Some years back, when I left Niamey, the capital of Niger, and headed north on a rutted, dirt track it was as if the country disappeared on me, writes Robert Kaplan of Stratfor. There was no police, no sign of authority, nothing. Flash floods had left the road completely washed out in places, with the wheels of large trucks half-sunk in mud, drivers stuck for days on the side of the road. Here there were only Tuaregs, the "blue men" as they were called, on account of the color of their dazzling robes and the blue vegetable dye ("nila") they smeared on their bodies. The Tuaregs, a pastoral Berber people, were lords of the Sahara; it's better to have a Tuareg with you than a GPS device, went the saying of U. S. Army Special Forces with whom I was embedded.

My experience heading north from Timbuktu in Mali was even more extreme. Though it connotes the back of beyond, Timbuktu was actually a cosmopolitan locale - complete with a museum of medieval Islamic manuscripts, a few decent restaurants and satellite dishes - compared to where I was going.

I was off to Araouane, 240 kilometers (150 miles) north from Timbuktu into the desert. Araouane was a name on a map, as though it were Cleveland or some place. But nobody in Timbuktu - and certainly not in Bamako, the Malian capital very far away to the southwest - knew anything about Araouane, and if anyone still lived there. It took 14 hours and numerous breakdowns in the fine sand to reach Araouane, a huddle of ruins on a cosmic emptiness where only women, children and old men lived - the Tuareg men were out conducting raids and commerce on caravan routes throughout the desert. Here the Malian state did not exist.

There is a geographical lesson here. Scan a map of the Sahara from the Atlantic Ocean to the Horn of Africa and you will see Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Chad, countries that encompass this desert comparable in size to the United States. Then notice where the capitals of these countries are located: crouched far away to the south, inside the Sahelian plain, where they are demographic and environmental extensions of coastal West Africa - and also where the local political elites whom the Europeans discovered are located.

You can drive from Cotonou in Benin on the Gulf of Guinea, due north for hundreds of kilometers to Niamey, and the landscape will change relatively little - compared, that is, to the concentrated differences that you encounter further on. For soon after leaving Niamey and heading north or northeast the landscape evolves into utter desert. A similar situation ensues after leaving these other capitals. European colonialists in drawing these boundaries decreed that the desert would be ruled not from a central point in the desert itself, as previous Berber cultures had done, but from a distant, coastal-oriented periphery in the Sahelian plain.

This situation would make governance in the hinterlands difficult under the best of conditions. But in this part of Africa the conditions are the worst, since the level of institutional development and transportation links is abysmal, and it is mainly through roads and institutions that

hinterlands are governed. There is little economic activity in the desert compelling governments to maintain more than a light footprint there. These aren't countries so much as city-states - Nouakchott, Bamako, Niamey, Ndjamena - with armies that try to keep some order in the far-flung, far less populated reaches. State armies never have ruled this desert; rather, they have maintained for much of the time a stable cease-fire with the Tuaregs there (often through integration of key Tuareg fighters into local military bases).

Democracy has complicated the situation, even as it has helped jump-start a tradition of better governance. As one diplomat in Bamako once explained to me, with democracy there was more pressure on local politicians to spend money in the populous south, near the capital, because that's where the votes are. And without aid to the desert communities to the north, governance cannot ultimately follow.

The most effective government I experienced in the Tuareg lands of the Sahara was Algeria's. A few years ago I spent a month in Tamanrasset, in Algeria's extreme south, as far from the capital of Algiers on the Mediterranean as it is from Lagos in Nigeria on the Gulf of Guinea. Algeria is a real state, with a highly professional army and institutions. But it was the Algerian army that ruled Tamanrasset and its environs, not civilian government bureaucrats. Security, even in this principal city of the central Sahara - ruled by a Mediterranean, North African state no less - was tenuous. Algeria as such, much as Niger and Mali as such, ended far, far away, closer to the capital.

The Tuareg dilemma, in which these Berber semi-nomads have recently conquered the northern half of Mali and may even threaten neighboring countries, is not completely solvable. The modern European state system is an ungainly fit for what obtains in the Sahara Desert. However, it is not out of the question that in the near future, through the building of better roads and more robust institutions - things that come with economic growth and democracy - governments in places like Bamako and Niamey can extend development deep into the desert, even as the Tuaregs are granted a reasonable degree of autonomy. An independent Tuareg state of the Sahara might then exist more formally - and the West will still have allies to combat al Qaeda in the region.

The problem in Mali, where junior army officers have overthrown the elected government ostensibly because of its failure to control the Tuaregs in the north, is not only one of a dictatorship replacing a democracy. The problem is also one of fleeting central authority itself. In his classic work on development theory, Political Order in Changing Societies (1968), Harvard professor Samuel P. Huntington noted that many governments in places like Africa cannot simply be classified as democratic or authoritarian, because their most "distinguishing characteristic" is sheer "fragility," no matter who is in charge. They have few institutions as such, and it is sturdy bureaucracies rather than elections that truly define a system.

So Mali and its neighbors will totter on. There may be elections in Bamako, or there may not be. Tuareg raiders may control the desert interior, or a battalion of southern-led soldiers from the capital may do so. The real fundamental drama will play out gradually, outside the strictures of media accounts. This drama will be about how, and whether, Africa's recently impressive economic growth rates can lead to the creation of larger middle classes. It is larger middle

classes that lead, in turn, to more efficient and vigorous government ministries, and to more professional militaries, so that hinterlands might be brought under control and artificially drawn borders made more workable. The Saharan countries, in this regard, are a more extreme version of the larger African challenge, as the desert has created the largest dichotomy of populations within the continent.

And this will be hard. For example, the fact that the capital city of Luanda, on the coast, is booming because of offshore oil wealth does not mean that the sprawling Angolan interior in southern Africa is doing likewise. The same can be said for a recently and weakly rejuvenated Mogadishu, and whether or not it affects the rest of Somalia. The African challenge, or at least an aspect of it, is to extend good governance and development far beyond the capitals.