

Security Update - President & Prime Minister Released; Tensions Remain Heightened

During the early morning hours on Thursday 27 May, media reports, citing a military official, indicated that Malian soldiers had freed Bah N'Daw and Moctar Ouane, who resigned on 26 May as president and prime minister just two days after they were detained. Their release comes as Mali's former junta leader Col Assimi Goïta announced on 27 May that he has declared himself the country's transitional president. Currently, tensions remain heightened in Mali though the situation appears to be calm. There are also remaining questions about how this latest 'coup' will impact the country's transition back to democracy after the August 2020 coup, and the overall security situation in Mali.

On 27 May, Baba Cissé, an aide to Vice President Assimi Goïta who orchestrated the arrests earlier this week and who also led last year's coup, disclosed that "they resigned, their release was scheduled, we have nothing against them." He went on to say that the whereabouts of N'Daw and Ouane will be kept secret to protect their security and declined to detail any plans for their replacement. The pair were freed at around 01:00 local time (01:00 GMT) on Thursday. Goïta had ordered their arrest on 24 May after a cabinet reshuffle in which two fellow coup leaders were dismissed from their posts.

N'Daw's and Ouane's resignations came as a delegation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) arrived in Mali to press the military to back down. ECOWAS has floated the possibility of sanctions against the officers responsible for the latest takeover. Mali's influential M5-RFP political opposition, which led anti-government protests ahead of last year's coup, has opposed the leadership of N'Daw and Ouane, though it has stated that it would strongly oppose Goïta's appointment as president. While the M5-RFP coalition has said that talks with ECOWAS had failed in part of Goïta, ECOWAS has so far not commented. A spokesman for M5-RFP, Nohoum Togo, disclosed that "the discussions yesterday (26 May) were unsuccessful because Assimi wants to be the president, which is contrary to the texts of the Transition Charter," adding, "nowhere is it stipulated that the vice-president can replace the president.

Second Coup in a Year

For the second time in a period of nine months, Assimi Goïta has seized power in Mali. While for the most part, the August 2020 coup was welcomed by the public, who had been increasingly exasperated by the previous government's failure to stem ongoing jihadist violence and corruption, questions remain about the public's reaction to this latest coup and what its implications will be on the transitional process which had been launched just weeks after last year's coup. The last time, it took weeks of negotiations before terms for a transitional period towards democratic rule were agreed upon between the coup leaders and ECOWAS mediators. In the end, Goïta was installed as Mali's transitional vice-president, in a move that highlighted the army's continued powerful influence, and an 18-month deadline was agreed for presidential and parliamentary elections to be held.

This time around however it appears that resolving the situation from the latest military intervention appears to be more complex. Democratic elections are scheduled to take place in nine months, with Goïta already promising that the transitional period and elections will be maintained. Questions however remain whether the elections will go ahead and whether this latest event will not push back the transition to democracy even further. Additionally, much-needed constitutional changes still have to be agreed on and either legislated by the nominated transitional assembly or approved by the general public in a referendum. Meanwhile, this latest military intervention might not easily be accepted by the public, who

are likely to be growing tired of the political situation and continuing jihadist attacks and are leaning towards getting the country back on track.

Regionally and internationally, this week's events have effectively shattered trust in Goïta as for the second time in less than a year, leaders of Mali's government were taken into custody at the barracks in Kati just outside Bamako. While in recent months, there have been a number of complaints that the transitional government has been slow to implement much needed changes, with opposition political parties indicating that they have felt that they had been marginalized, the takeover on 24 May omitted these grievances. Last year's coup was due to growing public discontent about the government of former President Boubacar Keïta, however this week's arrests of the transitional leadership was due to a military grievance stemming from the removal of two ex-putschists from ministerial posts and their replacement by more established senior officers. This latest political upheaval appears to highlight that Goïta is asserting his right to set the terms of the transition period. The deal that had been negotiated in the wake of last year's coup had effectively been based on an understanding that while the army's influence would be tacitly acknowledged through the appointment of soldiers to a number of key posts in government, the transition would be led by civilian - Bah N'Daw, a former minister and retired officer.

Questions are also now focusing on the regional and international reaction to this latest coup and what its implications might be. The United Nations, France, the United States, the African Union (AU) and the European Union (EU), amongst others, have all condemned the move, with the EU already threatening to impose sanctions. For the second time in less than a year, ECOWAS chief mediator, former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, will attempt to convince the Malian military that power must be restored to a civilian transitional government. As negotiations continue, regional and international countries may take a harsher stand on Mali. However, any blanket economic sanctions on the West African nation would cause severe problems for the local populations while creating disruption to an economy that has already been impacted by the long-running security crisis and COVID-19 pandemic. Targeted sanctions directly aimed at coup leaders is also a possibility. Moreover, if negotiators fail to put in place a civilian government, a military-led regime might not receive international recognition and may be deemed as being illegitimate. This could severely hamper ongoing security operations and efforts to push back jihadists operating in Mali who are increasingly threatening the security of the wider West African region. In light of this week's events, on 27 May the US State Department announced that it will halt its security assistance to Mali. A statement released by the department disclosed, "we are now suspending all security assistance that benefits the Malian security and defence forces that we had continued previously pursuant to available authorities," adding that "the United States will also consider targeted measures against political and military leaders who impede Mali's civilian-led transition to democratic governance." The US also disclosed that it would continue supporting efforts by ECOWAS and the AU in working to resolve the current crisis, and noted that a democratic, civilian-led government presented the best opportunity to achieve security and prosperity in Mali as well as in the wider Sahel region.

The negotiations to strike a deal to form a civilian transitional government will likely take weeks, and with reports already emerging that Goïta is set to name a prime minister, it is likely that he will not easily back down to growing pressures both internally and from the international community. What is evident is that an ultimate solution to this ongoing political crisis will no doubt need to balance growing military pressures, while saving the political transitional process and outlining a set route back to democratic rule.

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