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THE CURRENT: What underlies the coup in Niger?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita. In 2021, Mohammed Bazoum was elected president of Niger in the first peaceful democratic transition of power since the country achieved independence. But on July 26, President Bazoum was deposed in a military takeover led by his presidential guard. Coup organizers have since appointed former economic minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zein, as the new prime minister.

With us to talk about what's happening in Niger and what it signals about democratic governance in the Sahel region of Africa is Landry Signé, a senior fellow with the Africa Growth Initiative here at Brookings. Landry, thanks so much for talking to us today.

SIGNÉ: Thank you so much for having me, Adrianna.

PITA: I'm wondering if you could start us off with a little context. While Niger does remain a very poor country, President Bazoum's first few years in office seemed to be trending positively. There's been some economic growth, and Niger has been a key regional security partner in efforts against Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahel. What was the situation in Niger before the coup last month?

SIGNÉ: So one thing which is extremely important to highlight is that Niger has been one of the key democratic partner of many of the Western nations. And so, despite the pandemic, the security situation was improving. The economic situation, of course, very complex, the rising cost of living - and that is not just related to the country, it's a broader context. We also have the military, in Niger have always played, the military forces have always played an important role in politics. So, as you know, even in March 2021, before President Bazoum was supposed to come into power after the election, a fraction of the military has attempted unsuccessfully to seize power. So, the history of Niger is really characterized by numerous successful coups, at least five over the past five decades which were successful, but also numerous unsuccessful coups. And we were really hoping among the observers of the political development in Niger that a more stable democracy will evolve.

But let me tell you something, Adrianna. So, one of the challenges faced, and in this case by Niger, but by many of the African democracies, is sometimes the mismatch between citizens, expectation of a prosperous economic context of more jobs creation, of more poverty eradication. So, I think that mismatch that we sometimes have, whether democracies deliver economically speaking in terms of governance effectiveness, in terms of public service delivery, in terms of security imperative or not, those elements have contributed to create, let's say some concern with many citizens about whether democracy ultimately is providing what those citizens

were expecting. Having said that, when we think about the other countries, the neighboring countries, including Burkina Faso, Guinea, or Mali, which have had a military coup in the past, the economic situation or the security situation have not improved. So, in other words, the democratic countries do not have a worse performance compared to the non-democratic countries.

So, bringing all this together, the general who is responsible of the coup, General Tchiani, who was commander of Nigeria's presidential guards was reported to potentially be changed, removed from his responsibility as presidential guard. So, some reports of that. The security situation has been one of the key reasons announced for this coup. But again, we have numerous variable and numerous factors which make this coup really unwelcome development in a context where the hope of many players, whether from Niger or from West Africa and Africa in general, so many of the citizens and key players were really hoping to sustain democracy in Niger.

PITA: And how have some of those key players been responding? What's been the reaction from Niger's neighbors and regional powers like ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States?

SIGNÉ: So, we have had many clear declarations about the unwelcome nature of the coup, whether we speak about ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, and President Tinubu of Nigeria who is chairing ECOWAS now, was very clear about the imperative of returning to the constitutional order and reinstating President Bazoum of Niger. So that was one of the key players - Nigeria, ECOWAS - and of course as you know ECOWAS has numerous other countries such as Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, or Liberia, amongst other players. So, you have also in the international community many of the statements which were made by players such as the United States, France, the European Union, they all condemned the coup and they all called for the return of the constitutional order. But something which was quite intriguing, Adrianna, is the fact that some of the countries such as Burkina Faso, Guinea or Mali have shown solidarity with General Tchiani and also the coup leaders and organizers. So, you see on one hand the majority of the key players, state players who are opposed to the coup and who are condemning the coup, who are requesting the return of a constitutional order, and on the other hand you have some of the other countries where we have seen coups recently which are to a certain extent supporting, endorsing, or allying with Niger. So, which is a quite unfortunate situation because this could lead to the diffusion of unconstitutional seizure of power. So, under this context, it is extremely important for all the forces which are working toward democratic development to really partner with the democratic defenders of Niger to lead to a return of the constitutional order, to the return of democracy in the shortest time possible.

PITA: I want to now take us out to a little bit of a bigger picture look. As you referred to earlier, this is not the first military coup in the region. In the last three years, there have been about eight military takeovers in six different countries all across the Sahel region. What are some of the dynamics that are fueling this surge of instability and reversal from democratic governance?

SIGNÉ: Adrianna, many reasons could explain the development, those recent development. Of course, the coup organizer will typically use security, the security situation - Boko Haram, among others - but also the jihadist insurgency. So, this is one of the reasons which is often used in the broader Sahel, the fragility of the countries. Another question is also

one of economic situation, the poor economic performance. The Sahel region has some of the poorest countries on the continent, but also globally. So, this is another factor. You also have the involvement of international players. So, the geopolitics quite often, you will see on one hand forces which are aligned or supporting the Western players, such as France, the U.S., the European Union, so you have countries which are quite close to the Western player. And you also have other countries which will be closer to Russia and other players, among others.

So, you have many reasons which are typically used to explain, but if I bring those elements to the core value, the core determinants of democracy, so we have about five layers of accountability, why countries become democratic and why they may eventually remain democratic from a political perspective, if you are not necessarily thinking now entirely the economic prosperity dimension. So, this is what we like to call personal accountability. To what extent a leader is accountable, individually, have the personal value, personal democratic values. To what extent in absence of external constraints, the leader will choose the democratic road over an order. So that is what we call personal accountability. The second dimension is peer accountability. To what extent if a leader is not personally accountable, to what extent their peers will hold them accountable. So that is an extremely important dimension. And this is not just about the democratically elected leader when you speak about personal accountability or peer accountability. It's also about the military. To what extent when a military leader is organizing a coup, his peers or her peers will make a clear, will strongly condemn that coup and call for the return of the constitutional order. So that is a second dimension. A third dimension, Adrianna, is vertical accountability. To what extent the leader who are elected are freely, fairly, transparently elected, elected in a meaningful way and to have vertical accountability, which happened through the vote, it is also important to have a certain level of political rights and of civil liberties, including of association, among others. Vertical accountability is really key for democratic order, and when the quality of vertical accountability is put into question, that's also when you have some leader or some military officer who may potentially organize coup. The fourth dimension is the horizontal accountability, checks and balances, to what extent an institution which are constitutionally configured to ensure that no one abuses power can actually use your oversight and implement the oversight role at the fullest. Whether in this context the presidential power or executive power, maybe also a prime minister, so on one hand you have the executive body, so that is a key dimension of horizontal accountability, but you also have the legislative body, so the parliament, senate depending of the country, national assembly, depending on the country. So, to what extent those institution will help ensure that the president, for example, doesn't abuse the power or that the parliament either is doing so. And another key element of that horizontal accountability is also the judiciary. So, to what extent will we have an independent judiciary really able to control the action of the government? So that dimension of horizontal accountability makes a monumental difference in terms of quality of democracy because in many of the democracies, you may have an elected leader - what we sometimes call hyper-presidentialism - you may have an elected leader who is elected democratically, but once elected, rules without checks and balances. So that's why horizontal accountability is extremely important to prevent abuses of power and to sustain democracy. So, the final level of accountability that I also want to highlight here is the diagonal accountability. And speaking about the diagonal accountability is the role of the broader civil society of the media, of watchdogs, which will also often be elements which will trigger horizontal accountability. For example, the media covering misbehavior of some political leader could denounce actions which will therefore be either sanctioned by the government or if it's those action were led by an

elected leader may eventually be sanctioned by the judiciary. So typically, democracy will be interrupted when one and quite often many of those levers of accountability may not be functioning well. Now, sometimes they can still be functioning to a certain extent, and you still have some of the interruption and this probably shift to now the reason or what we'll call the deliveries of democracy. To what extent democracies are able to deliver public services and goods in an inclusive way to citizens. So, to what extent would they be able to deliver economic prosperity. So, when you have a high level of dissatisfaction between the citizens' expectations and what democracies deliver, quite often that will also give the opportunity to some non-democratic forces to attempt to seize power unconstitutionally.

PITA: Okay. So, you're walking us through all these levels of accountability, and you also spoke earlier about the importance of returning Niger to constitutional order. How can Niger's peers, the regional partners, as well as the U.S. and EU balance consequences and accountability for undemocratic takeovers like this with providing the needed development and resources for stabilization? What is a productive path forward to steer Niger and other similar countries back onto that democratic path with all these levels that you're speaking to?

SIGNÉ: Thank you, Adrianna. I think it is extremely important to support democratic forces, because to sustain democracy over the long run, one of the reasons why coup leaders or how they justify their coup in this context, for example, the security situation. or the poor performance in delivering security outcomes, sometimes economic outcomes, among other independent of the legitimacy of such reasons. So, what is extremely important for democracy to be successful is to enhance the ability of democratic leaders to further deliver public services, further deliver public goods among others. And in this particular context, as I was mentioning, so it's important to support the actions which will be reinforcing accountability.

In this context, ECOWAS has been very clear. They have even threatened the use of military forces. And the Nigerian Senate has denied that option to President Tinubu. And ECOWAS will also be meeting later this week to discuss the next step. So, it's extremely important to engage, to have dialogue, to offer an exit to the military, to offer them an honorable exit so that they can seize the opportunity. There's still a window of opportunity to bring President Bazoum back and reinstate the constitutional order. As the time is passing, we are missing that opportunity. So, I think that the first step is to try to reinstate President Bazoum as soon as possible, but then also to work with a broad variety of partners. For example, the U.S, France, the European Union, among other players, should work with the African Union, should work with ECOWAS, and should work with some of their strategic partners in West Africa to really find a political solution to these challenges. A military intervention could create unintended consequences and may not be likely to bring President Bazoum back in the fastest way possible. But it is really through a strong negotiation. I think ECOWAS here is also playing on its credibility, because after the successful coups in Burkina Faso, in Guinea, in Mali, now the citizens of the ECOWAS region, are questioning about the effectiveness of ECOWAS. So, strengthening democratic forces, engaging through African institutions, including ECOWAS, including the African Union, partnering with the population, directing part of foreign aid to the strengthening of various levers of accountability. So those will also be extremely important.

And ultimately, I think that a way to prevent coups to happen also in the Sahel, but also in other regions, is to really solve some of the challenges which are often considered as reason for non-democratic forces to evolve. To what extent the West could really provide the resources, the support to ensure that security challenges are addressed properly. To what extent could the

West provide resources to fix fragility? In one of my recent articles, I was discussing some of the strategies to address fragility. And one of the key strategies is to strengthen state capacity to deliver basic public services and goods so that the gap between the policy intention and the implementation outcome, so those gaps are reduced to the minimum possible because when you have a gap between the policy intention and the implementation outcome, so citizen are dissatisfied and create a window of opportunity for other players.

But it's also extremely important to act locally, to what extent could the broader partners, African and international, go beyond, in addition of working with the central government, also work with sub-national levels of governments? So, to what extent would they engage with the rural area, remote rural area, where unfortunately many of the extremist groups are recruiting and that they are also controlling. So, addressing the sub-level of government, the regions, but also rural areas will play a key role in fixing the situation. And I'm thinking about the cities as well. A third dimension is really the role of the private sector to accelerate development, to unlock development. So, to what extent the international community, the national community, but also the regional one, to what extent could they support the development of a vibrant, dynamic private sector? Because one of the reasons why we also have many of those insecurities and therefore the opportunities for non-democratic forces to evolve is also because of the lack of jobs. As you know, Adrianna, depending on the region, you have 60 to 70 percent of, depending on the countries, of the population below the age of 35. So, with such a young population, it is extremely important to create opportunities through education, but also employment and to provide basic public services and good. So, if I sum up, I think that there are a few ways. One of the ways is to really support the various level of accountability. Another way is to strengthen the capacity of countries to deliver basic public services and good to citizens because without those economic security services, we may still have the opportunity to have non-democratic forces. And finally, security, violent extremism and insurgency should be addressed, and the international community should really partner with local players. And I will conclude by highlighting the role of Africans, of African voices, of indigenous institutions, of the African citizens, to what extent the international community should also align with the local to ensure that there is no gap between the policy intention and the implementation outcome, to ensure that the policy adopted, the policy implemented, are aligned with citizens' expectations.

PITA: All right, it's a very complex situation, but you've given us a very thorough breakdown of a lot of the factors involved here. And we'll be sure to link to your article that you've referenced in our show notes so our listeners can find that for more information. So, Landry, thank you so much for talking to us today.

SIGNÉ: Thank you so much for having me, Adrianna.