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Popular Support: The Only Basis of Legitimacy for West Africa's New Military Regimes?

Boubacar Haidara

Starting with Mali in August 2020, a series of coups d'état in the West African Sahel has brought to power military regimes that have subsequently become popular with their respective publics. Demonstrations in support of them have regularly been held on an unprecedented scale in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The process began in Mali, quickly appeared to be a recipe that worked well, and was duplicated almost identically in Burkina Faso and Niger. The convergence of the views of the leaders of these countries led to the announcement of their coordinated and simultaneous withdrawal from ECOWAS¹ in January 2024 (Westcott 2024), which had taken restrictive measures against them in response to the coups. These countries had already announced the creation of their own regional structure, the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), in September 2023 (TV5 Monde 2024).

Since then, the countries in this alliance have made major changes—in security, domestic policy, and foreign policy—that seem to have been supported by a large proportion of the population. Military cooperation with France was halted abruptly and replaced by closer cooperation with Russia. These and other measures have been seen by part of the population as a return to the sovereignty of the countries concerned. The Malian transitional government went as far as to declare January 14th its National Day of Regained Sovereignty.

The situation in Niger was the logical continuation of a dynamic that began in Mali. Six coups have occurred since then: two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, one in Guinea, and the last one in Niger. It seems reasonable to think that Mali inspired the coups in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea and has succeeded in influencing the internal political trajectory, and above all the foreign policy, of Burkina and Niger, with whom it faces the same challenges.

The coups d'état had the same justification in all three countries (Guinea being the exception): the desire for change because of the inability of the deposed governments to improve the security situation. After the coup, Niger was quickly put under pressure by ECOWAS, which even considered military intervention against the country's military government. In

the meantime, the putschists succeeded in instrumentalizing the crowds. A series of pro-putsch demonstrations were organized against ECOWAS and France, presented as the main instigator of the sanctions imposed on Niger under the cover of ECOWAS. Relying on this narrative, the Nigerien junta succeeded in transforming what, at the outset, strongly resembled a personal ambition to take power into a struggle for national liberation and sovereignty from France. The French embassy was targeted, with the ambassador kept under siege until his departure from Niger, and demonstrations by junta supporters were held around French military bases.

A delegation from the Nigerien junta was quickly dispatched to Mali to meet with transitional president Assimi Goïta. A posteriori, the Nigerien junta seemed to consider the Malian case a success that had to be repeated at all costs: the end of military-cooperation agreements with France, the expulsion of the French ambassador, the banning of French TV channels (France 24) and radio stations (RFI), the portrayal of France as the sponsor of jihadist groups, all the restrictive measures taken by regional bodies (e.g., ECOWAS) in response to the coups presented to the public as French machinations, and closer ties with Russia. Apart from the last goal, Niger completed in just three months the process that had taken Mali almost two years. Burkina Faso followed the same trajectory. What has been called a success is in fact a dynamic based on the ability of juntas to secure lasting popular support. In Mali, such support is evidence of the sometimes visibly popular adherence to the often abrupt and radical policies put in place.

The type of relationship that can be seen among the AES countries could be based on three aspects. First, the failure of ECOWAS to manage the Malian case after the first coup, on August 18, 2020, leading to a second coup, on May 24, 2021, could appear to have created conditions favorable to coups, first in Burkina Faso and then in Niger. Second, Mali has served as an example, a source of inspiration for the other two countries—particularly in terms of capturing popular support—that have duplicated all the measures applied by the Malian transitional government. Third, the association of the three countries, which now share a common destiny, has greatly strengthened them vis-à-vis ECOWAS, which has been weakened as a result. ECOWAS, as soon as the three countries jointly announced their withdrawal from it, lifted all the sanctions it had imposed on Niger. It seems to have abandoned the agenda for a return to constitutional order that had been agreed to with the three governments, which now have no clear deadline for the end of the transition and the elections.

Instrumentalizing Public Opinion in Mali

In Mali, the junta has been popular since the second coup d'état on May 24, 2021. After the first coup, which deposed President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéita in August 2020, ECOWAS demanded that the transition be led by people other than junta members. Bah N'Daw, a retired officer, was appointed

president of the transition, with politician Moctar Ouane as prime minister. A coup within a coup on May 24, 2024, overthrew their government and allowed the junta, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, to seize the levers of power. It was only then that France became the junta's main target, with multiple accusations leveled against it. The instrumentalization of the population's grievances against France, and above all the supposed failure of international interventions, gave the Sahelian junta considerable popular support. Responsibility for this failure was attributed to France because of its leadership of the defense mechanisms that had been deployed, among them Barkhane, Takuba, and MINUSMA. That ECOWAS could not impose itself against the Malian junta (as was also the case in Niger and Burkina Faso) was due largely to the strong popular support, expressed in the streets on several occasions. From then on, the putschists found themselves under pressure from public opinion. They therefore had to maintain their hostility toward France to remain anchored in power.

In October 2022, the Malian transitional government lodged a formal accusation with the UN Security Council against France, accusing it of "violating Malian airspace and delivering weapons to Islamist fighters" (F24 2022). The same accusations were made against the international forces deployed in Niger and Burkina Faso. The Security Council's reluctance to accept a meeting requested by Mali to "present evidence of acts of espionage and destabilization carried out by France" was presented to the Malian people as international complicity in favor of France. The same accusation was made against MINUSMA. Thus, Barkhane, Takuba, and MINUSMA came to a premature end at the request of the junta, which subsequently withdrew from the G5 Sahel joint force. The same approach was taken by Niger, which ended all military cooperation with France, the European Union's civilian mission EUCAP² Sahel Niger, and the EU's military partnership mission in Niger, known as EUMPM (F24 2022). The Malian junta has not always been against France; in fact, it was a much-appreciated partner of France and vice versa. At the N'Djamena summit in February 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron made it clear that the Malian transitional government had done better in six months than the previous regime—that of the democratically elected Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta—had done in seven. And when the French Barkhane force was accused by MINUSMA and other organizations of committing a blunder by killing civilians (mistaken for jihadists) in the central Malian town of Bountou, it was the office of Defense Minister Sadio Camara that issued a statement in support of the French version of events. Camara, an influential member of the Malian junta, has long been considered the most radical vis-à-vis France among the members of the transitional government, as well as the main architect of Russia's return to Mali.

On the one hand, this could explain the Malian transitional government's exploitation of anti-French sentiment; on the other hand, it could reflect the incoherence of French positioning, based on the interests that France could derive from this or another regime. This reproach has often

been made against the French authorities, who, at the same time as firmly opposing the juntas in Burkina, Mali, and Niger, validated and supported the unconstitutional seizure of power in Chad. The same can be said of Gabon, another French-speaking country.

Part of the Malian population seems persuaded that the military are best placed to lead national policy, which now appears to be structured around the security issue, the questioning of the relationship with France, and the return to Russia; however, relations between Mali and Russia have a long history. Indeed, in 1961, the departure of the last French soldier—demanded by the socialist president, Modibo Kéita—was immediately followed by the opening of the Soviet Union’s embassy in Bamako: “the symbol marks the spirits” (Maillard 2021).³ Cooperation was rooted in the economy, agriculture, education, and defense. The Soviet Union saw the expansion of its influence in the Third World as an essential element of the socialist model (Touron 2017). It thus took advantage of the conjunction of common interests with the newly independent state, headed by a socialist leader, to establish economic, military, and cultural relations with Mali. The Soviet Union became one of Mali’s main trading partners, accounting for 42.8 percent of trade between 1964 and 1965, compared with 2.3 percent for the United States (Ronzon 2022).

Questioning the Approach Implemented by International Partners

The crisis that brought the military to power has often been seen as precisely the result of the approach implemented by international partners. Here too, the example of Mali is rich in lessons. For more than ten years, the country was at the heart of the international community’s attention, with a plethora of military and civilian intervention mechanisms: Barkhane, Takuba, MINUSMA,⁴ EUTM,⁵ EUCAP Sahel Mali. After ten years of intervention, the results have remained very limited, armed groups have proliferated, and insecurity has spread from the north to central Mali and then to Niger and Burkina Faso.

Another lesson of the Malian experience is that proposals made at the national level and by local communities were insufficiently considered, though these are the first victims of the crisis. The military solution seemed to have no chance of success, but it remained the main option envisaged by France, which had taken the lead in the international intervention. Indeed, France has fiercely opposed any initiative for dialogue between the Malian state and jihadist groups (Bensimon 2020; Carayol 2020; Le Point Afrique with AFP 2020)—a position that ran counter to the will of the Malian people, expressed at two national conferences that brought together all of Mali’s religious, political, and civil-society actors. These were the so-called Inclusive National Dialogue in 2019 and the National Conferences for the Rebuilding of the State in 2021. At those times, on the initiative of the local populations,

a plethora of local peace agreements were signed between several villages in central Mali and jihadist groups (Kleinfeld and Tapily 2022; Studio Tamani 2021). These agreements, in view of the absence of the Malian army over a large part of the territory and the inability of international forces to protect them, appeared to local populations as an effective means of reducing jihadist violence against them. This aspect is one of the reasons that made France undesirable in Mali, having imposed its choices—contrary to the will of the Malian people—on Malian governments.

New Partnerships and a New Security Architecture

Today, the credo of Mali's military leaders is "the army's rise to power" (*la montée en puissance de l'armée*)—a slogan taken up by a large part of the population and often depicted on fabrics worn by women in Mali. Regardless of its impact on the evolution of the crisis, this perception could be explained by the change in the military approach since the military came to power through the partnership with Wagner (a Russian private military company), the large-scale acquisition of military equipment from Russia, and the much more offensive military approach on the ground.

All these elements—in this case, the actual contours of the partnership with Russia and the acquisition of equipment—are characterized by a high degree of opacity. There are only tentative explanations, notably of the remuneration paid to the Russians in cash or gold, with no official information to back them up. In November 2023, the shift in the security approach led to the breakdown of the peace agreement that had bound the Malian state to the Tuareg rebels since 2015 and to the resumption of hostilities that resulted in the defeat of the Tuareg groups and the entry of the Malian army into Kidal, a town where it had not been present for more than ten years. Many Malians saw this development as proof that the transitional government had taken control of the security situation. There were demonstrations of joy in many Malian towns, and it probably contributed to strengthening popular support for the transitional government.

The security partnership between the Malian state and its Russian auxiliaries has resulted in many deaths, with the people killed always presented as jihadists by Malian officials, but usually as simple civilians by human-rights organizations. Many people perceive these mass killings as the effectiveness of the fight against jihadism, as when, in March 2022, the Malian army and its Russian allies were accused of committing "indescribable carnage" in Moura, a village in central Mali, killing between three hundred and six hundred civilians (Amnesty International 2022; Carayol 2022). Such actions are accompanied by a narrowing of democratic freedoms, with political actors, journalists, activists, and human-rights organizations often silenced. For instance, Oumar Mariko, Mali's historic opponent and a leading prodemocracy figure, after referring to the role of the army and its Russian allies in what he described as a massacre committed in Moura, was

forced into exile (König 2024). Several other people have been imprisoned for various reasons. The same dynamic can be observed in Burkina Faso, where the rule now seems to be that any political opponent who publicly criticizes the action of the transitional government is requisitioned, in other words, forcibly enlisted into the *Volontaires pour la défense de patrie*—a popular progovernment militia engaged in the antijihadist struggle—and taken to the front lines (Le Monde with AFP 2023; Traore 2023).

How Has Popular Support Evolved after Three Years in Power?

Popular support is not static: it can erode over time, as people face various difficulties. Demonstrating support is easy, but assessing it in concrete terms when it subsides, especially in the case of a military power that resorts to restrictive measures, is trickier. Assertions of support have been repeatedly expressed on social networks (notably Facebook), but above all at major demonstrations. The demonstration in support of the transitional government on January 14, 2022, held simultaneously in all of Mali's major cities, was one of the largest in the country's history. At the same time, the pro- or anti-transition government debate could arouse tensions in private (for example, within families or in the *grins*⁶), with some not tolerating any criticism of the transition government. These elements indicate the difficulty of measuring popular support at particular points in time.

Almost four years after coming to power, the junta has set no date for elections in Mali, and the time previously agreed on—February 2024—between the transitional government and ECOWAS has not been respected. The economic situation of the Malian people has become much more difficult than before the coup d'état, and this seems to be affecting both urban and rural populations. Additionally, Mali's major cities are facing their worst energy crisis, which is severely handicapping households and businesses, large and small alike, further complicating their socioeconomic situation. Diplomatic tensions with France had already led to the banning of all French NGOs operating in Mali, creating a vacuum in the provision of basic services, particularly for rural populations usually assisted by international NGOs. Following Mali's pro-Russian stance when it voted against the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine at the United Nations in February 2024, Sweden suspended its development aid to Mali (Hall 2024). The impact of such a measure on local populations is immediate. Also, the departure of MINUSMA exacerbated the situation, with the cessation of its so-called quick impact projects aimed at vulnerable groups.

Popular support for the transitional government is undeniable, but it appears to divide society. In families, or in the *grins*, the passion of the subject is such that those who oppose the transitional government are unable to find space for themselves. This, combined with the imprisonment of some of Mali's well-known dissenting voices, has helped to suppress any hint of dissent or opposition to the transition, resulting in the appearance of

unanimous support for the transitional government. It is therefore extremely difficult to assess the proportion of the population that does not support the transitional government. On April 10, 2024, the government banned public activities by political parties and associations until further notice. The government clearly intends to crush the potential for the expression of dissent.

Support for the transitional government remains clearer in urban areas, notably Bamako, than in rural areas, where the slogan of “the army’s rise to power” clashes with local realities. In some areas, this clash reflects a worsening security situation, combined with socioeconomic conditions that are much more difficult today than before.

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NOTES

1. Economic Community of West African States.
2. European Union Capacity Building Mission.
3. All translations of quotes from French-language sources are mine.
4. United Nations Multidimensional Integration Stabilization Mission in Mali.
5. European Union Trading Mission.
6. The *grin*, very popular in Mali, is an informal group of (mostly young) people who meet daily, usually outdoors, around a pot of tea, to chat, maintain bonds of solidarity, and discuss aspects of social and sociopolitical life. It is both the place where they meet (a headquarters that can change location) and the group itself (Këita 2007).

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