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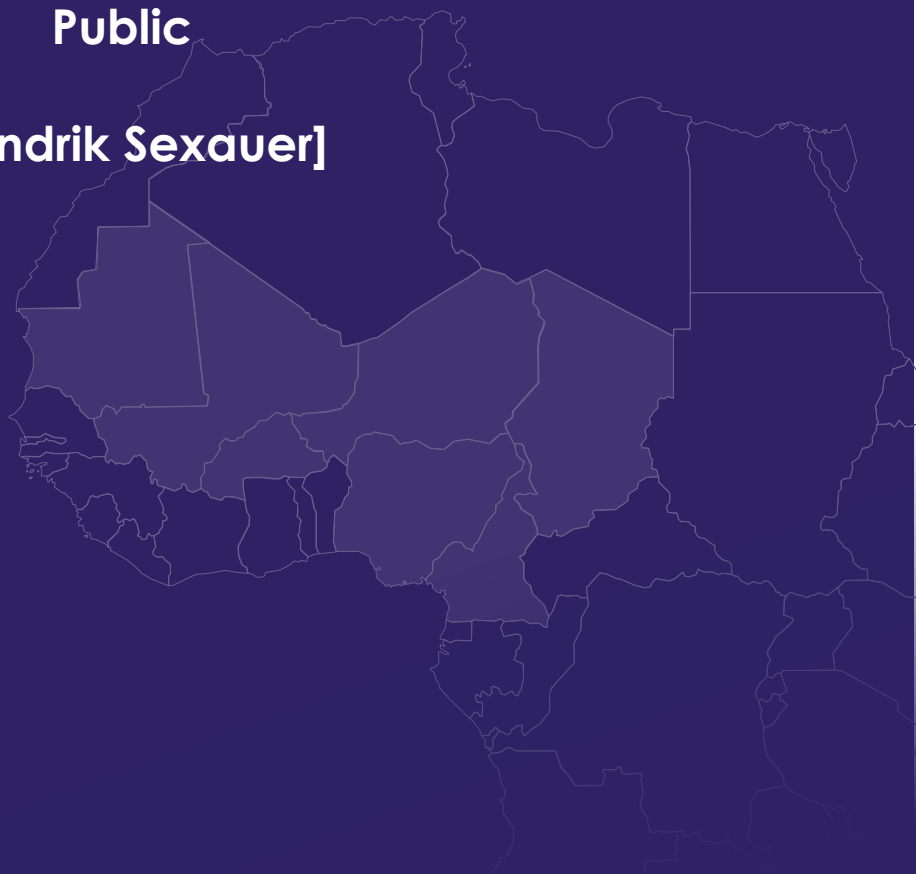
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Military coups in the central Sahel: What perspectives for democracy and the return to constitutional governments?

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CONTENT

1 - INTRODUCTION

With seven military coups and four failed coup attempts since 2012, democratic institutions in the countries of the central Sahel, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger have been severely challenged. Images of people celebrating the military's takeover in Niger 2023, while waving Russian flags, highlighted the troublesome state of democracy.1 At the same time, Chad witnessed an unconstitutional change of power following the death of president Idriss Déby in 2021. The subsequent transitional period gradually rejected democratic objectives and culminated in the election of interim president General Mahamat Déby and violent repression. These developments in Chad reflect the general assumption: "Coups, almost by definition, undermine constitutional rule, entrench bad governance, and create conditions that undermine human rights and civic freedom, including by encouraging future coups."2 The question remains how the now governing military leaders in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger approach issues of trust in political institutions and how they plan to return to democratic institutions.

For this, the policy brief brings together data and surveys, media reports and local expertise. First, a brief overview of the coups and their contexts will help to understand why they could prove successful in the first place. This is followed by the analysis of the current transitional periods which focuses on current developments and decisions as well as on an assessment of their governance performance. And while, it is important not to negate distinct, national contexts, the military regimes in the Sahel region seem to follow similar paths: Prolonging periods of transitions while limiting spaces for opposition and democratic freedoms.

2 - OVERVIEW OF RECENT COUPS AND THEIR SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

Already in 2012, Mali's President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted by military forces and after a failed countercoup the same year, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was elected President in 2013. In 2020, a military coup, led by Assimi Goïta, installs Bah N'Daw as civilian interim President only to be replaced by Goïta in another coup May 2021. In Burkina Faso, following mass protests, President Blaise Compaoré was ousted by the military in 2014. After a failed countercoup, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré was elected President in 2015 but ousted by military forces in January 2022. Interim President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba was then ousted by a second coup in September the same year, which installed Captain Ibrahim Traoré as President. Despite four coups d'état since independence, the 2020-election led to a constitutional change in power in Niger. Mohamed Bazoum took over from Mahamadou Issoufou, who had served as President for two mandates since 2011. However, in 2023 military forces led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani of the presidential guard overthrew President Bazoum and installed the "Conseil National pour la sauvegard de la patrie" as the ruling military junta.3

In Chad, a military council appointed Mahamat Idriss Déby as interim president after the assassination of President Idriss Déby in 2021. Despite violating the Chadian constitution, these actions had not been classified as a coup as such by the African Union, long-time ally France or the EU for instance. The transitional government initiated a transition plan towards elections, that took place in 2024.4 Hereby, Chad not only witnessed the process of transitional periods that currently occur in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, but it is the only country where this transition has officially been concluded with the election of interim president Déby as president.5

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1 (Balima 2023). See also: (Hassane 2024).
2 (UNDP 2023: 3).
3 (Mo Ibrahim Foundation 2023: 6-7).
4 (Ibid: 18).
5 (Human Rights Watch 2024).

To understand the surge in military coups, the UN Development programme identified six key factors which include persisting insecurity and state fragility, as well as a general frustration with state performance in governance, economic growth and in responding to demands for inclusive, democratic and legitimate systems.6 While Chad is additionally affected by conflicts in neighbouring Sudan and the Central African Republic, all four countries face sever risks to security from within their territories as well as the surrounding region.7 Terrorist groups, mostly based in northern Mali, are active across the region and the border region between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the Liptako-Gourma region, has been central to rebels' and extremists' arms trafficking in particular.8 Furthermore, Chad and Niger must contend with risks posed by the Nigeria-based Boko Haram group and to the North Libya serves as safe haven for criminal and extremist groups to expand activities and build up capacities.9 In this complex environment of risks and insecurity, terrorism and intercommunal tensions have kept spreading, without the pre-coups governments offering solutions to their populations.

Weak institutional capacities were overwhelmed by the security situation as well as by problems in areas of health care, food security and low economic productivity.10 This context of regional insecurity and mismanagement later became the basis for popular approval of the unconstitutional takeovers. The expectation was that these governments would perform better in key areas of societal needs. Nevertheless, if the objective is to generate stable legitimacy, even in the long term, for the military systems, a return to constitutional principles is essential, as transition periods are inherently defined by a pre-formulated target: democratic elections. Regardless of the supposed support they initially received from society.

3 - CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS AND DECISIONS OF TRANSITION PERIODS

Even if Chad has not experienced a military coup as such, elections consolidated the unconstitutional takeover by now-President Déby and the Military Council. As the Central African director at Human Rights Watch Lewis Mudge indicates how "the lead up to this election [had] been fraught with violence," the transition period saw violence and repression against opposition and against demands to return to civilian rule.11 Leaders of the National Dialogue, set to manage the transition process, prolonged the transition by two years in 2022, appointed Mahamat Deby as interim president and allowed him to run in presidential elections.12 Not only opposing central pillars of the initial transition process, but also enacting these decisions without a vote from the National Dialogue itself. Civilian protest erupted but was violently repressed by state forces, resulting in up to 128 deaths and 518 injured.13 Only a couple of months before the elections, the politician Yaya Dillo, a potential opponent to Déby, was killed by state forces in February 2024, mirroring not only reported instances of violence at the election day itself, but the "bloody crackdown" back in 2022.14 The developments in Chad might indicate how transitions in Burkina Faso, Mali or Niger develop. Already, the initial plans of transition have been changed or rejected. Contrary to original plans, Burkina Faso and Mali have postponed elec-

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6 (UNDP 2023: 15-16).
7 (Olivier 2024).
8 (Dakono and Théroux-Bénoni 2019).
9 (Abba 2023).
10 (Van Ackern and Detges 2022).
11 (Human Rights Watch 2024).
12 (Lacher 2022).
13 (Tahingam 2023).
14 (Human Rights Watch 2023).

tions scheduled for 2024 without setting a clear date, and Niger is still missing an actual "transition timeline."[15] At the same time, spaces for civic and democratic expression, participation, or contestation are severely limited, creating an environment of self-censorship and caution.[16] These developments will be analyzed in the following.

3.1 - Burkina Faso

In late 2022, Afrobarometer surveyed Burkinabé citizens about their concerns.[17] 40 percent of respondents cited insecurity as the most relevant issue; 12 percent even expressed worries about a civil war in the country. In the same survey, 66 percent supported military intervention in the country's leadership. And while 55 percent still found democracy as the most preferable form of governance, 45 percent acknowledged that some circumstances might call for a non-democratic government or saw no relevant impact on their daily life by whatever form of government. This survey was conducted during the second coup in 2022 and reflects the precarious situation of the society at the time.

As the security situation, however, is not improving, the government limits such democratic principles. Opposing its own plan of transition, the military regime expanded its unconstitutional ruling and postponed the 2024-election.[18] While the authorities do not provide "conditions for political and democratic discourses towards promoting inclusivity," a clear roadmap towards elections and to an end of transition is missing.[19] Political parties suffer from the suspension of political activities and civil society movements denounce arbitrary detentions and repressive conscriptions of those criticizing the regime to join the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland.[20] In general, this structure to use "civilian auxiliaries" in fighting terrorism has met criticism due to insufficient training and equipment. And whereas the official state forces are not sufficiently reinforced, the future reintegration of up to 90,000 armed civilians remains unclear and thus a potential destabilizing factor for national security.[21] Furthermore, slow progress in combating corruption and economic mismanagement question the commitment of the transitional authorities. Restrictions on media and investigative journalism, especially for international agencies like Radio France Internationale, Voice of America or BBC, underline this point.[22]

As a reaction, in April 2024, the civil "Front pour la défense de la République" has been established, to demand that the military regime refrain from the above-mentioned violations of political and civil liberties. The movement highlights its support to the state forces fighting terrorism but is concerned how this fight is built upon "the systematic division of the population into two categories: patriots and stateless people."[23] It is thus unclear to what extent society supports the military regime and its measures. The security situation remains in a state in which society has approved of unconstitutional interventions before. However, as the regime continues to fail to make improvements in the most urgent areas (e.g. security, economic governance, social services) and even undermines national unity, it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify such infringements on civil liberties.

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[15] (Souaré and Toupane 2024).
[16] (Tounkara 2024).
[17] (Afrobarometer 2024).
[18] (Tull 2024).
[19] (African Union 2024: 3).
[20] (Yeboah and Aikins 2024).
[21] (Koné 2023).
[22] (Tasamba 2024).
[23] (CADTM 2024).

3.2 - Mali

Dynamics in Mali support these observations. In 2022, approval of non-democratic governments has doubled compared to 2014. One year after the second coup and Goïta becoming head of state, only 39 percent of Malians saw democracy as the most preferable option of political system; eight out of ten supported the military in taking power.[24] And while the 2022-system was perceived as a deeply flawed democratic system (if democratic at all), 51 percent expect Mali to become more democratic again in the long term.[25] Nonetheless, current developments oppose such expectation.

In 2023, a new constitution was adopted with almost 97 percent. It established a presidential system with a two-term limit and ought to reinforce parliamentary powers. Yet, the military authorities plan to organize only presidential elections. Regional and legislative elections have to be conducted by the "newly elected authorities."[26] This protracts the transition further and questions the democratic ambitions of the military regime. Especially as the presidential election, initially scheduled for February 2024, has been postponed indefinitely: "Yet another occasion that the junta has broken a commitment it had made to Malian citizens."[27]

Simultaneously, freedoms for opposition parties and the media to voice concerns over the regime's politics are shrinking and spaces for civic participation remain limited.[28] Suspensions of political parties, death threats and politicians forced to flee the country are the result.[29] Moreover, the government has stopped the Algiers Accord, the national dialogue ment to mediate and reconciliate between state authorities and separatist armed groups in the North.[30] These decisions undermine the democratic outlook of the transition period and only heighten communal tensions within Mali. Consequently, the long-term objective of the military regime appears to be the consolidation of that same regime.

3.3 - Niger

In Niger, the now ruling National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland has proposed a three-year transition without delineating neither a timeline nor an agenda. How the military regime plans to return to a democratic government or include civilians in power-sharing remains unclear.[31] "Regional consultations" on how to structure the transition have only recently been launched.[32] As identified in Burkina Faso and Mali, the current decisions of the military authorities might constrain a truly democratic transition.

Compared to previous governments under the Presidents Issoufou and Bazoum, substantial deteriorations in security and economics as well as in democratic freedoms are already visible today. This includes the repression of opposition, appointing loyal military officials to municipal

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[24] (Traoré 2024: 2).
[25] (Traoré 2024. 9-10).
[26] (UN Security Council 2024).
[27] (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2024a).
[28] (African Union 2024: 4).
[29] In July 2024, political parties were re-authorized in Mali which, at this point does not negate the dynamics already observed.
[30] (Africa News 2024a).
[31] (Abba 2023) and (Obiezu 2023).
[32] (African Union 2024: 5).

councils and as regional governors as well the termination of deradicalization and disarmament programs.33 Moreover, surveillance, intimidation and detentions of journalists have created a "climate of fear."34 Restrictions on civil liberties are usually justified on grounds of protecting national security, whereby national security becomes interconnected with the security of the military regime itself.

In June 2024, Niger's supreme court, established by the military regime, lifted the immunity of the ousted president Bazoum, accused of treason and financing terrorism. Bazoum has been detained in Niamey since the coup in 2023. With these actions, the current government is rejecting demands by ECOWAS to liberate the former president and shows no willingness to cooperate regionally or nationally on questions of the rule of law.35 Also tensions with Benin exemplify how the military regime is following "an ultra-sovereignist line." As the border remains closed, trade between the countries is shut down, as is the pipeline to bring Nigerien oil to Benin for shipment. Niger accepts both national and regional economic losses for alleged national security reasons as it accuses Benin of hosting French military with the ambition to destabilize Niger.36 Still, Niger's peaceful and constitutional transfer of power following the 2020 election shows how democratic and constitutional trajectories remain possible.

This transfer of power in particular led Western countries to view Niger as the last remaining democratic partner in the region which only increased the paralysis after the 2023-coup.37 In general, the coup in Niger came with important implications to geopolitics and reinforced existing ones. First, for Western countries like France, the USA, Germany or Italy, Niger had been pivotal for military and strategic reasons. Especially concerning logistics and transportation of equipment after Mali stopped its military cooperation. The military regime accelerated the ongoing regional reorientation towards Russia as new security partner.38 Second, due to ECOWAS considering military intervention to restore political stability, Burkina Faso and Mali sided with the new government in Niger.39 With the new Alliance of Sahel States (AES) the military regimes are underpinning their cooperation and established an alternative organisation of regional cooperation in West Africa. Although the long-term effectiveness of AES remains to be seen, in the short term it can serve as a platform to present the governments as responsible actors who address regional challenges in a coordinated manner.

4 - ONGOING GOVERNANCE DEFICIENCIES

As Abdoul M. Abass, Nigerien expert in radicalization, says: "The transitional governments do not care too much about electoral issues, citing the need to defeat terrorism first."40 The military regimes based their claim to power on an expectation of performance, which they have to fulfill in order to maintain their own legitimacy. Yet, as the Sahel region continuous to be "faced with an unprecedented security crisis," this performance is seriously questioned.41 From January to March 2024, a total of 131 attacks have been reported in Mali, 72 in Burkina Faso and 19 in Niger. The most active jihadist-terrorist groups in the region remain the Islamic State's Western African province (ISWAP), Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS), and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin' (JNIM). While they continue to fight military forces, they are increasingly

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33 (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2024b).

34 (RSF 2024).

35 (France24 2024).

36 (Le Cam 2024).

37 (Al Jazeera 2024).

38 (Balima 2023).

39 (Mathur 2024).

40 (Abass 2024).

41 (UN Security Council 2024).

engaging in terrorist infighting.42 This implies how the actual state forces continue to lose control over their own national territories.

Consequently, the Norwegian Refugee Council draws a worrying picture: In Burkina Faso, two million people are internally displaced, two million people are "trapped" in towns across the country cut off from state control, and 8.400 people have been killed in armed conflicts in 2023 alone. 17.7 million people in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger are in need of humanitarian assistance. And in Chad, 2.9 million people are expected to be food insecure in 2024, especially due to an influx of refugees from Sudan, drawing upon the structural lack of basic services in the country. In addition, the coups led pivotal donors to withhold development aid. Tensions with ECOWAS led to sanctions against Niger, which did not exempt humanitarian support, and the expulsion of the UN-peacekeeping mission from Mali, propelled conflicts between the military and armed groups in the northern regions, increasing the number of internally displaced people to 340.000.43

It remains questionable, how the governments have responded to security risks and how equipped they are to offer actual relief. In the Burkinabé villages Nondin and Soro, Human Rights Watch found the military having killed "at least 223 civilians, including at least 56 children" on February 25, 2024. Mass killings conducted as part of military operations against civilians accused of collaboration with Islamist groups.44 Human Rights Watch also reported on how Malian forces "unlawfully killed and summarily executed several dozen civilians in counterinsurgency operations" with Russian support.45 Such actions continue to decline trust in political institutions and can even reinforce the attractiveness of radical groups As a result, the initial hope in the military governments, to ensure security which previous governments were unable to fulfill, is critically challenged.

Connecting issues of security with weak systems of economy and governance, the Sahel region has become a key transport route for drug trafficking (i.e. cocaine and cannabis). The region finds itself in a "vicious cycle" where trafficking benefits from flawed structures of rule of law, provides financial resources to armed conflict parties, who in turn undermine the rule of law. Particularly in Chad, northern Mali and Niger, different groups involved in conflicts correspond to different trafficking networks that channel financial resources for new weapons.46 Nonetheless, as illicit timber logging by the JNIM in Mali shows, such activities provide income opportunities for local communities.47 Thereby, illegal economic activities and their apparent unprosecuted proliferation, as well as the associated corruption and trade-based money laundering, underline the impression of an unreliable, detached state and also expose the inability to create sustainable labor markets.

5 - CONCLUSION

So what are the prospects for democracy in the central Sahel? As military regimes fail to find solutions to the multitude of problems and destabilization in the region, their basis for legitimacy is faltering. We must assume that not only will societal support gradually decline, but that governments will resort to authoritarian measures to compensate for these deficits in legitimacy and performance. A process that is already visible today and the violent events in Chad might serve as an indication of future developments in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. It remains difficult to evaluate to what degree the failure in improving security and economic perspectives is now being attributed to the military. Signs of pragmatic assessments have already emerged that

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42 (Eurafrica 2024).
43 (Norwegian Refugee Council 2024).
44 (Human Rights Watch 2024a).
45 (Human Rights Watch 2024c).
46 (UNODC 2024: 27 & 32).
47 (Ani 2024).

recognize the lack of ambition for sustainable change and the neglect of electoral democracy to stabilize the militaries' own rule.48

Still, from an external perspective it remains important to recognize societal decisions to condone violations of democratic principles. The regimes are equipping their systems to repress the potentially growing opposition against their ruling. Restrictions on political parties, the media and on reliable plans of transition highlight this point. Citizens who do not approve of the regimes may thence opt to remain silent for their own safety. At this point, the decision in Mali to re-authorize political activities in July 2024 does not change the observations presented and will require ongoing evaluations of developments concerned with political freedoms. Further, the persistent precarious security situation continues to impact priorities of local communities, pushing concerns about the state of democracy into the background.

For external actors, these observations call for a re-evaluation of partnerships. A continuous dialogue with civil society initiatives can help to determine potential areas of action. But such re-evaluation requires a broader discussion to what extent cooperation with non-democratic regimes is viable. International actors with articulated normative expectations, such as the EU and its member states, must formulate a shared understanding and a coherent political framework in order to identify potentials of cooperation. Seeing how the regimes in the Sahel appear to be on track to reinforce authoritarianism does not make this process any easier, or less important. Two fundamental recommendations can be formulated for European actors, particularly in the context of the newly constituted European Commission:

1. First, a common position must be developed on the form of military presence in the region. Decisions by individual states to maintain their military presence while other states terminate their deployments must be coordinated before being communicated publicly. This also includes a joint assessment of anti-democratic regional dynamics and how, despite these, bilateral engagement can be justified in certain cases.

2. Above all, given the regional impact of the security situation in the Sahel and the AES, European states should broaden their engagement with coastal states and ECOWAS-states. A shared strategy should address the dynamics of autocratisation as well as the specific demands of the region. This requires greater participation of civil society actors in political dialogues as well as European sincerity in debates about political and economic decolonization, and on the reinforced inclusion of African positions in international institutions.

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48 See: (Africa News 2024b) and (Hassane 2024).

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