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CHAD - NORTH AFRICAN HEADACHE

Chad - a country where as recently as 1975, witchcraft ceremonies were widely credited with having caused the downfall of one president and rise of another - presents political analysts with a major headache. In the wake of the recent unrest - complicated by the French refusal to defend the status quo with force of arms - most observers attempting to make some sense out of the tangle of allegiances and tribal antagonisms which characterise the politics of the country, tend to wind up feeling like the late President Tombalbaye's officials. Tombalbaye was an enthusiastic supporter of the "Yondo" initiation rite as a device to cow rebellious civil servants, who were airlifted into the mountains to be left in the hands of witchdoctors. The officials often returned to the capital, N'djamena, dazed and shattered.

The man behind the attempt to unseat President Felix Malloum - Prime Minister Hissen Habre, first achieved international notoriety as the kidnapper of Françoise Claustre, the French ethnologist who was used as a political pawn. In 1976 he was a leader of one of the three Frolinat (Chad National Liberation Front) groups, fighting the Government. Frolinat's aims have never been clear, and it is still not known what they want beyond a redress of the humiliation which the northerners, who form the backbone of Frolinat, suffered for many years at the hands of the southerners.

Habre and President Malloum appear to have had something of a tangled relationship stemming from Habre's insistence, in 1974, that Malloum be released from prison in exchange for Mme Claustre's life. At that time, Malloum (then a General and sacked Commander-in-chief of the Chad army) was in prison charged with having participated in witchcraft ceremonies aimed at Tombalbaye, later toppled in a successful coup on 13 April 1975.

Meanwhile, the Derde, Wodei Kichidemi - traditional leader of the Toubou tribe, source of Frolinat's fighting forces - began co-operating with Malloum's government when the latter made an impassioned plea for national reconciliation shortly after seizing power. This was not to the liking of the Derde's son, Goukouny Ouaddai, who joined forces with Habre's arm of Frolinat. Both men are members of the Toubou tribe elite. After a brief honeymoon, however, Goukouny Ouaddai realised that Habre was a sheep in wolf's clothing about to cross over to the enemy. Proof positive was forthcoming when demands by Habre addressed to "frere President Felix Malloum" as preconditions for a reconciliation were fulfilled, namely the evacuation of French bases and a clear statement of Libyan occupation of the Aouzou strip in the Tibesti region of northern Chad which was controlled by Mr. Habre's guerillas.

Accordingly, Ouaddai cemented forces with the leader of the third Frolinat group, Abba Siddick, who had been fighting both General Malloum's forces and those of Mr. Habre in the north-eastern corner of Chad adjoining the Sudanese border. Abba Siddick enjoys Libyan support, while Hissen Habre is violently opposed to the Libyans because of their occupation of northern Chad. (It is thus puzzling to read news reports claiming Libyan support for Habre's uprising.) The Libyans have an interest in the region because of the presence

of uranium ore and it was thought that the Libyans hoped for nuclear co-operation from France as a reward for helping to secure the release of the Claustres (then in the hands of Goukouny after the people became his responsibility when he and Habre fell out). Libya, incidentally, was reported as planning a nuclear bomb test in North Africa later this year.

Habre successfully negotiated an agreement with President Malloum which led to his being named Prime Minister in a new Government of National Unity on 29 August 1978. Mr. Habre's guerilla force of about a thousand men was integrated into the Chad army and it is thought that it is this force which launched last week's coup attempt against Malloum (quite apart, of course, from the other Frolinat groups under, inter alia, Abba Siddick, who are cashing in on the general confusion.) Why the Prime Minister wants to depose the President (his ally) when his worst enemies are breathing down his neck, is still not known.

In all of this there are two other important dimensions - the French and the Libyans. The French connection derives from their having awarded independence to Chad on 11 August 1960. Under De Gaulle, French foreign legionnaires became involved against Frolinat guerillas in 1968. They remained in Chad until 1975, when they withdrew at President Malloum's request (and Habre's insistence), because of French Government handling of the Claustre case. The French may have been temporarily delighted at this turn of events since they wished to be on good terms with all three countries in the region - Chad, Niger and Libya. However, two events then happened which simultaneously upset both the political apple cart and French composure.

The first event was that in April last year, after thirteen years of civil war, Libya arranged a cease-fire between the rebels and President Malloum - which was broken shortly afterwards when Chad claimed the Libyans were behind Frolinat rebel cease-fire violations. The second event was that shortly before this incident, French troops acted to restore order after violent anti-white race riots in the Abeche area, caused when the legionnaires were accused of assaulting local women. In the midst of all this tension, French reinforcements were brought into Chad when it was realised that the ragged, nomadic Frolinat guerillas had been turned into a sophisticated fighting force armed with Soviet weapons, and when Libyan intervention was proved to French satisfaction. In June 1978 a French Jaguar Supersonic fighter-bomber was shot down by Frolinat guerillas with a Sam-7 missile.

The seriousness of the overall situation was highlighted in the same month when the French Ministry announced that the foreign legion had fought the biggest battle involving European soldiers in Africa in many decades. Nearly a thousand of the Moslem Frolinat rebels were killed in a 48-hour pitched battle.

It is not known what Libya wants in Chad and Colonel Gaddafi, the Libyan leader, has been rather ambiguous as to his intentions. His most likely objective, however, is to wring concessions from Chad concerning the Aouzou zone and to boost economic co-operation between the two countries in order to create a new relationship based on patronage rather than confrontation. Colonel Gaddafi already enjoys good relations with Niger and relations with the Sudan are improving, leading some observers to suspect that his interest in Chad is merely part of a wider aspiration to realize a Libyan-led political grouping in North Africa.

In the latest flare-up in Chad, the French have been careful to adopt scrupulously neutral ground, no doubt recognising that there is little advantage to be gained in propping up the weak dictatorial regime of President

Malloum. Also, the fact that the French have equipped and supported Mr. Habre's guerillas since he became Prime Minister, may have something to do with it.

Chad is a strategic staging post for France (commanding its routes to Djibouti and the Indian Ocean), and President Giscard is probably of the opinion now that more would be gained by a friendly posture towards the Libyans than a hostile one. This may be at the cost of French interests elsewhere, however. The French attitude could be interpreted as defeatist in some quarters and former friendly colonies such as the Ivory Coast and Senegal might drift towards a pro-Soviet position if socialist countries like Libya and possibly even Algeria were seen to be making inroads on the continent.

The main danger at the moment, and one that could have a ripple effect on Niger and the Sudan, is the prospect of an all-out civil war in Chad between the north and the south and between the various tribes. The French military presence had at least stabilised the situation and kept hostilities to a sullen splutter.

One can expect that the French tactic will probably be to co-operate with Libya in the future, to orchestrate a settlement and avert a conflagration.

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