

## MALI: A COUP AGAINST FRANCE?

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*The fall of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) following the coup in Mali reflects the failure of the international security strategy in the country. Social discontent has fuelled a power grab that exacerbates the multiple crises in what is a key territory for the EU's efforts to contain terrorism and migration. The regime change appears to leave France and the West without a primary ally in the Sahel, but does it really threaten their interests?*



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The people of Mali have said enough is enough. Fed up of the bad government, poverty and violence that has blighted the country in recent years, many Malians applauded the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) by troops led by Colonel **Assimi Goïta**. Thousands of people celebrated a departure that had been clamoured for in mass demonstrations across Mali for months. The **June 5 Movement** – a heterodox political alliance whose membership ranges from progressives to conservatives – channelled public frustration over **April's contested legislative elections** and the storm clouds began to gather that presage a coup in a country that is sadly all too used to political arbitration by the army. Mutinous leaders arrested the president and forced him to resign. IBK fell and with him France's long shadow was lifted, at least a priori.

Seen as Paris's puppet, corrupt and incapable of tackling the major challenges the country faces at security, political, economic and social levels, the deposed president embodied the impotence of a people furious at continued foreign interference, the collapse of their state and worsening terrorist attacks and intercommunity conflicts. Not so long ago, he presented himself as a solution to some of these problems. In 2013 he won internationally approved elections and the political transition that began after the previous coup (deposing **Amadou Tamani Touré** in 2012) was complete. IBK promised social and economic development, the recovery of the northern part of the country from the hands of armed groups and an end to the violence. None of that happened; rather, it got worse. In 2018 IBK again won elections, but while the result was disputed by the opposition, whose leader, **Soumaïla Cissé**, had been kidnapped in the north, it **was accepted by the former metropolis**. Hence, IBK was given a last chance to rebuild a de facto fractured state being consumed by previously unimaginable inter-ethnic massacres, and which had become a testing ground for failed military strategies. He did not achieve his objectives.

Mali today remains among the planet's most vulnerable countries, with shocking levels of **poverty**. The northern regions are still beyond Bamako's control and, far from dissolving, the armed groups are proliferating. This desperate predicament is the result of incapacity, weakness and ineptitude, both internal and external. Appointing his **braggart son** president of the National Assembly's defence commission is just one example of the descent into nepotism and the disconnection of elites from the people's suffering. Such incomprehensible decisions ushered in larger and more controversial political gambles that undoubtedly led to the unsustainable crisis of legitimacy that culminated in the coup. Among the most significant were the **alleged contribution to the militarisation of the Dogon militias** that are responsible for the upsurge in community killings; the **attempted dialogue with jihadist groups** such as Ansar Dine, led by Iyad Ag Ghali, and the Macina Liberation Front, commanded by Amadou Kouffa, which the public viewed with suspicion; and the signing of the **Algiers Peace Agreement** with Tuareg insurgents, which agreed to decentralise the Malian administration and yield some sovereignty to northern elites. Little or nothing has been done to implement this pact since it was signed in 2015, but the mere possibility of its application has irritated people in the south, who are wary of what they consider an unacceptable concession to partition the Republic of Mali, and those in the north who are impatient that the commitments are being breached.

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These factors derive directly or indirectly from past colonialism and current neocolonialism, which have, over time, imposed Jacobin state logics; privileged cattle-breeding communities over nomadic and pastoral ones; and currently take an exclusively security-based stance to the fight against terrorism that is alien to the wishes of the local populations and contributes to spirals of violence that are difficult to reverse. The war in Libya, promoted by former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, brought disaster. The Sahel was destabilised, arms spread and secessionist and jihadist groups proliferated, hiding in areas that were difficult for fragile states (largely under foreign rule) to access. It was the beginning of the collapse of a country sold as an African benchmark of political and economic stability as recently as the early 2000s. France came to its former colony's aid with Operation Serval and halted the jihadist advance to the south. It won a battle, but not the war. The armed groups once again took refuge in the Sahara and began organising their offensives from there. Then came Barkhane and more recently, **Takuba**. France is firmly established on the ground with over 5,000 soldiers, and it is not alone.

Thousands of troops from all major global powers are deployed in the country. EU states – including 200 Spanish troops – are working on military training missions; the G5 Sahel, a body created by France, has around 3,000 units; and the United States provides substantial military aid, as well as an unknown number of troops. All seek to keep the peace, but above all to preserve what remains of the Malian state and protect geostrategic and economic interests linked to the arms and security industries, limiting migration and gold mining. With such a large international presence, it seems amazing no one foresaw military commanders trained by the foreign forces themselves taking power. Any involvement by one power or another power will become clear in time. For now the propaganda points the finger at hidden powers like Russia, which is eager to consolidate its influence in Africa. But the truth is that in this part of the world nothing happens without French approval, by commission or omission. The Elysée's ties with its former colonies remain close and Françafrique is in good shape in this part of the world.

So while anti-French rhetoric may serve as a catalyst for a disillusioned civil society against a depreciated leader, Paris is adept at pulling the strings to safeguard its estates. In fact, it is likely to already be preparing an unofficial candidate for a hypothetical future election. Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, IBK's former prime minister, would fit the bill. While on the street they rail against Barkhane, the new military junta has rushed to uphold international conventions and, aware of its need, accepts the foreign military presence, including the French. The new authorities claim to reject the ageing, clientelist political class and ask for time to organise elections. Eschewing "electoral fetishism", they fear a rush to the ballot boxes could strengthen foreign interference and favour already consolidated local leaderships. But no one accepts this: neither the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – viewed more as a club of leaders fearful of losing power than a body that guarantees democracy – which has imposed sanctions to promote a civil transition; nor the leader of the mobilisations prior to the coup, the influential imam Mahmoud Dicko, who in nationalist and anti-French outbursts calls for a process that includes civil society but also the elites he disowns but of which he forms part.

More than real change, then, the coup seems like a desperate attempt to supplant diffuse local power by making use of the anti-French sentiment simmering for good reason in the arid Sahel. The faces seem to be the only things changing: far from threatening foreign authority – seen more as part of the problem than the solution – the risk is of consolidating it, endangering an entire region that has long been subjected to violence of all types.