

Tens of thousands rally in French-occupied Mali for resignation of president

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Tens of thousands demonstrated at Independence Square in central Bamako, the Malian capital, on Friday to demand the immediate resignation of French-backed president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (known as IBK). It was the second mass protest for the removal of Keïta this month, after tens of thousands demonstrated on June 5.

The protests have been called by the official bourgeois opposition coalition, which has named itself the June 5 Movement: Rally of Patriotic Forces, many of whose leading figures are either former government figures or supporters. The widespread and growing demand for the removal of the government in the population, however, is driven by anger over rising inequality exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, the decline of social services, corruption and the government's role in sectarian killings and extrajudicial executions by security forces backed by the French-led occupation. IBK became president in 2013 and is closely associated with the French intervention in the country.

The protesters carried signs including "IBK resign," "The dictator will not stay," as well as banners calling for the release of political prisoners, "more money for education" and "an end to the coronavirus." A protester, Diawara Issaka, told *Le Monde*: "We should not be here, because there is the coronavirus. The president has promised a mask for every Malian, but no one here has received one; he is a liar. So we have come here to challenge this lie like all the others." A group of protesters with him added: "We have had enough of it. We, heads of family, have not received wages for three months."

So far 109 deaths have been confirmed in Mali and 1,933 cases of coronavirus.

Police fired tear gas to disperse the protesters, who

responded by erecting barricades to prevent the security forces from advancing.

The government had ordered the reopening of schools on June 2 despite the pandemic, but thousands of teachers boycotted school and refused to turn up. They demanded not only measures to protect teachers from the pandemic but also wage increases that had been formally announced by the government four years ago but never provided. According to the teachers' unions, only 35 percent of public schools opened on June 2.

President Keïta offered this week to form a government of national unity incorporating leading members of the opposition, and also pledged to provide the promised wage increases to teachers, in an attempt to defuse the growing movement. The official opposition has refused Keïta's offer and on Friday reiterated its appeal for him to resign.

The leading figure in the official opposition is Islamist cleric Mahmoud Dicko. Dicko has been a leading figure in the regime for many years. Between 2008 and 2019 he led the Islamic High Council, and he supported Keïta's election in 2013. In September 2019 he created an opposition movement amid rising opposition to the French occupation and to the Keïta government in the population. An adherent of conservative Wahabi Islam, he had also served as an interlocutor between the government and Islamic insurgent forces.

On June 9, French media reported that Dicko had met with a group of unnamed international officials, including representatives of the United Nations in Mali (MINUSMA), from the Economic Community of the States of West Africa, and the African Union.

The French government has not made any public statements either supporting or opposing the protests against Keïta. But there is no doubt that it is actively

intervening to ensure the continued defence of French imperialist interests in the geo-strategically important Sahel region.

France intervened in Mali in January 2013, against separatist and Islamist forces who came from Libya in the aftermath of NATO's regime-change war in that country in 2011. It has maintained more than 4,000 troops in Mali, increased to more than 5,100 since the beginning of the year, as part of an international coalition that includes Germany, Canada, the US and the so-called G5 force of troops from Niger, Chad, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Mali.

Mali is Africa's third-largest gold producer after Ghana (which is located to Mali's south) and South Africa. It also borders Niger, where France has stationed military forces including drone bases and from where it sources the majority of its uranium supplies required for nuclear power production in France.

In February, the Macron administration announced a significant escalation in the intervention, increasing the number of French troops in Operation Barkhane from 4,500 to 5,100, some of them being deployed to fight directly alongside the G5 troops.

The stepping up of the French intervention went hand-in-hand with a surge in the number of ethnic massacres and extrajudicial killings and war crimes reported by human rights groups. The French-backed government and G5 security forces are widely reported to be supporting ethnic Dogon militia in massacres of Muslim Fulaini communities, on the grounds that they are suspected of supporting Islamist forces. On March 23, 2019, a Dogon militia massacred 160 Fulani villagers, which triggered a reprisal attack killing at least 95.

A recent Amnesty International report provides evidence that the G5 security forces operating side-by-side with French soldiers are guilty of extra-judicial executions and war crimes.

Entitled "Human rights violations by security forces in the Sahel," it reports at least 199 such incidents in just three months between February and April 2020, immediately after the expansion of the French-led intervention.

It cites the example of a reprisal attack carried out by security forces against an entire town following the killing of 20 soldiers on January 26 by Islamist groups.

Malian soldiers intervened one week later in the town Kogoni-Peuhl on February 3, killing one herder and arresting two others. A witness stated, "When the soldiers arrived, they started shooting. Many villagers fled, those close to the mosque sounded the alarm and many others fled to the bush...."

In another incident, on February 7, in the village of Massabougou, security forces combed houses, arrested 22 people, and executed eight on site. A witness stated: "They arrive around 5pm shooting in the air, and arresting villagers. Many people fled or stayed in their houses after the soldiers arrived. They combed the houses, extra-judicially executed eight villagers and took the rest with them when they left."



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