



Mali after the Coup

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In August, a group of officers overthrew the president of Mali. This further complicated the fragile situation in the country. While the military has delegated some power to a transitional civilian government, it wants to retain influence over major decisions. The EU's priority remains the strengthening of Malian institutions so that the state ceases to be a seedbed of jihadism and criminality that threatens Europe's neighbourhood.

The vast, partly desert and sparsely populated territory of Mali is a convenient area for extremist groups to operate. Arms and drug-smuggling routes run through its porous borders. The weak state also lies along uncontrolled migration paths to Europe. For these reasons, ensuring stability and functioning institutions in Mali are key EU priorities in Africa. Mali is one country that receives significant funding from the EU Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF), a special, flexible financial mechanism created in 2015 with the active participation of Poland to reduce the sources of irregular migration. By the end of 2019, Mali received €214 million from the EUTF.

From Isolation to Acceptance. From June, anti-government protests continued in Bamako, the capital of Mali, led by the M5 movement of the charismatic Imam Mahmoud Dicko. The demonstrators demanded President Ibrahim Boubakar Keïta step down, accusing him of ineffectiveness in the fight against jihadists, electoral manipulation, and nepotism. A group of officers led by Col. Assimi Goïta decided to intervene and [overthrew the unpopular leader](#) on 18 August. In response, the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) declared sanctions: suspension of Mali's membership in these organisations and blocking travel to and from Mali. They announced those would only be abolished once the civilian transitional authorities are established and the schedule for new elections is agreed. At the same time, the EU and the U.S. condemned the coup and suspended the Malian army's training programmes. It was also a signal to the countries of the region that there is no international consent of such interventions despite support for their armed forces (Goïta

graduated from military courses in the U.S. and Germany). Although Malians initially supported the military, and the latter announced it would invite social organisations to work on reforms, the M5 quickly accused them of faking a dialogue. ECOWAS also had doubts as to whether the military was trying to hold onto power, seeing, for example, how the coup leaders arbitrarily selected electors who appointed the retired Gen. Bah Ndaw as interim president with Goïta as deputy. After the appointment of the government of Moctar Ouane, Mali's former representative to the UN, on 28 September with a mandate to hold elections within 18 months, ECOWAS and the AU lifted their sanctions and restored relations with Mali.

Security Problems in Mali. In 2012, the first the Touareg separatists, followed by radical Islamists, took control of the north of Mali. This provoked the first military coup (March 2012) as well as the [French intervention](#) (January 2013) that drove the jihadists out of cities but did not defeat them. In recent years, new extremist groups have emerged, such as ones recruiting Fulani supporters (13% of the population) in central parts of the country, widening the conflict. Today, the jihadists active in Mali comprise two large coalitions—the Al-Qaeda-linked Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS). Attacks by these outfits are increasing in frequency and have spread to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. In 2019, jihadist attacks left 4,000 people dead in these three countries.

In 2015, the Malian government made peace in Algiers with the secular Touareg factions, promising this traditionally marginalised population broader participation in the

administration, incorporation into the military, and development funds, among others. However, the promises have not been fulfilled and the separatist tendencies in the country and tensions in the army have continued. The weakness of Mali's military and routine harassment of civilians by soldiers resulted in the growth of local self-defence forces and further militarisation of the country. As a result, ethnic conflicts, some of them affected by climate change, such as fighting between Fulans and Dogons, has escalated. As areas of arable lands and pastures shrink, pastoral and agricultural societies are increasingly antagonised. Keïta's government engaged in dialogue with the indigenous Islamist factions of JNIM, especially the Touareg-led Ansar Dine and the Fulani-driven Macina Front. In the process, those groups made local non-aggression pacts with the self-defence militias, which gave hope that they would abandon violence in favour of a political struggle. However, the international forces present in the country, especially France, opposed the talks with jihadists.

International Involvement. The French *Barkhane* mission has been carrying out activities against extremist groups since 2014 with support from U.S. drones. President Trump's declaration last year of the intent to withdraw the drone air support increased Franco-American tensions. From 2017, there also have been troops from the region in Mali, including the Sahel G5 group (consisting of as many as 5,000 soldiers from Mauritania, Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali). Their original aim was to take over from the French the main burden of the fight against the extremists. The Sahel G5 forces were not ready for this, however, so France has strengthened its contingent to 5,100 troops. The French mission was initially very well-received in Mali, but in recent years it has been increasingly criticised. Protesters in Bamako have used anti-French slogans and linked Keïta's reluctance to step down to support from France. The impression that France is striving for the military subjugation of Mali was reinforced, among others, by [Russian propaganda](#), especially on Malian social media. In recent years, Russia has been [interested in increasing its role](#), including its military, in Mali. Information about the presence of two leading coup plotters in Moscow immediately before Keïta's overthrow heightened speculation about Russia's alleged role in the coup, although there is no clear evidence of that. In 2013, the EU launched a Training Mission in Mali (EUTM), in which a Polish military contingent initially was involved.

To date, the EUTM has trained some 18,000 Malian troops, aiming for professionalisation and—unsuccessfully, as it turned out—political neutrality. In July, a newly created contingent of special forces, the Takuba Task Force, from European countries (310 troops) arrived in Mali. The stabilisation of the state is also supported by one of the largest UN missions, MINUSMA. Its 13,000 troops though are vulnerable to extremist attacks. Despite concerns about the continuity of the actions against the jihadists, the cooperation of various forces has continued since the coup at the working level. Malian military leaders do not succumb to nationalist sentiment. Their spokesman explicitly called on Malians to support the *Barkhane*, MINUSMA, and Takuba forces, which he described as “partners in restoring stability”.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Despite declarations about state-building by the coup leaders focusing on strengthening Mali's institutions, the coup has perpetuated the military's interference in politics. The short, light consequences for the leaders of the coup could induce officers from other West African countries to take similar action. This is especially possible in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire, where the incumbent presidents Alpha Condé and Alassane Ouattara, respectively, despite public resistance have pushed through reforms allowing them to run for a third term. Military takeovers in those countries would undermine AU and ECOWAS efforts to eradicate the [practice of coups in Africa](#). The latest coup in Mali based on the same reasons as in 2012—a crisis of institutions and the army's inability to control the conflict in the north—shows the ineffectiveness of the efforts made so far to strengthen the state structures. European involvement in Mali and other Sahel countries should respond to social and institutional problems to a greater extent than before, and not narrow its perspective to security issues, namely borders. This especially applies to funds from the EUTF. Poland could support increasing the role of beneficiaries in defining the objectives of their spending. Otherwise, possible violent political changes similar to those in Mali could become anti-European in nature. This is especially relevant to Niger, the most used transit country for migrants from West Africa and the Lake Chad region.

The EU should also not be opposed to talks with those Malian factions in JNIM that will abandon the armed struggle for a political one.