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Chad's French-backed President Idriss Déby dies fighting opposition militia

Chadian President Marshal Idriss Déby Itno died yesterday from wounds sustained Monday while fighting the rebel Force for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) militia in northern Chad. His son Mahamat Idriss Déby, aged 37, seized power at the head of a military commission staffed with 15 hand-picked generals.

Military spokesman General Azem Bermandoa Agouna issued a communiqué yesterday, declaring: “The president of the republic, the head of state and supreme commander of the armies, Idriss Déby Itno, just breathed his last breath while defending our territorial integrity on the battlefield. It is with deep sadness that we are announcing to the Chadian people the passing on this Tuesday, April 20, 2021 of the marshal of Chad.”



Chadian President Idriss Deby Itno, center, attends his final campaign rally for the recent elections in N'Djamena, Chad. Friday, April 9, 2021 (AP Photo)

It added that Déby, “like each time our republican institutions are gravely threatened, led operations in heroic struggles against the terrorist hordes come from Libya. Wounded in the struggle, he passed away once returned to N’Djamena,” the country’s capital.

Déby, who ruled Chad with an iron fist for 30 years after seizing power in a French-backed coup in 1990, was a longstanding tool of French imperialism. Hosting French and US troops at strategic bases at N’Djamena in the heart of the Sahel, Chad’s geopolitical importance surged after the bloody 2011 NATO war in Libya, which toppled Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, in alliance with Islamist militias. Chad’s army has provided troops for French military operations in Nigeria and across the Sahel, including in Niger and Burkina Faso, amid the French war in Mali.

Déby’s death comes amid a deepening crisis of French imperialist strategy in the Sahel, shortly after French President Emmanuel Macron rejected mounting calls in February for a withdrawal of French troops from Mali and the region.

The Elysée presidential palace in Paris issued a statement endorsing the illegal seizure of power by Déby’s son and praising Déby as a “courageous friend” of France, who “worked ceaselessly for the security of his country and the stability of the region for three decades.” It stressed “the importance that the transition take place in peaceful conditions, in a spirit of dialog with all political actors and civil society, allowing for a rapid return to inclusive governance based on civilian institutions.”

This effectively endorsed the moves of Mahamat Déby and the army chiefs, who extra-legally dissolved the National Assembly and announced an 18-month military dictatorship.

With the FACT militia reportedly still moving south from the Libyan border on N’Djamena, panic is mounting in the capital, and the new junta decreed a 6:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew. There are some reports that civilians may have begun fleeing from N’Djamena across the border into neighbouring Cameroon.

There is mounting speculation that French forces, already stretched thin by operations in Mali and across the Sahel, may intervene against the FACT. France has 5,100 troops in Chad, including 1,000 troops, hunter-killer drones, and a squadron of Mirage jets at its main military base in N'Djamena, the headquarters for Operation Barkhane, France's war in Mali and the Sahel. In 2008 and again in 2019, French warplanes bombed and repulsed rebel militias marching south on N'Djamena from the border region with Libya.

Citing French official sources, Reuters reported: "France and its allies will be looking to see how the political handover happens in the coming days. ... If the [FACT] advance were to gather steam now, that could force Paris' hands although it would seek to avoid intervening directly given the general uncertainty and impact it could have on wider Sahel operations."

Washington and London have already ordered their non-essential diplomatic personnel to evacuate Chad, fearing violence if and when FACT troops reach the capital. "Due to their growing proximity to N'Djamena and the possibility of violence in the city, non-essential US government employees have been ordered to leave Chad by commercial airline," the US State Department declared in a statement.

While it is strategically critical and has significant petroleum resources, Chad remains one of the world's poorest countries. A former French colony that was granted formal independence in 1960, it ranks 187th out of 189 countries in the 2019 Human Development Index. Fully 66.2 percent of its population lived in severe poverty in 2019—before the economic and social dislocation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though Chad only obtained 12.5 percent of the revenue from the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline, revenues from the pipeline provided a basis for limited attempts by Déby to raise public sector workers' salaries. However, this ended with the collapse of oil prices in 2017.

Since then, protests and social discontent have mounted against Déby, in line with growing strikes and anti-imperialist protests across the region. These include prominently the *hirak* against the Algerian military regime in 2019, as well as strikes by public sector workers and protests demanding the withdrawal of French troops in Mali.

Just before Déby died, Chad had held a presidential election on April 11 that ended officially in Déby's re-election with 79.3 percent of the vote after security forces repeatedly attacked opposition candidates' rallies. The FACT launched its operations against Déby in the context of these elections.

The FACT is itself a former tool of French imperialism, though one that has somewhat fallen out with its patron amid reports of rising tensions between Paris and Moscow.

It is a Chadian rebel militia based in southern Libya that until recently worked closely with General Khalifa Haftar, a French- and Russian-backed warlord and former CIA asset that has played a leading role in the civil war triggered in Libya by the 2011 NATO war. Until recently, Haftar and Déby were reported to have maintained cordial relations. Recruiting primarily among the Gorane (or Tubu) ethnicity, it was reportedly based at Sebha, in Libya's Fezzan region, and tied to Russia's Wagner private security firm.

In 2017, however, Paris turned on FACT leader Mahamat Mahdi Ali and froze his funds in French banks, on unspecified charges of "committing, or attempting to commit, acts of terrorism."

In the run-up to the recent Chadian elections, the FACT moved south towards the Chadian border, however, attacking a border post while the elections were underway. Wolfram Lacher, from the German Institute for International Affairs and Security think tank, said: "By moving towards the border region with Chad, the FACT left the zone controlled by Haftar. It is not entirely certain whether it needed a green light from Haftar in order to attack Chad."

The Macron government expressed its anger in the press, unabashedly expressing its neo-colonial view that Chad is a French military base. "The FACT potentially was able to avail itself of money and weapons because it had worked for Haftar together with Wagner," an official French source told *Le Monde*, adding, "The fact that these people have now ended up in Chad in our zone of strategic influence is extremely problematic."

The FACT clearly retains ties to the French political and media establishment, however, and yesterday Mahamat Mahdi Ali gave a brief interview to Radio France Internationale

(RFI). He said that “Idriss Déby thought he was invincible” and appealed to “civil society” in N’Djamena to protest against the new regime.

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