

Military launches coup in Mali

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Mutinous soldiers led by Captain Amadou Sanago seized power on Thursday morning in Bamako, the capital of Mali. They moved to dissolve state institutions, suspend the constitution, install a curfew, and close the borders for an indeterminate period.

The military coup, which had started on Wednesday, reportedly left forty dead, including several civilians. It is still not certain that the military junta has succeeded in seizing all the levers of power.

The spokesman for the junta is a Lieutenant Amadou Konaré, as it would seem that the junta includes no high-ranking officers. They have either been arrested or have offered no resistance.

The mutineers criticized President Amadou Toumani Touré, in power since 2002, for being “incompetent” in confronting the rebellion of the Tuaregs in the north of the country. This revolt began on January 17, led by the Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA) and reinforced by heavily armed Tuareg veterans from Libya, who fought alongside the dictator Muammar Gaddafi against NATO forces in last year’s Libyan war.

A demonstration of women on February 1—wives and mothers of soldiers killed in the fighting between the Malian army and the MNLA rebels—accused the government of “sending their men to the slaughter without preparation or adequate equipment”. They were motivated notably by the announcement of the discovery of a mass grave containing the bodies of forty soldiers, whilst the government had only announced the death of two soldiers in the conflict.

The fighting between the Mali military and the Tuareg rebels has displaced 206,000 people since the middle of January, according to the UN Bureau for Humanitarian Affairs, especially towards Mauritania, Niger, Burkina Faso and Algeria.

Touré, who was then a general, came to power through a military coup in 1991 against Moussa Traoré.

He had handed power back to civilian authorities in the 1992 elections, which led to the coming to power of Alpha Oumar Konaré, of the Democratic African Union (RDA), linked to the French Communist Party (PCF). In 2002, after having left the army, Touré was elected president.

Western governments and NATO have issued the usual formal reprimands, but Touré clearly was no longer considered as a reliable ally by NATO. On November 24, *L’Express* quoted a highly placed anonymous French official familiar with the region, who complained: “We are very furious with the Malians. Whether it concerns the al-Qaeda cells in the Islamic Maghreb operating in the extreme north of the country, their links with the Tuaregs or the Latin American cocaine traffic in transit to Europe, it is no longer a question of passivity on their part but complicity. We have irrefutable proof. [al-Qaeda] is stronger today than before the launch in 2008 of the Sahel Plan, an anti-terrorist arrangement in which Paris invested enormous resources.”

Last month, Touré had granted an interview to *L’Express*, stating: “concerning the local Arabo-Tuareg rebellions, Gaddafi engaged in mediation, the disarmament and reintegration. His overthrow has left a vacuum....very early, we alerted NATO and others about the collateral effects of the Libyan crisis. To no avail.”

In fact, Touré maintained close ties to Gaddafi, for which he claimed he had “no regrets. Libya made substantial investments with us in tourism, hotels, agriculture and banking, contributing to our development.”

The fall of Gaddafi has spread great quantities of arms in the region and beyond: on October 15, the press related that an initial convoy of 400 veterans aboard 80 military vehicles re-entered Mali. The next day, a Malian soldier was killed in an ambush in this region.

Again in October, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* quoted the president of the NATO military committee, Italian Admiral Giampaolo Di Paola. Di Paola said, “more than 10,000 surface-to-air missiles, which represent a serious threat for civil aviation, could leave Libya and find themselves in dangerous hands from Kenya to Kunduz”. In June, Nigerian forces intercepted a convoy of more than 600 kilos of Semtex explosive originating from Libya.

Traditionally, the Tuaregs only demanded autonomy within Mali. It was only after the fall of Gaddafi and the establishment of supposedly closer links with al-Qaeda that they demanded complete independence. In reaction to the intensification of this conflict, the Tuaregs living in the south of the country are more and more victims of racist aggression.

The economic situation in the north of Mali explains to a great extent the attraction of the rebellion for Tuareg youth. Mali is one of the 25 poorest countries in the world, with an annual per capita GDP of \$1,300. The rate of inflation went from 1 percent in 2010 to 3.6 percent last year. The desert covers more than half the country and contains no oil; economic activity is largely concentrated in the south, around the river Niger. Nomads account for 10 percent of the population.

For Pierre Boilley, the Director of the African World Centre of Studies (CEMAF): “that explains their bitterness concerning what they consider to be the marginalization of their region and the failure of the integration policies put into place for their benefit since the 1990’s.”

Touré further explained to *L’Express*: “[P]overty and a precarious existence offer a fertile ground to terrorism and the Islamists. The Jihadists advance laden with charitable works. They intelligently target the poorest families or the unemployed youth. An oppressed youth steals a four-wheel drive vehicle or acts as a guide for them not out of ideological commitment, but for money. Our enemies infiltrate us using humanitarianism; we have to answer with economic development.”

Far from seeking to spare their men’s lives, the junta leaders have launched a vast battle around Kidal in the north east against Islamist forces—trying to militarily defeat a movement rooted in the economic crisis and

the destabilization of the region caused by the NATO war in Libya.



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