

The Sahel's Intertwined Challenges

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**INSECURITY, TURBULENT POLITICS, AND WEAK INSTITUTIONS
STYMIE PROSPECTS FOR SHARED ECONOMIC PROGRESS**



Without an analysis of power, it is hard to understand inequality or much else in modern capitalism,” Angus Deaton writes in the March issue of *Finance & Development*. Deaton’s thinking is equally relevant for some of the world’s most impoverished countries, notably in West Africa. Without analyzing political power and how it interacts with other forms of power, it is impossible to understand the economic trajectories of West African countries and the extreme fragility and uncertainty that pervade security and politics in much of the region.

Political instability and insecurity

The central Sahel region has attracted special attention as several non-state armed groups, including terrorists, have taken root over the past dozen years. According to the 2024 Global Terrorism Index, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are among the 10 countries most affected by terrorism worldwide.

These three countries experienced military coups between 2020 and 2023. Mali went through a two-stage putsch in September 2020 and April 2021, which launched a new phase in its long political and security crises that began in 2012. Burkina Faso followed in 2022, with a coup in January and another in September. In Niger, there was a coup in July 2023, even though the security situation was much less serious than it had been in Mali and Burkina Faso.

Some of the military officers who seized power may have been motivated, at least partly, by a sincere desire to improve the security situation—but others may have been attracted by power and privilege. Officers were able to take advantage of the widespread popular frustration with the deteriorating security situation, as well as the lack of economic and social progress under the country’s democratically elected leaders. The inability of elected civilian governments to stem the loss of effective control over large swaths of national territory, in Mali and Burkina Faso in particular, handed the military the perfect pretext for seizing political power. Even beyond the individuals who currently hold the reins of government, armies are bound to exert a strong influence on political power in this region for several years to come.

A decade of crises in the Sahel has already taken a very heavy toll, particularly through lost educational opportunities. The current cohort of adolescents and children has gained little in the way of knowledge and life skills given school closures, internal displacements, and worsening family destitution—and these young people risk becoming involved in crime and

terrorism. The worsening daily living conditions can only prolong the region’s security and political crises, and accentuate its fragilities.

History matters

Although the situation in the Sahel has deteriorated dramatically since 2012, the fragility of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is directly linked to the challenge of building countries—including their political, economic, and social institutions—that were shaped by the legacy of French colonization.

In addition to the lasting legacy of colonization, the Sahelian countries share their youth as independent states within their current borders. The work of building political institutions that inspire confidence among the people of countries with great ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity is only a few decades old and has had varying degrees of success.

Moreover, the economic and financial crises of the late 1980s and 1990s, followed by a period of macroeconomic stabilization and structural adjustment in the region, dealt a severe blow to efforts to build capable states by significantly reducing their capacity to act and making them dependent on international institutions. Multiparty systems and competitive elections have returned in several countries. But democratization processes were fragile, and constitutional provisions did not always materialize in political practice.



The boundaries and any other information shown on the map do not imply, on the part of the IMF, any judgment on the legal status of any territory or any endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PHOTO BY FLORENT VERGNES/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

The prisons of power

In an article on the political economy in Niger published in 2015, the French-Nigerien anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan theorizes about why countries fall into this trap of weak governance and instability. He identifies “prisons of power” with four main gatekeepers: big business; political party militants, allies, and courtiers; bureaucrats; and international experts.

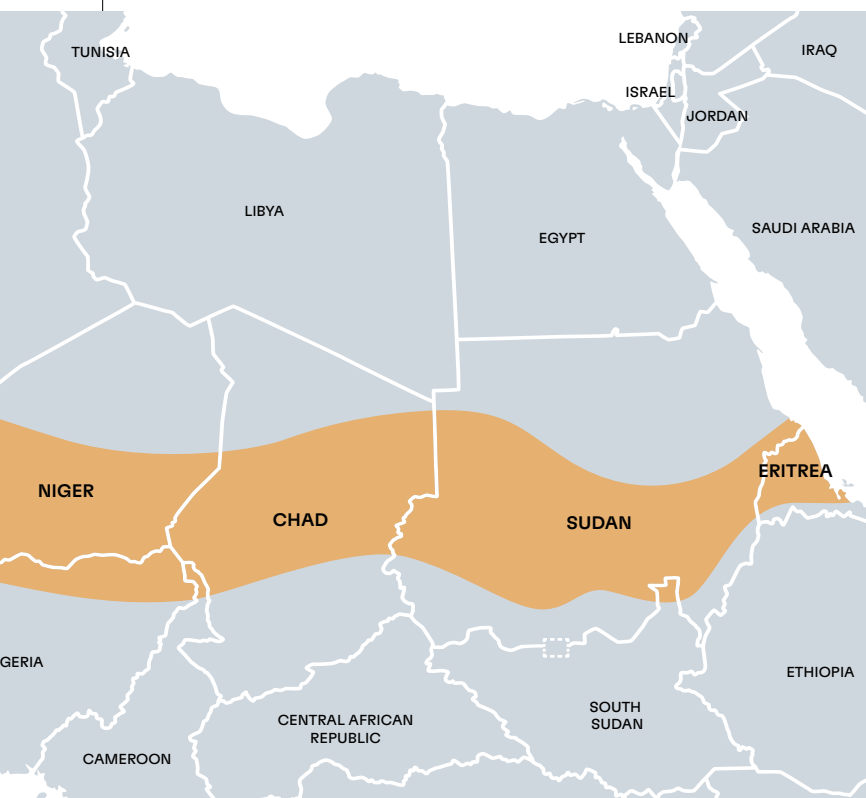
“Whoever comes to power must satisfy the demands of numerous interest groups,” Olivier de Sardan writes. “The elected president allocates ministries to the parties that helped elect him, the ministers must in turn distribute posts to activists, and the latter will also find small rewards for other activists in the form of service provision or small supply contracts.”

Business executives who yield political influence are seeking a return on their investment in the form of protection, tax exemptions, key government jobs for allies, and contracts awarded. They are thus at the heart of systemic corruption, which is directly linked to the ever increasing cost of election campaigns in a context of widespread poverty.

Olivier de Sardan also explains how international experts and the international aid system are part of this political economy, which has been nurturing inefficient public policies and disappointing economic results. “The aid system, whether project aid, sectoral aid, or

Previous spread:
A wholesale trader takes inventory of his stock in Bamako, Mali, in February 2022 following West African sanctions.

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budget aid (the three remain intertwined), induces an unhealthy and paralyzing dependence,” he writes.

These links between political practices, state functions, public services, and living conditions are not unique to the Sahel. They are present in most countries in West Africa and beyond—although the scale and sophistication of the capture of institutions and economic opportunities by interest groups vary. Security crises, in part the result of limited success in building institutions and developing the economy, add a further layer of complexity.

Investing in institutions and people

Curbing state capture by a few groups that abuse their proximity to those with political power calls for improving institutions by fostering efficiency and integrity. The actions proposed by the West Africa Citizen Think Tank (WATHI), which I lead, include strengthening institutions that control the use of public resources and combating corruption while institutionalizing citizen participation in public policy debate as an essential component of democratic governance. We also recommend a deliberate institutional approach aimed at reducing spatial inequalities within countries by monitoring progress in the delivery of public services.

Helping stabilize the countries of the Sahel is essential for sustainable economic development across a vast swath of the African continent. Despite the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, several West African countries (for example, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, and Senegal) have achieved remarkable economic growth in recent years. Nonetheless, continued growth depends on maintaining security in their territories and on the perception of risk, which is affected by the situation in the Sahel.

International financial institutions must take the local context and adverse effects of externally driven interventions more seriously, especially in the Sahel. In particular, such institutions need to work with countries in the region to prioritize investing in and reforming education and vocational training. This will help stimulate local economies based on crop production, raising livestock, and small-scale natural resource processing.

Throughout West Africa, sustainable economic and social progress—not to be confused with short-term economic growth—depends on refocusing efforts toward building institutions and investing in people. **F&D**

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