

### Mali's Growing Isolation could Fuel Closer Ties with Russia

Over the weekend, regional bloc ECOWAS imposed new sanctions on Mali as the transitional government in the West African country attempts to extend its hold on power. The move to impose a raft of economic and diplomatic sanctions was in response to Malian military leaders' desire to push back elections until 2025. With a number of airlines from neighbouring countries and former colonial ruler France cancelling flights to Mali on 10 January, the military junta is increasingly being isolated as repercussions from the August 2020 military coup and continued political upheaval continue. This isolation however could enable Russia to further strengthen its ties with the West African nation.



On 9 January, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed a number of restrictions against Mali after the interim authorities announced that they would not be holding democratic elections next month, as had been agreed after the 2020 coup. Instead, the military junta in power in Mali announced on 30 December that the government had suggested a transitional period of between six months and five years, starting from 1 January 2022. The 15-member bloc confirmed on Sunday that it had agreed to impose additional sanctions with immediate effect, including the closure of members' land and air borders with Mali, the suspension of non-essential financial transactions, and the freezing of Malian state assets in ECOWAS central and commercial banks. Meanwhile regional monetary union UEMOA instructed all financial institutions under its umbrella to suspend Mali with immediate effect, severing the country's access to regional financial markets. The sanctions were announced after a meeting in Ghana of regional leaders, which followed months of increasing tensions over the timetable for restoring civilian rule in Mali after two coups (August 2020 and May 2021) and a military takeover. In August 2020, army officers, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, toppled President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita amidst street protests against his unpopular rule. Under threat of sanctions, Goïta at the time promised to restore civilian rule in February 2022 after holding presidential and legislative elections. However he staged a de facto second coup in May 2021, in a move that forced out the interim civilian government that had been put in place in the wake of the August 2020 coup. The move also disrupted the reform timetable and was met with widespread diplomatic condemnation. While since May 2021, ECOWAS has insisted that the initial February 2022 election timetable be met, the Malian government indicated in the autumn of last year that it would only set an election date after holding a nationwide conference, arguing at the time that a peaceful vote was more important than speed.

Further isolating the country, on Monday neighbouring states announced that they would close road and air borders. Several regional airlines, including Ivory Coast's national carrier Air Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina

Faso's Air Burkina halted flights to the Malian capital, while Air France also suspended flights to Mali citing security risks following the new sanctions and border closures. Flights from Senegal have also reportedly been disrupted.

In response to ECOWAS's new set of sanctions, Mali's military-dominated government "strongly" condemned what it called "illegal" sanctions imposed on the country, adding that it has closed its land borders "with the states concerned." During a televised statement on 9 January, military spokesman Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga stated that "the government of Mali strongly condemns these illegal and illegitimate sanctions," adding that "on the basis of reciprocity, Mali has decided to recall its ambassadors and close its land and air borders with the states concerned." In a statement issued on Monday, Bamako accused ECOWAS and UEMOA of being "exploited by extra-regional powers with ulterior motives," in what appears to be a reference to Mali's partners engaged militarily in the Sahel region such as France. Mali's transitional government also disclosed that it "deplores the inhuman nature of these measures which affect populations already severely affected by the security crisis and the health crisis." The government noted that it had made arrangements to ensure normal supplies "by all appropriate means" as it called on the population to remain calm.

This is the toughest stance that ECOWAS has taken on Mali since it implemented similar measures in the immediate aftermath of President Keita's ouster in August 2020. Those sanctions, which caused a sharp decline in imports to the country, were lifted within two months after the authorities promised an 18-month transitional period to civilian rule. The ECOWAS bloc is hoping that renewed economic pressure on Mali, including cutting the West African country from regional financial markets and trade of non-essential goods, will push Bamako to rethink the latest proposal of delaying presidential and legislative elections to December 2025 - nearly four years after they were supposed to be held. While the Malian government has promised that it will try to ensure a normal supply of goods to the public, the sanctions are likely to further impact the economy, where on the ground, the Islamist insurgency continues to wreak havoc. Amongst the local populations, some residents in Bamako appear to have shrugged off the sanctions, saying that they supported the government's strategy.

The latest sanctions come amidst regional and international tensions between Mali and its partners in the wake of closer relations between the West African country and Russia, and notably private Russian security firm the Wagner Group. On Monday, Washington said that it backed the sanctions move and shared concerns over the likely destabilizing impact of Russia-backed Wagner group forces. The political upheaval in Mali coupled with the country's closer ties to Russia has also deepened tensions with France, which has thousands of soldiers deployed across the Sahel region to battle the insurgents. A senior French armed forces ministry official reported late on 10 January that between 300 to 400 Russian mercenaries are operating in central Mali, a statement that challenges junta assertions in recent weeks that only Russian military trainers have been deployed there. Speaking after a briefing late on Monday, the French official told reporters that, "I would say there are around 300 - 400 members of the Wagner and there are also Russian trainers, who provide equipment. The official went on to say that the Russian mercenaries had deployed with Malian forces to the centre of the country. Mali's junta has said that the new forces are military instructors who came with equipment that they had purchased from Russia. Paris has previously said that any such move would be incompatible with the French presence in Mali. According to the French official, "the fact that Wagner is in a different part of Mali limits the risk of interaction which would be very difficult (for us) to accept," adding that "they (the junta) made the choice to turn their backs on the Europeans, the Americans and Africans and that brings consequences." further noted that consultations are underway between France and its European partners, who have provided special forces in Mali, on how to respond, adding that decisions are likely at the European Union level at the end of

January. On 11 January, images emerged of some 200 Russian soldiers, believed to be fighters from the Wagner group, currently in Segou, some 200 kilometres north-east of Bamako.

With growing isolation regionally and amongst international partners, the junta in power in Mali may increasingly find itself reliant on Russia in the coming months as the West African country tries to defy ECOWAS and the growing pressure to steer the country back to democratic rule. Russia's expanding presence in Mali has already fuelled suspicions that Mali's army-dominated government has hired mercenaries from the Wagner group. While the junta in power in Mali may believe that Russia will be successful in aiding it in the ongoing Islamist insurgency, as previously seen in other countries across the African continent, Russian mercenaries have achieved minimal gains in stabilizing regional conflicts, and have only further fuelled tensions amongst local populations, highlighting that addressing security situations is not a major concern to them. For Russia, the further isolation of Mali from its regional and international partners is a significant gain for its desire to increase its influence on the African continent and a further mechanism to expand its presence in the country while gaining a foothold in the wider West African region. For the ongoing Islamist insurgency in Mali, which has significantly threatened security in neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger in recent years and which now threatens security in the wider Gulf of Guinea region, the deployment of Russian mercenaries in Mali will have minimal if any impact and only risks to add a further layer to an already complex security atmosphere, which has seen inter-communal violence spread throughout central Mali, with local jihadist groups benefiting from divisions amongst the local populations. With the regional and international communities focusing on the political crisis in Mali, jihadist groups will be able to further expand their operations, and may attempt to benefit from the crisis by launching attacks in Bamako and in other regional capitals. Locally, they may carry out attacks including massacres, ambushes and kidnappings. While ECOWAS's firm stance on Mali has been necessary, notably in a region where four coups have occurred in the past 18 months, for now, it appears to have had minimal sway on Malian authorities. The outcome of when democratic elections will finally take place in Mali will also likely demonstrate ECOWAS' influence in the region and its ability to hold nations accountable in the wake of any political upheavals. It should be noted that Guinea's transitional authorities announced on 9 January that they were not associated with the ECOWAS decision to impose sanctions on Mali, adding that its shared border would remain open. Guinea has been under ECOWAS sanctions in the wake of a September 2021 coup in that country.

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