

When France ignored the warnings that preceded the putsch in Niger

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The July putsch in Niger has placed France, the former colonial ruler, in an impasse with regard to its use of the country as a base for operations against armed jihadist insurgents in the Sahel region. With around 1,500 troops stationed in Niger, which Paris turned to last year as its principal West African ally after being forced to withdraw its military from neighbouring Mali and Burkina Faso, the outcome of the present standoff with the new junta is uncertain. Rémi Carayol reports on how the explosive situation follows a series of blunders in France's strategy in West Africa, where its presence has become increasingly unpopular.

"We were caught unawares," was what one French diplomat, whose brief is the Sahel region and who asked for his name to be withheld, said of the July 26th military coup in Niger. He might have added "once again", given the similar events surrounding the coup in Mali in 2021, and that in Burkina Faso in 2022.

Paris had not anticipated the overthrow by a section of the Nigerien army of the country's president, Mohamed Bazoum.

Over many years, the French army had hundreds of troops stationed in the three West African countries, all former colonies of France, working closely and daily with their own armies. France had also knotted close ties to the civilian governments, regarded by some as being too close.

According to French investigative and satirical weekly *Le Canard enchaîné*, President Emmanuel Macron, at a July 29th meeting of his defence council on the situation in Niger, severely rebuked Bernard Émié, the director of the French foreign intelligence agency, the DGSE, for its failure to identify the threat of a coup. But neither did the military intelligence agency, the DRM, nor the French embassy in Niger's capital Niamey.

"For years the French have been clueless in the country and, more widely, across this region," said a former French diplomat, who also spoke to Mediapart on condition his name was withheld. It was not the first time that events in Niger, the largest landlocked country in West Africa, had taken France by surprise. In 1974, and despite its many contacts within the country's administrative apparatus, Paris had not recognised the threat posed by military chief of staff Seyni Kountché, formerly an NCO in the French colonial army, who led a putsch against Niger's then president and loyal ally of France, Hamani Diori.

Macron's reported angry outburst, and the embarrassment expressed by some diplomats, follows a series of setbacks for France in this sub-region, illustrating a partial blindness in its approach in the western Sahel.

If the French government had grasped a greater understanding of the situation in Niger, it would have questioned the pertinence of stationing a large military contingent in the country last year. The move followed the forced departure of its troops from neighbouring Mali, subsequent to the August 2021 coup in the country, and that in Burkina Faso in January 2022, and the ending in November 2022 of Operation Barkhane, launched in 2014 to counter the armed insurgency in the region by armed Islamist militants. Some diplomats, concerned about France's deteriorating image in West Africa, did openly question the move, even urging the closure of French military bases in the region, but in vain.

Not only did Macron choose to maintain all of France's historic bases on the African continent (in Senegal's capital Dakar, in Abidjan in Ivory Coast, in Gabon's capital Libreville and, to the east, in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa), but he also positioned 1,500 French troops in Niger and another 1,000 in Chad as part of continuing anti-jihadist operations. "It is not the time to leave," commented a French presidential advisor in November 2022, days after the official announcement of the end of Operation Barkhane. "It would be to bring about a bad solution to a real problem." The option of a definitive withdrawal was not under consideration.

But in the capitals of the region, and notably Bamako (Mali), Niamey (Niger) and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), there is a quite different viewpoint. "Times have changed, and the French leaders appear not to have understood this," said a West African academic who, currently in post in Bamako, requested that his name be withheld. "Today, Africans – the young of course but also a certain number among the military – no longer accept the presence of a foreign military base on their territory. It is considered to be a denial of sovereignty and even an affront given that France is the former colonial power."

This rejection of the French presence, which has been expressed for many years now in street demonstrations and on social media in several countries in the region – and in Senegal and Chad as well as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – is not the result of the 'information war' led by Russia against France. It is above all the result of a catalogue of meddling, humiliation and incomprehension which today constitute a powerful motivation for mobilisation against the former colonial ruler, and which have made the voice of France largely inaudible, whatever it says.

The putschists of the Sahel region have well understood this. When he took power in Burkina Faso in October 2022, army captain Ibrahim Traoré won over support by accusing France of backing his predecessor, lieutenant colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who himself had led a coup nine months earlier. It sufficed for Traoré to announce that Damiba was being hidden and protected in the local French military base for thousands of demonstrators to turn out in the streets of Ouagadougou, sealing his power grab.

However, this resentment towards France is not the reason that led Nigerien general Abdourahmane Tchiani to commit mutiny (nor was it what drove the coups in Mali and Burkina Faso), when he convinced the rest of the army to take power. But Tchiani quickly realised that it allowed him to gain support and to consolidate his power in the context of the post-coup showdown with the international community.

The junta and its supporters have put about the claim that France will do its utmost to save the deposed president, Mohamed Bazoum, its ally, and which has proved a profitable strategy. On July 30th, several thousands of demonstrators turned out on the streets of Niamey in support of the putschists, chanting anti-French slogans and some waving Russian flags, before marching to the

French embassy and attacking the building.

In a statement issued on July 31st, the National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland (CNSP), as the junta calls itself, accused France, without providing evidence, of having signed documents with leaders of the overthrown regime which would allow it to carry out military strikes in order to free Bazoum.

Amid the deteriorating atmosphere, Paris on Wednesday began evacuating its nationals, along with those of other European Union countries. An umbrella group called M62, which brings together a number of organisations from Nigerien civil society and which have for several months been calling for French troops to pull out of Niger, called on the junta to make “any evacuation of Europeans conditional to the immediate departure of foreign military forces”. More surprisingly, Niger’s national union of teacher-researchers and higher education researchers, the SNECS, which is the largest staff union among the country’s universities, has also given its support to the leaders of the coup. It has denounced what it called “the far from frank and sincere” partnership with France, which it accused of wanting to “vassalise” Niger.

“To oppose France is today a guarantee of success for the putschists, and this is particularly the case in Niger,” said a former minister of the deposed president, who for reasons of his personal safety asked not to be named.

There have been several demonstrations in the country over recent years against Operation Barkhane, including one in November 2021 in the town of Téra when three people were shot dead by the French military. The French government, and also that of Mohamed Bazoum, chose to ignore such events, publicly presenting their military cooperation in the media as a “laboratory” of France’s new strategy in the Sahel region, and making Niamey the site of the largest French military base in West Africa (where fighter jets and drones are present on top of the 1,500 personnel).

“The French soldiers were relatively discreet, but certain signals should have alerted them,” commented Ibrahim Yahaya, an analyst with the International Crisis Group, a Brussels-based NGO which provides research and data on global conflicts. “Many in Bazoum’s entourage believed he was too overt about the military cooperation with France. They underlined that anti-French sentiment is very strong in Niger. But Bazoum didn’t listen to them.”

The West African academic researcher based in Bamako, cited above, agreed. “It was risky not only with regard to reactions on the streets, but also with regard to the military staff, where a certain number of officers wanted to emancipate themselves from the French tutelage, and to diversify partnerships.”

Neither did Paris take the risk seriously. According to the former French diplomat also cited further above, it followed misled conceptions about the situation in Niger. “French analyses remained on the surface level, and considered that Bazoum, because he had inherited power from the hands of [Mahamadou] Issoufou [*editor’s note, Burkina Faso’s president between 2011-2021*], was solidly installed in power, and that he was therefore a reliable ally,” he said. “That was to forget, or, rather, to ignore, the sociological realities of this country. Bazoum is an Arab who has no electoral base, who doesn’t even have the unanimity [*of support*] within the ruling party [*the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism, the PNDS*], and who imposed himself only because Issoufou chose him as his heir apparent. It was also to ignore the conditions in which he was elected in 2021. It was a parody of an election.”

France had for many years turned its eyes away from the authoritarian crackdown of the regime in Niger. During both of Issoufou’s two terms in office as president, the political opposition, civil

society and also international NGOs regularly denounced the attacks on freedom of speech, the intimidation of opponents, arbitrary arrests and the repression of social movements.

French NGO Tournons la page (TLP), an umbrella group of more than 200 associations involved in supporting good governance among African nations, published a report in June 2022 which documented a spectacular deterioration in public freedoms in Niger “since the beginning of 2014”. It recorded the banning of at least 53 planned demonstrations between 2014 and 2022, and, over the same period, the arrests and detentions of at least 1,091 people some of who were held behind bars for up to 19 months. Several corruption scandals also involved Issoufou’s entourage, while elections were regularly contested over claims of rigging.

But the French authorities, and some diplomats, dismissed criticism of the regime, and instead held Niger up as an example of democracy among the region’s nations.

Immediately after the July putsch, France’s armed forces ministry announced the suspension of military and civil cooperation with Niger, while also underlining that the withdrawal of French troops from the country was “not on the agenda”. The question is now raised as to what role would the 1,500 French military personnel present in Niger play if the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) decides to go ahead with its threat of leading an armed intervention to reinstate Mohamed Bazoum as head of state.

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P.S.

- MEDIAPART. 3 August 2023 à 20h32 :
<https://www.mediapart.fr/en/journal/international/030823/when-france-ignored-warnings-preceded-putsch-niger>
- English version by Graham Tearse.
- French original - MEDIAPART. 2 août 2023 à 18h50 :
<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/international/020823/aveugle-sourde-aux-critiques-et-inaudible-les-trois-handicaps-de-la-france-au-niger>

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