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What is the price of stability in Chad?

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Chad's history has been shaped by violence and conflict, and many states have appreciated its commitment to fighting Islamists in the region, seeing it as a pole of stability and reliability. In return, many turned a blind eye on late President Idriss Déby's repressive rule. With his sudden death and a political transition underway, there might be hope for a reset.

For many years, Chad has been leading the fight against Islamists in the region. Late President Déby had turned the Central African country into a bulwark against violent **militants** by providing well-trained troops and an unwavering commitment that was very much appreciated in particular by Paris and Washington. But his death in April 2021, fatally wounded while commanding his troops at the front, led to anxious speculation that this incident could **send shockwaves** from the Red Sea to the Atlantic, as the fight against terrorism in the region might collapse.

Late Déby himself, a close ally of Libya's long-term ruler Muammar Gaddafi, had ousted his predecessor by a coup d'état and held power for more than 30 years. About his successor, his son Mahamat, his plans and vision for Chad, only very little is known. Will he perpetuate the militarised system, rife with endemic corruption and deeply entrenched patronage? Will Chad be consumed by internal struggles over power with a subsequently dwindling and subsiding counterterrorism engagement? Or will the current transition, only recently gaining traction, eventually be the **long-awaited turning point**, facilitating a break with Chad as an autocratic, often shunned regime and enable a political reset?

Military investment at the expense of the economy

Chad is surrounded by six countries, all of them with severe security issues. Militias from Libya have spread across the Sahel and former Sudanese rebels from the Darfur region mingling with and exploiting uneducated and unemployed youth are pervasive, compounding rivalries between ethnic groups and communities over scarce resources and power.

To ramp up the fight against Islamist groups, several multinational military forces have been set up, in which Chad usually plays a central role. The **Multinational Joint Task Force** (MNJTF) was launched in 2014 by Chad, Nigeria, Niger and Cameroon, comprising over 8,000 troops. Combatting jihadist Boko Haram insurgents, freeing civilians and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid are attributable to the MNJTF.

The G5 Sahel Joint Forces (G5JF) were set up in 2017 by Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. Chad is providing two out of eight battalions that bear the brunt of the burden, as they comprise US-trained special anti-terrorism forces and other elite troops. The Chadian military is considered the most effective among the five Sahel countries as underscored in a **UN briefing**.

For MINUSMA, the UN Stabilization Mission in Mali, set up in 2013, Chad is the top troop contributor with currently 1,425 troops out of 13,000 on the ground.

Western partners, in particular the US and France, embrace Chad's commitment and support its troops through counterterrorism training and capacity-building. Chadian boots on the ground allow them to keep their own footprint light.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, late President Déby had never made any real investments in economic development. Prioritising security and the military led to defence expenditures gobbling up almost 14% of the national budget. In the last 20 years, the social and economic situation has worsened steadily as Chad climbed down from 171st to 187th out of 189 on the **Human Development Index (HDI)**. Average school attendance by children is 2.5 years; only 22% complete primary education. Chad has the highest child mortality and illiteracy rates in the world. **Oil exploitation**, starting in 2003, turned the country into the tenth-largest oil producer in Africa. But the main beneficiaries were the governing elites, in particular Déby's own Zaghawa tribe. The billions of dollars never served to reduce poverty or the debt burden, which eventually led the World Bank to ending a **pipeline deal** in 2008.

Will Chad's transition boil down to a choice between stability or democracy?

The takeover of power by late President Déby's son, leading a military council, was clearly unconstitutional. But most partners were instead driven by a fear of losing Chad as an ally in the fight against terrorism. French President Macron didn't hesitate to **endorse the junta** and grant several million Euros aid to avoid a '**libyanization**' of Chad. The African Union had suspended all countries with an unconstitutional change of power in recent years (Egypt 2013, Burkina Faso 2014, Sudan 2019 and Mali 2020). But recognising the important role in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, Chad was **granted an exemption** and suspension was avoided. A reduced Chadian engagement in counterterrorism operations would undoubtedly mean a significant blow to regional engagement, as it would be very hard to replace the Chadian troops in the MNJTF, G5JF or MINUSMA.

Many international observers agree that late President Déby's rule brought relative stability to Chad and the region, but at the price of a **repressive violent**

system, propped up by family, clan, army and political allies. Despite its military successes, the stability of the Chadian army itself has always been delicate, as it consists of many different groups, kins and clans. Late President Déby cunningly understood how to hold this patchwork together and how to secure allegiance to him, suppressing, coercing and rewarding the various parties. He himself survived several coup attempts.

Neighbouring countries and Western allies were mainly interested in maintaining Chad as a buffer and staunch force confronting terrorist groups. In return, the international community was turning a blind eye to Chad's autocratic system with its abysmal human, civil and political rights record.

With the current transition, there is potential for new avenues to open up for Chad. The Chadian junta could aim to perpetuate this one-person, clan-based system, promising stability. Out of fear that anything else could plunge the whole region into even greater chaos, partners could be willing to go along. Or the junta could use the transition for renewing Chadian society and the economy, ending decades of violence and destitution.

Only recently, some cautious signs of positive change are materialising. At the end of September 2021, the military council agreed to set up the transition parliament, a body handpicked by Mahamat Déby but still more diverse and more inclusive than anything that rigged elections had produced before. A comprehensive national dialogue is planned for the end of the year, and most societal groups, though still wary of the Déby-Clan, have agreed to participate.

The most powerful signal came from Mahamat Nour Ibedou, General Secretary of the Chadian Human Rights Organization (CTDH), declaring his readiness to engage. The transition charter foresees democratic elections for October 2022. If Chad is ready for a renewal, partners should likewise show readiness for a reset of relations, guided by three basic principles: first, not seeing Chad exclusively through the lens of counterterrorism operations to the detriment of good governance and human rights. Second, demanding a real transition towards democracy and the rule of law, and applying pressure on the junta, if they fail on delivering a real transition. And third, standing

ready to support Chad's social and economic development with a clear focus on fighting poverty and destitution, eventually improving all Chadians' lives.

Disclaimer: The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this article reflect solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the German Federal Foreign Office.

Photo: Swearing in ceremony of President Idriss Deby Itno of Chad / N'Djamena, 8 August 2016. Credit: Paul Kagame. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

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