



CIVIL-MILITARY IMBALANCE IN THE SAHEL



By Nina Wilén (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/nina-wilen/>) (27 May 2021)

In Commentaries (https://www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_parent/commentaries/)

European defence / NATO (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/european-defence-nato/>),

Other African regions (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/other-african-regions/>)

In less than a year, the Sahel region has experienced two coups, one coup attempt and something that now looks like a coup within a coup (<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-prompted-a-coup-within-a-coup-in-mali-46996>), firmly putting civil-military relations at the top of the agenda for understanding the current context of power competition between

political and military elites...

(Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons, by Peter Fitzgerald, amendments by LtPowers, own work, CC-BY-SA 3.0).

CIVIL-MILITARY IMBALANCE IN THE SAHEL

In less than a year, the Sahel region has experienced two coups, one coup attempt and something that now looks like a 'coup within a coup (<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-prompted-a-coup-within-a-coup-in-mali-46996>)', firmly putting civil-military relations at the top of the agenda for understanding the current context of power competition between political and military elites.

In democratic states, the imperative to 'guard the guardians' is the basis for civil-military relations. Civilian decision-makers are accountable (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwjO4vn70-XwAhWOCWMBHQBHBn4QFjAGegQICBAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.foreignaffairs.com%2Farticles%2Fus-fair-views-on-civilian-control-military-partisan-issue&usq=AOvVaw2T_c26gGUjZhMLFkbBj15T) to the people while military officers have a responsibility to abide by the civilians, and to advise, yet not impose, their views on those civilians. That is the basis of democratic theory, which has been institutionalized and taught to militaries across the world. A theory which nonetheless increasingly has been put to test in industrialized democracies (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwie6Z3vsOfwAhW_BmMBHa1YADQQFjABegQIAxAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.foreignaffairs.com%2Farticles%2Fus-fair-views-on-civilian-control-military-partisan-issue&usq=AOvVaw3YiSLLDJYZrYvieaqZ-ZW5) over the past few years.

In fragile democracies, such as Mali, Niger and Chad, where the societal unity and administrative ability to maintain a functioning state are lacking, and where armed groups entertain a violent status quo, calls for security and stability (<https://securitypraxis.eu/pivoting-stabilisation-in-the-sahel-competing-visions-and-implementation-checkpoints/>) give the security forces a central role. This central role is strengthened by security force assistance from external partners (<https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=12347>), which train and equip the armed forces to combat violent non-state actors in an effort to reinforce state authority. While the premises of civilian oversight and accountability most often are part of such training, such principles have little resonance

(<https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1738248/getting->

Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur : certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez notre utilisation de cookies en conformant à notre politique des Cookies ([cookies policy](#)) et à notre politique de confidentialité ([privacy policy](#)). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

[Plus d'information](#)

[J'accepte](#)

american-security-force-assistance-right-political-context-matters/) in a context where state officials are incapable or unwilling of providing a democratic framework to implement oversight and promote accountability, or when it is de facto military rule.

In all three states which have experienced coups and coup attempts over the past year, the military has historically been closely intertwined with politics. Niger, which experienced a feeble coup attempt (<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210331-attempted-coup-in-niger-france-24>) following the Presidential elections earlier this year, has a history of three coups over the past three decades. The country has spent 22 years of its 60 years as an independent state under military rule, giving an indication of the military's influence in domestic politics. Yet, the fact that the past two coups (in 1999 and 2010), were so-called 'corrective coups' (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41240194?seq=1>) – meaning that the coup makers handed over power to democratically elected leaders relatively soon after the putsches – in combination with a relatively low number of human rights abuses (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f524b4f15baeb6e140e38fc/t/60756eabed9c8568ed98cb30/1618308790844/Sahel+Ce+qui+doit+changer+-+Rapport+Coalition+citoyenne.pdf>) by the Nigerien armed forces in comparison to its regional homologues, has given the Nigerien security forces a slightly better reputation than their neighboring colleagues. That reputation is however vanishing quickly, as reports of mass executions (<https://www.dw.com/en/niger-fear-of-terror-and-the-military/a-54947989>) by Nigerien army units surfaced in 2020.

In Chad, a state where “politics is conducted with weapons in hand” (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/05/07/chads-president-lived-died-by-gun-will-country-shift-away-militarized-rule/>), the military has maintained a key role in a history of rebellions and suppressions under a 'warrior president' firmly supported by its former colonial power France (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/05/24/france-macron-chad-deby-democracy-g5-sahel/>). The late Idriss Déby, who stayed in power over three decades, was by all accounts an excellent strategist who managed to make sure that the Chadian military became a regional and international tool in the fight against terrorists and criminal networks. He thereby avoided repercussions for a deeply personalized dictatorship and multiple human rights abuses conducted against civilians, both home and abroad.

Chadian forces contribute most troops to the UN mission in Mali, often deployed to the most dangerous places in the North (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2017.1328810>), whereas they are in the lead for the G5 Sahel Joint Force for counter-terrorism and a valuable support to France in Barkhane. Fighting against Boko Haram in the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNTJF), Chad has also acquired support from other Western powers, thus rendering itself an essential ally (<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20210420-france-says-chad-s-deby-was-essential-ally-in-fight-against-terrorism>) and a strategic asset in the Sahel (<https://www.theafricareport.com/89399/chad-president-deby->

and-his-legacy-of-gatekeeper-politics/?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=post_articles_twitter_18_05_2021&utm_medium=social). Not surprisingly therefore, the recent unconstitutional move, whereby Déby's son Mahamat Déby bypassed the constitution (<https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210421-mahamat-idriss-deby-son-of-slain-president-emerges-as-chad-s-new-strongman>) and took the lead of a Transitional Military Council following his father's death at the hands of rebels in April this year, did not face any regional or international repercussions, but rather support for status quo. Mahamat's lightning career development as a 37-year old four-star general also reflects the heavy politicization of the military and personalization of the state. It does not seem far-fetched to view Chad as an example of a 'garrison state' (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2769918?seq=1>), where the specialists on violence are the most powerful group in society. Overall, the civil-military balance is not just superficial in Chad, it is illusory.

Mali, which has been the epicenter of the overlapping Sahelian crises over the past decade, has experienced one coup and what looks like a 'coup within a coup', within 9 months. These coups can be added to the earlier three in 1968, 1991 and 2012, the latter which prompted a heavy international response. Such a history of coups suggests a significant militarization of politics, where military members remain central political figures even during periods of civilian rule. The international focus on establishing security (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/a-logic-of-its-own-the-external-presence-in-the-sahel/>) and stability has inevitably reinforced the local security forces' standing in Mali, in spite of their poor reputation, as they remain the primary tool through which such stability is to be achieved. Recent decades' emphasis on the security-development nexus has also prompted a securitization of underdevelopment and poverty (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0967010617742243>) by recipient states, such as Mali, in the interest of attracting external security assistance.

The past year's military coups in the Sahel have thus underlined the profound imbalance in civil-military relations in the region and raised questions regarding security force assistance to fragile states more broadly. These questions are particularly timely as the EU is set to launch its much-debated European Peace Facility, an off-budget financial instrument which will allow EU to fund military training, equipment, and infrastructure in partner countries for the first time in history. There is clearly a case to be made against providing lethal equipment (<https://www.ft.com/content/dd29eb4d-1fc0-4123-ada1-290c4c63d966?shareType=nongift>) to, and improving the capacity of, security forces which recently have been involved in military coups and human rights abuses. There is also an important difference in the type of training and equipment that is delivered. Providing first-aid kits and training troops on judicialization processes not combat (the same) sequences as contributing with weapons and improving armed forces' combat efficiency.

Yet, in spite of the ethical dilemmas related to security force assistance, not providing any

Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur : certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez nos conditions d'utilisation et notre politique de confidentialité (/privacy-policy/). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

Plus d'information

J'accepte

training at all is not an easy solution, as although it decreases external partners' responsibility for local forces' transgressions, it also removes any possible leverage they may exert (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiQ5_e_pOfwAhUqDGMBHTFIBXoQFjACegQIAxAE&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.foi.se%2Frest-api%2Freport%2FFOI%2520Memo%25207468&usg=AOvVaw2E_TLIjU0mfTVqsB53_OJH) on the local militaries. Critics may claim that whatever influence external partners have had so far, it clearly has not been sufficient to prevent forces from conducting coups or even to limit abuse against the civilian populations. However, it is also possible to imagine that the situation would have been different without external training and assistance, leaving more space for non-state armed actors to commit attacks and even less control over local forces' behavior. Western states are also uneasy about leaving a gap when it comes to security assistance, as there is a risk that it is filled by other actors such as Russia or China who are keen to have an influence ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)642232_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI(2019)642232_EN.pdf)) in the region, and who have less scruples regarding democratic norms and civil-military balance.

The recent coups in the Sahel region exemplify the lack of a civil-military balance whereby the armed forces are both under substantial civilian oversight and capable of national defense. Fragile and divided states which fail to deliver basic services to their populations, are by their very nature more prone to instability and coups. In a crisis context where security and stabilization become priorities, the armed forces are likely to further strengthen their upper hand, especially with external support. International and national authorities which demand military expertise to fight armed groups and strengthen national security 'pull' the armed forces further into politics, while the latter exploit their advantage over civilian authorities to 'push' their way into politics (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1354066119866499>). Building on a history whereby the military has consistently been heavily involved in politics, the current context in the Sahel evokes Finer's classical civil-military question (<https://www.routledge.com/The-Man-on-Horseback-The-Role-of-the-Military-in-Politics/Finer/p/book/9780765809223>): Why is military intervention in politics or military government the exception, rather than the rule? The present answer to that question may unfortunately be that right now, it is more of a rule than an exception.

The author is grateful for useful comments by Marco Jowell and Andrew Lebovich.

Prof. Dr. Nina Wilén, Director of the Africa Programme at Egmont Institute and Associate Professor at Lund University is also a Global Fellow at the Peace Research Institute in Oslo

(PRIO) Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur : certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez notre utilisation de cookies conformément à notre [politique des Cookies \(/cookies-policy/\)](#) et à notre [politique de confidentialité \(/privacy-policy/\)](#). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

Plus d'information

J'accepte


EGMONT


Royal Institute for International Relations
Rue des Petits Carmes 24A
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

POSTAL ADDRESS

Rue des Petits Carmes 15
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

CONTACT

 +32 (0)2 223 41 14

 info@egmontinstitute.be (mailto:info@egmontinstitute.be)

Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur : certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez notre utilisation de cookies conformément à notre [politique des Cookies \(/cookies-policy/\)](#) et à notre [politique de confidentialité \(/privacy-policy/\)](#). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

[Plus d'information](#)