

Burkina Faso January 2022: Another US-trained Soldier Staged a Military Coup in West Africa

The leader of a coup in Burkina Faso is the latest in a line of U.S.-trained soldiers who overturned civilian leaders.

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Global Research, August 16, 2023

[The Intercept](#) 26 January 2022

Region: [sub-Saharan Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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This article originally published in January 2022 is of relevance to the evolving role of the US military in Francophone West Africa as well to Niger's military coup d'Etat.

Earlier this week [January 2022], the military seized power in Burkina Faso, ousting the country's democratically elected president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré.

The coup was announced on state television Monday by a young officer who said the military had suspended the constitution and dissolved the government. Beside him sat a camouflage-clad man whom he introduced as Burkina Faso's new leader: Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the commander of one of the country's three military regions.

Damiba is a highly trained soldier, thanks in no small part to the U.S. military, which has a long record of training soldiers in Africa who go on to stage coups. Damiba, it turns out, participated in at least a half-dozen U.S. training exercises, according to U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM.

In 2010 and 2020, he participated in an annual special operations training program known as the Flintlock exercise. In 2013, Damiba was accepted into an Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance course, which is a State Department-funded peacekeeping training program. In 2013 and 2014, Damiba attended the U.S.-sponsored Military Intelligence Basic Officer Course-Africa. And in 2018 and 2019, he participated in engagements with a U.S. Defense Department Civil Military Support Element in Burkina Faso.

Damiba is just the latest in a carousel of coup leaders in West Africa trained by the U.S. military as the U.S. has pumped in more than \$1 billion in security assistance to promote “[stability](#)” in the region. Since 2008, U.S.-trained officers have attempted at least nine coups (and succeeded in at least eight) across five West African countries, including Burkina Faso (three times), Guinea, Mali (three times), Mauritania, and the Gambia.

Since the 2000s, the United States has regularly deployed small teams of commandos to advise, assist, and accompany local forces, even into battle; provided weapons, equipment, and aircraft; offered many forms of training, including Flintlock, which is conducted by Special Operations Command Africa and focused on enhancing the counterterrorism capabilities of nations in West Africa, including Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal.

“When the U.S. prioritizes tactical training, we overlook longer-term goals that could create more stable governments,” said Lauren Woods, director of the Security Assistance Monitor, which is a program of the nonprofit Center for International Policy. “We need more transparency and public debate on the foreign military training that we provide. And we need to do a much better job thinking about the long-term risks — including coups and abuses by forces we train.”

AFRICOM emphasizes that its security cooperation and “[capacity-building activities](#)” foster the “development of professional militaries,” which are disciplined and committed to the well-being of their citizens. “U.S. military training regularly includes modules on the law of armed conflict, subjugation to civilian control, and respect for human rights,” AFRICOM spokesperson Kelly Cahalan told The Intercept. “Military seizures of power are inconsistent with U.S. military training and education.”

But coups d’état by U.S.-trained officers have become an increasingly common occurrence in Burkina Faso and elsewhere in the region.

Last summer, for example, American Green Berets arrived in Guinea to train a special forces unit led by [Col. Mamady Doumbouya](#), a charismatic young officer who had also served in the French Foreign Legion. In September, members of Doumbouya’s unit took time out from their ongoing instruction — in [small unit tactics](#), tactical combat casualty care, and the law of armed conflict — to storm the presidential palace and depose the country’s 83-year-old president, Alpha Condé. Doumbouya soon [declared himself](#) Guinea’s new leader and the U.S. ended the training.

In 2020, [Col. Assimi Goïta](#), who worked with U.S. Special Operations forces for years, participating in Flintlock training exercises and attending a Joint Special Operations University seminar at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida, headed the junta that overthrew Mali’s government.

“The act of mutiny in Mali is strongly condemned and inconsistent with U.S. military training and education,” Marine Corps [Lt. Col. Anton T. Semelroth](#), a Pentagon spokesperson, said at the time.

After staging the coup, Goïta stepped down and took the job of vice president in a transitional government tasked with returning Mali to civilian rule. But nine months later, he seized power again in his second [coup](#).

Goïta wasn't even the first U.S.-trained Malian officer to overthrow the country's government. In 2011, when a U.S.-backed uprising in Libya toppled autocrat Muammar Gaddafi, Tuareg fighters in his service looted the regime's weapons caches, traveled to their native Mali and began to take over the northern part of that country. Angered by the ineffective response of his government, Amadou Sanogo — an officer who learned English in Texas, received intelligence training in Arizona, and underwent Army infantry-officer basic training in Georgia — took matters into his own hands and overthrew his country's democratically elected government.

"America is a great country with a fantastic army," he said after the 2012 coup. "I tried to put all the things I learned there into practice here."

In 2014, another U.S.-trained officer, [Lt. Col. Isaac Zida](#), seized power in Burkina Faso amid popular protests. Two years earlier, when he was a major, Zida attended a counterterrorism training course at MacDill Air Force Base that was sponsored by Joint Special Operations University and attended a military intelligence course in Botswana that was financed by the U.S. government.

The next year, another coup in Burkina Faso installed [Gen. Gilbert Diendéré](#). Diendéré had not only taken part in a U.S.-led Flintlock counterterrorism exercise, but he also served as a literal advertisement for it, appearing in an AFRICOM photo addressing Burkinabe soldiers before their deployment to Mali in support of the [2010 Flintlock exercise](#).



Then-Col. Maj. Gilbert Diendéré addresses Burkinabe soldiers prior to their deployment to Mali in support of AFRICOM's Flintlock 10 exercise in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on May 1, 2010. Photo: U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Jeremiah Erickson, Flintlock 10 Public Affairs

In 2014, two generations of U.S.-educated officers faced off in the Gambia as a group of American-trained [would-be coup-makers attempted](#) (but failed) to overthrow another [U.S.-trained](#) coup-maker, Yahya Jammeh who had seized power back in 1994. The unsuccessful rebellion claimed the life of Lamin Sanneh, the purported ringleader, who had earned a

master's degree at National Defense University in Washington, D.C.

"I can't shake the feeling that his education in the United States somehow influenced his actions," [wrote](#) Sanneh's former NDU mentor Jeffrey Meiser. "I can't help but wonder if simply imprinting our foreign students with the 'American program' is counterproductive and unethical."

In 2008, [Stars and Stripes](#) reported that Gen. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, the leader of a coup against Mauritania's elected president, "has worked with U.S. forces that train in the African country." Arrested and charged with corruption after a decadelong rule, Aziz was recently [released on bail](#) due to ill health.

U.S.-trained coup-plotters aren't strictly confined to West Africa. Before Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi deposed Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohammed Morsi, he underwent [basic training](#) at Fort Benning, Georgia, (in 1981) and advanced instruction at the U.S. Army War College (in 2006).

A 2018 study by the military's go-to think tank, the Rand Corporation, cast doubt on the notion that U.S. military training breeds coup-makers.

"[T]here is little evidence that overall [security sector assistance] (measured in dollar terms) associates with coup propensity in Africa," according to the study, which was written for the Office of the Secretary of Defense and did note that there was a "[marginally significant](#)" association in the post-Cold War period.

A year before, however, a study by Jonathan Caverley of the U.S. Naval War College and Jesse Savage of Trinity College Dublin in the Journal of Peace Research, analyzing data from 1970 to 2009, [found](#) "a robust relationship between U.S. training of foreign militaries and military-backed coup attempts" despite the authors limiting their analysis to the International Military Education and Training program — "which explicitly focuses on promoting norms of civilian control."

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Featured image: A soldier patrols the streets of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, October 2018. Photo by Issouf Sanogo.

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