Chad: What are the risks after Idriss Déby’s death?

The death of Chad’s President Idriss Déby has plunged the country into uncertainty, causing concern among many Chadians and in neighbouring states. Crisis Group looks at recent events and examines the main risks facing the country.

What has happened?
According to official reports, Chad’s President Idriss Déby Itno died on Tuesday 20 April around 1am after clashes between the national army and the Front for Change and Unity in Chad (FACT) not far from Mao, in the country’s central Kanem region. After 30 years in power, Déby had just been re-elected for a sixth consecutive term in office. His death was announced at 11am on national television by the army’s spokesperson, General Azem Bermandoa. Some observers have expressed doubts about this version of events and suggest alternative, unconfirmed hypotheses about the circumstances of Déby’s death. One prominent story refers to a gunfight breaking out after failed negotiations with FACT members.

President Déby was present on the battlefield is not unusual. He took power in 1990 in a coup d’état deposing President Hissène Habré, for whom he had served as head of the army, and he consistently used his military credentials to buttress his political power. His armed forces successfully fended off rebel attacks in 2006 and 2008, and most recently in 2019, thanks to support from the French army. The late president himself was frequently on the front lines. In April 2020 for example, he led a counteroffensive against a Boko Haram faction that had just killed nearly 100 Chadian soldiers on the shores of Lake Chad. Déby’s presence on the ground allowed him to mobilise and motivate his troops, and to present himself as guarantor of the nation’s security. His death is thus a cause for concern for many Chadians and creates a climate of uncertainty in the country.

Who are the rebels who have entered Chad?
The rebels are members of FACT, a Chadian military-political group based in Libya reportedly consisting of around 1,000 to 1,500 fighters. General Mahamat Mahdi Ali set up FACT in 2016 in Tanoua, in northern Chad, after a split from another rebel group, the Union of Forces for Democracy and Development (UFDD) led by Déby’s former defence minister, Mahamat Nouri. Originally from Salal, in the central Barh el Gazal region, Mahamat Mahdi Ali, who studied in France, joined several armed movements in Tibesti, Darfur and Libya. He claims to be fighting for a change of power in Chad. Many rebels have followed similar paths, leading to several incursions into the country, mainly from the north and east. A number of rebel Chadian groups were chased out of neighbouring Darfur after the rapprochement between Chad and Sudan in 2010, and they took advantage of the downfall of former Libyan President Mouammar Gaddafi in 2011 to establish a presence in Libya, using it as a base for frequent cross-border raids into Chad.
FACT launched its recent offensive at a critical time for the country. The movement’s rebel forces made their first incursion on 11 April 2021, Chad’s election day, in order to exploit electoral tensions and as a call to other opponents to join their cause. In mid-April, their public statements summoned “members of the democratic opposition, civil society and the Chadian people to continue their pressure on the regime” to support the armed struggle. Civil society organisations and opposition parties have not followed this call, and have instead issued a communiqué urging each camp to observe a ceasefire.

On 11 April, FACT fighters travelling in heavily armed vehicles moved through the sparsely populated desert region of Tibesti. On 15 April, Chad’s air force launched a first round of air strikes against the rebels in Zouarké. In parallel, several other rebel groups, including the Union of Resistance Forces (UFR) and the UFDD, also based in Libya, stated their support for FACT – without, however, joining the fighting on the ground. On 17 April, the first major battle between FACT fighters and Chadian soldiers took place north of Mao, over 300km from N’Djamena. The Chadian authorities claimed to have killed 300 rebels and taken 150 prisoner. On the evening of 18 April, FACT’s leader Mahamat Mahdi acknowledged that he had lost some fighters and had made a tactical retreat further north while preparing a new round of attacks. At the same time, however, sources close to the opposition indicated that fighting was ongoing and the Chadian army was suffering significant losses, including some high-ranking officers. In a FACT communiqué, President Déby himself appeared on the list of wounded.

What is the link between Libya (from which the rebels launched their incursion) and recent events in Chad?

The rebels’ incursion into Chad from southern Libya comes as the latter’s peace process has been making significant strides. Last October, the two Libyan military coalitions – one led by the Tripoli-based authorities and the other by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA) based in eastern Libya – signed a ceasefire agreement. In March, these rival factions agreed to set up a new interim national unity government. A pillar of the ceasefire agreement was the call for the
departure of foreign armed forces, including those from Chad, which have served as proxy forces and were financed for years by the various Libyan military coalitions. Despite being presented as a priority, this part of the agreement has barely been implemented. Although some Chadian rebel groups have tried to join forces since February 2021 to prepare for possible future problems they could have with Libyan authorities, they have not yet faced any concerted pressure to leave the country. International actors are paying more attention to the mercenaries backed by Russia and Turkey.

FACT was able to launch its incursion into Chad because it has superior firepower and equipment compared to other rebel Chadian groups. It was able to accumulate these arms in part as a result of its aligning with Haftar’s forces. FACT rebels also probably took possession of armed vehicles and heavy artillery that Haftar’s foreign backers had supplied before his march on Tripoli in 2019. According to a report by the UN Panel of Experts on Libya, FACT’s forces did not take part in the fighting but were responsible for protecting military installations in central Libya in 2017 and in the south of the country after Haftar’s forces seized control of them in February 2019. It is therefore plausible that FACT was able to put together an arsenal while in contact with the LNA. Haftar’s forces have not issued a public statement on FACT’s incursion into Chad, but in private they deny any links to this group. Either way, recent events in Chad again show that arming foreign forces in Libya has potential consequences for the stability of the entire region.

**What does Déby’s death mean for Chad’s neighbours?**

The leaders of various neighbouring countries have expressed their condolences and deep concern at the news of Déby’s death. Chad has been relatively stable in a very precarious regional context. The country has also been a linchpin of the struggle against jihadist groups in the Lake Chad basin – where it intervened after 2014 at the request of its Nigerian and Cameroonian neighbours to fight against Boko Haram factions – and in the Sahel region. The death of Chad’s president is a hard blow for the G5 Sahel, a regional organisation set up in 2014 for security and development cooperation. Chad plays a leading military role in this coalition, and Déby was its standing president. The country also contributes more than 1,400 UN peacekeepers, currently deployed in Tessalit, Aguelhok and Kidal in Mali, and in February it sent a 1,200-strong detachment as part of the G5 Sahel joint force to the highly unstable tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. The current situation has raised concerns over the future of these forces, and whether they will return to Chad to help address problems on the domestic front. Such a repatriation could have repercussions on how Chad’s allies deploy in the Sahel, particularly for the French.

**What is the current situation in Chad and what risks does the country face?**

Immediately after President Déby’s death, the army established a new Transitional Military Council in charge of ensuring an eighteen-month transition, pledging to later hold “free and transparent” elections. Led by the late president’s 37-year-old son, Mahamat Idriss Déby, a general in charge of the army’s elite unit (the General Directorate for State Security or DGSSIE), this council has fifteen members who have all occupied senior posts in the security services. These include the chief of the general staff, Abakar Abdelkarim Daoud, the director of military intelligence, Taher Erda Taïro, and former public security, territorial administration and army ministers. The council
swiftly suspended the constitution, dissolved the National Assembly and the government, adopted a transitional charter, ordered a curfew, closed land borders and restricted air travel. However, after some days of hesitation, it has already backtracked on some of these directives, explaining that it needs to make “some clarifications”. For the time being, existing members of government remain in office to deal with routine business, and the borders have been reopened.

Political opposition figures and a section of civil society are highly critical of the Transitional Military Council. They are concerned about its defiance of the constitutional requirement that the National Assembly’s president oversee the transition, and about the takeover of power by the army. The former president’s supporters, in contrast, consider the council to be the only way to cope with exceptional circumstances, maintain peace and ensure the country’s defence during troubled times.

The council has reacted to criticism by seeking support. It has held meetings with members of the National Political Dialogue Framework (CNDP) and influential political party leaders, including Albert Pahimi Padacké, the runner-up in the recent presidential election. It has also pledged to set up a transitional government in the coming hours or days. It remains to be seen whether this proposed government will incorporate Chad’s full range of political groups and views, and whether those invited will agree to take up their positions. Many political leaders and members of civil society have already categorically rejected what they call a “military coup d’état”.

Chad finds itself in a very delicate situation. Political and military groups have already made it clear that they do not view the military council as legitimate. “We plan to continue the offensive”, said FACT’s spokesman Kingabé Ogouzeimi de Tapol. Although FACT has suffered significant human and material losses, President Déby’s death has undoubt edly spurred on his armed adversaries. The Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR), another Chadian rebel group operating out of Libya, has announced its support for FACT. According to some sources, the two groups may lead a joint offensive on Chadian positions. Renewed fighting could therefore break out in the coming days, either in provincial areas or near the capital N’Djamena, posing a risk for the civilian population.

Other issues hang in the balance. Tensions could spill over onto the streets and lead to a standoff between some civil society organisations and political parties on one side, and the new military authorities on the other. Although Chadian observers report that Idriss Déby’s son enjoys a good reputation and the respect of his soldiers, many wonder whether he will have sufficient authority to lead the army on various fronts, both within Chad’s borders and abroad.

To ensure a peaceful transition, it will be important to find areas of common ground between the military council and its opponents. Within such a volatile context, a ceasefire is the top priority. International actors with influence in Chad should push the various parties toward these objectives.

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