

Mali: Staying Engaged Despite Souring Relations

The Malian government's conflict with jihadist insurgents has entered its tenth year with no resolution in sight. The government that came to power in 2021 has adopted a populist, anti-Western stance, blaming France, its long-time ally in fighting the militants, for the deadlock, while doubling down on offensive military action that has resulted in a surge in civilian casualties. Alienated by Bamako's rhetoric and its decision to bring in the Russian private security company Wagner, France and other EU member states are withdrawing their troops from Mali, except for those deployed in the UN's mission there. Although the Malian army has recently won limited victories in the country's centre, the departure of its best equipped allies could shift the conflict's momentum, energise militants and worsen the protracted humanitarian crisis. The authorities in Bamako have thus far shown little inclination to revive a 2015 peace agreement the government made with (non-jihadist) armed groups in the north. Meanwhile, the state has stepped up prosecution of political opponents, space for public debate is shrinking and online attacks on independent media are proliferating.

Bamako's actions have greatly complicated the task for outside actors concerned with stability in the Sahel. Though the government's feud with France has seemingly won it broad domestic support, it has worried neighbouring countries struggling to contain jihadist violence on their own soil. Bamako has also taken a hardline stance against scheduling elections that, per the previous transitional government's agreement with other West African capitals, were to occur in early 2022. Its ties with most of its neighbours are at an all-time low since the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed trade restrictions on Mali over the authorities' refusal to compromise on the elections issue.

Despite the withdrawal of French and European troops now under way and Mali's growing opposition to the West, the EU and its member states must endeavour to keep channels of communication open. They should avoid public disputes with Bamako that could undermine the ECOWAS efforts to help restore civilian rule in Mali, while working quietly with regional partners to nudge the authorities toward a consensual transition.

To these ends, the EU and its member states should:

- ❑ Endorse ECOWAS-led talks to forge consensus on the timeframe for Mali's return to constitutional rule, urging the parties to de-escalate polarising rhetoric and find points of compromise.
- ❑ Increase diplomatic and financial support for Malian civil society, particularly for groups that support the freedoms of movement and expression and monitor restrictions on those rights.
- ❑ Make available and, where appropriate, provide support for electoral reform initiatives, including by working with civil society organisations and relevant authorities as opportunities arise. An important improvement, which the EU and member states should support, would be to establish an independent electoral body.

Mali Alienates Traditional Partners after Second Coup

After the military overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in August 2020, it put in place a largely civilian government that forged good working relations with foreign partners and neighbouring countries, but the arrangement proved unstable. Military leaders continued to pull the strings of government decision-making, causing civilian officials to chafe. The government's attempts to free itself from military influence prompted army officers to stage a second coup in May 2021, installing Colonel Assimi Goïta, who had been vice president, as interim president and Choguel Kokalla Maïga as prime minister. The latter exploited hardening anti-French sentiment – the result of grievances built up over the course of years of France's military presence – by ascribing the continued deterioration of security wholly to Paris's stabilisation strategy, which since 2014 has centred around a military counter-insurgency campaign called Operation Barkhane. The new government has also significantly slowed down talks aimed at implementing the important 2015 peace agreement signed with northern armed groups, and backed by the EU and other international actors.

A series of escalating verbal clashes then set Mali on a collision course with Western and regional partners. Fierce objections by the former to Bamako's plan to bring in mercenaries from Russia's Wagner Group led to a standoff. At the same time, the government reneged on an agreement between ECOWAS and the previous transitional government that elections would be held by February 2022. In January, in response to what it saw as Bamako's provocative proposal to extend the transition by up to five years, ECOWAS restricted regional trade with Mali and froze the country's financial assets. Additionally, the bloc imposed individual sanctions on senior government officials. These penalties deeply aggrieved Mali's leadership, which called for street protests and alleged that ECOWAS was acting under foreign pressure. The regional standoff affected another grouping, the G5 Sahel, which aimed to promote security and development in the five countries, although in fact little has been achieved. Mali effectively left the group in mid-May when its partners refused to hand its rotating presidency over to Bamako's military leaders.

Against this backdrop, relations between Mali and European partners quickly worsened. On 24 January, authorities told the Danish government to immediately withdraw a 90-strong contingent that was to operate within Takuba, a European task force that France had helped assemble to complement Operation Barkhane. The Malian authorities claimed Denmark had flouted procedure. A week later, angered by the French government's disparaging remarks about the transitional authorities' legitimacy, Bamako expelled the French ambassador. At that point, and following in ECOWAS' footsteps, the EU on 4 February imposed travel bans and asset freezes on five prominent officials, including Maïga, for undermining the transition.

Since then, the rift has widened further still. As it became clear that Russians in camouflage gear were indeed arriving at military bases in central Mali – despite the authorities' emphatic denials that they were working with Wagner – French President Emmanuel Macron said the French counter-terrorism force's presence in the country had become untenable. On 17 February, he announced that French and

other European troops part of the Barkhane and Takuba operations would withdraw and redeploy to other countries in the Sahel by June. In April, the EU suspended its training of Mali's army, though it has kept offering humanitarian law courses, and giving strategic and organisational advice to the military command and the government, especially the defence ministry. Around the same time, the country's centre saw a modest improvement of security following army pressure on jihadist groups, allowing for a return of some displaced people and some timid renewed economic activity.

The Malian government says security has improved because it is "diversifying partnerships", arguing that its efforts will create an enabling environment for eventual elections. Authorities appear to genuinely believe that Russian assistance, which includes rapid delivery of arms purchases and the presence of Russian paramilitaries alongside the national army in combat situations, can help respond to the Malian people's desire for progress in the counter-insurgency campaign. They attribute the improvement in security in some areas to new military equipment and Russian "instructors". The army has amplified news of its advances through a vigorous communications campaign.

But it is far from certain that the army will be able to keep its new foothold in the centre. Recent history shows that the army lacks capacity to hold areas for any length of time and that jihadist groups quickly return, often bent on revenge against civilians perceived as having helped the authorities. Meanwhile, insecurity still plagues other parts of the country. The impending departure of Barkhane and Takuba forces could see jihadist groups opportunistically expand their operations, while the UN force will be weakened as it previously relied on air cover, as well as medical and logistical support from the French. The humanitarian situation remains dire, in terms of both displacement and civilian casualties. In addition, while the French mission drew its share of human rights complaints, Wagner's track record gives reason to believe that abuses will get worse with the European troops gone and Wagner "instructors" influencing the army's behaviour.

Indeed, recent Malian military actions point to soldiers' disregard for the requirements of international humanitarian law and a heavy toll on the civilian population. In April, the army said it killed 203 militants during an operation in the village of Moura. According to multiple reports by human rights organisations and international media, the operation turned into a bloodbath as troops and Wagner mercenaries summarily executed hundreds of civilians they accused of collaborating with jihadists. The government barred the UN from investigating the incident.

There are also signs of a growing political crackdown. The judiciary has arrested or opened cases against opposition leaders, notably several who are very critical of the prime minister, for engaging in destabilising activities and inciting ethnic divisions, and jailed two politicians for criticising the head of government. (Their criticism of him is not the stated reason for the arrests.) Further, the government is using anti-Western sentiment as justification for circumscribing the space for public debate – accusing its opponents of siding with foreign powers. Activists, journalists

and members of the political opposition are expressing growing concerns about their ability to work freely or counter official narratives.

How the EU Can Stay Engaged

The EU has long sought to take a comprehensive approach to the situation in Mali, emphasising political solutions to the challenges the country faces, good governance and social, environmental and economic development. It has in the last several years [promised a surge of support](#) for civilian leaders across the Sahel to assist them in promoting good governance, but with violence rising, that proved hard to implement. Now, the standoff with Bamako has left European diplomats at a loss, not just about how to put its strategy into practice, but also how to salvage relations. Staying engaged at member state level in the UN mission in Mali, in line with the German government's 11 May announcement that it would boost its troop contribution, is a good step. In addition, there are three important things they can and should do.

First, the EU and its member states should throw their weight behind ECOWAS diplomacy as the bloc tries to persuade Bamako that it must agree to a deadline for a return to constitutional rule. [Recent statements](#) by the two sides indicate that tensions between Bamako and the bloc may be easing, raising prospects for an agreement. Through quiet diplomacy and (when appropriate) public support, the EU should use its good offices to help these negotiations move toward consensus. At this point, further EU sanctions would likely complicate an already delicate negotiation. Rather, the EU should signal its willingness to start dialling down sanctions if progress is made with the West African body.

Secondly, the EU should build on its existing support for Malian civil society organisations to counter tightening restrictions on freedom of expression. With international rights groups and foreign media finding it increasingly difficult to work in Mali, domestic groups will play a vital role in highlighting abuses and restrictions and in ensuring a healthy public debate, but they are facing mounting pressure. The EU's diplomatic and financial support can help them sustain their activities, which are valuable both in the short term and in the run-up to eventual elections. While there is some risk that Western funding will undermine the credibility of local NGOs, the EU can at least partly mitigate it by working with groups that are well-established in their locales and sectors, including the many vibrant women's groups working outside the capital. For the moment, given the tense political atmosphere, the EU should avoid highly visible initiatives.

Thirdly, the EU and its member states should offer their support for electoral reform initiatives. Many European diplomats in Brussels and the Sahel understandably worry that the authorities will use promises of major reform, and potentially constitutional amendment, as a pretext for delaying the transition to constitutional rule. Nevertheless, there is [wide agreement](#) that some reforms are needed and the EU should make clear that it is ready to help flesh out necessary restructuring to move toward elections. Perhaps most important among the reforms under discussion is the establishment of an independent electoral body, which the EU and member

states should support. Such a body would both absorb the territorial administration ministry's role in organising elections and limit the constitutional court jurisdiction for the arbitration of electoral disputes. Both steps would be important for increasing public trust in election integrity, as [many Malians accuse](#) the territorial administration and court of meddling in 2020 parliamentary contests in favour of the ruling party. While there appears to be solid domestic support for establishing an independent elections authority – it was identified as a priority in forums like the 2019 national inclusive dialogue, the 2020 national concertation days and the national refoundation meeting of December 2021 – actually creating one will be a significant undertaking. It will require complex legislative changes and additional resources. The EU should make clear that it can and will help with both technical and financial support.