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African Youth Activism and the Disruption of French Foreign Policy in the Sahel Region

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Abstract

The Republic of France has maintained close political and diplomatic ties with the countries in the African continent, especially sub-Saharan Africa. The relationship between France and its former colonies has been debated in international relations regarding its dominant and influential characteristics. In the last decade, French foreign policy in the Sahel region has been more pronounced with military and diplomatic interventions. Since assuming the French presidential seat in 2017, President Emmanuel Macron has proposed a new political discourse stating the need to move away from the traditional colonial dichotomy. This narrative, however, remains to be fully realized.

Between 2017 and 2021, France has been increasingly involved in the internal affairs of countries in the Sahel. Concurrently, a proliferation of youth movements denouncing French foreign policy and its impact on political and social settings has been taking place. This article offers a discourse analysis of the intersection between the notion of reform in France-Africa relations and the youth uprising, which critiques these policies and advocates for change, employing regime and post-colonial theories. The analysis will investigate how youth activism movements respond to these policies. The study is significant as its findings could guide policy reforms aimed at transforming France-Africa relations, with a particular focus on the Sahel region. Additionally, the article seeks to illustrate, through discourse examples of ongoing youth activism protests, that these responses represent a potentially influential form of resistance.

Key words: Sahel, Françafrique, French foreign policy, youth activism, Chad, Mali, Emmanuel Macron.

Introduction

In the 1960s, African countries under French colonial rule began to gain independence and entered an era of relative freedom. The state of France maintained relations with its former colonies, which have been ever-evolving and a subject of international debate. The nature of the relationship presents connotations of dominance and the idea of a sphere of influence.¹ This dynamic is illustrated by the concept of Françafrique, which has the literal meaning of French post-colonial domination.² The French foreign policy discourse on the continent of Africa varies from one region to another, and the Françafrique is more pronounced in the former French colonies.³ France

¹ Maja Bovcon, "Françafrique and Regime Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 19, no. 1 (August 23, 2011): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111413309>.

² Boubacar Boris Diop, "Françafrique: A Brief History of a Scandalous Word," *New African Magazine*, March 23, 2018, <https://newafricanmagazine.com/16585/>.

³ Sylvain Touati, "FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY in AFRICA: BETWEEN PRÉ CARRÉ and MULTILATERALISM" (The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2007), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Africa/bnafrica0207.pdf>.

enjoys a “privileged relation” with these former colonies and has a strong presence in the Sahel region with an agenda to fight terrorism. This region comprises ten countries, and the majority are former French colonies. In the last five years, four countries in the Sahel region have seen regime changes in which France has been involved at the diplomatic and military levels.⁴

Under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, the state of France expressed the idea of shifting its foreign policy approach in francophone Africa, especially in the Sahel region. President Macron has been pushing the idea of reform in diplomatic and political relations,⁵ emphasizing the message of renewed relationships in the post-colonial era. Amid these theoretical reform propositions, France has maintained a physical presence in the Sahel region through military troops in Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger in the fight against terrorism and this presence has been the region’s flagship of French foreign policy.

In response to these reform attempts, there has been a rise in civil society organizations, especially with youth social and political activists denouncing the French state and its policies in the region and in all of Africa. This rise is apparent through protests, condemnations, and press releases that gave birth to a widespread anti-French sentiment. It is essential to notice that the makeup of these movements is mainly youth between the ages 18 and 35, citizens born after the colonization era. Analyzing the youth protest in the Sahel is crucial for understanding its implications for international policy and its potential to influence new international practices and theories.

The article addresses the following research questions: How do youth activism groups respond to French foreign policy in the Sahel during Macron’s presidency, and what are the implications of these responses for France-Africa relations? Through

⁴ Tangi Salaün and John Irish, “Explainer: Chad’s Strategic Interest to France, Western Allies,” Reuters, April 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chads-strategic-interest-france-western-allies-2021-04-20/>.

⁵ Nikolay A Medushevskiy and Alisa R Shishkina, “Modern French Policy on the African Continent: Transformations of a *Françafrique* Model,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 6 (September 19, 2021): 1141–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096211046275>.

discourse analysis, the article seeks to examine current trends and voices to assess whether they have the potential to influence changes in French foreign policy in the Sahel.

Methodology and Objectives

President Macron's statements on French foreign policy and proposed reforms in France-Africa relations faced criticism from civil society in the Sahel region and other African countries. It is crucial to understand the current uproar, which has been louder and more impactful, and its implications in international politics.

The article offers an overview and a brief discourse analysis of French foreign policy in the Sahel region, examining responses through examples from Sahelian countries. The methodology employed is a qualitative discourse analysis, involving a comparative review of French discourse documentation regarding Africa, with a particular focus on the Sahel. Discourse analysis, as a qualitative and interpretive method, examines social occurrences and dilemmas, grounded in the belief that social reality and meaning are shaped by written words within their social context. This approach is well-suited to the study's aim of analysing speeches and media content to elucidate the meaning of French foreign policy discourse.

The documentation selected for analysis includes media reports, articles, speeches, and studies related to discourse and relations during Macron's first term. A total of 10 written sources were chosen from official government and academic sources in France. Key phrases guided the discourse analysis, focusing on topics such as foreign policy in Africa, the French-Africa narrative, views on renewed cooperation, mentions of a change in approach, and comparisons between current and previous foreign policy approaches. The analysis provided a subjective understanding of trends, thoughts, and behaviours of the actors and authors in the documentation. The selection process was structured to ensure coverage of Macron's first presidential term and his approach to African foreign policy. Included in the analysis were the speech delivered during the official visit to the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) introducing the reforms; the address at the 28th France-

Africa Summit in Montpellier (France); and articles from both government and media sources (BBC, Le Monde, TV5 Monde, France 24, Elysée, Vie-Publique) addressing French presence and cooperation with Sahelian states.

The second part of the analysis employs a descriptive approach to examine the responses of youth activist movements. It offers an overview of response trends during the same timeframe by analysing social media content (primarily Facebook) and published articles featuring direct quotes. Given that Facebook is the primary mass communication channel in the Sahel region, it was selected for content analysis. The focus is on the activists' responses and actions related to French foreign policy, changes in discourse in both countries, and variations in trends. The analysis uses a maximum of 20 social media posts (from Facebook) and 10 pieces of published content (including articles and videos). Key phrases guiding the analysis include the number of protests and events, views on French intervention, media responses, sentiments towards French presence and intervention, symbolic imagery, direct quotes from youth activists, and anti-French sentiment. These factors are analysed as variables to interpret and theorize the implications of current trends for the relationship between the two parties.

French foreign policy in the Sahel and proposed reforms

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the Sahel region has a strong French presence with military cooperation of five countries, namely Chad, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania, known as the G5 Sahel. Within the G5 Sahel is Operation Barkhane which is part of French foreign policy, with a global mandate to fight insurgencies that threaten regional peace in the region. France maintained bases in all these countries, with headquarters in Chad. However, it began steadily withdrawing its military personnel following recent political and diplomatic events as of 2021.

France has maintained a hold on Sahelian countries since independence. Its political and diplomatic identities have been intertwined with these countries, with the numerous governments coming from a generation of Africans born during colonial rule or in the decades following the end of it. The region is vital in international relations due to its strategic location and attracts various outside influences. Traditionally, Sahelian

leaders agreed with French foreign policy and have often willingly been partisans. The relations can be described as hierarchical, with France leading the countries' internal through their leadership. Scholars note that French foreign policy in the continent of Africa is underlined with outdated practices and is counterproductive. The relationship can be described as a form of international clientelism.⁶

On November 28th, 2017, President Macron travelled to Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso, and delivered a speech⁷ to students and members of government at the University of Ouagadougou. In his speech, Macron quoted Thomas Sankara, a former president of Burkina Faso (1983-87). Sankara was a known anti-imperialist and opposed the French state's involvement in his country's politics. Sankara also wrote the national anthem of Burkina Faso, which he renamed from its previous imperial name, Haute Volta, in 1984. During his presidency, his actions were geared towards the self-sustainability of Burkina Faso to ensure less dependency on foreign states. President Macron also referred to the 'Marxist' and 'pan-African' attributes assigned to President Sankara in his speech.

At first glance, referencing a former key leader may appear as a tribute. However, it is crucial to recognize Sankara's opposition to the French state during his tenure. This reference is ambiguous given that France continues to exert significant influence over countries like Burkina Faso, which contrasts with Sankara's vision. Furthermore, invoking Sankara could establish a historical connection with the primarily young African audience. This connection would be impactful if French-African relations have indeed shifted since Sankara's era, suggesting a departure from an imperialist stance. These observations presuppose that Sankara's vision has been realized, which does not reflect the current reality.

President Macron emphasizes the creation of a new relationship with Africa, asserting that there is no French policy for Africa that is not developed "in partnership"

⁶ Daniel Bourmaud, "France in Africa: African Politics and French Foreign Policy," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion* 23, no. 2 (1995): 58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1166509>.

⁷ "Emmanuel Macron's Speech at the University of Ouagadougou," Élysée, November 28, 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-the-university-of-ouagadougou>.

with both parties.⁸ This statement marked the introduction of Macron's vision for reform. His approach is notable for its departure from previous administrations, which did not directly engage primarily with young citizens or emphasize renewed partnership in such a direct manner. Macron underscores the novelty of this approach by acknowledging that it is "not easy for a French president to speak about Africa this way," reinforcing the idea of a fresh start in relations.

In his speech, Macron also points out that he was born after the era of colonization, representing a new generation. His recognition of the diversity among African countries and their varied historical and current relationships with France suggests that France may adopt different strategies for different regions of the continent. However, delivering the speech in Burkina Faso creates the impression that relations are particularly close with Francophone countries, contrasting with the situation across the broader African continent. The choice of words reflects an intention for reform, yet there is an underlying acknowledgment of lingering aspects of past relations with specific countries.

An article published on November 28th, 2018, by *Le Monde*⁹ begins with the statement that the previous presidents have made promises to distance themselves from the colonial past during their initial terms, suggesting that these issues are no longer relevant to the continent. This implies that France often makes commitments to forge new relations but fails to follow through. The reference to earlier presidents suggests that this might be a familiar tactic used by French leaders to promise a break from colonial ties and propose a new type of cooperation, an approach that seems to have lost its impact on the continent.

⁸ Denis M. Tull, "France's Africa Policy under President Macron: Good Intentions, Partial Reform and the Fiasco in the Sahel," *SWP* (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 2023), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2023C51_AfricaPolicyMacron.pdf.

⁹ Laurence Caramel and Cyril Bensimon, "Un an Après Le Discours de Macron à Ouagadougou, La Politique Africaine de La France A-t-Elle Changé ?," *Le Monde*, November 28, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/11/28/un-an-apres-le-discours-de-ouagadougou-la-politique-africaine-de-la-france-a-t-elle-change_5389808_3212.html.

The author argues that Macron's vision aims to create a new narrative for Franco-African relations, which has been tainted by decades of exploitation and interference. Despite various presidents making similar promises, this image has persisted. Macron's speech reiterates this promise, with a novel emphasis on engaging the youth in the discourse. However, the article further asserts, "the link is also based on fundamentals that do not seem likely to change." This suggests that the connection between France and Africa, while seemingly evolving, still fundamentally reflects a colonial or neo-colonial relationship. According to the author, despite the innovative rhetoric, Macron's speech represents a repetition of past promises and does not signal a genuine shift in France-Africa relations.

Since 1973, an annual summit has been held alternately in African countries and France, bringing together African heads of state and the French government. In October 2021, President Macron introduced a new format for the 28th Summit, which was notable for the absence of heads of state and the exclusive participation of civil society activists and members. Over 3,000 young Africans attended the summit. Macron expressed a desire to move beyond past relations and establish a new form of open dialogue with youth at the forefront.¹⁰ This innovative approach received mixed reactions. Some civil society groups in African countries criticized the summit as a superficial attempt to "clean" France's image amid strained relations with the Sahel and to address anti-French sentiments. Others argued that the youth invited were not truly representative of the entire continent, suggesting that the summit functioned as a staged platform.

On October 7th, 2021, Le Monde published an article on the French-African summit. It indicated that President Macron's "new summit" is intended to redefine France's relationship with the African continent. However, it suggests that realizing this vision may be challenging, especially as elections approached. In the French media, president Macron's quest was to change the overall direction of relations and move away

¹⁰ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, "The New Africa-France Summit, Reinventing Our Relationship Together," France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/africa/the-new-africa-france-summit-reinventing-our-relationship-together/>.

from the traditional Françafrique one. The press remains sceptical of this discourse, noting that similar promises have been made before and questioning the feasibility of the current approach. This could be interpreted as the expressed vision for reform reflecting more the personal desire of President Macron than a genuine state-level initiative by France.

Organizing the French-Africa summit four years after Macron's speech in Ouagadougou, with the African youth as the prominent guests, was an innovative approach. The format was a round table with eleven selected African youth from civil society with questions and discussions on topics related to history, military intervention, international development, and African sentiments towards the French. It is also important to note that the makeup of the round table participants is mainly francophone youth from the West and Central Africa region. This shows how the nature of the relationship discussed during the summit is more geared toward its former colonies rather than the entire continent.

During the summit, Ragnimwendé Eldaa Koama, an activist from Burkina Faso, metaphorically compared France-Africa relations to a dirty pot.¹¹ The dirt here refers to the nature of the relations, which, as mentioned above, is underlined by the "colonial past", "corruption", and "demeaning vocabulary". This illustration is indicative of the recurring theme discussed during the summit. The response from president Macron acknowledges the need to "clean the dirty pot," acknowledging the need for renewed relations since the beginning of his presidential mandate. He further added that "the pot will not be changed, and there will be residue". This phrase indicates that the relations will not fundamentally change, and the past colonial methodologies will remain to a certain extent.

Apart from that, the Senegalese activist Cheikh Fall addressed the president¹² with six points for the state of France to consider. The first three are related to asking for

¹¹ France 24, "Sommet : 'Si La Relation Entre Les Pays d'Afrique et La France Était Une Marmite, Elle Serait Sale,'" [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO7NW2FWvlg), October 8, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NO7NW2FWvlg>.

¹² Sétanal Média , "Afrique-France : Cheikh Fall SN à Macron FR," *YouTube*, October 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fM6eCWKEZy4>.

forgiveness for France's history of colonization and ensuring cooperation based on equality rather than a paternalistic approach. Although originating from African youth, these statements align closely with Macron's previous declarations about his overall vision for reform and distancing from the colonial past. In his response, president Macron says that "there is only a policy of promises". Macron's promises in Africa began right at the speech at the University of Ouagadougou. Guarantees regarding the achievement of projects in different sectors were partially accomplished as mentioned in the article.

The promises made during the speech in Ouagadougou and at the summit are symbolic of regaining African countries' trust through the youth and taming the growing anti-French sentiment rather than genuinely moving away from the colonial past.¹³ Directly addressing the youth who are at the forefront of the anti-French sentiments could be seen as a soft power attempt to maintain relations and influence in the Sahelian countries. The past and current relations between France and the continent of Africa show a level of power asymmetry. Focusing on its former colonies, the state of France maintains a level of dominance over the politics of francophone countries.

French foreign policy discourse can be examined through the lens of post-colonial theory, which highlights the continued dominance of former colonizers over their former colonies.

In the Sahel region, France maintains a presence for strategic military and diplomatic reasons. Since the independence era of the 1960s, the post-colonial period has introduced new approaches but often retained old methods. The sphere of influence persists, evident in the underlying discourse. Despite Macron's efforts during his first term to reinvent relations and acknowledge the changing times, implementing this vision has proven challenging for the new generation.¹⁴

¹³ Mucahid Durmaz, "Cornered by African Youth, Macron Intends to Repair FrancAfrique," [www.aljazeera.com](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/12/cornered-by-african-youth-macron-intends-to-repair-francafrique), October 12, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/12/cornered-by-african-youth-macron-intends-to-repair-francafrique>.

¹⁴ Corentin Cohen, "Will France's Africa Policy Hold Up?," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/06/02/will-france-s-africa-policy-hold-up-pub-87228>.

During his first term, Macron directed his message towards the youth, promising innovations across various sectors. The concern with this approach is twofold: first, governance communication between African countries typically occurs at the state level and seldom involves the general population, let alone the youth. Second, African governments often fail to sufficiently include the youth in governance and decision-making processes. Additionally, the decision to exclude heads of state from the 28th summit was criticized as a potential diplomatic risk.

Moreover, the preparation for the summit did not involve heads of state in selecting participants, and the attendees were predominantly from francophone countries, which did not fully represent the entire continent. Despite the seemingly noble intent, Macron's vision is hindered by a complex triangular communication dynamic, disconnected from the realities of diplomatic and historical relationships. During his first term, foreign policy has been marked by unfulfilled promises, contradictions, and practices that reflect the colonial past. The rhetoric of forging new relationships has not been matched by actions on the ground, as France's interventions have often contradicted the stated discourse.

Youth-driven advocacy in the Sahel

According to the United Nations, the African continent has the youngest population globally. 70% of the population in Sub-Saharan countries is under the age of 30.¹⁵ By 2050, the population will approximately double. In the last decade,¹⁶ there has been a rise in youth activism demanding inclusion in politics and governance. The rise of protests in the African continent led to the Age of Agitation,¹⁷ an era marked by intense public discontent, activism, and demands for change. The youth is underrepresented and

¹⁵ United Nations, "Young People's Potential, the Key to Africa's Sustainable Development | Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States," Un.org, 2022, <https://www.un.org/ohrls/news/young-people%E2%80%99s-potential-key-africa%E2%80%99s-sustainable-development>.

¹⁶ Souleymane Sagna, "The Rise of Youth Activism in Africa," OpenGlobalRights, December 16, 2021, <https://www.openglobalrights.org/the-rise-of-youth-activism-in-africa/>.

¹⁷ Alcinda Honwana, Dan Hodgkinson, and Luke Melchiorre, "Age of Agitation: African Politics and the Question of Youth," African Arguments, March 10, 2021, <https://africanarguments.org/2021/03/an-age-of-agitation-african-politics-global-activism-and-the-question-of-youth/>.

often excluded from the development process. This leads to frustration causing youth movements to form and protest against their leaders.

The form of protest has evolved throughout the decades in the world. In this new generation, the youth are increasingly connected through Information and Communications Technology (ICT), utilizing common platforms such as social media. For instance, during the Arab Spring in 2011, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp played a crucial role in organizing gatherings and enhancing the global visibility of their actions. This fast communication method has given the new generation an edge and has increased their impact on influencing public opinion. In the Sahel region, countless uprisings through protests against French foreign policy and presence in countries such as Niger, Mali, Chad, and Burkina Faso have been referred to as Anti-French sentiments by the international media.¹⁸ According to experts, the youth uprising has renewed a global youth culture, and its activities have the power to bring about social change, as seen in the Arab Spring.

These uprisings show significant discontent and frustration from African populations. Ignoring them could be a mistake that could lead to radical consequences. Studies show that France has deployed measures to support Sahelian peace and security initiatives. However, it has overlooked the voices of the local populations. French officials claim their presence in the Sahel is an equal partnership for security and peace. However, this claim is undermined by France's support for authoritarian regimes in African countries that contribute to widespread poverty.¹⁹ This situation fosters resentment among young Africans both on the continent and in the diaspora.

A 2020 report by the Ichikowitz Family Foundation, based on a survey of over 4,500 youths (aged 18-24) in sub-Saharan Africa,²⁰ reveals negative perceptions of France's

¹⁸ Daniel Egigba Agbiboa, "Youth as Tactical Agents of Peacebuilding and Development in the Sahel," *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 10, no. 3 (2015): 30–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/48602945>.

¹⁹ Komlan Avoulete, "Why France's Arrogance Is Pushing Africa Further Away," *International Policy Digest*, October 25, 2021, <https://intpolicydigest.org/why-france-s-arrogance-is-pushing-africa-further-away/>.

²⁰ "African Youth Survey 2020," *African Youth Survey 2020*, February 20, 2020,

influence in its former colonies. The report shows that 71% of respondents in Gabon, 68% in Senegal, and 60% in Mali hold negative views. This sentiment existed prior to President Macron's election but has been growing. In Sahelian countries, the presence of French troops, mandated to combat terrorism, and French intervention in national politics have intensified these feelings.

The wave of protests has always been in response to these events and is most notable in Mali, Chad, and Senegal. Since 2017, the number of anti-French demonstrations led by the youth have grown and are accompanied by destruction or property damage. In December 2019, anti-French protesters took to the streets carrying signs saying, "Non au néocolonialisme Français" (no to French neo-colonialism); "Macron missionnaire de la Françafrique" (Macron, advocate of the Françafrique); and "Non à la France" (No to France). In January 2020, during a protest in the Malian capital Bamako, over 1,000 young people gathered with signs saying, "A bas la France" (Down with France) and "France Dégage" (France, get out). French establishments were destroyed in these protests, and the French flag was burned.

A participant in the protest in Mali expressed that their anger was directed not at the French people but at the policies of the French state. This statement highlights that the growing negative sentiment is aimed at the French government and its policies rather than at French citizens. Understanding this distinction is crucial for analyzing the sentiment, particularly in the Sahel region, which hosts a significant number of French residents.

In the Republic of Chad, Wakit Tama,²¹ which translates to "the time has come" in Chadian Arabic, is a coalition of youth activism groups established in March 2021. It has become a prominent leader in organizing and coordinating citizen actions. This opposition platform has been organizing specific protests with a message against the involvement of the French state in Chadian politics. The group has denounced the French

<https://ichikowitzfoundation.com/our-work/african-youth-survey-2020>.

²¹ "Wakit Tama Continues to Protest, Military Authorities Continue to Restrict the Right to Protest," Civicus Monitor, December 15, 2021, <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/chad-Wakit-Tama-continues-to-protest-military-authorities-continue-restrict-right-to-protest/>.

backing of the transitional government headed by Mahamat Kaka Deby, son of Idriss Deby into. Les Transformateurs, (The Transformers), is also an opposition group created in April 2018. The majority of its members are youth between the ages of 18-35. This group is also a member of the Wakit Tama coalition, although it often stands as an independent group on various issues. Les Transformateurs has also organized protests against the Chadian government and views on France's involvement in national politics. In an interview with l'Opinion, a French TV news platform, the leader of Les Transformateurs stated that France can no longer look at Africa 3.0 with the magnifying glasses of the 20th century. The French involvement through outdated methods is no longer viable with the current generation. This statement also gives insight into the response of his followers in Chad, who have voiced the same opinion during protests.

Diplomatic relations between Mali and France have been marked by tension and began to deteriorate when President Macron announced the end of Operation Barkhane in June 2021. Following the announcement, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Maiga, speaking at the United Nations General Assembly, accused France of having "abandoned" Mali through its withdrawal.²² This statement sparked ongoing discussions between the two countries, eventually leading to Mali severing diplomatic and economic ties with France. Amid these strained relations, two youth activist groups, Yerewolo Debout sur les Ramparts (Standing on the Ramparts) and On a Tout Compris Waati Sera (We Have It All Figured Out), emerged as the most vocal on social media. They issued anti-French messages and organized protests against French presence in Mali.

On a tout compris Waati sera was created in 2021 which has been organizing a sit-in in front of the French embassy in Mali since 2017. The group denounces French foreign policy in Mali and leads protests. Yerewolo debout sur les ramparts was created in 2019 as an anti-French political youth group. Since its creation, the group's message has also denounced French foreign policy in Mali and external presence such as the Barkhane and

²² Africa News, "Mali PM Accuses France of 'Abandonment' over Troop Drawdown," Africa News, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/09/26/mali-pm-accuses-france-of-abandonment-over-troop-drawdown/>.

MINUSMA, the UN peacekeeping force.²³ The group has led various protests in the capital city of Bamako and has a growing number of followers since its creation.

There is a two-fold response to the diminishing French influence in the region and the openness to alternative influences. Many people opposing French foreign policy perceive a decline in French diplomatic and cultural power. In the protest discourse, groups in Mali have called for recognizing local languages as official, supported increased Mali-Russian cooperation, and demanded the closure of the French embassy. The expulsion of the French ambassador from Mali in 2022 and from Niger in 2023 indicates that such demands might be realized. Meanwhile, Russia has gained notable support, particularly among the youth in countries like Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). Supporters of Russia have displayed the Russian flag and signs during protests, reflecting a growing alignment with Russian influence. As various actors and anti-French sentiments rise, France is gradually losing its influence over local populations.

The impact of Sahelian youth activism on France-Africa relations

The security situation in the Sahel region remains unstable, characterized by ongoing conflicts and civil unrest. With a majority of the population under 35, the youth hold a significant voice and influence. Today's younger generation has a distinct perspective on France-Africa relations compared to their predecessors. Even beyond President Macron's first term, protests in the region have persisted. What began as peaceful demonstrations are increasingly evolving into expressions of frustration with the French presence.

The youth today feel less connected to France as a "Motherland" and have a different perspective on the nature of this relationship compared to the previous generation. In the contemporary world, interdependence is essential, and therefore, the stability of former Sahelian colonies and France is mutually influential. The stability of

²³ Mahamadou Kane, "Au Mali, Décryptage Des Objectifs Du Mouvement Yerewolo – DW – 05/08/2022," dw.com, August 5, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/fr/mali-yerewolo-debout-sur-les-remparts-d%C3%A9cryptage/a-62727681>.

one party undeniably impacts the stability of the other. France's efforts to combat jihadism in the Sahel are aimed at ensuring regional stability, which in turn helps maintain stability within its own borders.

The contestation of French foreign policy in the region has the potential to have negative consequences with an impactful repercussion on France. Currently, expressions of anti-French sentiment are mainly seen through critical discourse on social media and the destruction of French establishments. However, the years of accumulated frustration among the youth could escalate, potentially leading to violent acts that target individuals in addition to physical properties. In 2023, Niger temporarily banned French aircraft from its airspace and many French nationals living and working there relocated.²⁴

Analyzing youth movements is crucial for understanding the rising anti-French sentiments and the future of French-African relations in the sub-Saharan region. The central issue in this debate is identifying the root causes of these sentiments and their implications for future relations. The study's timeframe reveals that the root cause is the enduring contentiousness of relations dating back to the colonial era, with Sahelian countries still perceived as part of France's sphere of influence. This relationship is opposed by the new generation. Although President Macron's reform discourse was directed primarily at the youth, it has not mitigated anti-French sentiments or convinced audiences that French-African relations will significantly change. Additionally, the volatile political and social climate in Sahelian countries is exacerbating protests against national governments. These protests often target the international cooperation between these governments and France, with accusations of French involvement in regional instability.

The era of globalization introduces new forms of political interaction that require continuous adaptation to an evolving world. For instance, youth today, leveraging social

²⁴ Le Monde, "France to Close Its Embassy in Niger 'for an Indefinite Period of Time' Following Staff Exodus," *Le Monde.fr*, December 22, 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/12/22/france-to-close-its-embassy-in-niger-following-staff-exodus_6366493_4.html.

media, have a more prominent presence on the international stage and platforms to broadcast their voices globally. International relations theories and policies must account for these emerging dynamics. The ongoing debate surrounding anti-French sentiments and France's role in the Sahel serves as a catalyst for rethinking and developing new theories, offering a conceptual framework for analyzing these phenomena.

The Sahelian youth has been marginalized from the region, but it is slowly finding a voice. The prevailing message across most Sahelian countries is a demand for accountability from national governments, a shift in French-African relations, and, for the more radical voices, the expulsion of France. The global debate on the situation in the Sahel and its analysis must include the voice of youth as a catalyzing vehicle for potential change. Furthermore, the Sahelian youth, born after the colonization period, is at the forefront of these protests and demands. This is an important aspect to consider as it illustrates a new generation demanding a reset of French-African relations.

Conclusion

The regime changes in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad, along with rising anti-French sentiments in these countries, suggest that President Macron's proposed reforms during his first term have not had a significant impact. The approach failed to convince the youth that French-African relations, particularly in the Sahel region, would undergo meaningful change. The complex dynamics between France, African states, and the African populace underscore that Macron's reform narrative has largely remained unfulfilled. Efforts to engage directly with the youth, without involving heads of state, have been met with skepticism. The youth criticize their leaders for excluding them from governance while accusing France of supporting oppressive regimes, creating a volatile dynamic where French reforms appear impractical.

Throughout the Sahel, the youth have expressed their frustration with the lack of tangible implementation of these reforms. French military presence and support for unconstitutional transitions have only heightened their discontent, which has intensified beyond the study period. Anti-French sentiment protests continue and remain a significant

concern.

The youth's reaction to French foreign policy has broader implications for the region's political stability. Growing discontent, amplified through social media, is reshaping the future of France-Africa relations and the French presence in the Sahel. This evolving situation is likely to lead to increased unrest, as the youth's opposition to national governments and the deterioration of relations with France continue to grow.