

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Decoding State of Affairs in Mali: Internal Politics, Security Crisis and External Involvement

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S*ummary*

Mali has witnessed three coups in less than a decade, the latest one in May 2021. Despite the support extended regionally by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and internationally by the United Nations (UN), Mali continues to remain in political distress. For a country plagued by violent extremism, militancy, jihadist elements and insurgency, the coups have only increased the existing political instability and rendered the democracy dysfunctional. An underlying fundamental problem has been the largely unidimensional focus of the international community and regional players in providing only military support without adequately pushing for strengthening of the Malian government apparatus.

Standing true to “Coups beget Coups”, Mali has witnessed three coups in less than a decade and is currently in a state of political turmoil. The brief period of political stability for a few years following the 2012 coup was broken with a coup in August 2020 and another one in May 2021. Despite the support extended regionally by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and internationally by the United Nations (UN), Mali continues to remain in political distress. It is important to assess the various dimensions of the situation in Mali and, decode its implications on regional stability and international peace.

Internal Politics

Previously a French colony, since the early 1990s Mali had been a democratic multi-party state. However, the decade 2011–2021 has witnessed a breakdown in the political architecture of Mali.

2012 Coup

In January 2012, insurgent groups began an armed conflict against the government and took control of territories in the northern region. The rebellion was led by the *Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA) (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), a separatist organisation comprising the ethnic Tuaregs who seek to establish a separate Tuareg state called Azawad in northern Mali.¹ The rebellion caused instability which was aggravated by a military coup in March 2012 led by soldiers disappointed with the government’s inability to quell the rebel groups. Following harsh sanctions by various countries, a transitional agreement was charted out to cede power to Dioncounda Traore as interim President and later hold presidential and legislative elections.² With the advancement of the rebel groups towards central Mali and on the request of the interim government, France launched Operation Serval in January 2013 pushing back the rebels and gained most parts of the northern region.³ Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta won the presidential elections in August 2013 and his party ‘Rally for Mali’ won the parliamentary elections in November 2013.

2020 Coup

President Keïta was re-elected in the 2018 elections and there seemed to be political stability in the country. However, the rebel groups continued to pose security threats to areas in northern and central Mali. The legislative elections were held in March 2020, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the kidnap of the opposition leader Soumaïla

¹ May Ying Welsh, [“Making Sense of Mali’s Armed Groups”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 27 January 2013.

² [“Mali Junta Says Power Transfer ‘Within Days’”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 7 April 2012.

³ Carmen Cuesta Roca, [“From Operation Serval to Barkhane: Understanding France’s Increased Involvement in Africa in the Context of Françafrique and Post-colonialism”](#), *The Journal of Political Inquiry*, Spring 2015.

Cissé and the security crisis in northern and central regions leading to a low voter turnout.⁴ Popular protests began in June 2020 against the flawed elections, corruption in the administration and the government's failure to handle the security crisis. The protests were led by June 5 Movement–Rally of Patriotic Force (M5-RFP), which demanded the resignation of President Keïta.⁵

On 18 August 2020, the military began a mutiny against the government by firing inside the military base at Kati, 15 kilometres from the capital Bamako.⁶ Eventually, the soldiers arrested and detained senior government officials including President Keïta and Prime Minister Boubou Cissé. By midnight, President Keïta announced his resignation and dissolution of the incumbent government.⁷ The mutineers referred to themselves as the 'National Committee for the Salvation of the People' (CNSP), and five Colonels led by Col Assimi Goïta spoke in a TV broadcast addressing the nation and promised stability.⁸

While the US immediately suspended its military aid to Mali; ECOWAS ordered closing of all regional borders and the suspension of financial flows; African Union (AU) suspended Mali's membership and imposed stringent sanctions; and the European Union (EU) froze all its missions in Mali.⁹ Owing to international pressure and assurance of lifting sanctions on appointment of a civilian government for democratic transition, the Junta passed a political charter stating transition of power in 18 months, with elections scheduled to be held in February 2022, and appointed the Interim Heads of government.¹⁰ Moctar Ouane, the former Foreign Minister was appointed as the interim Prime Minister while a retired Col Bah Ndaw was sworn in as the President of the transitional government and Col Goïta was appointed as the interim Vice President.¹¹

2021 Coup

Despite smooth progress in administration, tensions arose within the members of the transitional government. On 24 May 2021, Col Goïta declared that he has seized

⁴ [“Mali: Legislative Elections Hampered by Low Voter Turnout”](#), *Deutsche Welle*, 30 March 2020.

⁵ Emily Cole, [“Five Things to Know About Mali's Coup”](#), United States Institute of Peace, 27 August 2020.

⁶ [“Mali President Resigns after Military Mutiny”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 19 August 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [“Mali Coup Leaders Pledge Democracy After Deposing President”](#), *The New York Times*, 19 August 2020.

⁹ [“US Halts Military Ties with Mali as Crowds Hail Junta Takeover”](#), *France24*, 21 August 2020; [“W African Bloc Wants Civilian Transition in Mali, Polls in a Year”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 28 August 2020; [“African Union Lifts Mali's Suspension Imposed in the Wake of Coup”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 9 October 2020; [“EU Freezes Missions Training Malian Army and Police after Coup”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 26 August 2020.

¹⁰ [“Mali Military Backs 18-month Transition Government as Talks Close”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 13 September 2021.

¹¹ [“Mali Transitional Govt Names Civilian as Interim Prime Minister”](#), *All Africa*.

power from the transitional President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane. He announced that he felt obligated to arrest the members of the transitional government in order to preserve the ‘transitional charter and defend the republic’ as they had failed to consult him on the formation for the new government.¹² Col Goïta stated the government reshuffle of the cabinet which removed two influential military-appointed cabinet ministers—ex-defence minister Sadio Camara and ex-security minister Modibo Kone—triggered the arrest of incumbent civilian leaders as they had been placed ‘outside of their prerogatives’.¹³

In the aftermath of the forced resignation of the arrested leaders and what French President Emmanuel Macron termed as ‘a coup within a coup’, the constitutional court in Mali reinstated Col Goïta as the interim President of Mali.¹⁴ Meanwhile, ECOWAS and AU suspended Mali’s membership, US State Department announced the suspension of its security assistance to Malian armed forces and the World Bank temporarily paused its payments to Mali.

Current Situation

In June 2021, Col Goïta was sworn in as the interim President of Mali and he appointed the opposition leader, M5-RFP spokesperson and former minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga as the interim Prime Minister of Mali assigning him the task of forming the new cabinet.¹⁵ On assuming power, Col Goïta assured the international community and the Malian citizens of his commitment to hold elections as scheduled. On 30 July 2021, Prime Minister Maïga announced a government action plan to the members of the National Transitional Council. The plan included the formation of an election body to prepare for and monitor the presidential and legislative elections in February 2022.¹⁶ Approved by the governing council, the plan sought to strengthen national security, drive institutional reforms, hold elections and promote good governance.¹⁷ In October 2021, when the UN delegation visited Mali to assess the progress towards elections, Malian authorities confirmed that they would announce election schedule following the national reform consultations in December

¹² Emmanuel Akinwotu, [“Mali’s Interim President and PM ‘Resign’ While Under Military Arrest”](#), *The Guardian*, 26 May 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hamza Mohamed, [“What Next for Mali after Second Coup Within a Year?”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 29 May 2021.

¹⁵ [“Mali Coup Leader Goita Sworn in as Interim President and Appoints PM”](#), *Reuters*, 7 June 2021.

¹⁶ [“Mali’s Interim Government is Mindful of Fixed Election Timeline – PM”](#), *Reuters*, 30 July 2021.

¹⁷ [“Mali’s Roadmap for Lasting Peace has Laudable Goals: But It Doesn’t Go Far Enough”](#), *The Conversation*, 24 August 2021.

2021.¹⁸ An indicator that the transitional government heads were likely to push the date further.

For a country plagued by violent extremism, militancy and jihadist insurgency, the coups have only increased the existing political instability and rendered the democracy dysfunctional. The political instability has an overbearing on the functioning of judiciary and other branches of administration. The country could descend into civil unrest which is already happening in some pockets of the Sahel region.¹⁹ Military's interference in all aspects of domestic politics²⁰ shows that the putschist regime is anchoring itself on the fragile political set-up.

Security Crisis

Mali is afflicted with continued insurgency, jihadist groups, militancy, terrorist outfits in its northern region and violence by vigilantes and bandits in nearly all pockets of the country. It has become a breeding ground for organised crime and illegal activities, especially smuggling of drugs, people and arms. These are exacerbated by challenges like the absence of political will to protect civilians, corruption in the administration, and internal strife among ethnic sections in the society.²¹

The security crisis in Mali began with the armed rebellion in 2012 by ethnic Tuaregs of the MNLA,²² which was aided by external Islamist militant groups like the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Ansar Dine.²³ The crisis was aggravated by the military coup in 2012. Owing to the violent conflict and subsequent political instability by the coup, northern Mali became a breeding ground for the influx of various insurgent, violent extremist and terrorist outfits. The security crisis is amplified by the growth of organised crime networks involved in human trafficking and drug smuggling in the region suspected to be the source of funding for the terrorist groups.²⁴

While local insurgent movements like the Tuareg rebels have turned into organised terrorist outfits by linkages with fighters from AQIM, external terrorist groups like the AQIM Sahel Branch laid inroads into the region in 2017 by merging with local

¹⁸ [“Mali Tells U.N. It will Confirm Post-coup Election Date in December”](#), *Reuters*, 25 October 2021.

¹⁹ Folahanmi Aina, [“Mali: Top 5 Implications of the Latest Palace Coup”](#), *The Conversation*, 3 June 2021.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Sindhu Dinesh, [“Mali: Growing Trend of Violence Against UN Peacekeepers”](#), MP-IDSA Comment, 25 October 2021.

²² May Ying Welsh, [“Making Sense of Mali’s Armed Groups”](#), *Al Jazeera*, 17 January 2013.

²³ [“Destabilization of Mali”](#), Global Conflict Tracker, Council on Foreign Relations.

²⁴ No. 21.

affiliates to form the Union for Supporting Islam and Muslims (also known as Jama'a Nusratul-Islam wa al-Muslimin- JNIM) further worsening the crisis.²⁵ Frequent attacks on civilians by armed extremist groups like JNIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and others, have led to the displacement of over 3,70,000 people.²⁶ It is of grave concern that besides consolidating their control over the northern and central areas of Mali, these groups have begun to expand into the southern regions.²⁷ It has been reported that the continued strengthening of the militant groups in Sahel region based out of northern Mali could allow the Islamic State (IS) and Al-Qaeda to establish a safe haven and engage in intensified militancy.²⁸ Besides the jihadist attacks, inter-communal violence of the farming and herding communities is another pertinent security issue.²⁹

Another aspect is the faltering in implementation of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, signed in 2015. The peace deal also known as “Algiers Accord” was mediated by Algeria and signed between the Government of Mali and two northern armed coalitions assuring disarmament, addressing northern political grievances, promoting development and re-establishment of state authority in the north.³⁰ The implementation of the agreement has been stalled due to delayed response from the government, the emergence of new armed factions since 2015 as well as armed struggle between the northern factions due to competing objectives which has complicated the security scenario.³¹

External Involvement

Taking cognisance of the security crisis in Mali and inability of the government to tackle the same, many nations have sent their troops after consultation with UN and Malian authorities to support the Malian security forces. They have made efforts to regain territories under the control of non-state elements.

France: France had notable economic presence in Mali. Owing to Operation Serval, French military presence was established in Mali. France launched Operation Barkhane in August 2014 to fight against the armed terrorist groups in the Sahel-Saharan Strip (SSS).³² Operation Barkhane is France’s largest deployment for overseas operation. Headquartered in Chad, the anti-insurgent operation is co-led

²⁵ [“Crisis in Mali”](#), Congressional Research Service, 14 July 2021.

²⁶ No. 4.

²⁷ [“Mali Violence Threatens Country’s Survival, Warns UN Human Rights Expert”](#), *UN News*, 6 August 2021.

²⁸ No. 23.

²⁹ [“Mali Coup: How to Solve the Conundrum”](#), *BBC*, 27 May 2021.

³⁰ No. 25.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² [“Press Pack – Operation Barkhane”](#), Ministère Des Armées - République Française, February 2020, p. 4.

by former French colonies—G5 Sahel which include Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.³³ French military assistance along with the support of other external players has been successful in attacking some of the existing terrorist bases, regaining pockets of lost territory, neutralising insurgents and terrorists, preventing re-establishment of safe havens and stemmed logistics flow of these extremist groups.³⁴

In June 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron announced that French forces would withdraw in a phased manner due to their inability to work with the national government.³⁵ He stated that some troops would remain and be merged as part of international missions. The announcement was not taken well by the transitional government authorities. PM Maiga accused the French government of abandoning Mali and instead sought to approach private Russian companies.³⁶ This led to strained ties between France and Mali. However, France has begun to hand over its northern military bases to Malian Armed Forces in a phased manner and announced a withdrawal by the first quarter of 2022.³⁷

Owing to internal factors such as political instability and dysfunctional democracy in Mali, the deployment of the French military forces since nine years has not yielded complete results. The continued foreign presence, lengthy fight against the extremist units and prolonged security challenges has led to the resentment of the former colonial power by the local population. Furthermore, the tensions between Malian government authorities and the French leadership, has caused the phased withdrawal of France from the country. Nevertheless, France has reiterated its commitment to partner Mali in dealing with the extremist forces as part of other existing missions.

United Nations: Initially Operation Serval by France was joined by ECOWAS-led troops from neighbouring countries. It was termed as ECOWAS-led Africa-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) and was unanimously approved by the UN Security Council (UNSC).³⁸ Following its success and seeking to curb the resurgence of the jihadist groups, UNSC deemed it appropriate to replace AFISMA with The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). MINUSMA was instituted in 2013 by UNSC Resolution 2100 to perform

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

³⁵ [“Macron Announces the End of France's Anti-Islamist Operation Barkhane in the Sahel”](#), *France24*, 10 June 2021.

³⁶ [“Mali Accuses France of Abandonment, Approaches 'Private Russian Companies'”](#), *France24*, 26 September 2021.

³⁷ [“French Soldiers Hand Over Timbuktu Military Camp to Malian Forces”](#), *Africa News*, 15 December 2021.

³⁸ [“Security Council Authorizes Deployment of African-Led International Support Mission in Mali for Initial Year-Long Period”](#), UNSC Press Release, 20 December 2012.

security-related tasks and support political processes in Mali.³⁹ The adoption of UNSC Resolution 2164 expanded its functions to include protection of civilians, support reconciliation efforts and national political dialogues amongst others.⁴⁰

Although the mission has been fairly successful in meeting its objectives over the years, the killing of 243 peacekeepers serving in MINUSMA has led to its perception as the “most dangerous UN mission”.⁴¹ Its mandate continues to be renewed every year by the UNSC. The mandate renewal in June 2021 called for a progress report every three months monitored by a local follow-up committee consisting of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Mali and Head of MINUSMA, members from ECOWAS and AU representatives.⁴²

The increased attacks on UN peacekeepers in Mali have not been effectively dealt with. It has been confined to issuance of statements condemning the same, reiterating the resolve to meet all mandates of the MINUSMA and pushing the government to take strict actions. The Malian authorities seem to neglect the issue. Attacks on peacekeepers are unacceptable and continued loss of lives as well as non-seriousness of the international community and Malian government in ensuring efficient quick accountability of the attacks would eventually affect the morale of the peacekeepers.

EUTM Mali: The adoption of UNSC Resolution 2085 led to the launch of EUTM Mali (European Union Training Mission in Mali) in February 2013. The mission focuses on strengthening the capability of Malian Armed Forces, contribute to political stabilisation, improve the security situation, aid restoration of state control and establishment of rule of law.⁴³ It underwent a fifth mandate and its mission was extended up to May 2024 with intermediate evaluation. Since its establishment, the EUTM Mali has trained over 15,000 Malian Armed Forces personnel, offered relevant courses and engaged in humanitarian assistance.⁴⁴

ECOWAS: To a great extent, on behalf of AU, ECOWAS has been the primary negotiator and stakeholder in pushing for democratic transition in Mali. The sanctions it imposed following the coup in August 2020 was perceived as harsh and insensitive of the economic and social realities of Mali. The coup in May 2021 occurred hardly a few days after the visit of ECOWAS negotiator, former Nigerian

³⁹[“About MINUSMA”](#), United Nations Peacekeeping.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ [“With Crisis Deepening in Mali, UN Top Envoy Says ‘All is Not Lost’”](#), *UN News*, 29 October 2021.

⁴² [“Situation in Mali – Report of the Secretary General”](#), UNSC Documents, 1 October 2021.

⁴³ [“European Union Training Mission in Mali”](#), EUTM Official Website.

⁴⁴ [“EU Training Mission Mali \(EUTM Mali\)”](#), EUTM Mali Factsheet, 15 July 2021.

President Dr Goodluck Jonathan, where he had appreciated the progress of the transition government.⁴⁵

ECOWAS strongly condemned the regression caused by the May 2021 coup and responded with immediate suspension of Mali from the organisation, froze all financial assets and banned travel for all leaders responsible for delaying the elections including the interim President and Prime Minister. Taking note of the likely delay in elections, in a summit held on 12 December 2021, ECOWAS warned of sanctions if Mali misses its election deadline.⁴⁶ The West African leaders also urged the international community to support ECOWAS in its sanctions so as to promote stability in the region.

Persisting Challenges

The recurrent coups in Mali have triggered an alarm in neighbouring countries as well as among international stakeholders in the region. The violence fuelled by political neglect has spilled beyond the borders of Mali into Burkina Faso and Niger. Despite Mali's dependence on international aid and the presence of foreign military in the country, external players have been unable to support authorities in anchoring civilian governance.⁴⁷ What began as an armed rebellion in Mali has metamorphosed into a cross-border violent terrorist and extremist security challenge for the entire Sahel region.

It is essential to understand that the 2015 agreement has lost colour and salience among both the parties in Mali due to changed realities. The international community must take note of it and renew efforts to draft a new peace deal rather than simply push for the implementation of the Algiers Accord. As a reaction to condemning the coup, the role played by ECOWAS and its measures to cancel organisational membership and impose sanctions against Mali have evidently proved to be unsuccessful.

An underlying fundamental problem has been the largely unidimensional focus of the international community and regional players in providing only military support without adequately pushing for empowerment and strengthening of the Malian government apparatus. The drastic expectation from Malian Armed Forces to fight jihadists without monitoring of proper training has been futile. The core issue in Mali is poor governance. The initial armed rebellion that began in the north was also due

⁴⁵ ["ECOWAS Mediator Jonathan Commends Malian Progress, Urges More Inclusiveness Ahead of Elections"](#), *Vanguard*, 13 May 2021.

⁴⁶ ["West African Bloc ECOWAS Warns of Sanctions If Mali Misses Election Deadline"](#), *Radio France Internationale*, 13 December 2021.

⁴⁷ ["Saving Momentum for Change in Mali's Transition"](#), International Crisis Group, 21 September 2021.

to poor governance and neglect of the minority ethnic communities by the administration. The coups too have occurred due to continued security crisis and inability of the corrupt government to tackle it.

In September 2021, while addressing the UN, the French foreign minister stated that France's efforts to combat terrorism in Sahel were not sustainable due to the lack of political stability and respect for democratic process.⁴⁸ The political dysfunctionality due to overarching corruption and inefficient governance has led to a security situation that has burgeoned beyond control. The Malian State must be helped in rebuilding itself.⁴⁹ Military action must be complemented with effective governance that prioritises settlement of grievances.⁵⁰ The solution to deal with the situation in Mali must be aimed at equipping the government for efficient and stable administration. In doing so, the role of civil society must be emphasised.

Conclusion

The trend of coups in Mali is an indication of the dismantling of its gains in democracy over the last few decades. This is concerning as the territory in Mali is increasingly being plagued by armed groups and militants associated closely with the Al-Qaeda and ISIS which is perpetually destabilising the regional security environment. It is evident that sole military aid would not help the situation and the international community must encourage and equip the government to settle the local grievances. Otherwise the already complicated situation in Mali would further dwindle into chaos.

In many ways, perhaps the half-hearted attention of the world to the state of affairs in Mali is proving advantageous to the terrorist Islamist outfits which are expanding geographically and consolidating their hold. The increased attacks on neutral entities like the peacekeepers is an alarm bell for the world to treat the issue seriously and aid Mali in defeating the terrorist elements and balance it with support for ensuring political stability. The consequences of this continued neglect by the international order could be fatal.

⁴⁸ No. 18.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ [**"A Coup in Mali is Unlikely to Make Matters Better"**](#), *The Economist*, 20 August 2020.

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