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Chad

When France endorses a coup in Chad

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France is closely monitoring the talks between the Chadian government and the armed factions. Indeed, Chad is a major country in France's military apparatus in Africa, both for its collaboration in Operation Barkhane, the French military campaign against Islamist groups in the Sahel region, and for its strategic location in relation to neighbours such as the Central African Republic, Sudan or Libya, countries that are experiencing deep crises.

France has a long track record in Chad. It supported Hissène Habré's coup d'état in 1981 against Goukouni Oueddeï, deemed too close in Western eyes to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. Habré would install a dictatorship responsible for tens of thousands of deaths and was condemned by an international court for crimes against humanity. This would in no way prevent the French army from supporting his regime, particularly against Libyan troops in Operation Manta in 1983. Habré was removed from power as he had come to it, in a coup d'état supported by France. The instigator was his chief of staff Idriss Déby. The latter remained in business for 32 years and proved to be a flawless supporter of the French army.

A centrepiece

If Chad is an oil exporter, it is for another reason that France is so closely interested in this country. Indeed, it has become over time one of the centrepieces of the French army. Recall that the command post for Operation Barkhane is based in N'Djamena, the Chadian capital. Idriss Déby was in trouble for his management of the oil windfall. He was accused, rightly, of squandering money on corruption and maintaining an expensive army while Chad is near the bottom of the Human Development Index (HDI) (187th out of 189 countries). But Déby managed to turn security policy into a rent. Thus, during Operation Serval in Mali against jihadist troops, it was Chadian fighters who were on the front line and paid a heavy price in human lives.

Despite Déby's countless abuses against his opponents, the French authorities saved the day for him many times. It was during one of these clashes that Déby took the opportunity to liquidate his main opponent, the mathematician Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh, who had always refused to condone political violence.

Dictator from father to son

Idriss Déby was killed in 2021, while leading yet another operation against armed rebels. Constitutionally, the President of the National Assembly should have ensured the interim. But for the Déby clan it was out of the question to leave power, even for a few weeks, to a person outside the family. A Transitional Military Council therefore installed the son of the deceased dictator, Mahamat Idriss Déby, in power. The latter dissolved Parliament, repealed the Constitution and bloodily repressed protest demonstrations. In short, he staged a classic coup.

Macron endorsed this putsch to maintain the status quo necessary for military intervention in the Sahel. This French decision is important for the junta's respectability. The latter has not been suspended from the African Union, nor from ECCAS, the regional body of Central Africa, nor condemned by the European Union and the USA, unlike the juntas of Mali and Guinea.

Talks to hide the dictatorship

For good measure, the Chadian authorities have embarked on a major “inclusive” consultation that should take place on 10 May. It is preceded by a pre-dialogue with the country’s armed factions, which is taking place in Qatar, and talks with the civilian opposition.

Discussions with armed groups are very discreet. The leaked government proposals are nothing new: DDR (disarmament, demobilization and reintegration) of combatants in exchange for a cessation of hostilities and immunity. In fact, as in the past, the issues of government participation of the rebel leaders, with the financial rents that go with them, are fiercely negotiated. Discussions with the civil opposition have stalled. Wakit Tama, the main coordination of political parties, trade unions and NGOs, has left the negotiating table following “a comprehensive analysis of the situation that highlights a total inability of the junta and its government to tackle Chad’s problems head on.”

Once again, it is the Chadian people who will pay the price for the realpolitik imposed by France’s military considerations.

28 April 2022

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