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The Politics of Chad

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Introduction

Chad, a vast landlocked country at the crossroads of North and Central Africa, has long been a focal point of regional politics and turbulence. Its complex history of colonization, independence, authoritarian rule, and ongoing struggles with democratization offers a compelling case for understanding the intricate interplay of politics, society, and security in Africa. "The Politics of Chad: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Chad" aims to provide readers with a thorough, accessible, and nuanced exploration of Chad's political landscape, both past and present.

Since gaining independence from France in 1960, Chad has experienced political upheaval at almost every turn. Successive governments have grappled with civil wars, coups, and rebellions, shaping a political culture marked more by conflict and instability than by democratic participation and transparency. At the heart of Chad's political system lies a strong executive, a legacy of both colonial administration and subsequent rulers who have often centralized power to maintain control.

The long presidencies of leaders like Hissène Habré and, more recently, Idriss Déby Itno, underscore the tendency toward power concentration within Chad's political system. The resulting dominance of the executive—often at the expense of other state institutions—has shaped everything from the drafting of constitutions to the conduct of elections and the distribution of state resources. This system has sometimes fostered order and development but has also bred resentment, opposition, and at times violent contestation.

The political transition following Idriss Déby's death in 2021 thrust Chad into a new era of uncertainty. The establishment of a Transitional Military Council, led by his son Mahamat Idriss Déby Itno, brought renewed challenges: a suspension of constitutional order, widespread protests, and mounting calls for an inclusive, civilian-led transition. The transitional period that followed, culminating in a new constitution and elections in 2024–2025, marked yet another turning point in Chad's fraught political trajectory.

Today, Chad remains a country at a crossroads. Essential questions about the future of democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and equitable economic development all remain pressing. The interplay of regional security threats, ongoing internal divisions, and enduring social and economic hardship creates a landscape rife with both risks and opportunities. Understanding Chad's past and present political realities is crucial for anyone interested in Africa's evolving political environment.

This book seeks to illuminate the structures, actors, and events that have defined Chad's political life, providing a comprehensive guide for students, researchers,

diplomats, and anyone wishing to more deeply understand the forces shaping this pivotal nation. Through a detailed analysis of Chad's history, institutions, actors, and contemporary challenges, "The Politics of Chad" invites readers to consider the prospects for peace, stability, and democratic governance in one of Africa's most complex political environments.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People of Chad

Chad is a big place. Really big. Located in the heart of Africa, it sprawls across 1.284 million square kilometers, making it the fifth-largest country on the continent. To give you some perspective, that's a bit larger than the state of Texas and California combined. This immense size means Chad encompasses a remarkable diversity of landscapes, climates, and, consequently, people. Bordered by Libya to the north, Sudan to the east, the Central African Republic to the south, and Cameroon, Nigeria, and Niger to the west, Chad sits at a historical and geographical crossroads.

The country is often described as having three major geographical zones, each with its own distinct character. In the north lies a vast expanse of the Sahara Desert, a place of towering sand dunes, rocky plateaus, and sparse vegetation. This is a world of extremes, where temperatures can soar during the day and plummet at night, and rainfall is a rare and precious event, often less than 100mm annually. Life here is tough, dominated by nomadic or semi-nomadic groups who have adapted to this harsh environment.

Moving south, the Sahara gradually transitions into the Sahel, a semi-arid belt that stretches across the middle of the country. Here, the landscape is one of acacia trees, thorny bushes, and grasslands. The Sahel receives more rainfall than the Sahara, typically between 300 and 600mm per year, concentrated in a shorter wet season. This allows for some rain-fed agriculture and supports a mix of sedentary farmers and pastoralists. It's a precarious balance, however, as the Sahel is highly vulnerable to drought and desertification.

Finally, the southern part of Chad is a Sudanian Savanna zone, characterized by taller grasses, woodlands, and a more tropical climate. This is the most fertile and well-watered region of the country, with annual rainfall exceeding 800mm, falling primarily during a rainy season that lasts from May to October. This southern belt is the agricultural heartland of Chad, supporting a denser population and the cultivation of crops like cotton and millet.

Despite its landlocked status, water is a significant element in Chad's geography, albeit one facing increasing challenges. The country is named after Lake Chad, a historically large, shallow lake situated in the southwest, bordering Nigeria, Niger, and Cameroon. Fed primarily by the Chari and Logone rivers, which flow northward from the Central African Republic, the lake has been a vital source of water for irrigation, fishing, and transportation for centuries. However, in recent decades, a combination of drought, climate change, and increased water usage has caused the lake to shrink dramatically, impacting the livelihoods of the communities that depend on it. The

Chari and Logone rivers themselves form the only major river system in Chad.

Beyond Lake Chad, other smaller lakes and seasonal rivers dot the landscape, particularly in the south. The country's topography is generally flat, consisting of broad plains, though it rises to mountains in the north, east, and south. The most notable of these are the Tibesti Mountains in the north, home to Chad's highest peak, Mount Koussi, an extinct volcano standing at 3,415 meters. These geographical variations have played a crucial role in shaping Chad's history, influencing migration patterns, economic activities, and the distribution of its diverse population.

Speaking of the population, Chad is home to a rich tapestry of over 200 distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. This incredible diversity is a defining characteristic of the nation, contributing to its vibrant cultural landscape but also presenting complex challenges in terms of national unity and political stability. While language and ethnicity don't always perfectly align, and people have historically been mobile, these identities remain significant.

Generally speaking, Chad's population can be broadly categorized according to the geographical regions they inhabit, reflecting centuries of migration, settlement, and interaction. The southern regions are primarily inhabited by sedentary agricultural communities, with the Sara being the largest ethnic group in the country. The Sara people have a complex history and are composed of several sub-groups, many of whom traditionally adhere to indigenous beliefs or Christianity.

In the central Sahelian belt, one finds a mix of sedentary and nomadic peoples. The Arabs constitute the second-largest ethnic group in Chad, with a significant presence in the central and eastern parts of the country. Many Chadian Arabs identify with broader Arab culture and speak Chadian Arabic, a local dialect that serves as a lingua franca across the country, used in commerce and daily communication by a significant portion of the population.

The northern desert regions are home primarily to nomadic groups, most notably the Toubou people. The Toubou are further divided into sub-groups, including the Teda and Daza (also known as Gorane). These communities have a long history of traversing the Sahara and maintaining traditional ways of life. The Zaghawa, a smaller but politically influential ethnic group, are also found in eastern Chad, near the border with Sudan.

This ethnic and regional diversity is reflected in the linguistic landscape of Chad. While French and Arabic are the two official languages, a multitude of indigenous languages are spoken across the country. French is the language of government and education, a legacy of the colonial era, and is more widely spoken in urban areas and the south. Arabic, particularly the Chadian dialect, is widely used, especially in the north and central regions and in trade. Beyond these, numerous other languages from various

language families – Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, and Nilo-Saharan – are spoken by different communities, highlighting the country's rich linguistic heritage.

Chad's population is also characterized by its youthfulness, with a large proportion of the population under the age of 15. This demographic reality presents both opportunities and challenges for development. While a young population can be a source of dynamism, it also places considerable strain on education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. The country faces significant challenges in terms of poverty, with a large percentage of the population living below the poverty line. Access to basic services like healthcare and education remains limited for many, particularly in rural areas.

The uneven distribution of the population across the country is another notable feature, largely dictated by the availability of water and fertile land. The southern regions, with their more favorable climate and access to water resources, are much more densely populated than the arid north. The capital city, N'Djamena, located at the confluence of the Chari and Logone rivers, is the largest urban center and a hub of economic activity, attracting a significant portion of the population. Other important towns like Sarh, Moundou, Abéché, and Doba are considerably smaller but are also growing.

Understanding the fundamental geographical and demographic realities of Chad is crucial to grasping its political dynamics. The vastness of the territory, the varying climates, the distribution of resources, and the diversity of its people all contribute to the complexities of governance and have historically shaped the nature of political power and conflict in the country. The interplay between these factors sets the stage for the political history and system that will be explored in the following chapters.

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