

Defiant leaders of Niger coup confident of holding on to power

Monday 14 August 2023, by [GARÉ Amadou](#), [BURKE Jason](#) (Date first published: 12 August 2023).

Analysts says key figures in new regime were underestimated as elected president remains confined to residence

The leaders of the military takeover in [Niger](#) remained defiant this weekend, apparently confident that disarray among regional opponents, support from other military regimes in neighbouring countries and a wave of popular mobilisation at home will allow them to keep power for the indefinite future.

Mohamed Bazoum, the democratically elected president of Niger, remains confined to his official residence in Niamey, the capital, amid faltering international efforts to convince the new rulers of the unstable but strategically important country to return to barracks two weeks after launching a coup.

Analysts say that Abdourahamane Tchiani, the former commander of the presidential guard who leads the new regime, and his fellow senior officers had been underestimated by observers in the region and farther afield.

“Unlike other coups [recently] these are high-level officers, men in their 60s, with lots of experience and including some who are really well trained. They don’t hold all the cards, but certainly hold a lot of them,” said Corinne Dufka, a respected independent consultant and author working on the Sahel.

“Everyone I speak to [in Niger] says the train has left the station and Bazoum is not coming back.”

Bazoum was seen by his doctor on Saturday, his entourage said, amid mounting concern for his health.

Bazoum, 63, was toppled on 26 July by his presidential guard, which has since held him and his family at his official Niamey residence.

The EU, the African Union and the UN joined others in sounding the alarm for Bazoum on Friday after reports described worsening detention conditions.

Bazoum “had a visit by his doctor today”, a member of his entourage told AFP on Saturday, adding the physician had also brought food for Bazoum, his wife and son. “He’s fine, given the situation,” the source added.

Human Rights Watch said it had spoken to Bazoum earlier this week. The ousted leader had described the treatment of himself, his wife and their unwell 20-year-old son as “inhuman and cruel”, HRW said.

“My son is sick, has a serious heart condition, and needs to see a doctor,” the group quoted him as

saying. "They've refused to let him get medical treatment."

On Thursday, the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) said a military force had been put on standby to restore democracy in Niger but gave no details of how or when an intervention might occur.

A key planning meeting of West African army chiefs of staff [was postponed indefinitely](#).

An earlier deadline set shortly after the 26 July coup expired on Sunday and Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the president of Nigeria, has shifted to stressing diplomacy and negotiations to resolve the crisis.

"The threat [of military intervention] was a miscalculation," said [Olayinka Ajala](#), an expert in west Africa and the Sahel at Leeds Beckett University. "Even the smallest military intervention could be disastrous for the region ... I don't think [Niger's new rulers] are going to relinquish power. They have gone too far."

In Niamey, Niger's capital, supporters of Bazoum continued to call for severe reprisals to weaken the tightening grip of the military before it is too late.

Ecowas has imposed economic sanctions against Niger in an attempt to destabilise the new regime and deter such takeovers after a sudden spate of coups against democratic governments in the Sahel since 2021.

Kossey Sanda, an adviser to Bazoum, said the Ecowas sanctions were proportionate to the "stupid acts" of the soldiers.

"The impact of the Ecowas sanctions is very obvious. The price of almost everything has soared, banks lack liquidity so their customers can't withdraw cash, state revenues have dropped 75% in a week," Sanda said.

But many say the suffering caused by such measures will only build support for the coup leaders.

Niger's military regime is already riding a wave of popular support rooted in deep resentment at the failures of its elected leaders in recent years. While a political elite has often prospered, sometimes through corruption, ordinary people face Islamic extremist violence, rudimentary services, sky-high unemployment and shortages of basic necessities.

The suspension of electricity supplies from Nigeria has caused deep anger.

Hamidou Albade, 48, said he's been unable to run his shop on the outskirts of Niamey because there's been no electricity.

"It's very difficult, I just sit at home doing nothing ... We're suffering now, but I know the junta will find a solution to get out of the crisis," he said.

Bassirou Baki, an independent journalist in Niamey, said the people of Niger were already being ravaged by day-to-day insecurity caused by terrorism and climate breakdown.

"Any sanctions should not target them but those who took power by force ... Lots of fresh food businesses are going bust, there are sick people dying in the hospitals and in the maternity wards babies are being delivered by torchlight. Some don't survive," he said.

Though the coup leaders initially claimed that they seized power to better protect the nation from

surging Islamist extremist violence, they have now shifted to a narrative focused on alleged exploitation of the country's resources by France, the former colonial power.

"This is clearly a populist narrative, and has evolved ... from something internal [about security] to a more anti-French, anti-western discourse which definitely resonates and mobilises support," said Nina Wilén, director of the Africa programme at the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels.

The new rhetoric from the military rulers of Niger may also be designed to divert attention from the real reasons for the takeover.

Bazoum, elected in 2021 with a vote of 55%, moved to marginalise a series of senior officers this year and is thought to have been planning to fire Tchiani. Several have been [named in graft investigations](#).

Bazoum has not been seen in public since the coup, although sources close to him say that he has refused to resign. The president and his family are living without electricity and relying on supplies of rice and pasta, [according to his daughter](#).

So far Niger's new military rulers have ignored international efforts to mediate and last week refused to admit mediation teams from the UN, the African Union and Ecowas. [A senior US official was also turned away](#).

Both Mali, ruled by a military regime since 2021, and Burkina Faso, where a 35-year-old army captain took charge last year, have offered loud support.

Kimba Karimou, president of a youth wing of the main party opposing Bazoum in Niger, said threats of military intervention "did not scare" anyone.

"Our sovereignty, our freedom is very dear ... The people of Niger will confront any foreign army," he said.

Niger was seen previously as the most stable of Sahel countries and a key western ally in the region. The EU and US have spent vast sums of development and security assistance there in recent years. Much of this aid has now been suspended.

Some research offers a slender hope. A mass opinion survey by the UN found support for military regimes as "superficial" and pointed to the enduring appeal of democracy across the Sahel in [a recent report](#).

"There is a stronger democracy in Niger than in other places in the region and a less abusive and more professional military. We need to listen to Nigeriens from all walks of life to come up with a concrete plan on how to midwife a speedy, inclusive transition back to civilian rule, understand why this happened, and address those root causes," said Dufka.

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