

Mali Opens Its Doors to Russia

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With strict pressure from the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the August coup leaders have installed an interim government that will run state affairs until next elections. Plucked from obscurity, the former Defense Minister Bah Ndaw became the transitional President, while Colonel Assimi Goita serves as Vice President. The transitional committee made up of representatives of political parties, civil and religious groups agreed on both positions.

According to their biographical reports, both had part of their professional military training in the Soviet Union and Russia respectively. The transitional civilian government, swearing-in ceremony and inauguration into office took place on Sept 25, completely closed the political chapter on the political administration of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

The military takeover, Mali's fourth since gaining independence from France in 1960, came after months of protests, stoked by Keita's failure to roll back a bloody jihadist insurgency and fix the country's many economic woes.

Over the years, reform policies have had little impact on the living standards, majority highly impoverished in the country. As a developing country, it ranks at the bottom of the United Nations Development Index (2018 report). The country, however, is a home to approximately 20 million population. The primary task, right now, is to draw up "a comprehensive road map" for economic recovery.

Earlier before the Sept 25 ceremony, Assimi Goita had issued a public statement at a media-covered conference to the Malian population,

"We make a commitment before you to spare no effort in the implementation of all these resolutions in the exclusive interest of the Malian people. We request and hope for the understanding, support and accompaniment of the international community in this diligent and correct implementation of the Charter and the transition roadmap. The results you have achieved allow me to hope for the advent of a new, democratic, secular and prosperous Mali."

While West African leaders would likely remove the economic sanctions imposed in the wake of last month's coup, following the installation of a civilian interim president, a number of foreign countries including Russia have already recognized these new developments taken toward stability.

Russia, apparently, is exploring all possibilities to regain part of its Soviet-era influence as Mali begins to restructure and systematize its state administration. In an official statement to mark Mali's 60th anniversary of its independence from France, Russian Ministry of Foreign

Affairs (MFA) hoped that Mali would fix in place civilian form of government and, focus on holding free and democratic elections following a short transitional period with the assistance of the Economic Community of West African States and the African Union.

It is noteworthy to recall here that Russia and Mali are linked by friendship and cooperation. In 1960, Mali attained independence following a prolonged struggle and opted for a socialist orientation. There were major projects implemented with Soviet assistance. These includes a cement factory, the Kalana gold-mining company, a stadium in Bamako, the Gabriel Toure Hospital, an airfield in Gao and a number of national education facilities. Large-scale prospecting operations were conducted, and 9,000 hectares converted into rice paddies.

Thousands of Soviet educators, doctors and other specialists worked in Mali. Over 10,000 Mali citizens received higher education in Russia.

“We hope that the time-tested Russia-Mali ties will continue to develop steadily in the interests of both states. We would like to congratulate the friendly people of Mali on their national holiday and to wish them every success in achieving nationwide reconciliation, reviving their country as soon as possible, and we wish them peace, prosperity and well-being,” the statement particularly stressed.

As Russia pushes to strengthen its overall profile in the G5 Sahel region, Mali could become a gateway into the region. Russia has made military-technical cooperation as part of its diplomacy and keen on fighting growing terrorism in Africa.

Experts suspected that the regime change in Mali could see Russia-friendly new leaders taking over the country from the French-friendly Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and his government, thereby dealing a severe blow to French influence and interests not just in Mali but throughout the Sahel zone.



Research Professor Irina Filatova at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow explained recently in an emailed “Russia’s influence in the Sahel has been growing just as French influence and assistance has been dwindling, particularly in the military sphere. It is for the African countries to choose their friends and people who are now in power will be friendlier with Russia.”

That said, the transitional government could continue to leverage with Russia. Reports indicate that Russia has established cordial relations with transitional government. On August 21, Russian Ambassador to Mali and Niger Igor Gromyko [met](#) with representatives from the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP). The CNSP is an umbrella organization of military personnel involved in the coup, which wishes to oversee an [18-month transition](#) before returning power to civilian authorities. Russia signed a military cooperation [agreement](#) with Mali in June 2019.

In November 2019, demonstrators in Bamako [urged](#) Moscow to repel Islamist attacks in Mali as it did in Syria. At the Independence Square demonstrations in Bamako that followed the coup, protesters were [spotted](#) waving Russian flags and holding [posters](#) praising Russia for its solidarity with Mali.

Samuel Ramani, DPhil candidate at the Department of Politics and International Relations at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, wrote in the Journal of the Foreign Policy Research Institute that “Since Russia possesses a diverse array of partnerships in Mali and

Sahel countries are frustrated with the counterterrorism policies of Western powers. Moscow could leverage the Mali coup to secure economic deals and bolster its geopolitical standing in West Africa.”

According to the expert, Kremlin-aligned research institutes and media outlets have consistently framed France’s [counterterrorism operations](#) in Niger and Mali as a façade for the extraction of the Sahel’s uranium resources. Russian nuclear energy giant Rosatom, which [directly competes](#) with its French counterpart Avenda for contracts in the Sahel, could benefit from favorable relations with Mali’s new political authorities. Nordgold, a Russian gold company that has investments in Guinea and Burkina Faso, could also expand its extraction initiatives in Mali’s gold reserves.

As one of the largest on the continent, Mali is a landlocked country located in West Africa. For centuries, its northern city of Timbuktu was a key regional trading post and center of Islamic culture. Mali is renowned worldwide for having produced some of the stars of African music, most notably Salif Keita. But, this cultural prominence has long since faded.

After independence from France in 1960, Mali suffered droughts, rebellions, and 23 years of military dictatorship until democratic elections in 1992. Mali has struggled with mass protests over corruption, electoral probity, and a jihadist insurgency that has made much of the north and east ungovernable. President Ibrahim Keita, who took office in September 2013, proved unable to unify the country. With time and commitment to sustainable development and good governance, there is still hope for Mali.

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