

Topic #2: The chain of coups d'état in Sahel

Background

From the shores of the Atlantic to the beaches of the Red Sea, the Sahel is home to a cornucopia of cultures, each unique and mesmerizing. This vast semi-arid region stretches 6,000 kilometres across the African continent, encompassing parts of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, and Eritrea. The Sahel serves as a biogeographic transition zone between the Sahara Desert in the north and the humid savannas of equatorial Africa in the south. The flat terrain of the Sahel is predominantly covered in grassland and savanna, characterized by a tropical semi-arid climate similar to the sprawling Sahara to the north. In this context, desertification, intensified by climate change, poses a significant environmental threat to the Sahel. The vast biosphere of the region contends with the challenge of sustaining itself amid the strain on already limited resources.

The history of the Sahel is deeply intertwined with environmental shifts and human civilizations, as conflicts over scarce resources punctuated the rich history of the region. Around 4000 BC, the Sahara and Sahel regions underwent rapid climate change, leading to increased aridity, shrinking lakes, and rising desertification. In response, farming communities migrated to the more hospitable climate of West Africa. The subsequent rise of the Sahelian kingdoms between the 9th and 18th centuries, such as the legendary Mali Empire during Mansa Musa's time, marked an era of wealth derived from controlling trans-Saharan trade routes. These kingdoms, with decentralized structures and notable cities like Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenné, thrived on the use of large pack animals for trade and military purposes. However, challenges in expanding southward arose due to wooded areas, impacting the effectiveness of mounted warriors. The colonial period in the late 19th century saw the Western Sahel falling under French control, with Chad joining as part of French Equatorial Africa in 1900.

Africa was a theatre for European imperialism, where the colonists raced to secure as much land as possible, while avoiding direct conflict between themselves. Colonist irredentism was quelled in 1884 by the *Berlin agreement* which sought to partition Africa once and for all, with little regard to local differences. Almost all the pre-colonial African states had lost their sovereignty, with the exception of Liberia and Ethiopia.

During the World War, 2 a large number of Africans volunteered to contribute to the war effort. This culminated in increased political awareness and expectation for greater respect and self-determination.¹ Widely acclaimed yet not officially ratified, the *Atlantic Charter*, which resulted from the discussion between F. D. Roosevelt and W. Churchill regarding the post-war world. In the *Charter*, it was argued for the right of a nation to decide for themselves, and to the restoration of self-government. After World War 2, the US and African countries put pressure on Britain to abide by the terms of the charter. Furthermore, African colonies pushed for independence amid the post-war exhaustion of colonial powers.

Following the era of colonial rule, which left a lasting imprint on the region's political landscape, the Sahel nations gained independence in the mid-20th century. The process of

¹ Ferguson, Ed, and A. Adu Boahen. (1990). "African Perspectives On Colonialism." *The International Journal Of African Historical Studies* 23 (2): 334. doi:10.2307/219358.

decolonising Africa was often marred with violence, political turmoil, and organised revolts. However, the legacy of colonialism, characterized by arbitrary borders, uneven development, and the imposition of external governance structures, has had profound implications for the post-colonial trajectory of these nations. Weak governance, a common theme in the post-colonial Sahel, has been a significant driver of conflicts. Many countries in the region experienced political instability, characterized by frequent changes in leadership, military coups, and governance structures that struggled to establish stability and meet the needs of their populations. The lack of effective institutions, transparent governance, and the rule of law created an environment ripe for corruption and misuse of power, exacerbating social and economic disparities. Economic challenges further compounded the post-colonial struggles of the Sahel. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and inadequate infrastructure hindered development efforts. The Sahel's vulnerability to environmental factors, such as desertification and climate change, added pressure on already scarce resources, contributing to competition and tensions. Additionally, the post-colonial period witnessed the rise of ethnic and religious dynamics as influential factors in conflicts. Competition for political power and resources often intersected with historical ethnic divisions, leading to identity-based tensions.

The factors above culminated in multiple political crises. In the past three years, the African Sahel region has experienced a surge in coups d'état, spanning seven countries from Guinea along the Atlantic Ocean to Sudan on the Red Sea. Successful military coups unfolded in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Niger, and Gabon, while constitutional coups took place in Tunisia, Chad, and Sudan. Concurrently, coup attempts were successfully thwarted in Gambia, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, and the island nation of São Tomé and Príncipe. This period has seen a notable and concerning trend of political instability, with both successful and attempted coups shaping the dynamics of governance across the Sahel region.

UN involvement

The UN is maximizing their effort in addressing this multifaceted problem in the Sahel. The UN approach is rather holistic, utilizing many UN subsidiaries and cooperating within.

The UN is closely participating with the countries of the Sahel through the UNOWAS office. With the Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), the UN is maximizing their capability through con. The overarching goal of the UN Support Plan for the Sahel, targeting 10 countries namely Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, The Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal, is to scale up efforts to accelerate shared prosperity and lasting peace in the region. The Support Plan, covering the period 2018-2030, will help implement identified priorities to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the African Union Agenda 2063. The Support Plan is not a new strategy; rather it is an instrument to foster coherence and coordination for greater efficiency and results delivery under the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) framework, which is at the centre of the international response in the Sahel and is in accordance with Security Council Resolution 2391 (2017)¹.

Just recently, on December 11th, the UN Peacekeeping mission MINUSMA (Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) was ended after the military government of Mali demanded the offset.

The causality of sahelian political tussles is complex in nature and difficult to navigate. To address these issues effectively, a highly holistic approach is needed. The UN maximizes its effort and directly cooperates with local governments, providing assistance, economic support, progress monitoring and triggering strategic investment.

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It is worth noting that the macroeconomic conditions in the Sahel have been steadier and stronger than the continental average over the past decade.² Additionally, The Sahel is endowed with great potential for renewable energy and sits atop some of the largest aquifers on the continent. With 64.5% of the population being below 25 years, the Sahel is also one of the world's most youthful regions. Therefore, investments in education and vocational training could yield huge demographic dividends.

In conclusion, it is evident that Sahel is a highly volatile region, both politically and environmentally. As a breaking point between different cultural values and beliefs, the Sahelian conflicts are complex and difficult to tackle. Despite the setbacks, the countries of the Sahel have the potential to enjoy an economic renaissance in the future.

A few questions to consider:

Should a foreign intervention be enforced?

How does the situation affect your country?

Should colonist countries previously active in the region be responsible for the disarray?

To what extent should the right to self-determination of a country be legitimate?

Useful links

<https://dppa.un.org/en/sahel>

<https://unowas.unmissions.org/implementation-united-nations-integrated-strategy-sahel>

<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-coups-detat-of-the-sahel-region-domestic-causes-and-international-competition/>

² *The Sahel: Land of opportunities | africa renewal; United Nations.* Available at:
<https://www.un.org/africarenewal/sahel>