

Amid French war, Malian military junta installs new interim government

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On Monday, Mali's Supreme Court invested Colonel Assimi Goïta as president after Goïta's junta arrested interim President Bah Ndaw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane two weeks ago. Goïta named Choguel Kokalla Maïga interim prime minister.

Facing criticism from the United States and the European powers over the ouster of the president, the junta made clear that it will continue to work with Paris amid the bloody French war in Mali.

The NATO powers have combined empty criticisms of the junta, which has worked with the French occupation forces for over a year, with threats of sanctions aimed at ensuring that the junta remains in their geopolitical orbit. They also have demanded guarantees from the junta that elections will be held in February 2022, so they can demagogically present the Bamako junta as a "civilian" regime.

Goïta responded by pledging the imperialist powers that he would organize "credible, fair, transparent elections at the scheduled date." He added, "I would like to reassure the subregional and regional organizations, as well as the international community in general that Mali will honor all of its commitments in the supreme interest of the nation."

Goïta's decision to select Choguel Kokalla Maïga as interim prime minister is also significant. Maïga, a longstanding tool of Malian military regimes, is president of the Patriotic Movement for Renewal and a leader of the June 5, 2020 Movement-Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RFP).

The M5-RFP backed the coup launched by Goïta's junta last August that toppled President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Amid mounting opposition to the French war in Mali, the M5-RFP encouraged mass protests by youth in the capital, Bamako, into the dead end of supporting Goïta's junta. Maïga is also

reportedly close to imam Mahmoud Dicko, a central figure in the M5-RFP and the protests last year that led to Goïta's coup toppling Keïta.

Both the M5-RFP and the National Committee for the Salvation of the People were heavily supported behind the scenes during last year's coup by French imperialism, who backed the coup to block a broader movement of the working class and oppressed masses demanding French troops leave the Sahel.

Maïga studied telecommunications in the Soviet Union in the 1970s before returning to Mali. Over his more than 30-year political career, Maïga has supported French-backed dictator Moussa Traoré (1968–1991); President Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012), under whom he was Minister of Industry. In 2013, he supported Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in the second round of voting, serving as his Minister of Communication from 2015 to 2016, before moving to the opposition. He ran in the 2002, 2013 and 2018 presidential elections.

As the French war in Mali bogs down in a bloody debacle, Maïga has criticized the French-backed peace deal between northern Malian militias and the Bamako regime in 2015. He claimed that the accord is obsolete, arguing that the government should open negotiations with armed groups, including those affiliated to Al Qaeda.

Maïga is however working strenuously to signal his support for the French war and the NATO powers and his intention to work out a deal that secures their interests. He pledged to "respect our international commitments, which are not contrary to the fundamental interests of the Malian people." Last Friday, he told a rally in Bamako that Mali needs support from its allies, but that "invective, sanctions, threats will only complicate the situation."

Goïta's latest coup came as working and toiling people in Mali and across the Sahel mount growing protests against France's eight-year war and collapsing social conditions. Just before the coup, the National Workers' Union of Mali (UNTM) had felt compelled by mounting working-class anger to call a nationwide strike against falling living standards. The UNTM bureaucracy called off the strike after the coup, cynically claiming that Goïta gave workers grounds for hope.

UNTM administrative Secretary Issa Bengaly said: "When Assimi Goïta took power by force, he notably mentioned the UNTM strike in his first public statement. He is paying attention to our demands, which were ignored by the previous prime minister and head of state. Anyway, we have taken note of this statement. But as workers' representatives, what currently concerns us is whether our demands are taken into account."

UNTM backing for the coup underscores its collaboration with the M5-RFP, the Goïta junta and its imperialist backers to suppress working-class opposition to the war and to falling living standards.

France's eight-year war has devastated West Africa. "Almost 7,000 people were killed during 2020, making it the deadliest year in the Central Sahel since the conflict began," the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect reported. Over 2.2 million people are internally displaced in the Sahel by the fighting, according to UN figures.

Opposition to the French war is mounting in particular due to a series of horrific massacres by French-backed militias, which have triggered protests calling for the withdrawal of French troops. At some of these demonstrations, protesters have waved Russian flags and called for Russia to expel French troops from Mali. "We want the French to leave and Russia to come in," one said.

In recent years, Russia's regional influence has increased. According to the US Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) think tank, from 2010 to 2018 it tripled its trade with Africa, from \$6.6 billion to \$18.9 billion. Since 2017, Moscow has increasingly supported President Faustin-Archange Touadéra of the Central African Republic (CAR), a former French colony, against France. Last December, it expanded its military intervention in the CAR, deploying 300

military instructors to the war-torn country.

Hopes that Moscow will help expel French occupation forces from Mali and end French imperialist oppression of Africa will be disappointed. Both in the era of the Soviet bureaucracy and after the Stalinist restoration of capitalism in 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has a long record of using Africa as a pawn in its dealings with the imperialist powers. Yet its influence is no doubt a subject of concern in Paris, amid growing anti-war sentiment in the region.

On Thursday, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a "profound transformation" of France's military presence in the region. Speaking ahead of the G7 and NATO summits, he said, "the form of our presence, with external operations involving more than 5,000 troops for a number of years, is no longer appropriate to the combat situation."

Macron indicated that France's Operation Barkhane mission would be replaced by another, in which France would seek to obtain more troops from its regional and international allies. "We are transforming our operations to be coherent and supportive of our allies. This is not due to recent events, either in Chad or in Mali," he said.

The recent death of Chadian dictator Idriss Déby, a longstanding tool of French imperialism providing Paris with cannon fodder for wars across the region, has unleashed a political crisis in N'Djamena amid rising social protests against falling living standards in Chad.

Macron intends to continue using all these corrupt political forces, including the Malian military junta and the M5-RFP, as proxies to assert French interests. The growing anger against the war must be converted into a conscious political movement, based on a revolutionary socialist strategy mobilizing the working class across the region, as well as in France and in the other NATO powers, against imperialist war and for the withdrawal of troops in Africa.



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