

The Sahel Stands Up And The World Must Pay Attention



Vijay Prashad

07-10-2024 ~ On July 6 and 7, the leaders of the three main countries in Africa's Sahel region—just south of the Sahara Desert—met in Niamey, Niger, to [deepen](#) their Alliance of Sahel States (AES). This was the first summit of the three heads of state of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, who now constitute the Confederation of the AES. This was not a hasty decision, since it had been in the works since 2023 when the leaders and their associates held meetings in Bamako (Mali), Niamey (Niger), and Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso); in May 2024, in Niamey, the foreign ministers of the three countries had developed the elements of the Confederation. After meeting with General Abdourahmane Tiani (Niger), foreign minister Abdoulaye Diop (Mali) [said](#) in May, “We can consider very clearly today that the Confederation of the Alliance of Sahel States is born.”

There is a straight line that runs from the formation of this Confederation to the pan-African sentiments that shaped the anti-colonial movements in the Sahel over 60 years ago (with the line from the African Democratic Rally formed in 1946 led by Félix Houphouët-Boigny, and through the Sawaba party in Niger formed in 1954 and led by Djibo Bakary). In 1956, Bakary [wrote](#) that France, the old colonial ruler, needs to be told that the “overwhelming majority of the people” want their interests served and not to use the country's resources “to satisfy desires for luxury and power.” To that end, Bakary noted, “We need to grapple with our problems *by ourselves* and *for ourselves* and have the will to solve them first on our own, later with the help of others, but always taking account of our African realities.” The promise of that earlier generation was not met, largely due to France's continued interventions in preventing the political sovereignty of the

region and in tightening its grip on the monetary policy of the Sahel. But the leaders—even those who were tied to Paris—continued to try and build platforms for regional integration, including in 1970 the [Liptako-Gourma Authority](#) to develop the energy and agricultural resources in the three countries.

Departure From Subordination

The current trend emerged because of the deep [frustration](#) in these countries with a host of problems, largely associated with the interventions of France. These include: the creation of a dangerous situation of al-Qaeda militancy fostered by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's destruction of Libya (2011); the failure of the French military intervention to stem that militancy and the anger at the civilian casualties due to the French and U.S. military operations in the three countries; the use of the French exchequer to benefit from all financial transactions in the three countries; and the manipulation of anti-terrorist discourse to create an anti-migration infrastructure to benefit Europe more than Africa.

These frustrations resulted in five coup d'états in the three countries since 2020. The three leaders of the countries are all products of these coups, although they have drawn in civilian leaders to assist them. What unites them personally is that two of them are very young (Assimi Goïta of Mali was born in 1983, while Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso was born in 1988), all of them have had military careers, each of them seems to be informed by the frustrations against the French that they share with each other and with their populations, and none of them has any patience for the pro-Western "stability" politics of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

In January 2024, the AES states [said](#) that they would not seek to rejoin ECOWAS after their expulsions over the past few years. "Under the influence of foreign powers and betraying its founding principles," the AES leaders said, ECOWAS "has become a threat to member states and peoples." ECOWAS was founded in 1975 as part of the pan-African dynamic and in close association with the Organization of African States (OAS), set up under the leadership of Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah in 1963. ECOWAS expelled the three Sahel countries because of the military coups, when in fact ECOWAS itself was the product of several military Generals who ran their countries (such as Nigeria's Yakubu Gowon, Togo's Gnassingbé Eyadéma, and Ghana's Ignatius Kutu Acheampong). At the founding of ECOWAS, General Acheampong [said](#), "The major purpose of the

formation of the community was to remove centuries of division and artificial barriers imposed on West Africa from outside, and to recreate together the kind of homogeneous society which existed before the colonialists invaded our shores.” At the Niamey summit to create the Confederation, the leaders said that they would no longer want to return to ECOWAS even though they have laid out plans for transitions to civilian rule.

Economics of the Confederation

In his powerful [speech](#) at the closing of the AES summit, Burkina Faso’s Traoré said that the “imperialists see Africa as an empire of slaves” and that they believe that “Africans belong to them, our lands belong to them, our subsoils belong to them.” Niger’s uranium lights up Europe, he said, but its own streets remain dark. This, Traoré noted, has to change. At the summit, agreements were made to allow for the free movement of people and goods, to create a stabilization fund in place of dependence upon the International Monetary Fund, and to develop an investment bank rather than rely upon the World Bank.

In February 2024, the UN Development Program (UNDP) [released](#) the *Sahel Human Development Report 2023*, which noted the immense wealth of the region that sits alongside the poverty of its people. These countries are blessed with reserves of gold and uranium, lithium and diamonds, but it is largely Western multinational mining companies that have been leeching the profits, [including](#) through illicit accounting practices. The UNDP report notes that the Sahel has “one of the world’s highest solar production capacities—13.9 billion kWh/y compared to the total global consumption of 20 billion kWh/y,” while the World Economic Forum [notes](#) that the region is capable of earning hundreds of billions of dollars from the export of health foods produced in the Great Green Wall that runs from Senegal to Ethiopia (such as Balanites, Baobab, Moringa, and Shea). These are untapped potentials for the people of the region.

In 1956, Niger’s Bakary had written that the people of Sahel needed to fix their problems by themselves and for themselves. In November 2023, the government of Mali hosted a [meeting](#) of ministers of the economy from the three countries along with experts from the region. They spent three days developing innovative projects in common. But none of this can advance, they said, in the context of the sanctions placed on them by their neighbors in ECOWAS. Sixty-three years after independence, [said](#) Niger’s Minister of Finance Boubacar Saïdou Moumouni “our countries are still seeking true independence.” This journey into the

Confederation is one step in that process.

By Vijay Prashad

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He has written more than 20 books, including [The Darker Nations](#) and [The Poorer Nations](#). His latest books are [Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism](#) and (with Noam Chomsky) [The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power](#).

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