

27 October 2022

Mali: political instability and its wider implications



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The coup d'état in Burkina Faso at the end of last month, the second in that country this year, serves as a reminder of the chronic and worsening instability across the Sahel, which is beginning to threaten the region's littoral neighbours.

Shaking up the neighbours

While civilian and constitutional rule had become the norm in West Africa over the course of the two last decades, since August 2020 we have witnessed two coups in Mali, one in Guinea, and now two in Burkina, a trend which has alarmed the chancelleries of the region, who fear the implications of such a precedent. It's not for nothing that the international response to these events has been led by the regional body, ECOWAS, with the African Union, UN, and major donors very much in the back seat. But ECOWAS has proven unable to maintain a united front, and has recently relaxed sanctions and acquiesced to extended transitions back to constitutional rule in Mali and elsewhere.

Mali at a crossroads

Mali is the nexus of many of the tendencies now afflicting the entire region, of which political instability is merely the most obvious. It was not ever thus. Mali's rich civilisation and cultural achievement (especially in the plastic, musical and literary arts) is well-known; more recently, defying poverty and attendant political pressures, it was a beacon of democracy for many years. But in the last decade, a conjuncture of forces has given rise to a "multidimensional crisis" which has shaken the country's foundations.

Long-standing alienation in the sparsely populated and marginalised North gave rise to a series of ethnic rebellions, which jihadist affiliates of Al-Qaida and later Daesh were quick to take advantage of, routing government forces and nearly seizing the capital, Bamako. French intervention, and later UN, European and regional contingents, kept the jihadis at bay, but were unable to drive them out of the North or even the central swathes of the country. For at least a decade now, the government's writ has not run far outside the cities in central and northern Mali. Now its control is being challenged even in the southern heartland, where the bulk of the population and food production, as well as its mineral resources, are found. Behind these conflicts

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lies the eternal rivalry between nomadic pastoralists and sedentary agriculturalists, compounded by desertification, an effect of climate change.

Coups within coups

The August 2020 coup was initially very popular, in part because of exasperation with the former government's performance against the terrorist threat, its mismanagement of the pandemic, and a dubious parliamentary election. Although it has little to show for its two years in power, the current government appears to retain considerable mass support, appealing to nationalist sentiment and bad memories of the ancien régime. It is increasingly military-dominated, particularly since the May 2021 putsch, which replaced an interim civilian president with Colonel Assimi Goita, the leader of the junta. Many key cabinet portfolios are held by military figures, and every ministry has a military watchdog; most recently, the mercurial civilian Prime Minister, Choguel Kokalla Maïga, was replaced by Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga (no relation) in August of this year, ostensibly on health grounds. This militarisation of government has been accompanied by increasing authoritarianism and limits on free speech. Among the government's latest acts was the promulgation a fortnight ago of a new draft constitution, which would centralise power in the presidency.

The Colonels and the Russians

The young colonels who seized power in August 2020 are clever and tactically shrewd, but they are unworldly and lack experience in government. If they have a strategy, it is bafflingly obscure. The arrest of nearly fifty Ivorian peacekeepers in July of this year might play well in the streets of Bamako, but does nothing for Mali's internal security, its relations with its neighbours, or its international reputation. Likewise, the expulsion of French forces capitalises on resentment against the former colonial power, but further imperils national security. Hiring Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group has led to severe human rights abuses, such as the massacre of hundreds of civilians in the village of Moura in March of this year. But, despite being unconstrained by the laws of war the Russians have not stemmed the advance of the jihadis, who are now striking the outskirts of the capital.

The Russian presence reflects Putin's effort to extend Moscow's influence in Africa, described in AP Insights [#144](#) and [#161](#), but it also represents pure commercial opportunism on the Wagner Group's part, matched with a degree of desperation and naivety in Bamako. The junta's decision to bring in Russian mercenaries predates Putin's invasion of Ukraine, which has since exposed unexpected weaknesses in Russian conventional military capacities. But Wagner's info-ops are proving quite successful in influencing opinion and fanning anti-French and anti-UN sentiment.

Islam is a cloak worn loosely in Mali, and there is little sign of sympathy for the jihadi movements. But a combination of terror, alienation at the periphery, and mismanagement at the centre could well lead to the collapse of the Malian state, with devastating implications for the people of Mali and the wider region.

Book Review

***The Consul: An Insider Account from Australia's Diplomatic Frontline* by Ian Kemish – available on [Amazon](#)**

Published by the **University of Queensland Press**, this is "An absorbing insider's account of leadership and service within Australia's Consular Service, through tumultuous events including

the September 11 attacks, the Bali bombings and the Boxing Day Tsunami. As head of Australia's consular service, Ian Kemish played a central role in the nation's response to some of the most dramatic events of the early twenty-first century, including the September 11 attacks and the Bali bombings. He led the small band of Australian consuls as they confronted the new challenges of global jihadism, supporting families who lost loved ones, and negotiated the release of Australians unjustly detained abroad. In *The Consul*, Kemish offers a unique and personal perspective on Australia's foreign affairs challenges of the last two decades, from hostage diplomacy to the political sensitivities of repatriating Australians abroad. This timely and engaging book also asks us to consider how world events have changed the way we travel now and in the future."

Review by **James Watt CVO**, former British Ambassador to Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon – "I've just finished reading your book - really excellent, well done. As you might imagine, I was gripped by memories of the emotions and dilemmas you describe so well in your poised, thoughtful, calmly narrated account."

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