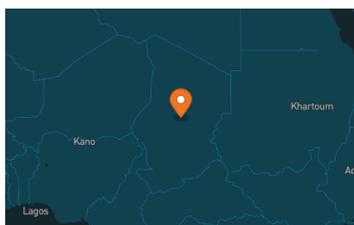




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Getting Chad's Transition on Track

Five months after President Idriss Déby's sudden death, Chadian authorities are preparing a highly anticipated national dialogue. The country faces significant challenges as it charts a course to civilian rule.



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In April, Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno was **killed** in clashes with the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT). The rebels had sped across the Libyan border in heavily armed convoys in a bid to reach the capital N'Djamena; the army had stopped their advance, and Déby had come to the battlefield. His unexpected death prompted a group of army generals to instal his 37-year-old son Mahamat as leader of a fifteen-member Transitional Military Council. The junta announced that it would rule Chad for an eighteen-month period, renewable once, during which time it would organise an inclusive national dialogue before handing over the reins of power to civilians through elections. Though wary of its ambitions, Chad's international allies swiftly endorsed the new leadership. By early May, the army had pushed the FACT insurgents back into Libya. The

military takeover reassured those who had worried

that Déby's death would usher in chaos, but dampened hopes for democratic rule. Some Chadian opposition figures express disquiet about the transition and the military's continued grip on the state. Government officials, opposition figures and rebels all have divergent views on what should happen next. Outside powers, meanwhile, appear to have little sway over the junta.

The military council would be wise to soothe anxieties about Chad's political future by taking concrete steps to ensure a smooth transition. It should agree that the current transition cannot be extended and disavow any intention of keeping the presidency in military hands. It should also proceed with preparations for a long-awaited national dialogue and, together with rebel groups, find conditions acceptable to both sides for securing their participation in those discussions.

Early Reactions

External actors have stepped lightly in reaction to the junta's assumption of power. France and the African Union (AU), arguably the ones most involved, were particularly reluctant to antagonise N'Djamena, an important ally in the anti-jihadist fight in the Lake Chad basin and the Sahel. Paris invoked "exceptional security situations and the necessity of ensuring the country's stability" to justify its support for the junta in N'Djamena. Though the AU had temporarily suspended Mali's membership in response to a coup the preceding August, it kept Chad in good standing because of the country's military contributions to the counter-terrorism operations as well as the fragility of the post-Déby dispensation. The AU agreed to support the transition on condition that the authorities hold a presidential election within eighteen months and bar the military council's members from running in those polls, demanding that the junta amend the transitional charter to include clauses to this effect. Mahamat Déby, aware of the considerable diplomatic leverage that Chad's contributions to regional counter-terrorism efforts provide, in turn promised to both adhere to the AU's demands and keep Chadian troops in the field.

Due partly to international pressure, the transitional authorities took steps to open up political space in the country. They reversed a decades-long ban on protest marches, allowed **the popular Transformateurs opposition movement** to become a political party and committed to drafting an amnesty or pardon for exiled or imprisoned rebels (some of whom a

Chadian court has sentenced to death). In late April, they formed a civilian cabinet, thus seeming to relinquish some of their power while co-opting key opposition politicians.

The junta has not, however, amended the transitional charter as it promised the AU, making opponents suspicious of its intentions. Some Chadian officials, including Prime Minister **Albert Pahimi Padacké**, say the charter's revision should be discussed during the national dialogue. But opponents fear that the transition will run into delays or that the junta will simply have Mahamat Déby take his father's place permanently. In a **June interview**, the younger Déby said two "conditions" would have to be met prior to the vote: that "Chadians get along" and that the transition receive international financial support.

While Mahamat Déby secured France's support during a state visit to Paris, the junta's relations with the AU quickly soured. In early July, N'Djamena rejected the appointment of Senegalese diplomat Ibrahima Fall as high representative of the AU to support the Chadian transition on the grounds that the AU had not consulted it about the decision, a version of events the AU disputes. With key member countries such as Egypt and Nigeria backing the military council, the AU finally **replaced Fall with Congolese diplomat Basile Ikouébé**. Some observers saw Chad's rebuff of Fall as an intentional snub to AU Commission Chair Moussa Faki Mahamat, a Chadian whom the junta reportedly suspects of having presidential ambitions. N'Djamena's distrust of Faki Mahamat may thus obstruct the AU's ability to influence the transition.

The Main Actors' Positions

Idriss Déby's demise has upended Chadian politics. Having lost its hegemony with its founder's death, the former ruling Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS) obtained less than half the ministerial posts in the 40-member government, although its national network could still be a powerful vehicle for a presidential candidate. In June, the party's secretary general, Mahamat Zene Bada, fled to France when the junta pushed him to organise an extraordinary general congress to name a new leadership. His deputy Ruth Madjidian Padja subsequently convened the congress, resulting in the appointment of former National Assembly chair Haroun Kabadi as secretary general. The widely held belief that the junta was trying to take control of the party stiffened resistance to it among key MPS founding members.

The opposition is divided. Some opposition leaders have opted to join the government – notably former opposition leaders such as Saleh Kebzabo or Mahamat Alhabo. Others question the junta's legitimacy. **Some political parties and civil society groups** – like the Wakit Tamma coalition, which has since stated it was open to joining the dialogue – initially called for a civilian-military council to replace the junta and rejected the decrees establishing the committee that is to organise the national dialogue. Further, while these groups and parties also wanted Chadians to agree upon an interim parliament's formation through the dialogue – which would have given it the necessary standing to vote on a new constitution – the junta on 24 September approved the formation of a 93-member interim parliament selected by a committee it had appointed for this purpose.

The National Dialogue

Most Chadian stakeholders have agreed to join the national dialogue, but their expectations vary. The dialogue should take place **in November-December 2021, followed by elections between June and September 2022**. Opposition figures, armed groups and civil society representatives have called for **dialogue** for decades, hoping that it can lay the groundwork for state reforms. Participants will undoubtedly want to discuss a wide range of issues. The new opposition coalition sees the dialogue as an opportunity to make up for years of exclusion from governance and will probably seek to redress the balance of power in state institutions, reduce the military's political role, and introduce checks and balances in government. They hold up Chad's 1993 National Sovereign Conference as a model, having long asked for an "inclusive and sovereign national conference". Given its short timeframe, however, the proposed dialogue is unlikely to yield progress on more than key constitutional and electoral matters.

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Perhaps the main sticking point, however, is the participation of rebel groups. Opposition and civil society figures believe that including various insurgencies (“military-political groups”, in Chadian parlance) will

strengthen the opposition's own bargaining position. Mahamat Déby and other officials have said they agree in principle to the insurgents' participation but want them to disarm first. Several rebel leaders, including FACT leader Mahamat Mahadi Ali, told Crisis Group that intermediaries have contacted them on behalf of the Chadian government, foreign governments and private mediators. In June, the Togolese government hosted talks with some of the rebel groups to determine their demands. The latter asked to be included in the national dialogue's organising committee, called for an amnesty and requested a preliminary round of government-rebel negotiations, to take place outside Chad, before they would decide whether or not to join the dialogue. Although Togo likely acted with the junta's consent, N'Djamena ignored the talks' outcome.

An abundance of mediators complicates things further. Mahamat Déby appointed two key figures to organise the national dialogue: National Reconciliation Minister Acheikh Ibn Oumar, a former foreign affairs minister and former leader of Chadian Arab rebel movements; and Ali Abderaman Hagggar, a respected intellectual from Déby's Zaghawa ethnic group who serves as the junta's reconciliation and dialogue adviser. The two men will have to navigate competition between the junta and the civilian government to whom they respectively report. Then, on 14 August, the junta named a 70-member dialogue organising committee gathering MPS members, former opposition leaders and civil society representatives, as well as a 28-member committee that is to organise separate talks with rebels, without specifying where talks would be held and whether they will be conditioned on rebel disarmament. Chaired by Goukouni Oueddeï, a widely respected former rebel leader turned president (1979-1982), the latter committee consists of MPS members and security officials who, like the Libya-based rebels, mostly hail from the north.

But whether separate talks can occur remains to be seen. Two armed groups are particularly divisive. One is FACT: Déby's sons hold FACT leader Mahamat Mahadi Ali responsible for their father's death, complicating his eventual return to Chad. The Union of Resistance Forces (UFR), also based in Libya, and led by Déby's cousins Timan and Tom Erdimi, is another. In July 2021, the Erdimi family accused Egyptian authorities of having arrested Tom in late 2020 at the Chadian government's request. His whereabouts are unknown. Egypt has not confirmed the arrest but describes Tom as "a dangerous terrorist". **Chadian security sources** suggest that Cairo may have since handed Tom over to N'Djamena, an allegation denied by Chadian authorities. On 24 August, the military council arranged the return to N'Djamena of the UFR's representative in France, Mahamat Abdelkarim Hanno, a former intelligence chief. Some rebels frame his homecoming as part of a divide-and-rule strategy, rather than a sign that the authorities want to engage

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with the armed opposition as a whole. On 31 August, during an official visit to Sudan, **Mahamat Déby called Libya-based rebels** “mercenaries”, stating they “should not be allowed to leave Libya because they constitute a threat for the stability and security of both Chad and Sudan”.

Risks and Prospects

While Chad has mostly avoided violence in a period of great uncertainty, the situation could become more perilous. Delaying the transition could shatter the brittle trust among the country's main stakeholders. National and international actors must strive to maintain consensus in order to see the transition through within the agreed timeframe.

Several risks loom on the horizon. Many Chadians fear that the military council will not honour its pledges to limit the transition to eighteen months and exclude its own members from running in the presidential election. Should it renege on those promises, protests could break out. Secondly, the Libya-based rebels are still active and, although weakened, could re-enter the country and launch a fresh offensive. Thirdly, ethnic divides could deepen as politicians jockey for power. Some Chadians, notably in the diaspora, are already spreading polarising rhetoric on social media.

Lastly, trouble is brewing along Chad's borders. On 30 May, troops from the neighbouring Central African Republic, reportedly accompanied by Russian mercenaries, **attacked** a Chadian army post, ostensibly in pursuit of Central African rebels who had crossed the frontier. The incident briefly heightened tensions between the two countries. On 4 August, **Boko Haram** insurgents in the Lake Chad area killed 26 Chadian troops, the highest toll since a March 2020 attack in the same area that killed nearly 100 soldiers and triggered a massive counter-insurgency campaign. Mahamat Déby responded by withdrawing **half the 1,200-strong Chadian contingent in the G5 Sahel force** from the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso tri-border area as part of a “strategic redeployment”.

“Much is resting on Chad's transition”

Much is resting on Chad's transition. The region remains highly unstable, with neighbour Sudan pursuing its own delicate transition, while Libya's patience with the Chadian rebels on its soil may soon run out. On 14 September, troops answering to Khalifa Haftar, the commander whose forces had battled the government in Tripoli from 2014 through October

2020, when the sides concluded a ceasefire, attacked his former FACT

allies in south-western Libya. Libya's national unity government pact, signed in March, requires that all foreign fighters who backed either Haftar or Tripoli leave the country.

While there is broad consensus around the need to go to the national dialogue, the junta needs to build trust so that the dialogue can take place under the best possible conditions. To that end, Chad's authorities should revise the transition charter in line with AU demands prior to the dialogue, ensuring that the transition will not exceed eighteen months and incorporating provisions that bar military council members from running in the presidential election.

They should also make greater efforts to ensure that insurgent groups can join the dialogue, so as to undercut the ostensible *raison d'être* of the Libya-based rebellions and offer reassurance that at least some of their members can return to Chad. The insurgent groups' participation to the dialogue will offer them a forum for airing their grievances peacefully and thus is vital for avoiding further armed conflict in the country. The junta could also engage directly with armed groups in internationally mediated talks outside Chad before the dialogue kicks off in N'Djamena, in order to build a baseline of confidence among the sides and avert risks of confrontation once they return. For their part, international stakeholders, notably the AU, relevant member states and France, should make concerted efforts to encourage Chad's authorities to apply these measures.