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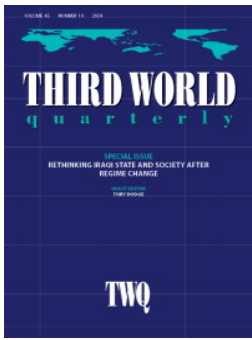
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# Transition meets instability: Chad after Idriss Déby Itno

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## Transition meets instability: Chad after Idriss Déby Itno

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### ABSTRACT

Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno died on 20 April 2021 on the front lines against rebels from the Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT). Following Déby's death, a military committee headed by his son, Mahamat Déby, seized power and initiated a transition that led to Mahamat's election to presidency in May 2024. Domestic conditions have worsened in the interim, and the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel are now among the most unstable regions in the world. Idriss Déby was a key figure in regional security operations and employed gatekeeping and neopatrimonialism to direct resources towards strengthening Chad's forces, but the prolonged transition has called into question the extent to which this strategy of rentier peacekeeping can be maintained. This article assesses why Chad is facing this crisis and how the transition has impacted domestic and regional conditions. This rests on theorisation of the Chadian state, analysis of Chad's history and transition to date, and application of theories of gatekeeper states, neopatrimonialism and omnibalancing to assess where the state is headed in the immediate term, concluding that a transition lacking real democratic transformation will exacerbate rather than alleviate tensions in Chad and the surrounding region.

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## Introduction

On 20 April 2021, longtime Chadian President Idriss Déby Itno was killed on the front lines against domestic Front for Change and Concord in Chad (FACT) rebels, opening a power vacuum in a country that had been an island of relative stability within one of the most unstable regions in the world. The period since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed a marked increase in coups across Africa, with 12 coup attempts on the continent between August 2020 and August 2023, including successful coups in Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Niger in addition to Chad (Chin and Kirkpatrick 2023). There has, more precisely, been a concentration of this recent rise in instability among Lake Chad Basin and Sahel countries, with nine coups in the region since 2020. Chad has long played a key role in both fighting and stoking insurgencies in the region, and the fall of Déby and uncertainty in Chad may constrain the ability of regional powers to restore stability in the region.

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Déby assumed the presidency in 1990 and, while failing to introduce democracy or improve domestic circumstances, long served as an important ally in the region for foreign powers including France and the United States (US). Seeking to avoid a power vacuum and ensure Chad did not follow the same pattern of regime change as many of its regional partners and neighbours, Chad's military leaders formed a transitional committee to ostensibly guide Chad to a democratic transition, with the late president's son Mahamat Idriss 'Kaka' Déby being appointed the head of this committee and, in October 2022, assuming the interim presidency before emerging victorious from the first round of presidential elections in May 2024. This apparent attempt at dynastic succession has been met with tentative approval internationally but, importantly, faced substantial early opposition domestically including widespread protests and clashes with security forces. Protests on 20 October 2022 in response to the younger Déby assuming the interim presidency and extending the deadline for democratic transition by up to 24 months, for instance, resulted in as many as 218 civilian deaths (HRW 2023a).

'Black Thursday', as 20 October is known in Chad, is indicative of the fragility surrounding the country's transition and the potential powder keg facing the new president. Amidst patterns of insecurity and forceful regime turnover in the region, the current transition in Chad could exacerbate tensions and add to the growing list of countries to succumb to civil conflict since 2020. Such an outcome is not inevitable, however, and will likely come down to the precise nature of the new regime and responses to Mahamat's victory. Importantly, external powers including the African Union (AU), France, and the US failed to condemn the unconstitutional transfer of power following Déby's death, and at the time Chad was the only AU member state since 2020 to have retained its membership after falling to a successful coup, although sanctions against other states in the region have since eased.

At Idriss Déby's funeral, French president Emmanuel Macron, perhaps sensing the wave of anti-France sentiment that has swept across the region, pledged that France would 'never let anyone, either today or tomorrow, challenge Chad's stability and integrity' (Nodjimbadem 2022). Chad's state has long derived much of its legitimacy from external sources, particularly through its operation as a 'gatekeeper state' (Cooper 2020; Henningsen and Gissel 2022) and emphasis on 'omnibalancing' (David 1991; Welz 2022). These strategies have been integral to the maintenance of neopatrimonial rule under Déby and have involved the application of 'rentier peacekeeping' (David 1991; Welz 2022; Brosig 2017) to ensure domestic abuses went largely ignored on the international stage. Any transition for Chad or effort to improve domestic and regional circumstances, then, rests on how and to what extent the state addresses these challenges and how it approaches gatekeeping, omnibalancing and neopatrimonialism.

### ***Gatekeeping, omnibalancing, and neopatrimonialism in Chad***

Chad is a textbook example of a gatekeeper state, concentrating efforts towards maintaining control over domestic institutions and the flow of resources and constructing regime security based on control over its borders, clientelism, and attracting international support (Henningsen and Gissel 2022). This nature of the Chadian state under Déby rested on the regime's dependence on international legitimacy, employing the militarisation of foreign policy to strengthen relationships to gain external and, to a lesser extent, domestic legitimacy (Emmanuel and Schwartz 2019, 197–198). This has been a trademark of its operations since

independence and has rested on domestic neopatrimonialism and the distribution of targeted patronage to secure domestic and international alliances (Emmanuel and Schwartz 2019, 197–198). As has been observed by scholars like Debos (2016a) and Henningsen and Gissel (2022), since gaining independence Chad has repeatedly fallen victim to domestic insurgencies, coups and civil conflict ‘as the result of elites’ attempt to control the gate and the flow of money and goods’ (Henningsen and Gissel 2022, 834). As Powell (2017) noted, in other words, ‘Chad is not a “stable” country, and the major source of instability is the regime itself’ (64). This self-imposed instability has, if anything, been exacerbated by the fall of Idriss Déby and the rise of his son.

Chad’s stable instability in recent decades has rested on its ability to omnibalance internal and external alliances and preserve gatekeeping mechanisms to concentrate influence and resources among a narrow selection of elites. In other words, Chad has presented itself to foreign patrons as an important partner in regional security efforts while at home actively repressing or co-opting opposition, a pattern that continued under the transitional government. Chad’s importance to regional security operations and Western powers’ ‘War on Terror’, via troop contributions and hosting and training of foreign forces, helped Déby retain power and remain virtually immune to international critique of his ruling style (Welz 2022). Déby was notorious for violently silencing opposition and stoking cross-border insurgencies when politically expedient, most notably through proxy wars with Sudan (Welz 2022; Henningsen and Gissel 2022). Despite this destabilising impact, the country’s status as a leading contributor to multinational operations has allowed Chad to cast itself as an indispensable partner in a strategically vital geographic area. This has resulted in leniency from foreign powers as a result of successful omnibalancing and moulding a particular international visage out of gatekeeper and neopatrimonial operations.

Neopatrimonialism represents the combined application of informal, ‘traditional’ and formal, ‘legal-rational’ mechanisms for rule to manage power and resources to preserve the centrality of the regime in domestic political and economic operations (McDonald 2022; Sigman and Lindberg 2017; Mkandawire 2015). In Chad, neopatrimonialism has been key to the regime’s ability to omnibalance and gatekeep, controlling resources and manufacturing external legitimacy through clientelism and regional peacekeeping operations. These strategies were integral to the success and survival of the regime under Idriss Déby Itno and will be among the core challenges facing his successor. In the aftermath of Déby’s death, the nature and result of Chad’s transition under its new President Déby will determine the role it plays in future regional operations, its relationship with Chadian society, and the extent to which it is able to navigate the demands of gatekeeping, omnibalancing and neopatrimonialism. The outcome of these processes will be significant for the future of Chad and the surrounding region.

### ***Past, present and future in Chad and the Lake Chad Basin***

These dynamics in Chad and the Lake Chad Basin have prompted this article’s interrogation of the influence of Chad’s transition on circumstances in this country and the surrounding region. Chad has long been a remarkable case of regime survival in the absence of any real domestic security or legitimacy, a record that has rested on its exploitation of oil reserves and attraction of international support. While Déby at the head of this gatekeeper state served dual roles as regional stabiliser and self-serving dictator (Okoli et al. 2022), the wave

of coups witnessed in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel offers insight into the risks facing his successor. Amidst this backdrop, newly elected President Mahamat Déby prolonged the transition and embraced tools for suppression and co-optation similar to those applied so successfully by his father, calling into question the legitimacy of the recent referendum and election. The ambiguity of this transition in Chad, and the wider implications for the surrounding region, are at the core of this article's analysis.

Specifically, this article sets out to investigate the precise dynamics underlying Chad's transition and the ramifications from this country's crisis. This rests on two core questions: *Why is Chad facing this crisis?* And *How has the transition influenced domestic and regional conditions?* These will be addressed through a theorisation of the Chadian state through the application of theories on gatekeeping, omnibalancing and neopatrimonialism and a review of Chad's history with instability and authoritarianism before expanding the focus to assess regional dynamics during and after the reign of Idriss Déby Itno. These insights will be applied within a broader discussion gauging what the immediate future holds under Déby's successor and what this means for domestic and regional dynamics and outcomes. The final section will recommend areas for future research and conclude.

## Theorising the state of Chad

Since gaining independence in 1960, Chad has represented a clear example of a neopatrimonial gatekeeper state dependent upon omnibalancing strategies and a militarised political marketplace to preserve the regime in power (Henningesen and Gissel 2022; Welz 2022). These processes have occurred at the expense of democracy or development in Chad and, while ostensibly aimed at providing security, have exacerbated domestic tensions and provided the context for the forceful toppling of each of the country's authoritarian leaders. Idriss Déby, in this way, is only the latest in a string of autocratic leaders to be forcefully removed from office in Chad since gaining independence from France. The former metropole, for its part, is far from innocent, frequently prioritising regime security over democratisation or development in Chad and publicly declaring unwavering support for the transition after the death of its 'faithful friend' (Tubiana 2021a, 7).

Such external sources of support and legitimacy have been central to the priorities of the Chadian state under successive presidents, accounting for a relative lack of domestic legitimacy. As Hansen (2020) observed, '[w]ithout armed support, gaining power in Chad has proven impossible' (17). Déby's ability to omnibalance domestic pressure and a need for international support was integral to the preservation of his regime. Such efforts by the state in Chad have rested, particularly in recent decades, on its ability to gatekeep between domestic and international marketplaces, strategically directing the flow of resources into the country, strengthening international alliances to weaken opposition, and employing access to power and resources to co-opt or suppress rival elites (Henningesen and Gissel 2022). This has relied on the state's use of neopatrimonial institutions and, specifically, international and domestic clientelist networks aimed at preserving those in power and co-opting or repressing domestic dissent. Out of these processes, the militarised political marketplace installed under successive Chadian regimes moulded a state that is heavily dependent on foreign support and, as has repeatedly proven the case, susceptible to incursions and overthrow due to a lack of domestic legitimacy or development (Debos 2014; De Waal 2014).

Such efforts became even more exaggerated under Idriss Déby following the onset of oil revenues in the 2000s, with substantial funds being directed towards growing the Chadian military to expand its importance to foreign powers and portray Chad as a 'regional hegemon' (Emmanuel and Schwartz 2019). The regime of Idriss Déby Itno, therefore, was driven by dual demands to quell domestic opposition and attract foreign support to manufacture external legitimacy. While Déby acted as a regional stabiliser and self-serving dictator, however, his death represents a crossroads for Chad. Put simply, Chad can either maintain the course and prioritise regime security or install a more representative government and provide genuine hope that its politics, economics, and society can change for the better. To assess Chad's paths in a post-Déby era and the nature of the transition to date, the article now turns its attention to providing a framework for analysing the Chadian state, the transition under Mahamat Déby, and what this indicates as to the outcomes and fallout from the elder Déby's demise.

### *Insecurity and the neopatrimonial gatekeeper state*

The survival of a gatekeeper state relies on its ability to attract international support, secure its borders, and manufacture domestic alliances (Gissel and Henningsen 2021). While the state under Idriss Déby employed its substantial military forces towards the first two objectives, importantly, the late president's ability to create alliances with potential domestic rivals in large part rested on the use of neopatrimonialism and specifically the targeted flow of resources and appointments through clientelist networks designed to preserve the regime. Theories of neopatrimonialism emphasise the use of clientelism, presidentialism and corruption to preserve the ruler's mandate and co-opt rival elites (McDonald 2022; Sigman and Lindberg 2017; Mkandawire 2015). This rests on the integration of these informal systems into the formal legal-rational instruments of the state, institutionalising patron-client relationships and freeing the state from pursuing any real legitimacy from its citizens (McDonald 2022; Sigman and Lindberg 2017; Mkandawire 2015). While critics argue neopatrimonialism 'offers little analytical content and has no predictive value', its use in this article aligns with such scholars' acknowledgement that 'neopatrimonialism can be used to describe different styles of exercising authority, idiosyncratic mannerisms of certain individual leaders, and social practices within states' and is not exclusive to the African context (Mkandawire 2015, 564).

To make such a system operate effectively, the Chadian state was forced to constantly omnibalance to manage threats from within and outside its borders, with Déby in particular demonstrating this drive to strengthen international relationships to counteract significant domestic threats (Welz 2022; Tubiana and Debos 2016). Not unlike neopatrimonial and gatekeeping states, importantly, theories of omnibalancing refer to systems motivated by the survival of the leader's reign rather than of the state itself, providing important insight into the operation of the Chadian state before, during and after the rule of Idriss Déby Itno (Welz 2022, 384). Chad has historically been characterised by authoritarian rule, employing gatekeeping and neopatrimonialism to concentrate power and resources among a narrow selection of elites with minimal development or delivery of basic needs (McDonald 2022). The resulting demands from omnibalancing domestic and international alliances and threats have been a centrepiece of Chadian politics, particularly since the accession of Idriss Déby in 1990 (Henningsen and Gissel 2022; Welz 2022), and represent key challenges facing the

new president. Though the transition has placed greater emphasis on stability than transformation, importantly, some scholars have argued that dynastic accession, while not unique among countries in the region, may yield the opposite of the intended result (Lacher 2022). Nevertheless, in the first round of the May 2024 election, Mahamat was elected president under the For a United Chad coalition led by the Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS) and consisting of more than 220 political parties along with support from several important rival elites.

Idriss Déby, in expanding Chad's militarised neopatrimonial gatekeeper state, moulded institutions based on clientelistic networks with the late big man at their centre. The operationalisation of rentier peacekeeping, rapid growth of the Chadian military, and sporadic incursions into and proxy wars with neighbouring countries, furthermore, weakened the state's formal institutions and impeded the distribution of resources and services, which may have aided in combatting vulnerability and insurgencies in Chad (Powell 2017). Around 81.5% of Chad's population is under 35 years of age, one of the highest youth population rates in the world (Akinyetun 2023, 185–186), and unemployment in Chad went from 42% in 2015 to 60% in 2017, increasing public disillusionment with the state and increasing youths' vulnerability to recruitment by rebel insurgencies (Akinyetun 2023; Mahmood and Ani 2018). Politics as normal in Chad, in other words, has contributed to and exacerbated domestic security challenges, strengthened regional insurgencies and impeded development (Akinyetun 2023; Mahmood and Ani 2018). Such pressures have been prominent in Chad for decades and, despite having brought most major opposition figures to the side of the transition, remain important concerns for Mahamat Déby as he seeks to suppress dissent, co-opt rival elites, and reassure foreign backers that Chad remains a reliable partner in an increasingly uncertain regional security landscape.

Despite the influx of oil revenues into Chad since 2003, the Chadian populace remain among the poorest and most vulnerable peoples in the world (Akinyemi and Asiyani 2023). Chad is one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Transparency International 2022) and is ranked among the least developed countries in the world in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Human Development Index (HDI) even when adjusted for inequality (UNDP 2022). Such outcomes are largely attributable to the Chadian state's function as a gatekeeper between the domestic and foreign, with the president prioritising international partnerships, border security and co-optation of potential rivals to preserve his mandate and directing resources towards these ends, particularly through the growth of Chad's military forces and placement of rival elites into strategic positions from which they gain access to resources without threatening power (Tubiana and Debos 2016). These processes are characterised by active omnibalancing of domestic and international alliances, employing gatekeeping and neopatrimonialism to suppress internal dissent and strengthen the external relationships from which it derives the vast majority of its legitimacy (Tubiana and Debos 2016; Welz 2022). This nature of the Chadian state has starved the populace of access to vital resources and services, stoked domestic and cross-border insurgencies, and sacrificed long-term stability and development for a much more fragile security that only benefits ruling elites.

Gatekeeper states interject themselves between domestic society and external markets and are characterised by an elite preoccupation with control over resources and institutions without providing for penetration by the state into domestic society (Henningsen and Gissel 2022, 829–830). Neopatrimonial states, similarly, are characterised by an elite emphasis on



formal and informal mechanisms for promoting clientelism, presidentialism and corruption, with an emphasis on narrowing the distribution of and access to key domestic resources to preserve the ruler's mandate (McDonald 2022; Mkandawire 2015; Erdmann and Engel 2007). Given these pressures, states like Chad need to omnibalance, with foreign policy dictated by domestic pressures and a need to attract and support foreign partners to increase the chances of regime survival (Welz 2022; David 1991). In other words, the Chadian state under Idriss Déby relied on external sources of legitimacy while using regional military interventions to bolster public support, force to repress public opposition, and clientelist networks involving the distribution of power and resources, often centred on ethnic rivalries and allegiances, to co-opt elite actors (Tubiana and Debos 2016).

These demands were integral to the operation of the Chadian state under Idriss Déby and have retained their centrality under Mahamat Déby, offering important insight into the form and function of the state going forward. After Déby's death, the Chadian state was seized by a military junta led by his son in a clear effort to preserve the neopatrimonial gatekeeper state employed so effectively under the late president (Lacher 2022). This junta established Mahamat Déby as the interim president and, in the time since, managed to suppress most public opposition while co-opting important critics and potential rivals for the presidency like Saleh Kebzabo and Succes Masra, despite the latter standing as the leading opposition candidate in the May 2024 election (Olivier 2024b, 2024c). The domestic operations of this state were only one side of the coin under the late president, however, and its gatekeeping priorities, emphasis on international alliances, and influence over regional security operations as a form of rentier peacekeeping have only served to exacerbate the militarisation of Chad and the surrounding region (Welz 2022). Rather than being an unfortunate byproduct of Déby's ambitions as a regional stabiliser, this was all part of a strategy that provided for the survival of his regime, amplifying the importance of Mahamat Déby's ability to balance international and domestic pressures and alliances through similar mechanisms. As this transition proceeds towards its conclusion, then, the priorities institutionalised by the new Chadian regime will be integral to long-term security in this historically unstable country and region.

### Chad before, under and after Idriss Déby Itno: a brief history

Chad gained independence from France in August 1960 and proceeded to become one of the poorest and most unstable countries in the world, only ranking above South Sudan in the UNDP's (2022) Human Development Index (HDI). Chad's gross domestic product (GDP) increased from US\$1.39 billion in 2000 to US\$11.78 billion in 2021, but its GDP per capita in 2021 was only US\$685.70 (World Bank 2023). Around 62% of Chad's population lives in extreme poverty and remains highly vulnerable to risks and displacement from conflict, climate threats, and other challenges (Oyekanmi 2022). These conditions did not arise overnight nor are they unique to this country, but Chad's scope of influence and potential impact on neighbouring countries make the convergence of an unstable history and uncertain future in this context particularly alarming. Prior to 1960, Chad was a *territoire* under the auspices of French Equatorial Africa, governed alongside Gabon, the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), and the Central African Republic (CAR). Since then, Chad has largely failed to remain stable as the state has come to prioritise regime security over domestic penetration or development.

Chad's first president, François Tombalbaye, was president from 1960 until his assassination in April 1975, setting a precedent that continues to dominate proceedings in Chad today. Tombalbaye was threatened by rebellions starting in 1965 and benefitted from foreign interventions by France and Libya in 1969 and 1972, respectively, but his assassination in 1975 foreshadowed the country's dissolution into civil war, inspiring the militarisation of Chadian society and indicating to prospective insurgents that power and resources in Chad were there to be taken (Azavedo 1998). Chad would fall victim to waves of civil conflict between 1977 and 1982, and the years between 1979 and 1982 witnessed 'the demise of the [Chadian] state' (Azavedo 1998, 75). The state was divided among competing factions, with a distinct north–south punctuation, and clashes in the capital of N'Djamena were frequent as the 1976 split within the National Liberation Front of Chad (FROLINAT) between Hissène Habré, later supported by the US and France, and Goukouni Oueddi, supported by Libya, would determine Chad's future. Habré and his Armed Forces of the North (FAN) would emerge victorious and assume the presidency in June 1982 (Azavedo 1998, 75).

The accession of Hissène Habré to the Chadian presidency would, however, be far from the end of the country's history with instability. Habré's reign over Chad would last eight and a half years and be stricken by civil conflict and hardnosed authoritarianism, prompting his toppling by the MPS led by his former commander, Idriss Déby Itno, in December 1990. Habré would go on to gain unwelcome notoriety in 2016 as the first head of state to be found guilty of crimes against humanity in a foreign court following his trial in Senegal and sentencing to life imprisonment. Far from altering this course in Chad, Idriss Déby's rule would represent more of the same, albeit with a greater emphasis on external legitimacy and appealing directly, and more successfully, to foreign patrons (Tubiana and Debos 2016). Where Déby's reign would depart from his predecessors', importantly, was in the resources available to the state and its forces, with the onset of oil revenues in 2003 representing a key turning point in Chad's history.

Despite now being a significant exporter of oil, Chad's GDP per capita (current US\$) in 2022 was \$716.80 (World Bank 2024) and these funds have failed to improve circumstances for the majority of Chadians, of whom roughly 10.65 million were living in extreme poverty in 2022 (Oyekanmi 2022). Déby was re-elected six times after gaining power in 1990, most recently on the eve of his death in April 2021. An emphasis on gatekeeping, external legitimacy, and an increasingly militarised political marketplace characterised by politico-military actors' dominance over a system running on clientelism and patronage, however, has cemented the state's dependence on external rents, decentralisation, violent governance, rent-seeking rebellions and patrimonial co-optation (Debos 2014; Powell 2017), impeding any progress towards fulfilling promises for free and fair democracy. This lack of progress stoked domestic insurgencies, including that which led to Déby's death, and represents a core challenge facing his successor. While Mahamat Déby managed to organise, and win, presidential elections, however, there has been no real indication that ruling elites are willing to promote the sort of change demanded by the Chadian populace.

### *Rentier peacekeeping and counterinsurgency in the Lake Chad Basin*

Compounding these conditions, Chad through its efforts to omnibalance and gatekeep has implemented a strategy for 'rentier peacekeeping' (Brosig 2017; Welz 2022) that has provoked regional insecurity and exacerbated tensions between the state and its citizenry.

The Chadian state has come to be characterised by its substantial contributions to regional peacekeeping operations and reliance on foreign powers for legitimacy, depriving Chadian society of any prospects for improving domestic circumstances. According to a report by Comité Catholique Contra la Faim et pour le Développement (CCFD)-Terre solidaire, shortly after the onset of oil revenues Chad's military expenditures increased by a factor of 7.79 between 2004 and 2009, from 35.3 billion FCFA (€53 million) to 275.7 billion FCFA (€420 million) (cited in Debos, 2016b, 4). At least \$4.5 billion from the original oil consortium payment from Chevron was used for arms imports, and '[a]rms imports were five times higher in 2004–2008 than in 1999–2003' (Debos, 2016b, 4). This rapid expansion of its military capabilities was integral to Chad's relative security, particularly in the face of regime-threatening civil conflict in the second half of the 2000s, as well as Déby's ability to derive legitimacy from external support in the absence of domestic penetration or development.

The convergence of domestic repression and regional intervention in Chad has been central both to surviving waves of conflict and the concurrent failure to manufacture any real stability or socioeconomic improvement. These dualling priorities were central to Déby's reign and his dichotomous role as a regional stabiliser and self-serving dictator (Okoli et al. 2022). Specifically, in addition to efforts to repress and co-opt opposition domestically, the Chadian state under Idriss Déby was a key, if controversial, contributor to regional peacekeeping forces, including the G5 Sahel Joint Force (G5JF), the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) headquartered in N'Djamena (Okoli et al. 2022). This drive to become the most potent military force in the region has been key to the strategy of omnibalancing employed by the Chadian state, prioritising the prestige and external legitimacy derived from these interventions, and is a clear avenue through which shifting domestic priorities could provoke increased insecurity in the region.

Chad in the past decade and a half has become a key ally to the West's 'War on Terror' (Tubiana 2021b), prompting concern that the loss of the Chadian big man could exacerbate the troubling rate of insurgencies, coups and terrorism in the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel (Blanchard et al. 2021; Orosz 2021; Moncrieff, Lesueur, and Gazzini 2021). Alongside its military ambitions, under Déby Chad attained key leadership positions in intergovernmental bodies like the AU and United Nations (UN), including representing central Africa in the AU Peace and Security Council and successfully campaigning for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council (Okoli et al. 2022). Déby himself was appointed AU Chairperson in 2016, allowing him to manufacture the accession of a key ally who has since fallen out with his son, the current AU Chairperson and former Chadian foreign minister and prime minister Moussa Faki, to the position in 2017 (Okoli et al. 2022). Déby appealed for further support by strengthening Chad's position in the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), deepening connections with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and aiding EU operations in the region including European Union Force (EUFOR) (Okoli et al. 2022).

Through these roles, Chad under Idriss Déby cast itself as an indispensable partner in the fight against regional terrorist groups, including deploying troops against Boko Haram since 2015 as part of the MNJTF (Dagogo 2022), adopting domestic measures including the Terrorism Act 2015 and prosecuting and convicting terrorists to combat the influence of such groups (Kwaja 2022, 75). Since the death of its longtime president, however, regional

security dynamics have evolved significantly, with the G5 Sahel essentially defunct following withdrawal by Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso and any Chadian involvement in these countries requiring approval by this newly formed Alliance of Sahel States (AES) (Laplace 2024). As insecurity continues to grip the region, then, the specific nature of Chad's relationships with its neighbours and regional allies may well depend upon the form the new regime takes and Mahamat Déby's ability to build international alliances similar to those that formed a core component of the elder Déby's ability to expand his regional influence and importance to foreign patrons.

### *The transition to date*

Following Idriss Déby Itno's death in April 2021, a military council comprising 15 generals and headed by his son Mahamat Déby went against constitutional procedures to place the younger Déby at the head of the state. The 'transitional military committee' dissolved the National Assembly and appointed Mahamat to lead the transition, as they concluded that this was necessary to avoid further instability and civil conflict (Soudan 2021). Although transitional authorities repeatedly emphasised their desire to return the country to civilian rule and hold democratic elections to move Chad forward politically, their actual commitment to such strides remained ambiguous at best. Mahamat Déby explicitly called for 'new institutions' and 'free, democratic and transparent' elections (Olivier 2021), but the four-star general known to prefer operating behind the scenes emerged victorious from the first round of voting in May 2024 and boasts the support of a wide range of political parties and potential rivals under the For a United Chad coalition.

The son of the late president has claimed this *de facto* coup d'état 'is not intended to confiscate power'. The new President of Chad had, however, set a prerequisite of Chadians being 'able to get along' and foreign partners helping 'finance the dialogue and the elections' before any democratic transition would be enacted (Africanews 2021). For a time, it remained unclear when or to what extent these objectives could be met, particularly in the absence of cooperation from key groups including the FACT rebel movement (Abayomi and Akanji 2021). With the successful passage of the 2023 referendum approving unitary government and victory in the presidential elections in May 2024, however, the transition appears well on its way towards cementing the reign of Mahamat Déby (Jeune Afrique 2024). If the official narrative is to be taken at face value, importantly, Déby's accession to head of the 'transitional military committee' and eventually president was vital for Chad's security.

In his first major interview after assuming power in 2021 the younger Déby discussed the circumstances that led to his seizure of power and why this move was necessary:

The chief of staff went to see the president of the national assembly to tell him to assume power, as provided by the constitution. He declined, arguing that the country was still at war and that he could not take the risk of leading it under these conditions. The chiefs of the different army corps then met, and we decided to take responsibility. A transitional military committee of 15 members was formed, and I was appointed by my brothers in arms to chair it. After a period of reflection, I accepted because we had to avoid a vacuum at all costs. The Chadian army has always played the role of the national bulwark. (Soudan 2021)

This account presents Chad as a country desperately in need of leadership and direction, and military leaders as the only actors capable of ensuring a stable transition for Chad after

civilian leaders cowered from their responsibilities. Such narratives have, however, failed to satisfy critics who have come to view this move as a coup d'état manufactured to ensure Mahamat's accession to maintain the status quo established under his father.

The new president has insisted his seizure of power 'was not premeditated and had nothing to do with a coup', maintaining that

The president of the national assembly, who was supposed to become president, refused to take office and no one could force him to become the head of state against his will ... It was therefore our duty to take charge of the transitional government. (Soudan 2021)

Throughout such statements, Mahamat Déby emphasised the committee's desire for democracy and to 'withdraw to the barracks' once its 'mission ... to preserve peace, unity and sovereignty' was completed. Nevertheless, he handily won the presidential election in May 2024, formally establishing the former interim president as his father's long-term successor at the head of the Chadian state. Considering the apparent reluctance to provide for democratic transition, observers and critics have challenged the legitimacy of his mandate and accused authorities of manufacturing dynastic succession to preserve their positions in the name of regime security (Lacher 2022).

Upon seizing power, the military council dissolved the National Assembly and promised a national dialogue and democratic elections within 18 months. This deadline passed in October 2022 and, rather than announcing free and fair elections to decide Chad's next leader, the National Reconciliation Dialogue Forum announced an extension of this deadline by up to two years, naming Mahamat Déby Interim President. This announcement on 20 October 2022 was met by widespread outrage, with protests prompting a violent government response as civil society and other critics viewed such moves as tantamount to an outright coup (Nodjimbadem 2022). Key opposition and rebel groups, likewise, withdrew from the National Dialogue following the announcement that Déby and all other members of the transitional government would be permitted to run for the presidency (Abayomi and Akanji 2021). Most of these groups have since been co-opted or otherwise returned to dialogue, however, with only the rebel groups FACT and Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR) remaining steadfast in their outright opposition to the transition (Olivier 2024a).

Despite public support from foreign powers including the AU and France, the transition for Chad thus far has generally failed to dispel suspicion that this seizure of power was aimed at manufacturing dynastic succession to preserve the regime's form and function. Chad under Idriss Déby Itno was a fundamentally neopatrimonial state, employing corruption, patronage and clientelism to preserve the regime and actively gatekeeping to secure the late president's rule (Henningsen and Gissel 2022). President Déby's death at the hands of FACT rebels marked the first time in almost three decades there was genuine hope for a first democratic transfer of power in the country's history. This unique disruption to authoritarian rule could have provided an opening of the political space in Chad and represented a key turning point in Chad's history. As it has played out, however, such hopes seem to have already been thoroughly dashed.

## Emerging dynamics and prospects for change

The core characteristics of the Chadian state under Idriss Déby Itno are fundamentally incompatible with the authorities' expressed goals of democracy, security and development. As has

been exhibited by this country through its record in (unsuccessfully) delivering security and development, when formal institutions are centred on preserving the state's gatekeeper status and protecting the regime through repression, political patronage, clientelistic co-optation, and external legitimacy, the benefits are limited and concentrated among a narrow group of elites. If Chad is to serve a stabilising role in the region and meet its obligations to its citizenry, then, the regime of Mahamat Déby must represent a departure from the rest of Chad's history and yield improved representation and transparency to give the Chadian populace for the first time a say in how they are governed and served by their state. Any outcome short of this is likely to further stoke domestic insurgency and provoke continued instability in a region that, since 2020, has witnessed more coups than every other region of the world combined (Chin and Kirkpatrick 2023).

All but one coup d'état since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has occurred in Africa and, of these, the majority have been concentrated among countries in and around the Lake Chad Basin and Sahel (Chin and Kirkpatrick 2023). With Chad at the heart of this region and its neighbours among the most recent victims of forceful seizure of power, exacerbation of domestic tensions in Chad represents a genuine threat to security in the countries in this region and beyond. In other words, while this transition is significant in and of itself, it assumes even greater importance once implications for Mali, Niger, Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Burkina Faso and other countries in the region are considered. In the Lake Chad region, conflict events involving identity militia including 'tribal, communal, ethnic, local, clan, religious, and caste militias' (ACLEDD 2023, 28) increased by 136% between 2015 and 2022, with regional fatalities from such events increasing by 26% to 45,472 in 2022 (Akinyetun and Ogunbodede 2023). As these patterns continue, leaders will have to adopt new strategies which account for shifting allegiances and increasing disillusionment among citizens in the region.

Perhaps the key actor to be considered driving relevant processes and shaping the transition is the son of the late president, Mahamat Déby. The newly elected President of Chad served as a four-star general under his father's rule and has since the elder Déby's death emerged as a measured and influential figure willing and able to meet with foreign leaders and co-opt rival elites to secure his position (Olivier 2024b, 2024c). Having recently won the presidency, a supporting coalition of more than 220 parties and co-optation of potential rivals like Saleh Kebzabo and Succes Masra, along with the suspicious death of others like Yaya Dillo, indicated a solidification of his position in advance of his inevitable electoral victory in May 2024 (Olivier 2024a, 2024b, 2024c). Violent state responses to pro-democracy protests, like that in October 2022, importantly, have shown some observers all they need to know when interrogating whether the younger Déby is likely to mimic his father in asserting his control through force (Nodjimbadem 2022). Although Mahamat has a strong reputation from his military endeavours, in other words, ambition to fill his father's shoes seems likely to lead this new leader down a similar path to his predecessor.

While a lack of progress or democratisation in Chad under new leadership is likely to exacerbate tensions and promote the continued impoverishment and disillusionment of the Chadian populace, this accession could furthermore have substantial knock-on effects for the rest of the region, particularly its neighbours like Sudan in the midst of severe humanitarian crises already impacting Chad (Crisis Group 2023). The president-elect is well respected for his role in leading domestic and regional security operations, but balancing the domestic and international demands on the Chadian state will require more than increased



militarisation and the strategic redeployment of forces. As more countries in the region fall victim to the increasingly endemic nature of civil conflict and insurgencies, Chad's leadership is faced with an increasingly disillusioned and vulnerable citizenry. Absent real change to Chad's formal institutions, Chadians are likely to continue to be repressed, quashing hopes for representation or development and likely ensuring Chad remains among the most unstable and impoverished countries in the world.

Ongoing changes to regional security dynamics, furthermore, are likely to influence the nature of regional security operations to which Chadian forces have contributed significantly, with an increasingly complex regional security landscape potentially inhibiting Mahamat Déby's ability to manufacture external legitimacy in the same way as his father. The G5 Sahel is essentially defunct, Chad has strategically redeployed some of its troops amidst increased domestic instability (Al Jazeera 2021) and the impact of these changes may increasingly be felt as the region grapples with a spike in coups and insurgencies (Chin and Kirkpatrick 2023). Economic crisis and the very nature of Chad's state have ensured the Chadian populace has become increasingly disillusioned and vulnerable to recruitment by violent groups, and similar trends are evident throughout the region. Niger, on 26 July 2023, fell victim to a successful coup d'état when members of the presidential guard led by Abdourahamane Tchiani seized power and detained the democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum, marking the latest example of the instability dominating the region since 2020.

Since August 2020 there have been 13 coups globally, nine of which were located in the Lake Chad Basin or Sahel, including two in Sudan, two in Niger, two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, and one in Chad (Chin and Kirkpatrick 2023). Additional neighbours of Chad including Cameroon and CAR, similarly, continue to grapple with insurgencies located near their borders with Chad while Gabon, long a unique case of regime longevity, experienced its own successful coup in August 2023. Nigeria, likewise, continues to battle terrorist movements, particularly Boko Haram which is a concern for all the countries of the Lake Chad Basin (Sempija, Brito, and Moutaouakil 2023). This complex, interwoven set of security concerns in the region raises the stakes of Chad's management of transition and domestic crisis given the central role Chad assumed in regional multinational operations under Idriss Déby.

This spike in instability has arguably been accompanied by democratic backsliding, most recently in Niger, and opposition figures immediately disputed the outcome of Chad's 2024 presidential election (Africanews 2024). Foreign powers, who arguably wield the most potent influence over the actions of the Chadian state, gave their tentative blessing to the military seizure of power and, in so doing, expressed their desire for the stability of this key ally to be preserved by any means necessary (Tubiana 2021b). Such consistency of external alliances indicates the extent to which the Chadian state is likely to retain its focus on balancing international and domestic alliances and threats and gatekeeping to control the flow of resources and power to prioritise the security of the new Déby regime, with much of its legitimacy derived from foreign powers absent free and fair democratic elections or improvement in Chadians' daily lives.

Chad for most of Idriss Déby's reign manufactured a vulnerable stability based on its ability to attract international allies, co-opt domestic actors, and serve an increasingly central role in regional security operations. The ability of the Chadian state to omnibalance domestic and international alliances has been integral to its relative security and is thus likely to remain a core focus of the new Chadian regime. As a textbook example of neopatrimonialism and gatekeeper politics, the Chadian state is likely to remain an intermediary between domestic

and foreign markets, impeding the distribution of domestic resources via corruption and clientelism and ensuring the Chadian populace remain among the poorest and most vulnerable in the world. With the accession of Mahamat Déby, domestic calls for real democratic change have seemingly fallen on deaf ears as ruling interests focus on preserving their influence and foreign powers retain access to one of the most potent militaries in the continent.

This outcome will likely prolong the militarisation of the region and force Chad and its neighbours to continue to prioritise security over development, a result that may be disastrous for some of the most vulnerable peoples in the world. Citizens in Chad and the surrounding region are grappling with severe vulnerabilities including extreme poverty and widespread displacement, which drive further disillusionment and perpetuate cycles of instability and deprivation. These concurrent threats have increased competition over limited land and resources, exacerbating domestic and cross-border tensions (Akinyetun and Ogunbodede 2023). These challenges have driven desperation and made Chad's relatively young population more likely to fall victim to recruitment by rebel or terrorist forces (Akinyetun 2023). Uncertainty and a lack of responsiveness from the governments of the region have exacerbated existing challenges, and increased insecurity in Chad can only add to this picture in the immediate term.

## Conclusion

The death of Idriss Déby Itno sent shockwaves throughout the region and could have presented an opportunity for important, if difficult, democratic transformation to provide space for input and development that has so far been absent in Chad. This did not occur, and power was seized by a military committee lead by Déby's son, which scrapped the National Assembly, formed a national dialogue initially boycotted by key rebel and opposition factions, and named the younger Déby Interim President of Chad. Pro-democracy protests were met with violent crackdowns, and the elections to have been announced in October 2022 were delayed until May 2024. Further complicating matters, as President-elect Mahamat Déby consolidates his power, the surrounding region has witnessed a wave of coups and insurgencies, most recently in the July 2023 toppling of Nigerien president Mohamed Bazoum.

The transition in Chad thus presents a key challenge to the security of this country and contributes to the insecurity of the surrounding region. While the immediate stability of the country was preserved, the long-term future of Chad and the region rests on the form and function of political institutions and subsequent patterns of resource distribution, social penetration and service delivery exhibited by a post-Idriss Déby state. As one of the least 'developed' (UNDP 2022) and most corrupt (Transparency International 2022) countries in the world, the fragility of conditions in Chad and the vulnerability of the population cannot be exaggerated. Political succession that fails to deliver real change to the Chadian populace or meet vocal calls for democratisation is unlikely to improve these circumstances. Nevertheless, this appears to be precisely what has occurred.

Chad has, for most of its history, been a clear example of a neopatrimonial gatekeeper state, creating a system that favours a self-serving dictator who acts as a regional stabiliser to omnibalance international and domestic allegiances. As the region and country become increasingly vulnerable to civil conflict, however, different leadership qualities will be



required. When Idriss Déby Itno was able to wield an iron fist over the country and pre-empt domestic opposition by generating international legitimacy via military contributions, the lack of progress and widespread human rights abuses in Chad went largely ignored in favour of larger geopolitical considerations. As the Chadian population calls for change and the region receives increased international attention, the pressure has grown to finally deliver democracy and development. This would mark unprecedented progress in Chad and could set an important example for the rest of the region to follow, but indications thus far are not promising.

Following the 'Black Thursday' pro-democracy protests on 20 October 2022 which resulted in 218 civilian deaths according to the Chadian League for Human Rights (LTDH, cited in HRW 2023a) and 128 deaths and 518 injuries according to the National Human Rights Commission (HRW 2023b), the response by the transitional government was branded a 'parody of justice' by the Chad Bar Association (Nodjimbadem 2022). In total, 621 people were arrested for their involvement in the protests, including 83 children, and 262 people were sentenced to prison for two to three years for 'taking part in an unauthorized gathering, destroying property, arson, and disturbing public order' (HRW 2023b) before a pardon and amnesty were announced. The government response to these pro-democracy protests provides important insight into the intentions of Mahamat Déby and Chad's authorities. Amidst the recent instability in Sudan, Mali, Niger and other countries in the region, real democratic transformation to fill the void left by the authoritarian Idriss Déby has not occurred, implying the inevitable maintenance of the status quo in Chad.

With the accession of Mahamat Déby to the presidency, the future for Chad and the surrounding region remains bleak. The Lake Chad Basin and Sahel are increasingly characterised by instability, and Chad's transition may further stoke discord and reinforce a relative lack of democracy in the region. Although these processes are ongoing, emerging dynamics in the region open avenues for future research, particularly on the widespread instability in the region, why there has been such a spike in successful coups since 2020, and whether a changing role for foreign powers in intervention operations has revealed state weaknesses in coercing support. As Chad's transition reaches its conclusion, likewise, an analysis of political operations under Mahamat Déby will be revealing for the future of the Chadian state and the extent to which it retains its standing as a neopatrimonial gatekeeper state lacking significant domestic penetration.

Democratic transformation is an inherently difficult and disruptive process, but citizens in Chad demonstrated a desire for the first free and fair elections in their history. These calls were met with violent repression by the state under Mahamat Déby, indicating a distinct lack of elite support for change despite public declarations to the contrary. The rest of the region, and the world, have been closely monitoring the transition in Chad, and the effectiveness of regional security operations may well depend on the precise form a post-Idriss Déby Chad takes. If the resulting regime under Mahamat Déby resembles its predecessors, Chad is likely to continue to play a substantial role in regional peacekeeping activities while stoking insurgency and suppressing domestic opposition to navigate domestic and international pressures and manufacture fragile legitimacy. While democratisation could pose risks in the form of increased instability in the short term, however, creating a Chadian state more open and responsive to its population is the only outcome that is likely to improve circumstances for those in Chad and the surrounding region in the long term.

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