

# NOREF Report

## Military rebels in Chad – changes since 2008

Dr Ketil Fred Hansen

### Executive summary

In February 2008, three rebel movements – in a joint operation – entered the Chadian capital, N’Djamena, and came very close to mounting a successful coup against the government of President Idriss Déby. Focusing on the three rebel leaders involved in the coup attempt, Mahamat Nouri, Timan Erdimi and Abdelwahid Aboud Mackaye, this policy brief describes and analyses what has happened to the main protagonists since 2008.

Rivalry over leadership of the rebel movement, particularly between Nouri, the then leader, and Erdimi, is widely believed to have been a major factor in the failure of the coup. In its immediate aftermath, all three rebel leaders continued to try to forge a variety of alliances and, with the support of the Sudanese government in Khartoum, launch further attacks on the Déby regime. In January 2009 Nouri’s power began to wane when, at the insistence of Sudan who had lost faith in him, Erdimi was appointed leader of yet another new alliance. In May 2009, in the only serious coup attempt after February 2008, Erdimi’s forces suffered heavy losses at the hands of the Chadian army in the town of Am-Dam after they crossed the border from Sudan. Four months later, Erdimi and 12 other rebels were sentenced to death in absentia by a Chadian court for their role in the coup attempt.

The final nail in the coffin for the rebels came in January 2010 with the signing of a peace deal between President Déby and President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, a condition of which was that Sudan should stop supporting the Chadian rebels and disarm them. Since then, many former rebels have returned to Chad, where large numbers have been granted amnesty, and Nouri and Erdimi have been forced into exile in Qatar. Aboud Mackaye remains in the Sudanese capital, Khartoum, as acting head of the remaining rebels but has little power. Some believe he is waiting for a suitably attractive offer from Déby to put an end to his opposition. However, with most rebel soldiers having defected or been expelled from Sudan, Déby has little interest in negotiating with him.

Based on interviews with (former) rebels and senior political opposition leaders in Chad and France, privileged access to US Embassy documents, and various blogs from the Chadian diaspora, the author concludes that the military insurgency in Chad has lost most of its power and that there is little chance of a unified rebel movement attempting another coup. He believes that the only possible route to regime change in Chad at present would be if the presidential guard were to mutiny.

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## Acronyms

<p>AN: <i>Alliance Nationale</i>, National Alliance</p> <p>ANCD: <i>Alliance Nationale pour le Changement Démocratique</i>, National Alliance for Democratic Change</p> <p>ANT: <i>Armée Nationale Tchadienne</i>, National Chadian Army</p> <p>CDR: <i>Conseil Démocratique Révolutionnaire</i>, Revolutionary Democratic Council</p> <p>FPRN: <i>Front Populaire pour la Renaissance Nationale</i>, Popular Front for National Rebirth</p> <p>FSR: <i>Front pour le Salut de la République</i>, Front for the Salvation of the Republic</p> <p>FUC: <i>Front Uni pour le Changement</i>, United Front for Change</p> <p>JEM: Justice and Equality Movement [a Sudanese rebel movement]</p> <p>MDRT: <i>Mouvement démocratique de rénovation tchadienne</i>, Democratic Movement for Chadian Renewal</p> <p>RaFD: <i>Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques</i>, Rally of Democratic Forces</p> <p>RFC: <i>Rassemblement des Forces pour le Changement</i>, Rally of Forces for Change</p> <p>RND: <i>Rassemblement Nationale Démocratique</i>, Democratic National Rally</p>	<p>RNDP: <i>Rassemblement National Démocratique Populaire</i>, Popular Democratic National Rally</p> <p>SCUD: <i>Socle pour le Changement, l'Unité nationale et la Démocratie</i>, Platform for Change, National Unity and Democracy</p> <p>UDC: <i>Union Démocratique pour le Changement</i>, Democratic Union for Change</p> <p>UFCD: <i>Union des Forces pour le Changement et la Démocratie</i>, Union of Forces for Change and Democracy</p> <p>UFDD: <i>Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement</i>, Union of Forces for Democracy and Development</p> <p>UFDD-F: <i>Union des Forces pour la Démocratie et le Développement-Fondamentale</i>, Union of Forces for Democracy and Development-Fundamental</p> <p>UFPD: <i>Union des Forces pour le Progrès et la Démocratie</i>, Union of Forces for Progress and Democracy</p> <p>UFR: <i>Union des Forces pour la Résistance</i>, Union of Forces for Resistance</p> <p>UFR: (aile de la paix): <i>Union des Forces pour la Résistance (aile de paix)</i>, Union of Forces for Resistance (Peace Wing)</p>
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## Introduction

Early on Saturday, 2 February 2008, Mahamat Nouri, Timan Erdimi and Abdelwahid Aboud Mackaye entered the Chadian capital of N'Djamena together. They had driven from Eastern Sudan and crossed the Chadian border on 28 January in a convoy of 250-300 vehicles, each carrying between 10 and 15 men. Within a few hours the roughly 3,000 rebel soldiers had taken control of large parts of the Chadian capital. At noon they were only a few blocks from the palace inside which President Idriss Déby had barricaded himself. Then, all of a sudden, the rebels ran out of ammunition and had to leave N'Djamena to replenish their stocks. By Sunday afternoon the battle was over and Déby remained in charge. A month later he told journalists that he would prefer to die in power than leave Chad for a life in exile.<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief examines developments within the major rebel movements in Chad since the attempted coup of February 2008. To date all Chadian presidents have departed from power as a result of coups. Military rebel movements became particularly active between 2005 and 2010, firstly

because of the 2005 amendment to the constitution which eliminated the two-term constitutional limit, thus allowing Déby to stand for the presidency on unlimited occasions and, secondly, Khartoum's desire for the establishment of a more Arab- and Islam-friendly regime in Chad as well as Sudanese support for the Chadian rebels.

The leaders of the different rebel movements had a single goal in common: to remove Déby from the presidency by force. Their troops were mostly young drifters with shifting allegiances, out to make a living and improve their social status. Thus anyone who offered them such opportunities had a good chance of getting their support. This article therefore focuses on the three leaders behind the February 2008 coup attempt rather than the various rebel groups *per se*.

## Mahamat Nouri

At the time of the attempted coup in February 2008, Mahamat Nouri, an ethnic Goran in his mid-60s, headed the largest and most important rebel movement, the UFDD (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development), which contributed over half of the 3,000 rebel soldiers.

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Déby broadcast on "Talk de Paris", France 24, 6 March 2008, [http://alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-Idriss-Deby-Itno-se-confie-a-France-24\\_a434.html](http://alwihdainfo.com/Tchad-Idriss-Deby-Itno-se-confie-a-France-24_a434.html), accessed 4 May 2011.

Mahamat Nouri had held powerful positions within Déby's government since 1993. He had been Minister of Health, Minister of the Interior, Minister of Defence, and Chad's ambassador to Saudi Arabia. The day Déby was re-elected as president for the third time in May 2006, Nouri resigned as ambassador. Shortly afterwards he set up the military rebel movement UFPD (Union of Forces for Progress and Democracy). A few months later, on 22 October 2006, he succeeded in bringing six different rebel movements together into one organisation, which he called the UFDD. The three most important groups within it were his own UFPD, Adouma Hassaballah Jedareb's RND (National Democratic Rally), and Acheikh ibn Oumar's CDR (Revolutionary Democratic Council).

In April 2007, following disagreements over strategy and leadership positions, the UFDD split into two factions. Six months later, on 25 October 2007, Nouri signed a peace agreement with President Déby on behalf of the UFDD. However, peace was very short-lived and in November 2007 the UFDD clashed with the ANT (National Chadian Army). Three months later, in February 2008, Nouri and his UFDD almost succeeded in their coup attempt.

### ***National Alliance established***

On 25 February 2008, shortly after the failed coup, Mahamat Nouri set up the AN (National Alliance) which brought together his own UFDD with Aboud Mackaye's UFDD-F (Union of Forces for Democracy and Development-Fundamental), Ahmat Hassaballah Soubian's FSR (Front for the Salvation of the Republic), Adouma Hassaballah Jedareb's new movement, the UFCD (Union of Forces for Change and Democracy) and Abderaman Koulamallah's UDC (Democratic Union for Change).

By March 2008 Khartoum had re-equipped Nouri's rebel movement to make up for the weapons, ammunition and vehicles lost during the February attack on N'Djamena. It also provided him and the AN with access to training grounds in western Sudan. To Khartoum's disappointment, however, the rebels never managed to launch a serious attack on Déby's regime and the Sudanese government therefore gradually lost faith in Nouri.

### ***UFR set up***

In December 2008 yet another new alliance of various rebel movements, the UFR (Union of Forces for Resistance) was formed when all five movements in Nouri's AN joined forces with Timan Erdimi's RFC (Rally of Forces for Change), Albadour Acyl Ahmat Aghbach's<sup>2</sup> CDR and Adoum Yacoub's FPRN (Popular Front for National Rebirth). Following a month of discussions over leadership positions within the UFR, Timan Erdimi was appointed leader in January 2009 much to Nouri's displeasure. Khartoum had reportedly made a change in leadership a condition of its ongoing support for the Chadian rebels. It was hoping that Erdimi, an ethnic Zagawa like many Sudanese in the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), a Darfur-based Sudanese opposition movement, would become president of Chad and offer JEM leaders and soldiers positions in the Chadian national army. By supporting Erdimi for the presidency, it thus hoped to get rid of the rebels in Darfur.

As a result of Khartoum's shift in allegiance, by January 2009 Nouri was no longer the strongest rebel leader in Chad. He had lost his leadership position to his rival Timan Erdimi but continued to head his own UFDD. When the UFR was established in January 2009, the UFDD was the most important single movement within it, comprising around 2,000 men and 200 vehicles.

Nouri's forces took part in the first and only serious coup attempt against Déby organised by the UFR. In early May 2009, Nouri's UFDD, as part of the larger UFR, drove from eastern Sudan and crossed the border into Chad. However, on 8 May, Nouri's forces encountered heavy resistance and were defeated by the ANT near the town of Am-Dam, some 120 km inside Chad. Since then, neither Nouri nor any of the other rebels have managed to launch a major attack on the Chadian regime.

In August 2009, Nouri moved his remaining UFDD troops to the north-east of El Fasher in Sudan where his troops were accused of killing and raping the local Sudanese population and looting their villages. For his adversaries this behaviour indicated that he had no control over his troops and was unable to

<sup>2</sup> On 2 January 2009, Albadour Acyl Ahmat Aghbach took over the CDR leadership from Acheikh ibn Oumar.

support them. Others believed the killings and rapes by his men in Darfur indicated that he was helping to fight the Sudanese regime's enemies in exchange for their continuing support.

The peace agreement signed between Déby and the Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir, on 15 January 2010 ended Sudanese support for the Chadian rebels, including Nouri, and on 21 February 2010 Khartoum also started disarming Chadian rebels in Sudan, a condition laid down by Déby.

### ***Emergence of the ANCD***

In May 2010, frustrated by Erdimi's leadership and his own subordinate position, Nouri broke away from the UFR and launched yet another new alliance of rebel movements, the ANCD (National Alliance for Democratic Change), comprising his own UFDD, together with Albadour Acyl Ahmat Aghbach's CDR, the FSR (now under the leadership of Ismail Moussa because former leader Ahmat Hassaballah Soubian has joined Déby as his special adviser) and the MDRT (Democratic Movement for Chadian Renewal), the leader of which was not known. However, many of Nouri's most trusted men within the UFDD leadership, including Abakar Tollimi, Tahir Wodji and Tahir Guinassou, held powerful positions in the UFR and did not join Nouri and his new alliance. Nouri thus lost considerable influence as a rebel leader between January and May 2010.

On 18 July 2010, the Sudanese government expelled Nouri from the country. He left for Doha (Qatar) where he now lives in exile. Between February and October 2010, Sudan captured most of Nouri's forces within the ANCD and flew them to N'Djamena. Some of them have also been accepted into the Sudanese army. In November 2010 the Chadian authorities arrested Tahir Guinassou and Tahir Wodji, former military commanders under Nouri. They were subsequently granted a presidential pardon and released in January 2011.

At the time of writing (February 2011), Nouri's forces consist of a few troops located in the border area between Chad, the Central African Republic, and Sudan. As the rebel movement has been significantly reduced over the past year, the only hope Nouri's soldiers have is that he will manage to negotiate a deal for them to take up civilian or military posts

within Déby's administration. However, in the next few years, peace in Chad will depend on the extent to which the former rebel soldiers have been incorporated into the ANT and whether they are generally satisfied with their living conditions.

### **Timan Erdimi**

During the coup attempt against Déby in February 2008, the second most important rebel movement was the RFC, headed by Timan Erdimi, a highly educated man in his mid-50s. Erdimi commanded between 800 and 1,000 rebel soldiers at that time.

Timan Erdimi is President Déby's nephew and both men are ethnic Zaghawa. Erdimi has held many trusted positions within Déby's regime, including the directorship of the parastatal cotton company Cotontchad during the 1990s, when cotton made up over 70% of Chad's exports. He is also a long-serving former chief of staff at the presidency. Until he broke with his uncle and joined the rebels in 2005, he was one of the richest people in Chad.

In 2005 Timan Erdimi and his twin brother, Tom Erdimi, established SCUD (Platform for Change, National Unity and Democracy). They planned to shoot down Déby's plane in March 2006, a few weeks before the presidential elections. However, their plans were discovered by French intelligence and so came to nought. Déby issued an international warrant for Erdimi's arrest. Tom Erdimi left Chad for Houston (US) while Timan Erdimi continued opposing Déby militarily from his base in Sudan.

### ***Erdimi sets up the RFC***

Between 2006 and 2008 Timan Erdimi twice brought different rebel movements together to form new entities headed by him. First he persuaded two less important groups to combine with SCUD to form the RaFD (Rally of Democratic Forces), which included many Zaghawa soldiers who had defected from the ANT. Then, in February 2007, the RaFD merged with the less important RNDP (Popular Democratic National Rally) to form the RFC.

Timan Erdimi's RFC trained in the Sudanese mountains known as Hadjer Moifaïn, close to the Chadian border and north of the Chadian town of Adré, and received massive support from Khartoum.



Erdimi was determined to lead the RFC and in February 2008 did not want to give in to Nouri. His dispute with Nouri over the movement's leadership was one of the main reasons why the coup failed.

On 15 August 2008, six months after the failed coup attempt, a Chadian court sentenced Erdimi and 12 other rebel leaders to death *in absentia* for treason. The Déby regime also confiscated his properties in Chad. Nevertheless, the 2008 death sentence, the international arrest warrant issued in 2006, and the confiscation of his properties did not stop him from carrying on with his rebel activities.

### **Emergence of the UFR**

In fact, on 15 December 2008, Erdimi decided to set up yet another rebel alliance, the UFR (Union of Resistance Forces), consisting of seven rebel leaders and their movements: Adouma Hassaballah's UFCD, Mahamat Nouri's UFDD, Abdelwahid Aboud Mackaye's UFDD-F, Adam Yacoub's FPRP, Ahmat Hassaballah Soubiane's FSR, Albadour Acyl Ahmat Aghbach's CDR and his own RFC. On 24 January 2009, Timan Erdimi, with strong support from Khartoum, was chosen as the UFR's first leader.

In May 2009, under Erdimi's leadership, the UFR launched an attack on the Déby regime but the ANT stopped them near the town of Am-Dam, 800 km from N'Djamena. Afterwards there were rumours that Déby had made nine billion CFA (close to 15 million euro) available to bribe the UFR leadership to join his regime. Although this amount was not officially confirmed, buying rebel rivals is a well-known strategy employed by the Déby regime.<sup>3</sup>

Observers in Chad argue that Timan Erdimi is one rebel who will never ever agree to rejoin the Déby regime, regardless of how much money or what positions may be offered to him. His personal losses in the struggle for power have been too great. In December 2006 one of his sons was killed during a clash with the ANT. In January 2009, a few hours after Erdimi had been appointed head of the UFR, Déby's forces killed his eldest sister in N'Djamena.

### **Exiled and isolated**

After incurring heavy losses near Am-Dam in May 2009, Erdimi moved the UFR base to north Darfur. He carried on recruiting new soldiers and Khartoum continued to equip him. However, when Déby and al-Bashir signed a peace deal on 15 January 2010, Khartoum stopped providing material support to the Chadian rebel leaders, including Erdimi. In July 2010 Erdimi was expelled from Sudan and left for Doha (Qatar) where he now lives in exile. His family lives in Ngaoundere (Cameroon).

By the end of October 2010 most of Erdimi's rebel soldiers in Sudan had defected voluntarily or been disarmed by the regime in Khartoum. Without Erdimi's consent, some people within the UFR launched a non-military branch of the rebel movement, called the UFR (Peace Wing) which urged rebels to peacefully rejoin the Déby regime.<sup>4</sup>

In early November 2010, some 4,000 former rebel soldiers were granted amnesty for crimes committed while they were insurgents and invited to join the ANT.<sup>5</sup> On 8 November 2010, several key rebel leaders under Erdimi's command were arrested in N'Djamena, the most well-known UFR members being Tahir Guinassou and Tahir Wodji. By granting them a presidential pardon and amnesty on 10 January 2011, Déby has managed to further split the UFR and isolate Erdimi from his former friends and collaborators.<sup>6</sup>

A decade ago Timan Erdimi was one of the richest and most influential people in Chad. Today he has an international arrest warrant pending against him and a death sentence hanging over his head. He has few troops and limited opportunities to travel and is living in exile far away from his close family.

4 Le Blog de Makaila, "UFR: Dr. Hissein Brahim Acyl disposé à dialoguer avec le régime Deby", 10 October 2010, <http://makaila.over-blog.com/article-ufr-dr-hissein-brahim-acyl-dispose-a-dialoguer-avec-le-regime-deby-58653774.html>, accessed 18 April 2011.

5 Al Wihda, "Les rebelles demandent pardon au peuple tchadien", 14 November 2010, [http://www.alwihdainfo.com/Les-rebelles-demandent-pardon-au-peuple-tchadien\\_a3662.html](http://www.alwihdainfo.com/Les-rebelles-demandent-pardon-au-peuple-tchadien_a3662.html), accessed 18 April 2011. Others doubt whether all the former rebel troops have been incorporated into the ANT but do not question the fact that 4,080 former rebels laid down their arms under the amnesty in early November 2010. See Tchadonline, "Deby n'a pas raté l'occasion", 21 November 2010, <http://tchadonline.com/deby-n%E2%80%99a-pas-rate-l%E2%80%99occasion/>, accessed 18 April 2011.

6 Ordinance No 001/PR/2011 and Decree No 013/PR/MJ/2011.

3 Ketil Fred Hansen, "Conflicts in Chad: The Porous Boundaries between Politicians and Rebels", A. M. Knutsen (et al), eds, *Pluralité de langues, pluralité de cultures : regards sur l'Afrique et au-delà*, Oslo, Novus, 2011.

## Abdelwahid Aboud Mackaye

Abdelwahid Aboud Mackaye, a man in his late 50s, headed the smallest of the three rebel movements during the coup attempt of February 2008. His UFDD-F numbered between 500 and 800 men at the time.

About Mackaye was a well-known dissident in Chad. Having served as a sub-prefect under Déby, he joined the rebels in 2003. Under the leadership of Nour Abdelkarim and his movement, the FUC (United Front for Change), Aboud Mackaye participated in what was an almost successful coup against Déby in April 2006. Following the coup attempt, Nour Abdelkarim sought refuge in Qatar while Aboud Mackaye joined Mahamat Nouri's UFDD.

In April 2007, following disagreements over strategy and leadership positions within the UFDD, Aboud Mackaye split from it and established his own Arab-based faction of the UFDD called the UFDD-F. On 25 October 2007, he signed a peace deal in Sirte with President Déby on behalf of the UFDD-F, giving himself and his rebel soldiers amnesty and the right to be integrated into the ANT.<sup>7</sup> Yet clashes between the UFDD-F and the ANT were still taking place a month after the signing ceremony, and in February 2008 Aboud Mackaye and the UFDD-F, together with Nouri and Erdimi, tried to oust Déby.

In late February 2008, Aboud Mackaye and the UFDD-F joined Nouri's AN. In interviews at the time he proclaimed his intention to combat Déby by military means. He told the newspaper *Tchad Espoir* that “until there is justice, peace and equality between all people in Chad, I would rather die with my weapons in my hands” and that “the coming battle will be without mercy”. In May 2009, Aboud Mackaye and the UFDD-F joined Erdimi's UFR and participated in the battle of Am-Dam, where they lost many men and vehicles.

## Waning influence

In January 2010, after the signing of the peace deal between Déby and al-Bashir, Aboud Mackaye's friends and troops began to disappear. When Erdimi

and Nouri were expelled from Khartoum in July 2010, he was the only leader within the UFR who was allowed to stay on. Since then he has served as the acting president of the UFR.

In August 2010 he told the international community that he still had 5,000 men under his command within the UFR and was waiting to negotiate with the Déby regime.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in the same interview, he said that “it is better to die than to realign with Déby's regime”. However, there were rumours at the time suggesting that he was actually waiting for a good cash offer or a position from Déby before ending his opposition. Since the expulsion or defection of most of the UFR troops from Sudan, Déby seems less interested in negotiating with Aboud Mackaye. The latter seems to have lost his power as a rebel, even in his capacity as acting president of the UFR.

## Conclusion

The three rebel leaders, who were literally and physically very close to the presidential palace in February 2008, are now (February 2011) further away from presidential power than ever. Within three years, Déby has managed to quash military opposition in Chad by using the law and the courts, together with vast amounts of money derived mainly from the oil sector, to divide and conquer the rebels. His tactical peace agreement with al-Bashir in January 2010 was the final nail in the coffin for the remnants of the military rebellion in Chad. Even if some more minor military opposition leaders still believe that a coup from outside could succeed, in N'Djamena this is no longer seen as a possible option. A coup would have to come from a mutiny inside the palace or as the result of a broader revolt within the ANT.

<sup>7</sup> The Syrte Agreement, available in French at <http://www.caringforaella.org/files/file/07.10.25%20Accord%20de%20Syrte.pdf>, accessed 18 April 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Le Blog de Makaila, «Tchad: Interview exclusive avec M. Abdelwahid Aboud Mackaye, président par intérim de l'UFR», 4 August 2010, <http://makaila.over-blog.com/article-interview-exclusive-avec-m-abdelwahid-aboud-de-l-ufr-54915632.html>, accessed 18 April 2011.

### Further reading

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