

Africa: Niger Revolution Takes Bonapartist Turn

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The 4-week old turmoil in the West African state of Niger is taking a curious turn that no longer allows a binary vision of “neo-colonialism and imperialism” versus “national liberation”.

Niger’s coup leaders are making overtures to the United States and keeping the Russian military contractors, Wagner PMC, at arm’s length — at least, at the present stage of transition of power.

The speed with which Washington deployed Kathleen FitzGibbon, an ace Africa hand with intelligence background, as its new ambassador to Niamey signals diplomacy as the preferred course while keeping all options on the table.

Significantly, in an [editorial, Washington Post](#) took note today that “The two armies [US and Nigerian] have worked closely together over the past decade: Officers are familiar with one another, and Niger’s generals have not been considered anti-American.”

Equally, the [US state department readout](#) on Ambassador FitzGibbon highlighted that her rushed assignment aims to “bolster efforts to help resolve the political crisis at this critical time” and that her “diplomatic focus will be to advocate for a diplomatic solution.”

Interestingly, the readout limits itself to call for the release of the ousted president and his family members and ignored the earlier specific demand regarding his reinstatement. The readout hints that the US diplomacy is casting the net wide and will not limit itself to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

On the eve of Ambassador FitzGibbon’s arrival in Niamey, New York Times carried an interview with Ali Lamine Zeine, the prime minister-designate of Niger. Most certainly, Zeine, the topmost civilian official in the military junta, spoke for the generals and was addressing the western audience.

Zeine’s remarks suggest that the ruling cabal in Niamey are a smart lot and could be in the long game, who seek a direct engagement with the US. Indeed, the ECOWAS itself is caught in two minds after its first face-to-face interaction with the coup leader General Abdouramane Tchiani in the weekend.

The ECOWAS mediatory mission was led by General Abdulsalami Abubakar, the enormously influential statesman and king maker, who was Nigeria’s last military head of state and a source of moral authority who had kept his word to hand over power to a democratically elected government, making the long-awaited dream of Nigerians a reality.

After returning from Niamey, Abubakar briefed President Bola Tinubu and later [spoke to the media](#) where he expressed optimism that the crisis in Niger is not likely to deteriorate beyond diplomacy. Asked if there was any possibility of avoiding a military action by ECOWAS in Niger,

Abubakar stated: “Hopefully, diplomacy will see the better of this. Nobody wants to go war, it doesn’t pay anybody, but then again, our leaders have said if all fails — and I don’t think all will fail, we’ll get somewhere, we’ll get out of this mess.”

Succinctly put, Niger faces a “messy” situation rather than a revolutionary situation. Perhaps, certain Bonapartist elements are discernible — for which, of course, there is plenty of blame to go around, as Africa’s elites and their failures are a major factor, not only because public opinion associates them with France but due to twin malaise of a poverty of political ideologies and populism, apart from the rise of new generations of young people frustrated by a status quo that, in their eyes, is of France’s making.

Importantly, therefore, the threat of Russia filling the vacuum is overstated and should not justify Western intervention. What needs to be understood is that part of Russia’s appeal is that many Africans see Moscow as sort of “anti-France”. Conversely, the less France lives as an exploitative ex-colonial power in the popular imagination, the less Russia’s symbolic appeal will become.

One can see that Russians themselves understand this behind Moscow’s anti-colonial, anti-imperialist rhetoric. A commentary in the [Russian daily Nezavisimaya Gazeta](#) noted three days ago that “For the Russian Federation, it is noteworthy that the putschists for the first time dissociated themselves from Russia and the Wagner PMCs, assuring the West that they were ready to conduct political and economic cooperation with it.”

However, General Tchiani, who heads the putschists, is not going to give up power. On the other hand, he no longer repeats that former president Bazum will be put on trial. The ECOWAS delegation who met the ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, estimated that he isn’t in any imminent danger. The putschists have heeded Washington’s stern warning.

General Tchiani is also [distancing himself](#) from raucous public support of the putschists, which seems to embarrass him. The salience, according to the Russian daily, is that “judging by the recent actions and statements of the Niger military, they really do not want to sever all opportunities for dialogue with France, the United States and the organisations they support.

In the [New York Times interview](#), Zeine outlined the ideas of the new authorities’ foreign policy priorities. He categorically rejected the assumptions and claims that Moscow was behind the coup. “I don’t see any intentions from the military government of Niger to cooperate with Russia or with the Wagner group,” Zeine said.

He even cautioned the West to be discreet not to push Niger into the arms of the Wagner. (According to reports, the redoubtable head of Wagner Yevgeny Prigozhin has flown into neighbouring Mali in Sahel, [fuelling speculations](#).)

Most important, Zeine clearly told New York Times that the pro-French foreign policy vector will remain unchanged for Niger even under the new authorities. “We studied at French universities, our officers studied in France,” he said.

On the whole, Nezavisimaya Gazeta wryly noted, “Judging by the interview, the only thing that Tchiani and his associates are seeking is a revision of the terms of cooperation with the former metropolis. As Zeine put it, “we just want to be respected.” Conceivably, this refers to the revision of the conditions for the extraction of Niger’s uranium and gold reserves. Both are now suspended.

That said, there is great uncertainty regarding the actual intentions of the protagonists. Is the junta, which has class or corporate interests, seeking some concessions to save face or is merely buying time? Is the West scaling down its earlier strident demands of immediate restoration of democratic

rule to a modest realistic expectation to let Bazoum go into exile and pin down the putschists to a timeline for transfer of power to an elected government? There are no easy answers.

One significant straw in the wind is that the African Union, at a session in its headquarters in Addis Ababa on Tuesday, while suspending Niger's membership, [decided that it needed time to study](#) the implications of any armed intervention in that country.

The domestic opinion within Nigeria is also vehemently opposed to any ECOWAS military intervention. After all, similar past interventions in Liberia and Sierra Leone didn't have happy endings Nigeria which was led up the garden path by Western powers and left holding the can of worms. Nigeria has its hands full with a [serious internal security situation](#) that allows no distractions. The northern Nigerian provinces have tribal, ethnic affinities with Niger and have come out against war.

M. K. Bhadrakumar was a career diplomat by profession. For someone growing up in the 1960s in a remote town at the southern tip of India, diplomacy was an improbable profession. His passion was for the world of literature, writing and politics – roughly in that order. While doing doctoral research on the works of Tennessee Williams, however, friends encouraged him to have a fling at the Civil Services Examination. “As it turned out, before I could figure out the momentous import of what was unfolding, fate had pitchforked me into the top ranks of the merit list and ushered me into the Indian Foreign Service.”

“Roughly half of the 3 decades of my diplomatic career was devoted to assignments on the territories of the former Soviet Union and to Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Other overseas postings included South Korea, Sri Lanka, Germany, and Turkey. I write mainly on Indian foreign policy and the affairs of the Middle East, Eurasia, Central Asia, South Asia and the Asia-Pacific.”

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