

Chad: Back towards War?

Africa Report N°111

1 June 2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The April 2006 rebel offensive brought Chad to the brink of all-out civil war. The victory that President Idriss Déby ultimately achieved in pushing the United Front for Democracy and Change (FUCD) back from the gates of the capital, N'Djamena, to its Darfur sanctuary settled nothing on the military front and underscored the political fragility of the regime. The army's success was primarily due to French logistical and intelligence support, while the setback paradoxically may encourage the armed opposition groups to forge closer links in order to pursue a war of attrition in the north, the east and along the border with the Central African Republic. The crisis is far from resolved, and is likely to be an enduring one.

Only weeks before the 3 May presidential elections, Déby had to fight off spectacular defections of senior figures from the army and the political elite as well as assassination attempts, all likewise aimed at preventing him from gaining a third term but he won the controversial elections with 64.67 per cent of the vote.[1] Though opposition groups challenged the result, France and the wider international community hastily accepted it to avoid further destabilisation, while declaring that they now expected the president to democratise his regime.

The rapid deterioration of the internal situation is not due solely to a spill-over of the Darfur crisis and Khartoum's deliberate use of Chadian warlords in its counter-insurgency strategy, as Déby's government claims. It is equally the manifestation of the political crisis of the semi-authoritarian regime and the absence of domestic political space that has militarised all political differences in the country. However, the ever deeper links between Darfur and the clashes in Chad underscore the convergence of the two crises and the difficulty of settling one independently from the other.

A hopeful aura surrounded Déby's rise to power in 1990. Libya's regional policy was becoming more normal, and the Cold War's end encouraged transition to multiparty politics. But the one-party culture and the drive to control all political space prevailed at the 1993 national conference. Although numerous parties exist, the institutions guaranteeing democracy have largely been emptied of substance. The 1996 and 1997 elections were marred by fraud; those of 2001 and 2002 were farcical.

Déby's sixteen-year rule has been marked by coup attempts and rebellions that were either suppressed with extreme violence or partially settled by expelling dissident elements to Sudan and the Central African Republic. Chad has known relative peace but never reconciliation, since renegotiating the social contract would have weakened the militarily dominant groups and opened a political process Déby did not control.

The present crisis has a triple context: systematic, large-scale embezzlement of state revenues triggering an unprecedented social crisis at a time when oil revenues should have allowed Chadians to live better; radicalisation of opposition within the inner ruling circles over the succession to Déby; and the Darfur war, which at one level should be considered trans-national because of massive involvement of Zaghawa (the president's ethnic group), who give the Darfur rebels the sanctuary and weapons necessary to sustain their struggle. Chadian armed opposition groups have aided the Sudanese government in Darfur, while Darfur rebels helped Chad's army turn back the April offensive.

The armed opposition to Déby is deeply divided by leadership clashes, not over objectives. While more than twenty others claim to be militarily active but are mostly present on the Internet, the three most significant groups are:

- the FUCD, headed by Mahamat Nour, which receives strong Sudanese support;
- the Zaghawa dissident groups, under the Rally of Democratic Forces (RaFD) umbrella and chaired by Timan Erdimi, a former director of Déby's cabinet; and
- the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT), established in 1998 and operating in the extreme north along the Libyan border under the command of Mahmat Choua Dazi.

This armed opposition, however, reflects only the aspirations of marginal or minority groups in the population. A regime change by force in such a context would bring neither stabilisation nor a democratic opening.

There are about 70 political parties, some created by the regime to divide its opposition. The most significant joined in 2002 to create the Coordination of Political Parties for the Defence of Democracy (CPPDD). Civil society has become increasingly organised due to national and international mobilisation around the oil and human rights issues. Unions and the exiled civil opposition also are important to the internal political dynamics.

The most shared aspirations among Chadians are for security (in particular, an end to ubiquitous police and army harassment) and a national dialogue that permits a political opening, the return of the armed opposition and transparent elections.

Nairobi/Brussels, 1 June 2006

[1] This was revised down from provisional figure of 77.53 per cent announced on 14 May 2006 by the National Election Commission. See Final Results of the 3 May 2006 Presidential Election, Constitutional Council of Chad, 28 May 2006.

