

West African coups: just changing masters

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Mali, then Burkina Faso, and finally Niger have experienced coups d'état and subsequently formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These military juntas are pursuing a unified policy of international rapprochement, a shared strategy in the fight against jihadists, and a common rhetoric around the defence of national sovereignty. What should we make of this new reality for West Africa? Some see these coup leaders as new heralds of Africa's liberation. Unfortunately, the reality is quite different.

The common thread among these three coups is that they are directed against French policy. This is not the same, for example, as the coup in Gabon, a Central African country also part of France's sphere of influence.

The crisis is so profound that French soldiers have been expelled, diplomatic missions closed, and French nationals are considered persona non grata.

France's unacknowledged African history

There are multiple causes of this understandable popular rejection, particularly the youth. There is, of course, the history of France's relations with African countries, marked by slavery and colonialism, aspects of which many French politicians still view positively.

France's neocolonial policy post-independence, was known as 'Françafrique'. The former colonial power maintained its economic and financial dominance with the continued use of the [CFA franc](#), a currency guaranteed by the French Treasury. Military domination has also persisted, with French troops stationed in Gabon, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, and Djibouti. And this is without mentioning the more than sixty military interventions on the continent since independence. The intervention in Libya met with strong opposition and destabilised the Sahel region. France's complicity in the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda remains a painful memory.

Confrontation with French policy

A French journalist published a book entitled [Arrogant as a Frenchman in Africa](#), a phrase aptly describing how French authorities have cut themselves off from African youth. We remember the statements of a former president who declared in Dakar that ["the African man has not entered history"](#) and President Macron's [disdainful joke](#) about his counterpart in Burkina Faso insinuating that he was leaving the room to fix the air conditioning. The unfair and humiliating visa policy also contributes to this perception.

France is seen as an Islamophobic and racist country due to its treatment of migrants and discriminatory policies toward members of the African diaspora.

The failure of French military operations in the Sahel

France's inability to eradicate the jihadist threat in this region is a major cause of the rift. The

French army intervened first in Mali with [Operation Serval](#). This operation, mistakenly considered a success, merely dispersed Islamist groups, who quickly reorganised and launched increasingly bold attacks. The French authorities then embarked on a broader operation, [Barkhane](#), covering all Sahel countries. Despite eight years of intervention, Islamists have advanced in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso, leading to widespread misunderstanding and even conspiracy theories about a supposed alliance between France and the Islamists.

The truth is, of course, quite different. French authorities failed to see that the insurgencies were grafted onto recurring problems which varied according to the territory. These included land and water competition between herders (mainly Fulani) and farmers, challenges to the rigidity of social structures by young people, or revolts by descendants of slaves and other marginalised families. Additionally, Islamist activities offer many young people remuneration through various trafficking activities. France's response was purely security-oriented. Worse, in Mali in 2017, people at the National Reconciliation Conference urged authorities to start negotiations with the belligerents. France firmly opposed this while at the same time negotiating and paying ransoms for the release of French hostages.

Coups as responses to popular mobilisation

The coups occurred amid significant popular mobilisations denouncing both corrupt regimes and their inability to resolve the security crisis.

In Mali, large demonstrations preceded the coup. These were led by a coalition, the June 5 Movement - Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP), composed of parties and Islamic associations. A minority faction of the M5-RFP, led by Choguel Maïga, supported the junta.

In Burkina Faso, a revolution in 2014 toppled Blaise Compaoré's dictatorship and the French military facilitated Compaoré's escape from the country. This was followed by the election of President Roch Kaboré, whose poor security record facilitated the military coup.

Niger's case is slightly different. The coup by General Tiani, head of the presidential guard, resulted from an internal struggle within the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism, which ruled the country.

However, in all three cases, the juntas appeared as saviours and enjoyed some popular support.

The Role of Ecowas and French Criticism

The popularity of the juntas was bolstered by the policy of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas). Under the pretext of restoring constitutional order, Ecowas imposed a harsh economic embargo that primarily affected populations already hard-hit by the COVID crisis. Ecowas even threatened military intervention against Niger while endorsing all electoral frauds. At the same time, French authorities continuously criticised the juntas publicly. Macron even refused to comply with Niger's demand for French troops to leave, deeming the government illegitimate. The juntas took advantage of this to withdraw from the regional structure and form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), an economic and military alliance.

Are the Juntas progressive?

The coup leaders have adopted a sovereigntist, anti-French, and anti-Western discourse that aligns perfectly with Putin's ideology. Democracy is criticised as an externally imposed and unsuitable system for African traditions or as ineffective.

Is the promised success evident? Clearly not. The security situation is deteriorating significantly, with jihadists controlling vast territories. The recent [attack on the Mansila barracks](#) in Burkina Faso, where over a hundred soldiers perished, demonstrates the juntas' incapacity to resist. Ironically, the detractors of France have pursued the same security-focused policy and reject any political solution to the conflict. The use of costly Wagner mercenaries has resulted in numerous massacres, such as in [Moura](#), where over 500 civilians were killed by mercenaries and Malian soldiers. Niger has enlisted the services of a Turkish mercenary company, [SADAT](#). In Burkina Faso, the junta has created poorly armed and trained militias, the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP), who are easy targets for Islamist groups and often target the Fulani community.

Suppression of democracy and repression

As the crisis deepens, the juntas weaken and respond by shrinking democratic space. Political activities are banned, and leaders are either arrested or exiled, as with Oumar Mariko, leader of a radical left-wing Malian organisation. The press is censored, opponents are imprisoned or sent to the front lines with the VDP, as happened in Burkina Faso to lawyer Guy-Hervé Kam, co-founder of the militant civil society organisation "Balai Citoyen," and the former foreign minister, even at the age of 70. Union leaders, such as Moussa Diallo of Burkina Faso's General Confederation of Labour, are persecuted.

Some may be deceived by the juntas' sovereigntist or even anti-imperialist rhetoric, which merely mimics other African dictators. Accused of corruption or electoral fraud, they defend themselves by adopting anti-colonialist rhetoric to vilify their opponents.

In practice, the juntas are indistinguishable from other dictatorships: same censorship, same repression, same electoral fraud, same corruption. The only difference is their allegiance to Putin. Those tempted by the "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" policy disregard the interests of the people of those countries and fail to see that the juntas have not freed them from neocolonialism; they have merely changed masters.

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