



Chad: A political and security digest

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President Idriss Déby Itno seized power in 1990. While, since then, there have been several moments when his tenure appeared to be coming to an end – most recently, in 2008, when rebels reached the capital, N'Djamena – in recent years his political and military position has stabilised considerably. In 2011, he was re-elected President for a fourth term and his party won parliamentary elections, amidst opposition protests about fraud. Poor relations with neighbouring Sudan, which led both countries to support armed proxies, have improved since 2010.

Déby has three main assets on which to draw: his control over Chad's oil, in which US companies have invested heavily (China is also increasingly involved); his opposition to Islamist terrorism, which has drawn Chad into the security orbit of the US, for example through its membership of the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership; and his close ties to France, which (so far) has given him a virtual 'security guarantee' against overthrow.

However, Chadian politics remains extremely factionalised. The east of the country is still highly volatile, with hundreds of thousands of refugees, and the north and south are also uncertain in terms of security. There is also some risk of 'blowback' from regime change in Libya, as a result of migratory flows back to Chad and the wider instability across the Sahel region which it has inadvertently triggered. Worst-case scenarios suggest that the current food crisis across the region could also have negative security implications for all the countries of the Sahel, including Chad.

The chequered course of the last 50 years suggests that, for the foreseeable future, no leader's position in Chad is ever likely to be more than 'superficially stable'. It would be unwise to assume that the post-Déby era, when it comes, will be the product of a peaceful, smooth transition of power.

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1 Overview

Chad is ethnically diverse, with an estimated 127 living languages spoken within its borders.¹ However, according to one report, “politics in Chad is the politics of faction”, with ethnicity playing a less important role overall than lineage and family.² The other main fault-line is between the Islamic north and the Christian/animist south. Most of the country’s agricultural wealth lies in the south, which the French called *Tchad Utile* (Useful Chad). Political and military figures from the north have dominated the country since the 1980s and there is considerable pro-autonomy sentiment in the south. There was a full-scale civil war between north and south during 1979-83.³

President Idriss Déby Itno seized power from Hissène Habré, in 1990, following a military coup that was backed at the time by Libya, Sudan and France.⁴ Since then, he has survived in power against the odds, despite a series of armed rebellions and attempted coups by discontented politico-military factions. Low-intensity conflict has been the norm in Chad, not the exception. Déby’s main social base is in the Zaghawa ethnic group, which makes up less than 20% of the population. The Zaghawa live on both sides of the Chad-Sudan border. Déby has also faced opposition at points from within his coterie, not just from beyond it. He depends strongly on members of his extended family and has kept the opposition down through a mixture of co-option, divide-and-rule and direct repression.

Overall, since February 2008, when rebels so nearly overthrew him, Déby’s political and military position has stabilised considerably. A 2010 peace deal with Sudan is sticking and most armed rebel groups have also signed accords. In February 2011, Déby’s Patriotic Salvation Movement (PSM) won an absolute majority in legislative elections. EU observers called the elections, which were peaceful, a historic turning-point. In April 2011, he was re-elected for a fourth term, winning an ostensible 89% of the vote, albeit on a low turn-out perhaps attributable to the fact that opposition figures boycotted the poll.⁵ Local elections were held in January 2012; opposition parties once again alleged fraud.

The relative stabilisation of the domestic political situation has not been accompanied by a change of posture on human rights; the record of the Déby regime remains poor on a host of counts.⁶ In April 2012, the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kyung-wha Kang, made the first visit by a senior UN human rights official to Chad, meeting Déby during the visit. She highlighted the current food crisis, which is affecting the Sahel region as a whole, violence against women, impunity, judicial capacity and independence as key human rights issues for the country.⁷

It is probably fair to say that, borrowing a phrase from the ICG, no leader’s position in Chad is ever likely to be more than ‘superficially stable’.⁸ The security and humanitarian situation remains highly volatile in the east, where there remain hundreds of thousands of refugees,

¹ “Chad: Politics and Security”, Writenet report, March 2007

² “Chad: Politics and Security”, Writenet report, March 2007

³ “Chad: Politics and Security”, Writenet report, March 2007

⁴ There has been wrangling for years between Senegal, where Habré now lives, and Belgium, where a prosecution against him for thousands of political killings and systematic torture, has been launched. Senegal has so far refused to extradite him to Belgium to face trial. Belgium has taken Senegal to the International Court of Justice.

⁵ “Chad’s president Idriss Deby re-elected amid boycott”, *BBC News Online*, 10 May 2011. In 2006, he was able to get a two-term limit for presidents in the Constitution overturned in a referendum.

⁶ See the [country report](#) for Chad in Amnesty International’s 2011 Annual Report.

⁷ “A crucial time for human rights in Chad”, *African Press Organization*, 4 April 2012

⁸ ICG, “[Chad: beyond superficial stability](#)”, Africa Report No. 162, 17 August 2010

and uncertain in the north and south, where Chad's border with the Central African Republic is highly porous. The Tuareg, whose armed campaign in Mali has helped to destabilize that country, are also to be found in Chad. Déby, now 58 years-old, has a reputation for being security obsessed and paranoid.⁹ It would be unwise to assume that the post-Déby era, when it comes, will be the result of a peaceful, smooth transition of power.

2 Chad's relations with Libya and Sudan

Déby's relationship with his other original sponsors, Libya and Sudan, has been chequered. Relations with Sudan collapsed in the mid 2000s as a consequence of the conflict in Darfur. Sudan's counter-insurgency operations drove over 200,000 refugees across the border into Eastern Chad, leading eventually to the introduction of, first an EU (*de facto* French) peace-keeping force, then a UN one, although Déby was never particularly comfortable about the presence of either. The UN's peace-keeping role was terminated at the end of 2010.¹⁰ Sudan and Chad now operate a joint force of their own to end cross-border rebel attacks.

With anti-Khartoum rebels in Darfur having a strong base in eastern Chad, the Chadian and Sudanese governments were drawn into sponsoring rebel groups against the other. In the case of Sudan, Déby's close ties with the largely Zaghawa leadership of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) also exerted a gravitational pull in that direction. In February 2008, rebels fought their way into the Chadian capital, N'Djamena. He was saved by French and Libyan support, and by opposition divisions. This near-death experience led him gradually to seek a rapprochement with Khartoum. Although it has had an on-off character, it did lead to a big reduction in support for JEM, although his regime still contained sympathisers who did not always follow the new script. The death of JEM leader Khalil Ibrahim, to whom Déby was related, may simplify matters. The improvement in relations with Sudan has been sufficient for Sudanese president Omar al-Bashir to attend Déby's wedding in N'Djamena in January. He married the daughter of one of the leaders of Sudanese Janjaweed.

With regard to Libya, relations never sank quite so low. But there were periods of relative estrangement and mistrust. The exit of Colonel Gadhafi leaves many questions about the future Chad-Libya relationship. Déby was relatively slow to recognise the National Transitional Council (NTC), whose support-base in southern Libya is shaky, to put it mildly. For this and other reasons, the NTC might not continue with the levels of Libyan investment (mainly in the oil and hotel sectors) in Chad seen under Gadhafi. Many Chadian migrants were forced to return to Chad, disrupting remittance flows southward and placing pressure on receiving communities. If there is instability in that region, there could well be spill-over effects in northern Chad. Some warn of a possible revolt by the Toubou in the historically rebellious region of Tibesti.¹¹ Even prior to the conflict in Libya that led to regime change, the International Crisis Group (ICG) was asking if north-west Chad might be the "next high-risk area", pointing to possible infiltration by Islamist terrorist groups and its role in drug trafficking and other illicit trade.¹² The ICG argues that the region is also a site of inter-communal tension and disputes between pastoralists and farmers.

In recent months, thousands of Chadian migrants working and living in Nigeria have returned, fleeing from the deteriorating security situation there.

⁹ "Mr Lonely", *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2010

¹⁰ EUFOR's mandate covered eastern Chad and northern Central African Republic. The UN's successor, MINURCAT, also had the same territorial mandate.

¹¹ ICG, "[Africa without Qaddafi: the case of Chad](#)", Africa Report No. 180, 21 October 2011

¹² ICG, "[Chad's north west: the next high risk area?](#)", Africa Briefing No. 78, 17 February 2011

3 Oil, counter-terrorism and relations with the US

One major asset which Déby has been able to deploy to stay in power is his control over Chad's oil. The Chad-Cameroon Petroleum Development and Pipeline Project began pumping out oil in 2003. It was built with massive financial assistance from the World Bank and other multilateral institutions. It has been the object of much criticism from human rights and environmental rights groups, who claim that the communities affected have suffered much injustice and degradation, and that the revenues raised have been used to fuel military expenditure.¹³ One of the main complaints of rebel groups revolves around official misuse of oil revenues. In 2008, the government paid off all its outstanding loans from oil revenues and ended its relationship with the World Bank.

Between 2001 and 2009, the World Bank supported an international advisory group to monitor the impact of the project on affected communities. While Oxfam America has had some relatively positive things to say in a recent report about how the IAG performed, nonetheless it acknowledges that the Chadian government ignored its recommendations on key issues.¹⁴ Another report claims that the World Bank has failed to learn the lessons of the project.¹⁵

Two of the three companies involved in the Chadian oil industry -- Exxon Mobil and Chevron -- are American (the third, Petronas, is Malaysian). The vast majority of Chad's oil is exported to the US. Given this, Chad is increasingly important to the US economically. The same is true in security terms. The US has also been more supportive of Déby since 9/11, since when he has portrayed himself as a bulwark against Islamic terrorism. Chad is a member of the US-led Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Partnership and receives military assistance from the US.

4 Relations with France

The French 'security guarantee' which saved Déby in February 2008 should not be exaggerated; the main value of the Chad connection for Paris these days is as a training ground for its troops, although that could change if Chad's considerable mineral potential can be more fully exploited. France reportedly only stuck with Déby in February 2008 because the armed opposition was so disunited.¹⁶ After the rebel attack was repulsed, France put pressure on Déby to commission an investigation into the events of that time, which included the arrests by the authorities of leading opposition figures, one of whom, ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh, died in mysterious circumstances following his arrest.

5 Relations with China

Oil-hungry China, as might be expected, has sought to deepen its ties with the Déby regime in recent years, although it remains a less important player for now than either the US or France. For example, the China National Petroleum Corporation owns 60% of the Djermaya refinery and has offered to invest heavily in a railway project. But the relationship is not all sweetness and light. Earlier this year, the CNPC and the Chadian government were at

¹³ "Oil exploitation in Chad: residents file complaint against the World Bank over pipeline", *Publish What You Pay*, 19 December 2011

¹⁴ Oxfam America, "[Watching the watchdogs](#)", August 2011

¹⁵ "[Ten years since the Chad-Cameroon pipeline, has the World Bank learned its lesson?](#)", Bank Information Center, 8 June 2010

¹⁶ K. Hansen, "[Chad's relations with Libya, Sudan, France and the US](#)", Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 15 April 2011

loggerheads over the sale price of petroleum produced by the refinery, although an agreement was finally reached.¹⁷ China's main interest, as always, is local stability. It has underlying worries that the refinery may be nationalised. While its' interests may currently translate into support for Déby, if he came to be perceived by China as the main source of instability, China would likely be pragmatic enough to switch horses.

6 Relations with the EU

Between 2008 and 2009 the EU provided a peace-keeping force, called EUFOR, in eastern Chad and the north-west of the Central African Republic. There has been considerable debate subsequently about the effectiveness of the mission. France has always had a strong influence over the direction of EU policy towards Chad, particularly with regard to political and security issues. Historically, EU engagement with Chad has been conducted primarily through development co-operation, aid and trade relations.¹⁸

¹⁷ "Refining relations", *Africa-Asia Confidential*, February 2012

¹⁸ See the following links for further details: EU-Chad [external relations](#); [EuropeAid](#); European Commission - [Trade](#)