

Security Advisory - President and Prime Minister Arrested

Nearly a year after a military coup threatened to further destabilize the security environment in Mali, reports that interim President Bah N'Daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane were arrested by soldiers and driven to the Kati military camp near the capital, Bamako, have raised concerns of a second coup within a year in the West African country. The arrests of the Malian leadership have been condemned by the international community, including the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the European Union (EU) and the United States, with all saying that the country's top politicians must be released without any preconditions. A delegation from ECOWAS is due to visit Bamako on Tuesday 25 May to help resolve the "attempted coup."

Attempted Military Coup?

On Monday 24 May, a joint statement by several international groups confirmed that Mali's transitional president and prime minister had been arrested earlier in the day and were in the custody of military officers, in what appears to be a continuance of a cycle of political turmoil. The statement by the country's Local Transition Monitoring Committee, which monitors Mali's return to civilian oversight after the August 2020 military coup and which includes the AU, the UN mission in Mali and ECOWAS, disclosed that several staffers were also arrested. The statement went on to say that the committee, "along with members of the international community, including France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the EU, express their profound concern regarding the situation in Mali marked by the arrest of the transition President and the Prime Minister and some members of their staff." It further disclosed, "they demand the immediate and unconditional release of those authorities and insist upon the fact that the members of the military who hold them will be personally held accountable for their safety." Reports have indicated that Defence Minister Souleymane Doucouré was also amongst those detained on Monday.

The arrests, which have been described in the statement as being an "attempted power grab," occurred just an hour or so after President N'Daw announced a series of nominations to top ministerial posts in the government. The government reshuffle effectively left out two soldiers who led the coup in August last year and has raised concerns of a second military takeover. Colonel Sadio Camara and Colonel Modibo Koné, who were given the defence and security portfolios when Mali's caretaker administration came into power after last year's coup, were replaced in Monday's reshuffle, though the military held onto other strategic portfolios it previously controlled. Their positions were to be taken by General Souleymane Dacouré and Major-General Mamadou Lamine Diallo respectively. Amongst the influential cabinet members who retained their seats were Lieutenant-Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga at the ministry of territorial administration and decentralisation, and Colonel Ismaël Wagué at the ministry of national reconciliation. At the ministry of justice, Doucouré Sidi Samaké replaced Mohamed Sida Dicko and at the ministry of finance Dionké Diarra replaced Alfousseyni Sanou. The reconstituted cabinet had 25 members, amongst them four soldiers and four women. While no reason was given for Camara and Koné's exclusion, the cabinet reshuffle came in the face of growing criticism of the interim government, with civil society groups questioning whether the military-dominated government has the will, or the ability, to push through reforms and hold elections next year. Camara and Koné's exclusion also appears to suggest mounting divisions within the transitional government.

Questions About Stability and Next Elections

Just nine months after the military coup, which saw President Keïta removed from office, Mali is once again threatened by instability that could potentially have significant implications for its path to democratic elections and on the jihadist threat in the country.

While initially, many Malians welcomed Keïta's departure, more recently there has been growing frustration with the military's dominance of the transitional government coupled with a perceived slow pace of promised reforms. N'Daw, a former soldier, and Ouane were sworn in September 2020 after Mali's generals, who were at the time facing increasing threats of regional sanctions, agreed to hand over power to a transitional government in the wake of the August coup that removed President Keïta from power. Coup leader Assimi Goïta was appointed as vice president and the caretaker administration was tasked with overseeing an 18-month transition back to civilian rule.

So far, there has been no official comment from the military or the government on N'Daw, Ouane's or Doucouré's detentions, and the city of Bamako remained relatively calm late on Monday. However, on 25 May, Mali's Vice President Colonel Goïta was quoted by Reuters as stating that he had removed the president and prime minister because they had violated the terms of the transition by not consulting him on cabinet changes. One military official has also disclosed that the detentions were not an arrest. The source further indicated that "what they have done is not good," referring to the cabinet reshuffle, adding, "we are letting them know, decisions will be made." Meanwhile a senior former Malian government official has also stated that "the sacking of the pillars of the coup was an enormous misjudgement," adding "the actions are probably aimed at getting them back in their jobs." Questions also remain about who is in power. As of 25 May, both the interim president and prime minister remain at a military base in Kati, just outside Bamako.

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A heightened security presence is likely in Bamako after the arrest of key interim government figures in what appears to be a possible coup attempt. While the overall situation in Bamako appears to be calm, tensions remain heightened and the security situation in the city could rapidly evolve. Currently, flights are still operating at Modibo Keïta International Airport, however, should the security situation disintegrate, officials are likely to close the country's borders and impose movement restrictions, including localized curfews. A heightened military security presence is likely in Bamako in the coming days. Anyone currently in Bamako is advised to follow directives from the local officials and to prepare for potentially extended disruptions.

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