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Chad's 'Political Transition' Is a Smokescreen for Military Rule

Daniel Eizenga | Tuesday, Oct. 12, 2021

The death of Chadian President Idriss Deby

(<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/20/chads-president-deby-has-died-of-injuries>) in April ended his three-decade rule and plunged the Central African country into uncertainty. Officially, Deby succumbed to wounds sustained on the frontlines of battle with a rebel group called the Front for Change and Concord in Chad, known by its French acronym FACT. Chad's constitution stipulates that in the event of the president's death, the speaker of the National Assembly serves as interim head of state and organizes new presidential elections within 90 days.

Instead, a military junta made up of those close to Deby announced that his son, Gen. Mahamat Idriss Deby, had been appointed interim president and leader of a 15-member transitional military council. Speculation that the elder Deby had been grooming his son to succeed him had been widespread prior to his death. The junta proceeded to suspend the government, legislature and constitution in what effectively amounted to a coup (<https://ufahamuafrika.com/2021/04/24/ep-114-a-conversation-with-dan-eizenga-on-idriss-deby-and-chad/>).

Mahamat Deby then appointed an interim prime minister (<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chad-military-council-names-former-pm-padacke-prime-minister-2021-04-26/>), Albert Pahimi Padacke, to manage the day-to-day work of government ministries. Padacke oversees a predominantly civilian Cabinet comprising former ruling party stalwarts, former opposition leaders and former Chadian rebels who now serve as political advisers. Of course, these figures serve at the pleasure of the junta, which consolidated its political control by coopting the interim government.

The junta also published a transitional constitution (<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210422-tchad-la-charte-qui-dessine-la-transition-consacre-les-pleins-pouvoirs-pour-le-fils-d-idriss-d%C3%A9by>) to serve as its legal framework. It outlines an 18-month transitional process during which a new charter will be drawn up, and which will culminate in new presidential and legislative elections.



Mahamat Idriss Deby, head of the Transitional Military Council of Chad, salutes the coffin of his father, the late Chadian President Idriss Deby, during a state funeral in N'Djamena, Chad, April 23, 2021 (pool photo by Christophe Petit Tesson via AP).

The interim charter has strengthened the younger Deby's hand by breaking with conventional practices in important ways. It does not preclude transitional authorities from contesting the results of elections. The charter also allows for a one-time extension of the transition period, by an additional 18 months. But, perhaps most importantly, the charter gives unrivaled authority to the transitional military council, removing checks and balances on Mahamat Deby's executive power.

Political transitions like the one Chad is currently undergoing take place during moments of high uncertainty and volatility, such as the aftermath of a coup, and generally aim to restore constitutional order while strengthening democratic institutions. As such, they are technocratic processes that should be advanced by bureaucrats rather than politicians or soldiers. The Chadian case presents the opposite scenario. Well-known politicians, empowered by a tightly knit group of military officers, have taken power.

Vesting ultimate authority in the junta led by Mahamat Deby equates to hereditary succession under a military government. This stands in stark contrast to the Chadian constitution that was in effect prior to Idriss Deby's death, which would have precluded the late president's son from standing in presidential elections due to his age and active-duty military status. Leaving these stipulations out of the interim charter conveniently leaves the door open to the Deby family staying in power indefinitely, while its associates retain significant power and influence.

By leaving the transition's timeline open to revision, the junta also removed pressure on the interim government to enact important reforms and listen to opposition voices, or to abide by an electoral calendar. In short, it removes a final check on the junta's power. There are no means nor benchmarks by which to hold the junta accountable.

Not all Chadians support the transition. Shortly after the military announced the coup, demonstrators took to the streets to decry the power grab. Security forces then violently suppressed them, including by firing on protesters (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/24/chad-post-deby-crackdown-abuses>) with live ammunition. Several were killed, dozens wounded and hundreds more arrested. The violence successfully silenced opposition voices and crippled their ability to mobilize further street protests.

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This provided the junta another opportunity to co-opt opposition voices. Last month, Mahamat Deby selected and named a 93-member interim legislature (<https://www.theafricareport.com/131309/chad-mahamat-idriss-deby-appoints-a-transitional-parliament-by-decree/>). Similar to the civilian authorities appointed to ministries, Deby used the appointments to reward loyalists and appease potential competitors.

Among the legislators are members of political parties, civil society, business associations, the military and trade unions. One-third of the seats are held by women. The ostensibly inclusive nature of the body has been championed by transitional authorities, but of course, this is a self-serving distraction. Claims of inclusivity help the junta argue that Chadian society is represented, but they simultaneously ignore the fact that Mahamat Deby handpicked each of the 93 members. Consequently, it is difficult to view the interim body as more than a rubberstamp institution.

While some opposition figures have opted to participate in the legislature and join the interim government, many others have continued to mount public pressure against the military regime. Since the junta's rise to power, a social movement calling itself *Wakit Tama*—"the time has come" in Chadian Arabic"—comprising unions and political parties has refused to recognize the junta. Their central demand calls for an inclusive national dialogue to establish a democratic transition, rejecting the current process as illegitimate.

The junta has attempted to ignore the movement, instead advancing plans for a national dialogue organized by a Deby-appointed committee (<https://www.voaafrique.com/a/le-comit%C3%A9-du-dialogue-national-tchadien-est-boud%C3%A9-par-certains/6005677.html>). But *Wakit Tama* categorically rejects this dialogue so long as the junta remains in power. Their uncompromising stance has undermined the junta's claims of inclusivity, and renewed calls for *Wakit Tama*'s supporters to mobilize street protests have led to further violent crackdowns. On Oct. 2, supporters of the *Transformateurs*, a political party belonging to *Wakit Tama*, massed at its headquarters in the capital, N'Djamena, in preparation for an officially approved demonstration. Police fired canisters of tear gas (https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20211002-tchad-la-manifestation-de-wakit-tama-dispers%C3%A9-par-les-forces-de-l-ordre?ref=tw_i) and violently dispersed the crowds, wounding dozens.

The junta's repression prompted a rare joint rebuke of the violence (<https://td.usembassy.gov/joint-statement-with-the-european-union-in-chad/>) from Chad's Western partners: the European Union, France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands. Such condemnations of Chadian leaders have been rare due to the international community's concerns for security and stability in the Sahel region.

Chad has been an important participant in both the Multinational Joint Task Force and the Sahel G-5 joint force, which are key regional security frameworks engaged in counterterrorism operations against violent extremist groups. Chad also contributes the largest military contingent of peacekeeping forces (<https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/minusma>) to the United Nations stabilization mission in Mali. This participation has helped solidify the perception of Chad in the West as a purveyor of regional security. However, such a view overlooks the ways in which Chad's authoritarianism has contributed to regional insecurity.

Under Idriss Deby's rule, armed rebel groups were crushed (<https://theconversation.com/five-key-insights-into-debys-leadership-that-point-to-where-chad-may-be-heading-159713>) or forced across Chad's borders, while political rivals disappeared or fled into exile. The cycle of violence and rebellion helped to indoctrinate generations of Chadians in living by the gun (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/living-by-the-gun-in-chad-9781783605323/>), a fact that ultimately claimed Deby's life. Deby left Chad confronted with insurgencies on all fronts. To the north, some four rebel groups including FACT have found safe haven in southern Libya, at times working as

mercenaries on either side of that country's civil war. To the west, Chadian forces are engaged in counterterrorism operations against Boko Haram militants moving between Niger, Nigeria and Cameroon in the Lake Chad Basin. To the east lies the turbulent Darfur region of Sudan, where Deby's kinsmen and Chadian Arabs have regularly been implicated in violence. To the south, violence in the Central African Republic has periodically crossed over the border into Chad, claiming the lives of six Chadian soldiers as recently as May 2021. Chadian mercenaries, militias, and soldiers find themselves entwined in each of these theaters, putting on stark display the connections between Deby's autocracy and instability (<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/chads-ongoing-instability-the-legacy-of-idriss-deby/>).

Similarly, perceiving the Chadian military as a stabilizing force overestimates the ability of the current junta—a perpetuation of Idriss Deby's authoritarianism—to contain internal instability. Deby's Chad has known years of armed opposition and civil war. These conflicts were often waged by those now with a seat at the junta's table. For others, they are now engaged in conflicts throughout the region. Deby's rule encouraged conflict (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/06/01/what-would-bring-stability-after-death-chads-president/>), and there is no reason to believe the current junta will rule differently.

Convening a truly inclusive national dialogue to reconcile Chad's authoritarian history and build a consensus around a civilian-led transition could relieve these tensions. However, this would require Mahamat Deby and the junta to step away from power. International actors, including Western governments and African intergovernmental organizations like the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States, need to recognize that continuing Deby's rule through hereditary succession prolongs insecurity and precipitates future instability.

Daniel Eizenga is a research fellow at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. The views expressed here are his own and do not represent an official policy or position of the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

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