

Report: On the situation in Niger and intergovernmental tensions in ECOWAS

**This analysis has been developed at the request of the Permanent Assembly of Africa Gate and following an open debate between young people from Spain and ECOWAS member states.*

The Sahel domino effect: coup d'état in Niger

Political changes in the Sahel, including seven coups in the region in the last three years, and the expulsion of French military personnel from Mali and Burkina Faso in 2022, call into question France's influence, and by extension that of Western powers. Niger is an ally of France and the European Union (EU), located in a region rife with Islamic violence. France had some 1,500 troops in the country engaged in counter-terrorism efforts. Niger is also a strategically significant country for the major powers because it is the main supplier of EU's uranium - a raw material in abundance in Niger, having 5 percent of the world's deposit. And for this very reason it is at the center of geopolitical tensions.

Recent years have been marked by high tensions between democratic and anti-democratic forces. Political changes in the Sahel, including seven coups d'état in the region in the last three years and the expulsion of French troops from Mali and Burkina Faso in 2022, are calling into question France's influence and, by extension, that of the Western powers.

The political conflict

On 26 July, a group of the Nigerian Presidential Guard called the Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP), led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani, orchestrated a coup d'état and deposed the elected President Mohamed Bazoum. Tchiani proclaimed himself president after suspending the constitution, government institutions and closing all the country's borders. The presidential guard is presently holding the president and his family.

The coup has subjected the country and the Sahel region to a crisis, adding to those provoked by previous coups with the involvement of mercenaries from the Wagner Group, a private military company financed by Russia.

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Public response has been divided between those who support President Bazoum and those who support the military coup junta, citing its limited ability to respond to the chronic insecurity on the country's borders. The conflict combines historical, such as colonialism, economic and political elements with a strong geopolitical dimension. Russian flags were displayed during demonstrations organised by the military coup junta.

Though this might be disturbing for the EU and France, it must be understood that the geopolitical tension makes Nigeriens reject a french influence over them. That is why they support the military junta. Democracy is less important to them now, as compared to the need to fight off a government that they believe colluded with the French government and is not working in their interest. Though coups are technically not a democratic thing, the celebrations show the desires of a large group of Nigeriens since they see it as the only alternative. Democracy represents a french backed government whilst the alternative looks indigenous, though with men in military uniforms.

The underlying critical debate

The communication from African urban elites and critical intellectuals in Europe is of a process of anti-colonial revolution. The Sahelians, tired of 10 years of French intervention, which has only escalated violence and spread terrorism throughout the region, point to françafrique.

Françafrique is defined as a regime of complex international relations of mutual dependence between Africa and Europe. It is also a rent seeking regime in which two rents are capitalised: raw materials - by Western powers - and Official Development Assistance - by African leaders. It is a post-colonial term, coined by Félix Hophoüet-Boigny, co-founder of the Fifth French Republic, former French minister and founder of the First Republic of Côte d'Ivoire.

Also put by François Xavier Verschave, a former French economist, stated in 1992, françafrique is a colonial system. It is based on three main pillars: the economic, commercial and financial pillar (asymmetrical trade relations, the French veto on the CFA franc, commercial priority,...); the military pillar (externalisation of security, French military barracks around its former colonies,...); the cultural pillar (la francophonie, the French educational model, the French media,...). The only pillar that has been eradicated is the legal pillar of the overseas territory denomination, although in practice the model is closer to the colonial model than to an independent model.

In recent years, anti-French sentiment and a social and political movement demanding the departure of the French has increased in Francophone countries in Africa. In part, this may be the result of the entry of other powers, which stems from the founding of a new multipolar geopolitical order.

What is likely to happen?

The EU, the US, the African Union and ECOWAS have condemned the coup. However, they have shown little coercive power following the military leaders' defiance of international demands to reinstate the ousted president, although military intervention has been discussed as one potential avenue, despite not implementing the threat.

On 30 July, during the extraordinary summit in Abuja, Nigeria, the 15-nation Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) issued a seven-day ultimatum saying it would initiate military action if the junta did not restore the legitimate president, Mohamed Bazoum, to power. But the junta closed the airport to prevent an ECOWAS intervention. ECOWAS's capacity for coercion is limited, even though it is the economic community with the most instruments and resources to resolve conflict in the region. The bloc is divided, with Niger's neighbours - Mali and Burkina Faso - ruled by military coup juntas - declaring that military intervention is tantamount to a declaration of war and that they will defend Niger should it occur. Guinea's military junta also issued a communiqué backing Niger's junta, while Nigeria warned of the implications of an intervention in Niger and the consequences for ECOWAS stability.

ECOWAS (including Nigeria and Benin) has also closed its borders with Niger after suspending electricity supplies to that country. ECOWAS's recent stance is largely the result of the leadership of its new President, who is also the Nigerian President, Ahmed Bola Tinubu. In his inaugural speech three weeks ago, President Tinubu defined his presidency of ECOWAS as one where coups d'état would not be allowed. This led Nigeria to take a firm stance against the coup in Niger and to lead the ECOWAS bloc in drafting the ultimatum to Niger. Compared to previous years, this position is unique in that the bloc has only condemned the coups that have occurred since 2020 without getting involved militarily. Nigeria's military and presidential leaders are suspected of having created the confidence necessary for ECOWAS to take the position it has adopted.

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In the last few hours it has been reported that the CNSP, Niger's interim military junta, intends to try Mohamed Bazoum for "endangering the internal and external security of the country" through exchanges between nationals, foreign heads of state and heads of international organisations.

On Sunday, ECOWAS also postponed indefinitely a meeting to define the operational details of the standby force, citing logistical problems due to air traffic. Internal tensions have been raised as a possible reason for the postponement.

The international organisation Human Rights Watch has stated that military leaders must respect fundamental human rights and release detainees, seeking a political solution that restores democracy and civilian rule.

The humanitarian implications are considerable as the sanctions directly affect the population and diplomatic action to de-escalate the tension is necessary. According to ReliefWeb, some 4.3 million people (17% of the population) are in need of humanitarian assistance. Any diplomatic step must include support for Niger to manage its natural resources so that they are distributed equitably and can benefit the nation and its citizens.

France and the EU suspended their economic and humanitarian support. The EU is expected to decide on a coordinated response at the informal summit in Toledo on 31 August. The conflict remains open.