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Commentary: The crisis in Chad

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CHAD RISKS REGRESSING to outright civil war. Although conflict has been a regular feature since independence, the fifteen years of President Idriss Déby's rule have been relatively stable by comparison with past eras. However, the current mixture of internal volatility and factionalism together with intervention by external actors, regional and international, recalls the political climate that led to full-scale civil war between 1979 and 1982. Déby has faced threats before, but his tenure has never looked more precarious. On 3 May, a presidential election went ahead despite the latest, and most determined, invasion attempt by dissident forces based in Sudan's Darfur province and supported by the Sudanese government. Whilst decisively repulsed by the Chadian army with targeted support from the French garrison stationed in the country, the rebels have not been defeated and are still in a position to destabilize the fragile Déby regime.

Chad is a society that tends towards fragmentation, and its political space reflects this. Beyond a crude dichotomy between the Christian/animist south and Muslim north, there exist over a hundred language groups, themselves split into multiple clans and sub-clans. President Déby is a member of the Zaghawa people, a collection of clans and sub-clans that live in an arc across northern and eastern Chad and across the border in Sudan, notably in Darfur province. Representing just two percent of the population, the Zaghawa have profited from presidential patronage and dominate all ranks of the armed forces and government. Their domination has antagonized the country's other ethnic groups yet the opposition has been unable to unite or prevent Déby from securing a third presidential term. Déby's support even among his own people, however, is far from secure. Many Zaghawa, including members of the armed forces and some members of his extended family, are infuriated by his management of southern Chad's Doba oilfield, the proceeds of which they suspect he will arrogate for the benefit of his immediate family. The perception of *fin de regime* has also been exacerbated by the country's endemic poverty with wages unpaid for months and defunct social services. Corruption — Chad ranks bottom of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index — and mismanagement have extinguished hopes that the new-found oil wealth might raise living standards for the majority.

Chad is also a victim of the Darfur conflict, which has spilled across the border and combined with the domestic crisis, creating real dangers of regional implosion.¹ In 1990, Déby took power in N'Djamena with the assistance of Darfurian Zaghawa and the Sudanese government, but in the current crisis, Zaghawa from the Chadian army have

been fighting alongside their Darfurian kinsmen against Khartoum. Déby has attempted to negotiate a settlement in vain, and Khartoum has sponsored camps in Darfur where, following a failed coup attempt in May 2004, Déby's Zaghawa enemies have organized to overthrow him. It has not helped Déby's cause that his continued ill-health — he has been hospitalized several times in Paris with liver problems — fuels the assumption that his time is coming to an end.

There are two main groups of Chadian rebels in Darfur, the *Rassemblement des forces démocratiques* (RAFD), the vehicle of Tom and Timan Erdimi, twin nephews of Déby and former *éminences grises* of his regime, and the *Rassemblement pour la démocratie et les libertés* (RDL) led by Mahamat Nour Abdelkerim. Nour is a veteran of the campaign that brought Déby to power and a member of the small Tama ethnic group. By 1994, the Zaghawa dominated the country's military and politics, and Nour quit Chad to enter into rebellion alongside former army commander Mahamat Garfa. He disassociated himself from Garfa when he rallied to Déby in 2003, following which he relocated to Khartoum where officially he built a profitable career in the oil industry. Unofficially he liaised with the Sudanese government and Musa Hilal, the leader of the Janjaweed, to recruit Tama as part of the ethnic cleansing of Zaghawa in Darfur. He has been accused of conducting operations alongside the Janjaweed and attacking refugee camps in eastern Chad. Nour's distinguishing characteristic is his unquestioning loyalty to the Sudanese government for over twelve years, and it is understood that 'he is the only Chadian rebel in which Khartoum has confidence'.² Encouraging its protégé to open a new phase in the campaign against Déby at the end of October 2005, Sudan promoted the establishment of the RDL. On 18 December, Nour launched an ill-conceived attack against the border town of Adré in which his young fighters were routed by the Chadian army with logistical support from the French garrison. At present, the RDL numbers about 3,000 fighters.

The other main rebel group, the RAFD, is comprised of three groups, the *Socle pour le changement, l'unité et la démocratie* (SCUD) led by Yahya Dillo Djerou, a group led by former army commander Séby Aguid, and a group led by Ramadane Bokhit. Its fighters are Zaghawa defectors principally from the Republican Guard. Tom Erdimi, Déby's head of cabinet and coordinator of the oil project, and his brother Timan, a director of Cotontchad, Chad's cotton parastatal, joined SCUD after being sent to negotiate with them! The RAFD currently has about 1,000 fighters. In March, using intelligence from high-ranking disaffected army officers still in the country, it plotted to assassinate Déby by shooting down his plane as he returned from a meeting in Equatorial Guinea. The conspiracy was discovered, and Déby received protection from the French military. The regime responded by issuing international arrest warrants for a number of senior Zaghawa including the Erdimis and Séby Aguid.

At the end of December 2005, at a meeting in El Geneina, the capital of west Darfur, Nour formed a coalition called the *Front uni pour la changment* (FUC), comprised of eight rebel groups including his own RDL. The RAFD's relationship with this alliance has been ambivalent, although prior to the 3 May election, it announced that it would be working alongside the FUC to disrupt the polls. Taking advantage of the Chadian army's vulnerability with the majority of its troops massed on the eastern border, between 9 and

13 April, the FUC launched an offensive, making a lightning assault from Darfur and the Central African Republic (CAR) to N'Djaména. Once more, French support permitted the Chadian army to inflict serious casualties on the FUC, and about 400 fighters were killed. France admits to providing reconnaissance intelligence, transporting Chadian troops back to the capital from the east and firing 'warning shots' at the FUC column. Emphasizing the connection between the crises in Darfur and Chad, the French air force reportedly transported Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) fighters from their rear bases in eastern Chad to secure the main southern city of Sahr.³

Beyond Darfur, there exist a number of other rebel groups that have the capacity to profit from the political vacuum created by the present insecurity. In the northern prefecture of Tibesti, the rump of the *Mouvement pour la démocratie et la justice au Tchad* (MDJT), whose founder Youssouf Togoimi died from injuries sustained in battle in 2002, has had leadership difficulties but still numbers about 500 fighters and has indicated a willingness to ally itself with the FUC. In the west, the *Mouvement pour la démocratie et le développement* (MDD) founded in 1992 is made up of supporters of the Chad's former president Hissène Habré. In the south, the *Mouvement pour la paix, la reconstruction et le développement* (MPRD), led by Djibrine Dassert operates in the bush around the main southern town of Sahr. Two other groups have bases in the ungoverned north of the CAR, the *Telsi résistance nationale* (Telsi RN), a small group associated with Dr Nahor Mamouth, and the *Forces pour la démocratie du peuple centrafricain* (FDPC) of Abdoulaye Miskine which claims an understanding with the Sudanese government that if it helps topple Déby, then Sudan will back its own rebellion in CAR.

Whilst Chad's entry, albeit on a small scale, into the club of oil-producing nations has not in itself provoked the current crisis, the existence of the oil exercises the minds of actors both internal and external. Fourteen years ago, reserves of crude oil were discovered in the southern province of Logone Orientale near the town of Doba. The decision by a US-Malaysian consortium to exploit the reserves, involving the construction of an export pipeline to an offshore terminal near Kribi in Cameroon, was taken on the understanding that the World Bank would provide four percent of the funding to endorse the 'ethical' validity of the project in the light of widespread misgivings over the management of extractive industries in the developing world.⁴ At the end of 2005, Déby pushed an amendment through parliament to raise the percentage of revenue that the treasury could access outside the regulatory framework created by the scheme. In response, the Bank's president Paul Wolfowitz refused to release profits to the treasury and suspended loans to the country worth \$124 million. Déby stood firm. 'Which country in the world, having the resources, would not buy arms to defend itself?', he challenged, stating bluntly that his intention was to spend the funds frozen by the bank on weapons.⁵ Threatening to turn off the pipeline, he outfaced Wolfowitz who succumbed to US pressure and agreed to release \$100 million in overdue royalties, accepted the amendment to the regulatory framework and recommenced loan disbursements.

What of external involvement in Chad? It is arguable that the crisis has already developed a dangerous international dimension, setting Western interests, represented by French and American support for Déby against Sudanese and Chinese backing for the Chadian rebels,

notably the FUC. As with its other former African colonies, France has shown a reluctance to cut the apron strings. Paris maintains three military bases in the country involving 1,100 troops with airlift capacity, as well as a squadron of Mirage fighters as part of *Opération Epervier*, deployed since 1986 to contain Libyan expansionism. The military presence allows France to pursue its geo-strategic interests in central Africa but has also been used to shield Déby who came to power with the help of France's external intelligence agency. Following his re-election, Chirac moved to support his ally Déby, becoming the first French president to visit N'Djaména. In the case of Chad, the reiterated official position that France adheres to non-intervention in Africa is diplomatic persiflage. The French military remains at the heart of Chad's political entanglements, and its artillery, armour, and especially air power have saved Déby three times in the last six months. A French diplomat with responsibility for Chad describes Déby as 'a natural ally' and the only guarantee against the 'Somalisation' of the country and a possible domino effect that would see other French allies such as François Bozizé in the CAR forced from power.⁶ Former president Goukouni Weddeye is yet more candid, stating that Déby came to power with the support of Paris for economic and geo-strategic reasons and remains, for the same reasons, 'France's man'.⁷

Aside from US interest in Chad's oil sector, America considers Chad strategically important in the global 'war on terror'. The United States has been involved in training units in the Chadian army as part of the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI), formerly the Pan-Sahel Initiative, building close relations between its special operations forces and their Chadian counterparts. Whether these troops have since defected or remained loyal to Déby is unclear, but the presence of units with superior skills and training in the national army would help explain its successes against the rebels.

Both the United States and France are understandably worried about the consequences of a Nour/FUC victory on the situation in Darfur and the refugee camps in eastern Chad. With a history of brutality, and his loyalty to Khartoum, a Nour regime in N'Djaména would leave the Darfurians open to attack from both sides. It seems likely that France will resist this scenario, with US support. It is possibly for this reason that Sudan is reportedly sponsoring a new unifying rebel front under the leadership of Mahamat Nouri, the former Chadian ambassador to Saudi Arabia. A Nouri regime might be acceptable to Western interests where a Nour regime would not be. However, Khartoum might drop all its proxies if the peace deal in Darfur proves durable.

A final intriguing external actor is the People's Republic of China. The existence of the Doba reserves raises the possibility that the Chadian crisis could be the first proxy war between the West and China over access to oil. The extent of Chinese support for Sudan and its proxy, the FUC, remains unclear; however, there have been reports that arms captured during the attack on N'Djaména in April were Chinese and new and that the Toyota vehicles that ferried the FUC to N'Djaména were bought by a Chinese oil company based in Sudan for which Mahamat Nour used to work.⁸ China's thirst for oil lies at the heart of Beijing's involvement. At present, Chad's oil is piped to Cameroon's Atlantic coast for export to a Western market. Moreover, the Déby regime recognizes Taiwan in preference to the People's Republic. A change of government could see a

reversal of this situation. China already buys about two-thirds of Sudan's oil and has majority shares in a new pipeline to a terminal on the Red Sea coast. Should a new regime in N'Djaména give its blessing, it would be feasible for any new reserves discovered in Chad to be channelled through Sudan and on to China.

Despite American appeals for a postponement, the presidential election went ahead as scheduled on 3 May. During the brief campaign, Déby's message to the electorate was plain — 'choose me or choose chaos'. As the polling stations closed, Mahamat Hissène, secretary general of the ruling party, declared a 'victory for the ballot box over the bullet'.⁹ Twelve days later the electoral commission announced a turnout of 61 percent of Chad's 5.7 million registered voters with Déby winning 77.5 percent of the vote. The main political parties boycotted the poll, leaving just four paper candidates, three current or former ministers, and an obscure socialist, who won between 3.7 and 8.8 percent of the vote. Déby hailed the victory, declaring that 'the people have made their choice and the choice is me . . . you have exposed those who said that Chad was about to explode, proving once more that in Chad democracy works and is moving forward'.¹⁰ Although the turnout was validated by election observers from the African Union and non-governmental organizations who described the poll as largely 'free, open, and fair', the figures were wildly at odds with the estimates of the opposition parties, as well as the local and international press, who reported that no more than between two and ten percent of the electorate voted. A day after the election, above a photograph of a child voting in N'Djaména, one influential journal ran the headline 'What Legitimacy!'. On behalf of the *Coordination des partis politiques pour la défense de la constitution* (CPDC), the umbrella group of opposition parties that boycotted the polls, Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh dismissed the electoral process as a 'masquerade' and called for Déby to open talks with the constitutional parties and armed opposition to his regime and demanded fresh, fair polls. Déby's 'victory' solves nothing and has only heightened the crisis. As Roland Marchal remarks, 'solutions will be more difficult to find after the election than before'.¹¹

Chad's political crisis is grave. Although the constitutional parties put aside their differences and organized an effective boycott of the election, their leaders, with the possible exception of southern federalist Ngarlejy Yorongar, lack legitimacy, having all rallied to the regime at some stage. The various rebel groups in Darfur and elsewhere are fractured, mirroring the wider Chadian society. The reported establishment of a new united front under Mahamat Nouri, if accurate, could prove significant, allowing France and the United States to abandon Déby. Even so the chances of the disjointed armed and constitutional opposition forming a united government are poor, and a proliferation of factions, akin to the civil war period between 1979 and 1982, seems probable. In these circumstances, there could be growing pressure from the south, long marginalized by a succession of northern governments, for federalism or even secession, exacerbated by the accumulating grievance over central corruption in the oil sector.

In the short term, France, with either the moral or practical support of the United States, has little option but to continue its support for Déby. That said, the existing regime is clearly a dead letter, and France's current government needs to step back from its conservative Gaullist stance and encourage authentic reform of Chad's civil society with a

view to creating a legitimate political environment. Given the danger of escalated conflict in Darfur and eastern Chad, the United States should apply maximum pressure on Sudan and China to reappraise their backing for Nour. With oil, Islamic fundamentalism and trans-national terrorism in the mix, it is time for external actors, who have long exerted a baleful influence on Chad, to accept the mediation of the international community in an effort to construct genuine national political dialogue.

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- ¹. For background, see Alex de Waal, 'Who are the Darfurians? Arab and African identities, violence and external engagement', *African Affairs*, **104**, 415 (2005), pp. 181–205. [↑](#)
- ². *Jeune Afrique* [Paris], 16 April 2006. [↑](#)
- ³. *Africa Confidential*, 28 April 2006, p. 5. [↑](#)
- ⁴. For background, see Scott Pegg 'Can policy intervention beat the resource curse? Evidence from the Chad-Cameroon pipeline project', *African Affairs*, **105**, 418 (2006), pp. 1–25. [↑](#)
- ⁵. *Le Figaro* [Paris], 19 April 2006. [↑](#)
- ⁶. *Le Monde* [Paris], 5 May 2006. [↑](#)
- ⁷. *Liberté* [Algiers], 19 April 2006. [↑](#)
- ⁸. *Journal du Dimanche* [Paris], 23 April 2006. [↑](#)
- ⁹. *Le Progrès* [N'Djaména], 4 May 2006. [↑](#)
- ¹⁰. *Libération* [Paris], 15 May 2006. [↑](#)
- ¹¹. *Le Monde* [Paris], 5 May 2006. [↑](#)

Bibliography of books and articles

References to other sources, including interviews, archives, newspaper articles, websites, and grey publications, are contained in relevant footnotes.

de Waal, Alex, 'Who are the Darfurians? Arab and African identities, violence and external engagement', *African Affairs*, **104**, 415 (2005), pp. 181–205.[\[Abstract\]](#)

Pegg, Scott, 'Can policy intervention beat the resource curse? Evidence from chad-Cameroon pipeline project', *African Affairs*, **105**, 418 (2006), pp. 1–25.[\[Abstract/Free Full Text\]](#)