

# Mali Military Coup Situation Report

20 August 2020



## Executive Summary

- ◆ On 18 August, at least 18 soldiers staged a mutiny at a military base in Kati, near the capital, Bamako, later arresting a number of top government officials in Bamako, including the President and the Prime Minister, who were then taken back to Kati.
- ◆ At midnight, on 18- 19 August, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita announced on national television that he was resigning from his post and had dissolved the government and the Malian National Assembly.
- ◆ At present, it is yet unclear whether the military is effectively in charge of the country. The soldiers who staged the coup stated that although they aimed to stabilise the country, they did not want to remain in power.
- ◆ A curfew has been implemented across the country, while all land and air borders remain closed for the time being. A communique by the group responsible for the coup was allegedly issued on 20 August reopening all the border as of 21 August, however this remains uncorroborated.
- ◆ Most regional and international leaders have denounced the coup. This includes the French President and his Foreign Minister, who urged the Malian military to return to their barracks.

## Incident

On the 19 August, Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita went on national state television at midnight to announce that he was, at last, stepping down from his post after serving over seven years in office. The statement came only hours after he was arrested from the presidential palace by a faction of the military along with Prime Minister Boubou Cisse, and brought to the Kati military camp, near the capital, Bamako. Several other political figures were also detained throughout the day, including the President's son, the Speaker of the National Assembly, as well as the ministers of foreign affairs and finance. Further arrests were reported over 20 August, including that of the Malian Director General for State Security, General Moussa Diawara, who has been accused of corruption. However, the safety of the officials, particularly of the President and the Prime Minister, has been guaranteed by the insurgents.

The coup was initiated when soldiers from the military camp Kati (located approximately 15km from the capital) took up arms and staged a mutiny, led by General Sadio Camarra and Colonel Malick Diaw, who is also the deputy head of the Kati camp. After taking control of the camp, the group then marched to streets of Bamako and stormed the President's residence, resulting in his arrest. Subsequently, a building owned by the justice ministry in Bamako

was set ablaze, and Mali's state television broadcaster ORTM went offline for a brief period of time.

Despite the chaos, the opposition and many activists took to the streets to celebrate the president's resignation, which comes after months of anti-government rallies.

On 19 August, shortly after the President's resignation announcement, the leaders of the military faction that staged the coup, the 'National



The President Keita allegedly won 67% of votes in the 2018 election, which was marred by claims of fraud. (Source: Ludovic Marin/Reuters)

Committee for the Salvation of the People' (CNSP), appeared on state television pledging to stabilise the country, however stating they did not want to stay in power. During the broadcast, Ismail Wague, Mali Air Force's deputy chief of staff and one of the leaders of the group, stated that the country's land and air borders would be closed until further notice and a curfew would be implemented, from 9pm to 5am. The Modibo Keita International Airport in Bamako was also closed and commercial flights have been suspended. Despite these measures, Wague asked people to return to work as normal over the following days.

Wague also assured people that there were no deaths or injuries during the coup, despite unconfirmed social media reports that indicated that there were at least four deaths and 11 people were injured. Some sources have stated that the casualties were the results scuffles during looting attempts. While Bamako is reported to remain largely calm at the time of writing, sporadic gunfire continues to be reported on social media as more people gather at the city's main square. These reports have also not been corroborated.

On a later interview on 20 August, Wague stated the CNSP's goal will be to set up a transitional council as soon as possible, with a transitional president who will be either part of the military or a civilian. A definite timeline for the set up of the transitional council or future elections was not provided. At present however, Colonel Assimi Goita, a 37-year-old career soldier and commander of the Autonomous Special Forces Battalion (BAFS) previously based in the "central" regions of Mali, seems to have been appointed as the current president of the CNSP. Also on 20 August, what seemed to be a CNSP communique circulated on social media, stating that the borders would open as of 21 August. However, the authenticity of the document has not been verified.

## Impact & Analysis

Over the last two years, Mali has observed growing civil unrest, particularly since the re-election of President Keita in 2018, as opposition parties claimed that the poll was marred by irregularities. As a result of the disputed election, tens of thousands of people took to the streets, demanding the President's resignation. The demonstrators blamed him and his government for the country's failing economy and deteriorating security, both of them mainly resultant from his inability to uproot the multiple terror groups present in the country.

Notwithstanding the numerous calls for his resignation, the President showed no intention to step down as the leader of the country. As such, on 30 May this year, the main opposition parties and various civil society groups decided to form a new opposition alliance, called the 'Movement of June 5 - Rally of Patriotic Forces', which urged people to stage further protests. Events finally took a turning point when, on 10 July, at least 14 people lost their lives over a three-day period of violent clashes between security forces and protesters, making it the worst political conflict in Mali in recent years. Despite the President offering to hold peace talks with the opposition with help of international mediators, Mali's opposition movement rejected the plan on 18 July.



Protests in Bamako called for the resignation of Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. (Source: Michele Cattani/AFP)

After the failed attempt to hold peace talks, the President swore-in nine new judges to the Constitutional Court on 10 August, following an ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) suggestion for resolving the dispute. However, the opposition rejected the measure, characterising it as 'abuse of power' as it was believed to be intended to bring in further Keita allies into the government. As a result, the demonstrations resumed, ignoring pleas from regional mediators. Violent escalations quickly followed, with security forces using tear gas on activists as well as utilising water cannons to disperse the hundreds of people who gathered at the Independence Monument square in the capital. Despite the violent response by the authorities, the opposition pledged to continue to stage daily protests and mass rallies until the President stepped down.

Several nations denounced the coup, including countries in the West Africa region and Mali's former colonial power, France. French President Emmanuel Macron condemned the coup and expressed his support for mediation efforts by the ECOWAS while discussing the situation with political leaders from Niger, Ivory Coast and Senegal. The French Foreign Minister Jean Yves Le Drian also released a statement, urging the soldiers to return to their barracks 'without delay', while denouncing the coup 'in the strongest terms'. Similar statements were released by the European Union and the African Union, who characterised the take over as an 'unconstitutional change of power', urging the responsible group to return to their barracks. The United Nations (UN) also condemned the arrest of Keita and the other members of the government, calling for their immediate release. As a result, the UN Security Council held a meeting on 19 August, to assess the situation in more detail. No particulars were provided on the discussion, which was held behind closed doors. Meanwhile, ECOWAS called for the return of President Keita and Prime Minister Cisse to their positions, additionally ordering its member countries to shut its land and air borders with Mali, a decision that will remain in effect until further notice, irrespective to the CNSP's decision to open Mali's borders.

It remains unclear whether the CNSP is now fully in charge, especially in the face of most global powers denouncing the group's actions. Having said that, the movement seems to enjoy widespread popular support, with Mali's opposition denying allegations of a coup, calling it instead a 'popular insurrection', as the CNSP have justified their actions by saying that the level of corruption and dysfunction within the military and the government forced them to act.

## Outlook

Despite Keita's long-wanted resignation, Mali continues to experience deep divisions among its people, which are unlikely to be resolved by his resignation alone. It is likely that over the next weeks, Mali's security environment will remain heightened, particularly in Bamako and its surrounding areas. Furthermore, coup leaders could implement further movement restrictions and potentially restrict telecommunications. It is likely that celebratory demonstrations will persist over the coming days, which could spark conflict between opposing groups, resulting in further clashes. Acts of vandalism cannot be ruled-out in Bamako, as well as transport interruptions, among other disruptions.

Moreover, militant groups that operate in northern and central Mali may seek to exploit the confusion in the capital by increasing attacks against local and foreign security forces. The heightened socio-political instability could prompt a spike of terrorist attacks as the military redirects its focus on civil unrest, thus creating a security vacuum.

Meanwhile, structural issues like corruption and the failing economy will persist, the later likely to deteriorate even further as a result of the current socio-political instability. In addition, the military continues to be deeply dissatisfied in terms of pay and work conditions, as well as the long-lasting fight with Islamist extremists across the country. If not addressed soon, this could lead to discontent, and potentially clashes, within the military, leading to further

instability. The coup in Mali will also present significant challenges for the French-led operations against Islamist insurgency across the Sahel region. Not only as a result of the greater instability and potential power vacuum, but more specifically as the opposition has called to an end to France's influence in Mali. Nonetheless, France has expressed its commitment to continue operations in Mali and in the wider region. This commitment was soon evidenced as French forces attached to Operation Barkhane conducted a joint strike Mali's Gourma area, reportedly killing Abdoul Hakim al-Sahraoui, the Islamic State – Great Sahara's Gourma leader.

## Recommendations

- ◆ Monitor local developments closely and maintain all staff informed on the situation and measures taken.
- ◆ Try to remain indoors and respect the nationwide curfew and other movement restrictions.
- ◆ Take extreme caution when travelling through the capital and if possible, avoid the main affected areas, taking alternative routes. Also limit all movements near government buildings, security installations or places with large concentration of police and soldiers, due to possible violent clashes.
- ◆ Allow extra travel time and plan for possible traffic delays and disruptions.
- ◆ If violence erupts or is imminent, leave the area as quickly as possible. If personnel cannot leave the area, seek shelter in large, public buildings such as hotels, churches, hospitals and museums (safe havens), avoiding government locations.
- ◆ If at a hotel/accommodation, stay there and contact location's management or/and local office representatives.

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