



Niger Was One Coup Too Many in the Sahel

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On 26 July, the military overthrew the democratically elected, pro-Western president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum. The regional ECOWAS bloc, followed by France, threatened military intervention. However, it turned out to be politically impossible due to the support that the junta had gained with anti-French slogans and widespread opposition in the countries that were to carry it out, especially Nigeria. Russia and jihadist groups active in the region have gained politically from the coup.

Niger was the best-governed state in the Sahel, an impoverished region strongly affected by the effects of climate change and the expansion of armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Unlike in neighbouring Mali, Burkina Faso, or Nigeria, Bazoum, and [his predecessor Mohammedou Issoufou](#), did not lose control of Niger's territory to jihadists. This was possible thanks to the presence of the functioning state (e.g., the local justice system) in the provinces and the inclusion of former combatants in its structures. Niger was an ally of the West in the fight against extremists in the region: French forces (1,500 soldiers), U.S. forces (drone bases and 1,100 personnel), and missions from several European countries operated in this country. Due to Niger's strategic importance and the fact that Bazoum came to power in 2021 as a result of a peaceful transfer, Western allies did not place high demands on him in terms of political freedoms. This, despite the improving economic and security situation, led to frustration among supporters of the persecuted opposition regarding the quality of democracy. Public distrust towards the authorities increased at the beginning of this year after the president consented to host additional French and European troops withdrawn from Mali, which created the impression that Niger was dominated by its Western partners. This strengthened the influence of anti-French movements active in the region, which often declared their willingness to cooperate with Russia.

Coup and Consolidation. The coup was directly initiated because of a personal dispute. Bazoum inherited a Presidential Guard created by his predecessor, which he

perceived as a tool of control by the former president. Wanting to free himself from this dependence, he planned to dismiss its commander, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani. In response, on 26 July, Tchiani and his forces surrounded the presidential palace. Bazoum then assured foreign partners that the situation was not dangerous and that the regular army would come to help. However, they joined the guards in overrunning the capital, Niamey, and then broadcast a televised declaration of their takeover. It was attended by the most important commanders of the armed forces, including the U.S.-trusted head of special forces, Gen. Moussa Salaou Barmou. Tchiani became the nominal head of the junta, although he began competing for dominance with Gen. Salifou Modi, the popular former chief of staff fired by Bazoum. Although there were demonstrations in the country on the first day after the coup in support of the restoration of Bazoum, supporters of the coup quickly began to dominate the streets, often with Russian flags treated as a symbol of changing the status quo. Forces opposed to the military, such as Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massoudou, who declared himself the successor of the legal government, or the Tuareg commander Rhissa Ag Boula, who announced an armed rebellion, failed to galvanise the inhabitants of Niger. The junta gained support by adopting radical, anti-French rhetoric popular in the region. Taking a cue from Mali and Burkina Faso, this rhetoric was followed by blocking French media (France24, RFI) and demanding the expulsion of the French ambassador and troops. The military announced high treason charges against Bazoum, who is under house arrest.

Regional Reaction: Threat of Military Intervention. Niger is the fourth country after Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso of the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to experience a military coup in recent years. In none of these cases was the group of rebellious military officers persuaded to step down. The young junta leaders have gained popularity and are striving to stay in power. Therefore, very quickly the new chairman of the bloc, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, issued a seven-day ultimatum, demanding the withdrawal of the coup forces under threat of intervention by Nigerian, Ivorian, Senegalese, and Beninese forces. At the same time, the bloc announced harsh sanctions, including cutting off Niger from electricity from Nigeria, a trade blockade, and barring financial operations through the regional central bank. While this resulted in an increase in prices, it also mobilised the residents of Niamey, with some joining volunteer forces to defend against a potential “invasion”. Additionally, the military leaders of [Mali](#) and [Burkina Faso](#) announced that in the event of war, they would join on the side of Niger, meaning such a confrontation would be an existential threat to the bloc. It thus became impossible to repeat the scenario of ECOWAS’s successful interventions in Sierra Leone (1998) or Gambia (2017), where it restored the constitutional order with the support of those populations. In Nigeria, the parliament refused to authorise the intervention plan. Opposition was strongest in the northern provinces, culturally close to Niger. Due to the ineffectiveness of the first attempts at mediation (delegates of ECOWAS, the African Union, the UN, and the U.S. were not received by Tchiani), [northern Nigerian Muslim leaders](#), who enjoy authority in Niger and are opposed to intervention, began to play a leading role in the talks. Despite the ECOWAS summit announcing the “activation” of forces on 10 August and later setting an (undisclosed) date for the start of the operation, the chances of its implementation were decreasing. At the turn of August and September, regional diplomacy focused on agreeing an optimal schedule for transferring power to civilians. While Gen. Tchiani suggested a desire to lead a long, three-year transition period, Tinubu suggested a nine-month period, and the Algerian authorities, lobbying ECOWAS against intervention, argued for six months.

International Context. The coup took place during the [Russia-Africa summit](#) in Saint Petersburg, which gave an impression of the effectiveness of the Russian “anti-colonial” narrative. However, speculation about Russia’s role in the coup that dominated media at that time were not confirmed. This does not change the fact that Russia has gained space to politically capitalise on the new situation, especially at the expense of France, for which the fall of Bazoum is particularly painful. The French, forced to

withdraw from Mali and Burkina Faso, treated Niger as the [last reliable supporter of its actions against extremists](#) on the border of these three countries, and an important source of uranium. Additionally, the quick announcement of support for the ECOWAS military action (for its critics, evidence of Western control of the organisation) and the refusal to withdraw the unpopular ambassador, also worked to their detriment. The U.S. took a more nuanced approach. Its priority is to maintain a military presence in Niger, which is why its representatives do not call the events in the country a “coup” and they count on the favour and influence of Gen. Bourma within the junta. The EU has frozen all budgetary and military cooperation with Niger, including the activities of the newly established training mission, and is preparing sanctions against the junta’s leaders. However, the EU is divided regarding possible intervention—for example, Italy, which cooperates with Niger on border control, opposes it. For China, the coup led to the suspension of preparations for the launch of the Niger-Benin oil pipeline, built with Chinese funds.

Perspectives and Recommendations. The coup in Niger threatens to reduce the country’s ability to contain and [politically influence](#) extremist groups. This is confirmed by the increase in the number of attacks carried out by them, especially from Tillabéri province. Although the ECOWAS intervention has not been cancelled, it is unlikely to happen. It could occur in case of new, special circumstances, such as Bazoum’s execution, as threatened by the junta, which, however, may result in the collapse of the bloc. A temporary normalisation of relations with the junta is more likely, while maintaining pressure to agree and implement a gradual restoration of civilian rule. A signal of détente is the restoration of the channel for talks between France and the junta on the future of its troops. Their transfer to Chad would be politically risky for that country, as it threatens to strengthen anti-French opposition movements there. While Russia has obtained politically favourable conditions in the region, it is an open question whether it will be capable of exploiting them. Add to this the uncertainty about Wagner Group and its resources after the [death of Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), as well as the opening of a new front in Mali where Russian fighters began to cooperate with Malian forces against Tuareg separatists, and this reduces the possibility of transferring Russian forces to Niger. When revising its strategy of engagement in the Sahel, the EU must assess the risks of an excessive emphasis on strengthening the power structures of its partners, which seems to be a factor destabilising weak states. The EU should also avoid the impression that its Africa policies are merely an extension of French interests.