

ELECTIONS DO NOT MAKE A DEMOCRACY: *The Transition in Chad*

*Helga Dickow*¹

Helga Dickow is an associate researcher at the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute (ABI) in Freiburg in Germany. Until 2025 she was a senior researcher at the ABI, heading the cluster 'Conflict and Fragility'.

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the electoral process that was undertaken to finish the transition in Chad, which is the only Sahel state to have held elections after a putsch. The president is now internationally recognised as the elected president, and the transition is complete. At the same, time human rights violations and the lack of democracy are obvious in all decisions – yet these issues do not receive comment by the international community.

Keywords: *Chad, transition, elections*

INTRODUCTION

Military leaders in the Sahel countries that have experienced coups d'état in the last five years have all made the same promise: they did not come to stay. Chad is the only country that has officially completed its post-coup transitional period by establishing a constitutional order and holding elections. However, given the electoral process and current political situation in Chad, including human rights violations, I argue that those elections, and the fact that the president and parliament were elected in general elections, do not automatically mean the country is now on the path to democracy. Rather, the country shows a democratic backsliding (Waldner & Lust, 2018). Indeed, international legitimisation as a reward for holding elections has given the current regime in Chad free rein – not only to crack down on the opposition and disregard human rights, but also to install the president for life.

¹  <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-2245-9107>

DEATH OF IDRIS DÉBY

The transition in Chad began with the unexpected death of long-time President Idriss Déby Itno in April 2021. He died while the *Front pour l'Alternance et la Concorde au Tchad* (Front for Change and Concord in Chad, FACT) was trying to advance towards N'Djamena (Dickow, 2021). The *Conseil Militaire de Transition* (Military Transitional Council, CMT) unconstitutionally seized power and appointed Déby's son Mahamat as president. Mahamat Déby has held onto power ever since.

Phases of relaxation and suppression alternated during the transition. It is not exaggerated to argue that what began as seeming liberalisation, at least compared to the late Déby's authoritarian rule, ended with the same inhumane forms of rule as in the past, under the new leadership. The following discussion illustrates the stages that unfolded from the outset, with the apparent ultimate goal being the establishment of an autocratic system as a continuation of the late Idriss Déby's autocracy.

FROM LIBERALISATION TO SUPPRESSION

Following the unconstitutional coup d'état by the CMT and the appointment of Mahamat Déby as a transitional president, Chadians experienced a phase of relative liberalisation and 'the impression of ... compromise and consensus' (Lacher, 2022). The transitional authorities loosened the control over various opposition groups that were established political parties and civil society organisations. These groups were given the liberty to express themselves politically; in addition, the ban on assembly was lifted, and demonstrations were permitted.

Despite these moves, the already weak political opposition became even weaker. During my interviews with members of the Chadian civil society and politicians in March 2022, I was told that the rapprochement between the transitional authorities and some opposition members merely led to the latter being co-opted into roles within the transitional bodies. The rapprochement included movements that are, in the Chadian context, called 'politico-military' movements; these had operated from neighbouring countries and had challenged the Idriss Déby regime repeatedly. During a period of eight months, a peace contract was negotiated in Doha, Qatar between representatives of the transitional authorities and some 50 movements. Only FACT and a few small politico-military movements did not sign the Doha Peace Treaty (Krippahl, 2022).

The decisions of the so-called *Dialogue Nationale Souveraine et Inclusive* (Sovereign and Inclusive National Dialogue, DNIS) concluded the smoothing phase, just as the promised 18-month phase of transition ended. Around 1,400 handpicked delegates, including a few token opposition members (in other

words, by no means an 'inclusive' group), decided to extend the transition period by two years. Mahamat Déby would remain as president. He and all members of the transitional authorities were granted the right to stand in the next elections. This decision was not in line with Article 25 of the African Union's Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (AU, 2012)², which Chad has signed. According to the article, persons involved in a coup d'état may not stand for election.

Resistance against the decisions and against the 'dynastisation' of power within the Déby family was immediate. Mostly young people followed the call for protests made by the opposition party Les Transformateurs under the leadership of Succès Masra as well as the newly founded civil society movement Wakit Tama. They protested not only against the dynastic concentration of power in the Déby family, but also because they had lost hope for political change or the establishment of democratic governance structures and a fair redistribution of the country's resources.

The security forces fired sharply on these (unauthorised) mass demonstrations. To this day, it is unknown how many people, mostly youth, were killed or disappeared after being arrested. Human rights organisations speak of more than 1,000 persons. The date of 20 October 2022 will forever be known in Chad as Bloody Thursday (International Crisis Group, 2022). The country was plunged into a state of shock and fear. Nobody seemed to dare to speak out anymore. Consequently, the transitional authorities were able to quietly follow the electoral roadmap that had been agreed upon by the DNIS.

ELECTION PREPARATIONS

A new voter list was needed. Voter registration took place in August and September 2023. The first round was focused on the densely populated southern regions of the country, where the population tends to be relatively opposed to the government. The north tends to be more pro-Déby, and the second round of voter registration took place here. This sequence meant that potential voters in the south who had just reached voting age were unable to participate in the subsequent elections, as they had been too young to register during the first round.

According to the DNIS's decision, the question of whether Chad should remain a unitary state or become a federal one should be decided by a referendum. The population of the south was largely in favour of a decentralised order. The national commission in charge of organising the constitutional referendum combined voting on the future form of state with that referendum. This was

2 <https://au.int/en/treaties/african-charter-democracy-elections-and-governance>

seemingly an economic decision. However, in practice, it meant that Chadians could only approve or reject the entire draft of the proposed constitution, in which centralisation was already determined. They could not opt for a federal state.

According to national observers and eyewitnesses, many Chadians boycotted the referendum on 17 December 2023 (RFI, 2023). The authorities reported a participation rate of 64% among the electorate, with more than 80% of participants voting in favour of the new constitution. The opposition expressed suspicions of fraud, but the Supreme Court confirmed the results. Chad was to remain a unitary state. The final stage to complete the transition was the elections, and 2024 would be the election year.

A SERIES OF ELECTIONS

Idriss Déby had held presidential elections regularly, but he had neglected any legislative elections. His son, Mahamat, has followed in his footsteps by prioritising the presidential elections. Also like his father, Mahamat Déby has ensured that no serious rivals can threaten his victory. His cousin, Yaya Dillo Djérou Betchi, could have been a serious contender. Yaya Dillo was a highly respected leader in their ethnic group of Zaghawa and had shown his willingness to stand in the presidential elections of May 2024. But on 28 February 2024, a day after the announcement of the election date, Yaya Dillo was shot dead by security forces in his party headquarters in N'Djamena. To date, there has been no official investigation into his death. For anyone with a political ambition to become the country's president, it was clear that such ambitions could be dangerous (Dickow, 2024a).

Despite eliminating one of his biggest rivals, Déby continued to play it safe. He allied himself with two groups, the first being the Movement Patriotique du Salut (Patriotic Salvation Movement, MPS), the powerful former ruling party under his father. The second was the newly founded Coalition pour un Tchad Uni (Coalition for a United Chad), a coalition of more than 200 political parties (Ngarndinon, 2025) and more than 1,000 civil society organisations. Chad has a population of approximately 19 million people, according to The World Factbook.³

Ultimately, only 10 of the 20 candidates who had submitted their candidacies were allowed to run for president, based on the Constitutional Council's decision. Among them were the transitional president, Mahamat Déby, and his then prime minister, Masra. During the election campaign from mid-April until 4 May 2024, all candidates promised to improve citizens' living conditions, particularly by

3 <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/chad/> <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/chad/>

providing electricity and water. They also promised to improve education and job prospects for young people and to promote good governance, reconciliation, and co-existence. Transitional President Déby also emphasised ‘stability’, and he had used that word throughout the transition period to justify his assumption of power. Masra promised a break with the past.

The elections were held on 6 May 2024. The results were not scheduled to be announced until three weeks later, due to the size and inaccessibility of some regions. Nevertheless, as early as 9 May, the election authorities published their preliminary results. Déby was declared the winner, having obtained 61% of the votes. Masra received 18.5%, and the former prime minister, Albert Pahimi Padacké Padacké, received 16.9%. The remaining seven candidates received less than 1% each (LAM, 2024).

However, the elections had taken place without any witnesses. No observers, not even the 3,000 civil society members who were financed by the European Union to observe the presidential elections, had been accredited to carry out this task. Therefore, no announcement of the results appears to have been based on credible data. In November 2024, I interviewed members of Chadian civil society and politicians. According to these witnesses, there appeared to have been widespread fraud. Voters were unable to vote, and voter lists and ballot boxes had disappeared. The counting process and rapid publication of the results were also subject to irregularities, leading to further speculation about the elections’ credibility (Dickow, 2024b).

On 22 May 2024, Masra resigned. The next day, Déby nominated Allamaye Halina, a former ambassador to the People’s Republic of China and his father’s long-time head of protocol, as the new prime minister. Déby was inaugurated as Chad’s president on the same day.

The subsequent parliamentary, provincial, local, and senatorial elections were a mere technicality. The first three elections all took place on 29 December 2024. Unlike in the presidential elections, most opposition parties called for a boycott. They included Masra and his party *Les Transformateurs*, as well as the political opposition coalition known as the *Groupe de Concertation des Acteurs Politiques* (Consultation Group of Chad Political Actors, GCAP), which criticised the new electoral law and its application.

The results of the first parliamentary elections since 2011 were released on 21 January 2025. Among the more than 300 political parties in the country (CSAPR, 2019), 38 are now represented in the new parliament. As in the past, the MPS gained a two-third majority of the 188 seats, at 124 seats. The party *Rassemblement National des Démocrates Tchadiens-le Réveil* (National Rally of Chadian Democrats, RNDT) of the former prime minister Albert Pahimi Padacké won 12 seats. In second place was the *Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et le*

Progrès (Rally for Democracy and Progress, RDP), with eight seats. Third place went to the Union Nationale pour le Développement et le Renouveau (National Union for Democracy and Renewal, UNDR) led by the former opposition leader and now mediator of the Republic, Saleh Kebzabo, with seven seats. The other political parties did not win more than a single mandate each. Many of them are so-called allies of the MPS.

The transition officially ended with the general election. The senate elections were merely a formality and took place for the first time in Chadian history on 25 February 2025. According to the new constitution, 46 senators were elected by the newly elected municipal and provincial councillors. Also according to the constitution, the president nominated an additional 23 senators. He chose loyal MPS officials and other individuals who had close ties to the ruling party. According to members of Chadian civil society and politicians whom I interviewed in March 2025, the inevitable result has been a senate that does not provide a check on power. It is, instead, an instrument of the executive.

CONCLUSION

I have described the election process in Chad in detail to demonstrate that the various steps and voting were not conducted in a free and fair manner, as required by international standards. As McDonald (2024) stated, the Chadian 'transition [is] lacking real democratic transformation.' My aim is to illustrate the manoeuvres that were employed to achieve the desired result, which was to maintain power for the ruling elite.

The newly elected president is the son of the former authoritarian leader. He governs with the support of his father's former power base and former ruling party, the MPS. Thanks to its majority in Parliament, the MPS will continue to dominate all parliamentary resolutions. The result is a complete lack of checks and balances. Like his father, Mahamat Déby will be able to rule without parliamentary control and for life. Indeed, in October 2025, Parliament and the Senate passed a constitutional amendment that increases the president's term of office to seven years, with no limit on the number of terms (RFI, 2025).

It has long been known to scholars (e.g., Schmitter & Karl 1991; Schedler 2006) that merely holding elections does not necessarily result in a democratically elected government. Briverty and Mulonda (2019) described elections in Africa as 'administrative formalities which have become standard signs of good conduct adopted by African governments to Western states and international institutions.' The Chadian case illustrates this logic. There were formal elections, but the electoral process was by no means free and fair. Strictly speaking, Mahamat Déby

met the demands of the African Union and the international donor community, which had called for the restoration of constitutional order in Chad after the death of his father. He was rewarded immediately. The number of international visitors to the presidential palace and embassies that recently opened in the capital city of N'Djamena has been impressive. Chadian journal websites regularly report on inaugural ambassadorial visits. Impressive, too, are the international aid commitments made since the end of the transition. In 2025, for instance, Chad received loans from the World Bank totalling around US\$200 million,⁴ and the European Union added another €280 million between 2021 and 2024.⁵

Nonetheless, ordinary Chadians have experienced a further erosion of their rights and the elimination of political opponents. Since the end of the transition, several journalists have been arrested and critical newspapers and journals banned. The main highlight to date has been the arrest of the former prime minister, Masra, in May 2025, on charges of inciting hatred and xenophobia. In August 2025 he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

The situation in Chad raises the following question: What is the point of international institutions and the Western world insisting on compliance with democratic rules? These institutions and countries should ask themselves why they are willing to impose sanctions on some countries, like Mali, while turning a blind eye to undemocratic practices in others – or even rewarding them. Considerations of *realpolitik* seem to be stronger than democratic standards.

The small, courageous opposition in Chad stands on its own. It urgently needs the support and recognition of the international community. As early as 2019, the Chadian NGO Comité de Suivi de l'Appel à la Paix et à la Réconciliation stated as follows: 'The real challenge is to enable citizens to freely express their expectations of the emerging political forces in order to promote the emergence of a national consensus among all social forces in Chad'⁶ (CSAPR, 2019). Those words must be taken seriously.

4 <https://financesone.worldbank.org/countries/chad>

5 https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/chad_en

6 '*Le véritable enjeu est de permettre aux citoyens d'exprimer librement leurs attentes auprès des forces politiques en construction, afin de favoriser l'émergence d'un consensus national entre toutes les forces sociales tchadiennes.*'

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