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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE (*FACEBOOK*) IN RESPONSE TO THE COMMUNICATION POLICY OF THE BURKINABE GOVERNMENT: A CASE STUDY OF THE 'SEYTENGA' ATTACK

<sup>1</sup>Marcel BAGARE and <sup>2</sup>Paul Marie MOYENGA

<sup>1</sup>Teacher-Researcher in Information and Communication Sciences (ICS) at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS) in Burkina Faso; <sup>2</sup>Teacher-Researcher in the Department of Sociology at Joseph KI-ZERBO University, Ouagadougou

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\*Corresponding Author:  
Jithin Jenner, E.G.,

#### ABSTRACT

Internet fait son entrée en politique dans les années 1990 et est aujourd'hui considéré comme indispensable à la pratique et à la modernisation de la communication politique. Ses outils numériques qui reposent sur la contribution du public participe au débat sur les questions d'ordre général. Les attaques terroristes de "Seytenga" qui ont suscité l'émotion aussi bien dans la sphère politique, sociale que militaire ont trouvé comme cadre de libération de la parole les réseaux sociaux numériques dont *Facebook*. Dans cette recherche, l'objectif est mis sur la participation interactive des politiques à travers les médias et les usagers sur les questions centrales soulevées et débattues aux lendemains des attaques de "Seytenga". L'usage de RSN par les acteurs (politiques et les publics) à propos de "Seytenga" permettent d'aborder des thèmes comme les stratégie politiques sur les questions sécuritaires, les conflits communautaires et la confusion faite par les usagers sur les Peulhs et le terrorisme. Si les débats sur les réseaux sociaux permettent de toucher aux questions liées au terrorisme qui semblent taboues, ils laissent des interrogations importantes en suspend comme la capacité réelle des politiques et aussi de militaires à lutter contre les attaques des populations civiles au Burkina Faso notamment au sahel.

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## INTRODUCTION

Three events have marked the history of political communication. The first is characterized by the emergence of political discourse and the controversy surrounding it in the newsrooms, particularly in the print media. This period is considered the "golden age" of political organizations (Kavanagh and Blumler, 1999). The second event witnessed the emergence of a new type of media in the 1960s: television. This new media landscape led to the rise of new actors specializing in communication, whose field of action was politics and its participants (opinion leaders and political figures). Finally, the last event, marked by the arrival of the internet in the 1990s, is seen as the "third age" period during which political communication was strongly impacted by information and communication technologies (ICT) (Ben-Mansour, 2017). The use of ICT by political organizations contributes to a general "visualization" of the political agenda (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). The transition from the Web 1.0 era, which was limited to the creation and dissemination of information, to the Web 2.0 era did not go unnoticed. This evolution was observed through the proliferation of digital platforms, especially in their political usage, as well as the potential effects these tools could have on political engagement.

The term Web 2.0 refers to the development of new digital devices in line with the dynamics of information and communication technologies (ICT) driven by the internet (Millerand, Proulx, and Rueff, 2010). Moreover, the exploitation of Web 2.0 by its users is manifested in interactive and collaborative combinations, fostering social interaction, and presenting new opportunities for user participation (Vaccari, 2013). It has truly created a new form of relationship and allowed for a unique flexibility in communication. Thus, discussions on the political implications of internet usage, particularly social media, have emerged largely due to the controversy raised by cyber pessimists and cyber optimists. These two major schools of thought have strongly influenced research on the usage of social media by both political actors and citizens (Larsson, 2016). From these perspectives, two theses regarding internet usage by users have contributed to a pragmatic understanding of internet usage: the legalization thesis (innovation) and the normalization thesis (politics as usual) (Schweitzer, 2008). According to the innovation thesis, digital tools provide political actors with the possibility of directly communicating with their fellow citizens without relying on traditional media. This facilitates exchange using various interactive online channels. Along the same line, innovation offers a decentralized space for political discussion (Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams, 2013).

On the other hand, the normalization thesis and the politics as usual tendency (Margolis, 2000) suggest that political actors develop strategies to resist change and instead promote a unidirectional, top-down usage of digital tools. This perspective implies a neglect of interactive options by political actors and total or partial control of communication. While social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or WhatsApp may not be the actual catalysts or causes of these expressions of discontent, they are not neutral in terms of their involvement in playing a decisive role as instruments for publicizing and organizing crises (Faris, 2012). Thus, social networks actively contribute to the escalation of conflicts. Digital platforms provide facilities for mobilized groups involved in socio-political crises/protests to produce counter-media images capable of triggering behaviors and feelings of revolt that can lead to collective actions (Nez and Cuny, 2013). According to these authors, there is a strong link between belonging to a political group on social networks and offline political engagement. They also highlight that belonging to such groups is not associated with a higher level of political knowledge compared to individuals not involved in networks. This situation indicates that online participation (on social networks) is related to the mobilization and strengthening of these networks for socially defensible causes (Marien, Hooghe, and Oser, 2013).

In this research context, we recall the latest in a series of attacks, including that of 'Seytenga,' which is strikingly like several others such as 'Mandjoari' in eastern Burkina Faso and 'Solhan' in the Sahel region, which resulted in dozens of identified civilian victims. The trivialization of human life through repetitive killings has triggered a wave of indignation among the population regarding the inability of the defense and security forces to combat terrorism-related insecurity in Burkina Faso. This socio-political and security climate has sparked grievances among the population across the entire territory. As a result, this resentment finds a more pressing echo on social media platforms, which have become an amplifier for an opinion that is largely unfavorable, if not highly skeptical, towards the government, especially under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who came to power in January 2022 through a military coup. While this seizure of power by force seemed to have received the approval of the population, who, in one way or another, welcomed the arrival of the military junta, they quickly became disillusioned by the increasing acts of terrorism, which were the main cause for the overthrow of Roch Marc Christian Kaboré's government. Consequently, there has been a pressing use of the Government Information Service (SIG), the central communication organ of the state by the military junta, in defending its security policy, which has become indelicate. The reaction of the population, particularly internet users (on social media), is not delayed. We are witnessing a phenomenon of crossfire between SIG statements, messages from certain government members, and the reactions of internet users on social media platforms such as 'Facebook' and 'WhatsApp.' Given this informational and communication ecosystem, we are interested in this situation, which resembles an informational war on social media, to understand the reactions of the actors (the government and internet users) and the underlying objectives of their engagement on the web, particularly on 'Facebook' and 'WhatsApp.' Therefore, we ask the question of how the discourses produced on social media (Facebook and WhatsApp) regarding the 'Seytenga' attacks contribute to a real understanding of the security context in Burkina Faso. And what lessons can be drawn from this discursive analysis of the various actors involved in this controversy on social media? Based on these questions, we formulate hypotheses that the analysis of discourses developed on social media contributes to an understanding of the socio-political factors affecting Burkina Faso's security system through the 'Seytenga' attacks. And controversies on social media enable an awareness among all actors involved in seeking solutions for the fragile security context.

### **Theoretical and methodological framework**

To shed light on the phenomenon of controversy and debate on social media regarding the 'Seytenga' attacks, we adopted an exploratory qualitative approach based on a case study.

This approach allows for a holistic study of the research subject and enables an analysis of the subject in all its dynamics and complexity. In this research, we refer to Social Network Analysis (SNA), also known as Analyse des Réseaux Sociaux (ARS). This technique allows for the study of network typology, the influence of the actors within the network, and the nature of their interactions. It is also used to identify strategic positions within the network and to decompose actors into specific sub-groups. It aids in understanding power relations and inter-organizational or intra-organizational communication (Angot and Jossierand, 2003). Despite paradigmatic contradictions mentioned by Cristofoli (2008), social network analysis is defined as a method for the descriptive and inductive modeling of the relational structure of a social network (Lazega, 1994). The internet, through the platforms we specifically focus on here (Facebook and WhatsApp), represents an interesting field of study for social network analysis. Its networked organization and the new relational practices that develop within it, aided by technical innovations facilitating user exchange, collaboration, and co-creation of content, are not unrelated to this new trend.

This is precisely why we refer to content analysis to complement the ARS approach. This method examines the discourse produced in a communication process. Therefore, this approach indicates a dual objective of content analysis: on one hand, it aims to uncover the meaning of the statement for the sender, i.e., its subjectivity, and on the other hand, it seeks to establish its relevance for the receiver, i.e., its objectivity (Bardin, 1977). According to the author, the objectivity of the statement is closely linked to its social nature, as it carries significant meanings within a given context. In this analytical approach, social representations integrate discourse within a familiar symbolic context for the two communication authors (Guimelli, 2003). This analytical dynamic also aims to highlight the subjective nature of the content of discourse. Each statement can thus become an indicator of the social representations that contribute to its constitution. For content analysis, which aims to examine the production conditions of discourse and their real meaning for communication using indicators, knowledge of the dynamics of social representations is very useful. To conduct the discourse analysis, we compiled a corpus of 5 Facebook accounts belonging to Burkinabe media outlets whose content (posts) is widely followed by users, with 5,000 to 10,000 shares. These include Omega-Fm and Wat-Fm radios, the print media outlet L'Express du Faso, and the online journal Burkina.24. In addition to this cohort, we included the accounts of 5 Burkinabe activists who have more than 5,000 followers on their page. We also included the WhatsApp groups of subscribers to the Facebook pages of activists identified in this study. In the context of this research, we integrated 7 WhatsApp groups in which both activists and opinion leaders who are friends with them participate. It is within this framework that we analyzed the content of exchanges related to the issue of the 'Seytenga' attacks.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research, which focuses on the production of discourse by users (political actors and internet users) on social media platforms (Facebook and WhatsApp) regarding the 'Seytenga' terrorist attacks, aligns with organizational management theory. In terms of political communication, social networks have become an indispensable instrument for political marketing. While most analyses conducted so far have highlighted the ethos of political leaders, it is important for 2.0 society to examine the construction of institutional identity and monitor audience feedback on social networks. The rapid development of new digital technologies has brought about major changes within organizations, including the redefinition of roles and hierarchies within organizations and the restructuring of organizational activities. Thus, communication represents the essence of the organization, considered by Karl Weick as a verb rather than a noun (attribute, label) (Giordano, 2006). In this perspective of interconstitution, we highlight:

"The performative and interactive role of organizations" (Fairhurst and Putnam, op. cit.), as well as the idea that the organization produces narrative texts, metaphors that represent it, and symbolic images that contribute fully to the consolidation of organizational

identity. In this context, the organization is more than a state; it is a "dynamic coproduction achieved through interactions [...] that create representations" (Vasquez, Cordelier, and Serg, 2013).

In summary, this theoretical approach highlights three factors: an empirical focus on how people act in contexts, a theoretical focus on understanding the relationships between actions taken and the structures of organizational life, and a philosophical emphasis on the constitutive role of practices in the production of reality. In other words, the discourses produced on digital social networks are based on the combination of several factors, including 'what' (e.g., the notion of identity), 'how' in terms of dynamic practices, and 'why'. This approach views the social world as a reality generated through daily activity, rather than something external to human agents (Tudor and Hertelui, 2016).

**The "Seytenga" attacks: agonistic political confrontations:** Since the popular uprising in Burkina Faso in October 2014, like its neighboring countries Niger and Mali, Burkina Faso has been under daily attacks from armed groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State (IS). The attack that occurred on the night of June 11-12, according to international media and certain UN organizations, resulted in an estimated 79 casualties. However, local media and sources from social networks report an even higher death toll. Various media reports indicate at least 86 deaths. According to the UN, this is "the deadliest incident in Burkina Faso since the massacre in Solhan in June 2021, which resulted in over 130 deaths." Why are these killings happening? Who exactly are the perpetrators of this latest act of brutality? Where are those who are supposed to ensure our security? What is the Damiba regime (the leader of the military junta in Burkina Faso) doing in the fight against terrorism? Responsibilities need to be addressed... These are some of the concerns fueling social media discussions. Consequently, we are witnessing an "informational and communicational war" between the government, which is supposed to provide explanations, and users who are seeking to understand the phenomenon of the attacks. This gives rise to controversies and clashes of ideas between those who defend the government and those who criticize it. This situation is described by Dominique Maingueneau through the terms "debate," "polemic," and "controversy," which simply refer to reasoned confrontations of viewpoints, regardless of their stakes, subject, enunciation situation, temporality, and degree of conflict (Maingueneau, 2009). Furthermore, the nature of the questions that fuel the debate can range from simple nuances to complex oppositions, depending on the issues raised by the protagonists in exchanges commonly referred to as "argumentative arsenals" (Angenot, 2012). When users argue about the number of victims in the 'Seytenga' attacks, the debates remain limited (simple), but when it comes to explaining the security flaws that led to the incidents, the debates become highly argumentative and complex.

On the use of the victims of "Seytenga" in political strategies According to the Center for Strategic Studies in Africa (CESA), the National Security Policy (PSN) of Burkina Faso encompasses the orientations, options, and objectives defined to promote and defend the nation's fundamental interests. It affirms the sovereignty of Burkina Faso as an independent nation exercising its choices freely and responsibly fulfilling its national, regional, and international obligations. While the development of security policies is a reality, their implementation is another matter. The contradictions or vagueness surrounding the statements of political actors regarding the 'Seytenga' attacks testify to the inconsistency of this national security policy. The controversy over the number of victims in the 'Seytenga' attack is evidence of this. A journalist from 'Radio Omega' reports on their Facebook account that the government refuses to provide the figures on the number of victims from the announcement of the attacks (see screenshot 1). After this information void, which leaves room for speculation, the government will communicate the figures while downplaying the situation with underestimated numbers (see screenshot 2), according to the media outlet 'Libre-Info' on their Facebook account. Although the government has revised the death toll upward, some organizations contest the numbers mentioned by

the government and claim a higher number of victims, as reported on the Facebook accounts of the media outlets Omega.



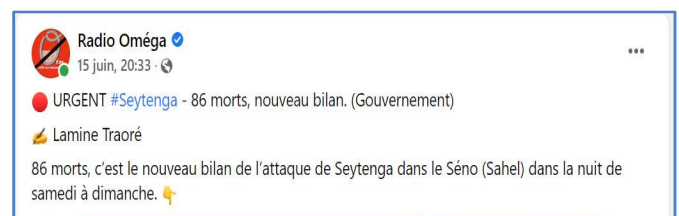
Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

**Screenshot 1. First assessment of the Government Spokesman according to the journalist of "Radio Omega"/Facebook account)**



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

**Screenshot 2. Second press release from the government according to its spokesperson according to the "Libre-info" media**



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

**Screenshot 4. The toll of the attacks according to the MPP, a political party ousted by the military junta**

Through these press releases shared on Facebook pages, we can observe another form of ideological struggle between political organizations (political parties, civil society organizations, etc.) and the government (specifically, the MPSR). The government, utilizing its communication strategy, aims to construct an image of a "savior" in a security context heavily impacted by the high number of victims from terrorist acts. It should be noted that one of the main pretexts for the overthrow of Rock Marc Christian KABORE's government was the significant number of victims from terrorist attacks, particularly the INATA attack that occurred a few months prior to the coup d'état.





Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot 4. The toll of the attacks according to the MPP, a political party ousted by the military junta

The attack on Inata, which occurred in November 2021, has become a symbol of these dysfunctions. Fifty-three gendarmes lost their lives in that tragedy. (...) The Inata tragedy has widened the gap between the field troops on one hand and the military and political hierarchies on the other. Since 2017, surveys have revealed a continuous decline in trust and satisfaction towards a government that has failed to meet the expectations of good governance of the Burkinabe people. Faced with persistent security and governance challenges, rumors of a coup d'état resurfaced at the end of 2021. The arrest of Lieutenant Colonel Emmanuel Zoungrana, suspected of plotting a coup, in early January 2022 indicated that the threat was taken seriously until January 24, when President Rock KABORE was overthrown. The coup was orchestrated by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba, recently promoted to the command of the country's 3rd military region. It occurred in a context of deteriorating security situation in Burkina, which has frustrated both civilian populations and defense and security forces due to the increasing number of civilian and military casualties, as seen in Inata, Solhan, etc. (Moderan, 2022).

The war of numbers surrounding 'Seytenga' between the government and other organizations has become an argument in their political strategy to win public opinion. For the political authorities, particularly those in power, it is important to ensure that the number of victims is not excessively high, as it would justify efforts in the fight against terrorism. In this context, the government's official figures, which gradually evolved from 50 to 79 and eventually reached 86 victims, are still lower than those reported by certain political organizations, such as the MPP, the political party of Roch Marc KABORE, who was overthrown by the military junta (MPSR) on January 24, and which reports 150 deaths. This underestimation of the figures gives the impression of downplaying the situation and creating the perception that the phenomenon is under control. This strategy helps generate a sense of acceptance or support for the government's policies among the public. This situation is comparable to the reflection developed by media sociologist Maigret (2002) during his work on audiences in times of war, where he stated that "War, through the intensity of emotions and stakes it mobilizes, is in fact one of the last strongholds of the primary belief in the manipulation of individuals and crowds by the media, in the existence of direct effects on opinions hammered by information" (Maigret 2002). Here, the highlighting of figures by political groups in terms of the victims of the 'Seytenga' terrorist attack serves to evoke partisan emotions, often a target for political exploitation (Descombes 1996), which contribute to shaping our emotions in a lasting way. The number of victims becomes a political stake for the actors. The greater the number of victims, the stronger the emotions, which serves as an alibi for political actors. According to Guy Nicolas, in a conflict such as the fight against terrorism, the involved parties engage in a victimhood market that involves quantitative assessments regarding the number of deaths and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in our case.

To increase their popularity in such a market, a community must reach a certain threshold of victimization, specifically victims who are their own (civilian populations) rather than those of their antagonists (eliminated terrorists), who may claim their own victimization to reduce the community's claims and promote their own cause (Nicolas 2003). The drama of "Seytenga" or the lack of anticipation of politico-military strategies. Public policies aim to achieve the modification or evolution of a given situation (Moulaye and Niakaté, 2012). When a crisis occurs, it is the responsibility of the government to draw all the consequences from it to prevent a similar situation from recurring. This is referred to as preventive political action (Coombs, 2007). The author argues that the organization's perceived responsibility in the crisis influences the nature of the crisis. Thus, crisis response strategies can range from defensive strategies (denial, mitigation, etc.) to accommodation strategies that involve addressing the causes or consequences of the crisis (reconstruction, reinforcement, etc.) (Capelli and Legrand, 2012). All these reflections can be summarized in the adage that "To govern is to foresee, and not to foresee is to court disaster" (De Girardin, 1852). This quote from De Girardin recalls the management of the security crisis in Burkina Faso by the government. According to the media outlet Lefaso.net in its Facebook page, the attacks in 'Seytenga' evoke emotions from past events, especially the attacks in Solhan, which have caused public outrage due to the number of victims (See screenshot #5). The report by Lefaso.net in its publication aligns with the principle of causality promoted by Descartes, particularly determinism, which states that under the same conditions, the same causes produce the same effects. The first common idea regarding all the terrorist acts in Burkina, even before those in Solhan, Mandjoari, and 'Seytenga', is that the Armed Forces Headquarters does not have a military strategy adapted to terrorist tactics.

Many Burkinabè believe that the government has failed to effectively resolve the security crisis, which has been ongoing since 2016, particularly with the increase in frequency of major attacks. The prevailing sentiment among the general population is that the existing policies, measures, and solutions are not effectively addressing the crisis (Coulibaly, 2021).



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot 5. Comparative analysis of Lefaso.net about the events of Solhan and "Seytenga"

The reaction of the Defense and Security Forces (FDS) to the attacks in Solhan and 'Seytenga' has been characterized by an unchanged strategy of inertia. This strategy involves remaining passive and not responding when the local populations raise alarm signals to the FDS. It has been reported that in most terrorist attacks, movements or columns of terrorists are identified by the local populations who alert the FDS, but no response is observed from them. Despite the repeated calls from the government for close collaboration and cooperation with the populations in sensitive areas, the users of social networks believe that the collaboration of the populations is real. However, they note that the reactions, if any, have been too late. According to opinions gathered on Facebook, such behavior from the FDS on the field of operations is not in line with the government's call. There is thus a paradox in the anti-terrorist policy advocated by the government.

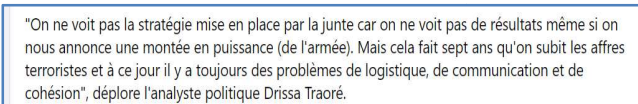
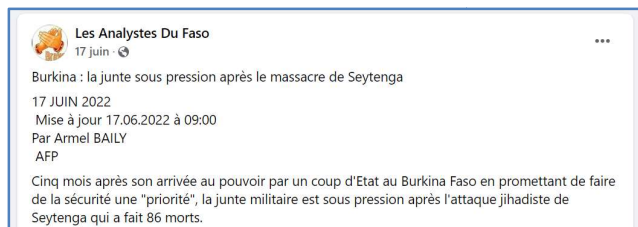
The 'Seytenga' attacks can be seen as a failure or an inadequacy of the security policy, which would hinder cooperation between the populations and the FDS, as analyzed by certain media outlets on social networks such as Facebook (see screenshot 6).



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

### Screenshot 5. Analysis of security policy by Ouaga Flash Info "La Une" on civil-military cooperation

The cooperation between the Defense and Security Forces (FDS) and the populations has been subject to criticism on social media networks like Facebook. Several comments indicate that the FDS are not effectively combating terrorism. Concepts such as 'bunkering' have emerged, suggesting that the FDS prefer to stay in their barracks and allow the enemy to deploy and occupy the previously controlled areas. In such circumstances, there is often talk of a 'refusal to fight,' which is nothing but a manifestation of the 'Strategy of Inertia' (Mamadou Sawadogo). Political actors seize upon this situation to denounce the incapacity of both the political and military authorities, criticizing their lack of anticipation in implementing effective security policies.



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

### Screenshot #6. Analysis of a user on "the strategy of inertia" of the FDS

If the terrorists' strategy of harassment remains unchanged, it should be an opportunity for the Defense and Security Forces (FDS) to deploy more offensive military strategies or tactics, which means attacking first. In the Burkinabe context, the military strategies developed against terrorists are mainly focused on a "retaliatory" approach, which means waiting for the terrorists' action before responding. The term "counter-offensive" is frequently used to describe the FDS response.

"The anti-terrorist strategy of Burkina Faso is highly opaque. I am not saying that it lacks expertise, scientific basis, or technical proficiency; I am simply stating that it is highly challenging to comprehend. That is to say, for those who are not in positions of responsibility, it is difficult to truly understand what is happening. How are things organized? How should they unfold?... What we observe is perhaps a reactive strategy. It is after the attacks that we see press releases informing us about the search operations that have been initiated. Apparently, the offensives that could push the terrorists to their limits, or even eliminate them, do not appear to be sufficiently proactive. Consequently, we are witnessing a simple situation: the terrorists attack, and our defense and security services react." (Siaka Coulibaly, 2021)

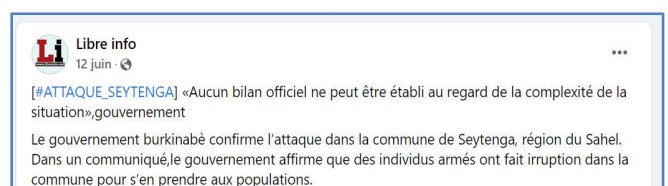
Burkina Faso's security policy is struggling to prove its effectiveness on the ground. This is precisely what social media users are denouncing. In this regard, the divisive question is the identity of the perpetrators of the massacre in 'Seytenga'. The label of "terrorist" comes into play. However, the lack of specificity regarding the perpetrators remains a question. Why is the number of dead and injured known, but there is no information about the perpetrators? Who is behind these terrorist acts? This question will undoubtedly spark controversy among social media users, especially since the state itself does not provide further information. This situation will allow users to speculate and point fingers at potential culprits.



### The 'Seytenga' massacre or the killings with ethnic/communal undertones: the 'Fulani' question.

The questions raised on social media networks regarding the perpetrators of the 'Seytenga' attacks are twofold: Who are the individuals causing mourning among the Burkinabe people? What do they want? Internet users are debating to find answers. Who better than the government to provide these answers? Unfortunately, government statements do not shed light on the issue. However, some security experts have examined these questions. From their perspective, it can be concluded that terrorism in the Sahel region, before being religious, is primarily a form of organized crime. The Sahel region is indeed a major hub for various illicit activities, and jihadism is often used as a cover for these illegal operations. Behind terrorism lies the real problem of a large part of Africa in general: ordinary criminality that disguises itself with the ideology and Islam to justify its attacks, looting, and atrocities (Van-Offellen 2020).

Regarding the identity of the perpetrators of the 'Seytenga' attack, the government, in its initial statements, remains uncertain about the situation. The government's adoption of this communication strategy with diplomatic undertones aims to cultivate a cautious approach to avoid premature declarations that may need to be modified over time (see screenshot no. 8).

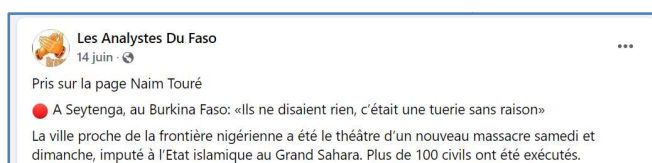


Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

### Screenshot #8. Government statement on the identity of the perpetrators of the "Seytenga" attacks



In response to the government's lack of clarity, internet users' reactions were not long in coming. Several media outlets, relying on their own sources, also revealed the identity of the perpetrators of the 'Seytenga' attack. These individuals are not unknown to the Burkinabe people in general. They are part of major groups operating in the Sahel region. While some believed that those committing these atrocities could not be Burkinabe, the reality today is quite different. Since 2016, the country has been threatened by jihadist groups coming from Mali, which have found fertile ground for their development in the Burkinabe Sahel region. Gradually, jihadism has become endogenous, embodied by certain Burkinabe figures like Imam Malam Dicko. While these jihadist groups still use Mali as their rear base, they rely, to a large extent, on Burkinabe citizens (Savadogo, 2019). According to the author of this research, two major groups are clearly identified: the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Around them, there are smaller, structured groups. They do not form a united front but rather an opportunistic alliance. Based on investigations, one factor in the identity of the perpetrators highlighted by social media users is their group affiliation (see screenshot no. 9 below).



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot #9. Identification of the authors of the attacks of "Seytenga" by the users of the RSN

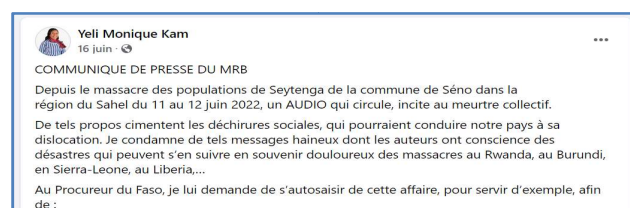
Media outlets report on the deployment of these major terrorist groups in Burkina Faso. While their names are known to the Burkinabe people, especially social media users, the individuals who make up their operational groups are a concern for users. Who are they really? According to the author we mentioned earlier (Mahamoudou Savadogo), a researcher on violent extremism at Gaston Berger University, these major groups employ a strategy of local recruitment, particularly within the communities where they operate, to strengthen their ranks.

"In the beginning, fighters from terrorist groups in Burkina were predominantly foreigners, and recruitment took place outside the Burkinabe borders. The first attacks in the capital, Ouagadougou, were claimed by AQIM in January 2016. However, over time, their strategy of territorial occupation and recruitment has changed, becoming increasingly local, particularly in their strongholds. To increase their number of followers, they have exploited local disorders and become adept at fueling social tensions and inciting communal conflicts. The Yirgou and Arbinda tragedies, for instance, have been attributed to their instigation" (Savadogo, 2020).

In this context, terrorist groups ensure not only the sympathy of a portion of the population, generally consisting of the ethnic group of the Fulani people in the occupied areas, particularly in the Sahel, but also present themselves as saviors coming to the aid of an oppressed people (the Fulani) by their own state, allegedly manipulated by Western powers (Savadogo, 2019). This is the type of message they convey to justify targeting symbols of the state. The resulting violence against the Fulani population due to this polarization becomes a pretext for terrorist organizations to encourage members of this community to join their ranks (Cissé, 2020). In a recording from 2019, Hamadoun Koufa ironically remarked that some Fulani populations, who referred to radicals using the term "yimbe laddè" (literally "bushmen" in Fulfuldè, the Fulani language), now find themselves living in the bush, being hunted like game by militias and soldiers (Ammour, 2020).

**The 'Fulani' Question: From Victimization to Instrumentalization:** For social media users, videos showing armed individuals conducting operations in an area identified as 'Seytenga' after committing their crimes have been circulating on platforms like Facebook.

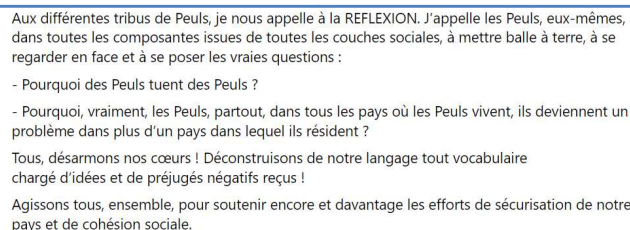
The disturbing aspect of these videos is not the individuals themselves, but the language they were speaking: the language spoken by the Fulani community. Are these videos real? Is the area where the armed individuals were operating actually 'Seytenga'. This study does not aim to determine whether these videos are fake news or not. We seek, within the context of analysis, to explore the discourse of users on social media regarding this issue. In a highly emotional context, the reactions of users reflect the magnitude of the shock felt. A controversy surrounding the Fulani question is actively taking place on social media. On one side, there are defenders of the Fulani cause, while on the other side, there are radicals. In between these two camps, the state acts as a defender of human rights, seeking to temper opinions. The issue of the Fulani community is being politically exploited by certain political parties or organizations to denounce baseless accusations made by users and to urge the authorities, who are responsible for social cohesion, to prevent the situation from escalating (see Screenshot #11).



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot #11. Denunciation of the accusations of the Fulani community in the attacks of "Seytenga"

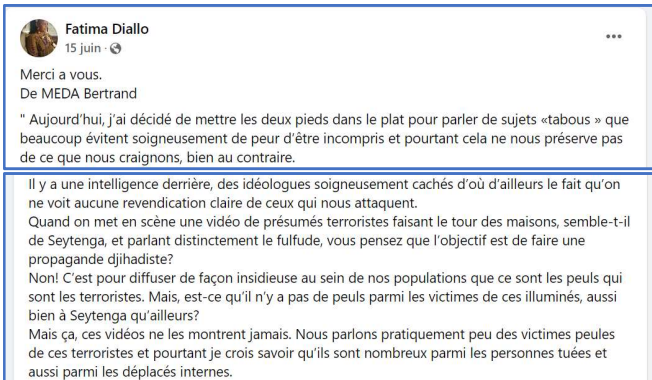
In the same article, the author of the publication (Yeli Monique Kam, a political opponent and unsuccessful candidate in the presidential elections) takes the opportunity to sound the alarm about the Fulani community, stating that "there is no smoke without fire." The fact that social media users are paying attention to this community (Fulani) following terrorist attacks against the population forms the basis for doubt. The following screenshot presents the continuation of her statement.



While some may argue that this publication aims to calm the fervor of social media users who make unfounded accusations against the Fulani community, it provides an opportunity for others to speak out against such a publication, which appears to accuse the Fulani of terrorism. Cissé (2020) confirms the disproportionate presence of Fulani among armed Islamist groups responsible for violence in northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, and regions in northern and central Mali, which has shattered intercommunity trust. The previously harmonious coexistence has been shattered. Today, the Fulani face unprecedented stigmatization, even though radicals represent only a small fraction of their community and do not represent them as a whole. For some social media users, although the Fulani community is blamed for the communal massacres, including those in 'Seytenga', these accusations have been more damaging to the community (see screenshots 12 and 13)

Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

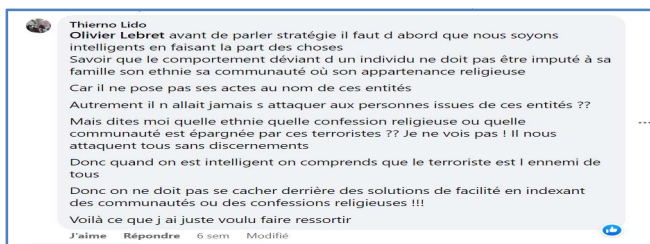
#### Screenshot #12: the Fulani victims of terrorist acts according to RSN users



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot #13: DSM users nuance the exclusive role of the Fulani in the attacks of "Seytenga."

The presence of Fulani fighters in certain terrorist groups creates an atmosphere of mistrust, fosters discredit towards the community on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, and often leads to cycles of violence in online discussions. However, there are other arguments put forth by social media users that counter the accusation solely targeting the Fulani community. These users note that multiple communities or ethnic groups are identified among terrorist combatants. While some consistently affirm this on social media platforms, research by scholars confirms it as well. Indeed, terrorist groups recruit from various localities, particularly in the Sahel and northern regions, targeting the youngest and most vulnerable segments of the population in search of employment opportunities in most cases. These are usually areas with limited economic potential due to neglect or weakness on the part of the state or its associated structures (such as public institutions and security forces). Other factors utilized by terrorist groups include religion (Islam), as they exploit a certain religious ideology that considers others as enemies or unbelievers (those who do not adhere to the principles of this religion) and targets them. The establishment of certain Quranic schools in these areas becomes a breeding ground for the expansion of this ideology through the indoctrination of its followers who then become combatants. This strategy has been deployed in several localities beyond those predominantly inhabited by the Fulani community. As a result, various ethnic groups are found among jihadist fighters (De-León-Cobo and González-Rodríguez, 2020).



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot #14. comment from a user on the responsibility of communities in terrorist acts

The attacks in Seytenga and others that Burkina Faso has experienced recently have fostered a climate of mistrust among Burkinabe communities, particularly those in the Sahel region, including the Fulani community in most cases. The publications from both media outlets and internet users on digital social media platforms, through their comments, are affecting the socio-political climate, further exacerbating the challenges faced by the country. Accusing a single community as solely responsible for the massacres of the population and harboring hatred towards them must be debunked by those responsible for maintaining social order and stability, namely the state. The decision to enforce the law while promoting tolerance among communities living in sensitive areas and throughout the territory has been praised by users of digital social media platforms (see screenshot #15).



Source: Analysis of the discourse of politicians and users of DSM (June 2022)

#### Screenshot #15. Statement on the arrest of the author of the incitement to hatred against the Fulani community

## CONCLUSION

The terrorist attacks in Seytenga and their consequential impacts have once again complicated the social and political climate in Burkina Faso. Every citizen, according to the principles of the constitution, has the right to express their opinion regardless of the situation without facing any repercussions. Therefore, the attacks in Seytenga, far from being a trivial matter, have greatly engaged users of digital social media platforms, particularly Facebook, following the initial dissemination of information on this channel. Today, the accessibility of a multitude of media and digital tools for Burkinabe citizens has resulted in a demand for interactive content. The capabilities of digital platforms utilizing Web 2.0 functionalities have transformed internet users from mere participants to actors who question their environment regarding political actors and issues of general interest. Seytenga, beyond its security implications, has given rise to concerns of various natures, including political (regime change through coup d'état and the reasons behind it), social (emotion and worry related to the attacks and their consequences on the lives of affected populations), and community and ethnic issues (the question of the identity of the perpetrators, particularly related to the Fulani community), which the government (authorities) cannot ignore in terms of communication. The aim is primarily to identify the range of discursive practices that users of digital social media platforms employ to express their opinions or contribute to debates on this platform. Therefore, a qualitative approach was chosen to better understand the issues discussed by users of digital social media platforms regarding Seytenga, including discussions on the strategies employed by the government, both political and military, to combat attacks by local communities perpetrated by terrorists, and to shed light on the stigmatization and generalization that the Fulani community faces on social media by being associated with terrorists. The use of digital social media platforms as communication channels presents advantages for both political organizations and the public, as well as the democratic system in general. Collaboration and interactivity form the basis of the infrastructure of these platforms, fostering online participation of individuals (users as actors and co-producers of information). It is precisely because these platforms allow their users to address one or multiple recipients, to engage and involve them in matters of general interest (Roginsky and De-Cock, 2015).

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