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‘Coupception’: Mali’s coup within a coup

Mali has just seen its second coup within one year. Regional and international actors’ timid responses could spell more disaster for the whole region

Roughly 280 days is the time a banana’s flowering stalk needs to produce fruit. Coincidentally, it is also how much time has passed since Mali saw its last coup d’état in August 2020. International observers and politicians have already many names for what happened on 25 May when former (and new) coup instigator Colonel Assimi Goïta took Mali’s fate into his own hands again: ‘coup d’état 1.5’, ‘coup within a coup’, or ‘coupception’. But regardless of the caption, the developments around the 25 May present an interruption in Mali’s transitional process that makes a successful transition less likely than ever. Mali is again at a crossroads.

After the August 2020 coup, the transitional body CNSP (*Comité national pour le salut du peuple*) was met with a lot of goodwill and hope locally as well as by the international community. The coup had to a large extend been tolerated in Mali as well as internationally as a necessary evil to stabilise Mali. The military was involved in leading the transition hoping it would give up its power voluntarily when the time would be ripe. But even though the transitional government started with high ambitions and had the support of the international donors, the early enthusiasm made way for a more sobering attitude.

After rising dissatisfaction with the transitional government and in light of a planned general strike by Mali’s biggest trade union federation UNTM (*Union nationael de travailleurs de Mali*), the government of then Prime Minister Moctar Ouane was dissolved in the early days of May this year. Ouane was afterwards reinstated to create a new ‘unity government’ with the stated goal of being more open and inclusive than the previous one. While the newly proposed government saw more participation from established political actors, with the same amount of military personal being placed in key positions. It didn’t even last one full day.

The new coup leader is the old coup leader

Shortly after the new government was announced in the afternoon of 24 May, rumours spread throughout Mali's capital Bamako that Ouane and the President of the transition Bah N'Daw had been arrested. They were being held in Kati, a city dominated by the military only a few kilometres outside of the capital. The orders were given by none other than Vice-President, and former self-proclaimed leader of the coup in August 2020, Colonel Assimi Goïta.

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Later, a spokesperson for Goïta stepped in front of the cameras of state TV to announce that president and premier were relieved of their duties. According to Goïta, the fact that he as vice-president hadn't been sufficiently consulted in the formation of a new government was a direct violation of Mali's Transitional Charter, so that he had to step in to protect 'Malian democracy'. After the announcement spread across the country, it only a few hours for N'Daw and Ouane to hand in their resignations in exchange for their personal freedom.

In the days after the 'coupception', the streets of Bamako saw no large-scale demonstrations from civil society, the trade union movement or political parties. The Movement M5-RFP (*Movement de 5 Juin – Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques*), which had initiated the mass protests against former President Keita in 2020, quickly agreed to take on a leading role in the new government under Goïta.

Within days the highest court in Mali (C*ourt Constitutionelle*) as well as the transitional parliament (*Conseil National de Transition*) confirmed Goïta's claim to the presidency. For the time being, Mali's political elite as well as the majority of civil society organisations have kept quiet. One rather opaque variable in the equation is the Malian military. It's not one homogenous block and Goïta's actions likely caused dissent in the military, notably within the higher military ranks.

More coups in the wider Sahel region

As concerning as the developments in Mali are, they are not an isolated event. Over the last twelve months, the Sahel saw four coup attempts:

two in Mali, a failed one in the Niger and a successful one in Chad. These developments are concerning, to say at least. It is not too hard to imagine that the reponses to each coup played a crucial role in encouraging actions in other countries, as each coup was met with a quick, implicit acceptance by regional organisations like the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

While ECOWAS was – at least in the case of Mali – involved and took a mediating position, the AU mostly stayed quiet. This is surprising, as the AU created a framework on how to deal with unconstitutional changes in their 'Constitutive Act' from 2007. Here, it clearly states that in cases of unconstitutional change 'it [the AU] shall suspend the State Party from the exercise of its right to participate in the activities of the Union [...] The suspension shall take effect immediately.'

The lack of decisive reactions to the coups in the region could signal to military actors throughout the region that coup d'états are accepted as a solution to political crises. While a similar argument can be made for other (outstanding) international reactions, the AU is the main regional body of the continent and, hence, its reaction carries a specific weight.

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After the most recent coup ECOWAS and AU suspended Mali. This suspension of Mali from all the regional bodies and the demand for a civilian prime minister present the bare minimum. After the events in August 2020, ECOWAS at least called for a civilian president of the transition. But the suspension of Mali from the AU and ECOWAS is a mere formality without meaningful real-world implications. Rather, it can be seen as accepting Goïta in his new position. That would set a precedent for how to deal with coups to come.

The tame international reaction

Other international partners seem to continue their engagement like before. The European training mission EUTM has so far not paused their programme. French president Macron suggested that France could pull troops out of its former colony if certain things will not change. But so far no concrete decision was made.

With the quiet acceptance of Goïta's actions, it seems like the transition is back on track. But where do these tracks lead to? The promise of the former junta to direct Mali within 18 months to a better future and then

leave in favour of a civilian, democratic government currently seems empty. Goïta and his supporters proclaim to continue with the transition as previously planned by trying to create an aura of normality. Whether they will succeed depends on the reaction by the Malian people as well as their international partners.

If Mali's international partners really want to contribute to the transition, just condemning Goïta's actions is not enough anymore. We have seen what lessons anti-democratic forces learned from reactions to previous coups. To break this vicious cycle of 'coup-encouragement' and ensure a stable future for Mali, the international community needs to clearly demand a civilian transition and closely accompany it politically. Putting pressure on the military junta must be considered, which could also mean to suspend or condition programmes in support of the transition as well as military cooperation.

It's clear that continuing with business as usual is not a politically feasible option, as Mali's second coup within a year will likely inspire others. Perhaps even before the next bananas are ripe for harvest.



Christian Klatt
Bamako

Christian Klatt is the head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Bamako, Mali.