# PolicyBrief

## Military Coup and Its Effect on the Democratization Process in Mali and in the Region

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## Executive Summary

A military coup d'état that took place in Mali in August 2020 brought about the dissolution of the democratically elected government of President Ibrahim Keita. Military coups have a long history in West Africa and this coup is the fourth in Mali's 60 years of post-independence governance. However, military and autocratic governments do not appear to have successfully furthered the democratization agenda in that West African country.

Democracy is generally seen as the most ideal form of citizen organization as it is founded on popular control and political equality. Military governments, on the other hand, do not acquire their authority to govern through democratic means and are thus less inclined towards good governance and the development of democratic institutions. Furthermore, the military coups may act as a trigger to more coups. Policy considerations must, therefore, emphasize the development and sustainment of democratic institutions to ensure good governance and adequately manage ethnic and religious tensions within the polity.

# Key Points

- The 18 August 2020 military coup in Mali was a result of, *inter alia*, weakened institutions, government's failure to provide basic services for Malian citizens and to successfully manage and resolve intractable insurgency in the northern part of the country.

- The military coup may trigger further coup d'états across the region which is already historically considered as the most active region for military coups in Africa.

- Domestic and foreign policy considerations in Mali and the West African Sahel region have prioritized security over the development of democratic institutions and the support of good governance.

- Future policy considerations must emphasize democracy and support the development of democratic institutions.

- Democratization and good governance must be strengthened and sustained in a manner that reduces future military interventions in public governance.

# Introduction

On 18 August 2020, mutiny within the Malian military resulted in a coup d'état led by Colonel Assimi Goita. The coup d'état, which occurred after weeks of sustained protests by Malians calling for the resignation of democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, immediately dissolved the government and instituted an interim military government.[1] This particular coup, which is the latest in a long line of military interventions in public governance in the West African region and the fourth for Mali since its independence on 22 September 1960,[2]occurred in the middle of a global pandemic and sparked concerns across the region and the world.[3]

It is important for West African policy experts to consider how this recent coup will affect the democratization process in Mali and across the region as the regular incursions of the military in the country's governance has had effects on the nature of government in the region and on the democratization process in Mali.

This article thus attempts to contribute to the discussions on the effects of Mali's military coups on the democratisation process in the country and in the entire region. The article analyses Mali's coups from independence, the role of public protests in Mali's coups, and Mali's democracy. It also makes recommendations for policy makers to consider in decision making.

# The Democratization Process: Foundations of a Stable Democracy

## Mali's Democracy

Mali's transition to democracy began in 1991 when thousands of demonstrators took to the street to demand the resignation of the then president, President Moussa Traoré, after more than two decades of military rule. Subsequently, Lt. Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré launched a military coup d'état and overthrew Traoré's government. He then established a transitional government composed of military and civilian leaders that later handed power to a democratically-elected government in 1992. Mali's democratization process was, however, plagued by the re-emergence of the Tuareg's (nomadic people who live in the northern desert region of Mali) rebellion in the early 1990s.

Mali's democracy ran uninterrupted from 1992 to 2012 with Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992 – 1997; 1997 – 2002) and President Amadou Toumani Touré (2002 – 2007; 2007 - 2012) as democratically elected presidents. Despite having one of the lowest voting rates on the continent due largely to outdated voter rolls together with instances of reported electoral and voter fraud, problems with voter IDs, registries and ballots, most Malian elections have been considered free and fair by international observers.[4] The consensus politics of President Amadou Toumani Touré, where the opposition was co-opted into a coalition, undermined the political opposition under his regime unlike that of his predecessor, President Alpha Oumar Konaré, which had vibrant opposition, decentralization and dialogue as the hallmarks of democracy. For instance, President Amadou Toumani Touré ran independently for his second term in 2007 but he was backed by a super-alliance of 43 parties called the Alliance for Democracy and Progress (ADP) which included all but two political parties. During the years of Amadou Toumani Touré, Mali's democracy was uninterrupted but governance was characterised by lack of commitment and follow-through with respect to decentralization. This was illustrated by the government's lack of concern for improving local governance and accountability. Corruption

was rampant and illicit trafficking in northern Mali was also growing.

A brief military intervention on 21 March 2012 interrupted Mali's two-decade-long democracy, overthrowing the government of President Amadou Toumani Touré. Shortly after the coup, in 2013, the military actors returned the country to the path of democracy through the conduct of democratic elections won by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Mali continued in that path until the military coup of 2020 which overthrew the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. During the period of democratic rule that spanned 2013 to 2020, the government failed to follow through on peace agreements in the north, whereas the implementation of the Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in northern Mali required divergent perspectives on security and the presence of the Malian state in the north.

## Mali's Military Coups

Mali has had four military coups since its independence in 1960. Its first coup which occurred in 1968 was led by Lieutenant Moussa Traore who ruled from 19 November 1968 to 26 March 1991 and established Mali's second one-party system with the creation of Union Démocratique du People Malien (UDPM) in the late 1970s. The regime of Lieutenant Moussa Traore

was wracked by corruption, human rights abuses, poor governance, and low economic growth. Traore's government was ultimately ousted by a military coup led by Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré in March 1991. Mali's second coup was a result of Traore's violent restraint of student-led protests,5 years of economic decline and non-payment of civil servants' salaries.[6] Touré, unlike Traore, instituted an interim government to transition the country to a multi-party democracy. After conducting popular elections, the Touré government handed over political power to democratically elected President Konaré in 1992.

The Konaré administration (1992-2002) represented a high point of Malian political governance; it was characterized by respect for civil liberties, political rights, vibrant opposition, security reforms and steady economic growth. After Alpha Oumar Konaré's two-term presidency ended, retired General Touré contested, won elections, and became Mali's president in 2002. Under Touré's two-term presidency, Mali's democratic institutions were weakened, and corruption became rampant.[7] The democracy nurtured under the Konaré administration severely deteriorated. By the final year of Touré's presidency, a Tuareg rebellion had broken out in Northern Mali and the region had been overtaken by militant Islamist groups.[8]

Touré's administration ended in a coup led by Captain Amadou Sanogo in 2012 — Mali's third military coup since independence. The coup was a consequence of perceived lack of progress of Touré's administration in tackling the Tuareg rebellion. Unlike the former coups, this one was devoid of popular support: public protests did not take place to celebrate the takeover. Captain Sanogo's coup, instead of providing a lasting succour to the problem for which it was initially carried out, plunged the country into crisis and allowed the Al-Qaeda fighters to seize the desert north while the nomadic Tuareg tribesmen seeking independence pushed further south 'nearly unhindered'.[9] Commentators say that Mali went from a democratic exemplar to a regional bad-boy under military rule and the coup may have been needless as it came a month before the country was due for democratic elections—an opportunity to choose a new president.[10] In 2013, Sanogo handed over power to a democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Mali's fourth coup which was led by Colonel Assimi Goita came in August 2020 after three months of sustained protests by Malians calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.[11] The protests were largely about election promises that President Keita had made before being voted to power but failed to successfully implement–doing away with corruption, terrorism,

insurgency, and instability in Northern Mali. Thus, President Keita's government had been plagued by the same unresolved challenges that led to the downfall of the previous administrations.[12] Unlike the coup of 2012, that of August 2020 was cheered by the populace which had largely lost confidence in President Keita's government. The celebration[13] that greeted the overthrow of Keita's government and his resignation was an indication that the embattled president had become unpopular and lost public support.

## Military Coups and the Democratisation Process in Mali and the West African Region

Military Democracy requires cultivation and nurturing and military incursions into the process have the effect of stunting its progress. By abandoning the decentralization agenda and ostensibly stifling a vibrant opposition through the practice of consensus politics, post-1992 civilian governments in Mali have failed to cultivate and support the democratic process thereby leaving Mali's democratization process stunted. The result was a description of Mali's democracy as fragile and shallow.[14]

A weak democracy is a breeding ground for insecurity, corruption, and economic challenges and it makes a state susceptible to coup plots by the armed forces.[15] This is the case of Mali,

a country that has experienced two military interventions and a failed counter-coup within a decade. Frequent incursions of the military into governance mean that democratic institutions which underscore a thriving democracy are not given the opportunity to grow through repetitive use. The Malian democracy has, therefore, over the last eight years, remained in a state of transition not free to transcend beyond elections and move on to civil rule that establishes structures that support a full-fledged democracy—fair and legitimate elections, justice, equity, accountability, transparency, responsible leadership, efficient political institutions and respect for the rule of law.[16]

The fact that Mali experienced two military coups within a decade as a result of state failure is an indication of the long-term structural weakness in state governance in the country.[17] For the period covering 2009 to 2019, Mali had been recognised as being amongst the long-term most worsened countries alongside Syria and Yemen[18] and ranked 108th (out of 180 countries) in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index and 112th in the Press Index Ranking made by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).[19] It also stood 144th in the 2020 Global Peace Index Ranking run by the Institute for Economics and Peace.[20]

Across the West-African Sahel region, the socio-political and socio-economic conditions in Mali are replicated in several countries.[21] The security crisis which destabilized the northern Mali region in 2012 quickly spread across to the other countries that make up the G5 Sahel—Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger. Now all these countries face similar challenges relating to terrorism and cross-border transactional crimes; however, their responses have been quite different.[22] The domino effect of problems of Mali's northern region on its neighbours means that Mali's August 2020 coup d'état has a possibility of triggering other coup d'états across the Sahel and possibly as far south as Nigeria.

The pressure put on Mali's military junta to put in place a transitional government evidences the concerns that regional and international political and economic institutions such as the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN) have for the continued entrenchment of democratic values across the West African region. It is also an attempt to prevent any domino effect (of triggering coups across the region) that the Mali coup may have on other African countries in the region. This is not far-fetched from the fact that West Africa, unaided by weakened democratic institutions and corruption, has a history of military interventions in the midst of socio-political and security crises.[23]

However, fragile democracies overtaken by coups d'état only push the democratization conversation backwards and delay the needed reforms that strengthen democracy in government institutions. Military usurpers do not concern themselves with citizen rights and popular control because they are not beholden to the citizenry. If the situation in Mali triggers military intervention in other countries in the region, any democratic gains made over the last 30 years may be quickly lost. Governance will retrogress even further without transparency and accountability. It is not clear that a military government will have a better handle on the security concerns in the region than a civilian government.

# Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

An examination of Mali's beleaguered history reflects the failure of leadership and its political systems. A comparison of Mali's fate under military rule with that under democratic rule indicates that a sustained military government in Mali is detrimental not only to the country's democratization process but also to the welfare of its people. Mali's democratically elected leaders from Konaré to Keita have failed to find a lasting solution to the problems bedevilling their country – insurgency, instability, corruption, terrorism. These somewhat appear to provide some sort of justification for military intervention in Mali's affairs. However, military rule that is rife with cases of abuse of power, suspension of the rule of law, human rights abuses, and corruption is not the solution to Mali's problems. Policy experts and government officials across the region must, therefore, seriously consider the triggering effect that the situation in Mali may have across the region, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying economic decline.

International pressure, especially from regional communities such as the ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel and the African Union must be sustained to dissuade the coup plotters from holding onto the reins of government and to encourage a speedy transition to democracy. Democracy is the best option of citizen organization in Mali, the stability of which is important to the region. In the interim, implementation of the reforms and concessions promised by the Keita administration must begin to engage the public in active political affairs and encourage the transition toward democracy. The present Malian government should continue to encourage popular engagement in political activities. Member states in the regional communities must themselves foster democratic values if the communities are to be strengthened.

Beyond the rhetoric of instilling and fostering democratic principles by regional and international institutions, there is the need to

address the underlying problems and challenges which triggered the coups in Mali to forestall future coup d'états. The coups in Mali all have a similar narrative which needs to be urgently addressed—the nomadic Tuareg tribesmen seeking independence, influx of Al-Qaeda and ISIS fighters into northern Mali, terrorism, insurgency, poor governance, and low economic growth. Considering that Mali and other countries in the region have similar challenges, failure to find a lasting solution to these issues exposes Mali and the entire region to possible military coups in the not-too-near-future. A nation with strong democratic institutions is less likely to devolve into a failed state, as is the case in several regions in the Sahel where the state apparatus has failed, and several armed non-state actors have accorded themselves territorial sovereignty. Pro-democracy conversations and activities must be occurring in Mali and across the West African region.

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