

Christian Manahl* - 20 September 2023

The Niger Crisis and the Perils of a New Cold War Descending on Africa

The Sahelian belt: from arc of instability to a geopolitical frontline

First it was Mali (2020, 2021), then Guinea (2021), then Burkina Faso (2022), and now, on 26th July 2023, a military junta led by the presidential guard deposed the democratically elected president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum. Barely a month later, another coup ended almost six decades of rule of the Bongo family in Gabon. Fragile West African democracies seem to be falling like domino pieces into the hands of military rulers, and most end up under the influence of Russia, which is using the Wagner paramilitary group to offer security assistance to beleaguered authoritarian rulers in exchange for lucrative natural resources contracts. It is a vicious and frighteningly effective way for Russia to gain strategic influence, establish a new form of neo-colonial exploitation, undermine democracy, and push Western partners out of a region that is of critical interest to the European Union.

This would be bad enough in normal times, but since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine last year and the ensuing broader geopolitical conflict with the West, Russia's strategic expansion into the Sahel region, and perhaps more broadly in Africa, should be cause for serious concern. The region is of crucial importance for the EU in terms of migration management, a very sensitive political issue in many member states, but also commercially as a source for minerals for the green and digital transitions¹. Should Russia get into a position where it can manipulate migration flows or deny the EU access to critical resources, then Africa would become a second front in the escalating hybrid geopolitical conflict.

To be factual, the Sahel region was already an arc of instability before the recent military coups and Russia's strategic inroads. Several countries, including Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have been beset by Jihadist insurrections and caught in a vicious circle of

poverty, violence, lack of investments due to instability, and adverse effects of climate change. Chad has seen a quasi-military take-over after its former president, Idris Deby, was killed in battle against rebels from the *Front pour l'alternance et la concorde au Tchad* (FACT) in April 2021. Sudan has stumbled from one crisis to another after the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir in 2019 and descended into civil war since April 2023, pitting the army against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), an offshoot of the Janjaweed militia which were notorious for their campaigns of ethnic cleansing during the height of the Darfur conflict.

Russia is neither responsible for this dire situation in the region, nor is there evidence that it has instigated any of the recent military coups in West Africa. But it has been quick to take advantage of the new dynamics by offering the services of the Wagner group as an alternative to Western military support.

The European Union has provided security assistance to a range of countries in the Sahel, notably through the G5 cooperation framework between Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. However, the ethno-religious complexities, the vastness of the region, transnational organized crime fed by tremendous financial gains from human trafficking, as well as simmering anti-Western and notably anti-French sentiments make it difficult to achieve rapid gains against Jihadist extremism. Exacerbated by recurrent droughts, perennial poverty, widespread insecurity, and a state largely absent from outlying territories, populations are losing faith in their governments and in the Western nations backing them. This is fertile ground for extremism and banditry, but also for military take-overs – and for external forces aiming to push the European Union and other Western partners out of the region, or at least seriously curtail their influence, and in the process, reverse decades of gains in terms of democratization.

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Democracy in Africa since the Cold War

These are difficult times for democracy in the Sahelian belt, but the problem is probably broader in geographical terms. Perhaps it is time to look back at the turbulent history of democracy in post-colonial Africa. Most African countries obtained independence against the background of the escalating Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, and several African countries – Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia – became peripheral battlefields of this global geopolitical confrontation. Others came under pressure to choose one camp or the other, and most turned into authoritarian one-party systems. Some intellectuals, including in the West, described these as “development dictatorships” and argued that due to ethnic tensions and rivalries, a strong hand was necessary to keep these young nations together. In the end, however, it was more dictatorship than development, as only few African countries made significant progress in improving the living conditions of their people during the first decades of independence.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War brought a period of political and socio-economic turmoil to Africa, with some countries experiencing extreme violence and vicious civil wars, notably in Algeria, Liberia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaïre) and Somalia. But it was also a period of outstanding achievements: South Africa turned the somber page of Apartheid; the Angolan and Mozambican civil wars came to an end; dictatorships were overthrown in Ethiopia and Somalia; Eritrea and South Sudan achieved their independence after decades-long liberation struggles.

Most notably, a wave of democratization swept across the continent and all countries except three – Eritrea, Equatorial Guinee, and Eswatini – became nominally parliamentary democracies. At the same time, most countries established liberal market economies. One could have been tempted to believe that Fukuyama’s “end of history” had arrived in Africa². The liberal West was the role model almost everywhere; the European Union and the United States and their allies as well as the Bretton Woods institutions were practically the only relevant partners in terms of development financing. Russia was struggling to recover from the collapse of the Soviet Union and was busy with itself. China gradually be-

came an important partner in trade and development in Africa, but it did not initially come with a strong political agenda.

It was, alas, only a temporary victory for democracy in Africa. While public support for democracy is strong across the board in Africa³, democratic conviction among African leaders and democratic culture remain shallow in many countries. Harassment and arrest of opposition leaders, intimidation of voters, corruption and influence peddling among an often ethnically biased elite, restriction of the freedom of expression, misuse of public funds for partisan purposes and other dismal practices tilting the level playing in favour of the ruling party are common practices across the continent. Country after country lifted presidential term limits to allow the incumbent to remain in power for life. Africa may have the most youthful populations of all world regions, but it also has some of the oldest and longest-serving leaders, with more than a quarter of them having been in power for more than two decades⁴.

There are, of course, exceptions to this bleak picture, in the form of several genuine and well-functioning, even if not always perfect, democracies. Some are quite important, both due to their size and the role they play on the continent in terms of regional political or economic leadership: Nigeria, the continent’s most populous country; South Africa and Kenya, the economic power houses of their respective subregions. Also, a couple of smaller countries have established solid and vibrant democracies – Botswana, Cabo Verde, Liberia, Zambia, to name just a few. Ironically, Niger had recently joined their ranks with the first genuine democratic and peaceful transition since independence, when Mohamed Bazoum was elected.

By and large, however, democracy has become fragile in Africa⁵, and the African Union decisions to ostracize unconstitutional power grabs⁶ must be seen against the context of frequent subversion of elections into a plebiscitarian confirmation of the incumbent president or ruling party. Basically, the various AU’s initiatives to declare unconstitutional changes of power as illegal look like a good thing. The continental body showed an intention to put an end to a series of military coups that had beset the continent during the early years of independence. But the fact that the AU seemingly turns a blind eye to systematic oppression of the opposition in many countries

makes the AU decisions against unconstitutional changes of power ambiguous: They also help authoritarian leaders to stay in power forever. The ruling party may violently oppress the opposition, misuse public funds for campaign purposes, restrict freedom of expression and muzzle the media, but as long as some sort of elections take place, it's considered "constitutional" rule. This sends a dangerous message to the restive youth of the continent: in semi-authoritarian countries, elections are futile because the result is a foregone conclusion; the only way to obtain a change of power is by force. No wonder military coups are becoming more frequent again.

A new geopolitical environment: polarization and new dilemmas

A changing global geopolitical environment adds to the woes of democracy in Africa. China is actively advertising its autocratic political system as a superior alternative to Western democracy. China's stunning economic success, which lifted hundreds of millions of Chinese people out of poverty, is hugely attractive for Africa. But the more immediate threat to Western and European interests comes from Russia, and it has gained a new dimension since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russia can use its growing influence in Africa to manipulate migratory dynamics across the Sahel region and in North Africa and thus weaponize migration in a similar way as Belarus did in summer 2021. By pressurizing governments which depend on Russian security assistance, it can monopolize trade relationships and deny the EU access to critical natural resources. By deploying its well-known arsenal of disinformation, it can damage the reputation of the EU and reduce Western influence in the broader public.

Russia and the West are engaged in a hybrid geopolitical conflict and Russia will instrumentalize its relations with African countries against the EU and the West. Africa is becoming another frontline in this geopolitical conflict and this is bad news for the continent. The earlier Cold War had devastating consequences for some of the countries that became battlefields of East-West competition, and it was a time when authoritarian, one-party regimes dominated. Alignment was a strategic imperative and there was little concern for human rights or democracy, even in the West, as long as the countries in question stayed

aligned with the West. A new Cold War may have a similar impact.

During the past three decades, the EU has invested a lot in promoting human rights and democracy in Africa, with significant success. The main challenges were internal. This has changed dramatically in the last years: China is becoming more assertive in its foreign policy but more importantly, Russia is now adopting an outrightly confrontational stance in the countries where it has strong relations, notably Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, and Mali. It is expanding its influence in other countries.

Fragile democracies will now pose a difficult dilemma: Should the EU continue to promote democracy, which requires criticism of manipulated or rigged elections and of human rights violations, at the risk of being accused of "neo-colonial interference", which could drive some governments into the arms of Moscow and Beijing? Or should the EU tune down its democracy and human rights rhetoric and cultivate relations with autocrats in order to secure contracts for critical natural resources, to keep markets open for European investments, and to secure cooperation of countries which are critical to migration management? The latter approach would almost certainly accelerate the backsliding of democracy in Africa because local democracy activists look to Europe for encouragement and support, both political and financial. They will feel betrayed by the EU's seeming cooperation with autocrats and the EU risks losing civil society in Africa and undermining its credibility as a global champion of democracy and human rights; with the former approach, the EU might lose African elites – as well as important markets and overall political influence.

Niger and the dynamics ahead

Niger is a symptomatic case for this dilemma. After Mali and Burkina Faso have fallen under Russian influence, Niger was the cornerstone of the EU's security strategy in the Sahel, hosting an EU security mission⁷ and about 1,500 French military personnel. It is a particularly important country for trans-Saharan migration.

After the coup in July, the EU supported the position of ECOWAS, which has imposed sanctions and threatened the coup leaders with a military interven-

tion. Such an undertaking would almost certainly require European and American logistic support, as the West African countries which could conduct an intervention do not have the required force projection capacity⁸. And while such military support would enhance the chances of a successful ECOWAS military intervention, the inevitable casualties could also fuel the type of anti-Western propaganda on which both Islamists and Russia are thriving.

Also, a military intervention is both politically and operationally a hazardous exercise. Politically, because Burkina Faso and Mali already announced that they would come to Niger's rescue in case of an ECOWAS intervention, opening the specter of a broader conflict among ECOWAS members⁹. And operationally, because a protracted conflict would draw away important military resources from the fight against Jihadist insurgencies, and because it would create a great temptation for Niamey to resort to military help from Wagner.

It is therefore not only the future of Niger that hangs in the balance, but the security of the entire subregion and its partnership with the EU. A diplomatic solution is still possible and efforts to achieve it should be pursued vigorously. Both sides will have to compromise but the compromise would be well worth the effort. It would prevent Niger from drifting further away from the West and falling under the influence of Russia. It would not end the threat of Russia's expansion in Africa, but it would give a clear signal that the EU is making every effort to counter it, and of the EU's continuing willingness to work closely with ECOWAS, the African Union, and individual countries in order to counter Russia's influence and to continue supporting the fight against violent extremism. Niger may be a small episode in the political dynamics of the African continent, but the way it is resolved will be indicative for a broader trend on where the continent, and its relations with the West, are heading.

Footnotes

- 1 *Africa's critical minerals, Africa at the heart of a low-carbon future*, Mo Ibrahim Foundation, Ben Chandler, October 2022
- 2 Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History", *The National Interest*, 1989. In this essay, published months before the fall of the Berlin wall, the American political scientist argued that the end of the Cold War represented the end-point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.
- 3 "Do Africans want democracy — and do they think they're getting it?" Afrobarometer, 21st November 2021
- 4 "One in four African leaders has served more than 20 years", *The East African*, 14th March 2018; two of the veteran leaders, al-Bashir and Idriss Deby, have been overthrown or killed respectively since the article was published, but the essence of the title still holds true; see also "Drunk with power: African presidents fight term limits", *The Citizen*, updated 11th April 2021.
- 5 "Is Democracy on Retreat in Africa?", Charles A. Ray, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 10th March 2022
- 6 The main legal instrument against unconstitutional changes of power (UCP) is article 4 (p) of the constitutive act of the African Union, but normative initiatives against UCP are found in multiple declarations of the OAU and the AU and ultimately go back to measures proposed by the 1997 OAU Council of Ministers for the restoration of constitutional order in response to the coup d'état in Sierra Leone. See "Unconstitutional "Changes of Government and Unconstitutional Practices in Africa", by Solomon Ayele Dersso, World Peace Foundation, June 2016.
- 7 See Council of the EU press release of 9th September 2022
- 8 *How Might an ECOWAS Military Intervention Take Shape in Niger ?* RANE/Stratfor, 11th August 2023
- 9 In mid-September, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a mutual defence pact, called l'Alliance des États du Sahel, which has widened the rift between the three regimes ruled by military juntas and the other member of ECOWAS. This further aggravates the risk of a regional armed conflict in case of a military intervention in Niger.