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Democracy Far Down List of Canadian Interests in Niger

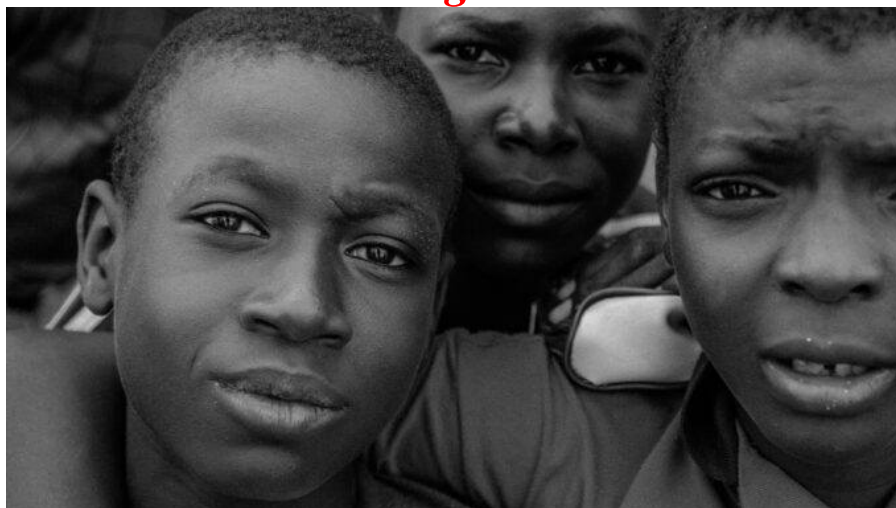


Image by Alex Burley.

Military coups are generally bad. Foreign invasions even more so. What then to think of the situation in Niger?

While the political situation in the west African country is fluid, some facts are incontrovertible. An (at least nominally) elected president was ousted by the presidential guard after demoting its leader. The pro US/French President Mohamed Bazoum has called for a foreign military intervention. Conversely the new military rulers have called for French troops to leave the country. They have also announced the abrogation of post-colonial accords Paris imposed on the country. Whatever their motivations, the military rulers are making anti-imperialist pronouncements.

What should be the government of Canada's role? How about left-wing Canadians? To answer these questions, one must first acknowledge some history.

Unlike with the recent ouster of leftist Peruvian President Pedro Castillo or Bolivian President Evo Morales, Canada has condemned the coup. On Saturday Ottawa announced it was severing a few million dollars in direct financial contributions to the government. Over the past two decades Canada says it has put up \$600 million for Niger, including \$59 million in 2021-2022. An important US/French/Canadian ally in the region, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau “congratulated President Bazoum on his leadership in the Sahel region” during a November meeting.

Ottawa explicitly backed the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) statement that it will invade if Bazoum is not returned to power. Global Affairs noted, “Canada welcomes the leadership and decisions taken by the leaders of the Economic Community of West African States at their summit on Sunday, July 30, aimed at restoring constitutional order in Niger.”

If ECOWAS pressure returns Bazoum to power, which appears increasingly unlikely, that could prove to be positive. But an invasion could be disastrous and ECOWAS is unlikely to do so without the nudging of its patrons.

Alongside the US and France, Canada has been building ECOWAS into a regional gendarme for many years. In 2005, Canadian officials assisted ECOWAS in producing a framework document for the operationalization of the West African Standby Force. In Canadian Foreign Policy in Africa: Regional Approaches to Peace, Security, and Development Edward Ansah Akuffo has a section detailing Canada’s multifaceted support for ECOWAS’ stand by force.

Assistance to ECOWAS’ force is part of Canada’s broader role in developing the African Standby Force (ASF). Washington and NATO countries support the regional African forces in the hope they will do their bidding. US Africa Command (AFRICOM) civilian Deputy Ambassador Anthony Holmes, described official US thinking on this point: “By and large our approach is what we call ‘by, with and through’,” which involves “developing partnerships for extended periods of time” to develop African military capacity for dealing with “problems” so “we don’t have to do it.”

Reframing this thinking in anti-imperialist terms, Stop NATO’s Rick Rozoff argued that Washington backed the African Standby Force (ASF) and its regional brigades to build “surrogate armies to control Africa region by region.” He further asserts that “by training, modernizing, arming and integrating the armed forces of the 54-nation African Union ... the U.S. and its main NATO allies are developing regional proxy forces — most notably

the African Standby Force — for armed interventions against nations whose governments are not to the West’s liking.”

The Canadian government has poured tens of millions of dollars into the standby forces as part of a professed desire to promote “African solutions to African problems”. But, in flagrant disregard of the African security regime they claimed to support, the US, Canada, France and Britain ignored significant African Union mediation efforts regarding Libya in 2011. In opposing the NATO invasion AU Commission Chief Jean Ping said “Africa’s concern is that weapons that are delivered to one side or another ... are already in the desert and will arm terrorists and fuel trafficking.”

Political tensions in Niger partly emanate from the jihadist insurgency stoked by the Libya invasion. The 2011 NATO war destabilized Libya and much of the Sahel region, which covers parts of Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, South Sudan, Sudan and Eritrea. In 2012 the Libyan conflict spilled south into Mali and increased the availability of weaponry in the region with fighters even receiving training in ISIL camps in Libya.

Before the invasion the “Canadian military predicted chaos in Libya if NATO helped overthrow Gadhafi,” reported the Ottawa Citizen four years later based on internal documents. The paper’s military reporter, David Pugliese, noted that during the fighting Canadian airmen joked that they were “al-Qaida’s air force”.

Despite knowing that they were increasing jihadist violence, Canada played a significant role in the 2011 NATO attack. A Canadian general led the bombing campaign, seven CF-18 fighter jets participated and two Canadian naval vessels patrolled the Libyan coast.

The jihadist violence partly sparked by the US, French and Canadian war in Libya has been used to legitimate NATO countries militarizing Niger. The US and France each have more than 1,000 troops in the country while Germany and Italy have over one hundred. Through Operation Naberius some 50 Canadians have been deployed to Niger. Additionally, the Canadian Special Operations Regiment has been increasingly involved in “counterterrorist” training exercises in the Sahel over the past decade. During the 2014 Exercise Flintlock the New York Times Magazine reported: “For the past three weeks, Green Berets, along with British, French and Canadian special operators, had been training 139 elite troops from Niger, Nigeria and Chad.” Sponsored by AFRICOM and directed by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Flintlock takes place in a different Sahel region nation each year.

Canadian officials generally tell the media the aim of training other militaries is to help fight terror or the illicit drug trade but a closer look at military doctrine suggests broader strategic and geopolitical motivations.

As well, multiple Canadian mining companies operate in Niger. In 2000 Montréal-based SEMAFO opened the first industrial scale gold mine in Niger. A 2007 Montréal Gazette business article headlined “Local Miner a Major Force in Niger: It’s not every day we receive a press release from a gold mining company that includes a warm personal message from the prime minister”, reported on the close ties between SEMAFO and Hama Amadou, then prime minister of Niger. “We work very closely with him,” said Benoit La Salle, SEMAFO chief executive and chairman. “We’re part of his budget every year.”

La Salle described how the prime minister helped his company break a strike at the Samira Hill mine in the west of the country. “He gave us all the right direction to solve this legally,” La Salle said. “We went to court, we had the strike declared illegal and that allowed us to let go of some of the employees and rehire some of them based upon a new work contract. It allowed us to let go of some undesirable employees because they had been on strike a few times.”

The bitter strike led to a parliamentary inquiry regarding environmental damage caused by the mine, lack of benefits for local communities and treatment of miners. Opposition politicians accused SEMAFO of paying “slave wages”. “The wages are very low,” explained Mohammed Bazoum, deputy chairman of Niger’s main opposition party in 2009. “The population is not benefiting at all from this gold.”

SEMAFO was accused of failing to pay both taxes and dividends to the government. Despite owning a 20% share in the Samira Hill mine, the government received no direct payments from the Montréal-based majority owner between 2004 and 2010. In a report headlined “Scandal of Mineral Wealth: Niger cries with famine while Semafo celebrates its ‘millionth’ ounce of gold”, Ouestafnews contrasted the widespread impoverishment in that country with the millions of dollars Québec’s leading mining company made from its operations in West Africa. By 2010 SEMAFO had extracted 350,000 ounces of gold from Niger worth about \$350 million yet many in the country went hungry.

In 2008 long time Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler, who was then the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy to Niger, and his aide, Foreign Affairs official Louis Guay, were abducted. They were kidnapped after visiting the Samira Hill mine. “Louis [Guay] called me and said he was going down there on a UN mission and that he heard the mine was a

Canadian success and he wanted to report this back to Canada,” La Salle told the National Post.

Why was a UN envoy, sent to a country to deal with a conflict largely over natural resources, visiting a Canadian-operated mine? Was the visit a message to Niger’s government? The rebels? The UN? Was Fowler in covert discussions with the mining company regarding the ongoing conflict between the Tuareg and the region’s mining companies?

In *A Season in Hell: My 130 Days in the Sahara with Al Qaeda* Fowler ignores these questions. He says the visit was simply an attempt to investigate a “Canadian success”, which still begs the question of whether it is common, or acceptable, for Canadian UN representatives to bestow diplomatic backing to corporate Canada?

In another example of employing their influence on behalf of corporate Canada, Jean Chrétien traveled to Niger months after stepping down as prime minister to advance the interests of TG World Energy. According to the *Globe and Mail*, Chrétien helped the Calgary-based firm “get out of a pickle in the impoverished African nation of Niger.” TG’s rights to explore 18 million acres of Niger’s wilderness for oil and gas were revoked by the government, which argued that TG failed to fulfill its investment targets. Niger then awarded the concession to a subsidiary of the China National Petroleum Corp.

The Calgary company sued Niger’s government and went to arbitration with the Chinese firm. “It also asked Mr. Chrétien to intervene,” reported the *Globe and Mail*. “The former prime minister spoke with officials of China National Petroleum during a trip to Beijing and then in March of 2004, he flew into Niamey, the Niger capital. In normal circumstances, the best TG World could have hoped to get on its own was a meeting with the energy minister. But Mr. Chrétien managed to snag a meeting with the president.” Chrétien’s lobbying led to a new agreement between TG World, Niger and the Chinese corporation, which saw the company’s stock increase from eight cents to more than a dollar within a year.

It’s unclear how things will play out in Niger. But Canada is not an uninterested power with no skin in the game. Our government will not necessarily do what is best for the people of Niger. Rather, the US empire and corporate interests will determine Ottawa’s words and actions.

Canadian leftists need to point this out, as well as argue our government should not promote a foreign military invasion.

Yves Engler's latest book is *Stand on Guard for Whom?: A People's History of the Canadian Military*.

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