

France threatens to back intervention in Mali

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Amid ongoing fighting and in the western African Republic of Mali, France, the US and their major allies in the region are seizing on the political opportunity to back a military intervention in the country.

On April 6 the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) declared unilaterally and “irrevocably” the independence of the Azawad region in Northern Mali from the Republic of Mali. Tuareg rebels organized in the MNLA and the Islamist Ansar Dine group have seized control of impoverished northern Mali after well-armed Tuareg fighters entered the country from Libya, where they had fought for the ousted Libyan regime of the late Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

The Tuareg have demanded autonomy since Mali became independent from France in 1960. The declaration of independence signed by MNLA leader Bilal Ag Acherif claims to recognize all existing borders and the Charter of the United Nations, and to create the conditions for lasting peace and a democratic state.

The declaration of independence was immediately rejected by the African Union, the Economic Community of the West African States (ECOWAS), France and the United States. Ansar Dine, accused of having close ties to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), also opposed the declaration, declaring that it wants the imposition of sharia law in Mali.

The Tuareg takeover of northern Mali and the declaration of independence comes after a March 22 military coup in Mali led by Captain Amadou Sanogo. Sanogo, who received military training in the US between 2004 and 2010, took power after weeks of protests against the government of Amadou Toumani Touré and its handling of the Tuareg rebellion.

On February 1, wives and mothers of soldiers killed in the fighting between the Malian army and the MNLA rebels protested, accusing the government of

“sending their men to the slaughter without preparation or adequate equipment”. Though the justification for the coup had been Touré’s alleged mismanagement of the Tuareg rebellion, the Malian army lost control of the whole northern part within the first ten days of Sanogo’s rule.

The imperialist powers, above all France and the US, sought to work out a mechanism to safeguard their strategic and economic interests in Mali and the broader Sahel region.

French foreign minister Alain Juppé announced that France could provide logistical support to an ECOWAS intervention force in Mali which was quickly put together after the coup to “protect the unity and territorial integrity of Mali”. Washington has supported several military interventions led by the ECOWAS in the past, including in Liberia 1990 and Sierra Leone in 1997.

ECOWAS is led by the Ivory Coast and Senegal, which are both allies of France, the old colonial power in the region. France has garrisons in both countries and intervened in the Ivory Coast in 2011 to back the removal of former president Laurent Gbagbo and his replacement with Alassane Ouattara.

Ouattara, who is now acting as ECOWAS chairman, stated that he and his allies intend “to use all means at our disposal to stop this rebellion, and to restore Mali’s territorial integrity. It is the sub-region’s duty.”

ECOWAS and its Western allies have put huge pressure on Sanogo in the past two weeks to hand over power to “constitutional order.” Senegal and the Ivory Coast enforced a complete embargo on Mali, and the other western African countries put harsh diplomatic and economic sanctions on the country, including the cutting of its electricity supply. One of the poorest countries in the world, Mali is highly dependent on foreign aid.

As a consequence of the embargo, Sanogo stepped

aside on April 8, handing over power to a transitional authority of national unity headed by Mali's parliamentary speaker Dioncounda Traoré. Traoré, an ally of ousted president Touré, has been president of the National Assembly of Mali since 2007. Touré himself handed in an official resignation letter, saying he had done this "without any pressure," thus paving the way for elections allegedly to be held in May.

It appears that the pressure by the ECOWAS, France and the US on the junta aimed to create unity amongst the Malian military and ruling elite to prepare the conditions for military action against the north. When Sanogo read the agreement to step down, neighboring Burkina Faso's foreign minister, Djibril Bassolé, stood next to him. The accord gives full immunity to Sanogo and the soldiers who participated in the coup.

Amadou Koita, the leader of a group of military personnel opposing the coup, welcomed the return to constitutional order and referred to a positive aspect of the coup. He told the French daily *Liberation*: "Today it is about the army to start reconquering the north and to hunt the rebel forces and the Islamists. The coup has at least allowed us to erase the denials about the situation in the north."

A senior ECOWAS source told the *Guardian* that the withdrawal of the coup leaders was the final hurdle on the path to a military offensive in the north: "We are now fine-tuning the contingency measures for intervention; it is very much on the cards ... A number of countries have offered assistance, including the US and France."

The plans to intervene in northern Mali mark a further escalation of imperialist intervention in the region. France and the US together have been the driving forces behind the NATO war against Libya which only has provoked the crisis in Mali. Both are now using the situation to prepare the next intervention which would further destabilize the whole Sahel region and as in the case of Libya cause the deaths of tens of thousands.

The French-US intervention aims at a region—the Sahara and Sahel—that was a target of French imperialist intrigue from the dying days of the Algerian war. It contains many important energy resources such as gas and uranium. The latter is found mainly in the Tuareg regions in Libya, Niger, and northern Mali. France's system of nuclear power generation and its nuclear weapons program depend on uranium mined in

the region.

An editorial in the French daily *Liberation* cynically complained on Tuesday that "Africa is completely absent in the particularly egocentric French election campaigns. It will be left to the next president to do everything to save Mali and its vulnerable democracy."

Algeria which had to pay the highest price for French colonialism in the region warned that the "situation is very, very worrying." Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia said that any foreign military intervention would end up "losing control. Every time that a foreign actor plays an essential role, it's bound to end up out of control, immediately or six months later."



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