



The Death of President Déby and the Resurgence of Another¹

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Abstract:

This article explores the political transformation in Chad following the death of President Idriss Déby Itno (IDI) in April 2021 and the rise of his son, Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno (MIDI), culminating in his election as president in May 2024. Drawing on primary sources and recent scholarly work, the study documents the murky circumstances surrounding IDI's death, the swift establishment of a Transitional Military Council (TMC), and the constitutional coup that enabled MIDI to consolidate power. It examines the regime's tactics of repression, co-optation, and strategic pardons to neutralize opposition, including the controversial appointment of opposition leader Succès Masra as Prime Minister. The article also analyses the Doha peace agreement, the Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue, and the constitutional referendum that paved the way for MIDI's presidency. Despite formal democratic reforms, the transition was marked by authoritarian control, exclusion of dissenting voices, and allegations of electoral fraud. The study concludes that Chad's political landscape remains dominated by fear, elite manipulation, and limited prospects for genuine democratic change, perpetuating the Déby legacy under a new guise.

Keywords:

Chad; Deby; Coup d'Etat; Sahel; Authoritarian Rule; Presidentialism.

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Introduction

On Tuesday April 20 at 11 PM, 2021, the death of Marchal President Idriss Déby Itno (IDI) was announced on the Chadian national television and radio.³ Less than 24 hours earlier, on April 19, the National Independent Electoral Commission (Commission électorale nationale indépendante (CENI) had declared IDI the winner of the Presidential elections held the former Sunday, on April 11 (Dariustone, 2021, April 16). The CENI had thus, officially, managed to count some five million ballots arriving from more than 23.000 polling stations within the country in eight days. Before the elections CENI had announced they would need two weeks to count the ballots and had planned to pronounce the preliminary results on April 25. The CENI officially declared IDI the preliminary winner of the presidential elections with 79,3% of the votes, late at night on Monday April 19 (France 24, 2021, April 19).⁴

Having come to power in a coup d'état in 1990 and won every presidential election since (1996, 2001, 2006, 2011 and 2016), the victory in the 2021 elections did not surprise people in Chad, nor international observers. Protests against IDI's candidature to stand for his sixth presidential election had been fierce. A massive civil rally held in N'Djamena on February 6 (2021), the day IDI announced his candidature, had been violently stopped by government forces (France 24, 2021, February 6; Human Rights Watch, 2021, April 8). Demonstrations intensified as some of the strongest opponent candidates, including IDI's own nephew Yialla Dillo, head of "Parti Socialiste sans Frontières", were not recognised by the CENI as valid candidates. Others were accepted but withdrew before the actual campaign started due to massive electoral fraud up front. This was the case with two of the elderly and most experience opposition leaders, Saleh Kebzabo from the "Union National pour le Développement et le Renouveau" (undr), and Ngarlely Yorongar, leader of the "Fédération Action pour la République" (far). Succès Masra, leader of *Les Transformateurs* - the most prominent newcomer on the political opposition scene – called for boycotting the presidential elections because of fraud. Masra (age 37) was not accepted as presidential candidate as the 2018 constitution in vigour imposed a minimum age of 40.

IDI, however, had no intention of stepping down. Instead, his regime increased its severity against opponents and outlawed political rallies and arrested people who did not respect the (unconstitutional) banning of political gatherings. For example, on March 20, the regime arrested the two most prominent human rights leaders in Chad, Max Loalngar and Mahamat Nour Ibedou when they peacefully demonstrated against IDI's candidacy (Front Line Defenders, 2021, March 23). When released, the police continued to survey them and their organisations closely until the elections day.

³ This article is a considerably updated and revised version of a keynote speech delivered in French at the conference *l'État: entre universalisme et variabilité des pratiques* (Université Assane Seck, Ziguichor, Senegal) on 8 December, 2023.

⁴ The first announcement's of IDI's victory I have managed to find was published around 22 h on April 19 (2021).



Not only the regime used violence to try to suppress rival voices or increase their power. The *Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad* (FACT), a main group among the insurgent “politico-militaires” in Chad, crossed the borders from southern Libya with some 1500 men in arms on the election day, aiming at a coup d'état. FACT managed with relatively ease to advance many hundred kilometres across northern Chad.

This article seeks to document and discuss political developments in Chad from the death of President Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021 to the election of his son Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno as president in May 2024. This contemporary history of Chad has naturally enough given its recentness, received little scholarly attention. McDonald (2024) has focused on the omnibalancing of Déby's reign rather than the state itself and offers valuable theoretical insights. Vircoulon (2024) tells a detailed story of how President Mahamat Déby manages the transition from an interim military president to an elected civil president.⁵ Thus, this article is mostly based on primary sources from various news sites, policy papers and public statements. Emphasis is made on contested, significant events and happenings in high politics in Chad from 2021 to 2024. What happened when President Idriss Déby died in the battlefield? How killed him and why? How did the appointed Military Transitional Council manage to gain security and control in Chad? Which institutions were dissolved, and which were (re)created? How did the new regime deal with the military opposition groups? How did the regime react to protests and dissidents? And finally, how did Mahamat Déby manage to move aside his two strongest opponents and gain the presidential elections?

When the facts are established and all these questions answered, it will be possible for future researchers to write a more theoretical article about the same period in Chad's contemporary history.

The first serious encounter with the Chadian army took place six days after crossing the frontier. On Saturday April 17 (2021) the *Direction Générale de Service et Sécurité des Institutions de l'Etat* (DGSSIE) killed close to a hundred rebels, took 200 prisoners and destroyed some 50 of FACT's vehicles, according to Mahamat Déby, who at the time headed the DGSSIE (Gwatiwa, 2024, p.2). Still according to Mahamat Déby, only one of his men were killed that day and a few injured (Déby Itno, 2024, pp. 99–101). The official military spokesperson for the Chadian Army, General Agouna, however, told international news agencies that five government soldiers were killed and 36 were injured, but that the army had killed some 300 rebels that weekend (Al Jazeera, 2021, April 20). FACT never confirmed, nor denied, any of these estimations.

Nonetheless, whatever chiffrs were correct, another army column, headed by Mahamat Déby's father, Marchal President Idriss Déby Itno (IDI), left N'Djamena in the evening of April 17 (2021) with the aim of fighting the FACT rebels. On Sunday April 18 around 15h, this column entered in combat zone near N'oukou, some 300 km north of N'Djamena (Déby Itno, 2024, pp. 99–101). President IDI was seriously injured. One

⁵ I only discovered Vircoulon's article few days before the revised version of this article was due, and has made less use of it than it deserves.

may speculate that he was killed on the spot since areas around the presidential palace in N'Djamena, saw a large deployment of tanks and armoured vehicles around midnight. The French newsmagazine *Jeune Afrique* stated that IDI had died from the serious wounds already on Sunday 18 April (Olivier & Duhem, 2021, April 20). IDI did not make any public appearances, nor verbally nor visually, after his electoral victory was officially announced (Vogel, 2024, p. 201). Mahamat Déby writes in his autobiography that, around 11h on Monday April 19, “la victoire est totale” (p.101). At that time, he also learned that his father IDI had been evacuated to N'Djamena. When he himself arrived in Ndjamenia with a helicopter on April 19, his father was already dead (Déby Itno, 2024, pp. 101-103).

So, the official story announced on the national radio on 20th of April (2021), and repeated in the official booklet describing how interim president Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno (MIDI)⁶ managed the transition (Présidence de la République du Tchad, 2024, January), stated that IDI died in the middle of the night on April 20 (Le Monde, 2021, April 20); International Crisis Group, 2021, April 22). This does not correspond with the story told by the current president of Chad in his autobiography. Given that MIDI also was the head of the presidential guard (the DGSSIE) and present on the battlefield when his father died, MIDI's own story about his father's death may perhaps be the most correct version? If this is the case, IDI was already dead when he was declared winner of the presidential elections late on Monday April 20, 2021.

For sure, as most news agencies reported, the circumstances around IDI's death were unclear and murky (See e.g Associated Press, 2021, April 20; Al Jazeera, 2021, April 20). How Déby was killed and who killed him are still not revealed, many years after his death. In fact, the homicide has never been officially investigated, despite international pressure to do so (see e.g. African Union. (2021, April 20). In his inaugural speech on May 24 (2024), MIDI asked for the first time, for an “independent and impartial investigation” on the circumstances of the death of his father (M. I. Déby, 2024, May 23

To keep the official story that IDI was killed by enemies of Chad at the battlefield was important. This made his legacy; IDI had been brave and courageous, a martyr offering his life for his country. Mahamat Déby – who added both “Idriss” and “Itno” to his name to honour his father's death after taking over presidency – contributed to make IDI a national hero by making and keeping the official the story about his death as the one and only recognised truth.

In fact, the new regime was so eager to keep one and only official story about IDI's death that even discussing how IDI was killed was not and is still not after MIDI's inaugural speech in May 2024, tolerated. This has led to many half-hidden speculations and conspiracy theories that were never confirmed, but neither proved to be incorrect. Here I will briefly refer to two of the most infamous ones.

⁶ Mahamat Déby, added «Idriss» and «Itno» to his name when he was nominated transitional president, and is often just called MIDI in unofficial conversations in Chad.



Some assume that this “honourable sortie” had been planned by IDI and his closest entourage up front. Could there be, in fact, a better death of an old - 68 years, 30 of them as president, in a country where life expectancy at birth is 53 years - and sick - rumours said IDI suffered from untreatable cancer- (Amnesty International USA, 2021, April 7), Marchal than being killed in the battlefield while defending his country? (Franceinfo, 2021, April 20). Years ahead of his death, IDI stated in an interview with *Le Monde* that: What remains for me to do [...] is to prepare Chad for a change of power (Le Monde, 2001, June 5). This hypothesis is not supported by the French anthropologist Jeremy Tubiana who claims that IDI systematically prevented any discussions, also within his extended family, about who should succeed him (Tubiana, 2021 p. 134). While most politico-military opponents of IDI agreed that the only way to remove him was to use armed force (Harchaoui & Carayol, 2021, June 30), the political-military establishment in N’Djamena apparently found General Mahamat Déby to be the best heir to the throne, when a transfer of power suddenly appeared necessary.

Other rumours insisted that IDI had been killed by one of his own, a close relative or a trusted guard, on Sunday April 18 (2021) (see e.g. Rewmi, 2021, April 21). Some speculated that the killing of IDI was a blood revenge orchestrated by Yalla Dillo, a former presidential councillor turned political opposition. Yalla Dillo had criticised IDI’s wife, Hinda Déby, and her NGO “Fondation Grand Coeur” for interfering (too much) in politics. Hinda Déby sued Dillo for defamation and orchestrated, in February 2021, an arrest warrant on him. In the chaotic operation early morning on February 28, 2021, when security forces arrived at Dillo’s house to arrest him, Dillo’s old mother and one of his sons were killed (DW, 2021, March 1; Dia, 2021, March 9). Dillo himself managed to escape and hide. Three years later, these rumours about a blood revenge in April 2021 intensified when Yalla Dillo was accused of being behind the attempted murder of the president of the supreme court in Chad.⁷ On February 28 (2024), Yalla Dillo was killed by MIDI’s security forces at the premises of the headquarter of the *Partie Socialiste sans Frontier* in N’jamena (See e.g. BBC News, 2024, February 28).

The speculations that IDI was killed by one of his own, were supported by unofficial photos showing IDI killed by a bullet shot from a very short distance, most probably by a French-produced FAMAS automatic rifle. The FAMAS had been used by the presidential guard since around 2010 (B-AREV, 2024, September 9). However, as these rumours were never confirmed nor investigated, they ebbed out as “fake news” or “conspiracies”.

Even if French official sources never confirmed it, most probably IDI was together with a French military intelligence officer when he was seriously wounded or killed on April 18 (2021) (See e.g. 237online, 2021, April 28). French intelligence thus, indeed knew who killed IDI. France has never revealed who was behind the murder, nor has France insisted that the killing of a close ally and friend should be investigated. Most

⁷ Le président de la Cour suprême, Samir Adam Annour, did not recognise Yalla Dillo’s candidature for the upcoming presidential elections, suddenly decided to take place on May 6, 3-4 months earlier than originally planned.

probably, thus, France believes that revealing who killed IDI would create immense insecurity and probably increase conflicts in Chad. Maybe this was why France was the first Western state to officially support Mahamat Déby as Chad's interim president? And French President Macron the only European head of state to participate in the funeral?

Techniques and tactics to transform a coup d'état to a legitimate presidency

At 11 AM on April 20 (2021), when the death of President IDI was publicly announced, it was also proclaimed that his 37 years old son, General Mahamat Déby, was to lead the country through an 18 month long transitional period. The transitional period should lead to new, free and fair presidential elections (Tahingam, 2021, April 20). In his first presidential decree, dated April 20, Transitional President Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno nominated the other 14 generals to form the Transitional Military Council (TMC). In addition to himself, seven of the other generals were ethnic Zaghawas, three were Goranes/Toubous, one was Tama, one was an Arab, and two were Saras (Vogel, 2024 p. 201). Thus, 13 out of 15 of the generals in the TMC were Muslims from the northern parts of Chad. Officially, the TMC was set up "to ensure the country's defence against terrorism" and replaced the civil government (Présidence de la République du Tchad, 2021, April 21). State of emergency was declared, general curfew from 6 PM to 5 AM was imposed and a new 104 paragraphs long *Transitional Charter*, published on April 20, replaced the constitution from 2018. In the 2018-constitution a president in Chad had to be minimum 40 years of age; Mahamat Déby was 37 years old. But the new regime had managed to write the 104 paragraphs long *Transitional Charter* within a very few hours. Or more probably, they started drafting the Charter when IDI died, on Sunday April 18 (2021), or even before...⁸

In the chaotic and unsecure situation on April 20, it seems as if nobody noticed paragraph 97 in the *Transitional Charter* stating that the traditional period could be prolonged once at the will of the majority of the TMC (Présidence de la République du Tchad, 2021, April). Nor that nothing in the Charter denied members of the TMC, including Transitional President Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, to run in future presidential elections.

Article 81 in the Chadian constitution from 2018, in vigour until April 20, 2021, reads:

In case of vacancy of the Presidency of the Republic for any cause, or of definite incapacity as declared by the Supreme Court, referred to by the Government, and deciding with the absolute majority of its members, the duties of the President of the Republic, with the exception of the powers specified in Articles 85, 88, 95 and 96, are provisionally exercised by the President of the National Assembly and, in case of incapacity of the latter, by the First Vice President.

⁸ I received a WhatsApp call from a very close friend of (parts of) the Déby family late at night on Sunday April 18, announcing the death of IDI. I did not believe him as I could not find any rumours about it on any weblog.

In every case, it proceeds to new presidential elections at least forty-five (45) days and ninety (90) days at most after the vacancy is opened (République du Tchad, 2018, May 4).

However, the actual president of the National Assembly, Haroun Kabadi, declared himself unable, due to personal health issues and the security situation in Chad, to fulfil his constitutional duties to organise new presidential elections within three months and act as interim president until then (Aminata.com, 2021, April 23; Tchadinfos.com, 2023, May 5). According to the April 21 communiqué from the office of the National Assembly, Haroun Kabadi noted (“prend act”) that the national assembly had been dissolved and that Mahamat Déby is the head of the army and the president of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) Thus, accordingly “[i]n view of this military, security and political context in the country and the sub-region, the President of the National Assembly has, in all lucidity, given his agreement for the establishment of a Transitional Military Council” (Présidence de la République du Tchad, 2021, April 20).

With both the government and the national assembly dissolved, and the constitution suspended, the appointed 15 generals in the TMC held suddenly all formal powers in Chad. Or, in fact, according to paragraph 47 of the Transitional Charter, the president of TMC held all powers himself as he could nominate and revoke members of the TMC, nominate and revoke the prime minister, nominate and revoke members of the high institutions in the country, dissolve the National Transitional Council (CNT), rule by decree and declare emergency. Thus, MIDI had fulfilled a constitutional coup and made his formal powerbase even broader than his father’s had been.

International reactions to the military takeover

As the only European state, France accepted the military take-over by MIDI and his CMT as highest legal body in Chad on April 20, the same day as Déby’s death was announced (Présidence de la République française, 2021, April 20). The official statement from the French presidency stated that “France loses a courageous friend” and that Chad’s stability and territorial integrity was primordial for France (ibid.). French President Emmanuel Macron was also the only European head of state to attend his funeral on 23 April. At the funeral President Macron repeated that France will never let Chad down (Le Point Afrique, 2021, April 23).

The European Parliament waited a month, until May 20, to condemn the take-over as “an unconstitutional military coup”, while also criticising the suspension of the constitution, and the dissolution of the National Assembly (European Parliament, 2021, May 20). The US did not officially comment the military takeover the first month and then, on May 21, while not condemning the coup, called for a “peaceful, timely, and civilian-led transition of power to democratically elected government before October 2022” (U.S. Department of State, 2021, May). The Peace and Security Council of the African Union condemned it as an unconstitutional transfer of power, and categorically asserted that “no form of extension of the transition period prolonging the restoration of constitutional order, would be acceptable to the AU” and called upon the chairman

of the TMC and all its members “not to contest or take part in the upcoming national elections towards democratic rule” (African Union Peace and Security Council, 2021, May 14). For sure, Mahamat Déby used much creativity, energy and money to legitimate why he would not follow the recommendations of the AU, EU and the US.

Repressing opponents or paying them off?

State of emergency was declared, and curfew imposed.⁹ The military transitional regime prohibited all political rallies for some weeks. Those who did not respect that decision was heavily sanctioned. Amnesty International reported at least 16 people were deadly wounded or shot dead by the police when they demonstrated against the constitutional coup in the streets of N'Djamena and Moundou during the first four weeks after the TMC took power (Amnesty International, 2021, June 1). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) reported more than 700 arrests among those protesting the military take-over (OHCHR, 2021, April 30). Not infamous for following the rule of law before the constitutional coup, Chad entered a period where even more people feared for their rights and lives. Numerous people were detained, and an unknown number disappeared in the aftermath of the constitutional coup. Protesting the constitutional coup your life was at risk.

Leader of the main opposition party, *Les Transformateurs*, Succès Masra planned a political rally on July 14 (2021) – emblematically chosen as this is the French National Day – together with Wakit Tama, a coalition of opposition parties and civil society organizations in the country. The rally was not permitted by the transitional military regime. However, the regime accepted the rally to take place two weeks later, on July 29. Some 500 people shouted slogans against France’s support for the TMC and the constitutional coup, without interference from the regime’s security apparatus. Could this be taken as a sign for some respect for human rights in Chad?

At least, after the constitutional coup, Mahamat Déby and his Transitional Military Counsel rapidly undertook actions to appear more like a civic and civil government. Only six days after the coup, on 26 April, Albert Pahimi Padacké was appointed as prime minister. Padacké, an old political enemy – at least of the surface - of deceased president Idriss Déby, had been third runner up in the presidential elections on April 11, receiving some 10% of the ballots. A week later, on May 2, MIDI assigned the transitional government consisting of 40 ministers, deputy ministers and state secretaries. An all-time high nine of them were women and several of the ministers were apparently political adversaries of MIDI. By this MIDI gained some international legitimacy as a civilized military president.

On May 5, the TMC announced that the FACT rebels were defeated. However, the new Chadian regime was astonished to discover the amount of Russian produced military equipment possessed by FACT soldiers. FACT’s spokesperson strongly rejected

⁹ Parts of the following paragraphs are based on the author’s chapters on Chad in the *African Yearbook* (Leiden: Brill).

that they had received any help from Russia or – at the time – the private, military company Wagner associated with the Russian regime.

On June 12 it was payback time for former President of the National Assembly, Haroun Kabadi. He was nominated secretary-general of *Mouvement Patriotique du Salut* (mps), the political party created by IDI and endorsed by MIDI.

Finally, increasing domestic alliances (Henningesen, T.B. & L. E. Gissel, 2022) by nominating, by presidential decree on September 24, 93 members of the new National Transitional Council (CNT) (Jeune Afrique, 2021, September 25). The CNT should function as an interim national assembly -the elected one had been dissolved on April 20 – for as long as it took to organize new parliamentary elections. Based on experience this could take a while; elections for the newly repealed national assembly had been postponed numerous times and elections of new representatives were overdue for five years.¹⁰ Nominating members of the CNT, MIDI selected both young and old, men and women, experienced politicians and oppositional civil society leaders. They were granted a decent salary supported by substantial - work-related - fringe benefits. The strongest opposition part, *Les Transformateurs*, and the strongest civil society organisation, *Wakit Tama*, were not represented in the National Transitional Council (CNT).

Seventy-three-year-old Haroun Kabadi, former head of the national assembly and newly appointed leader of the political party in power (MPS), was elected as its president by acclamation. An anonymous member of the newly appointed TNC told Radio France International's (RFI) reporter that «this could not have been otherwise since he [Kabadi] refused to act as interim president to let Déby's son take over the presidency illegally. We continue to live in the Déby-system without Idriss» (RFI, 2021, October 5).¹¹

Rumours said that Kabadi, when president of the National Assembly, had access to a close to unlimited amount of cash to arrange pressing political, and personal, issues. His price for accepting the constitutional coup on April 20 had now been paid back; first by being nominated to the very powerful position as Secretary General of the ruling MPS and then, while still serving as Secretary General, appointed as president of the TNC as well. Both positions included access to huge amounts of cash that could be used without vouchers and material benefits like cars, drivers, guards and servants, in addition to free diesel, telecom and electricity.

In short, the first year of TMC and MIDI's rule was characterized by a calculated mix of buying off allies and (former) adversaries and repressing those who did not accept to collaborate. This way of governing created unpredictability and fear, two factors reigning political life in Chad after MIDI's constitutional coup.

¹⁰ The parliamentary elections in Chad took place on December 29, 2024 and were the first once since 2011.

¹¹ «*cela ne pourra se passer autrement vu qu'il a refusé d'assurer l'intérim pour laisser le fils Déby prendre la présidence en toute illégalité. Nous sommes dans la continuité du système Déby sans Idriss*»

Trying to appease the military opposition - the pre-dialogue

Another example of buying off adversaries included MIDI's pre-dialogue with leaders of politico-military movements. A presidential decree dated August 17 (2021), created two bodies to organise preparatory talks with various opposition groups. The 70-member strong committee appointed to negotiate with the civil opposition was headed by two well-known figures in political life in Chad. Acheikh Ibn Oumar had been Minister of Foreign Affairs under President Habré and served as Chad's ambassador in Washington under IDI, before becoming a fierce opponent of his regime. After some 24 years in exile in France, IDI graced him in 2018. In 2021 he was offered the position as Minister of Reconciliation by MIDI.

The second 'special technical committee' was 29 members strong and consisted mostly of military personnel known for their former loyalties towards President Marshal Déby. The committee was headed by the aging Goukouni Oueddei (born 1944). He was a former head of state (1979-82), and, prior to that, a legendary rebel leader in FROLINAT- and therefore a hero for many of the politico-military movements operating in Chad.

Numerous pre-liminary meetings before the pre-dialogue should start were organised in various locations (Cairo, Paris, Khartoum, Doha...) with the most powerful politico-military opposition groups. E.g Goukouni Oueddei met with the leader of the *Union of Resistance Forces (UFR)* Timan Erdimi in Doha in October (2021) to negotiate terms for participating in the upcoming pre-dialogue. Erdimi wanted amnesty for himself and all his men in the UFR, release imprisoned soldiers and sympathizers, return of property confiscated by the regime and unbanning of political rallies. Within three months more than 500 prisoners were amnestied and Erdimi's death sentence - convicted in absentia for attempted coup in 2008 (Hansen, 2013) - was waived.

Right before the pre-dialogues were to start in Doha (Qatar)- in mid-Mars 2022, Goukouni Oueddei was replaced by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs in Chad, Chérif Mahamat Zene, (see e.g. DW, 2022, March 10). Complicated and slow, and very costly – the total cost was estimated to 1,3 billion US\$ and was mainly paid by the state of Qatar (Hansen, 2023)- the pre-dialogue lasted for close to five months. When they finally ended on August 8 (2022), between 30 and 40 leaders of politico-military rebel movements signed the 14 pages long and detailed peace agreement, also including an important disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) component (Peace Agreements Database, 2022).

In the Doha Peace Agreement's preamble, we read that:

"Taking into consideration the process initiated by the Transition Political Authorities in Chad to set the country on the pathway of peace, democracy and development, becoming a state with a stable rule of law which ensures a territorial integrity, national unity and social justice" [...] Taking into consideration that protection and promotion of human rights, democratic principles, rule of law and justice, as well as cessation of personal impunity, implementation of good

governance practices and transparency in public administration are necessary conditions for the stability, development and prosperity of the whole society.” (ibid.).

As will be evident less than three months later, on “black Thursday” October 20, most of these words proved to be of no worth. But first an inclusive national dialogue was organised.

The Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue (DNIS)

The Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue (DNIS) in Chad commenced on August 20, 2022, and concluded on October 8, 2022. Staring off as a forum with some 1400 delegates representing both civil and military opposition, religious- and traditional leaders, women- and youth organizations together with people loyal to MIDI and the TMC, the dialogues soon encountered serious problems. First, important politicians and military leaders refused to take part in the dialogue due to its organisation and likely outcome. Neither Succès Masra, nor anyone from the civil society organisation *Wakit Tama* participated. Nor did the leadership within the FACT political-military movement (USIP, 2022, October 4). Second, many of the participants did not get space to raise issues they felt were primordial, or their opinions were neglected, and thus many participants formally abandoned the dialogue after a short time. This was the case with both representatives for the Protestants and the Catholics in Chad. Others did not formally withdraw but only stopped showing up in the five organised thematic committees and their many working groups. This was the case with many of civil society representatives, but also political opposition delegates.

While the DNIS profoundly restructured Chad’s political space, the dialogues were criticised for not being inclusive, nor national, nor sovereign. Indeed, many argued the outcome was decided ahead by MIDI and his cercle of military friends. Even if interim president MIDI had made the DNIS look inclusive by appointing Gali Gatta Ngothé, a formally oppositional intellectual, as chair, and used Saleh Kebzabo, another well-known oppositional politician, as facilitator, few believed DNIS would end with any substantial changes or restrictions on MIDI’s powerbase.

Four-star army general, with the overall responsibility of some 35,000 troops, MIDI declared himself a five-star general on December 2 (2021) (Kodmadjingar, 2021, December 5). Due to increased internal and external threats following the constitutional coup, MIDI’s goal was to increase the number of troops to 60,000 by the end of 2022. Parts of the increase resulted from the DDR process agreed upon in the Doha Peace Accord in August (2022). However, the DDR process encountered many problems, including funding.

Among the 245 recommendations made by DNIS (Vircoulon, 2024, p. 21) was to write a new constitution and vote over it by referendum, to increase the number of delegate in the Transitional National Council, (CNT) from 93 to 197, (Alwihda Info, 2022, November 7) to prolong the transitional military rule by up to two years and to

allow all members of the TMC, including interim president Mahamat Déby, to run for president in the first upcoming elections. Specially the two latter decisions were very controversial. In fact, they were the main reason for the civil demonstration throughout major cities in Chad on October 20 (2022).¹²

The “Black Thursday” -the October 20 rally

By far the largest demonstration against MIDI and his regime took place on 20 October (2022). On this day exactly 18 months had passed since MIDI took power in the constitutional coup. Many citizens believed that MIDI had promised to arrange free and fair elections within these 18 months and step down, as the African Union, the EU and the US had insisted on. However, nor MIDI himself, nor the TMC had ever made such a promise. They always stressed that this period of 18 months was, if deemed necessary, renewable once. This had been stated in the *Transitional Charter*. And, to massive disagreement, this was also a stated outcome of the DNIS. The outcome of the DNIS was even to allow for another two years to prepare for presidential elections, thus increasing the *Transitional Charter’s* deadline with another six months, until October 2024. Still, thousands of ordinary citizens took to the streets in all major cities to reclaim MIDI to step down as interim president and not present himself in the upcoming presidential elections.

The security forces of the regime reacted immediately using harsh violence. By noon Prime Minister Saleh Kebzabo admitted that some fifty citizens were killed (France 24, 2022, October 20). Rapidly nicknamed “*Black Thursday*”, the regime updated the death toll of the October 20 demonstrations to 73. Human rights organisations, however, could later prove that at least 128 were killed, 518 injured and 943 arrested (Amnesty International, 2023, October 20). Many of those arrested were transported 600 km to the infamous Koro Toro prison in the midst of the desert where they were sentenced to spend years in jail in a trial called “a parody of justice” by the Chadian Bar Association (CIVICUS Monitor, 2023, January 20.) However, as part of MIDI’s tactic to gain sympathy from adversaries, many of the sentenced prisoners received a presidential pardon after a few months (RFI, 2023, February 23).

Insisting that the demonstration was an insurrection supported by [unspecified] foreigners, the regime answered by banning the activities of the *Transformateurs*, *Parti Socialiste sans Frontières* (PSF), and *les Patriotes*, together with four less important opposition parties, for three months. They also prohibited the civil society coalition Wakit Tama from all activities and imposed nightly curfew (from 6 PM to 6 AM) in all major cities.¹³ As police continued to search for what they named “potential coup makers” among the demonstrators, head of *Les Transformateurs*, Succès Marsa fled to Cameroon on 1 November, and later to the US.

¹² Right after the end of the DNIS on October 8 (2022), MIDI dissolved the government and appointed a new one, making Saleh Kebzabou his Prime Minister.

¹³ The curfew was only lifted on 5 December (2022).

Presidential pardons and Succès Masra as Prime Minister

Among the most remarkable presidential pardons was the 380 FACT fighters pardoned on April 5 (2023), less than three weeks after they were sentenced, many of them to lifetime imprisonment, for having taken part in the attempted coup in April (2021). Another noteworthy presidential pardon was the one given to Succès Masra on 31 October (2023), after negotiations facilitated by DRC president Felix Tshisékédi. In November (2022), Masra's US lawyers demanded the International Criminal Court in The Hague to investigate MIDI for crime against humanity. As an answer to that, the Chadian Court of Appeal issued an international warrant for Masra, on June 8 (2023), accusing him of "attempted attack on constitutional order, incitement to hatred and an insurrectional uprising." (RFI, 2023, October 5). Thus, the presidential pardon and amnesty for both perpetrators and victims, civilians and militaries, in the October 20 (2022) demonstration shocked most supports of *Les Transformateurs* and many others within the political and civil opposition. For MIDI, on the other hand, this pardon fitted perfectly well with his tactics of using sticks and carrots, buying former adversaries or threatening them if they became too difficult or powerful.

Succès Masra arrived in N'Djamena on November 3 (2023) after more than a year in exile, mainly spent in US and France. The political establishment in the country whispered soon that Masra had already made a deal with MIDI to become Chad's new Prime Minister after the referendum on the new constitution. The referendum had been planned since the beginning of the year but was finally decided to take place on December 17 (2023). Drafting the constitution took months even though everyone in the drafting committee was appointed by MIDI. On June 27 (2023) the new draft was voted by the CNT. 174 out of 197 voted in favour, though the official version of the new constitution was not complete. Only 232 of the 290 paragraphs officialised as Chad's 2023 constitution were available to the CNT at the time of voting. The same was the case as citizens voted on December 17 (2023).

Thus, what people casted their ballot for in the referendum, was not determined. Officially, the Chadian constitution as published on the website of the presidency stated that the constitution was "approved by referendum on December 17, 2023" (Présidence de la République du Tchad, 2024, June). However, what the Chadian citizens over 18 was asked to vote was the following question: "Do you approve the draft new Constitution of the Republic of Chad?"¹⁴

During the campaign leading up to the referendum the only question discussed was whether Chad should continue as a unitary state or should become a federal state. Many thousand members of the ruling MPS were engaged to campaign for "yes", and received smaller material benefits for that, while members of the organising committee received high salaries and per diems. Huge sums of money and material benefits were also handed out to potential "yes" voters all over the country during the campaign.

¹⁴ "Approuvez-vous le projet de nouvelle Constitution de la République du Tchad ?"

Not a single powerful politician argued for creation of a federal state, the “no” alternative. The few desiring a more decentralised political system in Chad, among them were the first PM under MIDI’s transitional government, Albert Pahimi Padacké and the rejected presidential candidate Yalla Dillo, argued for boycotting the referendum instead of voting “no”. Succès Masra argued that people should vote what they thought were the best for Chad without revealing his own position until some days ahead of the referendum (WeAfrica, 2023, December 13.) Then he started convincing his supporters (and others) to vote “yes”. He then most probably already knew that he would be nominated prime minister after the referendum.

In fact, also among the elites the referendum was about preserving a unitary state (yes) or not (no). Explaining the content of the 232-paragraphs long constitution – turning out as 290 paragraphs when the constitution was official – had been impossible in a country where at least half of the population was illiterate. More than four million voted “yes” while less than 700.000 voted “no” on December 17 (2023). The new constitution then replaced the constitution from 2018 (and the *Transitional Charter* in vigour since April 20, 2021).

Some important changes included the re-establishment of a prime minister as the head of government, the high court of justice, the supreme court, and the senate. The age of eligibility for a president was lowered from 40 to 35 and the term of office of a president was reduced from seven to five years. Still, a two-terms presidential limit was conserved in the new constitution (Présidence de la République du Tchad, 2024, June). For sure, the first three years as interim president did not count as a term and MIDI can, if re-elected in 2029, be Chad’s president until 2034. Although the president in Chad still retained control over the most important nominations and decisions, Chad’s fifth constitution is probably the most democratic ever, at least in theory.

The election of MIDI and the resignation of Succès Masra

On January 1 (2024) MIDI appointed Succès Masra as Prime Minister. By accepting this position most people ceased thinking of Masra as a trustworthy political opposition candidate, representing a real alternative to authoritarian military rule in Chad. MIDI had first threatened him seriously and then bought his loyalty. First president MIDI had accused Masra of attacking the constitutional order and being behind an insurrectional uprising in June. Then, half a year later, he appointed Masra as Chad’s new Prime Minister (Reuters, 2024, January 1). According to the new constitution (art. 100), the Prime Minister propose to the president the other members of the government, but the president appoints them.¹⁵ Masra managed to have two of his fellows within *Les Transformateurs* as ministers. However, MIDI was in total control of the government, and he could personally dismiss any minister for whatever reason.

¹⁵ Article 100 : le Premier ministre est le chef du Gouvernement. Il est nommé par décret du Président de la République. Les autres membres du Gouvernement sont nommés par le Président de la République sur proposition du Premier ministre.

Politically, Chad seems to live a stale-mate situation under its first government under the fifth republic. Masra had no credibility, nor as an opposition, nor as a PM within the regime. Trying to gain some legitimacy by offering his entire salary as scholarships to brilliant students (North Africa Post, 2024, January 8) did only increase rumours about too heavy corruption and fringe benefits for high level politicians.

Everyone outside the presidential power circles, also Masra, was surprised when the newly established election agency in Chad, with the happy acronym ANGE ¹⁶ that had replaced the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI) in January (2024), announced that the presidential elections would be held on May 6 (VOA, 2024, February 28). It was common knowledge that the elections would take place in October (2024). In February candidates were invited to present their candidature for the elections. More than 200 leaders of various smaller political parties soon regrouped to confirm their support for MIDI (VOA 2024, February 28 ; Le Monde, 2024, May 6). Head of the *Parti Socialiste sans Frontières* and a possible runner up for the presidential election, Yalla Dillo, was killed inside the party's premises on February 28 (2024), accused of trying to liberate a party member who had been jailed by the notorious National State Security Agency (ANSE). This incident intensified the sense of insecure climate both among regular citizens and among the elites prior to the presidential elections.

Finally, ten candidates were accepted to participate in the presidential elections. Seven of them were unknown to most Chadians and received from 0,4% to 1,5% of the ballots on May 6. Interim president Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno gained the elections in the first round with 61% of the vote, while Masra received 18,5 % and the infatigable Albert Pahimi Padacké received close to 17% (Journal du Tchad, 2024, May 17).

Masra had asked his supporters to take photos when the results were proclaimed and published in all the 23,000 polling stations and WhatsApp the local results to a secure call-centre controlled by *Les Transformateurs*. His party would calculate the results to minimise changes for fraud. MIDI did not like this idea as Masra resembled huge crowds when campaigning for the elections. Right before the election day, thus, MIDI ordered that no photos should be allowed near the polling stations. Those who did not respect this decree were heavily punished. Masra was, hence, unable to prove anything and his appeal to the court for electoral fraud, filed on May 12, (France 24, 2024, May 13) was rejected. Masra resigned as Prime Minister on May 22, and a new government was formed on May 27 (2024). Since then, Masra has close to disappeared from political life in Chad, until he was imprisoned on May 16 (2025) accused of spreading hateful messages on social media (BBC, 2025, July 13).

¹⁶ The French word ANGE means angel in English.

Conclusion

The death of Idriss Déby Itno (IDI) and the subsequent rise of his son Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno (MIDI) mark a significant turning point in Chad's political trajectory, characterized by contested legitimacy, repression, and strategic manipulation of power. Although initially promising a brief transition, MIDI's rule extended beyond expectations, underpinned by repression of dissent, strategic pardons, and co-optation of opposition figures like Succès Masra, who ultimately lost credibility.

Efforts to present a facade of democratic reform, including a constitutional referendum and peace dialogues, were marred by exclusion, lack of transparency, and continued authoritarian control. Despite promises of elections and reforms, MIDI maintained dominance, using a mix of rewards and crackdowns to suppress opposition and consolidate his regime.

The 2024 presidential election reaffirmed MIDI's hold on power amidst allegations of fraud, sidelining of opposition, and public disenchantment. Chad's political landscape remains shaped by fear, co-optation, and repression, with little evidence of genuine democratic transition under MIDI's leadership. This perpetuates a legacy of authoritarian rule, leaving the country in a state of uncertainty and limited prospects for meaningful change. However, one important change since his father's presidential periods now comes into play.

For sure, the strategies and techniques for gaining and keeping political power in Chad has been very costly for MIDI and his regime. Huge financial resources have been spent on various reconciliation processes, presidential pardons, creation of new positions both within the bureaucracy and the political apparatus. To align with the elite political power circles have been increasingly primordial for living a lucrative and good life, while most inhabitants continue to suffer in poverty.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that they have no financial interest in this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

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