



COUP D'ÉTAT IN NIGER:

HOW DID WE GET HERE? WHAT IS NEXT?

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ABOUT CDD



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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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Idayat Hassan is the Director of the Centre for Democracy and Development, a role she has held since 2015, and an expert in development and security studies in the region. Before assuming the directorship, she was a senior program manager at the Centre. Under her leadership, the CDD has risen from not being ranked in 2013 to placing 16th out of 94 think tanks in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to the 2019 University of Pennsylvania Global Go To Think Tank Index Report.

Her interests span democracy, peace and security, transitional justice, and information and communications technology for development in West Africa. As the director of CDD, she has strengthened CDD's position as a civic tech leader with a portfolio of projects—including analyses of the nexus between social media platforms, election processes, and electoral outcomes, using an app to identify electoral fraud and analysing the use of personal data in political campaigning in Nigeria.

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Mohammed Bazoum, the staunchly pro-Western president of Niger, fell victim to the latest coup d'état in West Africa. In the early morning of July 26, reports on social media from Niamey, the country's capital, hinted at a mutiny, but many inhabitants reassured others that there was no cause for concern. However, by midday, the rumors were confirmed, and President Bazoum found himself detained by his presidential guard, with General Omar Tchiani implicated as the instigator. General Tchiani has since July 28 assumed the leadership of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP in French), the new Niger military government.

The military announced the suspension of the constitution, the closure of borders, and air traffic on national television. This coup adds to a troubling trend of coups in West Africa, following the ones in Mali (August 2020, May 2021), Burkina Faso (January 2022, September 2022), and Guinea Conakry (September 2021).

Despite calls for an immediate and unconditional release of President Bazoum by ECOWAS, the African Union, France, and others, the putchists have continued unperturbed. As uncertainty looms in Niger, this analysis delves into the nation's recent history of coups and insurgencies, seeking answers to why this coup occurred. Furthermore, it highlights the far-reaching implications on the country's political landscape, regional stability, and international alliances.

A turbulent history of coups and armed insurgencies

Niger experienced its first military coup d'état in 1974. Three more had followed in 1996, 1999, and 2010 before the 2023 events. Additionally, the country has faced ten mutinies and at least five confirmed failed coup attempts, the latest occurring in 2021, just a day before Mohamed Bazoum's inauguration. What distinguishes coups in Niger from other West African nations is that, aside from the 1974 coup, all subsequent coups and attempts took place after the 3rd wave of democratization in the 1990s. This wave of coups was not in tandem with the regional dynamic following the 1990 Benin national conference when most West African countries adopted multiparty democracy. This suggests that Niger may not be as politically stable as commonly perceived.



Previous regimes, including the now deposed government of Bazoum, have struggled to establish a republican army that remains steadfastly loyal to its oath. Upon assuming office, Bazoum was not able to appoint a new person to replace General Omar Tchiani, who has been the chief of the presidential guard since 2015 and maintains a close affiliation with former president Mahamadou Issoufou. General Ibrahim Baré Mainassara and Daouda Malam Wanké, the leaders of the coups in 1996 and 1999, were also heads of the notorious presidential guard. The recurring presence of key coup leaders within the presidential guard raises concerns about the continued role of the Nigerien army in state affairs.

In addition to experiencing multiple military coups, Niger has faced at least three armed insurgencies. The first insurgency was initiated by the UDFP-Sawaba party during the 1960s. While in exile and taking a pro-China stance, the party's leaders trained combatants in Ghana, Algeria, and China. These fighters returned to Niger with the intention of seizing power in November 1964, but were subsequently arrested. The second insurgency occurred between 1991 and 1997 and was led by various Tuareg groups. They engaged in armed conflict against the Nigerien government, demanding increased political autonomy and development funds for the Tuareg-inhabited northwestern regions of Niger. The underlying causes of this conflict included significant droughts in the Sahel during the 1970s and 1980s, leading to the migration of disaffected Tuaregs to Algeria and Libya. These factors played a crucial role in fueling the conflict.

In the 1990s, Niger faced an armed insurgency led by the Toubou-led Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara (FARS), which remains a recent and relevant issue, as the key players in these insurgencies continue to be active in politics. These armed conflicts have significantly impacted Niger's stability and security, presenting substantial challenges for governance and development efforts. Notably, these insurgencies were primarily resource-based and had strong ethnic dimensions. Ethnic groups such as the Tuareg, Toubou, Arab, and other minorities sought greater independence from the government, which was predominantly dominated by black Africans. Throughout these conflicts, political violence played a prominent role in the actions taken by all parties involved. As a member of the minority Arab group, Bazoum's overthrow could awaken these ethnic tensions once again.



How did the Bazoum Election Contribute to the Current Democratic Disruption?

Bazoum won the elections in Niger in 2021, but Bazoum did not win the hearts of most Nigeriens who still believe the elections were not credible. As candidate of the Niger PNDS ruling party, Bazoum had all the resources including the state apparatus to help him win the elections. The opposition rejected his victory and clashes erupted across the country. However, international observer missions preferred to focus on the opportunity to deliver the country's first handover of power between elected leaders since independence from France in 1960.

A transparent and inclusive election stands as the ultimate safeguard against coups. Niger has failed to deliver in this regard. In short, the democratic transition in Niger has been superficial and still lacks an inclusive character.

Prior to assuming the presidency, Bazoum steadfastly championed the call for robust international support in the relentless fight against terrorism. His advocacy extended beyond the borders of his own country, encompassing the entire Sahel region. Bazoum has taken significant strides to distance himself from military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso, but this move may have inadvertently fostered internal incoherencies and alienation within the ranks of his own army.

Post-Coup Outlook for Niger

The approach taken by ECOWAS to counter the coup could have significant implications. While attempts to suppress the coup and impose harsh sanctions may aim to condemn the actions of the coup leaders, such measures could inadvertently hurt the Nigerien people and potentially turn public sentiment against ECOWAS, as seen in previous instances in Mali and Burkina Faso. So far, there are indications that ECOWAS is taking a firm stance against it while learning from past mistakes. Swift condemnation of the coup by Nigeria, the pending deployment of Benin's Patrice Talon to Niamey, and ECOWAS' statements so far suggest a determination to stand against the coup while also seeking to avoid actions that might exacerbate the



situation. As events continue to unfold, ECOWAS' response will be closely watched and could have a crucial impact on the outcome of the crisis.

The Nigerien civic space, categorized as “obstructed” even before Bazoum assumed power in 2021, has not seen substantial improvement during his tenure. The 2022 conviction of two investigative journalists, Samira Sabou and Moussa Aksar, exemplifies the restrictions on the civic space. While the military coup is likely to exacerbate the deterioration of the civic space in Niger, the coup leaders are expected to gain backing from various organizations that were marginalized under the Bazoum regime. Despite receiving support from democracy-minded allies, Bazoum's approach has mirrored the clampdown on the civic space observed during the Mahamadou Issoufou era.

At first, Nigerien citizens, in a dramatic shift from Mali and Burkina Faso, immediately protested the coup d'État. However, the situation may not remain static, as people are now using social media to organize in support of the coup. On July 27, just one day after the coup, a rally backing the coup in Niamey escalated into a riot, resulting in vandalism against the ruling party's headquarters. In video footage from the event, participants were seen waving Russian flags and chanting anti-France slogans.

Furthermore, some stakeholders in Nigerien politics, including political parties, might view the coup d'état as an opportunity to gain influence in the management of state affairs. They anticipate favors and trust from the coup leaders to be included in the transitional institutions, which will be established, leading them to support the coup from its early stages. A coalition of opposition parties has also indicated its support of the coup.

Also, due to the ethnic complexities of Niger's political landscape, there are legitimate concerns about a resurgence of the Tuareg uprising, which is still ongoing and connected to radical Islamists movements in the region. To move forward, a swift resolution and a prompt return to civilian rule under the close supervision of ECOWAS and the international community appear to be essential.

ECOWAS leaders have announced a high-level ad-hoc meeting in Nigeria's capital this Sunday to strategize on next steps in response to the coup in Niger. Given the far reaching implications of the coup, strong measures such as the deployment of an ECOWAS force in Niger, might be on the agenda.



As concerns intensify about the multiplicity of coups across the region, the outcomes of this meeting are poised, not only to shape ECOWAS' continued relevance but also the prevalence of coups in the region. ECOWAS must therefore strike a careful balance in handling this situation.

With serious implications for West Africa, this coup tests what a new world order will look like. For months, allies of the deposed president, Bazoum, particularly France, who had strategically moved their counterterrorism forces into Niger, dreaded this scenario. The coup's potential outcome may significantly shift the dynamics in the Sahel, favoring a possible extension of Russian and/ Prigozhin's Wagner's influence in the region.

It is noteworthy that all countries under military rule in the region share borders and constitute 50% of the 8 Francophone West Africa countries.



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