Who Are France's Sahelian Critics, and What Are They Saying?

By Alex Thurston / Wednesday, July 6, 2022



Throughout the Sahel region and especially in Sahelian capitals, anti-French voices are growing louder. Local protest movements are criticizing France's policies in the Sahel and criticizing the decisions of past or present Sahelian leaders on France. Movements such as the M5-RFP in Mali, COPA/BF in Burkina Faso, Tournons La Page in Niger, and Wakit Tama in Chad have all had anti-French messages as part of their wider political platforms. Some anti-French sentiment can be linked to Russian disinformation. Yet many developing debates in the Sahel, as well as many serious politicians and intellectuals in the region, have powerful criticisms of France. Listening to their criticisms reveals the depth of Sahelians' frustrations with international security (which France is not the cause, but which France has not reversed) and with politicians perceived as too deferential to France.

Russian Influence—An Accelerant of Anti-French Sentiment, But Not the Origin

Russian influence in Africa is serious and growing. Russia sometimes explicitly offers itself as an alternative to France. Kremlin-linked Wagner Group mercenaries have deployed in the Central African Republic and Mali amid heated tensions between those countries' governments and France. Many African governments have signed new defense and security agreements with Russia in recent years.

Another metric of influence is the spread of Russian disinformation. Here, though, some caveats apply. When Facebook did a simultaneous purge of fake Russian and French accounts in December 2020, France had more African-facing accounts than Russia, although Russia's accounts had far more followers and engagement. Meanwhile, social media consumption's effect on real-world politics is debatable. A recent *Washington Post* article showed the depth of one young man's attachment to Russian social media content, but COPA/BF is a real-life organization: their spokesman Roland Bayala gives media interviews, and COPA/BF helped drive protests inside Burkina Faso that temporarily blocked a French military convoy in Kaya. On the one hand, the newness of the organization and its call for a "win-win" partnership with Russia could suggest it is inorganic; on the other hand, the anti-convoy protests mobilized large numbers of demonstrators at multiple points along the route in both Burkina Faso and Niger, suggesting a level of antipathy to France, as well as general discontent with insecurity, that Russian messaging alone could not explain. Similar issues surround the Malian peer movement of COPA/BF, Yérewolo.

The increasingly pervasive idea that it is "patriotic" to reject France and embrace Russia can now bleed into support for the region's newly minted military regimes. Bayala and COPA/BF, who dinged Burkina Faso's then-President Roch Kaboré as lacking in patriotism due to his acquiescence to the French presence, have aligned themselves with the junta that took power in January. Further muddying the picture is the emergence of new, pro-junta movements that are enthusiastic about Russia, such as Mali's Collectif pour la défense des militaires (Collective for Defending Soldiers).

Other organizations criticizing France's role in the Sahel predate the current uptick in Russian influence. A key organization, particularly in Niger, is Tournons La Page (Let's Turn the Page). Founded in 2014 to advocate for a democratic transition in Burkina Faso, Tournons La Page has a presence in ten African countries. In Niger, the group's criticisms of France are not its core goal but rather an extension of its mission to promote democracy, accountability, and transparency. Criticisms of France, meanwhile, go well beyond the issue of Russia's agenda.

Four Key Criticisms of France in the Sahel

France's critics, in my reading, often advance one or more of four interlinked arguments: that France is neocolonial; that France violates Sahelian countries' sovereignty; that French deployments fail to improve security; and that France plays favorites in Sahelian politics.

The first argument begins with a set of agreed-upon facts: France colonized all of the countries of the Sahel and has exercised influence ever since. France has bases and open-ended deployments in Chad, Senegal, and elsewhere. The CFA franc currency used in Francophone West Africa, pegged to the French franc from the 1940s to the 1990s, remains pegged to the Euro—the CFA has been called "Africa's last colonial currency." The French language dominates higher education and government in much of the region.

Whether French influence amounts to neocolonialism is where the debate becomes explicitly political. For a critic like Burkina Faso's Bayala, the hegemony of the French language within the educational system erases local culture and perpetuates unemployment and even terrorism, because in his view French-language education leaves many Burkinabè children unprepared for life and work. Not all Sahelian critics go that far, but many feel that France treats the Sahel as its fiefdom.

The second argument is that France's influence compromises Sahelian sovereignty. In Niger, critics objected to a French National Assembly vote in April 2022, when deputies amended the government's main policy document to provide more flexibility on foreign military deployments—namely, the shift of some French troops from Mali to Niger. Critics felt the vote was rushed and legally dubious, and were also concerned that the influx of troops will prove destabilizing rather than beneficial. Such arguments reflect a wider concern that France simply does what it wants.

The third argument is that since 2013, French-led deployments have failed to bring security for ordinary people. Again, part of this argument rests on facts: violence in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has been escalating since 2015. France is not the primary cause, but France has failed to contain the violence, and there are clear signs of French pressures and French-led counterterrorism operations fueling violence. Endemic insecurity also accelerates the spread of rumors. For sober critics, the concern is that French deployments are like "putting oil on the fire" of inter-communal conflict and jihadist violence. For more radical critics (and here the question arises as to whether Burkina Faso's Bayala passes from making reasonable critiques to promulgating wild allegations), the charge is that France arms and passes intelligence to jihadists as a means of destabilizing and controlling the Sahel countries—a baseless allegation. As Nigerien intellectual Rahmane Idrissa has written, "This idea is irrefutable because it does not rest on facts but on sentiments." Without defending the conspiracy theorists, one can acknowledge that the conspiracy theories' roots reach far deeper than Russian influence. As Aoife McCullough points out, there is a clear disconnect for Sahelian civilians; amid France's talk of bringing security by killing major jihadist leaders, ordinary civilians do not see France coming to their aid to counter the attacks they themselves face.

The final argument is that France has political biases and favorites in the Sahel, especially the region's incumbent civilian presidents. At heart, this charge too is not a conspiracy theory. Long-standing French policies have also discussed, for example, France's "blind" support for Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita almost up through the moment where he was ousted in the August 2020 coup there. Some Sahelian citizens resent what they see as French backing for out of touch and unaccountable presidents. Going further, some Sahelian commentators argue that France tolerated or even abetted the territorial aspirations of certain armed groups in northern Mali, especially during the immediate aftermath of the 2013 French-led intervention there; the idea that France fostered the northern Malian rebellion of 2012 is baseless, but the charge that France allowed the separatists to gain a foothold in 2013 is backed by serious journalists' reporting from the scene. The upshot, for many Sahelians, is the sense that France is not a benevolent partner, but a biased manipulator with its own interests.

Whether or not one shares these sentiments, they deserve to be taken seriously as a political perspective in a turbulent region, one where Russian influence is real but is not the key determinant of realities on the ground. At bottom, the growth of anti-French sentiments speaks to a deep frustration in the region. That frustration partly has to do with insecurity, which is driven by factors that are mostly outside of France's control, but also with France's specific policy choices, including a counterterrorism-focused approach and a relatively permissive attitude toward the alleged corruption of Sahelian heads of state. At an even deeper level, France's Sahelian critics are frustrated with the very structure of its political and international relations in the Sahel, which the critics see as a neocolonial arrangement in which a handful of French-educated, France-oriented clients rule the world's poorest countries in a predatory and unaccountable manner.

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