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'This coup is no surprise'

Christian Klatt in Bamako on the drivers of the military coup d'état in Mali and what it means for stability in the region

Read this interview in German.

Last Wednesday, the military forced Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta to resign in a quick and bloodless coup d'état. This follows months of protests after the controversial parliamentary elections in April. Why did the military intervene so drastically?

What actually triggered the coup is still unclear. One of the leading putschists was probably removed from office the day before. Whether this was due to a suspected coup d'état has not yet been officially confirmed. With the experience of 2012, but also already from the change of power in 1991, the coup is now not necessarily a peculiarity and absolutely surprising.

During the protests since July, the military had held back, but observers had expected that the commanders-in-chief of the Malian army would soon have to decide for or against President Keïta. This has now happened. The putschists' motivations are similar to those of a large part of the Malian population: they were dissatisfied with Keita. Touted reforms were not implemented and corruption in the state grew. Moreover, the military has been complaining for years about a lack of equipment and support. With the losses that the Malian army had to suffer again and again in the last months and year, this coup is no surprise.

Behind the protests against the government was a very loose alliance of different social forces. Do these forces have common goals beyond the resignation or will internal quarrels arise now?

The June 5th Movement (Mouvement de 5 Juin, M5) mainly wanted to depose of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta and, hence, the end of his government. This has now been achieved. If one believes the rhetoric of the movement, its main concerns were the issues of Malian citizens,

which they saw embodied in Keïta.

Problems such as the basic security risk in the country, lack of food, high youth unemployment and lack of economic prospects, to name but a few, are however not solved with the departure of Keïta. Accordingly, we have to hope that M5 and its organisers will continue to push for a positive development in Mali. One of the more obvious goals here would be the rampant corruption that has afflicted the Malian state. A redistribution of offices after the coup could not only give the opportunity to disempower long-established incumbents of their prominent positions, but of course also to break up corruption structures in general.

The military has promised a civilian transitional government and the organisation of new elections. However, the unstable security situation in the country may prevent that from happening. How credible is the military's promise?

A distinction must be made here between credible and realistic. I think that the military coups d'état was not for the sake of power, but to remove the Keïta government. They managed to do so. According to this interpretation, there is no reason for the currently convened National Committee for the Rescue of the Population (Comité National pour le Salut du Peuple) to hold on to its position of power, but to quickly hand it back to civilian structures.

The situation is more complicated in terms of feasibility. The National Assembly elections at the beginning of the year have placed an immense burden on Mali's state coffers. In view of the Covid-19 pandemic and Mali's already difficult economic situation, it is unclear how the state can make money. Moreover, the security situation in the centre and north of the country remains poor, and not all election offices could be opened for the elections in March and April.

A driving force behind the protests were moderate Islamists around Imam Mahmoud Dicko. Will the Islamists gain influence in the future government?

I think that's rather unlikely. Even though Imam Dicko played a prominent role during the protests, M5 emphasized the secular character of Mali and the movement. On the Facebook account of Dicko's movement CMAS, he announced today that his task was "fulfilled" and that he would withdraw from the process.

Regardless of the composition of a future government, the M5 movement and the figure of Imam Dicko have shown the potential for mobilisation, hidden in the young, very religious population of Mali.

What impact will the coup have on foreign troops in the country, including the German Armed Forces, and on the security situation in the fragile region?

At present, the coup has no direct impact on the mandates of the international missions on the ground. It's clear, however, that both the UN mission MINUSMA and EU missions EUCAP and EUTM can only conduct an effective partnership with democratically legitimate governments. This should be a further reason for a rapid clarification of the situation, including from the international side.

The high international presence could have a positive effect on the security situation in the region. In 2012, we were faced with a power vacuum created by the internal problems in Mali, which was filled by radical Islamist groups and armed gangs. With the international military presence already on the ground, it's unlikely that similar processes can occur. However, the Sahel region has been very fragile for some time no, and a shake-up of power, such as the one we are seeing in Mali right now, may spread to neighbouring states. In a year when, among other things, the presidential election in Côte d'Ivoire is still to come, this would be very regrettable.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp and Claudia Detsch.



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