

The Stalled Decolonisation*

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Much of the ex-colonial world, having set up dirigiste regimes to wrest control over its natural resources from metropolitan capital and to build up industries behind protectionist walls, was sought to be re-assimilated into imperialist hegemony through the neo-liberal economic order; but in one segment of this world decolonisation itself was never completed. The former French colonies of West Africa belong to this segment. Even though local personnel replaced French administrators, they did not effectively shake off French hegemony, and by implication metropolitan hegemony even temporarily.

French troops continued to be stationed in each of those countries; and they were bound by a currency union with France, where their currency, the CFA franc (started in 1945), had a fixed exchange rate with the old French franc (and subsequently with the euro), an exchange rate moreover that was always kept somewhat over-valued. In any currency union, the segment that has the over-valued currency becomes less competitive and gets afflicted with de-industrialisation and unemployment, as had happened with East Germany after the German “re-unification”. In the case of Francophone Africa, currency union with France at an over-valued exchange rate doomed these countries to a permanent absence of industry: no industrial good could be produced domestically in any country because it was always cheaper to import it from France (which also gave the latter a perennially captive market). On the other hand, the primary commodities that were exported from these countries had to sell in the international market at certain fixed dollar (and hence Franc) prices, and an over-valued currency simply meant that domestic wages had to be suitably adjusted downwards to keep these countries internationally competitive in primary commodity markets. The net result therefore was that the local population did not gain in terms of wage rates but lost out in terms of employment (which then had second-order effects on wage rates too). These countries in short were doomed to a permanent state of underdevelopment and abject poverty.

But that was not all. The bulk of their foreign exchange reserves (at least 50 per cent) were kept in France, as had been the case with colonial India, which boosted the foreign exchange resources available to France. And to maintain the fixed exchange rate with the French currency, it was considered necessary that their monetary policy should be aligned with that of France, for which it had to be controlled by the French monetary authorities; this removed a possible tool for initiating economic development from their armoury.

This bizarre state of affairs was maintained politically by a variety of measures, from rigged elections behind a democratic facade, to coup d’etats and even assassinations. The most striking case was that of Thomas Sankara, a Burkinabe military officer and Marxist revolutionary and pan-Africanist, who came to power in Burkina Faso in 1983 and who wanted French troops out of his country. Sankara, an iconic figure in Africa now, was assassinated by one of his own associates, who was allegedly working on behalf of imperialism, and who then succeeded him as president of the country. An organisation ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) was formed, dominated by pro-western leaders of West Africa, which took on the

responsibility of preserving the status quo and hence furthering the cause of imperialism.

Of late however there has been a popular anti-imperialist upsurge in several countries of Francophone Africa. In Guinea, Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso, new anti-imperialist governments have come to power in the last couple of years that want French troops out of their countries; and in Mali they have even succeeded in getting French troops out.

Niger is the latest country to join this group. The governments of this group of countries have come to power through coup d'états; and in the case of Niger the coup was against an elected government. This fact has enabled imperialist countries to debunk such newly-installed governments as "anti-democratic", though the imperialist countries never once take a similar stance vis-à-vis coup d'états that install right-wing pro-imperialist regimes.

The irony of this imperialist double-speak was quite evident recently. The new government in Niger came to power through a coup d'état of the presidential guard, an elite segment of the armed forces against the elected government of President Bazoum which had been pro-west and pro-US even to the point of asking for an increase in the number of French troops stationed in that country. Victoria Nuland, the neo-con deputy secretary of state of the US went to meet one of the coup leaders who had received military training in the US to "persuade" the new Niger government to respect democracy and restore Bazoum to power. The same Victoria Nuland however had been directly responsible for organising the coup in Ukraine in 2014 that had removed Viktor Yanukovich the elected president of that country from power, an event that had unleashed the chain of developments leading to the current tragic war there. Imperialist concern in other words is not really for democracy; it is for the perpetuation of imperialist hegemony.

The argument that upholds elected governments in the Francophone countries may appear unexceptional; but the reality is that many pro-imperialist West African politicians have been amassing huge personal wealth by being in cahoots with the French government and French business interests, allowing the latter to exploit the valuable natural resources of their countries (Niger for instance has rich deposits of uranium which are required by France to generate electricity); with such massive ill-gotten wealth they purchase votes, and aided additionally by rigging, manage to win elections. The "elected" governments in short are not entities that enjoy popular support; they are constituted by corrupt politicians who manipulate elections to keep themselves in power.

On the other hand, segments of the army in many of these countries constitute the real location for revolutionary and patriotic ideas. Not surprisingly, the coup in Niger has been widely welcomed by the local population, the overwhelming majority of whom, even according to western public opinion surveys, want France out of their country.

The corruption associated with the electoral process is most clearly evident in the case of contemporary Nigeria where the elected president, Bola Tinubu, had amassed huge wealth, allegedly by doing money laundering operations on behalf of a group of drug traffickers, whom he had befriended when he was located in the United states (MR Online August 12). Returning to Nigeria he found himself among the richest

politicians of that country, and allegedly purchased votes to get himself elected as the country's president. He is always in close touch with the US embassy in Nigeria, and, after the Niger coup decided to cut off electricity supply from Nigeria to that country in a unilateral imposition of sanctions. In addition, being the current chairman of ECOWAS, he has tried to pit that organisation against the current anti-imperialist regime of Niger. In his capacity as chairman, he has announced that unless the elected former president of Niger is restored to office, ECOWAS would militarily intervene in Niger to bring about his restoration.

Unfortunately for him and fortunately for the anti-imperialist forces in Francophone Africa, the senate of his own country did not approve of any military intervention in Niger. And Guinea, Burkina Faso and Mali have already announced that if there is any military intervention against Niger, then they would also militarily intervene to defend the new government of Niger.

Despite all this, however, ECOWAS has not abandoned its plans of military intervention and there are reports of troops being amassed on Niger's borders. Francophone Africa therefore is on the verge of war; but if there is war it will be a proxy war being waged by imperialism against countries wishing to carry forward the decolonisation process that had been stalled at its very inception. It is significant that the imperialist countries themselves had briefly considered military intervention against Niger, before abandoning the idea, and letting ECOWAS go ahead with plans of military intervention as their proxy.

Significantly, the new regimes in Francophone Africa are looking to Russia to help them in their struggle against imperialism and often invoke the role that the Soviet Union had played in the third world's anti-imperialist struggle. The Soviet Union alas no longer exists and Russia is far from being its ideological successor; but it still has credibility because it is defending itself against imperialism in a different theatre of action.

* This article was originally published in the [Peoples Democracy](#) on August 20, 2023.