

Déby's death spurs security concerns in West Africa

The sudden death of President Idriss Déby of Chad on 19 April 2021 came as a surprise to the international community. The late president had been a great bulwark against terrorism in the West African sub-region.

So, when the news came that he went to the war front, no one thought anything untoward could happen to him. It was not his first or second time on the war front. However, when the news spread that he had been killed, there have been concerns over the actual cause of his demise, which has been swept under the carpet.

A man of war, Déby had survived several coup attempts since he himself overthrew his boss Hissène Habré and ascended to power in 1990. He was the head of the ruling Patriotic Salvation Movement. With the clamour for the military to quit power which reached its heights in the nineties, he jettisoned his army uniform and became a civilian president and won all elections he had organized since then. After six years in office as a military leader, he won his first presidential election in 1996 and was reelected in 2001. After those wins, the constitution limiting presidential terms to two was amended, allowing him to contest and win in 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021.

In fact, he had just been declared winner of the 2021 election and had not given his acceptance speech before embarking on the trip to the war front, which claimed his life.

The security implications of Déby's death

Since Déby's death, there have been security concerns in the West African sub-region as to the implications of his death to the region and the continent in general. It is a widely known

fact that he was a strong backer of the leaders of the region in the fight against terrorism. He had in the past sent his troops into the Nigerian territory where they recaptured Malumfatori, a town in Nigeria's northeast, which had been under Boko Haram terrorists for long.

His troops reportedly had to hold the town down for two weeks before the arrival of Nigerian troops to take it from them.

His death, therefore, has sent shivers down the nerves of countries in the sub-region because Chad is believed to have deployed the strongest military intervention to checkmate the insurgents. It is therefore of concern that a succeeding government may not have the same panache or determination to challenge the rebels and terrorists, especially those rebels who are now pouring in from Libya and other neighbouring countries. The fact that Déby's 37-year-old son General Mehamet Idris Déby had succeeded him notwithstanding, many doubt that he can hold a candle to his father. The battle still rages between the Chadian Defence Force (CDF) and the rebel group known as 'Front for Change and Concord in Chad' (FCCC).

The security vacuum from his death made France, one of the country's biggest backers and former colonial master, and the United States of America order nonessential diplomats to leave the country with their families. The two superpowers cited security threats, claiming that armed groups appear to be moving into the capital.

The developments in Chad have grievous implications for Nigeria, which shares a border with the country in the northeast, the home of the Boko Haram terrorists. The fear is that an outbreak of civil war in Chad might lead to the proliferation of arms and the influx of refugees into Nigeria, which would no doubt compound the present security scare in Nigeria. It is also feared that the FCCC could form an alliance with Boko Haram terrorists as well as some of the

secession groups springing up across the country.

A statement from Nigeria's Foreign Affairs Minister Godfrey Onyeama on the killing of Déby was filled with sympathy and admiration despite the general feeling that he was a dictator who had held his country under his thumb for three decades.

According to the statement, "The Federal Government of Nigeria expresses shock and sadness on the passing away of His Excellency, the Marshall of Chad, Idriss Déby Itno, who died as a result of injuries suffered in frontline battle with rebels. Nigeria calls for urgent consideration of dialogue among all the stakeholders, which Nigeria is willing to guide and mainstream, within the framework of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and ultimately, the African Union (AU)." Note that the statement called him "the Marshall of Chad," but did not mention his long stay in power, which might not be unintentional.

Continuing, Mr Onyeama remarked that "The influence and relevance of Idriss Déby Itno lay in his capacity to make Chad act as a buffer between North Africa, the Sahel, East and West Africa and, in particular, containing the negative extreme tendencies that are domiciled in these regions."

The fear for the security and safety of the region is not restricted to Africans alone. A former United States Ambassador to Nigeria, John Campbell, in his response, told the Voice of America, "In terms of the struggle against jihadism, his death is a distinct setback. [The Chadian army was probably the most efficient fighting force in West Africa, again, with the exception of the French. And the question will be whether the regime continues the effort or not.](#)"

In the same vein, Paul-Simon Handy, a senior regional advisor with the Institute of Security Studies, Dakar, Senegal, also told VOA, "[There is uncertainty about the immediate future of](#)

Chad. There's uncertainty about the stability of the current interim arrangement by the military council. There's uncertainty about unity within the ranks of the army. Islamist insurgents can actually use these opportunities to further destabilize Chad."

Mahamat, the son, steps in

However, there have been concerns that despite the fact that Déby's administration claimed to be a democracy, the constitution of the country has been violated with the choice of his son Mahamat as the head of a new military regime. This has been condemned as a military coup which the leadership of the AU and the other sub-regional political blocs have yet to comment on.

Many are kicking against this because, in their view, the country is being turned into a monarchy if this is allowed to stay. However, this is not new on the continent because after the death of Gnassingbé Eyadema of Togo, his son Faure succeeded him. Similarly, Omar Bongo of Gabon was succeeded by his son Ali Bongo. The same scenario played out in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where Laurent Kabila was succeeded by his son Joseph Kabila.

Mahamat is said to be discrete and always avoids the limelight, unlike some of his half-brothers. He is, however, said to be a battle-hardened soldier like his father and is widely known as "General Kaka" because he was brought up by his grandmother, or "Kaka" in Chadian Arabic.

He was with his father when he was killed by rebel fire on the war front. How much his military trainings in Chad and at the Lycee-Militaire in Aix-en-Provence, France, would be of help to his new role is in the is unknown.