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Coup d'Etat in Niger: Implications for Security in the Sahel and West Africa

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Introduction

On 26th July 2023, a coup d'état led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani took place in the Republic of the Niger, a West African country located in the Sahel region. Military forces from the Presidential Guard seized President Mohamed Bazoum and forced him to make a statement to resign as head of state. A few days after the coup d'état, the putschists revealed

the name of their group – the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (French: Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie - CNSP). Niger has a population of 25.2 million people and borders Algeria, Libya, Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali. It is a very strategic country in the Sahel region due to its geo-localization in the fight against

terrorism and human trafficking in the Sahel. On 29th July 2023 general Abdourahmane Tchiani declared himself head of state three days after the coup, violating the country's constitutional order and keeping elected President Bazoum with his family in detention. The leaders of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) condemned the coup and gave the military junta a week to release President Bazoum. They threatened to use the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) military forces to restore constitutional order in Niger. The military junta dissolved all government institutions in Niger, and the future of the country remains uncertain. To date, President Bazoum has refused to make a public statement, avoiding giving legitimacy to the junta coup led by General Tchiani. On 14th August 2023, the junta announced plans to sue President Bazoum for high treason against Niger State, a decision condemned by ECOWAS officials, including the international community, which still considers Mohamed Bazoum the head of state in Niger.

The 2023 Niger military coup

President Mohamed Bazoum was elected President of Niger on 21st February 2021. Soon after Bazoum experienced a failed coup that had occurred on the night between 30 and 31

March, and another coup in 2022 that had failed as well. His predecessor President Mahamadou Issoufou has invested a significant effort to build a constitutional order in Niger and he restrained from the 2021 presidential election race based on constitutional term limits and the principles of democracy. President Mamadou Tandja, Mahamadou Issoufou's predecessor, lost his position in 2010 in a coup led by Commander Salou Djibo, who ruled the country for a year before the 2011 presidential election was held and Mahamadou Issoufou took power. By then, Niger had experienced its fourth military coup. The well-established constitutional order consolidated by Mahamadou Issoufou was a good and promising way to propel the country both politically and economically. Issoufou had left the position of head of state after President Mohamed Bazoum was elected president in 2021.

Since Niger's independence in 1960, the country has faced five military coups.

Since Niger's independence in 1960, the country has faced five military coups including the recent one that has toppled President Mohamed Bazoum. Before the coup, General Tchiani served as the head of presidential security under President Bazoum, and until then he was a close and trusted associate of the

head of state. It is important to stress that Niger is one of the three main producers of uranium in the world, which is being exploited by the French company Orano and the Nigerien state company Sopamin. Niger's volume of supply of uranium on the world market is estimated at around 3,000 tons per year. This important mining resource is of interest to world powers, including armed terrorists in the Sahel region who are trying to control it. Niger is still one of the poorest countries in the world with its population living on less than one dollar a day, despite the country's rich mining potential.

Nigeria's role in search of a solution in Niger

ECOWAS has initiated many forms of economic sanctions and continues to threaten the possibility of military intervention in the city of Niamey to restore the constitution after the coup d'état by General Tchiani's junta. ECOWAS member states held their first meeting in the capital of Nigeria, Abuja, on 2nd August 2023 to discuss a mediation process and possible military action against the junta. Nigeria is the main military power and its growing economy in the region and has along with Ivory Coast denounced as unconstitutional the coup that broke law and order in Niger. On 10th August 2023 ECOWAS member states under

the chairmanship of Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu insisted on the option of diplomatic negotiations and said ECOWAS could still opt for "the use of force as a last resort." After the summit on 10th August 2023, Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara also told reporters that his country would supply a battalion of up to 1,100 troops to ECOMOG forces, along with troops from Benin, Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana. Over the course of two days between 17 and 18 August 2023, the commanders of the West African armies held meetings in Ghana to decide on their military plans, and even announced through a spokesperson that they have agreed on a start date (the date is still secret), which will be submitted to heads of state for a final decision in the coming days for the military intervention in Niger, in case the negotiations fail. The coup leaders told a US diplomat that they would kill President Bazoum in response to any military intervention in the Nigerien capital Niamey. This threat to kill Mr. Bazoum was announced to the US Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, during her surprise visit to Niger on 7th August 2023.

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Mediation started a few days after the coup and was led by the president of Chad, Mahamat

Idriss Deby who met with the leader of the junta general Tchiani with his team on 30th July 2023, and also the sequestered President Mohamed Bazoum together with the former president Mahamadou Issoufou, to try to find a way out of the crisis and also help release President Bazoum from captivity along with his family. Chad is not a member state of ECOWAS, but a military power in the Sahel region and shares a long border of around 1000 km with Niger. Immediately after Niamey, Niger, President Mahamat Idriss Deby went to Abuja, Nigeria and met with President Bola Tinubu to discuss the mediation process to restore constitutional order in his neighboring country. ECOWAS also sent a mission to Niamey which was completely ignored by the junta and they returned without meeting the coup leaders to negotiate, disparaging the fact that ECOWAS is a regional institution with Niger being its member state.

Concerns of the international community

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres and the European Union have expressed their concern and condemned the coup in Niger, as has the UN Security Council. The EU and its member states have imposed sanctions against Niger and canceled their financial support to the country. The international community's warning about escalation and insecurity in the Sahel region

point to a serious threat due to the presence of terrorist groups in the region. ECOWAS member states have closed their borders with Niger, and sanctions from the EU and France were introduced. These sanctions are keeping Niger's citizens with food shortages and the collapse of the local economy, as well as rampant inflation in a country where more than half of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. The French have previously warned that they will use their military intervention in the event that its citizens are in danger, but after several negotiations, the junta allowed the rescue of French citizens by airplanes, as well as citizens of other EU member states. The first rescued citizens arrived in Paris on 1st August, and for remaining group of persons to be rescued five transport planes were secured.

Algeria said it supports a peaceful solution, avoiding the risk of escalation.

The US President Joe Biden and the UK have warned the junta to immediately release President Mohamed Bazoum. US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken said: "As we have made clear from the beginning of this situation, providing US assistance to the government of Niger depends on democratic governance and respect for the constitutional order." The Junta

has also sent twice its envoy to Mali and Burkina Faso to meet with other juntas leading those countries for cooperation and military support in case ECOWAS sends its troops to intervene in Niamey. Algeria, which borders Niger, said it supports a peaceful solution, avoiding the risk of escalation and increasing insecurity in the Sahel region. In the meantime, rebel generals have been holding Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum and his family hostage in presidential palace for weeks.

Strategic importance of the Sahel region

Mali and Burkina Faso have pledged to support Niger with their troops in case ECOWAS uses military intervention. The two countries cooperate with Wagner, the Russian military group that controls their natural resources in the exchange of arms supply. Russia is using Wagner to gain influence in the Sahel region and has pushed coup leaders in Mali to drive out a French military camp fighting terrorists in the Sahel region. French army was welcomed by President Mohamed Bazoum in Niger after they left Mali. For any knowledgeable observer of geopolitics in the region, there is a hybrid war going on between the established world order and Russia trying to perverse the rules while seeking to gain control over natural resources in Sahel at the same time.

Russia is using Wagner to gain influence in the Sahel region.

Geopolitical and strategic interests in the West African region are real problems that make the region very vulnerable. Russia supports the ongoing coups in the region with arms supply and its strategies, with a goal to obtain control of the natural resources in the region very rich in uranium and gold, among others. Countries with regular coups are the poorest in the region with people living in poverty, while their population is being manipulated into supporting these coups. The presence of Wagner in some African countries has very negative ramifications. Previously, Russia refused to accept that Wagner had any support of the Russian government, but at the last Russia-African summit held in July in St. Petersburg Russia has confirmed their cooperation with Wagner, including the ongoing war in Ukraine. There is apparent positive result from the cooperation of African countries with Russia, as these countries are still very poor and lack facilities such as access to drinking water, food, electricity and other infrastructure.

Humanitarian crisis in Niger

The population of Niger is currently struggling with difficulties in accessing food and has

almost no access to electricity, which was supplied from Nigeria for decades by more than 70%. The UN has confirmed and launched its humanitarian aid, development and peace programs in the country, stating that “they remain fully committed and engaged in providing support to the vulnerable.” The UN has said that 4.3 million people in Niger are already in need of humanitarian aid, which represents almost 20% of people living in extreme poverty, in a 25 million nation. Peculiar things are happening in Africa with public opinion, as a big part of the population welcome every coup. One should remember that, when Moussa Dadis Camara unconstitutionally took power in Guinea in December 2008 with his junta called the National Council for Democracy and Development (French: Conseil National Pour la Démocratie et la Développement - CNDD), after the death of President Lansana Conté, and after ousting of the constitutional heir Aboukakar Sompore who was the President of the National Assembly, a large part of the population were actually supporting this coup.

UN has said that 4.3 million people in Niger are already in need of humanitarian aid.

Just one year later, in December 2009, the same population went on strike across the street against this junta, with some protestors getting

killed. Junta member Aboubakar Sidiki Diakité, who was Dadi Camara’s personal guard, shot Camara during the assassination attempt so he had to be evacuated to Morocco in order to get a medical treatment. This example only shows that the population in some African countries is sometimes enthusiastic and insufficiently lucid when such a situation occurs, as they are easily manipulated by even the slightest sensational speech. It happens in many cases in Africa when a coup d’état happens that people naively rejoice, forgetting to care about constitutions and principles of democracy. This is a result of the manipulations that take place and junta leaders aim to legitimize each of their coups unjustly and against constitutional order and democracy in their countries.

Conclusion

The African Union seems to be calm after many coups and especially with the latest one in Niger, while ECOWAS is more worried than its partner organization, the African Union. For outside observers it seems that the institution is not organized enough to deal with such cases. ECOWAS is holding meetings and seeking peaceful negotiations and also threatening to use the military power of ECOMOG to restore constitutional order in Niger with President Bazoum still a hostage to the junta led by General

Tchiani. The UN has been showing concern since the beginning of the crisis in Niger and has been making statements including ways out of the crisis using peaceful solutions. In order for peaceful negotiations to take place and be successful, the UN, the African Union and ECOWAS must send a joint mission to Niamey, the capital of Niger for effective negotiations and to find a way out of this situation that is causing a humanitarian catastrophe in a country with hunger, high inflation, lack of electricity and other basic infrastructure. The country is basically stuck in a gridlock and the life of the population is becoming more complicated to handle. The UN has started working on food and healthcare supplies which are still not enough considering the number of people affected by this coup, while more donors are encouraged to donate these UN programs to be able to solve this humanitarian crisis. Many scenarios must be explored to protect this country from any escalation of violence, terrorism and other forms of insecurity. President Bazoum must

be released with his family from captivity and reinstated as president of the state with an uninterrupted mandate after the presidential elections. More negotiations and dialogue are needed to convince the junta to abandon its coup plan and save a country that is already facing high inflation, hunger and lack of other benefits. A peaceful solution is more welcome and advisable to get out of this situation, which means that the junta must release President Bazoum and stop their coup plan for the state of emergency in Niger.

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