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Policy Brief

The Militarization of Democracy in Chad: Peaceful transition at crossroads?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Chad has been in a state of almost constant instability and protracted conflict since achieving independence in 1960. The conflict-prone country experiences recurrent political violence which revolves around contestation for power during and after elections and recurrent attempted coups. The most recent de facto coup d'état was on 20 April 2021 when Mahamat Idriss Déby took over the country's transitional government following the death of his father and longtime president of Chad, Idriss Déby Itno.¹ While the international community have largely let pass the opportunity created by Idriss Déby's death, allowing for the consolidation of power by his son, the Chadian population have not. Political leaders and pro-democracy groups like the main opposition alliance, Wakit Tama (Chadian Arab for "the time has come") rejected the military transfer of power and stepped up their call for Mahamat Déby and his fifteen (15) member ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) to hold tight to their pledged eighteen (18) months transition timeline. The military takeover of the state and the crackdown on civilian protests, however, cast doubt on the TMC's willingness to resolve the politico-military instability in Chad through a peaceful democratic transition. This policy brief explores how a drift away from authoritarian politics would avert the continuation of former president Deby's rule through hereditary succession and would result in the opening up of political space for increased democratization in Chad.

KEY POINTS

- The death of former President Idriss Déby Itno provided a window of opportunity for Chadians to drift away from authoritarian regimes through the opening of civic and political spaces for increased democratization in Chad.
- Fears of dynasty succession with the consolidation of power by General Mahamat Déby as was the case under late President Idris Déby Itno, seriously challenges the possibility of a consensual and peaceful transition to civilian rule in Chad.
- The Transitional Military Council (TMC) should redouble its efforts to ensure that the inclusive national dialogue leads to a national reconciliation, a consensual constitution, free and fair elections and the establishment of strong institutions that will continue the reconstruction of Chad after the transition period.



INTRODUCTION

Former President Idriss Déby Itno who ruled Chad for more than 30 years, was killed in April 2021 during clashes with the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) rebel group, who were attempting to overthrow his government. His death led to the establishment of the Transitional Military Council (TMC), made up of fifteen (15) generals who were all loyalists to Idriss Déby Itno. The TMC unconstitutionally changed the government by proclaiming Mahamat Idriss Déby, a 37-year-old military general and former President Déby Itno's son, as transitional president.² They then suspended the constitution, the legislature, and the executive branch of government and adopted a transitional charter. The charter outlines the transition's goals and provisions for a national dialogue which will lay the foundation for a new constitution and elections.³ This de facto coup d'état led to clashes between Chadian security forces and protesters denouncing TMC's unconstitutional take over, with at least nine deaths, dozens injured and several arrests.⁴ Unlike in previous coups d'états in countries like Burkina Faso, Mali or Sudan, the African Union's Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) did not sanction or suspend Chad after the unconstitutional change of government and was highly criticized for its inconsistent responses to African coups.⁵ The African Union is, however, set to reverse its decision to accept the TMC's claim to power if they fail to organize elections by October 2022 (within the 18-month transition period). Drawn from secondary data and personal insights, this policy brief focuses on the TMC's unconstitutional change of power with the aim of providing actionable recommendations for a successful democratic transition to civilian rule in Chad.

FROM MILITARY-LED TRANSITION TO DEMOCRATIC LEADERSHIP

In an effort to implement the transitional charter and successfully transition from military to democratic leadership, the Transitional Military Council (TMC) granted amnesty to about 300 rebels and political dissidents. This met a key demand by the opposition and a precondition by Rebel groups to joining the planned national dialogue. The Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT), whose forces were fighting late President Idriss Déby when he was killed in April 2021, notably welcomed the amnesty as “a major step forward towards, among other things, dialogue, reconciliation and peace, which all Chadians want.”⁶ “The TMC also gradually opened civic space that would have been impossible under late President Idriss Itno. For instance, opposition leaders like Succès Masra, of the Transformers party, who was banned from the 2021 presidential elections, restarted campaigns. He filled the Idriss Mahamat Ouya stadium in N’Djamena with supporters during the “Grand Meeting of the People” held in January 2022. Several other political parties such as Yacine

Abdaramane Sakine’s Reformist Party⁷ took part in what has been described as the largest opposition political meeting to date in Chad.

Other prominent political figures, who feared for their lives under late President Idriss Déby Itno’s regime have returned to Chad and are open to General Mahamat Déby’s offer of reconciliation.⁸ Similarly, Wakit Tamma, the main coalition of civil society organizations and opposition parties, organized marches and protests to demand a peaceful transition to civilian rule in Chad. The arrest of six of their members and supporters during a protest on 14 May 2022, and the banning of all protests against their detention, however dashed hopes for reconciliation and participation of actors who represent a civilian opposition at the national dialogue. Fears of dynasty succession with the consolidation of power in General Mahamat Déby as was the case under late President Idris Déby Itno, however, seriously challenges the possibility of a consensual and peaceful transition to civilian rule in Chad.

CHAD'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION AT CROSSROADS?

After more than a year of military rule, delays in the organization of a national dialogue and in determining a clear election timeline are major concerns for the reintroduction of democracy in Chad. The national dialogue which was initially scheduled for February 15, 2022 and then May 10, 2022 in order to pave the way for a new constitution and democratic elections, was postponed and rescheduled for August 20th, 2022. Opposition parties and activists believe that the postponement of the national dialogue which should lead to a transfer of power from military to civilian rule are political schemes to extend the 18-month transition period indefinitely.⁹ The military junta, however, believes that the postponement gave enough time to about 40 rebel groups and political opponents to sign a peace agreement with Chad's transitional authorities to launch

a national reconciliation dialogue. The peace agreement, signed in the Qatari capital, Doha, on August 08, 2022, commits signatories to a ceasefire and guarantees the safety of rebel leaders during the national dialogue scheduled for August 20th, 2022.¹⁰ The rejection of the peace agreement by the main rebel group, the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) and about eight other rebel groups however cast doubt on the success of the dialogue as the eighteen months (18) transition from military to civilian rule winds down. While General Mahamat Déby has not ruled out an extension of military rule if conditions for restoring civilian rule are not met¹¹, the AU PSC, however, stated that an extension of the eighteen months (18) transition period would not be accepted, nor would members of the TMC be allowed to contest the post-transition elections.¹²

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Political transfer of power in Chad usually came about through military coups with a host of authoritarian regimes following one another. The death of former president Déby Itno provided a window of opportunity for a transition towards a more democratic and less oppressive form of rule in Chad. However, vesting ultimate authority in the TMC led by Mahamat Déby, equates to hereditary succession under a military government with significant power and influence staying within the Déby clan. A drift away from authoritarianism would avert the continuation of former president Déby's rule through hereditary succession and would result in the opening up of political space for increased democratization in Chad. Hence, as a way forward for a peaceful democratic transition in Chad, the following implemental policy options are necessary:

1. The Transitional Military Council should redouble their efforts in ensuring that the national dialogue scheduled to take place on 20 August, 2022, is inclusive and successful. The dialogue should lead to a national reconciliation, a consensual constitution and the establishment of strong institutions that will continue the reconstruction of Chad after the transition period.
2. Free, transparent and credible elections, regulated by impartial institutions, should be organized immediately after the national dialogue in order to ensure a peaceful transition to civilian rule in Chad.
3. The Transitional Military Council should respect the democratic participation of the opposition, protect Chadians' right to peaceful protest, and ensure that security forces implicated in human rights violations are held accountable.
4. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) should provide financial and technical support to Chad throughout the transition period, which if not well handled, could perpetuate instability in the country and the region. They should equally consider all means, including sanctions, should the TMC fail to fulfill their pledged 18-month transition timeline.

ENDNOTES

1. CSIS (2022). Keeping Chad's Transition on Track. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/keeping-chads-transition-track>
2. The constitution of Chad states that a presidential candidate must be at least 45 years old and a civilian. The constitution also asserts that, in the event of a president's death, the president of the National Assembly should be interim president.
3. Daniel Eiizenga (2021). A Crucial Moment in Chad's Transition. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/a-crucial-moment-in-chads-transition/>
4. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210427-manifestations-au-tchad-retour-sur-une-journ%C3%A9e-de-contestation-et-de-r%C3%A9pression>
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6. Kingabe Ogouzeimi de Tapol, FACT's spokesman. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20211129-chad-gives-amnesty-to-hundreds-of-rebels-and-dissidents>
7. The Reformist party organized a similar grand meeting on March 14, 2022 and another meeting on June 4th 2022.
8. <https://newlinesinstitute.org/africa/a-year-after-a-dictators-death-there-is-still-time-to-support-democracy-in-chad/>
9. Ibid
10. Aljazeera (2022). Chad military gov't, opposition groups sign peace deal in Qatar. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/8/chad-military-govt-opposition-groups-sign-peace-deal-in-qatar>
11. Africa news (2021). Chad's new leader Mahamat Deby on a 'friendship and working' visit to France. Available at: <https://www.africanews.com/2021/07/04/chad-s-new-leader-mahamat-deby-on-a-friendship-and-working-visit-to-france//>
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