

Beat: News

Jihadism and military takeovers in West Africa:

Burkina Faso coup highlights the links

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ARAC International StratCom - The West African sub-region at the southern edge of the Sahara Desert has recently attracted significant attention. The main reasons have been an increase in violent extremism and what appear to be manifestations of democratic backsliding.

Events in Mali and Guinea offer examples. In both countries, democratic governance was truncated. Political power was seized by military force and constitutionalism suspended.

Unfolding events in Burkina Faso also have consequences for peace, stability and security in a keenly contested region characterised by state fragility and decay.

The latest coup in Burkina Faso on 30 September 2022 was the second in only nine months. In the second coup, 34-year-old Captain Ibrahim Traore removed Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba from office.

The signs were clear that an internal crisis was brewing.

Shortly before the coup, Damiba had sacked his defence minister and assumed the position himself. It appeared to be a show of strength to consolidate his grip on political power.

The reasons for the sacking were not unconnected to the country's continued failure to defeat violent extremist groups. Most are affiliated to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and have made significant inroads into the country since 2015.

Just days before the latest coup, a convoy of 207 trucks on National Road 22 in Gaskindé, a commune located in the province of Soum, was attacked. It claimed the lives of 37 people, including 27 soldiers, and 70 truck drivers are still missing. Al-Qaeda has since claimed responsibility for the attack.

Recently these extremist groups began their foray into other West African states such as Togo and Benin. Should these groups establish their hold on Burkina Faso, they could potentially train recruits and launch attacks from there.

Arresting the activities of extremist groups was the reason Damiba seized power in a coup on 24 January 2022. He described this as a "necessary and indispensable" coup. Nine months later, Traore gave similar reasons for seizing power from Damiba.

To understand the latest coup, one must appreciate three inter-related factors. The first is internal power struggles in the country. The second is the links between these struggles and the prevalence of violent extremism in the country. Third is the complex twists of regional dynamics involving external state actors. For instance, France had provided backing for Damiba. But Traore has indicated his willingness to work with Russia.

Violence continues

Like his predecessor, Traore assumed power as "head of state and head of the armed forces". He is now known as "transitional president" and has promised to bring an end to violent extremism.

But Traore doesn't appear to have a comprehensive strategy to end this violence, which has continued unabated. Barely a month after assuming power, 10 Burkina Faso soldiers were killed and 50 others were wounded following a terrorist attack on an army base in Djibo.

The citizens of Burkina Faso continue to pay a heavy price for the violence. They live in a poor, landlocked state that in 2021 was

ranked 184 out of 191 on the Human Development Index. A quarter of the population of 22 million lives on emergency assistance.

But the focus of the state appears to still be on securing military assistance rather than trying to fix these problems.

Foreign support

A number of countries have provided some form of military assistance to Burkina Faso in its quest to ensure its survival against jihadists.

Before Damiba was removed from office, France was considering supporting Burkina Faso with 15 million euros. Following his ouster, France is reported to have received Damiba.

Traore, on the other hand, has blamed France for the advances made by jihadists and signalled his willingness to work with Russia to defeat this persistent threat.

No doubt, Russia remains the greatest non-western state beneficiary of the latest coup, which it has unofficially welcomed. Russia seeks to fill the “policing gap” created by France’s dwindling strategic influence in the region following its recent end to Operation Barkhane.

It is also significant that young supporters of the latest coup attacked the French embassy and waved Russian flags.

The other beneficiaries are the jihadists, who are likely to intensify their brutal campaigns of terror by taking advantage of the political instability created by coups, by exploiting local grievances and frustrations.

The implication for the US and its western allies in an age of great power competition is the potential loss of strategic relevance in the contested region.

While there is no clear evidence of Russian involvement in events leading up to the coup, it’s clear that the geopolitical dynamics of the region are shifting in its favour.

As with the other recent coups, the latest coup in Burkina Faso has attracted the toothless condemnation responses of the international community, including the United Nations and the African Union.

The Economic Community of West African States has however indicated its willingness to send a team of mediators to Ouagadougou. There is no guarantee that they are likely to achieve much, given that protesters have pushed back against the regional body’s diplomatic efforts.

Regional ripple effects

Shortly after seizing power, Traore put together a two-day national forum, which was dominated by representatives of the junta.

Plagued with a history of 27 years of military dictatorship which only came to an end in 2014, Burkina Faso’s woes might have only just begun. And they could have a ripple effect across the West African sub-region.

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