

Regional Response to the Niger Coup d'état: A critical analysis

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Abstract: *The recent coups or undemocratic ascensions to power that have characterized Africa have caused a great deal of concern, particularly in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The regional bloc has seen unprecedented military takeovers that are threatening to spread across the region if caution is not taken. The military takeover in Mali and Burkina Faso then Niger Republic have destabilized the region, halting major proposed projects that were expected to drive regional integration forward. Niger Republic particularly, has been masked with decades of great turmoil and coups that were a result of the country's economic landscape, which disadvantaged many Nigeriens and led to the devaluation of the CFA, frequent Structural Adjustment Programs, and stringent education measures and policies, which would further disenfranchise the average Nigerien. This study first looked at the background of Niger Republic's political economy from the 1980s to 1994, the causes of the 26 July 2023 Coup and some of the implications of the coup on both Niger and ECOWAS, as well as some recommendations or strategies that would remedy the situation.*

Keywords: Niger, coup d'états, regional response, ECOWAS.

Introduction

Background of the Political Economy of Niger

The Niger political economy has since the 1980s faced various challenges, most of which were because of the stagnation in living conditions of many working-class Nigeriens. What was expected to be an era of great jubilation because of the discovery of uranium, which boosted the nation's economy, fostering an enabling environment for the building of schools and clinics, improvements in public services and manufacturing between 1975 and 1980 turned into a nightmare for the average Nigerien as the Structural Adjustment Policy came into play (Boukaey, 1994). The national debt in Niger quadrupled between 1980 and 1982, as prices of uranium dropped, cutting the Gross Domestic Product by a third. As a nation drowning in debt, the government at that time opted to explore other avenues to counter the effects on the country's economy by reaching out to international financial institutions.

The International Monetary Fund in 1982 came to Niger's rescue by introducing a stabilization program. The terms and conditions attached to this program were budget cuts as well as liberalization measures, which were to allow the government to restructure its external debt. The Structural Adjustment Program negatively affected the education system, with the Nigerien government forced to cut back on free school supplies at the primary level, stopping boarding in high schools and colleges, disenfranchising young people who had come from rural areas into the cities in search of education due to lack of accommodation (Gregoire & De Sardan, n.d). As if adding salt to an open wound, the Nigerien government went further to implement the *Education 111 project* in 1987 cutting the education budget further. The prerequisites for attaining a scholarship were revisited and made more selective. The program policy that gave students a guarantee of being absorbed into the labor force upon school completion was scrapped, creating a bleak and uncertain future for many aspiring graduates.

The living standards of many Nigeriens continued to deteriorate, with student-led activism at the start of 1990 brewing. The bone of contention was the Education 111 project, which disenfranchised students from poor backgrounds, as well as the need for political freedom and the increasing military brutality (Gregoire & De Sardan, n.d). A clash between the military troops and students on the 9th of February 1990 was characterized by teargas, gunshots, and bloodshed, with three students dying. Another demonstration followed soon after, on the 16th of February, with trade unions joining in and religious denominations lending helping hands. The rebellion against the existing government at that time gave birth to democratic institutions. In the face of great public displeasure, the Ali Salibou government was forced to withdraw and give the student activists more recognition and create an environment that fosters more freedom of expression. The Higher Council for National Orientation on the 15th of June 1990 proposed a review of the country's Constitution, proposing a development of democratic pluralism. Material expectations amplified through calls for democracy were evident in the rejection of structural adjustment policies proposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Le Sahel, 29 January 1996). This was to be in vain as after the World Bank-IMF mission visited Niger, the Prime Minister made known the adoption of an economic policy document in September 1990, the document called for the privatization of public enterprises and the liquidation of those who were not performing as well as expected.

A National Conference spearheaded by Ali Salibou was held on the 29th of July 1991 in Niger to discuss issues such as the implementation of democracy, and the direction to be taken by current economic policies, with a focus on the relentless rejection of

the structural adjustment policies. When the National Conference came to an end, with new government officials ascending office, the International Monetary Fund opted to halt all support directed towards the Niger Government, citing a breach of the conditions attached to the structural adjustment agreements as reasons for such (Le Sahel, 29 January 1996). The International Monetary Fund's decision to stop financial support increased Niger's debt by over 20%, causing the government to repay over 11 billion francs it had not budgeted for when the yearly budget was formulated.

To circumvent the disaster caused by the withdrawal of funding by the International Monetary Fund, the Niger government redirected its focus onto the consolidation of public accounts to recover stolen funds by the outgoing government, which unfortunately, were less than previously anticipated. To make matters worse, when the government renegotiated uranium prices with foreign entities, it was a total disaster and the price kept on dropping. Taiwan was the only source of aid available to the Nigerian government at that point. When the reviewed Constitution was submitted in 1992 for a referendum, the people took to the streets to protest and decry the unpaid salaries of civil servants. The rumors that examinations in the education sector would be invalidated, which was dismissed by the then incoming government when the year ended to discourage the continued demonstrations, only added fuel to a raging fire. When the elections came a month later between the former military regime and the main parties of the National Conference, the International Monetary Fund brought forward certain guidelines concerning the freezing of salaries and a cut in public spending. The people of Niger chose to vote for the military regime, as choosing the main parties of the National Conference would have meant the coming back of structural adjustment policies (Le Sahel, 29 January 1996). President Mohamadou Issoufou unfortunately announced budget measures, meaning he had in the end chosen the much-dreaded structural adjustments. The structural adjustments introduced this time were so much worse, with civil servants' salaries frozen, even though civil service bodies were in arrears. The retirement age was reduced, and in high schools and universities, the teachers went on strikes for days.

The energy sector joined the strike after the World Bank manager announced the suspension of disbursements in the electricity sector. This caused the country to be in disarray, with a military uprising in Zinder planned to abduct the President during his visits. The military tried in vain to arrest him to force him to pay their wages and for better workplace treatment (Le Sahel, 29 January 1996). The trade unions at this point had already given up on "saving *democracy*." In October, the French Minister of Finance demanded a return of all African countries to the International financial community, threatening that no payments would be made available to African states that had not made the necessary effort to obtain the signature of the agreement with Bretton Woods institutions.

Mounting national debts forced Niger to go back to the International Monetary Fund in 1994, the negotiations ending with the obtaining of a confirmation agreement in March, 2 months after the CFA had been devalued after an agreement by the West African Heads of States in Abidjan on 11 January 1994 in the presence of the French Minister of Cooperation and the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund. The rise in prices of consumer goods dampened everyone's spirits as the salary freeze was still in effect (Gregoire & De Sardan, n.d). An increase in violence during mobilizations characterized streets in Niamey, with bloodshed and teargas in full display, leaving one student dead. A coup d'état was launched on 27 January 1996 by Colonel Ibrahim Mainassara Bare, the chief of staff at that time (Le Sahel, 29 January 1996). The national assembly was dissolved, political parties suspended, and a state of emergency declared, marking the evaporation of political aspirations that had been developed at the beginning of the decade, as no one took to the streets in defense of the government, unlike before (Boukaey, 1994).

Overview of the Niger Coup

Tensions between the former Head of State in Niger, His Excellency Mohammed Bazoum, and his head of the Presidential guard Abdourahamane Tichiani, which have been simmering before the Presidential inauguration in 2021 gave birth to the current coup. After the failed coup attempt in 2021, the President developed reservations surrounding his presidential guard, who had served as a presidential guard to Bazoum's predecessor Issoufou for over a decade (Brown, 2023). As a countermeasure to the failed coup attempt in 2021, Bazoum started putting in motion plans to dismiss the presidential guard, going as far as decreasing the budget of the said guard. Anticipating backlash from the presidential guard over such a big decision, Bazoum then went on to increase the military's budget as a means of responding to the seemingly increasing terrorism attempts Niger was experiencing and this increase was to cushion him and provide him with military support in case of anticipated backlash (Brown, 2023).

However, even after all measures to gain support from his army, the military's response was not what he had expected. As if in support of Tichiani, the military supported the putschists in taking over the running of Niger, owing to the inadequacy of Bazoum's security policies, which on the contrary were much stronger than before, due to Bazoum's strong connection with the West (Brown, 2023).

Subsequent Causes of the Coup in Niger

Although Tichiani when announcing that he had taken over the governing powers from Bazoum cited economic and political instability as drivers leading up to the forceful seizure of power, several underlying factors are thought to have ignited such a drastic step, considering that Bazoum's ascension to power was said to have been democratic, with a rise in the country's economy (Ajala,

2023). The strong emphasis on ethnicity, especially in the military in Niger is very important, a crucial contributing factor to Issoufou's two-term run as president. Bazoum's ethnicity became a heated and sensitive issue, even though he had won the elections by 56% and was a member of the same political movement as his predecessor. Bazoum was regarded as a foreigner because of his Arab roots, a fact which caused a great outcry all over the military base, which is made up of the larger existing ethnic groups found in Niger. (Ajala, 2023).

The presence of military troops and army bases from France in Niger created a rift between Niger's military and Bazoum, with the military believing the foreign troops, which were approximately 1500 undermined their capability to provide security in the country. The presence of uranium in Niger, which the country exports to France is one of the reasons why France decided to deploy the troops to guard the mines (Ajala, 2023). According to an article published in the African Leadership Magazine in February 2014, France was expected to bump close to \$550 million into the mining industry, with an annual budget of \$150 million spread over five to seven years (Ajala, 2023).

Another thorn in Niger's flesh was the existence of Base Aerienn 201, a United States military outpost, which is widely known as *Base Americaine*, which houses wide-ranging intelligence, surveillance, and security information in the region. This high-flying base is home to Space Force personnel operating high-tech satellite communications (Turse, 2023). Facilities include the Joint Special Operations Air Detachment and countless drones that include the armed MQ-9 Reapers, which patrol the region twenty-four hours, guarding against terrorist activities within the surrounding region. Nestled within a 25-kilometer base security zone, the base is surrounded by fences, and barriers, boasting of state-of-the art air-conditioned guard towers which are furnished with custom-made firing ports and military working dogs (Turse, 2023). Nigeriens decried such, mentioning that the construction of such a base would make Niger prone to terrorist attacks, increasing instability.

After France and European special forces were withdrawn from Mali in 2022 following the country's coup, President Mohammed Bazoum invited these troops into Niger, saying the country has accepted help from the deployed troops in boosting security around the borders. However, Maikol Zodi stated that the presence of these troops was illegal, and military personnel from Niger would treat their presence as such (Aljazeera, 2022).

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union's somewhat reluctance to address coups in Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali might be blamed for the current situation in Niger. In a space of seven years, there have been seven reported coups in the region, of which three were successful (Ajala, 2023). West Africa has experienced the highest number of coups, accounting for 44.4% in the continent, with 20 happening in West Africa and the Sahel region, with 5 successful and 2 failed coup attempts since 2019. There has been a surge in coups in countries that were former French colonies, with 12 of the reported 20 occurring in the Sahel. It can be speculated therefore that the coup that occurred in Niger was because of the coups in neighboring states, and these phenomena will likely spread to the remaining states such as Sierre Leone (Onapajo & Dans Suleiman, 2022). This assumption is partly backed by the contagion theory, which proposes that a coup in one country may lead to a coup in neighboring states. In other words, an introduction of a communist government in one nation would quickly lead to communist takeovers in neighboring countries, with the effect being like that of dominos falling (U.S Department of State, 2023).

Implications of the Niger Coup

The Niger coup has redirected the country's security fight against the terrorist group Boko Haram to the ongoing political distress in the state, creating a huge humanitarian crisis. At the peak of the Boko Haram insurgency in Niger, Chad deployed 4,500 troops in 2015, with Nigeria and Cameroon deploying 25,000 and 7,000 troops respectively. France, the United States of America, Belgium, Italy and Germany landed helping hands by also deploying military in Niger (Oyewole, 2023). Since the coup on the 26th of July 2023, this mechanism has been under threat, with the shift from subduing the terrorist group to responding to the crisis in Niger. Since the political instability in Niger started, Boko Haram has been responsible for kidnapping 15 civilians and killing 12 people in Nigeria. In August this year, 17 Niger soldiers were suspected to have been killed by the said group near the Mali border (Oyewole, 2023).

Security around the Sahel region has been greatly compromised, leading to numerous disasters in the region such as food insecurity, environmental disasters, transnational crimes in the form of human trafficking, population displacement, and widespread poverty (Oyewole, 2023). Continued fractions and instabilities in Niger have far-reaching complications for planned cross-border development projects, several involving Niger. The proposed \$25 billion Nigeria-Morocco gas pipeline which was projected to foster connectivity between gas producers in Nigeria to numerous West African states, cutting across Morocco into Europe has been halted, owing to the recently rekindled rivalries stemming from both pro-democracy calls in the country and those who are calling for pro-Russia interventions. (Izuaka, 2023).

The Trans-Saharan Road, a proposed major route that was anticipated to boost the economies of six African countries, including Niger has also been halted. This route links Algeria, Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Tunisia, its ports connecting Algeria and Lagos,

with a 4600-kilometer of intertwined highways feeding into Tunisia, Mali, Niamey, and Chad as an integral part of this corridor. The Tunisian branch connects the ports of Tunis and Gabes, with 80% of the corridor paved (UNCTAD, n.d). Nigeria's existing agreement to export electricity to neighboring countries, which include Niger creates a division in that those countries which signed this agreement will not dam the waters that feed major power plants in Nigeria. This is so because Nigeria at present supplies electricity to the Republic of Benin, Togo, and Niger, and a show of support for the Niger coup by these countries would presumably lead to a power cut in their respective countries. (Onapajo & Dans Suleiman, 2022). There have been increasing tensions and factions in the West African states, which threaten to weaken ECOWAS. Burkina Faso and Mali showed immediate support to the coup leaders in Niger, with a shared dislike for France and a growing alliance with Russia, dividing the regional bloc as these states are coming together to form a de facto anti-west francophone fraction within the community. A weakened ECOWAS will inevitably lead to the disbandment of plans to establish the West African Economic and Monetary Union, posing a threat to possible future endeavors in the regional bloc (Onapajo & Dans Suleiman, 2022).

The shift in alliances in Niger threatens to trigger security priorities and responsibilities having to be outsourced at a higher rate than currently. With the move of Western countries such as France, the United States of America, and the European Union partners to withdraw support geared towards financing Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, there has been a great vacuum in Sahel's security architecture, thus propelling the respective governments to search for alternative financing, which Russia through the Wagner Group provided (United Nations, 2023).

This newfound partnership raises several concerns, however, for the citizens of these countries as the Wagner Group has a history of violations of human rights, and mercenary behaviors, posing a threat to human security in the region. With Niger being the world's seventh producer of uranium and the second largest supplier of uranium to France, Niger has become a country Western states cannot afford to lose, which means it will be plagued by more global superpower confrontations. (Onapajo & Dans Suleiman, 2022).

The introduction of Russia into an already hostile coup environment will not only hurt cooperative efforts across the Sahel but will encourage a congested and chaotic security landscape within the region, as existing security personnel within the Sahel are being pulled in all directions, creating a vacuum for extremist groups to exercise their influence. The divided support from other militaries creates a gap for more coups to occur, which means instability will continue to unravel in the region (Onapajo & Dans Suleiman, 2022).

ECOWAS's interest in the Niger coup

Following the preceding coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Mali, the Heads of State of the various Western countries on 3 February 2022 held an Extraordinary Summit as member states of ECOWAS to condemn the coups in Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau, which were two weeks apart. These coups pointed towards an existing discourse on issues of democracy and inclusive governance in its member states, despite the existence of a framework that advocates for the protection of democracy and freedom (Maluleke, 2022). The Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance of 2001, whose contents bear twelve principles that all member states should adhere to, including separation of powers, legitimate means of ascending to power, and appropriate civil-military relations.

Article 45(1) states that "*If democracy is abruptly brought to an end by any means or when there is massive violation of human rights in a member state, ECOWAS may impose sanctions on the State concerned.*" (ECOWAS, 2010). Article II, Item 3 of the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol in Security Sector Governance in West Africa of 2001 stipulated that No serving member of the armed forces may seek to run for elective political office. Every accession to power must be made through free, fair, and transparent elections. - Zero tolerance for power obtained or maintained by unconstitutional means" (West African Network on Security and Democratic Governance, 2005).

The provisions of this Protocol were expected to be internalized by each member state, promoting peace and democratic values. On the contrary, the crux of the matter is that West African countries are characterized by unstable and authoritarian regimes, and addressing these falls on the shoulders of the 1999 Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security. The Mechanism acts as a deciding body on all matters about peace and security, as mandated by the Authority of Heads of State and Government, the highest decision-making body of ECOWAS (Maluleke, 2022). Although such a Protocol exists to serve as a guide in such cases, peace attempts in Sierra Leone between 1991-2002 and in Guinea-Bissau between 1998-1999 did not succeed due to the regional block's inability to formulate and implement sustainable peace agreements while maintaining an effective and efficient military presence in both states. As per its mandate to maintain peace and security in the region, ECOWAS has often employed sanctions and suspensions as mechanisms to discourage coups within its member states, with little success (Maluleke, 2022).

Possible shortcomings to ECOWAS-led military intervention

ECOWAS had given the coup leaders in Niger up until 10 August 2023 to reinstate President Mohammed Bazoum but no action was seen following that directive. Instead, the French embassy in Niamey was set ablaze, with masses demonstrating in the streets waving Russian flags in favor of the coup (Mednick, 2023). Moreover, Nigeria has the rotating seat as chair of ECOWAS, so the likelihood of any military intervention was halted when Nigerian legislators dismissed that idea. Nigeria's constitution states that for any declaration of war by the President to happen, the Head of State should first seek parliament's approval.

However, in cases where there is a direct threat to Nigeria, the President has the right to deploy a fraction of soldiers but inform parliament of such a decision within five days. It is feasible therefore to point out that any attack on Niger could have drastic repercussions for Nigeria, which has suffered years of terrorism (Akinkuotu, 2023). An attack on Niger would ultimately lead to an influx of refugees into Nigeria since seven states are bordering Niger. Moreover, it is imperative to mention that Nigeria's military and economic contributions to ECOWAS are very influential in the decision-making, diplomacy, conflict management, and de-escalation endeavors of the regional bloc (Afolabi, 2009).

The support of the coup by Burkina Faso and Mali has increased the number of pro-coup supporters, The number of youths who have joined forces with the military as a show of support for the Niger coup is alarming (Ajala, 2023). Another important component of this crisis is the fact that Niger is a member of a Multinational Joint Task Force and the G5 Sahel, both organizations which fight against terrorism in the region. A declaration of war in Niger would imply that the soldiers who were fighting side by side had to switch sides. (Ajala, 2023).

Recommendations

- The current situation in Niger calls for ECOWAS as a regional bloc to employ other means to circumvent the coup such as negotiating a short transition period for the military to avoid further blood spills and demonstrations in the region. A smooth transition would encourage calm and assure partners within the region of stability in the region. This can be done through the adoption of the peace innovation approach that will address long-term conflicts, which will encompass different stakeholders such as innovators, and academics, providing lasting solutions that are cognizant of geopolitical tensions within the regional bloc.
- Those countries that are not directly affected by the current happenings in Niger should heed the calls for diplomatic communications. A multifaceted approach that addresses the current turmoil within the bloc such as socioeconomic disparities, and historical legacies, and establishing long-term collaborations and partnerships would ensure a basis for social inclusion and stability. This will address the issue of inequalities and ensure the full application of the principles of good governance within the region.
- ECOWAS should adopt and implement accountability mechanisms to ensure member states internalize and uphold laws set by the organization. Both the ECOWAS revised treaty and supplementary protocols provide sufficient guidelines on how the community is expected to intervene in cases of undemocratic takeovers. In that same vein, it becomes crucial to ensure that these provisions are enforced. Stringent sanctions are passed to promote commitment to the principles and provisions of the community's agreements. The respect of the community law, principles, protocols, and provisions rely heavily on the enforcement mechanisms set aside to monitor the process and progress of the implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the economic and political landscape of Niger from the 1980s up until now has suffered great constraints and distress due to bad governance at the hands of leaders who were more focused on their gain than the welfare of the people. The recent coup painted a glaring picture of the legacy of socioeconomic instability experienced by Niger since the 1980s and the historic legacy of bad institutions and bad governance that have led to countless coups since the country gained independence, the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programs which had devastating effects on the education as well as on the currency in the Republic of Niger. The number of coups that have been experienced in Niger has been a cry for help from organizations such as ECOWAS and African Union in restructuring the key governing institutions in that region. To prevent a possible ripple effect of more coups within the region, there is a need to put in place numerous strategies aimed at creating a more conducive environment that promotes the inclusivity of various non-state actors in eradicating undemocratic takeovers within the region for sustainable development and the continuation of proposed projects that will foster regional integration.

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