The Tragedy of Niger’s Coup
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By Michael Madill

In case you missed it, there was a coup d’état last week in Niger. The President, Mamadou Tandja was arrested and forced to live in the servants’ quarters of his palace while a group of junior army and air force officers installed Colonel Salou Djibo as the new head of government. State power lies with the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy, which overthrew the elected president.

Niger is big and dry. It’s double the size of Texas and is made up mostly of the sand of the central Sahara Desert. The Niger River passes only through a panhandle in the far southwest of the country. The country’s name is a holdover from the Scramble for Africa, the competition between Britain, France, Belgium and Germany to claim colonial or protected territory in the late 19th century.

France, temporarily controlling a small part of the big river, sent emissaries as far into the desert as supplies and diplomacy would reach, sinking stakes and making maps all the way. Today, the river winds mostly through neighboring Mali and empties into the Bight of Benin through Nigeria, but 1.3 million square kilometers of desert still bears the name, and the first language of the country is still French.

Friendship with the onetime colonial power is kept warm by a brisk trade in uranium, which powers France’s fifty-nine nuclear power plants and tips its three hundred nuclear warheads. The French reacted strongly to the upheaval in Niger this week, calling for a speedy return to civilian rule. Neighboring West African states also expressed dismay, probably because they don’t want to be next.

The Nigerien coup was the third in eighteen months in West Africa alone – Mauritania and Guinea experienced coups recently – and the latest episode in a style of politics common to Africa, which makes rich people richer and keeps the poor in Niger living on less than seven hundred dollars a year.

When the French colonial administration departed Niger in 1960, it left behind a very small number of people with the education necessary to run government departments, utilities, planning commissions and the other institutions which keep a country together. Most people scratched a living from the arid soil or tended herds of cattle, goats or camels. Some got a steady job in the army under native officers trained in France to assume command – and assure continuity of French-approved strategy – when colonial officers left.

People who grapple with persistent malnutrition, chronic unemployment, disease, drought and petty crime express very little concern for politics when they are asked. This means that they tend not to vote in elections or participate in government campaigns unless forced, and they keep out of the way of government as much as possible, unless there is food, medicine,
education or a job waiting at some official meeting point. Life on two dollars a day in the Sahara Desert is a very finely balanced struggle for survival.

If most of your people are occupied in this way, the lucky few with education, money or access to the tools of organized violence get power disproportionate to their numbers. This means that, though democracy exists on paper in Niger, government is really a power struggle between the army, the wealthy elite of new and old money and the families of well-connected public servants of the last half century.

In the fifty years since Niger’s independence there have been three coups d’etat, and the army has governed in place of elected leaders for twenty of those fifty years. So when senior Nigerien officers last week protested that the army had no interest in politics, it was a little hard to take them seriously.

The army there, like armies in many poor countries, and especially poor African countries, sees itself as the guardian of the constitution and the one institution powerful enough to keep politicians honest. The trouble with this view is that all senior military commanders are also politicians, and their rule turns out to be no better than the civilians they usurped.

The army officers that are now running the Nigerien state say that they will manage affairs in the interests of the people and return the country to civilian rule as soon as it is ready. When is that? It’s true that the streets of Niamey, the capital, were scenes of jubilation and outpourings of support for the coup plotters. It’s true that President Tandja suspended Niger’s National Assembly and abrogated its constitution and tinkered with basic laws to extend his term of office.

It’s also true that Niger’s GDP growth rate is just over three per cent per year and that its population growth rate is over three and a half per cent per year. This means that any gains in material well being get eaten up, literally. Unless the army can find ways to reduce the population or boost the economy, they will leave the country in worse shape than they found it.

Niger’s history – the slide from foreign oppression and an economy based on sucking things from the ground to domestic repression and an economy based on sucking things from the ground – doesn’t inspire hope that the army can fix things. Since its record of guarding civilian politicians (it approved of Mamadou Tandja’s victory in elections in 1999) isn’t winning either, there’s no reason anyone watching should believe in the army at all.

Mostly, Nigerians seem to be waiting. The cheering in the streets of Niamey was expected. If you were destitute, you would cheer anyone who removed the symbol of a government which didn’t care, too. It’s also like an insurance policy. If you depend on government handouts for survival, always cheer the government. When the government rides through the streets waving machine guns, smile extra wide and blow kisses.

The tragedy of Niger’s coup is that no one really knows how to fix the lot of the country’s fifteen million people. They are almost the poorest in the world (parts of Sudan and the Central African Republic and Congo are worse off). The best that the new junta could do was make vague
pronouncements about elections, calm fears in other West African states about exporting revolution and reassure France about its supply of uranium. Meanwhile, most Nigerians still don’t have enough to eat.