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Assessing the Role of National Dialogue in Chad's Political Transition

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Preface

While global conflicts seem to be increasing in number and intensity, it is all the more pertinent to deal with peacebuilding processes. After all, there have always been wars in human history, and they always last too long. At some point, however, they come to an end, and it is important that the ends of conflicts are accompanied in an informed and well-reflected manner. It is therefore essential to think about these processes of accompanying the transition from war to peace at an early stage, even if the war is still going on and real peace seems very far away. National peace dialogues are a key instrument of peacebuilding processes. Our Fellow Mariia Levchenko is an internationally recognized and renowned expert in this field. She has not only addressed it from a theoretical perspective as a researcher but has also actively conducted and observed peace dialogues as a practitioner. In this paper, she gives an insight into her expertise using the case study of the National Dialogue in Chad. The lessons learned are of fundamental value and one can only hope that these insights will also be of relevance to Mariia's home country, Ukraine, in the future.

Da weltweite Konflikte an Zahl und Intensität zuzunehmen scheinen, ist es umso wichtiger, sich mit Peace-Bildung Prozessen auseinanderzusetzen. Kriege hat es in der Geschichte der Menschheit immer gegeben, und sie dauern immer zu lange. Irgendwann kommen sie jedoch zu einem Ende, und es ist wichtig, dass das Ende von Konflikten sachkundig und reflektiert begleitet wird. Aus diesem Grund ist es ratsam, sich frühzeitig Gedanken über diese Prozesse des Übergangs vom Krieg zum Frieden zu machen, auch wenn der Krieg noch andauert und ein wirklicher Frieden in weiter Ferne scheint. Nationale Friedensdialoge sind ein wichtiges Instrument der Friedenskonsolidierung. Unsere Fellow Mariia Levchenko ist eine international anerkannte und renommierte Expertin auf diesem Gebiet. Sie hat sich nicht nur als Wissenschaftlerin aus theoretischer Sicht mit diesem Thema befasst, sondern auch als Praktikerin aktiv Friedensdialoge geführt und beobachtet. In diesem Beitrag gibt sie anhand der Fallstudie des Nationalen Dialogs im Tschad einen Einblick in ihre Expertise. Die gewonnenen Erkenntnisse sind von grundlegendem Wert, und man kann nur hoffen, dass diese Einsichten in Zukunft auch für Mariias Heimatland, die Ukraine, von Bedeutung sein werden.

Manuel Becker
Head of Scientific Programme

Abstract: *This paper examines Chad's 2022 National Dialogue (Dialogue National Inclusif et Souverain, DNIS) as a case study of the use of so-called "National Dialogues" during political transitions. After providing an analytical overview, the study finds that Chad's dialogue largely served to legitimize the existing military-led regime rather than to effect genuine systemic change. The convened forum (August–October 2022) was initiated by the Transitional Military Council (TMC) after the death of longtime president Idriss Déby (2021) and was presented as an inclusive platform to address deep-rooted conflicts, design reforms, and prepare elections. In practice, however, the dialogue was dominated by pro-regime actors, while key opposition and armed groups largely abstained. Its ostensible outcomes – notably a two-year extension of the transition and endorsement of Déby's bid to run in future elections – were announced without meaningful debate or vote, prompting mass protests and a harsh government crackdown. The research findings are based on fieldwork conducted by the author during a research fellowship at the Academy of International Affairs NRW, including surveys and interviews with dialogue participants and key stakeholders[1]. It concludes that Chad's dialogue ultimately reinforced the status quo, underscoring that National Dialogues have potential only if they genuinely balance elite and popular interests. Lessons are drawn for other contexts: effective National Dialogues require broad stakeholder buy-in, transparent procedures, and binding follow-through. Without these, they risk becoming facades that entrench rather than resolve conflicts.*

Abstract: *In diesem Paper wird der Nationale Dialog im Tschad aus dem Jahr 2022 als Fallstudie für den Einsatz sogenannter „Nationaler Dialoge" im Kontext politischer Transformation untersucht. Nach einem analytischen Überblick kommt die Studie zu dem Schluss, dass der Dialog im Tschad eher der Legitimierung des bestehenden Militärregimes diente als einem echten Systemwandel. Das einberufene Forum (August-Oktober 2022) wurde vom Übergangs-Militärrat (TMC) nach dem Tod des langjährigen Präsidenten Idriss Déby (2021) initiiert und als integrative Plattform präsentiert, um tief verwurzelte Konflikte anzugehen, Reformen zu konzipieren und Wahlen vorzubereiten. In der Praxis wurde der Dialog jedoch von regimetreuen Akteuren dominiert, während sich wichtige Oppositionsgruppen und bewaffnete Gruppen weitgehend der Stimme enthielten. Die angeblichen Ergebnisse des Dialogs - insbesondere eine Verlängerung des Übergangs um zwei Jahre und die Unterstützung von Débys Kandidatur bei künftigen Wahlen - wurden ohne Debatte oder Abstimmung verkündet, was zu Massenprotesten und einem harten Durchgreifen der Regierung führte. Die Forschungsergebnisse basieren auf Feldforschungen, die die Autorin während eines Forschungsstipendiums an der AIA NRW durchgeführt hat, einschließlich Umfragen und Interviews mit Dialogteilnehmern und wichtigen Akteuren. Sie kommt zu dem Schluss, dass der Dialog im Tschad letztlich den Status quo gestärkt hat, und unterstreicht, dass Nationale Dialoge nur dann Potenzial haben, wenn sie einen echten Ausgleich zwischen den Interessen der Eliten und der Bevölkerung schaffen. Daraus lassen sich Lehren für andere Kontexte ziehen: Wirksame Nationale Dialoge erfordern eine breite Beteiligung der Interessengruppen, transparente Verfahren und eine verbindliche Umsetzung. Andernfalls besteht die Gefahr, dass sie zu einer Fassade werden, die Konflikte verschärft, anstatt sie zu lösen.*

[1] Fieldwork conducted by the author during a research fellowship at the Academy of International Affairs NRW (2024-2025), including anonymous participant surveys and expert interviews related to Chad's 2022 National Dialogue.

1. Introduction

"National Dialogue" has become a common mechanism in post-conflict and transitional contexts. Broadly defined, a National Dialogue is an inclusive, structured negotiation convened to resolve deep-rooted political, social, and economic conflicts and to chart a path for political transition (Berghof Foundation 2017: 5; Papagianni 2014: 11). Such processes aim to involve government, opposition parties, civil society, religious and traditional leaders, and other constituencies to reach consensus on constitutional and governance reforms. In theory, National Dialogues can provide forums for airing grievances, building understanding among warring factions, and designing institutions that reflect diverse interests (Berghof Foundation 2017: 7; Paffenholz 2014: 7). Notably, Tunisia's 2013 National Dialogue successfully bridged a political crisis and laid the foundation for democracy – a contribution recognized by the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize (Cammett/Jones Luong 2014: 214; Nobel Prize Committee 2015). By contrast, other National Dialogues have faltered or been co-opted by entrenched elites. Research shows that even when agreements are reached, only about half of National Dialogue outcomes are fully implemented, often because dominant actors lack incentive or will to carry them through (Paffenholz 2015: 16).

In this context, Chad's 2022 National Dialogue offers a revealing case of the limits of such processes. Chad – a key Sahel state – has long grappled with authoritarian rule, ethnic/regional cleavages, armed insurgencies, and state repression (Debos 2016: 8; Marchal 2016). When President Idriss Déby was killed in battle in April 2021, his 30-year autocratic regime gave way to a military council headed by his son, Mahamat Déby. The new rulers promised a swift transition to civilian rule, including an "Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue" as a capstone (Lacher 2022: 2).

This paper explores how that dialogue was conceived and executed, and what it achieved. It asks: To what extent did the National Dialogue promote genuine political reform versus entrenching existing power structures? By critically examining preparatory processes, participant composition, proceedings, and aftermath – drawing on academic analyses, media reports, and participant surveys – the paper assesses the dialogue's role in Chad's political trajectory. Finally, it reflects on broader lessons about National Dialogues in similar contexts.

2. Legacies of authoritarianism and conflict: Chad's path to the 2022 National Dialogue

Chad's political history is marked by long autocracies and recurrent conflict. After independence (1960), decades of civil wars and coups culminated in Hissène Habré's dictatorial rule (1982–1990), during which northern ethnic groups consolidated control and southern communities were repressed (Debos 2016: 21). Hissène Habré, a former military leader and head of the Armed Forces of the North (FAN), came to power through a coup and became notorious for widespread human rights abuses during his presidency. In 1990 Idriss Déby, a northerner of the Zaghawa group, overthrew Habré and soon established his own one-man dominance. Déby maintained power for three decades through rigged

elections, cooptation of rivals, and forceful suppression of dissent (Marchal 2016; Debos 2016: 36). His regime, while bringing some stability, was characterized by corruption, marginalization of Arabs and southerners, and a near-monopoly of authority by the military elite. As Lacher (2022) notes, "Instability in Chad has simmered for decades, disrupted by periodic explosions of violence. Corruption, political exclusion, growing disparity, and repression of dissent have long been trademarks of Déby's rule." These deep-seated grievances – regional inequalities, ethnic favoritism, and neglect of peripheral areas – created a volatile backdrop.

Under Déby, Chad's security forces were involved in the region's conflicts (e.g. the Darfur war and battles against Boko Haram in the south), further militarizing politics (Debos 2016: 72). By 2021 Chad ranked near the bottom on human development indices; simultaneous crises spilled over its borders (refugee flows from Sudan and the Central African Republic) (Mandibaye 2021). Protest movements emerged, exemplified by the 2018 Kessaï (Dead City) strikes and youth mobilizations under figures like Succès Masra of the Transformers party. These movements, largely from southern communities and urban youth, decried Déby's kleptocracy. At the same time, Chad's armed opposition persisted: various politico-military factions (most prominently the Front for Change and Concord in Chad, FACT) continued to challenge the regime from bases in Libya and elsewhere (Lacher 2022: 5).

On 20–21 April 2021, just after Déby claimed another electoral victory, he was killed while battling FACT rebels. In the immediate aftermath, a fifteen-member Transitional Military Council (TMC) led by his son Mahamat seized power, suspended the constitution, and dissolved the government. Contrary to Chad's constitution (which mandated that the Speaker of Parliament become interim president pending elections), the military junta declared an 18-month transition, pledging elections in late 2022. This move was promptly denounced by many opponents as a dynastic coup (Mandibaye 2021). International actors (African Union, EU, USA) accepted the takeover conditionally, urging compliance with the promised timeline and barring any junta member from contesting the presidency. Yet the groundwork for the transition was already undercut by the security crisis and popular distrust: protests in N'Djamena and elsewhere were met with repression in May 2021.

Against this historical backdrop of centralized military rule and unresolved sociopolitical fractures, the TMC announced that a National Dialogue would be held as the climax of the transition. In July 2021, a new charter was promulgated (replacing the constitution) and an interim parliament was appointed – moves that critics said preempted genuine dialogue (Mandibaye 2021). The TMC outlined a roadmap: peace talks with politico-military groups (for which a partial ceasefire was negotiated in Doha in mid-2022) and a National Dialogue to produce consensus on a new constitutional order and electoral timetable. By late 2022, however, emerging opposition parties like Les Transformateurs (Masra) and coalitions such as Wakit Tama were overtly challenging the regime and calling for inclusive dialogue and a swift return to civilian rule. Thus, when the National Dialogue began in August 2022, it entered an environment of cautious hope mingled with deep skepticism.

3. Engineering consensus: Origins, structure, and dynamics of Chad's 2022 National Dialogue

The 2022 National Dialogue (officially *Dialogue National Inclusif et Souverain*, DNIS) was formally convened by the TMC after delays. Its planning drew on the earlier Doha peace process: from March to August 2022, 40–50 rebel groups and regime representatives negotiated in Qatar (Marchal 2016: 5; International Crisis Group 2022: 7). This "pre-dialogue" ended with a peace agreement signed by over 40 groups, promising rebel integration and amnesty, though key hardline factions (notably FACT — the Front for Change and Concord in Chad, which led the 2021 offensive that resulted in President Idriss Déby's death — and CCMSR — *Conseil de Commandement Militaire pour le Salut de la République*, a Chadian politico-military group formed in 2016) held back (Debos 2016: 87; Oxford Analytica 2022). Immediately after the Doha accord, the National Dialogue was launched in N'Djamena around 20 August 2022. According to observers (Magnani 2024: 3), about 1,400 delegates were registered to attend the multi-week conference.

Officially, the DNIS was designed as an inclusive, national-level forum. Its organizers proclaimed goals of "national unity" social cohesion, and designing reforms (constitutional and institutional) to underpin democratic elections (Berghof Foundation 2017: 35). A transitional "roadmap" was to be developed, including measures on decentralization, judicial reform, and the eventual constitution. Politically, the forum was touted as "inclusive and sovereign", implying broad participation. In practice, membership lists reflected the TMC's outreach: participants included representatives of political parties (both pro- and some former anti-regime parties), civil society actors, traditional and religious leaders, returning "politico-military" figures (exiles who had signed the Doha deal), as well as a sprinkling of women, youth, and diaspora representatives. International support was visible: the EU and UN provided technical advisors, and Qatar played a prominent host-role for the peace talks (Lacher 2022: 3).

Notably absent or marginal at the start were the main opposition coalitions. Two of the most significant civil actors – the Wakit Tama coalition and Masra's Les Transformateurs – announced they would boycott the dialogue, calling it "a facade" with no guarantees of genuine reform (Oxford Analytica 2022). Several Arabophone activist networks also stayed away. Among armed groups, only those who signed the Doha agreement (many of which had scant armed capability) came forward; the military council explicitly excluded any dialogue that might bar its leaders from contention (Marchal 2016: 7; Azevedo 1998: 212). These exclusions foreshadowed the power imbalance: the forum was engineered by the TMC with the blessing of its allies (France, Qatar) to satisfy the appearances of dialogue, while preserving elite prerogatives. Agenda-setting and rules were largely under the purview of the transition authorities. In theory, decisions were to be taken by commissions and plenary votes, but in reality, the process moved under constant TMC oversight (Debos 2016: 92; de Waal 2015: 44).

According to researchers (Lacher 2022: 4; Magnani 2024: 6), the ND convened five technical commissions (on governance, the rule of law, the army, etc.) that met regularly.

At the conclusion in early October, a conference-wide assembly adopted a series of resolutions (without formal voting) and recommendations. The authorities framed these as a consensus roadmap: a draft constitution would be prepared, a referendum held (on choosing unitary vs. federal state), and a timeline set for elections. Most strikingly, the final communiqué declared that the existing 18-month transition should be extended by 24 months, with the TMC dissolving and Mahamat Déby remaining as interim president. It also affirmed (again) that any Chadian meeting legal requirements could stand for office – effectively upholding Déby's eligibility. However, as critics immediately pointed out, these outcomes had not been debated or voted on by the participants; rather, they aligned precisely with the junta's prior announcements. In short, the structure of the dialogue – broad in title but tightly managed in practice – allowed the ruling elite to create a veneer of national consensus around decisions it had already made.

4. Inclusive rhetoric and elite capture: Analyzing power dynamics within Chad's National Dialogue

Understanding the real level of inclusivity within the DNIS was a central focus of the author's research conducted during the Academy of International Affairs NRW Fellowship. In order to evaluate whether the National Dialogue achieved its stated goals of national unity and democratic participation, participant surveys and qualitative interviews were designed to systematically capture the experiences and perceptions of a broad range of delegates. Particular attention was paid to the extent of meaningful participation by grassroots actors, youth, women, and opposition representatives. The findings presented in this section are based directly on that field research, providing first-hand insight into how the dialogue operated in practice compared to its formal promises.

Assessing inclusivity reveals the gulf between intent and reality. The DNIS was nominally open to a wide array of Chadian society, but important segments of the population either lacked voice or chose not to engage. Scholars note that truly equal participation is often the first casualty of politically sensitive dialogues (Paffenholz 2014: 70). In Chad's case, the dominant actors – the military and allied political factions – filled most seats (Debos 2016: 91). Official reports and later surveys indicate that ordinary civil society, grassroots leaders, women's groups, youth associations, and opposition party members had very limited influence.

According to participant surveys and interviews conducted during the author's research fellowship at the Academy of International Affairs NRW (2023–2024), many grassroots voices felt that the "selection process was…engineered" and that the core issues of marginalized populations (women, minorities, young people) were largely sidelined. The organizers did include some quotas for women and youth, but these proved token: women's delegates made up only a small fraction of the 1,400 National Dialogue delegates and only a few held actual decision-making roles.

Major opposition forces explicitly refused to attend. For example, the Wakit Tama platform and Les Transformateurs party denounced the ND as illegitimate, so their thousands of supporters – especially in southern provinces – were absent. Similarly, although some rebel leaders returned under amnesty, the most powerful armed groups (FACT, CCMSR) deliberately stayed out of the process. Thus, the dialogue lacked the full range of political voices. Even among participants, the balance was skewed: many delegates were former officials or ex-rebels who had already been co-opted into the transition by the TMC (often receiving government posts). Hardliners outside had no seat, making the proceedings essentially a conversation among factions that the junta had already allied with.

Power dynamics within the room favored continuity over change. The TMC maintained tight control: its leaders (including Déby himself during parts of the dialogue) patronized the sessions, and "rapporteurs" such as Justice Minister Ahmat Bachir (also rapporteur of the DNIS) guided outcomes. Decisions on key issues (timing of elections, eligibility) were treated as foregone conclusions. When delegates did debate, their concerns were largely non-sensitive issues: for instance, participants did repeatedly raise grievances about corruption, mismanagement, and regional inequality, with some even demanding federalism. Nonetheless, these debates had no discernible effect. The only concession adopted was to hold a future referendum on centralism vs. federalism. The final communiqué otherwise ignored majority sentiments. Many participants "have said they were left disillusioned by this exercise whose result was apparently predetermined – namely to enable Mahamat Déby to retain power." This pattern reflects broader findings on National Dialogues: despite the rhetoric of "inclusive reform," such forums often become instruments for elites to re-legitimize themselves (Papagianni 2014: 5). Research on dialogues notes that dominant actors typically initiate them when their rule is contested, seeking a controlled negotiation format that leaves the basic power structure intact. Chad's ND fits this scenario. In effect, it served the military's goal of endorsing an extended transition under its own leadership.

International observers had explicitly warned that any dialogue excluding opposition would lack credibility; Human Rights Watch reported in mid-2022 that Chadian activists were already criticizing the planned dialogue and demanding real inclusion (Human Rights Watch 2024). When key actors stay away, the process cannot capture the "broad consensus" such dialogues promise. The imbalance of power was also evident in who controlled the agenda and decision-making. Officially, decisions required plenary approval, but in practice few formal votes were held. Instead, draft texts were presented by the leadership and declared adopted by consensus. In delegative terms, many ordinary delegates found their role reduced to rubber-stamping predetermined results. On sensitive issues, they were instructed to follow the military line. This mismatch – between the nominal inclusivity and the actual elite-driven process – created a legitimacy gap. Participants and external critics alike noted that while the dialogue platform "should have been inclusive," it effectively functioned as an endorsement of Déby's plan.

In sum, the DNIS failed to substantially alter the existing power dynamic. As an anonymous participant in the fieldwork interviews bluntly put it, the process was "never truly inclusive…only those who pledged loyalty to the President were allowed to participate." Observers noted that women, youth, and other marginalized groups were largely

silent at the table. Even the participation of diaspora was limited to a few appointees, with no robust channels for Chadians abroad to influence outcomes. In these respects, Chad's ND illustrates the risk of elite capture warned of by dialogue scholars: when negotiations are orchestrated by the holders of power, genuine transformation is unlikely to happen (Paffenholz 2015: 861).

5. Between managed transition and missed opportunities: Outcomes and shortcomings of Chad's National Dialogue

When the National Dialogue formally concluded in early October 2022, the announced outcomes reflected the junta's pre-established strategy. The key decisions were (1) to extend the transition by 24 months; (2) to dissolve the TMC and install Mahamat Déby as interim president of a new government; (3) to allow Déby and the other military council members to stand as candidates; and (4) to initiate a commission for drafting a new constitution, to be approved by referendum. These decisions mirrored exactly what had been signaled in advance by the military leadership. Crucially, they were conveyed as collective decisions of the dialogue without any actual vote: no formal tally of opinion was released. Many delegates who had hoped to see real choice in the dialogue's decisions felt betrayed when the final communiqué simply enacted the junta's plan.

Findings from participant interviews corroborate this sense of betrayal. Several delegates expressed that discussions on core transitional issues were "steered" by the leadership, while alternative views were either suppressed or ignored. As one interviewee noted, "We came with hope to build a new Chad, but the key decisions were already made before we sat down". Another participant summarized the outcome bluntly: "It was like being invited to endorse a script written in advance."

The immediate public reaction was swift and violent. On 20 October 2022 – the date on which the originally promised 18-month transition was to end – large-scale protests erupted in N'Djamena and provincial cities. Demonstrators, organized by Les Transformateurs, Wakit Tama, student unions, and others, denounced the ND resolutions as a "masquerade" that perpetuated military rule. They demanded adherence to the original timeline and a return to civilian governance. Security forces responded with lethal force. According to official figures, about 50 people were killed and nearly 300 wounded in that day's violence; human rights groups reported even higher tolls and accused the state of shooting unarmed citizens (Human Rights Watch 2024). The government declared the protesters to be "armed insurrectionists," even as witnesses described a largely peaceful movement. Either way, the scale of repression underscored that the dialogue had done little to contain popular discontent.

Beyond the bloodshed, the ND's structural shortcomings quickly became apparent. Of the promised reforms, few were implemented. The draft constitution commission did produce a text (approved by parliament in June 2023), but it notably ignored many key demands from the dialogue debates: for example, it preserved a unitary state despite

strong federalist calls. Proposed changes to decentralize power or reform the security sector were shelved. The peace agreement with politico-military groups also stalled: disarmament and reintegration were delayed, and some signatory groups retreated from commitments (Lacher 2022: 5). In short, most of the transitional "roadmap" affirmed by the ND remained on paper. Participant testimonies collected during fieldwork further highlighted a deep sense of disillusionment. Many emphasized that not only were key promises disregarded, but that trust between civil society and the transitional authorities was further eroded.

A further criticism is that the ND had neglected to establish credible institutions to oversee the transition. Although a transitional legislative council (Conseil National de Transition) was formed, it was seen as handpicked by the TMC and had limited legitimacy. Likewise, no independent body was created to ensure that ND resolutions would be carried out. As a result, civil society and opposition complaints – that the ND had been a token exercise– were never addressed through formal mechanisms. Instead, after October 2022, the government embarked on tightening control: a three-month ban on political activities was imposed, curfews reintroduced, and thousands of arrests followed. In effect, the regime responded to dissent with force, rather than revisiting the dialogue outcomes.

As Lacher (2022) and Magnani (2024) argue, and as confirmed by field interviews, Chad's ND was a missed opportunity at best. It failed to reconcile divergent visions for Chad's future, and it deepened distrust. On the one hand, the dialogue did at times permit controversial discussions – for example, participants openly lambasted bad governance and asked for federalism – suggesting there was genuine engagement. On the other hand, the official results completely nullified those debates. Many who participated feel that the process "reinforced existing power structures rather than transforming them." In practice, the ND did not bridge "stability" and "change" so much as cement the military's grip on power under the guise of dialogue. It allowed a managed transition – a controlled transfer of power within the same elite – rather than enabling an authentic, inclusive shift to civilian rule.

In terms of tangible outcomes, the only unambiguous changes were negative from a democracy perspective. The transition deadline was put off, postponing elections until late 2024. The military council was dissolved, only to be replaced by a new transitional government still headed by Déby and including many former generals. The election rules were changed to permit essentially anyone meeting formal criteria (i.e. the incumbent) to run, undoing the earlier promise that neither Déby nor any military officer would be candidates. This was widely interpreted as the dialogue ratifying a dynastic succession. Indeed, a civilian government formed in October 2022 remained dominated by Déby's associates, and popular calls for reform went unanswered.

6. Lessons learned: Implications for National Dialogues in other contexts

Chad's experience offers sobering lessons about the promise and pitfalls of National Dialogues in transitional settings. On the one hand, the very fact of convening a dialogue can

help channel grievances into a formal process rather than street action, potentially avoiding immediate conflict. In Chad's case, the leadership likely hoped that a dialogue would mollify critics and provide an orderly veneer of consensus. Indeed, in the short term the ND may have delayed an outright coup or collapse by co-opting some factions into the process. This reflects a pattern noted in comparative studies: National Dialogues can dampen unrest by transferring public demands into negotiations (Paffenholz 2014). For example, even Chad's critics had insisted on dialogue (versus continued armed struggle), and a few "signees" of the Doha peace deal were integrated into government roles. International supporters (EU, UN, AU) also got an institutional outlet to engage Chad's transition (Berghof Foundation 2017). However, the Chad case also underscores the limits of National Dialogue when conditions are skewed. Key factors proved decisive:

(1) Balance of power and elite buy-in: If those in charge of the state see the dialogue as a zero-sum threat to their authority, they will shape it to preserve power. In Chad, the TMC held all the cards; the interim president himself co-led the process. By contrast, successful dialogues (e.g. Tunisia) involve powerful actors on both sides willing to make concessions (Papagianni 2014). In most failed or weak dialogues, one side merely used the forum to legitimize its rule. In Chad's ND, the situation of ruling versus pro-change forces exactly matched the typical dynamic: anti-change elites led the process with only selective opposition engagement.

(2) Inclusivity and legitimacy: A dialogue's authority derives from broad stakeholder participation and transparent decision-making. Chad's DNIS was widely perceived as exclusive and top-down. Many observers (domestic and international) noted the absence of major parties and the opaque voting procedures. As research shows, even formal inclusion of women, youth, and civil society means little if those delegates lack real influence (Paffenholz 2015). In effect, Chad's ND failed the legitimacy test. No civil-society leader or opposition bloc felt represented by it, so the dialogue's pronouncements carried little weight with the population at large. Other contexts show the opposite: where leaders of different camps actually participate (often under neutral mediation), the dialogue outcomes are more durable.

(3) Follow-through and enforcement: Even a genuinely inclusive dialogue can fail if its agreements are not binding or implemented. In Chad, the ND's resolutions were essentially advisory, and the authorities treated them as recommendations that could be selectively applied. Comparative research warns that half of National Dialogue agreements are never fully enacted (USIP 2024). This happened in Chad: almost none of the promised reforms (decentralization, judicial independence, security sector overhaul) were carried out. For other countries, this suggests that dialogues must be linked to enforcement mechanisms – either through constitutional entrenchment, external guarantees, or strong domestic oversight – to have impact.

(4) Managing expectations: A National Dialogue raises public hopes, so failure can provoke backlash. In Chad the dialogue was touted as a transition enabler, but its outcome (extension of military rule) felt like betrayal to many, triggering violent protests. This

underscores how crucial it is for dialogues to either meet popular demands or temper expectations. When the gap between what is promised (elections, change) and what is delivered (status quo) is large, the resulting instability can be worse. In other transitions (e.g., Ivory Coast 2010, Ukraine 2014), broken agreements or elite entrenchment have led directly to renewed conflict (Cammett/Luong 2014).

(5) Role of third parties: International actors can help ensure neutrality and compliance. In Tunisia's dialogue, the "Quartet" (civil society organizations) mediated between parties under quiet EU and UN support, which helped to build trust. In Chad's dialogue, external actors provided technical help (via African Union/EU) and monitored human rights, but they largely deferred to the TMC's timetable. Crucially, promises like barring generals from running were not enforced. Future dialogues might require stronger international or regional guarantees (e.g., UN-backed roadmaps, tied aid or sanctions) to constrain spoilers.

(6) Contextual factors: The timing and environment of the dialogue matter. Chad's ND began just as regional conflicts (Sudan, CAR) destabilized the area, and as the military faced insurgencies at home. The generals likely felt vulnerable and used the dialogue partly to project strength. In other contexts, dialogues launched at moments of acute crisis (and without ceasefires) often struggle, as participants still face battlefield uncertainties. Conversely, dialogues that have succeeded (South Africa 1991, Ethiopia's ongoing talks) often did so after major violence had subsided or under guaranteed peace conditions. In Chad's case, the ND overlapped with continuing rebel threats and civil unrest, undermining any sense that issues were "off the table."
In sum, Chad's National Dialogue illustrates that the process of dialogue matters as much as the idea of dialogue. Its failures in inclusivity and implementation echo common pitfalls identified in the literature on National Dialogues (Paffenholz 2014; Papagianni 2014). When powerful elites resist change, a National Dialogue alone is insufficient to achieve a credible transition. For other countries considering similar processes (post-coup or post-conflict states), Chad offers a cautionary example: dialogue must be genuinely open and its results binding, otherwise it risks being merely a veneer for managed continuity.

7. Conclusion

Chad's 2022 National Dialogue was an event of great promise and great disappointment. Presented as a bridge between stability and change, it ultimately skewed decisively toward preserving the existing regime. The forum provided a platform for airing some grievances and included diverse groups on paper, but the ground rules ensured that the military council held all substantive power. The dialogue's formal achievements – the roadmap for a new constitution and a delayed election timetable – were outweighed by what it did *not* do: reform the security sector, address marginalization, or produce a democratic handover. Instead, it extended a transition mired in controversy, culminating in bloody street protests.

This analysis does not deny that National Dialogues can be useful tools. In theory, they can foster reconciliation and lay the groundwork for peaceful change. Examples from

Tunisia, Kenya (2008 post-election dialogue), and other cases show that when National Dialogues are genuinely inclusive and their outcomes respected, they can facilitate critical consensus. However, Chad's case underscores that dialogues are not inherently virtuous. The mere act of talking does not guarantee transformation. Without genuine commitment to a fair process – including broad participation, transparency, and follow-up – a "National Dialogue" can become a facade. In Chad it arguably contributed to delaying and legitimizing a contested power grab.

Moving forward, lessons from Chad suggest that countries should only attempt such dialogues under clear conditions: ensuring balanced representation (perhaps via independent facilitation), stipulating which decisions are final, and linking the process to enforceable timelines. International actors may need to play more robust guarantor roles. Most fundamentally, National Dialogue should be part of a larger political strategy that includes safeguards for civil rights, institutional checks, and avenues for dissent. In Chad, as of early 2025, these elements remain fragile. The new constitution (drafted in the transition's aftermath) is poised to inherit the very limitations the dialogue did not fix – for instance, it enshrines a unitary state rather than resolving regional grievances. Whether Chad's political transition ultimately moves toward democracy or backslides will likely depend less on the rhetoric of dialogue and more on how the next elections (and broader reforms) are managed.

In conclusion, the ambition of the DNIS has not been matched by transformative results. It provides a clear case that National Dialogues, though valuable as a concept, have **potential and limits**. They can channel change, but only if structured and conducted in ways that genuinely empower all stakeholders. Chad's experience serves as a reminder: dialogue without inclusion is a hollow term, and stability without reform can be a recipe for future crisis. As peacebuilding scholars such as Paffenholz (2015) and Cammett/Luong (2014) warn, "elite capture" can derail any process designed for the people – and in Chad, the dialogue was largely captured by those seeking to maintain the status quo. Understanding this dynamic is essential for any country attempting to navigate between stability and change.

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