

Anti-French protests in West Africa spill over into Chad

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Anti-French sentiment is gaining ground across a number of West African countries, where the presence of the former colonial power, engaged in fighting armed jihadist insurgents across the Sahel, is challenged by growing Russian influence and popular anger against its history of support for strongman regimes. Protests against France's military presence in the region have now spilled over into Chad, France's key African ally, governed by a junta, where last month French nationals were targeted in the capital N'Djamena and petrol stations belonging to oil giant Total were ransacked. Rémi Carayol reports.

Over the past three years, anti-French demonstrations have swept West Africa, above all in those countries where France's military is deployed in anti-jihadist operations – Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, but also in Senegal, all former French colonies.

Now the protests have gained Chad, a longstanding key strategic ally for France, situated further to the east, where French nationals present in the country have been the targets of threats, and where last month what began as a peaceful protest ended with the ransacking of petrol stations belonging to French oil company Total.

The protest on May 14th was organised by Wakit Tama, a coalition of political parties, labour unions and civilian associations which had called for a march through the streets of the capital N'Djamena, to denounce what it called “the support of France for the authorities of the military transition”, and “the eventual presence of a military base in Chadian territory”.

The army-led, so-called Transitional Military Council (TMC) took power in a coup in April 2021 after the death of [Idriss Déby Itno](#), the country's iron-fisted ruler since 1990, who reportedly died [in combat against rebels](#) based in neighbouring Libya. The TMC, led by Déby's son Mahamat, promised it would hand the country over to democratic rule within 18 months.

France has for 35 years maintained an important military base at N'Djamena airport, where the high command of its current anti-jihadist Operation Barkhane, active in the wider Sahel region, is based. It also has other military camps in the town of Abéché, in the east, and Faya, in the north, where it conducts regular joint training exercises with the Chadian army.

In February this year, Paris announced the withdrawal of its around 2,400 French troops stationed in Mali, together with a back-up force of several hundred military personnel from other European countries. That followed a collapse in relations with Mali's ruling junta, which [has since turned to the Russian private paramilitary Wagner Group](#), closely linked to the Kremlin, for help in combatting jihadist insurgents in the country.

In the days shortly before the May 14th demonstration in N'Djamena, local posts on social media

relayed a growing rumour of an expanding French military presence in five areas of the country. Questioned by Mediapart, the French armed forces ministry denied the existence of a plan to widen its presence in Chad.

One of the organisers of the Wakit Tama protest last month, Demba Karyom, who is also an official with Chad's largest trades union, the UST, said the aim of the demonstration was to "say no to France" and that it should end its support for the junta and leave the country. "Since the death of Déby, [*French President Emmanuel*] Macron has always shown his support for the military transition [*Council*]," she said. "We do not agree with this transition, which has neither an agenda or calendar, and which constantly postpones the national dialogue that it had promised. Chadians must discuss among themselves. We don't want foreign interference anymore."

"We refuse a redeployment of the French army in the country," added Karyom. "We don't want Chad to receive the soldiers who are leaving Mali. It's now 120 years that France is here, and the Chadian people have gained nothing from that. It's time for it to go."

She insisted that the protest on May 14th was to be a peaceful one. A number of witnesses, including among the police, confirmed that it was indeed a calm procession until tensions flared as it dispersed.

Another member of the Wakit Tama, who asked not be identified, said that it was at the end of the march that the situation degenerated because of the actions "of youngsters who hadn't even taken part in the demonstration". That was when at least seven Total petrol stations situated around the capital were attacked. According to Total, the ransacking caused 152,000 euros worth of damage. On the same day, vehicles carrying French nationals were targeted and the headquarters of western NGOs were stoned. Meanwhile, at one point, a Russian flag was brandished.

Karyon said around 20 people were arrested, including 15 minors, and shortly afterwards five leading members of the Wakit Tama were also arrested, including the general secretary of the UST, and were questioned by the *Renseignements généraux*, an intelligence-gathering agency. They were later charged with committing public order offences, endangering human lives, arson and destruction of property, and were jailed. Shortly after, Max Loalngar, a lawyer, rights activist and the spokesman for Wakit Tama, was arrested at his mother's house.

A Total service station ransacked after the anti-France demonstration in N'Djamena, May 14th 2022.
© Photo AFP

The six arrested men received the support of one of France's largest trades unions, the CGT, which issued a statement calling for the French government "to signify to the Chadian authorities the illegality of such acts [*arrests*] which contravene the right to demonstrate" and "to cease all cooperation with and support for the dictatorial Chadian regime".

The six have been sent for trial on June 6th. "That means that they will spend 20 days in prison for events they are not responsible for," said the previously cited Wakit Tama source who asked not to be named. "It is a form of unacceptable intimidation [...] It is further proof that one cannot criticise France in this country, and that Macron and [*Mahamat*]Déby are complicit in this."

A strong message to opponents of the regime

According to several sources close to the junta, the arrests were aimed at sending a strong message to its opponents, as sporadic protests continued in the days following the march. A former minister

under the previous regime of Idriss Déby Itno, whose name is withheld, summed up the message as being, "Whoever attacks France also attacks Chad".

Following the disturbances, Deby's son Mahamat, head of the TMC and the country's new ruler, announced: "It is time for this to end. It is time also for an end to the lying and baseless accusations that are circulating about the redeployment of French troops within the country."

The French government, meanwhile, has not commented on the recent events.

France has regularly been the target of criticism within Chad over its support for the country's despots, including not only Idriss Déby Itno, and now his son, but also Hissène Habré, the former president who ruled from 1982 to 1990. "France has made Chad its [*object of*] military expansion to the contempt for democracy," commented Karyom. "We can no longer accept it."

The strategic context now has changed, illustrated by the appearance of the Russian flag at last month's protests in N'Djamena, and which were also waved during recent anti-French demonstrations in Burkina Faso and Niger. For several years, Russia has led a campaign to challenge what until now has been regarded as France's own 'preserve' in Africa, beginning with the Central African Republic (CAR), and more recently in Mali. Both countries have virtually broken off their relations with France in favour of making Russia their principal foreign partner.

Chad is considered by France to be an essential ally in Africa, notably for its operations against armed jihadist groups in the Sahel. But Chad is now surrounded by countries allied to Russia, where operatives of the Russian private paramilitary Wagner Group are present – in CAR, Libya and Sudan. The mercenaries are also now present further west, in Mali, another traditional French 'preserve'. Some observers in France and Chad believe that Russian influence may have been behind the May 14th protests, which Wakit Tama refutes.

The spectre of Russia behind anti-French sentiment also diverts attention from a critical assessment of France's actions in Africa. Laurent Duarte is executive secretary of French NGO Tournons La Page, an umbrella organisation for associations promoting good governance and democratic change in African states. "In Chad, the Russians don't need trolls for the expression of anger against the support for despots," he said, citing Emmanuel Macron's presence at the funeral last year of Idriss Déby Itno, and the support the French president has lent for Déby's son. "Today, to position oneself as pro-Russian is also a way of being noticed and to gain visibility in a competing political and social space," he added.

Cécile Petitdemange is an anthropologist and political scientist specialised in Chadian affairs and based in N'Djamena. She observes "a real anger against France" in the country, which she argues is "a backlash from colonial and post-colonial history" and little to do with Russia's strategy. "All the grievances accumulated over the years against the Chadian authorities – unemployment, the absence of democracy and political alternance, poverty, power cuts – are today amalgamated in criticism of France and come together in the slogan 'France get out'," she said.

That long-brewing sentiment is today amplified with the emergence of social media, in Chad as in other countries of the Sahel region, on which rumours and disinformation abound. But the attacks on France are also joined by perceptions, for some, of it somehow being an enemy of Islam, which is an accusation increasingly put about in N'Djamena, notably among the capital's Arab community.

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P.S.

- MEDIAPART. JUNE 1, 2022 :

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