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Interview with Spanish journalist and researcher Alex Anfrus

Niger and the revolution in the African Sahel



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To understand what is happening in that portion of the immense African continent, we spoke with the Spanish journalist and researcher Alex Anfrus.

The Sahel is a region of sub-Saharan Africa which, like most of the African continent, rarely occupies a news space in the big cartelized media of the West. It's a very poor region, where jihadism and the consequences of colonial and neo-colonial forces have wreaked havoc.

Recently, however, three countries have made headlines by a series of coups d'état that have led to the Nationalist and pan-African governments. The most recent of these in Niger, which occurred in July 2023, even led to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), an organization in which France has a large to threaten a military invasion of the country.

To understand what's happening in that portion of the vast African continent, we spoke with journalist and researcher Alex Anfruns. Alex is Spanish, but has lived in Belgium, France and currently works as a teacher in Casablanca. He has directed the Journal de Notre Amérique and has been editor-in-chief of the media outlet Investi'action (2014-2019). He is co-author of the book *Nicaragua: Popular Uprising or Coup d'Etat?* (2019) and the documentary *Palestine: The Besieged Truth* (2008). His most recent research book is entitled *Niger: Another Coup d'Etat or Pan-African Revolution?*

Did the situation in Niger capture the attention of the Western mainstream media in the wake of the coup d'état that took place on 26 July 2023, which was connected to similar processes in Mali and Burkina Faso. What was the situation in Niger prior to the coup and what factors did it take? Explain what happened?

– From the first hours after the coup d'état In Niger, it became clear that this was not "yet another coup." There was a cascade of media statements in defense of the ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum, and against the military who proclaimed their action as "the National Council for the Safeguarding of the Homeland" (CNSP). But, in other words, On occasion, in the face of coups d'état and long-lived dictatorships in Africa, France I had become accustomed to more discreet or even favorable reactions. By for example, in Chad, following the death of dictator Idriss Déby in April 2015. 2021 saw the succession of his son to power. So what did Macron do? He hurried to go and legitimize his great ally. Why was there so much this time agitation? Since the advent of military governments in Mali and Burkina Faso, the France's presence in the Sahel has experienced a historic setback. materialized with the expulsion of the troops of "Operation Berkane" from the Malian territory. Consequently, France's counter-terrorism strategy in the region had been completely delegitimized, and the Nigerien army He was faced with a dilemma: defend a nationalist vision or submit to a Failed strategy. On the one hand, as France's ally in Niger, Bazoum had taken in some of those expelled troops at the French military base in Niamey. On the other hand, Bazoum had a suspicious attitude towards groups as part of a "deradicalization" program, which some analysts perceived it as support for these groups to destabilize the neighboring countries.

It was impossible for the Nigerien military to turn their backs on neighboring countries. It's in the "Triple Frontier" area between those three countries, known as Liptako-Gourma, where the largest number of terrorist activities. And the Nigerien military had the vital need to cooperate with its neighbouring countries. A few months before the coup, Nigerien Army Chief of Staff Salifou Mody visited Colonel Assimi Goita of Mali to strengthen

mutual cooperation. That visit raised concerns. Only a few days later, Bazoum dismissed him from his duties, responsibilities, appointing him to a diplomatic post in the Emirates United Arab Emirates. That dismissal may have been caused by the fear that Mody was behind preparations for a military coup d'état. The ingredients were gathered for the coup d'état. But it remained to be seen if it would be a "palace revolution" or a real change of course...

The mainstream media interpreted what happened in Niger in the context of the geopolitical struggle between Russia and the West, basically as a move in this struggle. As a result of the research that What is the nature and particularities of your recent book? policies of the government constituted in the country after the coup? What has been its evolution to the present?

"Indeed, a line of interpretation that has prevailed in the hegemonic media after the coup d'état was that this it was due to internal power struggles. In short: according to this approach, the coup which was carried out cleanly and without bloodshed, was started by well-known actors, high-ranking army commanders who could only act out of craving and to share a more substantial share of corruption, a phenomenon that which is sadly widespread in the country. However, that the military enter the scene with a clear nationalist vision, considering that they should fulfill a historic mission in the recovery of its national sovereignty... that It does not fit into the schemes of Eurocentric propaganda. It's more cost-effective to shake the specter of Russophobia. But to present Russia as if it were behind Every African popular demonstration is contrary to common sense.

There's a reason why such anti- CNSP sticks to its thirteen: to understand the true motivations of that A coup would also involve explaining the reasons for the transformations in the course in Mali and Burkina Faso. For the mainstream media, there is only one discourse Whatever it is, these soldiers are "demagogues", "populists", "sovereigntists"... According to that point of view, they would be using it for their own personal ends the "anti-French sentiment" of the peoples of the region.

Obviously, the explanation is different: these Leaders emerge as the concrete and determined expression of demands Popular. Any observer of the African reality knows that the peoples of the African They have been demonstrating for years against the mechanisms of neocolonial domination such as the CFA Franc. In the case of Niger, one of the demands has been the closure of foreign military bases, in particular the French base in the capital, Niamey. If we are to judge a government by its actions, I will It would qualify as a nationalist government with broad popular support. From the very first A few

days after the coup, a transitional government was formed. pawns on the chessboard without any hesitation, in the midst of sanctions and a threat of military intervention by ECOWAS, which was supported by active from France and the United States. Daily demonstrations in Niamey show that despite all the suffering that regional actors and were ready to inflict on the Nigerien people, the government of the CNSP had seized power to meet their demands without yielding to the blackmail. That lesson in dignity of the CNSP was the result of Listen to the people. For the most infamous pages in history There will be statements such as that of the Italian Emmanuela Re, Representative of the EU in the Sahel, who argued that sanctions that lead to a shortage of medicines, food, or electricity" are useful and effective in weakening the junta in power."

In the months that followed, it became clear that the CNSP did not act in an improvised manner, but its actions responded to a Pan-African political vision full of maturity and farsightedness: the threat of ECOWAS to form an African military coalition to intervene in Niger It was left in the mud, making it clear that it was an organism at the end of the day. service of foreign interests, or rather a mere neo-colonial instrument of France. Above all, Mali and Burkina Faso reacted with a message of solidarity provided with great moral strength for millions of Africans: "Yes they are touching Niger, they are declaring war on us as well." On the 16th of September, barely a month and a half after the coup, the creation of the of the Alliance of Sahel States. A formidable initiative that not only military cooperation between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, but also the sharing of economic development projects in the Sahel and even the prospect of monetary union. In just a few weeks it's as if the African history would have accelerated by several decades. After that, the course of events flowed in accordance with the will of the people: expulsion of the French Ambassador, Announcement of Concerted and Definitive Withdrawal of Troops progressively until December 31, 2023... But also various measures such as the cancellation of the agreement on the non-taxation of double taxation with France, which had allowed its companies to benefit from historical privileges, the end of the migration agreement with the European Union or the End of Niger's water distribution contract with the multinational Veolia.

I return to the initial question about Russia: in my In this book, I have devoted an entire chapter to responding to this anti-Russian propaganda in Africa. I have taken the different aspects of the project with the seriousness it deserves. Historical and Current Role of Russian-African Relations: Forgiveness of debts, arms trade, technical assistance, defence cooperation, technology transfer... One thing should be clear: after the intervention In the

wake of the military in Ukraine, African countries refused to join the sanctions against Russia. Let's Talk About Reality: Russian-African Relations open the horizon for the development of the nuclear industry in several countries African.

Jihadism is a complex problem, with extensive ramifications in the Sahel region. What are the roots of that problem? and how does it affect the country and the region?

– The first chapter of my book, the subject of which is Niger, is dedicated to the origin of the destabilization in the Sahel. There I analyze the causes of the failure of the French intervention in Mali in 2012, citing different testimonies that point to the continuity between the war in Libya and the threat of territorial partition of northern Mali, which He went so far as to justify the French military presence in the country. It should be known that Even senior French military commanders admitted the porosity between the so-called "jihadist" groups and Tuareg rebel sectors. Despite the fact that Almost a decade after the French operation, the problem in Mali has become more difficult. entrenched. The Malian army was even prevented from entering Kidal, in one of the attempts to regain sovereignty over their national territory. That was perceived by the nationalist military, among whom Colonel Assimi Goita, as a real affront.

Returning to the phenomenon of "jihadism," the ancient President Bazoum had a precise knowledge of the gears that led to he. He explained the vicious circle that engenders this problem: first, the lack of access to education, which is related to high rates of fertility and poverty in the country. He also explained that the young pastors whose situation had been worsened by climate change, instead of To keep an eye on their cows, suddenly they could grab a rifle and ride off on a motorbike to extort money from the residents of another town. Bazoum was right to insist that this motivation had a lot of the romantic ideal, that the discourse of the Religion was used only at the level of the hierarchy of these groups, but it was not used at the level of the hierarchy. played the slightest role in the youth recruited to the base, and that this phenomenon He was closer to banditry. Indeed, in an interview conducted by shortly before the coup d'état, Bazoum admitted that he was in contact with the with "sub-leaders" of these "jihadist" groups. Which was able to convince the Nigerien military that, instead of fighting terrorism, the strategy in the Sahel was based on promoting it, as more and more people were asserting institutional actors in Mali and Burkina Faso. In any case, as leader who was blindly entrusted with the implementation of the policies of the IMF in Niger, Bazoum had not the slightest will to really improve the fate of the Nigerien people.

The joining of the efforts of three countries that share the same problem in their border areas should be a good news. But a strange thing happens: the mainstream media silences the victories harvested by the national armies, such as the capture of Kidal on 14 November 2023 or the Battle of Djibo on November 26, 2023. And at the same time magnify the errors of African military operations, showing which are invariably presented as massacres against the civilian population. As is often the case in war operations, it is difficult to separate the reality of propaganda. Let's admit that it's a necessary attitude for the Citizens do not take literally everything that the communiqués say Military. But the insistence with which they try to delegitimize the actions by the armies of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso must make us Be wary of that simplistic approach of the mainstream media.

The process in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso seems to be anti-colonial and pan-African in nature. At least that's clear from the statements by its main leaders and their firm rejection of the presence of European (mainly French) and American in the region. How do you do it? Value?

– The next generation of leaders of the The Sahel States include several of the historical demands of the Pan-Africanism, including the creation of a common African army or the valorization of their national resources in relation to development projects. industrialization and strategic infrastructures. To paraphrase Lenin when He said that communism is "the power of the soviets plus electricity," in which he In the case of the Sahel, the Pan-Africanists have their sights set on the domination of the technology and the development of nuclear energy. Their willingness to To put an end point by point to the status quo imposed on them by the former colonial master to the founding fathers of the African states after the independence of 1960.

In my book I look at one of the key documents, the "1960-61 Defense Accords," which left their hands and feet tied to the new African countries, with regard to the diversification of partners for the sale of its strategic raw materials. Now this situation is change, and both Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso and Ali Lamine Zeine are expanding its relations with new partners such as Russia, China, Turkey and Iran, reinforcing the weight of the multipolar world in the face of the old privileges of a actor as France.

When you look at a country like Niger, which counts with the lowest global human development indicators, with figures of 44% of extreme poverty, and at the same time with the most formidable riches in the world. The subsoil, one of the world's largest producers of uranium, must Look for the factors that relate this equation. I picked up the information for the reader to judge for themselves. But I clearly state that it is a

relationship in which there are accomplices and culprits. It is true that the international relations are based on interests, but the people Nigerien has shown that he has the dignity of a giant. From now on, relations between Niger and the rest of the world will have to take into account the respect and mutual benefit.

Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso have just announced its decision to leave ECOWAS. How can we assess the role of this organization, considering that he even considered invading for a while militarily to Niger?

– The exit of the three countries from ECOWAS In a joint statement, it confirms the sense of dignity of the current Pan-African generation in the Sahel. ECOWAS had appeared before the eyes of the millions of Africans as a tool in the hands of the former colonial master, whose These ends are contrary to the wishes of the people. But the sanctions that have imposed on Niger may be the final nail in the coffin that marks his final burial. Despite being three landlocked countries, the mechanisms of inter-African solidarity have worked, weathering the effects of the of this punishment that violates the organization's own texts.

Leaving aside inflation in some products The Nigerien people declare that the sanctions are not felt. The commissioning of the Gorou Banda photovoltaic plant (55,000 solar panels, 30 Megawats), inaugurated on November 26, has allowed solve the problem of dependence on electricity from the neighbor Nigeria. Commercial convoys from Burkina Faso have secured the arrival of of provisions. Even the interests of economic sectors of belligerent countries within ECOWAS, such as those represented by the Port of Cotonou Benin, decided to lift the ban on resuming trade relations with Niger, in view of the losses represented by the blockade of imports to that country (80% of the volume of transit). But the Speaker of the House Niger's Trade Ministry responded in a statement on Dec. 27, that by maintaining illegal ECOWAS sanctions, traders were invited to continue using the port of Lomé in Togo and trade convoys with Burkina Faso Faso. We cannot fail to mention the initiative of the Moroccan Kingdom, which proposes the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States to access the Sahel with their goods to the Atlantic. These are signs of the failure of the neocolonial attempt to isolate the poor. these three countries and that Pan-Africanism is here to stay.

ECOWAS was no longer a credible organization. A day before the historic decision, an ECOWAS delegation, announced for more than a month, he had to meet the Prime Minister of Niger in Niamey to negotiate an end to sanctions. Lamine Zeine had just arrived from tour of Russia, Turkey and Iran, and if he had not intended to host ECOWAS,

could have extended its visit abroad in order to achieve important economic cooperation agreements. Well, it turns out that the plane of the The ECOWAS delegation did not take off from Abuja, on the official pretext of a technical breakdown. An explanation that was interpreted as little less than grotesque, and in any case an unforgivable lack of respect. Hours later, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger dealt a mortal blow to this remote-controlled organization by Paris. This action opens the door to other measures, such as the the adoption of its own currency, moving away from the iniquitous mechanism of the CFA franc.

How do you assess the process that takes place in a global way? Is it happening in the Sahel? How to see it in the context of transformations and challenges? of Africa today?

– The transformation underway in the Sahel is underway. giving a lesson to those who had become accustomed to dealing with Africa since a paternalistic attitude. The peoples of Europe must distinguish between the discourse of fear inoculated by their leaders – fear of migrants, fear of the terrorism, etc. and the hope-filled events and ideals that It is passed on to the new Pan-African generation. The vision they propose for the The future of their peoples is rigorous and complete. In just a few months they have broken into the false illusions of abstract democracy, to the point of that the people of these three countries are beginning to see the fruits of change and Demand a longer transition period than announced: they demand that governments military personnel continue for up to ten or fifteen years. It's obviously a nightmare for him imperialism. But the measures taken by these governments – such as the Volunteers for the Defence of the People (VDP) in Burkina Faso – must be a School for the people. After France has been left with no other choice than to go out the back door in a humiliating manner, it is to be expected that the Provocations will go in crescendo this 2024. This was announced without qualms by a Former French Agent on a TV Set: From Now On The Plan It will consist of clandestine destabilization operations. To cope to those criminal actions, it is a requirement to be informed about what is going on. at stake there. For the peoples of the North, whose relative well-being has had As a condition, amnesia and ignorance cultivated for centuries is a duty correctly identify and support the aspirations of the new Pan-African generation. For the peoples of the South, it is necessary to share experiences and efforts, to denounce the weapon of war that is the illegal sanctions and build more solidarity among peoples. Which it requires studying the history and present of their struggles, or as Martí said: "The people must hasten to get to know each other as if they were going to fight a battle

together." I would add that today that battle, in the circumstances of the One of the historical aspects of the New Cold War is that of anti-imperialism.

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