

Army launches coup in Burkina Faso amid mass protests against France

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On Friday, Burkina Faso's army ousted junta leader Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration (MPSR). The second military coup in this former French colony in 2022 occurred amid mass protests against France and rising opposition to French imperialist wars across the region.

Damiba was overthrown after soldiers carried out heavy gunfire near the main military camp and residential areas of Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. A large blast also rang out near the presidential palace where the army took up positions. Several main roads were blocked by troops in the capital. Soldiers reportedly took control of administrative buildings and the national television station, which stopped broadcasting.

Friday evening, on national radio and television, the coup leaders said: "Lieutenant-Colonel Damiba has been dismissed as president of the Patriotic Movement for Safeguard and Restoration." Damiba had himself came to power early this year in a coup toppling President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. Damiba's whereabouts are known, but a Facebook page under his control urged people to remain calm.

After the coup, 34-year-old captain Ibrahim Traoré declared himself the new head of the MPSR junta. The army announced the closure of the country's land and air borders as of midnight, as well as the suspension of the constitution and the dissolution of the government and the transitional legislative assembly. It imposed a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew.

The coup came after Burkina Faso, like the entire Sahel region, was devastated by deepening bloodshed since Paris launched a war in Mali, supposedly to fight Islamist terrorism, in 2013.

Despite France's recent withdrawals of troops by

ending Operation Barkhane in Mali, French imperialism retains military influence across the region and faces escalating protests.

The ousted junta leader, Damiba, was widely seen as too closely linked to France. Late Saturday, there were protests outside the French embassy in Ouagadougou and the French Institute in the city of Bobo-Dioulasso. Video on social media showed residents with lit torches outside the French embassy, and other images showed part of the compound ablaze. The crowds also vandalised the French Institute.

The attack on both institutions came after the coup leader Traoré accused France of giving refuge to the deposed Damiba and planning to attack Burkina Faso. Damiba "is believed to have taken refuge in the French base at Kamboinsin in order to plan a counteroffensive to stir up trouble in our defence and security forces," said Traoré.

The French embassy issued a statement "firmly denying any involvement of the French army in the events." It also denied "rumours that Burkinabe authorities have been hosted or are under the protection of French military."

"We condemn in the strongest terms the violence against our diplomatic presence in Burkina Faso," the French Foreign Ministry added late Saturday. "Any attack on our diplomatic facilities is unacceptable."

On Saturday, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said Washington "is deeply concerned by events in Burkina Faso. ... We call on those responsible to de-escalate the situation, prevent harm to citizens and soldiers, and return to a constitutional order."

The regional West African economic bloc, known as ECOWAS, and the African Union both condemned the military coup. "ECOWAS finds this new power grab inappropriate at a time when progress has been made,"

it said, citing Damiba's recent agreement to return to constitutional order by July 2024.

The officer corps and the ruling elites in Burkina Faso are terrified by the rising opposition in the working class and oppressed masses of the Sahel to French imperialism. The coup aims to block social opposition from erupting outside of the army's control, while also allowing the army to continue maneuvering for the best possible deals with the major powers.

The coup came after several hundred people demonstrated in Ouagadougou to demand the departure of Damiba and the end of the French military presence in the Sahel. A section of the Burkina military who support the new coup leader Traoré have called on the government to develop military cooperation with Russia, as a counterweight to France.

"One point of contention that has divided the MPSR (junta), the army and indeed the population for months is the choice of international partners," said Constantin Gouvy, Burkina Faso researcher at Clingendael, the Netherlands Institute of International Relations. "Damiba was leaning toward France, but we might see the MPSR more actively exploring alternative from now on, with Turkey or Russia for example."

On Saturday, the new junta leaders presented their policy in terms of their "strong will to go towards other partners who are ready to aid the struggle against terrorism." They added: "We have decided to act on our responsibilities, driven by a single ideal: the restoration of security and the integrity of our territory." They added, "our common ideal was betrayed by our leader in whom we had placed all our trust. Far from liberating the occupied territories, the once peaceful areas have come under terrorist control."

More than 40 per cent of the Burkina Faso remains outside government control, as militia attacks and bombings have escalated during the French war in neighboring Mali. The number of incidents has been sharply increased since 2020, with over 1,100 attacks in Burkina Faso, one of the world's poorest countries. This is more than the number of violent events reported in Mali and Niger together.

Since 2015, thousands have been killed and injured, and over 2 million people have been forcibly displaced by fighting as it spread to Burkina Faso.

Last week, at least 11 Burkinabè soldiers were killed and 50 civilians went missing after an attack on a

150-vehicle military-escorted convoy taking supplies to a northern town. On September 6, at least 35 civilians were killed in another attack. The June 2021 attack in Solhan in northern Burkina Faso's Yagha province killed at least 160 civilians, the largest death toll in a single terrorist attack in country's history.

Across West Africa, climate change and pandemics, such as Ebola and COVID-19, have had disastrous consequences, with millions projected to be pushed into extreme poverty. These countries now face dire consequences following the US-NATO led war against Russia over Ukraine. Before the Ukraine war, the food crisis already exploded in recent years due to war, climate change and pandemics.

In a note titled "Implications of the Crisis in Ukraine on West Africa", the World Food Programme (WFP) warned that "the region's problems will be exacerbated, with dire economic and political consequences."

Since the NATO-Russia war broke out, rising inflation and the hikes in food and oil prices have devastated millions across the region, which relies on grain imports from Russia and Ukraine. In 2008, rising food prices led to hunger riots across the region, including in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Mali, Cameroon, and Nigeria.

"It is important to point out how quickly a rising price for a staple can lead to protests, violence, and political instability. As seen with recent uprisings in the past decade it's often a price shock that sets off conflict. Hunger can increase tensions producing inequality and simultaneously radicalize mass political movements," the WFP wrote.

Neither the factions of the Burkinabè ruling elite closer to French imperialism, nor those closer to the post-Soviet capitalist regime in Russia have anything to offer the African workers and oppressed masses. The way forward against hunger, poverty and war is the unification of the workers and oppressed masses in Africa, Europe and internationally in a struggle against imperialism and war.



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