

# Niger: A Coup Against French Control and Dominance

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*The situation in Niger is still in flux. On 26 July 2023 a military coup took place in that West African state that led to the ouster of its elected President, Mohamed Bazoum, by Brigadier General Abdourahmane Tchiani. The Brigadier General has proclaimed that he is the new president of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP).*

The coup has been condemned by the 15 member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) of which Niger is a member, the African Union, the European Union and the United States of America. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of July, ECOWAS whose current head is Nigeria (not to be confused with Niger) issued an ultimatum to the coup leaders to restore Bazoum to power within one week, or face the consequences including possible military action. The deadline has expired. ECOWAS has not acted. It is alleged that the regional grouping would now prefer diplomacy.

One of the reasons why ECOWAS has changed its stance is because of strong opposition to any military intervention from some of its member states. Mali and Burkina Faso have made it explicitly clear that they would view military intervention as a "declaration of war" against the people of Niger and would defend the newly installed military junta. Besides, Niger is geographically one of the biggest countries in West Africa and possesses a well-trained army.

But an even more compelling reason why military intervention may not be an option for ECOWAS or anyone else for that matter is because the 26<sup>th</sup> July coup, it is obvious to most observers, has widespread support among the people. The people see the coup as an attempt to end continuous Western — mainly French and now also American — exploitation and dominance of Niger. Niger, once a French colony, is rich in natural resources, uranium, oil and gold. Its uranium industry for instance is owned and operated by a so-called joint venture between Niger and France, the Societe des mines de l'Air (Somair). 85% of Somair is owned by France's Atomic Energy Commission and two French companies, while 15% is

owned by Niger's government. Niger is the world's seventh largest producer of uranium, vital for nuclear energy while France relies heavily upon nuclear energy for 70% of its domestic power supply. As Vijay Prasad and Kambala Musavuli put it in a recent article,

"One in three lightbulbs in France are powered by uranium from Niger, at the same time as 42% of the African country's population live below the poverty line."

France's grip over Niger's uranium is just one example of the former colonial power's hold on Niger's economy. This neo-colonial dominance expresses itself in many other ways. Niger, like other ex-French colonies in Africa, is tied to the French currency and the French financial system. It uses the *Communaute Financiere Africaine* (CFA) for its domestic and foreign financial transactions. 50% of the reserves of these African states are held in the French Treasury as part of an arrangement forged between the ex-colonies and France. Consequently, when France devalued the CFA, the impact upon the African economies including Niger was disastrous. If we look at these economies as a whole, it is only in the fields of external trade and investments that some positive changes have occurred in recent years largely because of the emergence of China as an important partner.

Outside the Nigerien economy, the neo-colonial presence is most visible in the form of French and American soldiers and bases. French and American militaries were brought in by the government to fight Muslim insurgents. The rise of these insurgents is linked — to some extent at least — to the US-NATO overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 which paved the way for the growth of so-called jihadist groups in parts of North and West Africa. Of course, the Jihadist phenomenon cannot be divorced from US and British intelligence operations in the post 9/11 period.

Resentment against French and American troops has reinforced the perception that leaders like Bazoum, though elected, were mere puppets of Western interests. This explains why in the huge demonstrations that have taken place in the Nigerien capital, Niamey, and elsewhere Bazoum was denounced for betraying the people. It is not just in Niger that anti-French and anti-Western sentiments have peaked. In three other states, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea such sentiments have also found expression. The presence of French and American troops in those states has also played a role in the mounting anger towards Western power. Economic difficulties faced by the people which are often attributed to Western dominance have exacerbated popular feelings. It is significant that in all 3 states military coups had taken place between August 2020 and September 2021.

As feelings against France in particular and the West in general have become more pronounced in West Africa, the mood towards Russia seems to have become more positive. An article in *The Guardian* (5 August 2023) notes that

"Russian flags were brandished by those demonstrating outside the French embassy in Niamey, with many calling for Vladimir Putin to replace Macron as their biggest global backer."

Putin himself has been critical of the coup and has expressed the hope that civilian rule would be restored.

And indeed, civilian rule should prevail in Niger and other states in the region. But civilian rule should reflect the people's legitimate desire for liberation from neo-colonial dominance. Civilian rule should uphold the dignity of the human being and the sovereignty of the

people. It should protect the independence of the people which must include their right to own and control their economy and define and defend their own security.

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