

Niger Capital Is Calm After Coup

February 20, 2010

By **ADAM NOSSITER**

COTONOU, Benin — The military junta that overthrew the president of [Niger](#) began asserting its authority on Friday, amid signs of public support within the country and condemnation from abroad.

Tanks continued to be posted at strategic locations in the capital, Niamey, a day after an assault on the presidential palace ended in the removal of President [Mamadou Tandja](#), whose turn toward autocracy in the last year had made him widely unpopular in the nation's cities.

Local journalists said that Mr. Tandja was imprisoned in a military barracks, as supporters of his ouster marched in the capital. "The situation is calm," said Moussa Kaka, who runs radio station Saraounia and had been jailed by the Tandja government. Mr. Kaka said he and hundreds of others went into the streets of Niamey on Friday in a show of support for the coup. Another demonstration is planned for Saturday.

But the [African Union](#), which had passed a resolution earlier this month to take a firmer stance against coups, suspended Niger, Agence France-Presse reported, adding another layer of isolation to an already poor nation. Niger had previously been shunned by its West African neighbors because of Mr. Tandja's steady dismantling of the nation's democratic institutions, and some African Union officials said the coup — whatever its aims — should be viewed no differently.

"There is not good or bad coups; all of them are bad," the African Union's peace and security commissioner, Ramtane Lamamra, said during a news conference at its headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on Thursday. "Once they happen, you have to condemn them with the same energy and same strength."

The military junta's intentions and makeup remained something of a mystery to observers in the capital. Several said unknown junior officers appeared to dominate. Maj. Salou Djibo, the self-proclaimed leader of the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy, as the junta calls itself, spoke to reporters about setting up a consultative council, and many of the ministers who had been seized in Thursday's coup were freed.

Anger at Mr. Tandja was deep, Mr. Kaka said. "People have had enough; they have suffered deeply," he said. He said he hoped that the junta would hold elections, though others in the capital expressed doubt about the new leaders' intentions and methods.

"This wasn't the best way to overthrow a regime like that," said Adjil Souley, a sociology professor in Niamey. "Regimes shouldn't be changed like this," he said, ticking off the numerous military coups that the country had suffered through.

Still, others said the sense of satisfaction at the overthrow of Mr. Tandja was palpable. The president had peeled away the impoverished country's democratic gains over the last year, dissolving the National Assembly and high court, and pushing through a new Constitution that extended his time in office, repealed term limits and gave him authoritarian powers.

"There is a sense of relief," said Ousmane Toudou, director of Radio Anfani, another private radio station. "Niamey is in favor of the coup. The people were totally hostile to Mamadou Tandja."

Alan Cowell contributed reporting from London, and Jason McLure from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.