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Thousands rally in support of Niger's coup leaders as Western-backed ECOWAS threatens military intervention

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Protesters in support of Niger coup wave Russian flag. Sign reads, “Down with France, Macron Get Lost, Son of a Bitch.” Photo: [Black Agenda Report](#)

The military junta which took power in Niger last week [warned](#) on Monday, July 31 that France might militarily intervene with [authorization from the ousted government’s foreign minister](#) to restore Mohamed Bazoum to the presidency.

Thousands have mobilized to the streets to welcome the military takeover, sloganeering against their former colonizer — “Down with France,” “Foreign bases out.” Protesters reportedly tore out the plaque on the French embassy in capital Niamey and torched its door on Sunday, July 30.

With drones and airplanes [reportedly](#) backing up to 1,500 of its troops in Niger, France, along with the US which has another 1,100 troops in two military bases, has extended support to the West African regional bloc which on Sunday [threatened a](#)

[military intervention](#).

[Imposing a no-fly zone](#) and [freezing Niger's assets](#) in its central and commercial banks, the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) said on Sunday that it will “take all measures necessary,” including “the use of force,” to restore Bazoum to presidency.

Bazoum was taken captive and removed from office on July 26 in a coup led by the head of the presidential guard, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani. Speaking on behalf of the military junta which has called itself the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP), Col Maj Amadou Abdramane announced in a televised statement, “the defense and security forces.. have decided to put an end to the regime... This follows the continuing deterioration of the security situation, and poor economic and social governance.”

“ECOWAS condemns in the strongest possible terms the attempt to seize power by force and calls on the coup plotters to free the democratically elected President of the Republic immediately and without any condition,” said its current chair, Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, immediately after the coup.

“[T]he EU also associated itself with ECOWAS’ first response to the matter,” said the European Union’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, adding that the “EU condemns all attempts to destabilize the democracy.” US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan also condemned “any effort to...subvert the functioning of Niger’s democratically elected government.”

The first-ever ‘democratic transition’?

After taking office in April 2021 following what is described as the [“first-ever democratic transition”](#) in the country, Bazoum instituted an internet shutdown for ten days while the security forces cracked down on protests and arrested hundreds

amid accusations of irregularities.

In November that year, militant mass demonstrations tried to stop the movement of a French army convoy through the country en route from Ivory Coast to Mali. French soldiers and the Nigerien gendarmes escorting their convoy fired shots and tear gas, [killing two Nigeriens and wounding 18](#).

Angry protesters also [confronted the convoy all along its route through Burkina Faso](#) before entering Niger. Two months later, in January 2022, Burkina Faso's president was ousted in a popular coup. After consolidating power with another coup in September 2022, the junta demanded that the French troops leave Burkina Faso in January 2023. Mass demonstrations welcomed their military government's decision.

In Mali, French troops had withdrawn by August 2022, six months after the military government, which had similarly consolidated power with two popular coups, demanded they leave. Tens of thousands took to the streets of the capital Bamako in celebration.

Announcing the withdrawal of 2,400 troops from Mali, French president Emmanuel Macron had [said](#) at the time that the "heart" of France's military operation in Sahel "will no longer be in Mali but in Niger."

Impervious to the popular sentiment against France in Niger and other former colonies in West Africa, the democratically elected Bazoum, touted by the BBC as "[a key Western ally](#)," [welcomed into Niger the French troops](#) ordered out of Mali.

"It is unacceptable and intolerable to accept this redeployment on our territory," Maïkol Zodi, a leader of the protest movement calling for the withdrawal of French troops, had said at the time, warning that "we will treat them as an occupying force."

Later in August that year, 15 civil society organizations came together to form “[M62: Sacred Union for the Safeguard of the Sovereignty and Dignity of the People](#)” to launch a joint struggle against the French military’s presence in Niger. The M62 Movement’s coordinator, Abdoulaye Seydou, said at the time that the French troops, deployed as a part of Operation Barkhane, have “killed more civilians than terrorists,” *DW* [reported](#).

Donning a T-shirt with Thomas Sankara’s image at the protest the M62 led in September 2022, he [told](#) the *AFP*, “there are anti-French slogans because we demand the immediate departure of the Barkhane force in Niger, which is alienating our sovereignty and destabilizing the Sahel.”

Operation Barkhane ended in failure, but French troops remain

Starting from 2014, Operation Barkhane was a Sahel-wide expansion of Operation Serval launched in Mali in 2013. Barkhane’s aim was to defeat the Islamist insurgencies, which were a fallout of the NATO’s war destroying Libya, in which France itself was a major participant. At its peak strength, the Barkhane force consisted of 5,500 French soldiers deployed in Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania.

From the start of Operation Barkhane to mid-2022, violence involving Islamist Militants [nearly tripled in the Sahel](#), according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. With this track record of failure, Macron [ended the operation in November 2022](#), announcing however that about 3,000 troops will remain in Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso.

But two months later, on January 23, 2023, Burkina Faso’s government also [asked France to leave](#). That very day, police in Niger arrested M62 Movement’s coordinator Seydou in what *Frontline Defenders* [deemed](#) to be an “arbitrary

detention...directly linked to his peaceful and legitimate work in defense of human rights.”

Later in April, he was [sentenced to nine months imprisonment](#) for “disseminating data likely to disturb public order.” Rallying behind the recent coup, M62 has [called](#) on Niger’s military government to release anti-French activists like Seydou who were incarcerated by the government of Bazoum.

Breaking away from the mass demonstration in front of the parliament on July 27 to support the military takeover, a group of angry Nigeriens chased away politicians from Bazoum’s party headquarters and [torched the building](#).

While a protest in defense of Bazoum’s government quickly fizzled out, the pro-coup demonstrations continue to gain in strength as protesters count on the military junta to follow Mali and Burkina Faso in demanding the withdrawal of French and other western troops.

Alongside Niger’s flags, anti-French protesters also waved Russian flags, reflecting the popular demand to end the country’s dependence on its former colonizer for security and explore an alternative security partnership with Russia instead.

An imminent military intervention

Deeming the coup as “completely illegitimate,” the French president [said](#) on July 28, “We also support the regional organizations, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in particular, in their further decisions...”

With the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken also conveying American support for ECOWAS chair Tinubu’s “continued efforts to restore constitutional order,” the regional bloc threatened an armed action after the summit in Nigeria on July 30.

In its statement after the summit, ECOWAS warned that it will “take all measures necessary to restore constitutional order in the Republic of Niger. Such measures may include the use of force. For this effect, the chiefs of defense staff of ECOWAS are to meet immediately.”

The junta’s spokesperson Abdramane [said](#) ahead of this summit that its “objective” was “to approve a plan of aggression against Niger through an imminent military intervention.. in collaboration with other African countries that are non-members of ECOWAS, and certain western countries.” He added, “We want to once more remind ECOWAS or any other adventurer, of our firm determination to defend our homeland.”

Former CIA analyst Cameron Hudson [tweeted](#) about a “speculation” that Chad’s president, Mahamat Idriss Déby, “is being asked to lend his forces to help plan/lead a possible intervention force in Niger, as the most capable force in closest proximity.”

Incidentally, Gen. Deby also took power in a coup after his father and former president Idriss Deby died on the front while commanding his armed forces against a rebel group in northern Chad in April 2021.

However, unlike in the case of Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger, where the coups have been welcomed by mass demonstrations, Chad’s coup leader has been facing pro-democracy protests, including a major one on October 20, 2022, which was met with a violent crackdown.

FP [described](#) it as “one of the worst repression in the country’s history.” Hundreds were imprisoned. Deby’s government admitted that 50 people, including 10 security personnel, were killed, but pro-democracy organizations and political parties claimed that as many as 200 people were killed.

Nevertheless, not having called for the withdrawal of French troops, Deby remains in the good books of ECOWAS and its Western backers. Arriving in Niger on Sunday, he held a [meeting](#) with Gen. Tchiani and will be [reporting back to ECOWAS chair Tinubu](#), who assumed Nigeria's presidency earlier this year after winning an election [marred by allegations of voter suppression](#).

Source: [Peoples Dispatch](#)

