

## **Making Sense of the Coups in the Sahel**

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Analysts have been attempting to make sense of the spate of coups and coup attempts we have witnessed in the Sahel region. Many of these analyses focus on the vexing security situation, the dire economic circumstances of the population and the ineptitude and crass corruption of governing political elites. Whilst these explanations are useful, there may well be other more malevolent reasons for the spate of coups convulsing the region.

The security situation is dire. Over the last 5 years, terrorists have gained control of 40% of Burkina Faso's territory leading to 2,500 closed schools and over one million people internally displaced. Economic hardship has increased. 40% of Niger's population or 10 million citizens live in extreme poverty according to 2021 World Bank figures. According to the Human Development Index, Niger ranks amongst the lowest in the world. Climate change and its attendant desertification is serving to fuel communal conflict and religious strife, thereby increasing numbers to militant causes. Where civilian governments have failed to provide security, it is understandable when citizens place their trust in those in uniform. But, the military is a blunt instrument and rank-and-file soldiers are demoralized, nepotism and corruption are the norm in the Sahel's armed forces, their doctrine is not fit for purpose, they are under equipped or not suitably equipped and their logistics a mess. Moreover, coups disrupt command and control structures within the armed forces. This is especially the case when junior officers overthrow their senior officers as in Burkina Faso for instance. Despite the coups, then, military juntas have been unable to thwart the Islamist juggernaut.

Polls also demonstrate that citizens in the region do not believe in democracy given their rapacious and inept political leadership. Often the will of the people is violated through electoral fraud or once the newly elected leadership enters the presidential palace and promptly ignore the plight of the people who put them in power. The social contract between rulers and the ruled is disregarded or even violated. In the process, democracy itself is debased. Before the military stepped in, in Mali, disapproval and denunciation of President Keita culminated in massive protests demanding his resignation over his handling of the terrorist threat and a series of corruption scandals. These included contested legislative elections. Ousted presidents in Guinea and Burkina Faso were subjected to ferocious criticism for various autocratic and repressive measures they enacted. These included arresting opposition figures, banning protests and curbing media freedom. In this context, the military often step in acting as saviours of the people. Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traore styled himself as a new Thomas Sankara with his revolutionary anti-imperialism. However, soldiers have not been schooled in the subtle and sophisticated art of governance. Consultation and compromise is the stuff of democracy, whereas the military's top-down culture is an ill-fit for the Sahel's fractious and fragile polities. Neither is the military schooled in irrigation, health care or entrepreneurship. As such, governance has suffered under the rule of military juntas across the region.

The reasons for the spate of coups is not only related to internal factors. We also need to reflect on the prevalence of coups in French-speaking states. French colonialism was as brutal as it was stupid, creating centralized power in deeply fragmented societies. It is not a co-incidence the most coup-ridden countries are all Francophone. In fact, 78% of all coups in Africa since independence has been in former French colonies. There have also been too many incidents of so-called collateral damage from French counter-terrorism strikes which has further angered the populace across the Sahel. Indeed, Niger's President Bazoum was berated because of the presence of foreign troops in Niger.

Not all foreign troops are French, of course. The US have a large drone air base in Agadez in Niger, called Niger Air Base 201. After Djibouti, Niger Air Base 201, is Washington's second largest military base in Africa after Djibouti.

What is interesting is that whilst the focus has been on French troops in Niger, and their withdrawal, there has been considerably less attention, including from the military junta regarding the American military base. Could this be because the Americans have until this past week not labelled the ouster of Barzoum as a military coup whilst President Macron openly campaigns for Barzoum to be reinstated? Moreover, the Americans via Victoria Nuland, have been engaged in a dialogue with the military junta.

Some analysts have raised concern if the French and the American military withdraw, what then are the prospects for counter-terrorism? But what has been achieved from US and French counter-terrorism over the years in the Sahel? November 2002 can be identified as the starting moment of the Global War on Terrorism in the Sahel, when the US Department of Defense (DoD) announced the launch of the Pan-Sahel Initiative, a program aiming at securing borders, tracking the movement of people, and fighting terrorism in Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad. France, of course, the former colonial power never left. The training of military officers over decades, the arming of Sahelian states, and joint military exercises followed. But what has been achieved in terms of counter-terrorism? Terrorist groups have proliferated across the Sahel with attacks growing ever more lethal. To put matters into perspective in 2016 there were 76 violent events linked to Islamist militant groups in the Sahel but this jumped to 2800 for 2022 – a 3,600 percent increase. This, despite the fact that the US poured in more than a billion dollars of security assistance to Sahel states for more than 20 years!

The coup in Niger highlighted the major problem of counter-terrorism efforts over these past two decades – with its over-emphasis on the military. Niger has a long history of coups and coup attempts – with the July coup being the fifth “successful” coup in the country since independence in 1960. In this context, was it smart to train and equip such a military and to use the military as one's primary counter-terrorism instrument? Writing in Rolling Stone, Nick Turse wrote a hard-hitting article entitled “How Many More Governments will American-trained Soldiers' Overthrow?” He points out that Lt. Col

Paul-Henri Damiba who overthrew a civilian government in Burkina Faso was trained by the US over many years. This included an annual US special operations program (Flintlock), an US State Department Africa Contingency Training and Assistance course, the US-sponsored Military Intelligence Basic Officer Course and a Civil-Military Support Element. In fact, according to Turse, US -trained military officers was involved in seven coups in Sahel countries – three in Burkina Faso, three in Mali and one in Mauritania. Clearly these graduates of US largesse got a fail for civil-military relations. The current leader of Mali, Colonel Assimi Goita who participated in two Operation Flintlock exercises, worked with US Special Forces for several years and staged two coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021. Of course, these coups by US trained officers are not a new phenomenon. In 2012, Captain Amadou Sanogo who was trained in Texas, Georgia and Arizona in courses ranging from being an infantry officer to military intelligence, returned to his native Mali where he promptly staged a coup. Following the coup, he proudly declared: “America is a great country with a fantastic army. I tried to put all the things I learned there into practice here”.

What accounts for this colossal failure on the part of the US? According to Donovan Chau, the answer seems to be ignorance – ignorance of local cultures, ignorance of the state in the African context, ignorance of history and ignorance of African militaries.

So could ignorance account for the US to keep making the mistake of training Africa’s officers who have this propensity to stage coups in their country. I have interacted with the American military over several years and can assure you that these are not ignorant people. They tend to be amongst the brightest people I have met. Moreover, the US military is quick to learn lessons from past experiences. Consider, too, that it is not only the Sahel where US-trained military officers have staged coups. Nick Turse reminds us of the likes of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, Pakistans’ Mohammed Zial ul-Haq, Romeo Vasques of Honduras and Philippe Biamby of Haiti.

So, if not ignorance what could account for this apparent failure on the part of the US? Perhaps the 2015 US Geological Survey has an answer. The Taoudeni Basin which runs across Mali and Mauritania happens to possess: 160 million barrels of

conventional oil, 1880 billion cubic feet of conventional gas, 602 million barrels of shale oil, and 6395 billion feet of shale gas.