

Junta forces Malian prime minister to resign

By Ernst Wolff
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Mali's prime minister, Cheick Modibo Diarra, was arrested and forced to resign by the country's military junta on Monday night. Django Cissoko, a former senior official in the president's office, was appointed as the new prime minister on Tuesday. Cissoko announced that he would form a government of national unity before the end of the week.

The junta that removed Diarra from office took power in March after toppling the government of President Amadou Toumani, which it accused of not providing adequate equipment to combat Tuareg rebels in the North. The Tuareg rebels had returned home heavily armed from Libya in October 2011 after the killing of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, on whose side they had fought as mercenaries. After a power struggle between the Tuaregs and local Al Qaeda-linked islamists, the latter prevailed and seized control of two-thirds of northern Mali, an area the size of Texas.

In April, the junta, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, who received his military training in the United States, installed Dioncounda Traore as president. Traore appointed 60-year-old Diarra, a former NASA astrophysicist and Microsoft chief for Africa, who has an American passport, as interim prime minister. When Traore fled to France after being beaten unconscious in April, Diarra took over his office until he returned.

At the beginning of November, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreed to send 3,300 Nigerian-led troops into Mali in 2013 in order to beat back the Islamist forces and restore order in the country's north. Only last week, Ivory Coast President Alassane Ouattara demanded quick military action because the Islamists were gaining a tighter grip on the areas they controlled. The United Nations has signalled its readiness to support an intervention without so far specifying any details. On Monday, the European Union approved a plan to send 250 trainers to

revamp Mali's military.

Modibo Diarra favored such an intervention and had regularly been in touch with Western governments about the issue. He also organised a pro-intervention demonstration in Mali's capital Bamako on Sunday that might have sparked his arrest. The military junta under Captain Sanogo is strictly opposed to any intervention, because it doesn't want to share power with foreign forces. Sanogo's spokesman accused Diarra of "no longer acting in the interest of the country" before his resignation.

The events in Mali have also become an arena for intensifying frictions between two leading imperialist powers—the US and France. Both share responsibility for unleashing the crisis in the country, which was part of the regional reverberations from the US-NATO war for regime-change in Libya.

"We need to continue to move forward on what security arrangements are needed to reinforce the legitimate military authorities in Mali," said Victoria Nuland, spokeswoman of the US State Department. "And clearly they're going to need more help."

Evidently, the US government is reluctant to take immediate action. Some American military strategists have even spoken out against a foreign troop deployment on Malian soil and say that only financial and logistical support is needed.

This is probably because Washington views Mali as part of its long-term strategy to undermine and roll back China's influence in Africa. Also, the Obama administration's present alignment with local Al Qaeda groups in Syria forces it to pursue an extremely careful policy towards Islamist fundamentalists all over Africa.

France, on the other hand, is calling for immediate military action. It is already deploying drones on Malian territory and pressuring the UN Security Council to give a green light for sending troops into Mali's north. "It is our own security that's at stake",

said French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian last week. “If we don’t move quickly, a new terrorist state will develop step by step.”

As always, the invocation of a terrorist threat is largely a pretext. Behind the scenes, the imperialist powers are fighting out their corporate interests and strategic relations with Mali’s neighbouring states.

French nuclear corporation Areva, 79 percent state-owned and the world’s biggest developer of nuclear equipment, is highly dependent on political stability in the region, because it gets much of its uranium from Mali and its neighbour, Niger. With the deepening of the euro crisis, France and one of its leading multinational companies simply cannot afford a failure in its supply chain from Africa.

The growing tensions between the US and France were highlighted by two official comments made last week. Whereas French Foreign Ministry spokesman Philippe Lalliot told reporters in Paris that “these developments underline the need for the rapid deployment of an African stabilization force”, Susan Rice, the US ambassador to the United Nations, answered in much less diplomatic language, calling French- and African-backed plans to retake control of northern Mali from a coalition of Islamist militants linked to Al Qaeda “crap.”

Still, these differences are of a purely tactical nature. Strategically, France and the US are striving for common imperialist aims. In order to advance this agenda, both countries have lately been heavily courting Algeria’s support behind the scenes.

After Hillary Clinton’s trip to Algeria, US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns went to Algiers last week, meeting with several Algerian officials, including President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal and Maghreb Affairs Minister Abdelkader Messahel, signing contracts on construction, housing, pharmaceuticals, oil and gas.

Next week French President François Hollande will pay a two-day visit to Algiers and try to further improve relations with France’s former colony, which has already backed away from its former position of “no interference in Mali”. In an interview with *Le soir d’Algerie* African and Maghreb Affairs Minister Abdekkader Messahel said on November 22 that armed intervention should be pursued only “if all avenues of dialogue had been explored without success”—a clear

indication that Algeria is ready to act if the imperialists pay the right price.

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