

Africa: Why are French soldiers in the Sahel? Protesters have an answer

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Macron's autocratic attitude towards dissent in countries such as Niger and Mali is only stoking anti-French sentiment

Large protests have been taking place in Bamako, the capital of Mali, demanding that French troops leave the country. "We marched for them to leave, and now they send 600 more," [one blogger in Mali wrote](#) in response to the news that more French soldiers were to be [deployed to the Sahel](#). In total, roughly 5,100 French troops are deployed in Mali, as well as across Chad, Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso. Public opposition to French military intervention in the Sahel, seen as undermining national sovereignty, has been growing over the last year across francophone Africa. The popular Cameroonian musician [Général Valsero recently declared](#), "The presence of the French army is an insult."

French troops have been in the region on and off since they occupied it in the 19th century, seeking to secure French access to labour and resources. They have remained, and returned, since independence. The French launched [Operation Serval in 2013](#) in response to gains made by insurgent groups in the north of Mali. Since then, instability has spread and different states in the region are now dealing with repeated attacks and insurgencies from a range of groups, some linked to al-Qaeda and Islamic State.

"Threatening foreign presidents to quell public debate and dissent at home is an autocratic gesture"

Deep-rooted and [complex tensions](#) are driving the insurgencies: livelihoods under attack, trafficking networks manipulated by political and business elites, the failure of nation states to provide economic and social security for its citizens. The climate crisis and associated land degradation are major factors.

In this context, President [Macron says](#) the French Operation Barkhane, which replaced Serval in 2014, exists in the name of the "collective security" of the Sahel and the wider world.

But France still has significant commercial and political interests in the region. The state-owned energy company, Areva, gets a large proportion of its [uranium from Niger](#). Total has oil fields in Mali. The French have a military base in Chad (when Macron visited in 2018, he brought enough [champagne for 1,300 troops](#)). Despite years of fighting, the insecurity and attacks on civilians continue. Four thousand deaths [were reported](#) last year alone.

Sahelian public resistance to the French military presence is a problem for Macron's government. He is under rising pressure at home because of [recent French casualties](#) in the region. As a result, the presidents of Sahel countries came under orders from Macron to sort out anti-French sentiment. Speaking after the Nato summit in London last December, Macron put on a stern, somewhat exasperated tone. "Do they want us to be there? Do they need us?" he asked. To get an answer,

Macron [called a summit](#) in early January in Pau, a town in the south-west of France. On Burkinabè television, the president of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Kaboré, criticised the tone of this “summons”. Nevertheless, he later joined the presidents of Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Chad in releasing a joint statement confirming that, yes, they wanted France to stay.

In making French military presence apparently conditional on a public show of allegiance, Macron wants to be seen as committed to democratic process in Africa. Famously, at a landmark [speech at the University of Ouagadougou](#) in 2017, he described himself as a president from the generation for whom “the crimes of colonisation are indisputable”. He wasn’t one to tell African countries what to do. And sure enough, here he is in 2020 asking African presidents what they want. But threatening foreign presidents to quell public debate and dissent at home is an autocratic gesture.

Members of the public have responded: “We are acting legally and democratically to express our disagreement against France’s policy,” said one organiser in [Mali](#), denying that protesters were to be treated as rebels or disturbers of the peace. “We need to free ourselves from this,” said Valsero.

It is no surprise that some pushback – albeit fleeting, and only directed at a domestic audience – came from Burkina Faso. Kaboré is facing elections later this year, in a country where in 2014, after 27 years in power, popular struggle [dislodged Blaise Compaoré](#), a staunch ally of the US and France. Kaboré is not in a position to completely ignore his electorate, even if the French president tells him to.

In Niger, President Mahamadou Issoufou played down the significance of those protesting against the French military in his country. “Those demonstrating in the street are a tiny minority,” he said [in an interview](#) in December last year. This insouciance was at odds with his authorities’ prohibition of a protest in the Niger capital, Niamey, the week before. The French have supported Issoufou and in turn he gives the French army free rein. French drones take off from Niamey to monitor Islamist movements in the Sahel.

Last February, [French forces attacked](#) soldiers opposed to the Chad president, Idriss Déby. As the political scientist Marielle Debos has [pointed out](#), these soldiers were no cuddly democrats, but bombing the regime’s opponents falls squarely outside the stated objectives of Operation Barkhane. It seemed to serve only to shore up the position of Déby, who himself took power by force in 1990 with French support. Seen this way, the presence of French soldiers in the Sahel has more to do with securing French interests than about achieving security for the general public.

There is also a relationship between foreign policy and what’s going on in mainland France. In Bamako in January, demonstrators calling for French troops to leave burned a French flag, and a man on a loudspeaker called for the abolition of the camps in Calais. In [France](#), members of the Chad diaspora campaigning against French interference have been involved in organising with the “*gilets noirs*”, a movement mobilising against the exploitation of the undocumented migrants on which the French economy depends. At the Pau summit, a collective associated with the *gilets noirs*, La Chapelle Debout, called a protest against the theatrics of Macron’s summit: “We demand the departure of French troops,” one member wrote. “Colonisation is over.”

The *gilets noirs* have been explicit about the connections between exploitation at home and French presence abroad. Seen through this optic, the instability in the [Sahel](#) is not a hermetic issue confined to the region. It is a part of a story of inequality across the international divisions of labour that western states and companies help produce.

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