

Mali's Corona Coup of 2020: Untangling a Vicious Cycle

The coup of 18 August 2020 in Mali will be remembered as the Corona Coup. During the previous months, and in the midst of a deadly global pandemic, public discontent there had swelled and festered, until flooded the streets to join massive demonstrations against the government, organised by a coalition of civil society organisations starting June 5th. The rate of contamination surged (see Fig. 1) but it could not stop the protests. In fact Mali reported its highest single-day case spike on June 5th, with 110 new cases of coronavirus, according to data from the European CDC. But Malians were angry

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enough to overlook health security measures and they held regular rallies until the army stepped in and deposed Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, commonly known as IBK.

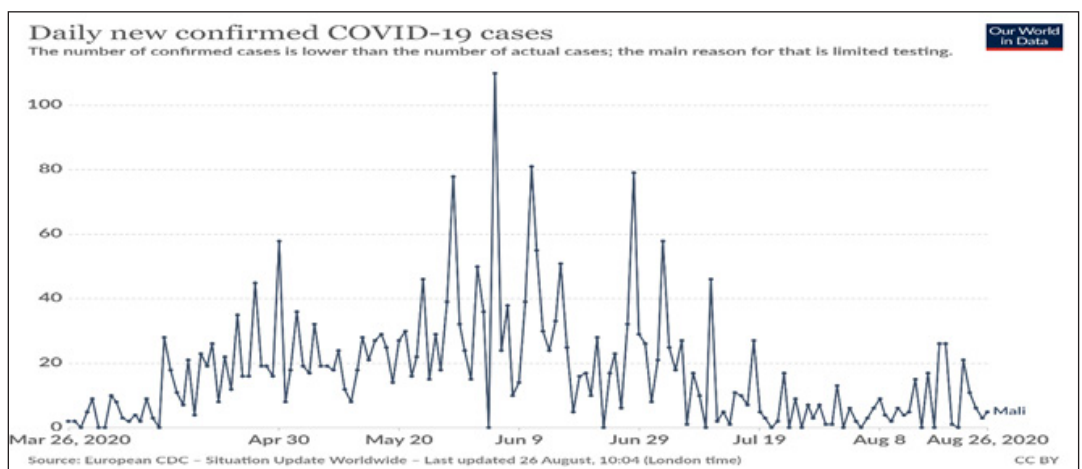


Figure 1: A graph showing the number of new cases in Mali since the beginning of the pandemic in March. The surge in new infections noted in June can be reasonably explained by the beginning of popular demonstrations.

Source: <https://coronamali.info/live-infection-coronavirus/>. Data: European Centre for Disease Control (CDC).

In a scene that could have come from a melodramatic soap opera, ousted President IBK gave his resignation speech wearing a face mask, under the scrutiny of the putschists. In a sorrowful tone, he said he was not hateful of anybody, insisted that he had done his best to uplift Mali and reform the army, and declared he did not want any bloodshed. The two-minute televised speech will surely go down in the annals of Mali's history. It was the denouement of the most impressive demonstration of the Malian army's capacity to discard its principal-agent relationship with the president, notwithstanding the fact that the latter is the constitutional head of the armed forces. This episode exposed once more the fragility of Mali's political ecosystem, but it was not a surprise to keen observers of its long-running quandary.

Not a surprising coup

In Mali, a coup is always an option. The country's historical trajectory and political economy corroborate this statement. The country has had six presidents since its independence sixty years ago, with four transitions taking place through coups.

The first political transition in Mali, in 1968, followed a coup. It was a decisive episode that led to the foundation of a fragile political ecosystem in which political leadership was unlikely to survive when economic, security and social crises mixed. A donor-driven economy, a perverse path-dependency trajectory and a web of weak or inefficient regional and global security mechanisms perpetuated instability and devastation in Mali.

Aid delivered through budget support programmes has disempowered and infantilised Mali's political leaders. It has led to misaligned donor-

driven development policies that add little if any value to people's livelihoods. In 2020, international assistance represented 11.2 per cent of the country's planned budget.

A vicious adverse selection mechanism is biased towards the election of old political elites and shrinks the leadership pool. Indeed, the leadership supply processes favour longevity in politics and a perverse alignment with foreign interests to the detriment of the common good. In every case, older people disconnected from the aspirations of the youth and with limited commitment to deliver needed services monopolise the political field. In these conditions, voters are left with a choice of bitter pills, with easily foreseeable outcomes.

The median age of Mali's population from 1950 to 2020 is seventeen years. In the same period, the average age of the president when taking power is sixty-seven years. This age gap exacerbates the divide between the political elites and the majority of the citizens who fill the streets to express their frustration whenever various crises hit the country.

Mali has always counted on its neighbours and various regional arrangements to help build a balanced political environment and safeguard the country's security within and across its borders. Nonetheless, during the latest episode, a tenuous regional and global context contributed to the further deterioration of an already precarious situation.

An enabling regional and global context

The most decisive factor that led to the 18 August coup is the remarkable conjuncture of regional and international challenges.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), one of the most dynamic Regional Economic Communities (REC) in Africa, has been tremendously weakened by opposition to the new Eco currency, which has seen Nigeria and Ghana, among others, divided against the West Africa Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) countries, which include Mali. Despite travel restrictions due to the coronavirus, the regional institution deployed former president Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria to start a mediation process, but this has delivered limited success thus far.

At the continental level, the African Union (AU) commission's position on the way forward for Mali following the coup has been unclear; the Peace and Security Council (PSC) has been relatively silent. In the context of increasing distrust between ECOWAS and the putschists, the AU will need to provide leadership and facilitate negotiations between the various stakeholders during this transition period.

MINUSMA, with 15,610 personnel in Mali, is the second-largest UN peacekeeping mission. However, with a limited mandate and with the US having unilaterally cut its share of the UN peacekeeping budget from 28.5 per cent to 25 per cent, MINUSMA has not been effective and has become the deadliest UN mission, with close to 200 casualties recorded since its launch in 2013.

Further, Mali's great neighbour, Algeria, has been too absorbed with its own internal challenges to give proper attention to what is happening on its doorstep. The most apparent consequence of Algeria's passiveness is the limited effect of the Algiers peace deal concluded in 2015 under its auspices.

Is Mali France's Afghanistan?

It is no secret that France plays an outsized role in Mali's modern history. As the former colonial power, it has shaped the institutions and the leaders who are failing the country that France considers its *pré carré*. When Mali unravelled under a historic hybrid secessionist-jihadist rebellion in 2012, Paris launched Operation Serval. After a lightning success against the rebels, Serval became the poster child of France's external operations (OPEX). Serval's success enticed France to put forward a *tout sécuritaire* approach in Mali and the Sahel region. Thus, Operation Barkhane, an international anti-insurgent force, was established in 2014. However, six years down the road, Mali has become France's Afghanistan.

Barkhane's objective to support the Malian army to acquire the capacity to provide security independently from external forces has not been achieved; the Malian army is still in tatters. Its ambition to stop jihadists from seizing and holding territory has only partially been met. Furthermore, the cost of the operation in monetary terms (four million euros per day) and human lives (forty-eight on the French side and hundreds on the Malian side) has been a concern to France.

I highlight the various factors above to drive home the idea that there might exist the symptoms of a Mali fatigue. Barkhane has been the object of much debate in the French media and scholarly research over the past few years. Paris has tried with little success to position the operation under a European umbrella to garner more funds and political support from its allies. Germany, for example, has resisted French proposals by using the argument of its foreign policy doctrine of 'global civilian power'. Nevertheless, France benefits from

critical logistical support from its EU partners. Despite these setbacks, France is forging ahead with Barkhane, as was reiterated by Emmanuel Macron while replying to a journalist question during an interview just a day after the Mali coup.¹

France's excessive focus on security crowds out other potential options. It is likely to continue seeking to exercise significant influence on the political process post-IBK. Conversely, all efforts and energy spent on a security-first approach delay the formation of a viable political settlement and the rebuilding of Mali's institutions. Ultimately, it is the ordinary citizen on the streets of Mali who will bear the cost of a lengthy and uncertain post-coup transition if it does not lead to an overhaul of Mali's institutions and a strengthening of its mechanisms of accountability.

A scenario bound to repeat itself

Given the conditions above, many fear that the coup scenario is written in advance. Like a looming threat, it repeats itself when the imbalances in the accountability triangle of people-army-government are substantial.

As in the past, the euphoric installation of a fresh political leadership and a short grace period are giving way to the familiar politics of dillydallying and stalling. Suboptimal political leadership feeds popular discontent. At boiling point, frustrated and

angry citizens start rallying as they actively demand more ethical governance and accountability. If nothing transformative happens, they turn to the army for support to topple a democratically elected leadership. This is the essence of Mali's implicit civil-military social contract. And when international security arrangements are compromised, a coup is an even more likely outcome. It is this very cycle that repeated itself with now former President IBK, albeit with a marked difference from past coups—the 2020 unrest and coup occurred amid a devastating global coronavirus pandemic.

Note

1. <https://www.facebook.com/oeildafrique/videos/304693400640951/>

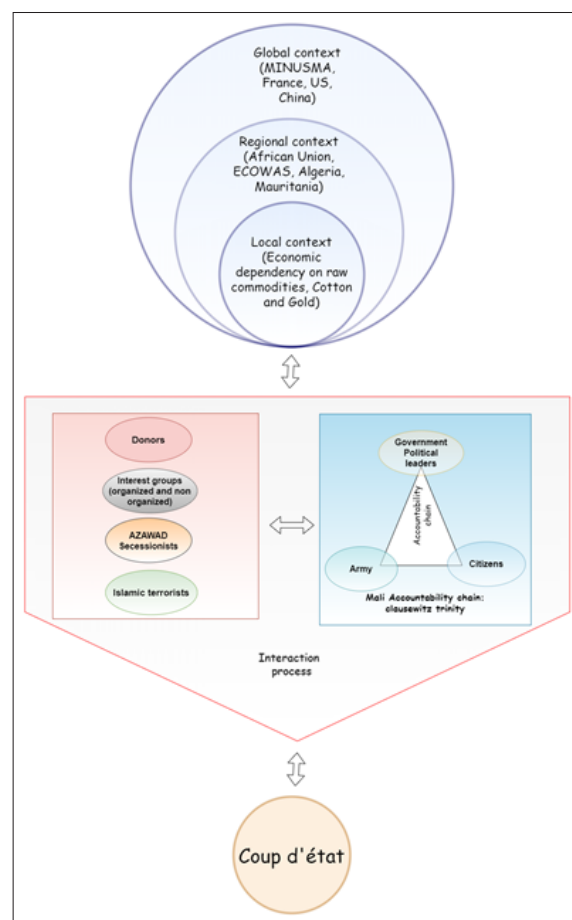


Figure 2: Coups d'État in Mali – Conceptual framework and contextual interactions

Source: Kodjo Tchioffo. Modeled from Bresser (2009) contextual interactions theory and Clausewitz paradoxical trinity