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Niger: A coup for democracy?

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BBC News, Niamey

Most people in Niger's capital, Niamey, seem to regard the military coup as an opportunity not a disaster.

"We have had coups before, and usually not many people die, so for us the military coup is not so traumatic as it might be somewhere else," says Mohamed Bazoum, deputy president of the opposition PNDS Taraya party.

" Niger cannot survive without international aid "

Mohamed Bazoum PNDS Taraya

The last time Niger's military staged a coup was in 1999.

Then the putsch heralded a short transition before elections. Nigeriens hope this coup will lead towards elections as well.

"We're proud of what the soldiers have done and we expect them to manage a clean, honest transition, because the soldiers who have taken over are not eager and ambitious, they don't want power," said a man in Niamey's main market who did not want to be named.

'Have faith'

For most people, the advent of a military coup is the fault of the politicians, not the soldiers.

"It's regrettable that we have had a coup d'etat," said another man in the market. "But the politicians have failed us and so I am glad the army stepped in."

Many coups across West Africa have started out with soldiers promising a return to civilian rule and democracy. Things do not always go so smoothly.

But in Niger, most people think the army will stick to its word, including those in the government that was ousted.

"At this stage we have to have faith in what the army says and we think they are men of their word," says Tamboura Issoufou, the spokesman for the party of the deposed President Mamadou Tandja.

Mr Tandja's MNSD party may be allowed to take part in the transition and run in elections.

The opposition is adamant that Mr Tandja himself not only be barred, but tried for high treason.

Mr Bazoum has more forthright reasons for believing the army will return power to civilians.

"Niger cannot survive without international aid, and as long as there is a military government, the sanctions imposed during President Tandja's time will remain in place."

The extreme poverty of Niger has long been an important factor in its political landscape.

Crumbling tarmac

The country has had to rely on its uranium reserves for foreign revenue and has been very vulnerable to price fluctuations. Aid from the international community is essential.

In the past, unpaid salaries have led to tensions in society that have ended in coups.

Many in Niger think it was the international isolation caused by President Tandja's changing of the constitution to stay in power that posed the biggest threat to Niger's well-being.

Niger sits close to the bottom of the United Nations human development index and regularly faces food insecurity.

Being largely a desert nation, cultivating crops and raising livestock is a precarious business at the best of times.

At the end of January the government warned that 2.7 million people, or a fifth of the population, were facing food shortages because of poor rains.

There is no need to look for statistics to appreciate how poor Niger is.

When trucks and other vehicles cross the border into Niger from Benin, they feel the poverty straight away as the road deteriorates into potholes and falls away at the edges.

This road is the main artery from the capital Niamey down to the port of Cotonou in Benin, yet still the money has not been found to repair it.

The trucks crawl along at a snail's pace. Often hugely overloaded, they sometimes tip over as the heat-softened tarmac crumbles into the sand.

"Sometimes good things can come from coups," says Mr Bazoum.

The groups of beggars that wander around Niamey and the millions going hungry across the nation must be hoping the same thing.

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