



Pro-coup Opinions Dominate Debate on Social Media in Niger

Social Media Monitoring

August 2023

To support the humanitarian response in the Sahel, Insecurity Insight is conducting ongoing [social media monitoring](#) to understand sentiments on key issues expressed via social media. The aim is to contribute to the development of aid agencies' risk management and communication strategies at a time when social media use is growing rapidly in many crisis-affected countries. Opinions shared via social media can influence attitudes towards aid operations, as sentiments are reinforced within social media echo chambers and may be influenced by misinformation or disinformation.

Summary

This social media monitoring brief presents the findings from a review of sentiments expressed by some 1,500 Facebook posts during the coup d'état in Niger of 26 July 2023. The aim was to identify possible misinformation, disinformation or malinformation targeting the aid sector and to identify online sentiment trends that could be indicative of possible risks for international aid organisations as a result of the coup.

- Pro-coup opinions appear to dominate the ongoing debates on the coup on Facebook. However, contributing to this trend are significant numbers of profiles of people from countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali who do not seem to have any direct connection with Niger. The possibility that some of these profiles are fake cannot be excluded.
- Internet penetration and social media use rates in Niger are very low, and the apparently dominant social media opinions may not fully reflect wider opinions in Niger in relation to the coup, but they may influence the thinking of a minority of active social media users and possibly activists who take to the streets.
- Anti-Western sentiment, specifically targeted at France, is noticeable. Like in Burkina Faso and Mali, pro-Russia sentiment has also been observed. As in Burkina Faso and Mali, anti-Western sentiment in Niger could develop into security risks for international organisations operating in the [country](#).
- At the time of publishing, international humanitarian organisations do not seem to feature as a topic in the debates surrounding the coup d'état on social media, and no misinformation, disinformation, or malinformation targeting the humanitarian sector has been identified.



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Context

On 26 July 2023, members of Niger’s presidential guard seized [democratically elected President Mohamed Bazoum](#), who had been in power since 2021, and announced the end of the regime. Soon after, despite international condemnation of the coup, the army lent its critical [support to the perpetrators of the coup](#), in a sign that they may succeed in their attempt to assume power. On 28 July, presidential guard head General Abdourahmane Tchiani [declared](#) himself the new leader of Niger.

Following the coup, the United Nations [condemned](#) the “efforts to unconstitutionally change” the government and [suspended](#) its ongoing aid programmes in Niger, despite the fact that the country already faces a complex humanitarian situation. The European Union has also [suspended humanitarian aid](#) to Niger. An estimated [4.3 million people need assistance](#) in Niger, with around 2 million considered to be food insecure.

Social media usage in Niger

In January 2023, an estimated 5.98 million people – or 22.4% of the population – had internet access in Niger. Of these, 467,900 – or just over 2% of the population – are estimated to be active on social media. The majority of these social media users – around 410,100, or some 1.9% of the total population – were Facebook users, 79,300 were Instagram users and 38,500 had Twitter accounts. Source: [Datareportal](#), 2023

Main findings

- **Pro-coup social media users are using Facebook to share their support for the coup.**

Facebook posts appear to be dominated by supporters of the coup, with people citing close proximity to France as a main source of grievance, with some calling the overthrown government France’s “puppet”.

At the same time, some Facebook account holders, albeit on the margins, criticised the coup. For example, one Nigerien wrote in French: *“Niger can never rid itself of poverty with these coups, which are like a curse”*. Another wrote: *“Power cannot be taken by force. The aspirations and the choice of the majority must come first”*.

Importantly, among those demonstrating support for the coup are a number of profiles from neighbouring countries, including Burkina Faso and Mali, as well as some profiles that may possibly be fake. For example, one coup supporter, who turned out to be from Burkina Faso, accused the Nigerien government of mismanagement: *“a democratic election cannot be in any way a pretext for the mismanagement of institutions”*. Another, who argued that the *“legitimacy [of democratic governance] is not valid when it serves Westerners rather than Africans”*, has images and videos of Burkina Faso leader Captain Ibrahim Traoré on

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his profile wall, suggesting that the person is either from Burkina Faso or sympathetic to Traoré, who led a coup in Burkina Faso in 2022. Moreover, the possibility of fake profiles featuring among some of these coup supporters active on Facebook cannot be excluded.

In view of this, the overwhelming support for the coup that appears on Facebook in Niger may not actually reflect the real extent of support for it on the ground, but that Facebook is being used in an attempt to build such support.

- **Prevalent anti-Western sentiments dominate debates surrounding the coup on social media.**

Anti-Western sentiments, specifically targeted at France, which is a privileged partner of the Nigerien government, appear to have been a key feature of hostility towards the government even prior to the coup. This sentiment also includes attacking institutions associated with France, such as Radio France Internationale and France24.

At the same time, in an echo of events in other Sahel countries such as Burkina Faso and Mali, pro-Russia sentiment has also been observed. A pro-Russia page followed by over a thousand users wrote:

“#Vive le Niger 🇳🇮🇵🇵 oui, l'alliance avec la Russie, 🇷🇺🇳🇮🇵🇵 la France 🇫🇷🇳🇮🇵🇵 par voie terrestre, le Niger 🇳🇮🇵🇵 libre 🇳🇮🇵🇵🇳🇮🇵🇵”

However, at this stage the pro-Russia social media users appear to be isolated, in the sense that there are no signs of a coordinated campaign promoting Russian interests in Niger, and any images look very homemade. Nevertheless, in view of the apparent importance of events in Niger to individuals and pages from Burkina Faso and Mali, where governments have recently moved to closer relations with Russia, it cannot be excluded that pro-Russian interests on social media in Niger may originate from neighbouring countries.

- **International humanitarian organisations have thus far been excluded from coup-related social media discussions.**

At the time of publishing, no disinformation, misinformation or malinformation targeting humanitarian organisations has been observed in the context of the coup in Niger. Indeed, the aid sector did not seem to feature as a topic of discussion in the public social media posts analysed for this brief.

Nevertheless, as previously seen in the case of Burkina Faso and Mali, anti-Western and anti-French sentiment can easily influence perceptions of international and local aid organisations, especially in a context where the United Nations has openly [criticised](#) the coup. However, because only 1.9% of the population have Facebook accounts, views circulating via Facebook are unlikely to reach large groups of people at the moment. It is not known if activists are mobilised through non-public social media platforms such as WhatsApp.

Recommendations to the aid sector

- Avoid any publications or public statements that could trigger a social media discussion about aid activities that could in any way be linked to the current political situation in Niger.
- Stay in close interpersonal conversation with staff, partner organisations and other stakeholders to understand sentiments. The low level of internet penetration in Niger and the extent to which social media users from outside the country contribute to discussions limit the possibility of insights from social media spreading into wider public opinion.
- Monitor the wider social media space from a regional perspective, because targeted disinformation or misinformation campaigns could appear in the future and could be more general than campaigns targeting a single country.
- Monitor Facebook to understand to what extent comments that remain in the low thousands at the moment may influence activism that may also be taken to the streets.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data in Niger was first collected from Facebook during the period 1 June-28 July 2023 using Boolean search queries focusing on major international aid organisations, the United Nations, and key international actors such as France. Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to collect the data.

The collected data was filtered to comb for possible misinformation, disinformation or malinformation and to identify social media users' sentiments. Priority was given to social media posts with the highest engagement actions (i.e. the number of social interactions by other social media users with the original post). Relevant comments, usually accompanied by reactions (i.e. comments or replies), were analysed using an online participant observation approach to research sentiments. An estimated minimum of 1,500 relevant Facebook comments were reviewed in preparation for this brief.

Only public social data for which users had given their consent for public viewing have been included. Therefore this analysis excludes possibly pertinent data from encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp.