 11, 2020.
42. Zida, TV interview, TV Oméga, November 11, 2020.
43. Zida, campaign meeting, Ouagadougou, November 2, 2020.
44. Tassembédo, TV interview, RTB, November 7, 2020.
45. Diabré, meeting, Banfora, November 18, 2020.
46. A. Ouédraogo, TV interview, RTB, November 10, 2020.
47. Kam, TV debate, BF1, November 15, 2020.
48. Kam, campaign meeting, Ouagadougou, November 5, 2020.
49. Douce, “Au Burkina Faso, un sentiment anti-français diffus.”
50. Farama, manifesto, 13.
51. Farama, TV debate, BF1, November 15, 2020.
52. Barry, TV interview, RTB, November 14, 2020; TV debate, BF1, November 15, 2020.
53. A. Ouédraogo, TV interview, RTB, November 10, 2020.
54. Diabré, TV interview, RTB, November 11, 2020.
55. Traoré, “L’Emergence des Koglweogo”; Hagberg, “Performing Tradition While Doing Politics.”
56. Lankoandé, “Burkina Faso: Casting a Shadow over the Polls?”
57. Leclercq and Matagne, “‘With or Without You’,” 12.
58. Zida, manifesto, 8.
59. Farama, manifesto, 14; Sessouma, TV interview, RTB, November 18, 2020; Komboïgo, TV interview, RTB, November 14, 2020; Diabré, TV interview, RTB, November 11, 2020.
60. Zutterling, “Armer les civils.”
61. Leclercq and Matagne, “‘With or Without You’,” 5; Lankoandé, “Burkina Faso: Casting a Shadow over the Polls?”
62. Human Rights Watch, “By Day We Fear the Army”; Mouvement Burkinabè des Droits des Hommes et des Peuples, “Que s’est-il passé à Kain-Ouro?”; Amnesty International, “They Executed Some.”
63. G. Ouédraogo, TV interview, RTB, November 14, 2020; Farama, TV debate, BF1, November 15, 2020.
64. Diabré, manifesto, 28; 96.
65. Diallo, “Les Pasteurs Nomades Au Burkina Faso.”
66. CENOZO, “Burkina Faso – Massacres de Yirgou.”
67. Farama, TV debate, BF1, November 15, 2020.
68. Ouédraogo, “Drame de Yirgou.”
69. Sessouma, TV interview, RTB, November 18, 2020.
70. Komboïgo, campaign meeting, Kaya, November 16, 2020.
71. Komboïgo, campaign meeting, Manga, November 15, 2020; Diabré, campaign meeting, Bobo Dioulasso, November 20, 2020.
72. Diabré, manifesto, 85.
73. K. Ouédraogo, manifesto, 10.
74. Sessouma, manifesto, 8.
75. Soma, manifesto, 7.
76. Sessouma, campaign meeting, Pissy, November 5, 2020; and TV interview, RTB, November 18, 2020.
77. Cheeseman, Lynch, and Willis, The Moral Economy of Elections.
78. Elischer, Salafism and Political Order in Africa, 170–71.
79. Saidou, “L’après-Compaoré au ‘concret’.”
80. Komboïgo, manifesto, 19.
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