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Mali is (again) at a crossroads

After two coups d'état, Mali is facing isolation in West Africa and strained relations with Europe. Russia may benefit from the situation

Diplomatic missteps, Russian forces, and strained communication: relations between Mali and its European partners have rarely been as tense. Almost 18 months after the August 2020 coup, Mali is still facing a lot of uncertainty. One thing is for sure: the leadership's promised rapid return to normality is now a distant prospect.

After the regional bloc ECOWAS and other international partners demanded a binding timetable by the end of the 18-month transition period, Mali's interim government launched a process of local, regional, and national consultation to gather recommendations for the transition along with ideas for reform. Among these was the suggestion – given the scale of the proposed reforms and the fragile situation within the country – to extend the transition period.

The military-dominated interim government interpreted this as a mandate for a further five years in power. The timetable presented to ECOWAS late last year envisaged wide-ranging reforms by 2023 and elections in 2026. Not surprisingly, the bloc rejected this and imposed wide-ranging sanctions against the interim government, which include measures such as the closure of neighbouring ECOWAS states' borders to individuals and goods from the country and the withdrawal of all ECOWAS ambassadors from Bamako.

Strained European relations

In early February, the EU introduced its own sanctions against five leading members of Mali's interim government, accusing them of standing in the way of a successful political transition in the country. The five members, which includes Prime Minister Choguel Maïga, are barred from entering the EU and subject to an asset freeze.

As was the case after the 2020 coup, ECOWAS's sanctions are hitting

Mali hard. Up to now, however, they have mainly had the effect of rallying the population behind the interim government and turning it against the regional bloc. Their imposition has also triggered a diplomatic tug-of-war. With each party seeking allies for support, the two sides are digging in while simultaneously emphasising their willingness to talk. A new proposal from the African Union and mediation attempts supported by neighbours Algeria and Mauritania have, on the other hand, raised hopes for an imminent end to sanctions and a more realistic route out of the transition period.

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It's not just Mali's regional partnerships that are strained. Relations with France have reached a new low, with the interim government adopting a populist, anti-French line championed chiefly by Prime Minister Maïga and his supporters in the capital. From corruption to the disastrous security situation, the former colonial power provides a convenient scapegoat for much of Mali's current ills.

For its part, the French government accuses the interim regime of being reluctant to make reforms and attempting to cling to power at all costs. With President Emmanuel Macron needing to project strength in the midst of an election campaign, France has been less than tactful in many of its dealings with Mali: both the French foreign ministry and Macron himself have repeatedly taken a harsh tone with the regime. By 31 January, the situation had escalated to the point that the French ambassador to Mali was ordered to leave the country within 72 hours.

Russia's involvement

This diplomatic spat with France is not the only strain on Mali's relations with its European partners. Since autumn, rumours have been swirling that the Russian security firm Wagner is engaging in talks with the Malian government about the deployment of mercenaries, something that has drawn strong criticism from the EU. While the Malian side talks of Russian military trainers being sent as part of a bilateral partnership, the evidence for many outside observers points towards the involvement of Wagner's highly trained special forces. In a press conference in early February, President Putin stated that there were currently no Russian trainers in Mali, merely private security operators.

Wagner's track record in other African countries, among them the Central African Republic, shows that – far from improving security – deployment of its mercenaries leads to further destabilisation. The group

has also frequently been accused of serious human rights abuses. All this takes place under the pretext of helping to support the state. In return for such support, Wagner has in some cases received access to raw materials and precious metals, and Mali, too, has been suspected of offering gold mining rights to the group. In December, a statement signed by 15 of Mali's international partners, Germany included, criticised the interim government's collaboration with Russia and hinted at changes in their own relationship with Mali.

The need to reform international missions

When discussing any continuation of international operations in Mali, it's important to distinguish between the various missions. Germany is involved in the European Training Mission (EUTM) and the United Nations Stabilisation Mission (MINUSMA). While the EUTM's key focus is on training and support for Malian forces, the MINUSMA mandate extends to protecting civilians and implementing the peace and reconciliation agreement of 2015.

The EUTM's work has increasingly come under fire of late, not least since the August 2020 and May 2021 coups. Yet even prior to these events, critics had pointed out that the mission was unsustainable. It is now undergoing an important process of restructuring. For the EUTM to be successful, it is vital that the training of Mali's armed forces is subject to more specific monitoring and support. The mission should work towards clearly defined milestones, and proper records need to be kept of all completed training, something that has long been lacking.

Mali's military leadership currently shows little interest in a comprehensive security sectorreform. The EUTM mission also needs to look beyond the interim government, however, and prepare for what will come after. A democratic underpinning of the security sector is essential for long-term stability in Mali. Only if the armed forces see themselves as part of the Malian state, and are thus brought under democratic control, can future coups be avoided.

With the security situation deteriorating in recent years, MINUSMA too has repeatedly come in for criticism. In response, its mandate was extended in 2019 to include civilian protection – and should be widely supported. While power struggles persist in Bamako, the Malian population continues to suffer after almost ten years of crisis. If international support for MINUSMA dwindles as a result of the current political situation, it is the most vulnerable in Malian society who will be

worst affected.

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These two very different missions are currently under scrutiny, with both the EUTM and MINUSMA mandates due to expire at the end of May. In view of the political situation in Mali, it is safe to say that neither mission can simply go on as before; their successes have been too limited and the costs are too high. An abrupt end to the missions, however, and a cessation of military support would send a disastrous message. A withdrawal or drawdown of troops could suggest that participating countries have given up on Mali and are ceding the field to another actor. By giving Russian mercenaries free rein, Mali's European partners would be walking away from something that has taken years of hard work to establish.

Mali is again at a crossroads. Its partners' initial hopes for the interim regime have almost entirely evaporated. And though justified given the regime's problematic attempts to extend its mandate, the imposition of sanctions by ECOWAS have hit the country hard. Its rift with France, meanwhile, represents a watershed moment for Mali – and poses a major challenge for its European partners.



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