



# BETWEEN REPRESSION AND LIBERATION

## The Changing Face of Civil Society in the Sahel States

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## Executive Summary

Socio-political transformations in the Sahel region of West Africa over the last decade have revitalized the role of civil society in shaping political processes in the region, making it an increasingly pressing and contested issue in the search for democratic consolidation. Civil society emerges as both a battleground and a bridge between power and resistance to it. Yet, two dominant and contradictory narratives have gained prominence about its prospects. On the one hand, there is the narrative of a “shrinking civic space” as presented on democracy scorecards. This narrative frames civil society as the silenced victim of state repression suffocating under authoritarianism. On the other hand, this unfolds the narrative of a “liberatory” awakening defended by neo-pan-Africanist social media discourses. This narrative imagines civil society as a willing partner of state actors, including military transitional governments, working together to reclaim sovereignty in a new fragmented, multi-polar emerging world order. The coexistence of these two narratives is nothing new, but their divergence has now reached the point where representing either one in isolation borders on the absurd. Such representations could be overly simplistic, failing to account for the nuanced, often paradoxical realities of civil society’s engagement with power. It is contended in this paper that the interaction between repression and liberation obscures the dynamic and evolving nature of civil society, which is characterized by inherent tensions and ambiguities.

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## Introduction

This paper examines the prospects for civil society in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, three Sahelian countries at the epicenter of a prolonged fight against terrorism, which have recently established a confederation while under military transitional governments. Conventionally, civil society is understood as “a set or system of self-organized intermediary groups that: 1) are relatively independent of both public authorities and private units of production and reproduction, that is, of firms and families; 2) are capable of deliberating about and taking collective actions in defense or promotion of their interests or passions; 3) do not seek to replace either state agents or private (re)producers or to accept responsibility for governing the polity as a whole; and 4) agree to act within pre-established rules of a “civil” nature, that is, conveying mutual respect.”<sup>1</sup> Stephen Orvis defined it as “a public sphere of formal or informal, collective activity autonomous from but recognizing the legitimate existence of the state.”<sup>2</sup> Without falling prey to a supposed African exceptionalism, it is safe to argue that in Africa, the prerogatives of civil society extends beyond the conceptual boundaries of this conventional definition. For instance, civil society does not restrict itself from seeking (unofficially) to replace state agents and govern the polity. Members of civil society have been called on (or have invited themselves) to play critical roles at the higher level of governance including at critical times such as transitional regimes including the current ones in all three countries under consideration. This paper aims to illuminate two pivotal questions. First, it asks how has civil society in the Sahel evolved since its role in sparking democratic change in the mid-1990s? Second, how do the youth bulge, media, and the political situation marked by the heightened violent extremism and military rule in the region influence the potential for a more vibrant and resilient civil society?

## Methodological Approach

This study takes a more cautious approach to the understanding of what constitutes civil society within the context of West Africa and the Sahel states (Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger) in particular. The contemporary Sahel represents a particularly fertile ground for such organizations, with a multitude of organized initiatives under the banner of “civil society.” It incorporates myriad interest groups that have mushroomed in every corner of society. This approach seeks to open the possibilities to include in the study the convergence of various constituted, organized actors who exert or exercise power. The analysis draws on the vast literature on civil society and political movements in West Africa, news reports, and civil society discourses. The documentary research is complemented by extended qualitative interviews with two select actors within and outside civil society in each one of the three countries.

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<sup>1</sup>Schmitter, Philippe C. “Civil Society East and West.” In *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Themes and Perspectives*, edited by Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu, and Hung-mao Tien, 239-262. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>Orvis, Stephen. 2001. “Civil Society in Africa or African Civil Society?” *A Decade of Democracy in Africa*, January, 17–38. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047401049\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047401049_003).

## The New Face of Civil Society in The Sahel

In the Sahel, the emergence of a formal pro-democracy civil society is intrinsically linked to the advent of neo-liberal democracy in the 1990s, forming associations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that championed democratic demands. The case of Burkina Faso is illustrative enough. Prior to the 1983 revolution, civil society was primarily composed of three key political forces: traditional chieftaincies, the Catholic Church, and trade unions.<sup>3</sup> These non-state political actors represent earlier post-colonial civil society and would provide the blueprint for formally registered civil society. They were also at the forefront of popular movements that saw the fall of early postcolonial dictators, military rulers, and single party leaders, paving the way to the democratic wave of the 1990s.

In Niger the protests by the Union of Nigerien Students (USN), the Union of Nigerien Workers' Unions, the Association of Nigerien Women, and others sparked a major political crisis that ultimately led to the convening of the Sovereign National Conference in July 1991.<sup>4</sup> However, these CSOs were not immune to manipulation for political purposes.<sup>5</sup>

This partially explains why civil society has always been deeply entwined with political issues because it has always since its inception been political, even when it claims an apolitical status. Since the 1990s, civil society has risen to become an indispensable political actor in the region; it played an instrumental role in the ouster of President Blaise Compaore in Burkina Faso in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, in all the three Sahelian countries of concern, civil society has a history of participating directly in transitional governments alongside military leaders. The imbrication of civil society in decision-making and in managing the post-transition regime brought about new ways of organizing power. This also indicates a new organization of the rule of law, where civil society plays a more significant role in those institutions.<sup>7</sup>

Although the most accepted organized forms of civil society truly emerged in the 1990s, one can also trace the roots of African CSOs further back. Indeed, since the early 1950s and the 1960s when these countries gained independence, there have been various associations with different orientations representing earlier forms of CSOs.<sup>8</sup>

It is widely accepted in the literature that, historically, the demands formulated by civil society in the Sahel almost always aligned with international norms of upholding human rights, democracy, and good governance. This perceived alignment contributed to normalize

<sup>3</sup>Loada, Augustin. Réflexions sur la société civile en Afrique: Le Burkina de l'après-Zongo. *Politique africaine*, 1999, no 4, p. 136-151.

<sup>4</sup>Azizou, Garba Abdoul. Niger: la société civile face au «tazartché». *Alternatives Sud*, 2010, vol. 17, p. 119.

<sup>5</sup>Otayek, René. 2002. "Vu d'Afrique". *Société Civile et Démocratie*. *Revue Internationale de Politique Comparée* 9 (2): 193. <https://doi.org/10.3917/ripc.092.0193>.

<sup>6</sup>Saidou, Abdoul Karim. 2018. "We Have Chased Blaise, so Nobody Can Resist Us": Civil Society and the Politics of ECOWAS Intervention in Burkina Faso." *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25 (1): 39–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2018.1417899>.

<sup>7</sup>Thiriot, Céline. Rôle de la société civile dans la transition et la consolidation démocratique en Afrique: éléments de réflexion à partir du cas du Mali. *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 2002, no 2, p. 277-295.

<sup>8</sup>Alou, Mahaman Tidjani. Niger: la société civile face aux mutations sociopolitiques. *Alternatives Sud*, 2016, vol. 23, no 4, p. 65-70.



as a catalyst of positive change in Africa. In 2015, following the coup d'état against the then transitional government of post-Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso, civil society urged The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to uphold international norms and reject the coup.<sup>9</sup> ECOWAS's hesitation and failure to condemn the coup right away raised a lot of suspicions among civil society in Burkina Faso and marked the beginning of the rupture between most youth-led emerging Burkinabe CSOs and the regional body. This moment was also an important turning point in the gradual loss of trust in international democratic institutions among civil society in the Sahel broadly.

Over the past five years or so, alongside traditional civil society, there has been use of concepts such as "*la foule*" (the crowd), "*la rue*" (the street) to define new manifestations of civil society in the Sahel. These new actors played a determining role in the constitution and operationalization of civil society broadly. This crowd or street is loosely organized but it has a never-before-seen mobilizing potential.

Under the umbrella of the National Coordination of Citizen Watch Associations (CNAVC) in Burkina Faso, one such group which came to dominate public space (in both physical and social media sense) is the "*Wayiyan*" meaning "*let's come out*" in Mooré language.<sup>10</sup> The Wayiyan members have occupied roundabouts and public squares in all major cities of the country every night since the failed coups against Captain Traoré in August and December 2023. They represent a fierce support of the transitional government leading some observers to tag them as a civilian extension of the MPSR.<sup>11</sup> Yet, international media and scholars often approached these constructs with a condescending narrative that fails to understand what ideology nurtures their mobilizing force especially within the particular context of the Sahel volatile political situation, conflict, and generalized uncertainty. In the wake of the 2022 coup d'état in Burkina Faso, media commentators attributed the success of spontaneous mass mobilization of crowds in various cities to prebendalism and political clientelism, a form of unprincipled political tribalism that allows the manipulation of the crowd and the street. These residual categories—crowd and street—came to crystalize the most dominant form of civil society in the transformative moment of the West African Sahel. The cultivation effect of such spontaneous civil society organizations on civil society within the context of military regimes in the Sahel alliance challenges the assumption of their "iron-clad" role as a catalyst for liberal democracy.

While a decade ago, civil society contributed to the successful ousting of Blaise Compaoré in Burkina Faso, most of the groups that made it happen are now largely silent. In Burkina Faso, a September 2022 ministerial injunction ordered CSOs to refrain from actions that could lead

<sup>9</sup>Saidou, Abdoul Karim. 2018. "We Have Chased Blaise, so Nobody Can Resist Us': Civil Society and the Politics of ECOWAS Intervention in Burkina Faso." *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25 (1): 39–60.

<sup>10</sup>The National Coordination of Citizen Watch Associations (La Coordination Nationale des Associations de la Vieille Citoyenne, CNAVC) operates in a decentralized manner, with representations across all 13 geopolitical regions and 45 provinces of the country. Its members include civil society organizations (CSOs) from both rural and urban areas. What unites these diverse groups is their unwavering support for the current transitional government.

<sup>11</sup>The Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (PMSR) has been the ruling military regime in Burkina Faso since the January 2022 coup d'état against Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Initially led by Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the leadership changed following the September 2022 coup, when Damiba was overthrown. Captain Ibrahim Traoré has since become the leader.

<sup>12</sup>Lefaso.Net. 2022. "Suspension Des Activités Des OSC: Un Communiqué Apporte Des Précisions," October 2022. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article116462>.

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to public disturbances and potentially undermine efforts to strengthen social cohesion.<sup>12</sup> In some instances, civil society organizations have aligned themselves with military regimes, as exemplified by the group *Wayiyan* in Burkina Faso and *Yèrewolo* in Mali. Efforts by some Western governments to support civil society are now frequently met with allegations of infringement on African state sovereignty. As pro-democracy civic space becomes increasingly constrained in the Sahel, the prospects for grassroots initiatives to steer Sahelian states back toward democratization are uncertain.

Early organized civil society movements in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger played an exceptionally large role in the inception of liberal democracy in the 1990s. Workers unions and student movements, in particular, contributed to the consolidation of democratic institutions and democracy-minded political parties after the single-party era. While grievance-driven movements that could be considered CSOs existed earlier, the official recognition of civil society constitutionally took place in the 1990s. Such a formal emergence of CSOs followed the democratic opening of the 1990s, which ended single-party rule and ushered in multi-party elections. In Niger, as in much of Francophone Africa, the rise of civil society organizations in the 1990s has always followed a dual dynamic. On the one hand, CSOs channeled popular demands into the political arena, engaging with the various electoral competitors. On the other hand, they were often co-opted by a broadened politico-administrative elite, some of whom were destabilized by the structural adjustment programs, seeking to solidify their control over the political public space.<sup>13</sup>

These new dynamics, both external and internal, have sparked numerous academic debates, often centered around varying resistances—sometimes commendable, sometimes detrimental—to the adoption of democratic practices. Civil society has notably contributed to the defense of human rights, freedom of expression and association, and the promotion of participatory development. These have been championed by the new actors in the 1990s that made up civil society. These actors have sometimes emerged as a force of accountability, stepping up where opposition parties hesitated to take responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

Organized civil society contributed to civic education, and education about human rights. It often played this role beyond the home country where it is formed. For example, the Burkinabe Mouvement for Human Rights and the Rights of the Peoples (MPDHP) took on the role of observing elections in Burundi, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Senegal, Togo, and Central Africa.<sup>15</sup> Today the configuration is different because civil society does not have the same appeal it used to have.

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<sup>12</sup>Lefaso.Net. 2022. “Suspension Des Activités Des OSC: Un Communiqué Apporte Des Précisions,” October 2022. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article116462>.

<sup>13</sup>Azizou, Garba Abdoul. Niger: la société civile face au «tazartché». *Alternatives Sud*, 2010, vol. 17, p. 119.

<sup>14</sup>Azizou, Garba Abdoul. Niger: la société civile face au «tazartché». *Alternatives Sud*, 2010, vol. 17, p. 119.

<sup>15</sup>IDEA, Democracy in Burkina Faso, Assessment Mission Report. Dialogue for Development, 1998

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## The decline of the civic space in the Sahel

In the Sahel Alliance States, CSOs are struggling. Traditionally well rounded and organized CSOs such as *Mouvement Burkinabè des Droits de l'Homme et des Peuples* (MBDHP) in Burkina Faso and *L' Association des élèves et étudiants du Mali* (AEEM) in Mali are now almost only a shadow of themselves. They no longer command the respect they used to have and now have to work carefully when their activities intersect with national interest in the political sphere, which is by essence the role of civil society: “to represent interests, articulate demands, express dissent and influence political power.”<sup>16</sup> Even most recent social movements such as *Balai Citoyen*, which was successful in uprooting/chasing Blaise Compaoré in 2014, had congratulated the military in Burkina Faso for its coup d'état against twice elected Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. In January 2022, *Balai Citoyen* national coordinator refused to condemn the coup calling it a “coup d'état salvateur,” i.e. a sort of a saving coup that is welcome.

While the above statements echoed the general sentiment of most urban Burkinabe about the coup, it reflects the last gasps of a declining movement that, until just five years earlier, enjoyed widespread acceptance and popular support. Yet, this “surprising” position vis-à-vis the coup d'état did not allow *Balai Citoyen* to reconcile with the public at large nor did it facilitate a re-alignment of *Balai Citoyen* with the leaders of the subsequent coup eight months later. How then do we make sense of the decline of the democracy minded CSOs such as *Balai Citoyen* in the Sahel Alliance States?

While the new media has given opportunities to civil society to mobilize, it has also fragmented its discourses. In other words, social media has contributed to both pluralize civil society discourse and broken it apart, thus empowering a new shadow civil society to rubber stamp the agenda of the new military leaders. Movements such as *Yèrèwolo* in Mali, *Wayiyan* in Burkina Faso, and the *M62 Movement* in Niger exemplify this trend. While most of the traditional CSOs have lost the influence they once enjoyed in the public space, a lot more are surprisingly comfortable with the military rulers, harnessing social media as a catalyzer to promote themselves and their work. The former likely leaned heavily on donor funding, while the latter operated with far less dependence on external resources.

On democracy scoreboards, observers of the civic space in all the three countries seem to be unanimous that it is gradually losing ground since the military take-over. Insights gathered from interviews with actors in all three countries suggest, however, a more complex picture than the “shrinking civic space” discourse alone would suggest.

In 2014, *Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso mobilized a pro-democracy movement to halt a constitutional amendment and remove Blaise Compaoré. Ten years later, *Balai Citoyen* has lost its mobilizing force and became almost irrelevant in the eyes of the youth who supported it and swelled its gatherings. Some of its last vocal leaders have been conscripted to join the

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<sup>16</sup>IDEA, Democracy in Burkina Faso, Assessment Mission Report. Dialogue for Development, 1998

Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (VDP in French) on the frontline against terrorism.<sup>17</sup> Partially, this loss of relevance can be attributed to *Balai Citoyen*'s inability to keep its prime directive: to be a politically neutral entity that speaks truth to power for "our number is our force," as its motto suggests. For one key informant from Ouagadougou, "Balai Citoyen thought that all the people who were in the street saying 'enough is enough' were potential followers of their ideology. People wanted Blaise to go but they were not ready to support Balai Citoyen when it began to metamorphose into a political party".<sup>18</sup>

CSOs in Burkina Faso which were successful could not fare well when they sought to transform their movement into a political party and compete in the political arena. In 2020, *Balai Citoyen* following its success in impacting political change in Burkina Faso created a political party to conquer power. During the legislative elections that same year, SENS failed to secure even a single seat in parliament. The poor performance of SENS reveals that CSOs' capacity to mobilize millions to defend a democracy do not necessarily equate to the capacity to become politically viable to win elections.

Some observers prefer CSOs to remain neutral and not get involved with politics: "Most of us wanted *Balai Citoyen* to learn from the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after the Egyptian revolution of 2011. What this means is that they would take time to help the people mature politically instead of rushing to create a political party. You see, the Muslim Brotherhood won seats in parliament and also the following presidential election even if the president was later sacked."<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, it is the individual leaders heading the CSOs who contribute to the erosion of trust in the CSOs. A key informant translates that view in the following terms:

We were asking of *Balai Citoyen* one thing and its opposite. We wanted it to remain neutral, but we also wanted it to support the democratic process which was set in motion by the 2014 revolution. I think they have tried to pursue both goals and found themselves on a slippery slope. And you know in these matters, there is no how-to-book you can read and make the right decisions. Plus, some of the leaders were quick to love money and a luxurious life. I must say people like Smokey and Samska [leaders of Balai Citoyen] were simple mortals who could not resist the cookie jar.<sup>20</sup>

Allegations that the two musicians and leaders of the movement were involved in corruption and colluded with the competing sections of the military during the formation of transitional government truly undermined their legitimacy to mobilize subsequently.

Often the line between being a CSO and joining a political party is a thin one. Most opposition leaders started in CSOs before formally joining political parties. During the numerous transitions that took place in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, CSO leaders often found

<sup>17</sup>Collectif. 2024. "Liberté Pour Zinaba Rasmane." CADTM. February 22, 2024. <https://www.cadtm.org/Liberte-pour-Zinaba-Rasmane>.

<sup>18</sup>Key informant from Burkina Faso

<sup>19</sup>Key Informant from Burkina Faso

<sup>20</sup>Key informant from Burkina Faso



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themselves being part of an interim government either in the parliament or in ministerial capacity. This contributed to breaking dynamic in most traditional CSOs. In Burkina Faso, for example, Bassolma Bazié who served as the secretary general of the all-powerful workers union, *Confédération Générale des Travailleurs du Burkina* (CGTB), is now state minister in the transitional government.

Even elected leaders in the Sahel can find themselves in conflict with civil society and that can be mutually detrimental and corrosive to the civic space. Such was the case in Niger under President Mohamed Bazoum.

Bazoum won the elections but did not win the hearts of people in Niamey where there is a concentration of CSOs, NGOs, and educated people. Remember that the civil society was a key player in the transitional government after Mamadou Tandja was deposed in 2010. Several leaders of the civil society then joined the *Conseil Consultatif National* [transitional parliament]. We can say that even after elections were organized in 2012, which Issoufou won, he had to collude with civil society. The civil society members that supported the military transitional government were ... rewarded with appointments under Issoufou and some have moved to join the opposition.<sup>21</sup>

In Mali, National Union of Workers of Mali (UNTM), the Association of Students and Pupils of Mali (AEEM), and unemployed young graduates were the driving force behind the insurrectional movement that overthrew Moussa Traoré's regime in 1991. From these movements emerged two pro-democracy associations: the National Committee for Democratic Initiative (CNID) and the Association for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA), which acted as a counterbalance to the government, born out of popular discontent.

Transitional governments often regard long-established civil society organizations with suspicion, fully aware of their potential to disrupt power. These seasoned groups, when mobilized against a regime, can become agents of subversion—a reality no fledgling regime can afford to ignore. The military authorities are for the most part graduates of the public schools and universities, and they understand the potential and capacity of student militant groups such as AEEM in Mali or ANEB (Association Nationale des Étudiants Burkinabe) in Burkina Faso to mobilize against established order. They also understand how some of these earlier CSOs work. According to a key informant from Bamako, “None of the CSOs from the 1990s have any good rapport with the military government today. This also explains why some CSOs wield significant influence, while others struggle to survive. Newly established CSOs are more likely to work with the government because they do not have a legacy that poses a significant threat to the government. On the other hand, most established CSOs live in constant fears that the government will shut them down if they act out of line.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Key Informant from Niger

<sup>22</sup>Key Informant Interview from Mali

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Empirically, the protracted conflict in the region constitutes an obstacle to the functioning of CSOs, especially those with offices outside major cities. Even without direct government interference, the ongoing terrorist crisis severely hampers the ability of CSOs to operate in remote areas. An informant from Mali highlighted how CSO workers are often targeted by both terrorists and pro-government vigilante groups, compelling them to restrict their zone of operation: “Sometimes we are not protected by the government who fears us and considers that our work can indirectly benefit the terrorists. At the same time, it was very risky to venture in some of the zones where the conflict is taking place. And without proper first-hand information on abuses on the ground, we are as confused as the rest of the people”.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, CSOs throughout the Sahel face significant challenges with funding. The shrinking civic space is compounded by a lack of financial resources to carry out their work. As the needs of the communities which they serve grow due to the ongoing conflict, the financial capacity of CSOs continues to dwindle. For example, the situation worsened in Mali when the government expelled the UN and barred CSOs from receiving funding from external donors deemed hostile to Mali, further crippling their operations.

The exponential increase in the numbers of civil society organizations in the Sahel might suggest healthy and thriving democratic states. But more likely, it is rather a reflection of a growing political entrepreneurship in the civic space. In fact, the space that should exist between state power and the private sphere is being stifled by the permeability and connections between state actors, CSOs, NGOs, and the media. This civic space has essentially become a terrain where political actors can engage in politics indirectly. Following the 2022 coup in Burkina and the one of 2021 in Mali, CSOs that agreed to send delegates to work on the charter of the ensuing transitional government demonstrated that their true intention was political gain. In Burkina Faso, all delegates competed to have seats in the transitional parliament and loudly rejected the idea of working for free in the public interest in the transitional parliament.<sup>24</sup> Similarly in Mali in April 2024, the military authorities suspended the activities of CSOs “of a political nature”. They also dissolved many CSOs. These suspensions followed a call in March by several political parties and CSOs for the restoration of constitutional order. The ‘*Coordination des organisations de l’appel du 20 février 2023 pour sauver le Mali*’ (Coordination of the Appeal of 20th February 2023 to Save Mali), a platform of political opposition parties and civil society organisations who were behind the call for constitutional order was dissolved by a government decree.<sup>25</sup> When the military authorities reinstated the right of political parties to conduct activities in Mali, they maintained the suspension.

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<sup>23</sup>Key Informant Interview from Mali

<sup>24</sup>Sana, Guy. 2022. “Newsletter Lefaso.Net.” Burkina: Les Entrepreneurs Politiques Sapent La Charte Constitutionnelle - leFaso.Net. Accessed August 10, 2024. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article111630>

<sup>25</sup>Compaore, Erwan. n.d. “Newsletter Lefaso.Net.” Mali: La Coordination Des Organisations de l’Appel Du 20 Février 2023 Pour Sauver Le Mali Est Dissoute- leFaso.Net. Accessed August 10, 2024. <https://lefaso.net/spip.php?article129574#:~:text=de%20l’Etat.La%20Coordination%20des%20organisations%20de%20l’Appel%20du%2020%20février,et%20à%20l’unité%20nationale.>

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Internally, many CSOs fail to uphold rigid democratic principles. Beyond their political alignments with certain groups which undermine them during times of major crisis, some founders cling to leadership for life, stifling opportunities for youth and women to advance within the CSO hierarchy. These founders often have substantial financial benefits while their employees struggle with meager salaries. During crises like the current financial downturn related to the overall terrorism crisis and the militarization of power, these leaders are quick to cut jobs to preserve their perks, yet they blame everyone but themselves for the fallout. One informant explained it this way: “Civil societies that are exemplary and transparent in the way they do their work do not fear anyone because they will be protected by the people they serve. But when as a CSO you have your skeletons in your own closet, you rub shoulders with politicians to get funding, etc. How can they take you seriously? They know how you are, and they know you won’t hesitate to take money somewhere to work against them.”<sup>26</sup> This absence of democracy and accountability in the internal functioning of CSOs constitutes a major handicap in a time of crisis. Most of the new CSOs that support non-democratic ventures are created by leaders who had experience in established CSOs. Then, they broke away to create their own CSOs with a new agenda.

The fleeting success of some CSOs like Balai Citoyen in recent years can be attributed to their gradual disconnect from the grassroots they once mobilized. Pro-democracy movements traditionally attracted urban youth, particularly university students who would support progressive ideas. However, today’s students are more likely to back military regimes, supporting their calls for national unity in the fight against terrorism and what they see as a struggle for true independence from French neo-colonialism. “When we used to have dictators, students would rally with human right movements to ask for accountability. We have seen that when Journalist Norbert Zongo was killed in Burkina Faso. We have seen this even recently when Macky Sall sought to postpone the Senegalese elections. This is no longer the case because those CSOs speak more to their donors than to our youth and their everyday life”<sup>27</sup>

Some of the movements that were successful such as Y’en a Mare in Senegal and Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso had ties with rap music. One of the dominant music discourses in West Africa, traditionally upheld by the griots, has long served the interests of the elite, with even contemporary popular music derived from it often focused on praise. However, the rise of pop music, especially rap, marked a significant break from this tradition with most rappers having a cosmopolitan experience, a sense of social justice and desire to change society. Rap artists began to denounce social issues and criticize government actions in their music. This music resonated deeply with the youth in urban areas and especially students. The connection between rap music, journalism, and advocacy groups from university campuses laid the foundation for grassroots movements that mobilized for political change in countries like Burkina Faso and Senegal.

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<sup>26</sup>Key Informant Interview from Mali

<sup>27</sup>Key Informant Interview from Burkina Faso

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Today, the decline of rap in the region poses a serious challenge to youth civic engagement. Before the advent of viral social media and the spread of disinformation, rap music played a crucial role in youth formative years. In their gatherings and daily life, it fostered a sense of civic responsibility and fueled the drive for democratic change. In the case of Burkina Faso, some of the earlier rappers have either crossed into politics and become partisan or abandoned the art altogether.

#### ***IV- “The rule of many is not good, let there be one ruler, one Lord” (Iliad, II, 208)***

The emergence of a neo-civil society—crowds and streets—is occurring in a complex political context in which military regime is cast as the ultimate response to the security crisis. The metanarrative around the security crisis has begun to seriously question the Sahelian states’ relationships with Western partners/former colonial masters. In this metanarrative, the origins and persistence of terrorism in the Sahel are attributed to Western military presence in the affected countries.

Within that civil society, people are questioning why terrorism has persisted in the Sahel for a decade despite military partnerships with the West. Recently, a comparison is being made between Western military support to Ukraine and that to Africa in the context of the security crisis. The conclusion of such a comparison points to a skewed balance in favor of Ukraine. The West is then urged to be less involved in managing internal politics, as it is perceived as complicit in the financing and supply of weapons to violent extremist organizations in the region. While this narrative could sound farfetched to an outsider, it is sustained by both military leaders and in civil society. This support should not be equated to a mere upfront indictment of the rules-based international order, but rather a call to make it more realistic because it is becoming more and more inaudible in the Sahel context.

Most CSOs supported the cancellation of the military accord between Mali and France and between Burkina Faso and France, which led to the departure of French Barkhane from Mali in 2022 and Operation Sabre from Burkina in 2023. These events and all the poor communication surrounding them have reinforced the belief among the neo-civil society organizations that Western powers have ambitions to reconquer the Sahel militarily, albeit indirectly through sponsoring terrorism. This “recolonization” theory nurtures social media propaganda and is appealing to a new generation of young people in need of a reference point.

One key informant from Mali argued that: “The International community—NATO in particular and its allies—are playing a dangerous political chess game in the Sahel. Ukraine did us a favor with its celebratory move to applaud the terrorist act against the FAMA and their Russian partners at Tinzaouatine.” A dominant narrative among die-hard supporters of the military authorities in the Sahel is that there is a Sahelization of NATO’s conflict against Russia. This, they argue, only confirms their belief that European partners lack transparency and goodwill in supporting the Sahel to win the battle against terrorism.



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Today, the decline of rap in the region poses a serious challenge to youth civic engagement. Before the advent of viral social media and the spread of disinformation, rap music played a crucial role in youth formative years. In their gatherings and daily life, it fostered a sense of civic responsibility and fueled the drive for democratic change. In the case of Burkina Faso, some of the earlier rappers have either crossed into politics and become partisan or abandoned the art altogether.

#### **IV- “The rule of many is not good, let there be one ruler, one Lord” (Iliad, II, 208)**

The emergence of a neo-civil society—crowds and streets—is occurring in a complex political context in which military regime is cast as the ultimate response to the security crisis. The metanarrative around the security crisis has begun to seriously question the Sahelian states’ relationships with Western partners/former colonial masters. In this metanarrative, the origins and persistence of terrorism in the Sahel are attributed to Western military presence in the affected countries.

Within that civil society, people are questioning why terrorism has persisted in the Sahel for a decade despite military partnerships with the West. Recently, a comparison is being made between Western military support to Ukraine and that to Africa in the context of the security crisis. The conclusion of such a comparison points to a skewed balance in favor of Ukraine. The West is then urged to be less involved in managing internal politics, as it is perceived as complicit in the financing and supply of weapons to violent extremist organizations in the region. While this narrative could sound farfetched to an outsider, it is sustained by both military leaders and in civil society. This support should not be equated to a mere upfront indictment of the rules-based international order, but rather a call to make it more realistic because it is becoming more and more inaudible in the Sahel context.

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This manifestation of civic engagement in the public sphere aligns well with the neo-sovereignty ideology promoted by the military regimes in the three countries. For CSOs that surf on this momentum, the advent of the military takeover offers a silver lining moment. The advocacy of traditional CSOs came to symbolize a dissension and lack of focus against the common enemy - terrorism. “This is why the concept of ‘apatride’ makes sense now in our context,” according to a key informant from Ouagadougou.<sup>28</sup> The concept of “apatride” emerged in Burkina Faso to signify the enemies within, those who have no dignity and are ready to betray their homeland.<sup>29</sup> While its articulation by officials remains unclear, the supporters of the regime use it as a label against outspoken activists, journalists, and CSO leaders who criticize government action.

In all the three Sahel states, new forms of mass mobilization have emerged, blending proto-democratic ideals with sovereigntist narratives. Just like the *Wayiyan Movement* in Burkina Faso, there is the *M62 Movement* in Niger and the *Yerewolo Movement* in Mali. A notable feature of these movements is their broad appeal. While analysts are quick to point out that they are manipulations of the military regimes, it is important to note that these movements are not confined to urban centers nor to the educated elite. Instead, they also draw in peasants and young people from the informal sectors in both cities and rural areas. Their discourse which is amplified via social media platforms resonates well with these masses that are desperate to find a way out of the protracted terrorist crisis.

The *M62 Movement* is composed of 15 civil society organizations and was launched on August 3, 2022, as Niger celebrated 62 years of independence from France. As tensions surrounding the presence of French forces in Niger increased, the M62 group doubled down calls for their immediate departure, accusing the Barkhane troops of killing several Nigerien civilians and undermining Niger’s sovereignty. The movement also accused France of destabilizing the Sahel region. Additionally, the *M62 Movement* accused ECOWAS of being manipulated by France, as highlighted in a statement made in October 2022. Its leader, Abdoulaye Seydou, was imprisoned for nine months in April after criticizing military operations in the town of Tamou in the southwest of the country, where civilians were killed. The military which removed Bazoum from power became a natural ally for the movement.

Following the coup against President Bazoum in July 2023, M62 redoubled its efforts to demand the withdrawal of French troops and called for Bazoum’s arrest, citing the financial and political scandals mentioned by the CNSP as justification for their seizure of power. The group is responsible for the July 30 protest during which some participants attacked the French Embassy in Niamey. The group denied encouraging its supporters to target the embassy or take French residents in Niger hostage, while asserting that the evacuation of Western nationals should take place on the condition of the immediate withdrawal of foreign military forces.

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<sup>28</sup>Key Informant Interview from Burkina Faso

<sup>29</sup>The word “apatride” which is French for stateless is used in the context of French speaking Sahel to mean a person who betrayed his/her state.

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Mali's movement *Yerewolo–Debout Sur Les Ramparts* (standing on the ramparts) also saw the military as a solid ally to advance their desire for sovereignty. Initially, Yerewolo was part of the “On a tout compris-Wati Sera” platform. The organization was led by Adama Ben Diarra, also known as “Ben le Cerveau,” who was also a member of the National Transitional Council (CNT) before falling out of favor with the military and being imprisoned in September 2023.<sup>30</sup> Yerewolo gained widespread acceptance in Mali, particularly in 2020, through its frequent protests against the French forces of Operation Barkhane and international forces in the country. Since its inception, Yerewolo has maintained a hardline stance, consistently demanding the withdrawal of foreign forces from Mali, and Mali's exit from G5 Sahel. The movement has accused the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) of being an occupying force that fosters fear, ethnic divisions, and mistrust among Malian communities. A distinctive feature of Yerewolo is its alignment with the Russian cause. The movement views Russia as an alternative to what it perceives as Western occupation of Mali.

## **V- Pathways for a resilient civil society in the Sahel**

Today, the expected role of civil society is central in the debates on democratic transitions in the Sahel. One of the dilemmas facing some democratic-minded civil societies in the Sahel is how to genuinely engage the military regimes to move towards a more democratic direction without them perceiving those demands as an attempt at destabilization. Similarly, since these regimes have adopted a sovereigntist trajectory that questions the sincerity of traditional Western partners in favor of new alliances and partnerships, Western support of CSOs is suspected of meddling. This section of the paper assesses the best approaches to support CSOs.

As a crucial pillar providing a foundation for democracy, it can be said that civil society appears established; however, it remains paradoxically still under construction. Therefore, CSOs present a lot of vulnerabilities which can be exploited to support and sustain deviations from democratic norms. With these new CSOs poised to play a more robust role in the mobilization in support of the military regimes, it is key that they are not pushed to the corner as being anti-democratic. Rather, it would be important to build connections with them in order to understand their vision of sovereignty and how that sovereignty can be achieved within a more democratic and free society.

There is a need for CSOs to develop adaptive strategies that respond to the contingency of the moment. The rapidly evolving challenges which the Sahel states face invite for more responsible CSOs that collaborate, share resources, and remain united in an effort to promote values of solidarity, democracy, and accountability. To their Western partners, Sahelian CSOs should go beyond seeking to satisfy their terms of references and checklists when implementing projects.

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<sup>30</sup>Kane, Mahamadou. 2022. “Au Mali, Décryptage Des Objectifs Du Mouvement Yerewolo Deutsche Welle. August 5, 2022. <https://www.dw.com/fr/mali-yerewolo-debout-sur-les-rempartsd%C3%A9cryptage/a-62727681>.

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They must strive to bring new authentic ways of informing, educating, and supporting the masses that are distracted by the conflict and the competing narratives surrounding it.

Likewise, Western donors should involve Sahelian CSOs in the inception of programs that promote democratic values, freedom, and equality. In international circles, Sahelian CSOs are often pressured to deal with the Sahelian events exclusively through the lens of anti-authoritarian narratives and democracy promotion. This way of funding CSOs has shown its limits already. Donors must understand that these countries are really at war and that there is a certain fatigue among people when it comes to CSOs who talk about freedom of speech, human rights, democracy, and fail to link those values and aspirations with the harsh realities which the war brought about.

Furthermore, international donors should not fetishize the role of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the democratic processes of the Sahel either. This is because it is important to recognize that CSOs in this region are deeply rooted in the social and political dynamics of their environment marked by a decade of war against terrorism that led to the military coups. Even some of the historically democracy-driven CSOs fall short to have a good reading of the situation and this shortcoming leads them to take actions that eventually compromise them in the eyes of both the people they serve and the authorities. This is because CSOs are not isolated entities, but are influenced by the same societal and political interests that shape the broader context of the region. As a result, CSOs in the Sahel embody their own set of contradictions and weaknesses. Donors must approach their support with a nuanced understanding of these complexities rather than assuming that CSOs are inherently progressive and capable of positive transformation.

Finally, combating information disorder in the Sahel and improving the integrity of the information in circulation can help civil society perform better. The information space in the Sahel has become a battleground and CSOs are both a perpetrator and a collateral victim of misinformation and disinformation, and this undermines their capacity to mobilize and defend certain democratic values. Partner media from afar which should conduct impartial and factual reports of the conflict demonstrate a profound lack of sympathy vis-à-vis the Sahel people as their focus is often on the illegality of the military takeover.



## ABOUT CDD

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The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) was established in the United Kingdom in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit, research training, advocacy and capacity building organisation. The purpose was to mobilise global opinion and resources for democratic development and provide an independent space to reflect critically on the challenges posed to the democratisation and development processes in West Africa.

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