

Mali: The coup and its consequences

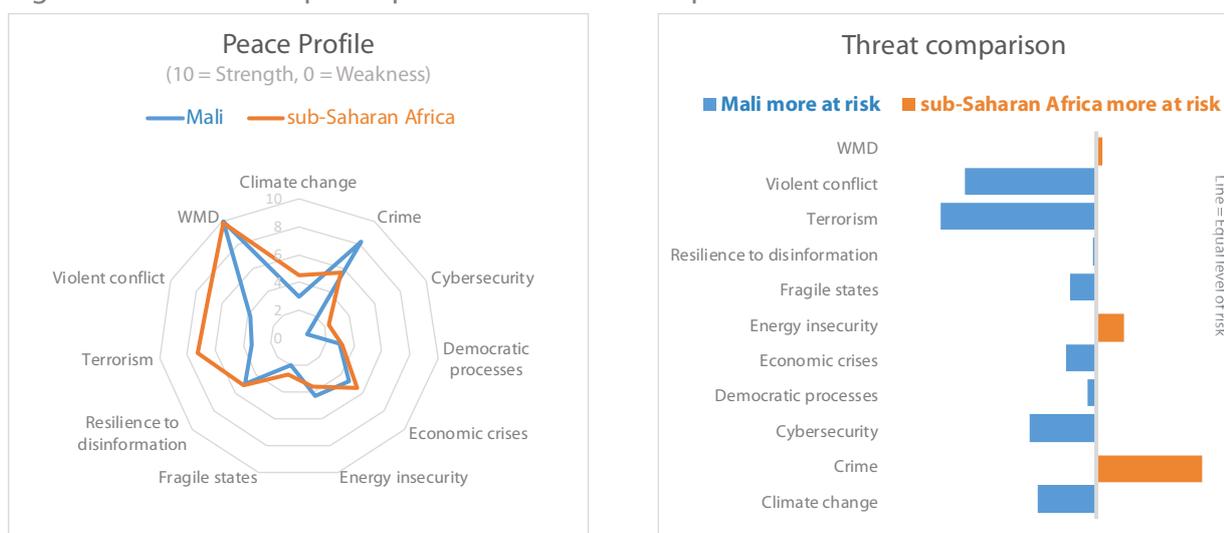
On 18 August 2020, a group of mutinying soldiers from the Malian army arrested President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita and forced him to resign and dissolve the government and National Assembly. Although the putschists promised to organise elections and reinstate the constitutional order, no clear path for transition emerged from the discussions with the West African regional authority, ECOWAS. The coup risks further destabilising the Sahel and challenges the EU strategy in the region.

Background

The [coup](#) – a [term denied](#) by its masterminds, calling themselves the Comité national pour le salut du peuple (CNSP) – is the culmination of the [protests](#) that began following the contested parliamentary elections of March 2020. [M5-RFP](#), a coalition made up of religious groups, political parties and civil society organisations emerged out of the protests and called for civil disobedience, which led to [increased violence](#) and deadly repression from 10 to 12 July. On [12 July](#), to appease the unrest, Prime Minister Boubou Cissé promised to set up a government of national unity. For his part, President Keita announced the 'de facto dissolution' of the Constitutional Court (suspected of partiality in assessing the elections) and hinted at the possibility of holding by-elections where results had been contested. [M5-RFP refused](#) to join a government led by Keita and called for further protests. After its failure to mediate a solution to the crisis since June, the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) renewed its call for appeasement [on 27 July 2020](#), comparing the situation to the one that had led to the 2012 coup. On 18 August 2020, mutineers [accessed](#) the presidential palace and arrested President Keita, Prime Minister Cissé and some other government officials. M5-RFP hailed the president's resignation, yet Imam [Mahmoud Dicko](#), a key M5-RFP figure in the protests, denied rumours that he would hold a post in the new government.

The present unrest was fuelled by the deep economic and [humanitarian crisis](#) and further compounded by the insecurity caused by Tuareg insurgents, violent Islamist groups and other armed groups that came into possession of an abundance of small arms after the fall of Libya's Qaddafi regime in 2011. Keita's government, riddled with [corruption](#), showed no willingness to address these issues, despite raising [hopes](#) after the 2013 presidential election and brokering a [peace agreement](#) between armed groups in 2015. President Keita's re-election in 2018 was [contested](#).

Figures 1 and 2 – Mali peace profile and threat comparison



Source: EPRS, Normandy Index 2020 (forthcoming)

Regional and international reactions

The [African Union](#) suspended Mali's membership, while the [G5 Sahel group](#) called for the release of President Keita and a return to constitutional order. [ECOWAS](#) took swift action by way of imposing sanctions on Mali, closing neighbouring countries' borders and sending Nigeria's former president as a [mediator](#). The [UN](#), which had recently [extended](#) the mandate of its mission in Mali to June 2021, condemned the president's overthrowing, as did other [important players](#) in the Sahel, such as [France](#). [China](#) blamed the 'attempt to seek a change of power through force'. Using a softer tone, [Russia](#), which is [increasingly involved in Africa](#) and reportedly [trained some officers](#) implicated in the coup, expressed its 'concern' about the situation. The [United States](#), having itself trained Mali's army, has suspended military ties with the country. The [EU](#), which is [strongly involved in the Sahel](#), notably through its CSDP missions in Mali ([EUTM Mali](#) and [EUCAP Sahel Mali](#)), acknowledged that [some of the putschists](#) had benefitted from EU training for the Malian armed forces and decided [to suspend the activities](#) of these missions, while vowing they 'will start working again as soon as possible'. Some staff from these missions might be [redeployed](#) to Burkina Faso.

Outlook

Following [tough negotiations](#), ECOWAS dropped its call for the 'immediate reinstatement of President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita as President of the Republic' – a claim that President Keita himself renounced – while the CNSP committed to release him for [medical reasons](#). While [ECOWAS calls for a civilian-led transition](#) leading to elections within 12 months at the latest, the CNSP has declared that the modalities of the transition are a purely domestic matter and that it would negotiate them with Malian political parties and civil society organisations. However, a concertation meeting scheduled for 29 August 2020 was [postponed](#) after the M5-RFP protested that it had not been invited. As of the end of August 2020, the CNSP has reportedly been in favour of a [three-year military-led transition](#), but has denied this; the M5-RFP has proposed a [civilian-led transition of up to two years](#).

Maliens have widely hailed the ousting of President Keita. However, the new leaders will have to quickly address Mali's long-standing [issues](#) such as corruption, an economic and financial crisis, and insecurity. To this end, the CNSP must involve most of the political and social forces in the process. It also needs to earn back its neighbours' trust, as insurgency ignores borders and cannot be fought at country level only. The [quick reaction](#) of regional organisations once again proves that [coups](#) are no longer accepted as a normal path to power in Africa. However, so far, ECOWAS mediation and sanctions have not achieved any sizeable results.

The new order in Mali might reshuffle the [influence ranking](#) in the region, where notably the French military presence is increasingly [contested](#). It [challenges the EU strategy](#) for the region, which appears not to have been able to anticipate the coup. This calls for [reassessing](#) the training of military staff by EU personnel – even though 'this coup d'état has been by no means related to the training that we are offering to the Malian soldiers', as the EU High Representative [pointed out](#). Moreover, the mutiny raises [questions](#) linked to the EU's deeper military involvement in partner countries, notably through the [European Peace Facility](#), planned for the next multiannual financial framework, which would allow the EU to finance its own military operations or provide support to foreign ones. More generally, further destabilisation of the region both offsets the results linked to the security aspects of the EU Sahel strategy and hampers its development aims.

European Parliament

The current developments in Mali are likely to be debated during the EP's [September 2020 plenary session](#). In addition to the usual debate on foreign affairs issues with the High Representative, Members (MEPs) are to discuss EU-Africa [security cooperation in the Sahel region](#), West Africa and the Horn of Africa. To this end, the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) adopted a [report](#) prepared by Javier Nart (Renew, Spain). In line with the [Parliament's position](#) favouring support to the security sectors of third countries, 'including, under exceptional circumstances, [to] the military', AFET calls for the EU to be allowed to provide 'military equipment to partner countries, including arms and ammunitions', while making sure 'that any military equipment is not given to recipients that are committing abuses, atrocities and other harms against civilian populations'.

