



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The coup in Niger - a security vacuum being filled with new risks



Last Thursday's military coup in Niger overthrew the last democratically elected civilian government in the vast Sahel region, opening the door wide to chaotic scenarios in sub-Saharan Africa.

Since his election in 2021, the ousted president Mohamed Bazoum, who has been held captive by coup plotters in his presidential palace, has led the nation through its first democratic transition since gaining independence from France in 1960.

However, his rule was not long enough to establish democratic procedures, strengthen the alliance with the West, which he aspired to, and gain momentum in the fight against Islamic extremists.

Niger's brief democratic advancement has been a victim of the unfortunate epidemic of military coups in the region. In the past three years, there have been as many as four military coups, two in each of the neighbouring nations of Burkina Faso and Mali.

The leader of the military junta in Niger, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, linked this regional trend to the coup he carried out. He accused President Bazoum of not cooperating with the juntas in Burkina Faso and Mali in the fight against jihadists.

Regional coalition of putschists

General Tchiani also stated that he would be willing to form a coup alliance with the military regimes in the area, and if that happens, the course of events in Niger will be fairly predictable.

The first step is likely to be a demand by the coup plotters in Niger that foreign troops leave the country, following the same decision previously taken by military authorities in Burkina Faso and Mali.

French troops left Burkina Faso last February, and a month ago, the UN Security Council granted the request of the military junta in Mali for UN peacekeeping troops to leave the

country.

The ten-year UN peacekeeping mission in Mali (MINUSMA) ended at the suggestion of France, and its 12,000 members will withdraw by the end of the year.

Since it is almost clear that the newly-installed junta in Niamey, the capital of Niger, would follow the same strategy as its predecessors in Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger may soon be devoid of a Western military presence.

The total Western contingent in Niger numbers about 3,000 soldiers, of which the most are French (about 1,500), followed by the US (about 1,000), Italian about 300 and up to 100 members of the mission under the auspices of the EU.

They are all stationed in Niger to aid local troops in the region's struggle against pervasive Islamic extremism, either by training them or securing the borders to crisis regions.

The fall of the last link of stability

If such a scenario comes to pass, which has a prospect of happening, Niger will be submerged in the general perception that does not favour the repression of Islamic extremism but rather raises the likelihood of its emergence.

This makes sense, assuming that the military regime in Niamey will take root, which is still unlikely, because it is not clear whether the coup plotters have the support of other branches of the armed forces and, in particular, the public.

Niger has been destabilised as the last link of Western support in the wide Sahel continental belt and a significant barrier to the rise of extremists.

As a result of the coup in this enormous country, the size of two and a half France, all of the countries in the region, from Mali in the

west to Sudan in the east, are now governed by military administrations.

Who will fill the security gap?

With the coup in Niamey and the well-founded assumption that the remaining contingents of Western armies will depart Niger, a security vacuum is emerging in Niger, which will be filled from two directions. However, none of them brings peace and stability.

It is likely that one of those parties will be Islamic jihadist groups, despite the claims of the coup plotters that they themselves intend to engage in a decisive battle with them.

The military coup has completely destabilised Niger, making it more vulnerable than ever to extremist groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda from Mali and Boko Haram from neighbouring Nigeria.

Russia's clearly stated ambitions to increase its influence in the Sahel, both officially and through its parastatal operations, provide another channel for filling the security vacuum.

Russia's influence has been expanding

Under the administration of the now-removed Mohamed Bazoum, Niger was one of the African nations who condemned Russia's aggression against Ukraine in the UN and requested its immediate withdrawal.

The positions of the Nigerian coup plotters regarding Russia remain unknown. Even the display of Russian flags by some protestors in Niamey's streets in support of the military junta should not be interpreted as a clear indication that Niger's political allegiance has shifted away from the West and toward Russia.

However, the pattern of military coups in Niger's neighbourhood inexorably indicates that even a junta-run Niger will embrace

Russia as a desirable partner.

Apollinaire Kyélem de Tambèla, the coup-installed prime minister of Burkina Faso, made a statement at the beginning of the year that serves as a reminder of this. He said that for his government, Russia was a "reasonable" choice for a new partner in the fight against jihadists when he demanded the withdrawal of French troops from the country.

The juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso have clearly profiled themselves as pro-Russian regimes, as is common in similar political and security disruptions throughout Africa.

However, Russian influence in the Sahel also has the dimension of direct participation of the Wagner Group's paramilitary formations in combat operations, thus establishing Moscow as a factor with a clear economic interest in the region, primarily regarding the exploitation of raw materials.

Although the Kremlin traditionally denies such aspirations, it is more than interested in events in the region developing according to the current recipe from Niger and before that in Mali, Burkina Faso and other points in the Sahel.

The Kremlin also uses indirect signals, and one of them happened at the recently concluded Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg, where Vladimir Putin promised a group of six African countries, worried about the termination of the Black Sea grain deal, that he would supply them with less quantities of grain - free of charge. Among those six countries are, of course, Mali and Burkina Faso.

However, worrying for the region is that there is evident Russian support for the junta there, including Wagner's military presence, which coincides with a rise in jihadist activity and more victims than before the violent power changes and the strengthening of Moscow's influence.

The security gap caused by a series of military coups is thus being filled with even greater instability, the growth of Islamic extremism and an increase in civilian casualties. Niger is

taking a similar detour.