

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

# AFTER THE COUP D'ÉTAT

Hopes and Challenges in Mali

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October 2020



After the military coup of 18 August 2020, Mali is at a crossroads. Despite a civilian president, the planned transition period of 18 months will have a clearly military character.



International actors must take advantage of the coup as a wake-up call to rethink their engagement in Mali. Europe must move away from a pure focus on security policy in order to stabilise the country in the long term.



Hopes after the coup are high, but the challenges are even greater: armed conflicts in the north and the centre and pressure for an inclusive process of domestic political reform.



On 18 August 2020, a military coup was carried out in the Malian capital Bamako against the incumbent President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (known as IBK), in power since 2013. The military acted swiftly and, at first glance, very precisely: IBK and Prime Minister Boubou Cissé, together with other members of the government, were taken to military base in Kati without resistance and key buildings were occupied. Late in the evening, President Keïta announced his resignation and the dissolution of the National Assembly on the national television channel ORTM. Shortly afterwards, five members of the military appeared before the camera and declared that the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (*Comité national pour le salut du peuple*, CNSP) would take charge during the transition period. The coup was over in less than 24 hours. Crowds gathered to celebrate the coup on the *Place de l'Indépendance*, the main scene of protests against IBK in the months before.

The coup was led by the Chairman of the CNSP, Assimi Goïta, commander of a special unit trained with international aid, Vice Chairman Malick Diaw, Colonel in the National Guard, and spokesperson Ismaël Wagué, Colonel-Major in the Malian Air Force.

The coup in Mali and its consequences have given rise to a number of questions:

1. Just how surprising was the coup and were there any warning signs?
2. Are the putschists speaking on behalf of all of Mali, how do they give themselves legitimacy?
3. What path can Mali take out of this current crisis?

## A SURPRISE COUP?

For analysts and observers of Malian politics, the coup itself did not come as a surprise at all, although maybe the precise timing. Since the middle of the year, a lot of people in Bamako had taken to the streets to protest against President Keïta's government and demand his resignation. After one of the mass rallies in mid-July 2020, there were some initial acts of „civil disobedience“ by protesters in the form of targeted actions at the National Assembly, the airport and the state television station ORTM, and later violent clashes with Malian security forces occurred in which at least eleven people lost their lives. The “June 5th Movement – Rally of Patriotic Forces” (*Mouvement du 5 Juin 2020 – Rassemblement des forces patriotiques*, M5RFP) initially refrained from more large-scale demonstrations after the weekend of violence, but was preparing further mass rallies before the coup in August.

The demonstrations were an expression of the deep dissatisfaction with the government and especially with IBK. Keïta took office in 2013 as a beacon of hope, but from the very outset it was difficult for him to fulfil the expectations pinned on him. After his re-election in 2018, accusations of corruption and incompetence exacerbated the situation. It

seemed as if the beacon of hope elected in 2013 had long lost the goodwill of the Malian people.

The proverbial final straw came with the parliamentary elections in March and April 2020. Under Malian law, the Constitutional Court (the *Cour Constitutionnelle*) is responsible for confirming the final election results. Subsequent changes in the distribution of seats, often to the advantage of the ruling parties, are not a new phenomenon. This time, however, the discrepancy between the initial, provisional results and the final results in favour of the ruling party *Rassemblement pour le Mali* (RPM) was so big that the population staged protests.

In the face of the political unrest in Bamako, the Malian armed forces had initially kept a low profile. Senior officers were loyal to Keïta and other parts of the armed forces remained silent. As pressure on the government grew, it became clear that the military had to take a stand as well. After 1968, 1991 and 2012, Mali has now witnessed its fourth coup in the 60 years since independence from France. The 1991 coup, which had civilian support, put an end to more than two decades of dictatorship and established today's Malian democracy. This experience was one of the reasons why the coups in 2012 and also in 2020 had some support among the Malian population.

Goïta and the CNSP cited the unacceptability of IBK's government as the justification for the coup, but never linked their actions directly to the civil society movement of M5RFP. Although it cannot be ruled out that the two groups consulted in the run-up to the coup, this has not yet manifested itself in joint action. On the contrary, since the coup clear rifts have appeared between the CNSP and M5RFP.

## »UNDERSTANDABLE, BUT NOT LEGITIMATE«

Since the coup, the CNSP has been trying to dominate the discussion about how the coup is to be interpreted. In the first few days in particular, the spokesperson Wagué never tired of emphasising that at the time of the coup IBK had reached a dead end and had lost the support of the Malian people. The thousands of people who gathered on the *Place de l'Indépendance* in Bamako a few days later for the victory celebration seemed to confirm this point of view. Many national and even some international commentators believe that the coup has positive aspects. In their opinion, the break with the IBK system is an act of maturity on the part of the Malian population in the face of elites controlled from Europe. The positive effects of international engagement in Mali and the Sahel are, however, all too quickly forgotten in such arguments. Moreover, many an overzealous analysis falls into the trap of seeing the events in Bamako as representative of the whole of Mali, whereas, in fact, populations in different parts of the country have very different views. People in the fragile north in particular have a very ambivalent relationship with the mili-

tary, whose crucial role in the transition period following the coup may lead to heightened tensions.

The question is, therefore, whether the lack of support for IBK which had manifested itself on the streets of Bamako since June 2020, was enough to justify a coup? The CNSP may claim moral authority for itself, but it is standing on thin ice, figuratively speaking. IBK was only re-elected in 2018, in elections that the international community considered largely fair. At the time of the coup, he was not seeking an unconstitutional third term, nor did he demonstrably violate Malian law. As justified as the allegations of political inaction, failure to resolve the security crisis, corruption and nepotism may be, these failures called for a democratic and/or, if necessary, legal solution. Political incompetence is not a legitimate reason for a coup d'état. In democracies, elections serve to replace governments with which citizens are no longer satisfied. We can see clear parallels here with the 2012 coup d'état, which was also driven by the armed forces and at first enjoyed a certain amount of popular support (in the hope that the military offered the best chance of cleaning up the endemic corruption), even though the incumbent president at the time, Amadou Toumani Touré (known as ATT), was not seeking a third term in office and would not have run again in the elections scheduled for just a few months later.

## INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT PUT TO THE TEST

The coup against IBK was not explicitly directed against international and European engagement in the country as some commentaries suggest. In its first statement after the coup, the CNSP emphasized that international partners would continue to be welcome in the country and that international agreements would be respected. Nevertheless, the coup clearly shows that the recent international engagement must be critically scrutinised. Since 2012 at least, if not before, European engagement in Mali and its neighbouring states has been subordinated to the primacy of security policy and the fight against terrorism, as clearly reflected in the budgets. The many domestic political challenges were often not given sufficient priority, although there is no lack of either programmes or new approaches in this field. But no political pressure was applied to the Malian government, especially in connection with the implementation of the long-planned security sector and territorial reforms. Consequently a lot of opportunities for change were missed.

Mali's international partners had also become increasingly dissatisfied with IBK's government and the Malian establishment in recent years. Nevertheless, even if their overthrow could mark a turning point for international engagement in the country, there are no easy answers to the question as to what to do next. Anyone who now talks of withdrawing foreign troops and cancelling the training and modernisation programmes is misjudging the security situation in the country. In the short and medium term, the

presence of foreign troops in Mali is an essential part of the country's security architecture. Even in the long term, it is uncertain whether Mali, given the current situation, can take on sole responsibility for the protection of its territory. The sheer size of the country, the lack of financial resources and the inability and unwillingness of the Malian armed forces and security organs to fight currently present a sobering picture. Moreover, the coup has confirmed the analysis that many of Mali's challenges do not stem from security issues, but are based on political problems. The absence of the Malian state in many of its regions, endemic corruption on all levels, an education system long afflicted by strikes and the lack of future prospects for the young population are just some of the problems. Neither the elites in Bamako nor the international partners have yet found any adequate answers to these challenges, fuelling more discontent among the Malian population and creating the breeding ground for security problems in the country. If long-term stability is to be achieved, thus providing foreign troops with an „exit strategy“, these domestic problems must be tackled more actively.

The European Union, the United States, as well as ECOWAS and the African Union immediately condemned the coup as a violation of the Malian Constitution and their own agreements. The US completely suspended its bilateral programmes and the EU part of its EUCAP and EUTM training missions. ECOWAS imposed sanctions on the movement of goods, money and people (these have since been lifted following concessions made by the leaders of the coup). Demands for the reinstatement of IBK as president were dropped within hours (France) or days (ECOWAS), however, as it quickly became clear that this could only happen against the apparent will of the Malian people. Since the international support needed by Mali requires democratically legitimate partners and cannot be provided on the basis of agreements with putschists, the international actors are faced with a dilemma and are consequently pressing for a very swift transition towards a democratic reorganisation.

## MALI AT A CROSSROADS

What should happen in Mali next? The list of challenges is long and many experienced politicians have already failed to meet them. Decisions now lie with the politically rather inexperienced military junta, themselves not entirely untouched by endemic corruption. High hopes are being placed in the military and the transition period. Caution is called for here, though, since the 2012 coup was also initially seen as a herald of radical change, with IBK as the principal beacon of hope in the subsequent elections. A certain pragmatism has already set in. For however fast and efficiently the coup was carried out, the actions of the putschists since then have been just as ambivalent. On the one hand, key social groups such as the M5RFP protest alliance were not taken into account in initial negotiations, and consolidating meetings were repeatedly postponed or cancelled. On the other, the CNSP was also very aware that

they could not afford to affront Mali's international partners and that negotiations on the transition process therefore had to be started quickly.

Less than four weeks after the coup, a roadmap for the transition period in Mali had been drawn up in a process of *concertation nationale*. The country is to return to democratic normality in an 18-month transition period under the leadership of a president and a vice-president, both appointed by the CNSP. In addition, a government of 25 ministers was to be formed, led by a prime minister. A further key component of the transition is the *conseil national* with 121 members. This National Council will assume the role of the dissolved parliament during the transition phase. According to the Transition Charter, the Council should be as inclusive as possible and made up of representatives from all the most important groups, including the M5RFP movement, representatives of trade unions and political parties, other civil society organisations, military personnel, representatives of the diaspora and even signatories of the 2015 peace treaty. However, the Charter does not clearly state how the members of the Council are to be selected. This raises the question as to whether the high standards of inclusion can be met and how the legitimacy of the Council can be established.

Meanwhile, Bah N'Daou (also spelled N'Daw, N'Dah or Ndaw) has been appointed transitional president and CNSP Chairman Goïta vice-president. The former foreign minister and Mali's representative to the UN, Moctar Ouane, has been appointed prime minister for the transition period. The appointment of N'Daou as president is a response to calls by ECOWAS, among others, for a civilian transitional president, albeit mainly on paper. N'Daou is a former military man who came out of retirement to become defence minister under IBK from 2014 to 2015. At 70, he is at the upper end of the age limit set in the Transition Charter. The surprising appointment of Goïta as vice-president makes it clear that the CNSP putschists will continue to have a major influence in the transition process. However, neither N'Daou nor Goïta will be eligible for election after the transition period. This important condition for a return to democratic procedures has been laid down in the Charter.

Before N'Daou's appointment by the CNSP, the question of whether a military or a civilian should head the transitional government divided the country. While some were in favour of a military person leading the country as this represented a clear break with the old system, others saw this as a threat to the country's democratic structure. The appointment of a former military man with ministerial experience is a clear compromise. Goïta's role as vice-president and the appointment of three members of the CNSP and one other military person to central ministerial posts (defence; security and civil protection; national reconciliation; territorial administration and decentralisation), make it clear that the junta and the military will play a major role in the transition in the medium term, even if the CNSP is dissolved. The ministers of finance and of mining also have close associations with the armed forces, giving rise to the

question as to how „civilian“ the transitional government actually is. Under pressure from ECOWAS, however, the originally planned powers of the vice-president have been significantly reduced in the Transition Charter.

Dissatisfaction with the arrangements for the transitional period can be mainly heard from the M5RFP alliance, the driving force behind the demonstrations against President Keïta, who call for greater political participation by civil society. They feel that their representatives do not occupy any key ministries. Moreover, only four women have been appointed. Other Malian political groups, especially from the north of the country, have also repeatedly criticised their insufficient involvement in the negotiation processes. Many sections of Bamako's political elite, especially from the political parties but also the trade unions, have not played a major role in the process either. They did not try very much, in fact. An important task for Bah N'Daou and the CNSP will therefore be to create a sustainable consensus with these groups in order to integrate as many sections of Malian society as possible in the transition.

## OUTLOOK

There is no doubt that the coup in Mali presents us with an opportunity to rethink international engagement in the country and the region. But this should be done regardless of the coup. In 2012, the response to the coup was to find the fastest possible route back to the democratic order that previously existed, although this order turned out to be far less of a model democracy than previously thought. Structural problems in Malian democracy and society were ignored at the time, and both the Malian people as well as the international community hoped for a new beginning with IKB, even though he was part of the political establishment. Developments since then have made it unmistakably clear that the challenges facing Mali cannot be solved simply by exchanging political leaders. Comprehensive reforms of the constitution, institutions, electoral law and territorial structure of the country are badly needed.

Mali has no alternative but to engage in international cooperation, although such international engagement and intervention must be critically reappraised. The security situation in the country has continued to deteriorate despite the presence of international troops, and despite training missions there are still repeated reports of human rights violations by Malian security forces. Nevertheless, international cooperation can help to address many of Mali's challenges, provided that it is planned and implemented consistently and in line with the concrete needs of the Malian people. This requires an open mind for new approaches and a departure from a focus purely on security, however.

Mali needs time for this process, a fact that has now been recognised by the West African community of states ECOWAS and mediator Goodluck Jonathan. A transition period of 18 months seems realistic. For as important as it is for the putschists to clear the way for a transition to a

democratically legitimised order, it is also important that the transitional government has enough time to plan a real new start. The process implemented in 1991 should serve as a model rather than that of 2012. After the overthrow of Moussa Traoré's dictatorial regime, an extended process of dialogue began in Mali, which was seen by many as a perfect example of a functioning transition process, so that Mali was long regarded as a model country. The success of the reforms in Mali depends largely on making the process as inclusive as possible, as in 1991. This means that all parts of the country and as many groups as possible, especially from the north, must be involved in decision-making. In its approach so far, the CNSP appears inclusive on paper, but many decisions were taken without any real involvement of other actors. This must change under Bah N'Daou. Only then can the transition process succeed.

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After the military coup of 18 August 2020, Mali is at a crossroads. Despite a civilian president, the planned transition period of 18 months will have a clearly military character. The putschists from the *Comité national pour le salut du peuple* (CNSP) led by Assimi Goïta are trying to organise the transition and want to win both Malian society and international partners over to their side. So far, this has only been partially successful.



For international actors, the coup must be seen as a wake-up call to rethink their engagement in Mali. It has become clear that focusing solely on security policy is not successful when it comes to sustainable stabilisation of the country. Now it is time for them to rethink their strategies and find more comprehensive approaches. Coordination between the partners and with Mali is just as important here as clear strategies.



Hopes after the coup are high, but the challenges are even greater: armed conflicts in the north and the centre and pressure for an inclusive process of domestic political reform. In order to initiate the necessary changes and meet the high expectations, the transitional government around President Bah N'Daou and Vice-President Assimi Goïta needs time and above all the will to tackle reforms.

Further information on the topic can be found here:  
[www.fes.de/en/africa-department](http://www.fes.de/en/africa-department)