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Chad: Guardian of Stability in the Sahel

By Daniel Eizenga

Summary

- Relative and recent stability in Chad has enabled the regime to further consolidate its power through continued authoritarian politics, while worsening public dissatisfaction and lowering the level of civil liberties in the country.
- Support from western governments and policy makers continues in light of Chad's role in promoting stability and countering terrorism across the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin.
- With little hope for democratic progress or transition, long term outlooks in Chad need to account for what will happen when the current president is no longer in power and what that may mean for stability in the country and broader region.

On April 10, 2016, millions of Chadians made their way to polling stations to vote in the fifth presidential election since President Idriss Déby Itno took power in 1990. Eleven days later, the Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante (CENI) announced the provisional results, which gave Déby a clear majority with over 60 per cent of the vote. Within a few weeks, the Constitutional Court validated the results. The electoral victory —hardly a surprise to those familiar with Chadian politics— and the continued relative stability in Chad highlight the extent to which Déby has consolidated political power while simultaneously positioning himself as

a crucial Western ally in a sub-region plagued by chronic instability. However, the election also revealed popular frustrations over a lack of democratization in Chad and a continued willingness on the part of the regime to rely on its repressive apparatus to suppress those frustrations. This article explores recent political dynamics in Chad alongside continued international support for the current regime and offers insights on the future of stability in Chad and larger Sahel region.

The 2016 election

During the election Déby faced increased criticism and stronger electoral challenges than in past campaigns. Déby's electoral campaign confronted a wave of social protests in response to the February 2016 gang-rape (viol collectif) of an opposition politician's teenage daughter.¹ These protests gathered momentum with the help of a coalition of anti-regime civil society groups modeled after similar movements in Senegal (e.g. Y'en a Marre) and Burkina Faso (e.g. Balai Citoyen). However, as this coalition was planning protests for the weekends before the elections, authorities arrested four leaders from the Chadian groups, Ça Suffit, Iyina, and Trop c'est trop, effectively repressing the movement.²



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In addition to the repressive measures exhibited by the regime before the election, the election itself experienced a number of inconsistencies regarding the calendar and process. Problems with the implementation of a biometric census and the roll out of new voter ID cards caused the government to indefinitely postpone municipal and legislative elections originally scheduled for 2014 and 2015.³ Yet, many of the problems responsible for the postponement of those elections persisted during the presidential election. Opposition candidates and election observers also noted a number of irregularities at polling stations, including: stuffing ballot boxes, removing ballots cast, and a lack of properly trained staff.⁴ Some in the opposition even declared that the provisional results announced by the CENI could not be accurate based on their own tabulations. The Chef de File de l'Opposition, Saleh Kebzabo, continues to maintain that the election was a "coup d'État électoral."⁵

Despite these irregularities, the opposition's criticisms and the continued activities of the anti-regime social movement, Déby is now more than a year into his fifth term as the president of the country and little has changed. In fact, by some indicators the socio-political situation in Chad has even further deteriorated. In response to the opposition's accusations, security forces have arbitrarily detained several prominent members of the opposition and barred them from assembling meetings or rallies. Security forces have also

targeted leaders of civil society movements more aggressively since the election arresting several of them over the past year.

In addition to these domestic tensions, Chad finds itself surrounded by conflicts. Across Chad's northern border, southern Libya is described as essentially partitioned between terrorists recently reported to be aligned with Chadian rebels and the Libyan National Army.⁶ To the south, Chad continues to accept refugees fleeing the Central African Republic, as CAR teeters between peace among its Muslim and Christian communities and falling back into what one UN official warned could be the prelude to genocide.⁷ Meanwhile, the Chadian military continues to be embroiled in the Lake Chad Basin and northern Mali conflicts. Given all of these potentially destabilizing factors, how has Déby maintained power?

Electoral authoritarian regime

First, it needs to be acknowledged that Chad is far from being an outlier. Virtually all sub-Saharan African regimes adopted at least ostensibly competitive elections during the 1990s. Yet, the newly established electoral institutions did relatively little to consolidate democratic process and even less to bring about democratic change. In some cases, the routine of the electoral process not only failed to strengthen democratic practice and change, as some theorized,⁸ but it rather served

to erode public confidence in those institutions as autocratic leaders consolidated their power in “electoral authoritarian regimes.”⁹

There is insufficient space here to dive deeply into all of the various domestic factors and consequent regime trajectories which allow autocratic leaders to consolidate their power in electoral authoritarian regimes. In my research, I explore these dynamics and trajectories in more detail by investigating the relationship between modalities of civil military relations, configurations of traditional institutions and society, as well as political institutions to understand how regimes evolved differently in Chad, Burkina Faso and Senegal.¹⁰

Levitsky and Way¹¹ advance a theory of democratization in “competitive authoritarian regimes” based on two international mechanisms: linkage and leverage. They argue that certain countries contend with increased pressures to democratize due to their links to other democracies or their dependence on Western aid, but Chad does not appear to fit this narrative. Although Chad maintains fairly strong links to France and, despite oil revenue, remains one of the world’s poorest countries heavily dependent on aid, Chad under Déby’s regime has become progressively more authoritarian following the implementation of a multi-party electoral system.¹² And yet, despite this “restoration of authoritarianism”,¹³ Chad, and Déby, have emerged as vital allies to Western countries and their policies aimed at guarding “security and stability” in the Sahel.

Déby: the West’s stability strongman

The actions of the Chadian state against civil society activists and the opposition during the 2016 election cycle have been so blatantly repressive that prominent Western allies have felt compelled to voice their disapproval. The European Union, the Swiss Representative Office and the German, French, and American Embassies issued a ‘Joint Local Declaration’ from their offices in N’Djamena, through which they expressed their concerns over the detention of civil society activists and their support for political rights such as freedom of speech and assembly.¹⁴ This, of course, amounted to little more than a slap on the wrist and has resulted in no change from the repressive tactics pursued by the regime.

The fall of the 2011 Gaddafi regime in Libya marked the beginning of a set of strategic steps undertaken by Déby

during which he positioned his regime as the West’s most reliable and stabilizing ally in the region. The subsequent movement of arms from Libya to Mali produced a sub-region plagued by chronic instability, conflict, terrorism, and migration, each a priority of Western policymakers. In 2013, I argued that Déby was in the process of positioning himself to renew his role as strongman for the West in the Sahel.¹⁵ Déby reacted quickly during the conflict in Mali, partnering with the French during Operation Serval and consequently earned the support of former French president Hollande. France subsequently decided to base its counter-terrorism headquarters in N’Djamena in 2014.

Then, in 2015, following reports of massacres in northern Nigeria near the borders of Cameroon and Chad, Déby once again pursued a similar strategy by sending troops into combat against Boko Haram. This marked the beginning of the African-led operation which became the Multi-National Joint Task Force, now also headquartered in N’Djamena. This

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instability, and the threat of terrorism, around, but not yet in Chad, continues to make Déby an invaluable ally in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin. Déby’s contributions to counter-terrorism and UN peacekeeping in the region

help to solidify his image as the political leader most capable of safeguarding stability in the Sahel, and thus enables him to avoid pressures for increased civil liberties or democratic rule from Western countries.¹⁶

This is not a new strategy for Déby. He has built a career on being the dependable option for stability in Chad and it has functioned as an insurance policy for him in the past. Nearly a decade ago, in February 2008, a rebel coalition led an attack on N’Djamena laying siege to the presidential palace. After three days of difficult negotiations, the French military finally intervened on Déby’s behalf. According to a memoir written by one of the rebels, the French decided to support Déby when it became clear the rebels could not agree on who would take his place.¹⁷ In other words, the devil they knew seemed better than the potential devils they did not.

Déby’s willingness to engage in regional security activities demonstrates the value of his continued rule not only to Western, but also African allies. This is perhaps most evident in the decision to include Chad in the Sahel G5—a new multi-national institution aimed at promoting development and countering terrorism in the Sahel. Déby’s role in these events, discussions, and institutions, as well as the Chadian

military's continued contributions towards maintaining security and stability in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin reinforce the importance of a stable Chadian regime for regional stability.

Western Support and Long-term (In)Stability

The conflicts in northern Mali and the Lake Chad Basin as well as policymakers' and Western government's overriding concerns for stability in the greater Sahel region, leave little doubt that Western support will continue for the Chadian regime. Meanwhile, Déby's continued rule and observed reliance on repressive measures will only serve to further erode what remains of democratic institutions in Chad. This leaves a pressing question as security analysts fail to address what continued Western support for Déby's regime will mean for the region in the long term: what will happen when the regime is ultimately confronted with succession after Déby? Will the Chadian lynchpin hold against Sahelian instability when inevitably the strongman holding it in place falls?

Marielle Debos' analysis suggests that the end of Déby's rule will likely mark the beginning of a renewed cycle of violence and conflict in Chad.¹⁸ She meticulously demonstrates that Chad has historically been, and continues to be, plagued by shifting rebellions and political allegiances driving cycles of conflict throughout the region. Given the current domestic pressures and ongoing conflicts in neighboring countries, these cycles are likely to be exacerbated by Déby's eventual departure. Ironically, this may have been avoided had Western policymakers made different choices regarding the decision to sacrifice support (and pressure) for democratization in Chad in exchange for short term stability. Instead, policymakers' support for Déby and his continued rule actually increases the likelihood for long term instability and conflict in the future.

The willingness to accept the erosion of democratic institutions for stability in the short-term may only serve to worsen the chances of a lasting stability in the region. Democratic institutions aim to mitigate political uncertainty by providing rules for political competition which limit the legitimate pathways for politicians to obtain power and thereby dramatically reduce the possibilities of violence and instability when those rules are followed. Conversely, long-term authoritarian rule lacks mechanisms for the clear and peaceful transfer of power shrouding political succession in uncertainty and often instability. By supporting one strongman over the others, Western security policy demonstrates a preference for immediate stability over lasting democratic institutions. By undermining the democratic process in Chad, Déby has

insured that his continued rule is the only stable outcome in the short-term. The question we are left with now, is without political institutions to constrain the inevitable generation of strongmen waiting for their turn in power, what are the chances for long term stability in Chad and more broadly the Sahel?

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¹ See various reports covering "Affaire Zouhouira".

² For more information see: Amnesty International. 2016. "[Urgent Action: Four Chadian Activists on Trail Await Verdict.](#)" April 11. April 11. CIVICUS. 2016. "[Media Statement on Chad: Release civil society activists ahead of April 10 elections](#)". April 8.

³ Freedom House. 2016. "[Chad.](#)" Freedom in the World 2016 Report. And the PDF version is available [here](#).

⁴ Eizenga, Daniel. 2016. "[Chad – Expert Briefing.](#)" Africa Research Institute. Updated January 2017.

⁵ See interview given to the Burkinabè newspaper Le Pays on 30 August 2017. Battiono, Antoine and Françoise Dembele. 2017. « [Saleh Kebzabo, Chef de file de l'opposition Tchadienne : 'C'est Salifou Diallo qui a pris en charge ma famille, ici, lorsqu'il y eu la guerre en 2008.](#) » Le Pays August 30 2017.

⁶ See interview with Chadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hissein Brahim Taha: Nako, Madjiasra. 2017. "[Hissein Brahim Taha, ministre tchadien: 'le Qatar cherche à déstabiliser le Tchad.'](#)" Radio France Internationale, August 24, 2017. And Radio France International. 2017. "[Tchad-Qatar: Timan Erdimi, rebelle tchadien au cœur de la brouille diplomatique.](#)" Radio France Internationale, August 24.

⁷ Associated Press. 2017. "[UN Official Sees Genocide Threat in Central African Republic.](#)" Voice of America. August 22.

⁸ Lindberg, Staffan I. 2006. Democracy and Elections in Africa. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.

⁹ Schedler, Andreas. 2006. Electoral Authoritarianism: the Dynamics of Unfree Competition. Boulder, CO: L. Rienner Publishers.

¹⁰ More on my research can be found here: "[Electoral Authoritarian Regimes and Civil Military Relations in Sahelian Africa](#)".

¹¹ Levitsky, Steven and Lucan Way. 2010. Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War. New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹² [The 2016 Human Development Report](#) ranks Chad 186 out of 188 countries.

¹³ Buijtenhuijs, Robert. 1998. Transition et élections au Tchad, 1993-1997: restauration autoritaire et recomposition politique. Leiden [Netherlands]: Afrika-Studiecentrum.

¹⁴ [Joint Local Declaration of the European Union, the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Embassy of France, the Embassy of the United States of America and the Representative Office of Switzerland](#). April 25 2017.

¹⁵ In a working paper analyzing the effects of the Malian crisis in the greater region, I observe that, prior to Gaddafi's fall in 2011, the regime in Chad had begun to lose favor with some Western allies and increased pressures on the Chadian regime for political reform seemed unavoidable. The Malian crisis changed that situation by presenting Déby with an opportunity to re-demonstrate his potential value as a 'stabilizer' in the Sahel a role he has routinely played since coming to power. Eizenga, Daniel. 2013. "[Managing Stability through Military and International Acclaim: The Stakes of the Malian Crisis in Chad](#)." Paper Series: The Stakes of the Malian Crisis in the Sahel. Working Paper No. 001.

¹⁶ These types of tactics are strongly theorized within Bayart's concept of "extraversion." See: Bayart, Jean-François. 2009. The State in Africa: the Politics of the Belly. New York: Cambridge.

¹⁷ Koulamallah, Abderaman. 2014. La Bataille de N'Djamena : 2 Février 2008. Paris: L'Harmattan.

¹⁸ Debos, Marielle. 2016. Living by the Gun in Chad: Combatants, Impunity and State Formation. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.



News and announcements

- Bruno Charbonneau edited with Pr Tony Chafer and Pr Marco Wyss a special issue of the Journal of Contemporary African Studies titled "[Whose 'West Africa'? The regional dynamics of peace and security](#)", result of the work of the first symposium of the West Africa Peace and Security Network in May 2015 in Ghana. In this special issue, Bruno Charbonneau published the article "[Intervention in Mali: building peace between peacekeeping and counterterrorism](#)".
- In this same issue, Maxime Ricard published the article "[Historicity of extraversion in Côte d'Ivoire and the 'post-conflict'](#)". Cédric Jourde also published the article "[How Islam intersects ethnicity and social status in the Sahel](#)".
- Other contributors to this special issue are members of the West Africa Peace and Security Network : [Eliza Lopez Lucia](#), [Edward Stoddard](#), et [Marco Wyss](#).
- Émile Ouédraogo published the article "[Le Nettoyage ethnique en droit international](#)" in the Canadian Yearbook of International Law. On 14 and 15 August, he taught two training modules for officers to regional directors and human rights officers in Burkina Faso. He also intervened in the newspaper "La Presse Plus" in the context of the Ouagadougou bombings.
- Niagalé Bagayoko participated to the 39th Assilah Forum from July 6 to 9 in the framework of the Conference "Africa and the World, which World for Africa", on the theme "Reform and Democratic Governance of the Security System in Africa". She participated in the closing conference of the program "Hybrid Security Orders in Africa", a program she co-led with Professor Eboe Hutchful. The conference was held in Accra on July 21 and 22. She spoke on VOA-Afrique on September 1st on the theme of Morocco's accession to ECOWAS.
- Adib Benchérif published in the journal Terrorism and Political Violence the article "[From Resilience to Fragmentation: Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Jihadist Group Modularity](#)". He was welcomed to the Laboratory of Studies and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development (LASDEL) in Niger for a second research stay from July to September 2017.
- In June, Yann-Cédric Quéro evaluated a program of the European Union in North Cameroon, for strengthening border security (police) and building trust between citizens and the State. On June 26 and 27, he participated in the UN-Habitat and Geneva Peacebuilding Platform conference at the United Nations in Geneva, at the conference "Reviewing the State of Safety in Cities: Partnerships and Solutions for Localized Implementation". In this capacity, he co-hosted the Working Group on "Enabling peaceful, inclusive and just cities", as part of the Small Arms Survey.
- Bruno Charbonneau made several news appearances this summer: on the Africa news broadcast of TV5 Monde ([Défis et limites de l'opération Barkhane](#)), on Canadian news broadcast CTV ([2 canadiens killed in Burkina Faso](#)), and in the broadcast "Sur le Vif" of Radio-Canada Première Ottawa ([Attentat au Burkina Faso](#)).

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