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SWP Comment

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Chad's Crisis-Prone Transition

Dynastic consolidation and its risks

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Since President Idris Deby's violent death in April 2021, the ruling elite in Chad have sought to protect their hold on power by promoting the dynastic succession of his son Mahamat. The risks of this strategy are becoming clearer with the October 2022 decision to prolong the transition by another two years as Mahamat Deby is appointed interim president. With the emergence of new opposition forces, the tactic of dividing antagonistic elites through selective co-optation faces limits. Both in the capital and in the provinces, power struggles are fuelling identity-based mobilisation. The regime's repression of the opposition plays into the hands of the proponents of armed struggle. France, as the guarantor of Mahamat Deby's superior position vis-à-vis the rebels, is playing an increasingly unpopular role.

When Idris Deby was suddenly killed while defending his country against an incursion of Libya-based rebels, Chad's military elite reacted swiftly and cohesively. A fifteen-member military council headed by his son Mahamat took power, suspended the constitution and announced a transitional process that would lead to elections within eighteen months.

Contrary to other recent takeovers executed by African militaries, this move did not provoke international sanctions. The African Union (AU), whose Commission's Chairperson Moussa Faki is said to harbour ambitions for the Chadian presidency, did not qualify the event as a coup. Instead, it merely insisted that the military council stick to its timetable and honour its promise that none of its members – including Mahamat Deby – would run for

the presidency. France, which has a significant military presence in Chad, ostentatiously backed Mahamat Deby, though President Emmanuel Macron claimed that he supported a transitional process rather than a dynastic succession. The European Union (EU) aligned with the positions of France and the AU.

Eighteen months later, the illusion of a transition towards free elections has become impossible to maintain. In early October 2022, the National Dialogue that was convened by the military council decided to prolong the transition by two years, dissolve the military council, appoint Mahamat Deby as interim president, and to allow him and the other members of the military council to run in presidential elections. These decisions were announced without having been put to a vote among the



National Dialogue’s roughly 1,400 participants. Segments of the opposition protested the decisions and were met with bloody repression on 20 October. This ended a phase that had been marked by cautious hopes for a political opening. But it remains uncertain whether the ruling circles around Deby can secure their hold on power through a dynastic succession.

Managed transition

In the first phase of the transition that ended in October 2022, the generals surrounding Deby created the impression that they were looking for compromise and consensus. This led many critical voices to fall silent for a while. Deby pursued an open arms policy when it came to welcoming back opponents and former rebel leaders who had previously sought refuge abroad from his father’s regime. Some who returned were rewarded with positions, all while the power of the core elite remained intact.

This approach also guided the negotiations with armed groups preceding the National Dialogue which the military council sought to convene. The “pre-dialogue” held with the rebels in Qatar from March to August 2022 concluded with a peace agreement signed by 43 out of 52 participating groups. The signatory movements then returned to Ndjamena, with some of their representatives obtaining official positions. Yet, few of these so-called politico-militaires actually had fighters, and many were not actual rebels; in fact, some had even travelled to Qatar from Ndjamena. By signing the peace agreement, the government committed to giving the rebels shares in a transitional government and the transitional council, as well as material benefits through an internationally financed process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration. The latter has yet to begin, and its delay is provoking frustration among the signatories. Above all, however, the Chadian leadership rejected more substantial demands, including those that sought to prevent Deby from running in future elections

and others aimed at fundamentally reforming the army to break the dominance of Deby’s Zaghawa ethnic group within its ranks. As a result, several groups refused to sign the Qatar agreement — among them the only two organisations with notable firepower, the Front pour l’Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad (FACT) and the Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République (CCMSR), as well as several smaller groups.

The National Dialogue that began in August 2022 and concluded in early October proved equally superficial. The vast majority of the Dialogue’s participants were considered representatives of the regime’s elites. The two most significant opposition movements — the civil society coalition *Wakit Tamma* (time is up) and the party *Les Transformateurs* led by Succès Masra — boycotted the event. Even so, discussions were surprisingly controversial at times. Participants lambasted bad governance and demanded a federal reorganisation of the state. But the results of the Dialogue, as adopted by its organisers, did not reflect these debates aside from the promise to hold a referendum on implementing either a centralist or federalist model of governance. No votes took place on the Dialogue’s conclusions. Numerous participants — among whom many had long served under Idris Deby — say they have been left disillusioned by this exercise whose result was apparently predetermined, namely to enable Mahamat Deby to retain power and run for president.

The Chadian leadership still maintained the façade of consensus during the formation of the so-called unity government in mid-October. Four politico-militaires who had signed the Qatar agreement received ministerial posts. Veteran opposition politician Saleh Kebzabo became prime minister.

But the semblance of inclusivity cannot hide the fact that change has been cosmetic at best. The regime’s hard core — the army and security apparatus — remains in the firm grip of the Zaghawa-dominated military elite that initially emerged from the 1990 rebellion which allowed Idris Deby to

seize power. Elite insiders speak of tensions between Mahamat Deby and the generals, who view the selective co-optation of former opponents with suspicion. The fear of losing power and subsequently suffering retribution against the Zaghawa keeps inter-cine struggles among competing elite factions in check. But to stay in office, Mahamat Deby needs to prove that his rule safeguards the military elite's clout — and this heavily limits his room for manoeuvre.

The co-optation of individual opposition figures is in continuity with the strategies used by Idris Deby. Positions in government and the administration had been and continue to be constantly reshuffled while the power of the core elite remains constant. Including opponents in the governing apparatus, even if nominally, lends legitimacy to the regime while simultaneously dividing opposition parties and rebel groups, and undermining the credibility of their apparently venal leaders.

It is doubtful whether this model can ensure the viability of the dynastic succession. As state resources remain constant, the inclusion of additional actors will create discontent among the established elites. Moreover, the most important opposition forces have proven resistant to co-optation so far. Among them have been the unarmed forces of the Transformateurs and Wakit Tamma.

Western diplomats sought to ensure the inclusion of the Transformateurs through the appointment of Succès Masra as prime minister of the unity government, but the efforts failed due to his maximalist demands and resistance by hardliners in the core elite. Since then, the Transformateurs and Wakit Tamma are trying to mobilise the public as well as international actors to exert pressure. They organised the 20 October protests and have been trying to use the subsequent regime repression to spark further mobilisation and delegitimisation of the regime in the eyes of the international community. For now, the violence and hundreds of arrests on 20 October have forestalled further protests, and Masra has since sought refuge abroad. But the repression

has only deepened the rift between the regime and the civilian opposition.

Among the armed opposition, too, the most important forces remain defiant — particularly FACT. On the one hand, this is due to the group's demands for meaningful political change; on the other hand, the obstacles to reconciliation between the regime and FACT are higher than with other groups as Idris Deby was killed during a FACT offensive and the regime continues to hold many prisoners from that attack. During the negotiations in Qatar, FACT adopted a relatively conciliatory stance but the prolongation of the transition and the violent repression of the 20 October protests are likely to play into the hands of rebel groups who advocate for armed struggle.

Dynamics of mobilisation

The political conditions that marked the transition's first phase and made a dynastic succession appear as a feasible option should not be considered fixed. The cautious opening of political space during that phase has triggered dynamics of mobilisation that are hard to reverse, and that could soon make it more difficult to manage the situation.

Several characteristics of the transitional period favour identity-based mobilisation. First, since Idris Deby's death, there has been a growing perception that state authority is weakened. Second, the transition has raised questions and facilitated debate on fundamental matters including the form of state. Third, this period has accelerated the incidence of struggles for representation. Factions jostled to find a place in the two governments formed within eighteen months just as they fought for seats at the pre-dialogue, the transitional council and the National Dialogue. Many of the associated controversies concern the — perceived or actual — insufficient representation of particular regions or communities.

Among the dynamics unfolding during the transitional phase is the new phenomenon of protest. Since the Transformateurs

emerged in 2018, and particularly since Deby's death, Succès Masra has been able to mobilise the general public in a way that is unusual for Chad. Masra succeeds in rallying poorer, marginalised societal groups that are angry about the ruling elites' corruption and overall mismanagement of the country. However, those following his calls are mostly residents of southern provincial cities or neighbourhoods in the capital that are largely inhabited by communities from the south of the country. The identitarian dimension of this movement is being emphasised by the regime, and increasingly also by Masra himself, and risks reviving an old divide. By contrast, Masra — who maintains good relations with Western embassies — has to date pointedly avoided exploiting the public's widespread resentment of French support for Mahamat Deby. With involvement from Wakit Tamma, several demonstrations in May 2022 called for France to leave Chad, and many of the demonstrators came from the large group of Arabophone university graduates who see themselves as disadvantaged when it comes to being appointed to the administration. Anti-French sentiment that has been on the rise in Francophone Africa recently has the potential to gain far more traction in Chad than it has before.

Two other topics act as focal points for conflicts revolving around identity politics. First, there are growing calls for a federal system. These demands are increasingly coming from northern and central Chad, but they are still strongest in the country's south, where a particularly strong perception prevails that the south is politically marginalised in a regime led by "northern" groups. The backdrop to such demands is the south's experiences of repression at the hands of armies dominated by "northerners" under presidents Hissène Habré and Idris Deby — experiences that are burnt into the collective memory of the region. The second area of contention is also all too compatible with a supposed antagonism between north and south; it is expressed in the conflicts between farmers and herders in the country's south and east. Clashes

along these lines have been on the rise for the past two decades, but public perception would have one believe that their scale and intensity have further increased since Deby's death. Members of the military elite are frequently involved in such conflicts as they may own large herds or be investors in land. In a mutually reinforcing dynamic, communities are increasingly arming themselves. Among farming communities, the conflicts are promoting a discourse that stigmatises Arab herders as foreigners and intruders; and among the Arab herders, an ideology of Arab supremacism is spreading that has played a fatal role in the neighbouring region of Darfur in western Sudan. There, the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces have recruited a large number of Chadian Arabs.

The French factor

Despite what has unfolded in the transitional phase, the Chadian leadership has until now enjoyed a relatively comfortable negotiating position vis-à-vis both the civilian and the armed opposition. This is mainly due to two factors: the French military presence and the lack of foreign support for Chadian rebels.

The French military contingent in Chad constitutes a security guarantee for the Deby regime. In February 2019, French fighter jets bombed a rebel incursion from Libya which the Chadian army hesitated to confront. During the FACT offensive in 2021, France provided intelligence and logistical support to the regime, playing a crucial role in the rebels' defeat. Since Idris Deby's death, Macron has repeatedly declared that France would defend Chad's "territorial integrity". In the past, the main reasons for this backing have been the fact that Chad hosted the headquarters of the French military operation Barkhane and that it made a major contribution to the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA in Mali. Since the departure of French troops from Mali, the calculus in Paris has changed somewhat; now, fears take centre stage that revoking the security guarantee would provoke the rapid de-

stabilisation of Chad. This, in turn, would reverberate across the region, including in neighbouring Niger, an important partner for France and other Western states.

Due to France's position, Chadian rebels based in Libya or the Central African Republic have had limited potential to mobilise since Deby's death. They would find it easier to recruit if the space for civilian politics shuts down again and if they receive foreign support. The chance of such support coming from Russia, whose Wagner Group is present in southern Libya and in the Central African Republic, has receded as the Wagner Group's focus has shifted towards Ukraine in 2022. Yet regardless of foreign sponsorship, Chadian rebels will continue to find refuge and bases in neighbouring countries due to weak or non-existent state control.

Looking ahead

So far, domestic resistance to a dynastic succession in Chad has not been strong enough to force the country's leadership into negotiations and steer the transition from above. Similarly, the AU and Western states have not exerted any meaningful pressure in favour of a negotiated transition, even as the regime's efforts to squash new opposition movements and political debates through repression could fuel further mobilisation. This threatens to drive identity-based polarisation that could also be aggravated by provincial conflicts. Such an unfolding of events could soon make negotiations inevitable while simultaneously worsening the conditions in which they would take place. This scenario would likely also witness the further spread and radicalisation of anti-French sentiment seeing that the vast majority of political actors view French backing as the key reason for the current Chadian leadership's recalcitrance. Sooner or later, the French military presence, while stabilising Chad security-wise, could become politically unsustainable.

However, the risk of destabilisation also applies to an alternative scenario in which growing internal and external pressure forces the ruling elite to negotiate how to provide the opposition a more substantial role. A negotiated transition would undoubtedly provoke intense power struggles, both within established elite circles and between entrenched elites and new populist forces. This would mean an even greater potential for popular mobilisation and identity-based polarisation. A fragile power-sharing arrangement in Ndjamena would likely also weaken state authority, which could in turn lead to the escalation of conflicts in the provinces. Parts of the military elite, faced with the prospect of losing power, could react with a coup and look for alternative sources of foreign support – with Russia as a possible candidate. In any case, the ruling elite certainly will not give up power without fierce resistance.

Such scenarios are not the only reason why France is unlikely to exert greater pressure on the Chadian leadership to make more substantive concessions to the opposition. France's recent loss of influence in the Central African Republic and Mali also serves as a deterrent to disengagement. Paris calculates that threatening to cut financial or military support to the regime could push segments of the ruling elite into the arms of other powers such as China or Russia.

By contrast, Germany and other Western states would do well to distance themselves from the French approach, and they should advocate for a more critical stance at the European level. For example, conditionalising EU budget support for Chad could disincentivise the ruling elite from intensifying repression. The reactions of international actors do play a role in the Chadian leadership's calculations as to how much brutality it can deploy against the opposition. With this in mind, Germany could act in concert with its European and Western partners to send clearer messages that would help prevent further violence.

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