

West African Papers



Populist civil society, the Wagner Group, and post-coup politics in Mali

JULY 2022 NO. 36



POPULIST CIVIL SOCIETY, THE WAGNER GROUP, AND POST-COUP POLITICS IN MALI

This paper has been prepared by

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WEST AFRICAN PAPERS

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Please cite this publication as:

Elischer, S. (2022), "Populist civil society, the Wagner Group and post-coup politics in Mali", *West African Papers*, No. 36, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<https://doi.org/10.1787/b6249de6-en>

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West African Papers

ISSN 2414-2026

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Abstract

The military coup of August 2020 upended Mali's fragile liberal democratic order. The junta-led transitional government defies international pressure to fasten the return of democratically-elected rulers and constitutional rule. The ability of the junta to shape the course of Malian politics rests on two interconnected pillars. First, there is public resentment towards the post-1991 political class and France's military involvement in the country. The forces representing that resentment view the junta as change makers and have formed influential political organisations that oppose the return to the status quo ante. Second, there is the security co-operation with Russian mercenaries, which provides the transitional government with an alternative security partner. The paper traces the origins, evolution, and the future strength of these pillars. It concludes by outlining future political scenarios and the future role of the military in Malian politics.

Key words: military coup, democracy, Mali, Russia, Wagner Group

JEL classification: D74, F50, F55, P48

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Executive summary

The military coup of August 2020 upended Mali's fragile liberal democratic order. The junta-led transitional government defies international pressure to return the country to democratically elected leaders in the foreseeable future. Yet, instead of paving the way for multiparty elections in the short term, the junta appears to be engaged in a process of narrowing democratic space.

The intimidation and arbitrary arrests of opponents, severe human rights violations of the civilian population through the security services, and an aggressive rhetoric toward France and other Western allies have raised concerns that the junta intends to establish an authoritarian government. This differs from the post-coup dynamics in 1991 and 2012, which both ushered in multiparty democracy.

This paper illustrates that the capacity of the junta to shape Malian politics rests on two interconnected pillars: first, a nationalist populist movement, which houses under one roof the Movement of June 5 - Rally of Patriotic Forces (M5-RPF). The M5-RPF views the military as a harbinger of meaningful change and a facilitator of what it calls "true democracy". The movement is the organisational predecessor of several pan-African and anti-globalisation associations, which emerged as influential political players in the aftermath of the 2012 military intervention. Its opposition to the political status quo ante and its anti-French rhetoric derive their support from the broken developmental promises of the post-1991 period and the perceived poor results of Operation Barkhane in terms of improving the security situation.

Second, security co-operation with Russian mercenaries provides the junta with an alternative security partner to France and the European Union (EU). Driven by economic motives and geostrategic concerns over the expansion of Western influence in several world regions, Russian involvement across Africa has grown over the last two decades and has left a visible impact on Malian civil society. Closer co-operation with Russia offers the junta the opportunity to free Mali from the political conditionality that is attached to Western economic and military support.

The paper argues that both pillars rest on shaky foundations. As the civilian administration that came before it, the junta is confronted with colossal economic problems, which will certainly expose it to greater public scrutiny. Despite the growing influence of Russia, Mali remains dependent on Western economic aid and in dire need of additional security assistance, which Moscow is unlikely to provide. The suspected massacres of the Malian army against civilian populations, the mysterious death of the former prime minister, and the arbitrary arrests of individuals opponents

will further increase the political pressure on the junta from the population but also from within the military at large.

The current situation leaves the junta with several options. First, it can enshrine political prerogatives for the military in the yet-to-draft constitution. Second, it can remain in power through rigged elections. Third, it can withdraw from power and pave the way for multiparty elections without interfering in these elections. Juntas in other countries have resorted to either of these options.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the onset of the so-called “third wave of democratisation” in sub-Saharan Africa, the Republic of Mali has experienced three military coups. In March 1991, March 2012, and August 2020, sections of the Malian armed forces (FAMA) overthrew the government and claimed executive power.

The military interventions of 1991 and 2012 ushered in competitive multi-party elections and the subsequent withdrawal of the armed forces from executive power. Most accounts of the 1991 coup pay reference to the fact that the Malian military took down the long-standing dictatorship of General Moussa Traoré, sided with street protestors and paved the way for the drafting of a democratic constitution. These interpretations frequently overlook the fact that segments of the Malian armed forces posed a threat to the democratic transition until the mid-1990s. The desire of praetorian elements within the Malian military to return to the seats of executive power once more was visible in the aftermath of the 2012 coup.

The coup responded to a major security crisis in Mali’s north, the failure of the Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) administration to provide the Malian armed forces with adequate support during that crisis, and an overwhelming perception that the government had failed to live up to its developmental promises. Within Malian civil society, some associations called for a more assertive role for the military in Malian politics. Their demands posed a challenge to the principle of civilian oversight, a necessary condition for liberal democratic rule (Kohn, 1997; Croissant et al., 2010). Democratically-minded domestic actors were able to constrain the ability of the armed forces to prolong their influence in politics with the help of outside players.

The political dynamics that triggered Mali’s most recent coup resemble the political conundrum that led to the intervention of the Malian armed forces in March 2012. Popular frustration with the underperformance of the administration of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) combined with widespread suspicion that the government manipulated the official outcome of the 2020 legislative elections in their favour, and the ongoing failure of the security services to contain multiple security crises.

Since the military coup of August 2020, the Malian junta has defied outside pressure to hand over power to democratically-elected civilian leaders. To illustrate and explain the current dynamics of the relationship between Mali’s military and civilian elites, the paper starts with an analysis of Malian politics between the military coup of March 2012 and the French military intervention in January 2013. As the paper demonstrates, this period sets the ideational and organisational background to the current

political dynamics. Subsequently, it analyses the factors that triggered the August 2020 coup and the emergence of a politically assertive military junta.

The assertiveness of the junta-led transitional government rests on two pillars: political support from an array of populist civil associations and Russian security support. The failure of the IBK administration to live up to the hopes of ordinary Malians augmented popular resentment against the country's longstanding political elites, French interference in Malian affairs and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). This frustration has led to the emergence of a powerful alliance of civil society organisations, which regard the junta as an ally in its desire to see through meaningful political reforms and to rid Mali from the influence of outside forces. This alliance was able to build on the experiences of Mali's post-coup landscape that emerged in 2012. Russia's growing influence in West African politics and the presence of Russian mercenaries provide the current Malian government with an alternative to French and European military assistance. The paper argues that, despite current appearances, both pillars rest on weak foundations.

The coup of March 2012 and the remaking of Malian civil society

The coup of 21 March 2012 started as a mutiny in response to grievances of lower-ranked soldiers. Confronted with an insurgency of secessionist Tuareg rebels and jihadi-Salafi groups in northern Mali, the FAMA found itself incapable of matching their opponent's fighting power. In mid-January 2012, the insurgents killed approximately 100 soldiers in the battle of Aguelhok. Images of brutalised soldiers on the internet and reports that the armed forces had run out of ammunition led to desperation and panic among the southern-dominated armed forces. In Bamako, it led to a sense of national humiliation and anger. On 2 February and 8 March, military wives took to the street decrying the conditions of ordinary soldiers (International Crisis Group, 2013; Boisvert, 2019).

On 21 March, the minister of defence, Brigadier General Sadio Gassama, and the army chief of staff, General Brigadier Gabriel Poudiougou, convened a meeting in Kati to discuss the soldiers' grievances against the background of the unfolding security situation in the north. The meeting resulted in soldiers throwing stones at the minister of defence. After the minister had to be escorted away, a group of soldiers took up arms to stage a mutiny. By the late evening, the mutineers found the presidential palace deserted. What had started as a spontaneous mutiny ended with an improvised military coup under the leadership of Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo (Hagberg and Körling, 2012; Chauzal and van Damme, 2015).

The frustration of mid- and low-ranked officers echoed widespread political disillusionment among the civilian population. According to Whitehouse (2017: 18), the illegal expropriation of property and criminal violence characterised day-to-day life during ATT's second term. A growing number of Malians was questioning the alleged dividend of democratisation and ATT's philosophy of governing by consensus, which many had come to associate with corruption and the marginalisation of political alternatives (Hagberg and Körling, 2012). Attempts by the IBK administration to bring about constitutional reforms fostered the public's perception that Mali's political elite was self-serving rather than attempting to deliver the political and developmental promises of the 1991 democratic moment (Wing, 2015; Siméant and Bergamaschi, 2017).

After the takeover of power by the *Comité national pour le redressement de la démocratie et la restauration de l'État* (CNRDRE) on 22 March and the formal resignation of ATT as president on 8 April, Mali's political landscape

changed profoundly. In the aftermath of the coup, influential civil society organisations calling for a prominent role of the military in political decision making emerged and became an integral part of Mali's political arena. The leading pro-junta groups were the Coordination of Patriotic Organizations of Mali (COPAM), the Popular Movement of March 22 (MP22), and the African Solidarity Party for Development and Independence (SADI). The COPAM emerged during the first half of April 2012. It claimed to be part of the pan-African movement but emphasised national autonomy and self-determination (Tchioffo, 2015). Despite their pan-African and anti-colonial neo-Marxist leanings, both movements espoused black African nationalism targeting the Tuareg and non-African minority groups. Both asked the new Malian government to prioritise the needs of its black population (Bøås and Torheim, 2013; Lindberg, 2013). The goals and the rhetoric of pro-government civilian militias was in accord with the demands of the COPAM and the M22. After the coup, these militias became more professionalised and formalised their organisation structure (Boisvert, 2015). The SADI was the only political party that had opposed the ATT administration in parliament and never benefitted from the *modus operandi* of “consensus politics”. The SADI also launched the MP22 (Siméant and Traoré, 2012) and had protested the government's expropriation of land (Mann, 2012).

Prominent anti-globalisation activists constituted the leadership of the COPAM and the MP22. Young people suffering from economic hardship constituted the bulk of their followers. The COPAM, SADI, and smaller organisations such as Yèrèwolo-Ton portrayed the coup as an opportunity to break with the socio-economic failures of the past. Although they did not approve of military coups as conventional means of politics, they regarded the coup of March 2012 as a chance to realign the political system with the needs of ordinary people. The plight of Sanogo and other soldiers resonated with the lived experiences of many ordinary Malians, which gave rise to the idea that the junta was more in touch with the political realities than the established political elite. The COPAM, MP22, SADI, and Yèrèwolo-Ton opposed any peace agreement with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) or the jihadi insurgents and any intervention by ECOWAS, which they regarded as serving the interests of foreign and undemocratic heads of state (Mann, 2012).

Between March 2012 and January 2013, the activities of the pro-junta associations posed a stark challenge to the return of civilian rule. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, an ECOWAS delegation was unable to land in Bamako as COPAM and MP22 protestors took over the tarmac of the international airport (International Crisis Group, 2012). Under pressure from ECOWAS, the junta reinstated the 1992 constitution and the National Assembly in early April after it had initially suspended both on 22 March. This paved the way for a civilian-led interim government (Wing, 2015). The CNRDRE subsequently appointed a civilian-led transitional government led by President Dioncounda Traoré and Prime Minister Cheikh Modibo Diarra on 12 April 2012. Traoré had served as president of the National

Assembly since 2007; the son-in-law of former President Moussa Traoré, he worked in the private economy in several high-profile international positions. The COPAM and the MP22 decried both as representatives of a broken kleptocratic political system and as individuals that were out of touch with reality (Hagberg and Körling, 2012). On 25 May, COPAM protestors stormed the presidential palace and beat Traoré unconscious. The military did not protect the interim president, who had to be flown to Europe for medical treatment and remained absent until late July. After Traoré's humiliating departure, the COPAM called for junta leader Sanogo to be made interim president (McGregor, 2013).

Although Sanogo did not take over the presidency, the junta clearly intended to remain at the centre of politics. On numerous occasions junta leader Sanogo acted independently of the interim government thereby fostering doubts about the willingness of the military to hold elections (Arieff and Johnson, 2012). Reoccurring street demonstrations in favour of the junta provided Sanogo and the CNRDRE with a certain degree of popular support and enabled the junta to use the frustration of the population to their advantage. On 11 December, the junta forced the resignation of interim prime minister Diarra and appointed Diango Sissoko as new interim prime minister. Sissoko was known to be close to the junta. However, internal divisions weakened the junta within the overall military. Divisions between the green berets and the red berets were visible throughout the transition period. The former referred to Sanogo and those involved in the overthrow of ATT. The latter referred to soldiers that had initiated the coup of 1991 and served as ATT's presidential guard (McGregor, 2013). On 30 April, the red berets attempted a counter-coup. After the attempt to remove Sanogo failed, many red berets were abducted, killed, or imprisoned (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Organisations and parties demanding an immediate return to constitutional rule came together under the banner of the United Front for the Protection of Democracy and the Republic (FDR). The FDR was largely composed of politicians that had shaped the political landscape since 1991, including some from the *Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali-Parti Pan-Africain pour la Liberté, la Solidarité et la Justice* (ADEMA-PASJ). The FDR called for elections to be held as soon as possible. Supporters of the FDR frequently clashed with supporters of the COPAM and MP22. In addition to the FDR, the *Alliance IBK*, a movement centred around former prime minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, emerged. It also demanded a return to democratic rule but was less critical of the junta and avoided direct confrontations with COPAM and the MP22.

ECOWAS remained unable to come up with a viable resolution for the crisis in the north. In July, ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) requested a United Nations mandate authorising the deployment of an ECOWAS stabilisation force. Divisions inside ECOWAS and opposition to an outside military force by the junta undermined the composition of a regional force to Mali (Charbonneau and Sears, 2014). Mauritania and Chad, two

military powerhouses in West Africa, were not members of ECOWAS, which complicated and slowed down the decision-making process within the organisation. Algeria, a key diplomatic and security player in the region did not support an outside military intervention (Arieff and Johnson, 2012). Inside ECOWAS, there were diverging opinions about the role of Burkina Faso as mediator in the conflict. Several members states felt that Blaise Compaoré did not have the required diplomatic credentials to negotiate a return to democratic rule. The chief negotiator Djibril Bassolé, Burkina Faso's foreign minister, evoked mixed emotions too. There were also different positions about the goals of the negotiations within ECOWAS. For example, Niger and Nigeria disagreed with Burkina Faso over the inclusion of armed groups from the north in the negotiations (International Crisis Group, 2012; Bergamaschi, 2013).

By early January 2013, the jihadi-Salafi insurgents were in control of two-third of Mali's territory and appeared set on marching further south. In Bamako, COPAM and the MP22 organised mass demonstrations paralysing the capital for days.¹ The two movements announced their intention to organise a sovereign national convention, which would discuss the constitutional future of Mali. Many interpreted this as an attempt to put the junta into executive power (International Crisis Group, 2013; Charbonneau and Sears, 2014). France's military intervention on 11 January and the overwhelming support the intervention received ended all speculation about the future role of the junta in Malian politics. This reaction *"destroyed the anti-Western rhetoric of the pro-junta movement. The junta and its allies (...) were not able to transform the anti-ATT feeling into lasting political influence"* (Boisvert, 2019: 214). The French military intervention ushered in multiparty elections that took place in July and August 2013.

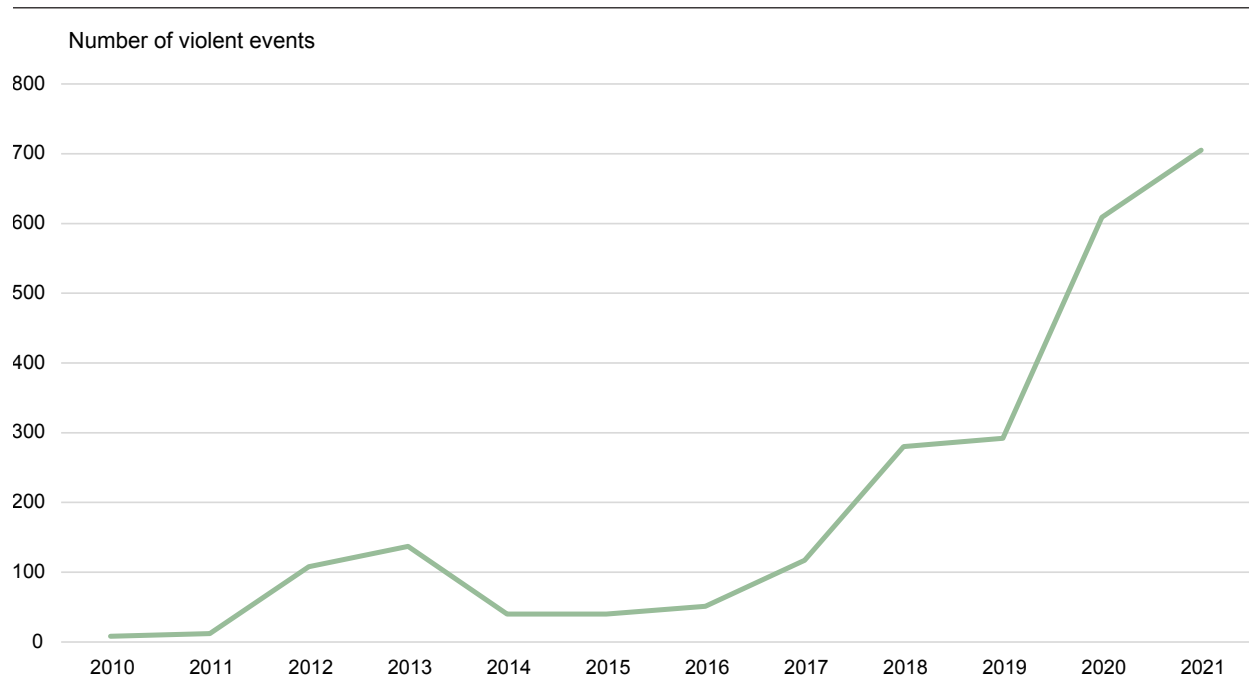
Back to square one: The August 2020 coup

The conditions that triggered the military coup of 18 August 2020 mirrored the conditions that led to the previous coup in March 2012. Figure 1 summarises the number of violent activities by extremist organisations between 2010 and 2020. The French military intervention in January 2013 and the subsequent deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in April 2013 initially established a modicum of security. Nevertheless, since 2017, Mali has experienced a dramatic increase in jihadi-led violence affecting the north and the centre of the country (OECD/SWAC, 2020).

In addition to MINUSMA, two other actors, Operation Barkhane and the G5 Sahel, have operated in Mali with the goal of strengthening public authority. The French-led Operation Barkhane has been present in Mali since August 2014. As France's largest military operation overseas, Barkhane's annual budget is EUR 600 million and includes 4 500 to 5 100 French troops. Created on 15 February 2014, the G5 Sahel include Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Chad. The G5 Sahel provides an intergovernmental framework to create regional responses to security and economic challenges. The confrontations between the Malian state, the French military, MINUSMA, the G5 Sahel and the plethora of violent extremist organisations had detrimental consequences for the civilian population (OECD/SWAC, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2020a).

Doubts about the accuracy of the results of the legislative elections in April 2020 (Lebovich, 2020) and the unwillingness of the government to make headway in the fight against corruption eroded whatever public support the IBK administration had left. As in 2012 many Malians saw waste and harm as the defining features of the government (Niang, 2020). In response to these long-standing crises, Bamako and other cities experienced several mass protests calling for the resignation of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta throughout June, July, and August. In July the protests disintegrated into violent clashes between protestors and the security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2020b). Strong anti-French sentiment, Russian flags, and signs calling for greater Russian involvement in Mali featured among the protestors. The M5-RPF, an umbrella organisation uniting a diverse set of civil society groups, was the main driver behind these protests.

Figure 1
Events related to violent extremist organisations, 2010-21



Note: The graph includes all violent events related to the following groups: Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, Al-Mourabitoun, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims, and Katibat Macina.

Source: Author's compilation based on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022). ACLED data is publicly available.

As trust in civilian leaders declined, trust in the military increased. In the months prior to the coup, Malians trusted the military more than any other state institution: 82% of all respondents said that they trusted the military somewhat or a lot. Trust in the military was higher than in religious leaders, the ruling coalition, and the opposition. This was also the case in regions affected by jihadi violence, i.e., areas in which the military had failed to live up to its mandate (Coulibaly et al., 2020). The FAMA thus was able to use public frustration with the IBK administration to its advantage.

Confident praetorians: *Le Comité national pour le salut du peuple*

The 2020 coup was led by mid- and high-ranking members of the armed forces, including Colonel Malick Diaw, deputy chief of the Kati military camp, Colonel Sadio Camara, former director of the Kati military academy and General Cheick Fanta Mady Dembélé, the director general of the Alioune Blondin Beye Peacekeeping School. The coup plotters held considerable clout within the armed forces compared to the disorganised junior putschists that found themselves in power in 2012 (Berger, 2020). Colonel Assimi Goïta emerged as the head of the Comité national pour le salut du peuple (CNSP). Goïta had led several military operations in the north since 2012 but was not implicated in any human rights violations there. Colonel Malick Diaw served as the CNSP's vice-president.

Immediately after the coup, the CNSP suspended the constitution and the National Assembly. On 12 September 2020 it published the transitional charter that regulates the exercise of power and summarises the procedures guiding the drafting of a new constitution. The immediate post-2020 period thus provided the junta with more steering capacity than had been the case in 2012 when ECOWAS forced the junta to comply with the existing constitutional framework. The junta appointed Bah N'Daw, a former minister of defence (2014-15), as interim president and assured the population that it would hand over power to an elected civilian president within 18 months. Bah N'Daw enjoyed broad support among many opposition groups. Moctar Ouane, a former foreign minister (2004-11) served as interim prime minister. Junta leader Goïta served as the vice president of the transitional government. He also had the prerogative to appoint all 121 members of the National Transitional Council (CNT), Mali's transitional legislative body. On the CNT, the Malian armed forces held more seats (22) than the political parties (11) and civil society organisations (8) combined (Diallo, 2020). Several parties and movements boycotted the CNT from its onset or subsequently resigned from the body. So far and despite the protest of some of its members, the CNT has followed the junta in all instances. The design and use of the CNT was a first indication of the junta's willingness and its capacity to shape the future course of Malian politics.

On 24 May 2021, the Malian armed forces arrested N'Daw and Ouane. The junta resorted to this dramatic measure after the interim civilian government had failed to consult with the junta leader over a cabinet reshuffle. In its place it appointed a new administration with junta leader

Goïta as the new president and Choguel Maïga, the former spokesperson of the M5-RFP, as Prime Minister. In January 2022, the junta-led transitional government announced that it wanted to prolong the transitional period by up to five years. The announcement came after the government had convened a National Conference on Reform in Bamako. At the conference, 1 600 delegates recommended to delay the election of a new president. However, major political parties and civil society organisations boycotted the consultations. In February 2022, the CNT passed draft legislation that abolishes the position of the vice president, increases the number of CNT members, calls for a reform of the electoral law, and contains amnesty provisions for the junta. These reforms further strengthen the political influence of the junta.

The rise of pro-junta nationalist populism and anti-French sentiment

The CNSP derives much of its current popular support through the activities of the M5-RPF. There is no definite list of which organisations make up the M5-RPF. Beyond its unanimous support for the removal of the IBK administration, the group does not have a clear-cut position on the future particularities of the transition, let alone the political future of Mali (Cole, 2020). Three organisations are particularly influential inside the M5-RPF.

The *Coordination des mouvements, associations et sympathisants* (CMAS) is a movement centred around Mahmoud Dicko, Mali's most influential, politically outspoken, and long-standing Islamic leader (Lebovich, 2019). Commentators often associate Dicko with the growing islamisation in Mali (Idrissa, 2020). After throwing his support behind IBK in the 2013 presidential elections, Dicko turned into an opponent of the IBK administration (Thomas-Johnson, 2020). In the immediate aftermath of the coup, there was some speculation in the media that Dicko could take the reins of power and transform Mali into an Islamic republic (Haidara and Savané, 2020). In recent weeks Dicko stated that France should remain Mali's strategic partner. Dicko further questioned whether the alienation between France and Mali served Mali's political interest. This puts him at odds with the transitional government and other M5-RPF organisations.

The second leading force of the M5-RPF alliance is the *Espoir Mali Koura* (EMK). The EMK and the groups associated with it enjoy close links to the transitional government. Led by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko, who served as minister of culture between 2002 and 2007, the EMK represents Mali's anti-globalisation left (Felter and Bussenmaker, 2020). It regards national autonomy and sovereignty as necessary conditions for what it calls "true democracy". It opposes interference from France and ECOWAS in Malian affairs and thus is one of the key drivers of anti-French sentiment (Idrissa, 2020; Coulibaly, 2021). The EMK supports the junta.

Other groups that share the EMK's views are the *Groupe des Patriotes du Mali* (GPM) formed in 2016 and Yèrèwolo, a legacy group of the 2012 post-coup period. In 2020 it asked for Russian intervention in Malian politics. Yèrèwolo frequently organised rallies in support of the junta. Many of these rallies feature Russian flags. Its leader, Adama Ben Diarra, is a member of the transitional government. Prior to the 2020 coup, he was a pan-Africanist youth activist and confidant of former SADI MP Oumar Mariko. In 2019 the Malian police arrested Diarra and accused him of trying to overthrow the

government (Diarra, 2019). The EMK currently is the most influential part of the M5-RPF alliance. It stands in the intellectual tradition of COPAM and MP-22.

The third pillar of the M5-RPF is the *Front pour la sauvegarde de la démocratie* (FSD). It formed on 6 October 2018, on the initiative of (the late) Soumaïla Cissé, Mali's long-time opposition leader. It represents the pre-coup parliamentary opposition. Its members belong to the country's political establishment (Coulibaly, 2021). The movement is close to the current prime minister. The FSD supports the transitional government. As the EMK, the FSD is highly critical of France's past role in Mali. One of the most influential forces inside the FSD is Mali's long-term opposition party, the *Union pour la République et la Démocratie* (URD).

The desire for a new and meaningful political beginning unites the various wings of the M5-RPF. As with COPAM and the MP-22 in 2012, it views the junta as a facilitator to link decision making in Bamako to the plight of ordinary Malians. The M5-RPF derives its popular support to a large extent from the fallout of the French military intervention in 2013 and the political proximity between Bamako and Paris since. The reasons behind the surge in nationalist and anti-French sentiment are manifold.

The first cracks in French-Malian relations occurred after the French liberation of Kidal in 2013, which occurred without the participation of the FAMA. The French initially did not allow the Malian army to enter the city. Following the liberation of Mali's north, Paris treated the MNLA, a key player in the Tuareg-jihadi insurgency, as an ally in the reconstruction of the north although the MNLA began to attack FAMA forces and to establish its own administration (Tinti, 2013). Within Mali this raised suspicions that France pursued a paternalistic relationship and was supportive of Tuareg secessionists (Tull, 2021; Powell, 2022).

For many Malians the worsening security situation was a paradox defying simple explanations. The initial suspicions about France's motives metamorphosed into the widespread belief that France intended to extract natural resources. To do so, according to these rumours, France would have secretly supported the jihadists to justify its ongoing military presence (Munshi, 2021; Shurkin, 2022).² By echoing these rumours, the junta-led government augmented these fears. In October 2021, Choguel Maïga claimed in an interview with a Russian media station that the French had been training terrorist groups with the intention to divide Mali (Toukara, 2021). In January 2022 the foreign minister of the transitional government, Abdoulaye Diop and Choguel Maïga in television interviews complained about a lack of respect from Paris and suggested that the French military intervention aimed at the division of Mali.

Further, throughout Operation Barkhane, France lacked an awareness of how its role as a former colonial power might undermine its mission in Mali. This was most evident during the 2020 Pau summit between the G5 Sahel countries and France. The summit gave rise to the impression that France had summoned African leaders and coerced them to express support for France's continued military mission (Wilén, 2022). The consistent failure

of Mali's southern-based political elite to reform the Malian armed forces augmented the perception that the IBK administration was Paris' client. In November 2019, long-term opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé expressed that sentiment when he declared that the Malian government had betrayed the Malian armed forces (Devermont, 2019; Tull, 2019).

Finally, since the coup of August 2020, Paris has decried the junta as illegitimate rulers. This position is perceived as contradictory to the lack of condemnation of the military coup in Chad and has helped shape the image of a hypocritical and self-serving colonial power in Malian public opinion.

The waning influence of Western and regional powers

Since the removal of the civilian-led interim government, the relationship between Mali and its major Western partners has declined considerably. Given the strong anti-French sentiment inside the junta, the transitional government, and larger sections of civil society, it seems unlikely that France will be able or willing to influence Mali's post-coup political trajectory. At the end of January, Mali asked the French ambassador to leave the country within three days (Jeune Afrique, 2022). In mid-February 2022, France announced that it would gradually decrease the number of its troops from Mali and move its troops to Niger where they will continue to try and contain the jihadi-Salafi insurgency in the Sahel region. The French government explained its withdrawal from Mali by referring to the breakdown in relations with the junta. It claimed that the current Malian government did not support the fight against the jihadi-Salafi organisations. In mid-March, the government announced that it would suspend broadcasts by French state-funded international RFI radio and France 24 television channel. Both media outlets reported that the Malian armed forces had killed civilians during a military campaign based on allegations made by the United Nations (UN) human rights commissioner and Human Rights Watch.

In late January 2022, the government asked Denmark to withdraw its troops, which were part of Operation Takuba, a task force composed of European special forces, part of Operation Barkhane since 2020. According to the transitional government, the Danish forces did not have the required authorisation to be on Malian territory (Olsen, 2022). In response to Denmark's decision to withdraw its troops, Norway decided to rescind its earlier decision to send a contingent of troops to Mali. At around the same time, the German national army experienced problems getting government authorisation to launch its drones and helicopters. Germany also questions any future military engagement in Mali (Hille, 2022). In mid-February, the transitional government asked all European military forces associated with Operation Takuba to leave the country. On 11 April, the European Union Training Mission (EUTM) decided to follow France's lead and end its mission. The United States military involvement in Mali is relatively small compared to similar programs elsewhere in the region. As the EU, the United States also has temporarily halted any military co-operation with the military government.³

After the junta announced that it would delay the presidential elections by up to five years, ECOWAS ramped up its sanction regime. The new sanctions include the closure of land borders within the ECOWAS region,

the suspension of all commercial and financial transactions, the suspension of the delivery of medical supplies including materials for the containment of COVID-19, the freezing of Malian assets in ECOWAS central banks, and the suspension of all financial assistance and transactions (Aubyn, 2022; ECOWAS Commission, 2022). The EU and the United States followed ECOWAS' lead and further imposed targeted sanctions on several senior figures of Mali's transitional government. The announcement of further sanctions provoked mass demonstrations in support of the junta and the transitional government. On 14 January 2022, large crowds in central Bamako denounced the sanctions as being imposed upon the country by illegitimate outside powers. In a televised speech, Goïta labelled the sanctions illegal and inhumane. For many Malians, the ECOWAS-imposed sanctions appear as hypocritical as France's condemnation of the junta as illegitimate. The argument could be made that many ECOWAS member states do not qualify as textbook cases of democratic rule and frequently do not comply with constitutionally-prescribed norms and institutions. Mali's Worker's Union summarised the public's sentiment towards ECOWAS as having "*once again betrayed Africa*" (Gbadamosi, 2022).

If anything, the ECOWAS sanctions strengthened the populist bond between sections of Mali's civil society and the military-led government. Their effects cannot yet be determined. Guinea, which has been under junta rule since September 2021, is not enforcing the sanctions thereby defying ECOWAS' authority. Co-operating with Guinea may provide Mali with maritime access. Mauritania and Algeria are not ECOWAS members and do not comply with the sanctions. Mali's transitional government already made attempts to strengthen co-operation with all three states (Moderan et al., 2022).

Russia, Mali's new partner of choice

As Western and regional influence is waning, Russian influence is waxing. Russian media and social media campaigns helped motivate the anti-IBK protests in the months prior to the 2020 coup (Siegle and Eizenga, 2021). The recent deployment of Russian mercenaries affiliated with the Wagner Group has provided the junta with an alternative pool of foreign troops and has enabled the junta to pursue its aggressive stance towards France and other Western partners (Lebovich, 2021; Thompson, 2021; Thompson et al., 2022). The EU, United States, and the UN all warned Bamako to allow the deployment of Russian mercenaries and now have condemned their presence (Rondeaux, 2019; Mackinnon, 2021a). Through the strategic use of the Wagner Group and other Russian-financed organisations, Moscow aims to influence domestic elites and to spread misinformation about Western and Russian foreign policy goals among the broader population.

Wagner and other Russian private military security contractors operate independently of the Russian state and the Russian military. Their initial purpose was to protect key Russian energy infrastructure including Russian state-owned energy firms such as Gazprom. Moscow's economic dependence on energy exports turned Wagner into an essential security provider for the Russian state. The precise relationship between Wagner and the Kremlin is shrouded in secrecy. Most analyses link Wagner to Russian oligarch Yevgeney Prigozhin, a close confidant of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Russia's intervention in the Republic of Georgia in 2008 witnessed the breakdown of the command structure within the regular Russian armed forces. As a result, Russia now has increasingly utilised Wagner and other mercenary groups in a diverse set of theatres including Egypt, Libya, Crimea and Syria.

The involvement of Wagner in Mali is part of a larger Russian strategy in sub-Saharan Africa. Russia's growing interest in the continent developed in tandem with its growing frustration with what Moscow perceived to be the expansion of Western influence globally. In 2006, Vladimir Putin became the first Russian president to visit sub-Saharan Africa. Subsequently, the Russian government embarked on many high-profile visits to the continent. The removal of longstanding partners such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak or Libya's Muammar Ghaddafi, the civil war in Syria and economic sanctions in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of the Crimea in 2014 augmented the need for Moscow to diversify its network of economic partners. In stark contrast to the 1990s, Moscow's foreign policy now portrays Africa as a continent with economic potential that seeks greater

engagement with Russia. The Institute for African Studies at the Russian Academy of Science in Moscow has provided the Kremlin with the intellectual hardware to formulate its new Africa strategy and to identify suitable African partners. Economic and political expediency rather than grand strategy are the key drivers of Russia's turn towards Africa.

Two goals seem to be at the heart of Russia's African strategy: to export manufactured weapons and to gain access to local natural resources (Kalika, 2019; Matusевич, 2019b). To achieve these goals, Russia provides African countries with security services in exchange for privileged and discretionary access to raw materials. Russia also seizes on the widespread disappointment over the modalities of Chinese loans to make Russian financing more attractive. Finally, the Kremlin helps stabilise authoritarian rulership with the goal of avoiding an "African spring" in countries where authoritarian rule is under threat. According to Kalika (2019), for example, Russia warned of an African spring in 2015 and sold security services through their consulates in Madagascar, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan. The strategic deployment of Wagner and linking Wagner with Russian private companies allows the Kremlin to achieve its overriding goals. Working through Wagner and groups that are not formally associated with the Russian government further enables Moscow to act as a facilitator.

The Wagner Group is active in several African countries. The Mozambiquan government hired the services of the Wagner Group to stem the tide against the escalating jihadi insurgency in the northern province of Cabo Delgado. In return for Wagner's help, the government allowed Russian businesses to extract liquefied natural gas. Wagner's security mission failed spectacularly due to its inability to engage with the local environment and the Mozambiquan military (Sixto, 2020; Fasanotti, 2022). In Guinea, the Wagner group provided economic advice to the Condé administration (Lyammouri and Eddazi, 2020). In the Central African Republic, Russian mercenaries serve as bodyguards for President Faustin Archange Touadéra. A former Russian intelligence officer, Valery Zakharov, serves as Touadéra's national security advisor. Several other Russian nationals occupy influential economic and political advisory positions (Mackinnon, 2021b; Olivier, 2021). Wagner fighters protected Touadéra from a coup attempt. Their presence has shifted the balance of power in the country in favour of the government and created a modicum of stability in an otherwise highly unstable country (Bax, 2021). The UN has urged the government to cut all ties with Wagner after a panel of experts found that the group had been committing grave human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances, and summary execution (United Nations Security Council, 2021).

In Mali as well as elsewhere on the continent, Russian officials describe their country as a non-Western power, which has experienced humiliation by the West thereby linking Russia's foreign policy predicament to the continent's historical experiences of economic exploitation and other forms of Western colonialism. It further promotes the sovereignty of formerly

colonised nations, a traditional view of gender relations, and national values. Russia's narrative about the importance of national sovereignty, its interpretation of events in world politics, and its self-portrayal as an emancipatory power found its way to Malian households through the RT France news channel. In addition, Moscow-based groups became invested in Maliactu.com, a major online resource for Malian news. Informal networks and illicit organisations such as the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) bankrolled initiatives to foster Russian soft power in Mali and to help sustain Malian civil society groups such as Yèrèwolo or GPM. These associations have turned into visible pro-Russian actors.

In 2019 Russia's efforts to increase its political, economic, and social leverage in Africa culminated in the first Russia-African summit in Sochi. Co-hosted by Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, 47 African heads of state and 3 000 delegates attended the summit, which yielded an unknown number of security and commercial contracts between Russia and individual African countries (Olivier and Suchkov, 2015; Kalika, 2019; Matusевич, 2019a; Shubin, 2019; Stronski, 2019). It was only until recently that Moscow identified Mali as a key ally for its broader strategy in Africa. Although former President IBK attended the Sochi summit, there were comparatively few transactions between Bamako and Moscow before and after the summit (Parens, 2022). Russia's recent engagement in Mali illustrates its flexibility to respond to political shifts on the continent.

Why Bamako's gamble might fail

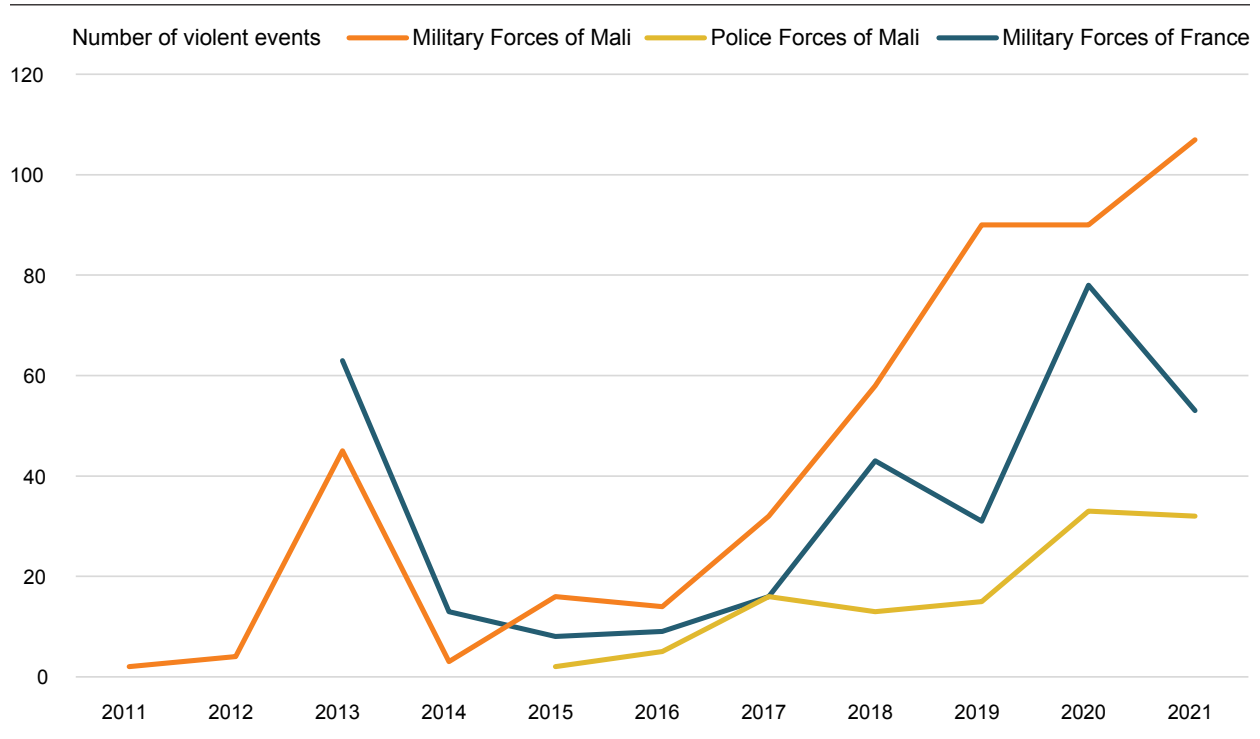
The political dynamics that have shaped Malian politics since August 2020 and Bamako's co-operative stance towards Moscow even in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, have raised the concern that the junta will continue to defy pressure to depart from power (Murphy, 2022). If that is indeed the case, the junta faces manifold and colossal challenges.

First, the junta-led transitional government will have to take sole responsibility for its battlefield performance against the jihadi-Salafi militants. Figure 2 summarises the extent to which various security actors have been involved in confrontations with violent extremist groups in the years leading up to the 2020 coup. The graph demonstrates that Mali became increasingly dependent on Barkhane's security assistance. Since coming to power, the Malian armed forces have claimed that the security situation has improved significantly due to Mali's newfound sense of patriotism.

Events in recent months question those claims as violent extremist groups continue their attacks against northern militias and the civilian population (Weiss, 2022). According to the UN, in 2021 close to 600 civilians died at the hands of the Malian armed forces (Baché, 2022). According to various interviews with former United States security officials, European military advisors, and French analysts conducted by the author in Bamako and the United States between 2019 and 2022, the withdrawal of Barkhane will most likely lead to a worsening of the security situation and undermine popular support for the junta. The lack of viable Western military support might provoke the growing participation of local militias in the conflict with potentially detrimental consequences for local communities (Shurkin et al., 2021). Although Russia tried to shield Mali from international criticism following the massacre of hundreds of civilians by the Malian armed forces in Mondoro on 1 April, Wagner will not increase its military commitment in the country. Given the limited profitability of mining, the income generated from it is insufficient to pay for the current services of the Wagner Group. The invasion of Ukraine could also provoke a shift of Wagner troops to Ukraine (Parens, 2022).

Figure 2

Violent events involving military actors and violent extremist groups, 2011-21

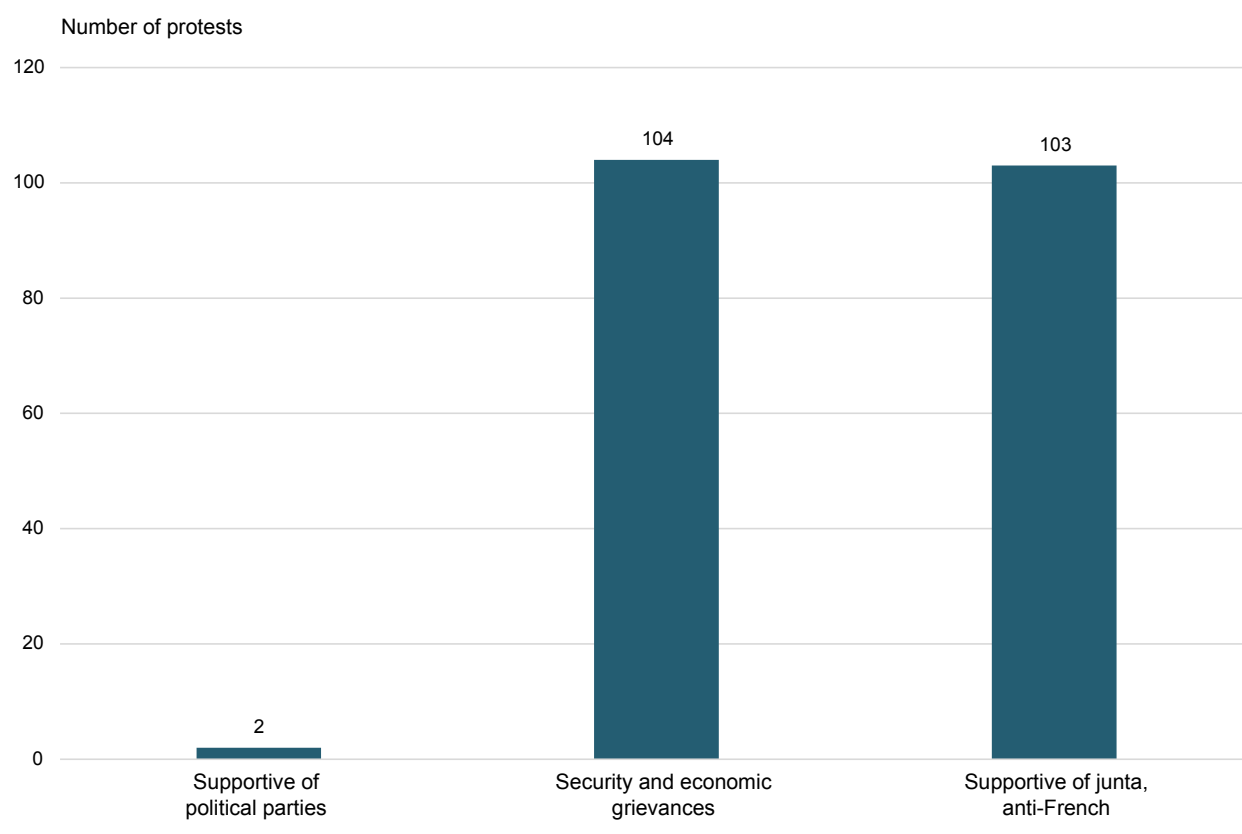


Note: Violent extremist groups include Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar Dine, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, Al-Mourabitoun, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, the Group for Supporting Islam and Muslims, and Katibat Macina. Source: Author's compilation based on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022). ACLED data is publicly available.

Second, the junta-led transitional government must live up to popular demands that are not related to security but the delivery of public goods. A closer analysis of popular demands at protest rallies in Mali during the first months of 2022 demonstrate this. Figure 3 compares the number of protests expressing support for the existing political parties with the number of protests demanding that the junta address the security and economic situation in the country, as well as the number of protests espousing support for the junta including anti-French sentiments. Around half of all protest rallies target Mali's poor economic conditions and the lack of security. To satisfy the demands of the Malian people, the transitional government will have to alleviate the economic sufferings of the population. The Russian invasion of Ukraine is likely to provoke a hike in agricultural goods, which may exacerbate popular frustration and expose the junta to new economic challenges.

Figure 3

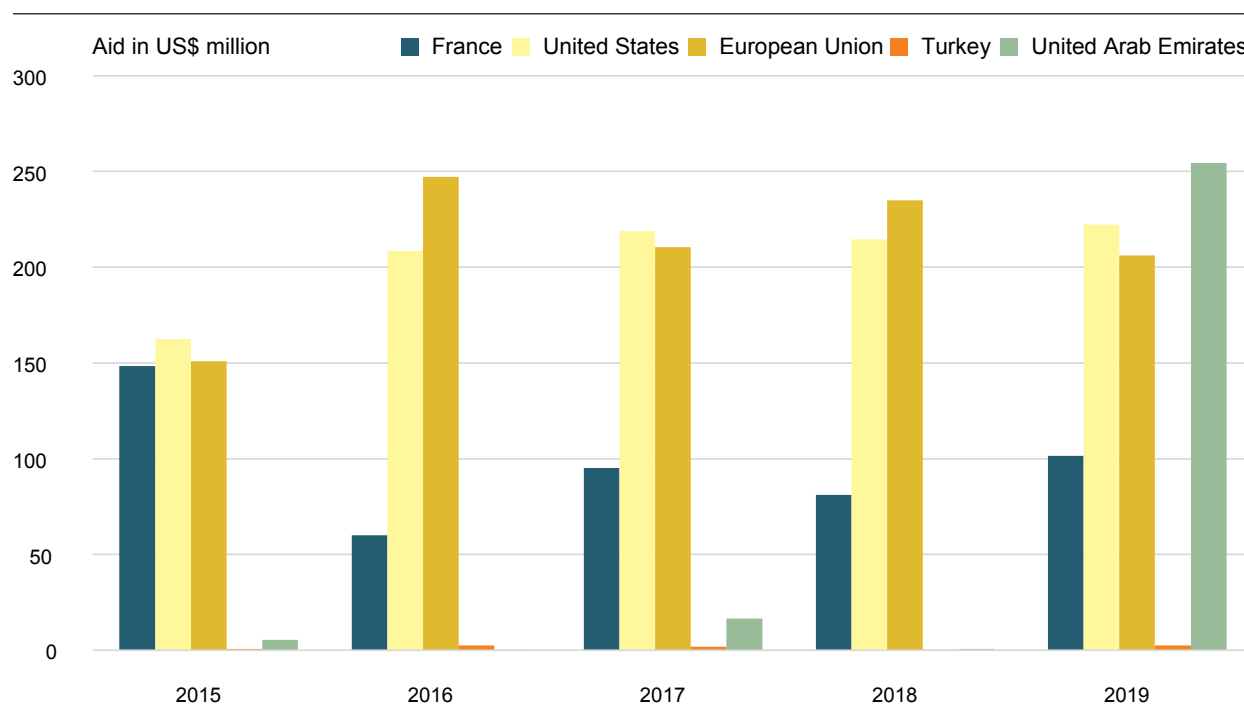
Demands by protestors, 1 January 2020 – 3 March 2021



Source: Author's compilation based on the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED, 2022). ACLED data is publicly available.

Third and related to the point above, is the fact that the Malian government remains dependent on donor aid from Western countries. Figure 4 summarises the amount of aid that Mali received from several donors between 2015 and 2019. Mali received most of its aid from France, the United States, and the EU member states. Only in 2019 did Russia become a bilateral donor. Russian aid to Mali is minimal: total Russian aid in 2019 was USD 1.5 million and is too small to be represented on Figure 4. The Russian government does not have a separate ministry of aid or ministry of economic collaboration. Interestingly, in recent years the United Arab Emirates has increased its aid but this is unlikely to have any political repercussions. Turkey also remains absent among the major donors in Mali.

Figure 4
Bilateral aid to Mali, 2015-19



Source: OECD (2022).

Overall, thus, the Malian transitional government will likely face difficulties in dealing with the manifold security, political, and developmental challenges. The exclusion of groups opposed to the junta from political decision making, the arbitrary arrest of junta opponents, the mysterious death of former Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, and the denial of human rights violations by the armed forces and the Wagner Group, indicate that things are not going well for the junta. Civil-military relations scholars have found that military juntas are more inclined to depart from power as being in government undermines the internal cohesion of the military (Geddes, 1999; Thyne and Powell, 2016). So far, there have been no visible counterforces inside the Malian army that have challenged the junta's desire to determine the country's political course of action. This might change if the security situation does not improve and as France and the EU begin to limit their financial footprint.

Future scenarios

Based on the current political situation and the manifold challenges, three scenarios are plausible:

- If the junta-led government remains in power for the next three to five years, there will be little chance for a return to a liberal democratic constitutional order. Backed by populist civil society organisations, the military could enshrine political privileges for the armed forces in the yet-to-be-drafted constitution. The post-Pinochet constitution in Chile or the current Pakistani constitution are prominent examples of how praetorian militaries have managed to cement their political influence.
- Over the course of the next two years, the junta-led transitional government will pave the way for multiparty elections. However, the junta will try to maintain its influence in politics by forming a new party or by supporting an existing political party that serves as its civilian proxy. The junta will become entrenched in power by manipulating the post-coup elections. Empirical examples are the post-coup elections in Mauritania in 2008, which resulted in the election of junta leader Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and the 2017 post-coup elections in Zimbabwe in which the military ensured its influence by rigging the elections in favour of a civilian proxy.
- The transitional government will reform Mali's electoral system, oversee the draft of a new constitution and hand over power to newly elected civilian rulers. The junta returns to the barracks within the next two to three years. Empirical examples of such a strategy include the post-coup trajectories of the 2010 Nigerien and the 2012 Bissau-Guinean coups.

Notes

- 1 Author's interview with several Malian and European analysts in Bamako over the course of August 2013.
- 2 The author wants to thank Dr. Moumouni Soumano for his insights.
- 3 Various interviews with former US security officials, European military advisors, and French analysts between 2019 and 2022. The interviews were conducted in Bamako and in the United States.

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Populist civil society, the Wagner Group, and post-coup politics in Mali

The military coup of August 2020 upended Mali's fragile liberal democratic order. The junta-led transitional government defies international pressure to fasten the return of democratically-elected rulers and constitutional rule. The ability of the junta to shape the course of Malian politics rests on two interconnected pillars. First, there is public resentment towards the post-1991 political class and France's military involvement in the country. The forces representing that resentment view the junta as change makers and have formed influential political organisations that oppose the return to the status quo ante. Second, there is the security co-operation with Russian mercenaries, which provides the transitional government with an alternative security partner. The paper traces the origins, evolution, and the future strength of these pillars. It concludes by outlining future political scenarios and the future role of the military in Malian politics.

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