DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 08.09.2023 | Boubacar Haidara

A coup after coup in the Sahel

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Since 2020, there have been six *coups d'état* in francophone West Africa: two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, one in Guinea and one recently in Niger. With the exception of Guinea, all of these countries are experiencing a serious security crisis. The coups were mainly justified, among other things, by the desire of the perpetrators to improve the situation following the inability of the ousted regimes to do so. In all 3 cases, the juntas quickly succeeded in exploiting the 'anti-French sentiment' that was already widespread while also winning the support of a large part of the population.

The 'anti-French sentiment' – or perhaps we should say the rejection of France's Africa policy – originated in Mali, before spreading to other countries. It is worth remembering that the French operation Serval (launched in January 2013 and renamed 'Barkhane' in 2014) was initially welcomed by a majority of Malians, as it led to the liberation of the country's north, which was occupied by jihadist groups. However, in the following years, the crisis worsened dramatically and eventually spread to central Mali in 2014, and to the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso and Niger, at the end of 2017. It is therefore the 'failure' of international interventions, in which France held the lead, that lies at the root of what is now known as 'anti-French sentiment'. All the more so because France had imposed its choices on the country (the all-out security approach), going against the wishes of the Malian population (the need for dialogue with the jihadists).

Making use of the momentum

Very dynamic civil society organisations – such as Yèrèwolo, which means 'worthy sons' in Bambara – were set up with the explicit aim of ousting France. Their rhetoric consisted of claiming that France was participating in the destabilisation of Mali with the sole aim of legitimising its presence on the ground. Rumours, images and misleading

videos were regularly circulated on social media to support this theory. At times, French soldiers could be seen delivering equipment to jihadists or illegally taking gold out of Mali. This fake news, which caused considerable damage to France's image, has also been sustained and sometimes financed by pro-Russian networks.

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Whether in Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger, the putschists understood very well that stirring up anti-French rhetoric was enough to secure popular support. As soon as they took power, the three juntas quickly took identical decisions along these lines: they cancelled military cooperation agreements, demanded the withdrawal of French troops, banned the French radio and television news channels RFI and France 24, and expelled their French ambassadors. In the case of Niger, France categorically refuses all the demands put forward by the junta under the pretext that it does not recognise its legitimacy.

Immediately after the coup was announced, the heads of state of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) met in Abuja, Nigeria – without the four military juntas that are currently excluded from the organisation. A series of sanctions against Niger were adopted, including the closure of all borders between Niger and other countries, and the suspension of all commercial and financial transactions with Niger. In addition, ECOWAS gave the putschists seven days to reinstate President Mohamed Bazoum, under the threat of military intervention. When the junta refused, at a second meeting in Abuja on 10 August, the ECOWAS heads of state decided to activate the organisation's standby force to impose a return to constitutional order. In the meantime, the planning of the military intervention would be finalised, and its launch would only await the exhaustion of all possibilities for dialogue.

A decision to influence the whole region

After the ousting of President Bazoum, the Niger junta hastened to send a delegation to Mali and Burkina Faso for talks with their juntas, which declared (in addition to Guinea) that they would not implement any of ECOWAS' sanctions against Niger. In a joint statement, they indicated that, if necessary, they would fight alongside Niger against ECOWAS troops. This, combined with strong popular support, makes military intervention in Niger more complicated than it appears at first glance.

The risk of failure and a protracted conflict is very real and must be considered. Moreover, an intervention could have a destabilising effect on the region as a whole. Military intervention would inevitably change the priorities of Niger's army, which, given its limited resources, would likely find itself in a severe imbalance *vis-à-vis* the jihadist groups. This would be a godsend for the latter, who could take advantage of the situation and increase their territorial gains.

The fact that Mali and Burkina Faso showed solidarity with Niger, however, was motivated by an important reason that does not necessarily have anything to do with Niger. Even before the coup in Niger, ECOWAS was engaged in a power struggle with the other military governments over the duration of their transitional periods. They therefore have a vested interest in seeing ECOWAS weaken. A failure of the regional institution to manage the situation in Niger could have far-reaching implications, possibly triggering a domino effect and leading to interminable military transitions and further *coups d'état*. Thus, military intervention entails so many risks that it is imperative to consider another solution.

Western ignorance

When France was prematurely pushed to withdraw from Mali, the country shifted some of its troops to Niger, and President Mohamed Bazoum became the preferred interlocutor of Western partners in the region. Under the circumstances, this was a very unpopular decision, which had a negative impact on Bazoum's legitimacy and popularity. The violent clashes that occurred in connection with the passage of the Barkhane military convoys bear witness to this. The same is true for Germany, which considered Niger to be an 'anchor point for stability in the region' and was about to send more troops there, in addition to the hundred or so already in the country. The EU has also drastically reduced its training mission in Mali (EUTM), transferring some of its personnel to Niger.

Western partners should be more sensitive to public opinion when making political choices for African countries, rather than being guided exclusively by the wishes of national political actors, who often have little legitimacy and are discredited already. It is obvious that the 'invasion' of Niger by international forces was badly perceived by a large part of the population.

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Under the current circumstances, ECOWAS should definitely pursue the sole path of dialogue with the junta, while reconsidering its

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demands. The post-coup dynamics observable in Niger today mean that reinstating President Bazoum in his post simply looks utopian. On the other hand, the sanctions already imposed on Niger – with the exception of the humanitarian aspect – should help put pressure on the junta and force it to make concessions, notably on the duration and form of the transition (to a civilian government).

This overall disorder and the deep mistrust towards France that comes with it are a godsend for Russia, which has taken on the role of an opportunistic player. Moscow can offer the states concerned another form of security and thus put itself in France's place – as it was able to do in Mali with the deployment of the private military company Wagner.

In conclusion, one might think that the recurrence of *coups d'état* reflects the perpetual quest for a democratic model that the countries concerned have still not been able to find since the establishment of democracy at the dawn of the 1990s. The widespread corruption and patrimonial management of states have contributed to widening the gulf between the political elites and their constituents. The severe security crisis in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have further weakened their already largely dysfunctional institutions and destroyed the livelihoods of many people. In this general chaos, the appeal of the military to the population can be explained not least by the fact that the army usually has disciplined, hierarchical and well-organised structures. There is a natural tendency for the population to expect the organisation and spirit of the military to be transposed into the management of society and political affairs. In retrospect, however, it must be said that this is usually not the case.



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