

Revolutions and Reckonings in the Sahel

The wind of revolt is blowing across the Sahel. Common characterisations of the unfolding situation as a ‘transition’, an ‘interregnum’ and a ‘turning point’ all acknowledge the historical significance of the ongoing contestations. These conflicts, however, pose various questions simultaneously that hinge upon different temporalities. Some are pressing concerns that demand immediate solutions, such as security issues and acute economic conditions, including youth unemployment. Others necessitate long-term structural reforms that encompass the very nature of the postcolonial state alongside an incomplete process of decolonisation.

Although the democratic question lies at the core of these contestations, it cannot be examined in isolation. Contemporary popular movements that advocate for democratic reforms often operate outside traditional frameworks, displaying a more spontaneous and less structured nature. These movements arise from a fusion of various ideological and political registers and thrive on the polarisation of differences. Nonetheless, it is crucial to acknowledge their significance and their constitutive nature.

The overthrow of Mohamed Bazoum in July 2023 by Abdourahmane Tchiani—former chief of the Nigerien presidential guard—marks the sixth successful coup in West Africa since 2020. It occurred within a context of escalating anti-state insurgencies. In recent years, these insurgencies have manifested in various forms across the continent, ranging from street protests to jihadist uprisings

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to military coups. However, all these developments point to a common dilemma: the nature of postcolonial political settlement in Africa.

The postcolonial order laid the groundwork for a compromised sovereign foundation that did not allow African states to devise autonomous policies aligned with a national project while exploring alternative democratic avenues. Young people, in particular, grapple with a procedural democratic system that has yielded minimal change. The generational shift is all the more significant as the gap between the conservative nature of politics at the top and the vibrant creative energy at the grassroots level becomes increasingly apparent.

The Age of ‘Patriotic Coups’

The resurgence of influential military figures stems from the belief within the military that civilian governments have a poor track record in combatting terrorism. But, as I have written elsewhere, the very demarcation between civilian and military spheres does not consistently correspond with historical realities in the Sahel. At the least, this distinction has evolved unevenly across the continent, with varying degrees of consolidation and separation between these entities. During colonial rule, the

Sahelian hinterland was primarily governed by military authorities. This practice continued in the post-colonial era, leading to situations where communities in northern Mali and Niger, as well as in large parts of Chad, often encountered the state as a violent, predatory and exploitative institution. In essence, the military has always played a role in political governance.

In Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and to a certain extent Mali, civilian governments have consistently found themselves in a position of co-governance with military and security forces. The relationship between these civilian and military institutions has always been tenuous, with civilian authorities closely monitoring and often making special concessions to pacify the military. Whatever Tchiani’s immediate motivations might be—whether to preserve his (private) privileges or handle the security context—the Nigerien situation thus appears as an *aggiornamento* of a growing military government mindset that has swept across the region. This mindset draws its impetus from the fervent demands of the youth for something new and transformative, for a revolution with uncertain contours.

In Mali and Burkina Faso, the military has effectively garnered widespread support around two key objectives: championing sovereignty and opposing external interference in domestic politics. With the substantial and enduring popular backing that these regimes continue to enjoy, the urgency of a ‘return to democratic rule’ seems to have diminished significantly.

However, given the considerable pressure exerted on Bazoum's usurpers, the Nigerien military may hesitate before pursuing a path similar to that of Mali or Burkina Faso. This is particularly significant given landlocked Niger's heavy reliance on Nigeria for electricity and Benin for the transit of essential goods, in addition to its dependence on Western development aid support.

The military has, arguably, benefited from public goodwill thus far. It has effectively tapped into the frustration of citizens who are dissatisfied with the ineffective counterterrorist policies and the worsening security situation. However, the military has not presented a clear vision for substantive reforms. They have mostly been kicking their heels. This lack of direction is not unexpected, since neither their training nor their primary mission has prepared them for the governance of states.

Niger has experienced four coups d'état since gaining independence in 1960 (in 1996, 1999, 2010 and 2023), in addition to several unsuccessful attempts. However, unlike neighbouring Burkina Faso, where Thomas Sankara led a more radical and emancipatory agenda, successive military regimes in Niger have tended to adopt a pragmatic, if not opportunistic, approach to politics. None of the successive military regimes actively pursued policies aimed at achieving political liberation or setting Niger on a path to economic development.

In Defence of a Chimera

The motivations given by Tchiani for the military takeover encompass issues such as mismanagement, chronic insecurity and poor economic performance. These reasons fall in line with a predictable script often presented by military leaders following coups. But Tchiani is far

from a revolutionary figure. Having played a part in previous government apparatuses, he is very much a product of the existing predatory system. Nevertheless, he demonstrated a rapid ability to adapt to the new era and appears to have crafted a suitable justificatory narrative following the coup.

Despite Tchiani's removal of a 'democratically' elected president, the prevailing narrative still revolves around the binary distinction of military rule versus democracy in most analyses. Such reductionism often simplifies very complex dynamics into a linear cause-and-effect storyline. Unfortunately, 'democracy' in this context has taken on a distorted connotation, being associated rather perversely with the 'protection of Western strategic interests'.

Bazoum secured his presidency with the support of 2 million voters out of a total population of 25 million. This notably fragile foundation for 'democratic legitimacy' can be attributed to various factors, including political apathy and voter fatigue, low voter registration rates, difficulties in organising votes in specific regions, and a prevailing perception of the ineffectiveness of elections as a means of political participation. It is evident that elections alone do not confer true legitimacy upon elected leaders, especially in contexts where presidents can be so badly elected. Hence, the real transformation is rooted elsewhere—possibly a profound rejection of procedural democracy and the associated liberal capitalist governance model.

The ongoing tension in the Sahel region stems from deep-seated frustration with impoverishment that is both endemic and chronic, widening wealth disparities and the diminishing hope for a better future despite abundant natural resources that,

if managed differently, could have transformed Sahelian countries. Niger, for instance, is a global producer of uranium, a resource that has primarily benefited France and Europe over the past five decades. In 2022, Niger supplied Europe with a substantial 24.3 per cent share of the market. In the same year, it supplied 20.2 per cent of France's uranium, making it France's second-largest supplier after Kazakhstan. In aggregate, Niger contributes one-fifth of the European Union's uranium supply. France operates three mining sites in Niger, one of which is currently active. This effective monopoly on Niger's uranium resources has positioned the country as a crucial partner for France, especially for Orano/Areva, the multinational corporation involved in nuclear power production.

Beyond these statistics, Niger's strategic importance to France cannot be overstated. The competition for resources extends beyond uranium. Niger is also in the midst of constructing Africa's longest pipeline, spanning 2,000 kilometres, connects Niger's Agadem oil field to Benin. Under Chinese Petro-China control, this pipeline is poised to supply oil to China and the global market.

At any rate, Niger serves as a glaring example of a systematic plunder of natural resources and the perpetuation of impoverishment driven by predatory political elites and external actors.

Given all these factors, one may question: What is it about this very flawed democracy that warrants a military intervention to 'restore' it? This is not a straightforward narrative of bad coup plotters toppling benevolent democratic leaders. The case of Mahamat Déby's government serves as a stark reminder that Western condemnation of coup leaders in Niger has little to do with a genuine concern for democratic go-

vernance or the wellbeing of Sahelians. In 2021, the French president personally endorsed the unlawful seizure of power by Idriss Déby's son, in defiance of every claim of supporting democratic rule in Africa. In the rank of unsavoury regimes supported by Paris and the West, one could add the Congo, Togo, Cameroon and Mauritania, all regimes that make a mockery of the principles of democracy. If the West cares as much as it claims, why are Western policy-makers not making every effort to understand what is happening in the region? Why aren't they heeding what young people are saying? Sahelian youth are perishing by the dozens daily in the Mediterranean and the Sahara and it is not because their countries lack democracy and 'free and fair' elections.

As for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), it is fast losing both clout and credibility. The organisation's stated desire to intervene militarily following a series of harsh sanctions is seen as an attempt to rescue a member of the old boys' club. One after the other member states exhibit stark governance problems. In Benin, the opposition has been brutally suppressed by the government of Patrick Talon. Togo has been under the rule of a single family since independence and has never experienced a democratic transition. Senegal has been relatively stable, but this stability is now at risk as a result of violent confrontations between youth protestors and security forces, resulting in harsh crackdowns. Over the period from March 2021 to June 2023, more than sixty lives were lost in the struggle for justice, political participation and basic freedoms. Political activities are being criminalised there. Macky Sall dissolved the main opposition party of Ousmane Sonko and imprisoned him, sparking the most severe political crisis

since the 1960s. And Côte d'Ivoire is emerging from a protracted crisis marked by radicalised ethnic and regional divisions, with the memory of a contentious French-backed military operation to enforce Alassane Ouattara's election deeply ingrained in people's memory.

Postcolonial democratic turbulence could also be viewed as a sign of dynamism rather than a passing bug. The frustrations resulting from decades of unfulfilled socioeconomic development and political stability have disrupted entrenched social hierarchies and well-established modes of governance and intercommunal cohabitation in a highly diverse context. What is now unfolding is a revolt led by those who had been marginalised previously, and their demands are nothing short of a revolution. The result is a fragile security situation.

Meanwhile, security policy faces three significant dilemmas: relevance, autonomy and resources. Firstly, security policy has seldom prioritised the well-being of the people and has instead been dominated by a securitarian agenda. The war on terror has monopolised policy and resources over the past decade, sidelining policies aimed at human and social security. Secondly, security policy has rarely been developed autonomously, as a result of the postcolonial agreements that have bound former French colonies to (secret) security and defence treaties with France. Thirdly, security policy has never received adequate resources to address the complex challenges it faces.

As a result of the above, insecurity in Mali and Burkina and to a lesser extent Niger is no longer just a factor, it is the prevailing condition. People now are concerned not just about security; they are actively demanding it as a fundamental public good.

The Disappearance of Religious Pluralism

Sahelian countries are not defined by the coincidence of a shared desert space. The Sahel region is home to highly cosmopolitan, cultured and open societies. From the eighteenth century through to the first half of the twentieth century, Tukulor monarchs (*almamys*, or 'leaders' in Arabic) for instance ruled vast swathes of the Sahel in what were and remain highly plural societies. A similar story is to be found in other city-states, caliphates and imamates that rose and ebbed in the region. Their rule was influenced by various principles stemming from the Tijanniya and Qadriyya traditions regarding social formation. Moreover, Sahelian cities have served as significant intellectual centres for Sufism, where subjects such as law, logic, mathematics and literature are taught in schools that use local languages written in Arabic script. Islam thus opened spaces for intellectual exploration and syncretic practices that have flourished among both nomadic and settled communities. The war on terror has effectively undermined these complex dynamics and arrangements.

The dislocation of these plural societies created an opening for jihadists who are now vying for control due to the breakdown of intercommunal entente. Caught between the rigid rules enforced by jihadist factions and the predatory practices of state agents amidst pervasive insecurity, communities like herders are facing an unenviable dilemma. While jihadists continue to instil fear in these communities, they also introduce an alternative form of governance and thus disrupt the existing order.

By and large, the anti-Islamist discourse has turned into an anti-Muslim discourse. Both terrorism

and the anti-terrorist campaign have, to some extent, contributed to generating forms of violence tied to conflicts over differences, be it status, economic activity, religion, ethnicity or political affiliation. However, terrorism is neither a cultural marker nor specific to a religion, region or an ethnic group; its danger lies in its capacity to create divisions among people along these lines and disrupt established traditions of solidarity.

By and large, the anti-terrorist rationale has been reduced to a singular moral imperative while the issue of coexistence (*le vivre ensemble*) within the framework of political, economic and cultural pluralism has been marginalised. The deterioration of the terms of cohabitation has facilitated the successful infiltration of radical groups and militias and the recruitment of members from within local communities. It has also triggered inter-communal violence, leading to the destruction of villages, livelihoods and economies. People are no longer battling ‘external’ militants but instead confronting their own neighbours-turned-enemies. This transformation is profound, and it requires careful consideration. The foot-soldiers of jihadist groups are often opportunity-starved local youths who have been radicalised against their governments and their fellow neighbours. According to a UN study titled ‘Journey to Extremism in Africa: Pathways to Recruitment and Disengagement’, derived from primary research involving 2,200 respondents, including 1,000 former fighters, the primary motivator for youth radicalism is not religion but rather the lack of employment opportunities.

Initially confined to northern Mali, the jihadist threat has spread steadily towards central Mali and intensified in the tri-border region encom-

passing Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The jihadist focus has shifted from merely targeting state symbols to burning villages and massacring entire communities. Furthermore, it has become deeply entrenched in specific localities. This destabilising influence has extended beyond the tri-border region to affect the entire surrounding area.

Following a bitter diplomatic fallout between Bamako and Paris, and a similar rift between Ouagadougou and Paris, French forces partially relocated to Niger. Some of these forces were stationed in proximity to the airport, with the aim of maintaining a foothold in the region and transforming Niger into a new ‘laboratory’ for its counterterrorist efforts. In the meantime, Niger had become one of the staunchest partners—critics would say a ‘subcontractor’—in the externalisation of EU border policies and the criminalisation of irregular migration to Europe. As a key actor in EU migration agreements, Niger has been deploying its security forces to discourage young Africans from embarking on journeys across the Sahara towards Europe. In fact, there is a strong perception that political elites have literally abandoned this part of the continent to ruthless religious, political and economic entrepreneurs and that they are happy to delegate governance responsibilities to external actors. Thus, a concomitant project of continued extraction of African resources and the criminalisation of the circulation of Africans characterises this particular relationship.

Seen as the last bastion of alliance in a region that is turning hostile to France, Niger has become too important a partner to drop. If ECOWAS were to carry out its threat of military intervention, France could potentially become a direct co-belligerent. This would inevitably fur-

ther cement its involvement in yet another Sahelian crisis, echoing its role in the Rwandan genocide.

In addition to French forces, Niger is home to military and security forces from the US, Belgium, Germany and Italy, involved in training Nigerien forces in the fight against jihadist groups. The Nigerien military presumably resented not only the important presence of foreign forces but also the fact that Bazoum had marginalised them in decision-making with regards to anti-terrorist operations. In fact, neither the Nigerien government nor the French government seem to have taken the full measure of criticism that had been levelled at Barkhane, including calls from youth circles for an equitable relationship with external partners. This criticism contributed in part to the withdrawal of French troops from Mali in August 2022 and the recently announced plan to withdraw French forces from Niger too.

Decolonisation Is a Fraught Process

The burgeoning anticolonial front is rallying people around a pivotal issue—the question of the post-colonial (com)pact, more specifically the revision or revocation of postcolonial security and defence treaties and treaties of economic cooperation. Energised by anti-imperialist activists, these social movements, often backed by youth activists, exhibit significant political influence. Their overarching stance is a critique of a historical system in which a former colonial power and former colonies are intricately intertwined. For many young people, military coups find merit in an anticolonial struggle that lacks dedicated champions among civilian leaders. In fact, a driving leitmotif is a deep suspicion of fran-

cophone elites, who are seen as a colluding caste that has governed their countries as semi-colonies.

The anti-imperialist perspective, thus, centres on the dismantling of the postcolonial framework in Francophone Africa. Within this context, France is rapidly eroding its moral authority and political credibility. It has consistently struggled to establish 'normal' diplomatic relationships with states in a region where it has repeatedly intervened to support dubious regimes aligned with its strategic interests.

On 29 July 2023, following the coup in Niger, the French president convened a special Defence Council meeting at the Elysée Palace. Both President Emmanuel Macron and the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Catherine Colonna, made it explicitly clear that France would not stand idly by while its interests in Niger were being jeopardised. France's pursuit of its 'strategic interests' in this part of the world has at times been scandalous. France continues to be oblivious to the fact that manipulating processes that either support or dismiss specific political actors, perpetuate impunity for corrupt leaders and sustain authoritarian regimes, as long as they align with France's policies, using diplomatic, military, economic and political leverage (especially within the UN and other multilateral organisations) to reward or punish governments, constitutes unwarranted interference. This is not unique to France; the EU's approach to democracy in Africa is at best cynical. The EU has signed a slew of agreements with the authoritarian and racist regime of Kais Saied of Tunisia and with Libyan factions (there is no unified, let alone democratic government in Libya) to enforce lethal anti-African migration policies.

France's response to the coup in Niger offers an insight into how it continues to perceive its relationship with its former colonies. On 26 July, France issued an immediate condemnation of the coup, even when the situation in Niamey was still marked by confusion and called for utmost caution. On 30 July, France issued threats in response to any 'attack against France and its interests'. Prior to the expiration of the ECOWAS ultimatum on 10 August, France initiated the evacuation of French and European nationals, seemingly preparing for the possibility of intervention. On 6 August, the Burkinabe government expressed support for the military government of Niamey, prompting France to suspend its financial aid to Burkina Faso—a move meant to send a strong message to any African government contemplating similar support. Furthermore, on the same evening that ECOWAS was deliberating on its course of action, whether to intervene militarily or not, the French government declared its 'full support for all conclusions'. On 28 August, during a meeting with the network of French ambassadors worldwide, Emmanuel Macron reiterated France's stance that it could not tolerate the continued captivity of President Bazoum by the military leadership in Niger.

We have come to a situation in which every government seen to be somewhat close to Paris is open to contempt by the wider Sahelian public. France's presence in West Africa has gone from a positively perceived, even special, relationship to one of open hostility. France's attitude has not helped at all, being invariably arrogant and a predictable meddler. If successive French presidents have all stated a commitment to put an end to the FrançAfricaine system and if some of them

have backed such commitment with the partial withdrawal of French military presence, the most effective tools of domination remain almost intact: extractivism via development aid and soft pressure, a military umbrella, and a currency regime.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, one of the key areas of failure in the current predicament lies in academic research and analysis regarding the contemporary history of the Sahel. There are few analysts who possess a solid understanding of the intricate, interconnected processes unfolding in the region and their historical roots. Even fewer can approach the subject with genuine empathy for the challenges faced by the peoples of the Sahel. The dominant outlook is overwhelmingly determined by a securitarian perspective. Western commentary, in particular, often displays limited interest in Africa, with its primary focus being the concerns of Western governments, leading to an obsession with Islamist-related issues.

The parallel temporalities at play in the current stalemate suggest that a precondition to a meaningful democratic model is a serious and sustained reflection on both the universality and the specificities of the African condition.

Regardless of their ideological leaning, whether patriotic or sovereigntist, military coup leaders may provide an initial, temporary opening but they possess neither the training nor the vision to steer countries into long-term, sustainable and fitting models of democratisation. In the absence of a solid political project, their sporadic irruption in the political space will likely result in a one-dimensional narrative infused with simplistic viewpoints and arbitrary determinations.