

# Military Coup In Burkina Faso In The Context Of The Franco-Russian Struggle In Africa

Africa, which is seen as the continent of the future - especially in terms of its population and economic potential - is also the continent with the most conflict areas in the world. On the other hand, terror attacks, civil wars, conflicts, and military coups there have now become common. There are many reasons for these developments. The most important reasons are generally the problems that the continent inherited from the colonial period and the effects of the colonial states there.

Certainly, it is a fact that the former colonial states continued their exploitation schemes with different methods. However, there is also another fact that the perpetrators of these acts of violence are the people of the continent itself. It is known that states such as France, the UK, or the US support different political and armed groups in these countries for their own interests. Then groups in Africa that receive support from third countries use violence against their own people and hinder the political, economic, and cultural development of the countries.

The last of these events was the military coup that took place in Burkina Faso on September 30, 2022. Burkina Faso - where there have been two military coups in the last year alone - has witnessed nine military coups in total since its independence in 1960, not to mention the unsuccessful military coup attempts that were made. With the September 30 military coup, Interim President Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, who was accused of being unable to solve the security and other problems in the country, was overthrown by the military led by Captain Ibrahim Traore. The overthrown junta leader Damiba also overthrew Roch Christian Kabore with a military coup. Kabore came to power with a democratic election on January 24 for the first time in the country's history. Like Captain Traore who overthrew him, Damiba used security issues as an excuse to seize power. Traore, who took over the administration as an interim leader, declared that the constitution was suspended and that all entrances and exits to the country were closed.

## **Background**

Burkina Faso, which is among the 10 poorest countries in the world, is struggling with many problems, including escalating conflict and violence, mass displacement, and food crisis. One of these problems is the civil war and conflicts that have been going on since 2015, which created millions of Internally Displaced People.

In August 2015, nearly two million people had to leave their homes due to the conflicts and civil war that broke out between the government and terrorist groups, and at least two thousand civilians lost their lives. Exclusively, attacks carried out by terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda and DAESH in the neighboring country Mali, especially in the northern and eastern regions of the country since 2015, are the most significant reason for the unrest that triggered the coup in the country.

As a matter of fact, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba seized power in January 2022 due to increasing terror attacks and continued the junta regime despite all international sanctions. However, the attacks and civil war continued, causing casualties and displacements of civilians. In the last military coup, the junta accused their predecessors of failing to stop the attacks that killed thousands of people and displaced nearly two million people in 2015-2021. Before the last coup, a state of emergency was declared in 14 of the country's 45 provinces. The attacks are concentrated in a region called Liptako Gourma, shared by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. These attacks and conflicts, which mostly affect the border regions in the north and east of Burkina Faso, destabilize the whole country economically and politically, to say the least.

While terrorist organizations in the region earn a serious income from illegal means such as looting, weapon, and fuel smuggling, states in the region are dragged into a deeper political and economic crisis. Burkina Faso, which has been fighting against coups and political instability as well as

worsening attacks since 2015, cannot provide its army with the necessary weapons and equipment to fight these terrorist organizations as in other countries in the region, and this only complicates their fight against terror. Another dilemma, which serves as the main problem here, is that the army tends to use all its energies and resources to seize power and carry out coups, instead of fighting terrorist organizations.

Obviously, the reasons to justify all the forced power takeovers were overthrown by the last coup, because the lingering atmosphere of insecurity only leads to increasing terror attacks and conflicts in the country.

### ***Reactions to the Coup***

The reaction of the people of Burkina Faso to the coup is twofold. While some of the public celebrates the coup, others think that this coup will worsen the already grave security problems and political chaos. Chrysogone Zougmore, head of the Burkina Faso Human Rights Movement said that the country's instability will not help in the fight against extremist violence and described the coup as "very regrettable".

France and the US stated that they were concerned about the coup. French Minister of Foreign Affairs Catherine Colonna made a statement about "serious and intolerable incidents" about the attacks made to the French Embassy and some French companies in the country following the allegations that the ousted leader Paul-Henri Damiba took refuge in a French military base.

Turkey has announced that it is concerned about the coup attempt in Burkina Faso. The African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) also condemned the coup.

Russia, on the other hand, has called for a return to normalcy for a "complete order" and a "return to the framework of legitimacy" in Burkina Faso. Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the Wagner Group - a private military company based in Russia with soldiers in various conflict zones around the world, especially in Eastern Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and some countries in Africa - congratulated the putschist, Captain Ibrahim Traore. Prigozhin described Traore as "a truly courageous son of the motherland".

### ***The biggest sources of instability in Africa: Armies and Coups***

West Africa is suffering due to its armies, which only offer political and institutional instability as a solution to security instability. From August 2020 to October 2022, West Africa will have recorded a total of five coups, including two in Burkina Faso, two in Mali and the one that overthrew President Alpha Conde in Guinea. In addition, coups have also taken place in Mali and Sudan recently. So many putschists in just two years would obviously cause concerns for the stability of the region, especially since this occurs in a context of progressive deterioration of the global security climate. However, this is perhaps not the biggest threat of this region. The scourge that needs to be put to an immediate end is the tendency to mindlessly legitimize the resurgent phenomenon of coups d'etat, using the equally simplistic pretext of "policy failure". However, armies in Africa, quicker to dislodge the presidents from their palaces than to track down the enemy who harasses and decapitates women and children, are no less responsible for the tragedy.

### ***France and Russia's New Battleground: West and Central Africa***

As in many parts of Africa, the struggle of global actors is seen in Central and West Africa. The most prominent of these global actors are France, the former colonizer of this region, and Russia, which is boosting its influence in Africa through military operations. Desiring to maintain its colonial order with different methods, France still maintains its influence in the military, economic and political fields in

the countries of the region following their independence. While France makes direct military interventions in Mali and Chad, it also hosts military missions in other regional countries such as Burkina Faso. In addition, there are huge French companies and investments in these countries. The Central African Franc (CFA franc) is still used in these countries and the banknotes are printed by the Bank of France. France's continuous influence causes unrest in these countries and its people. Many politicians and most of the people in these countries see France as the main cause of their problems.

Ibrahim Traore said that the Lieutenant Colonel he ousted was supported by France. Traore also said that they need to gain new partners to fight terrorist groups in the country. This statement was interpreted as the new military junta being pro-Russian. The "new partners" mentioned by Burkina Faso's new junta are believed to be Russia, ready to provide support in terms of its Wagner group and arms to West African armies in exchange for undermining France's influence in the region. This theory was made clearer because, after the recent coup in Burkina Faso, supporters of the new military junta chanted pro-Russian slogans and waved the Russian flag in the streets. There are also comments that the military junta may choose to hire mercenaries from Russia. Considering the statements of Wagner's founder Yevgeny Prigozhin after the coup and him congratulating the new junta, it is clear that this possibility cannot be ignored.

Potential Russian aid can come in a variety of ways. Russian influence in Burkina Faso is assumed to increase with the new junta regime, just as it has in Mali. On the contrary, French influence in the region entered a period of decline after Paris failed in the Barkhane operation, which was launched in Mali in 2014, and subsequently withdrawn in August 2022. This situation has opened a new area of Russian expansion. This will be achieved through the deployment of experts from Wagner to the country for training, as well as the provision of arms support. Moreover, it is estimated that Russia will benefit from the rich zinc, phosphate and manganese mines in the country and the gold mines in Burkina Faso, which ranks 5th in the African continent's gold production.

Russia's rising influence in the region through the Wagner Group in countries such as the Central African Republic (CAF), Sudan and Mali concerns the West, particularly France and the US. For instance, the US is holding a major counter-terrorism training exercise for West African countries as a response. However, it is noteworthy that both Mali and Burkina Faso did not participate in Operation Flintlock this year. The Wagner Group has been operating in the CAF since 2018 and has been accused of many human rights violations, including mass murder, torture and rape. With mercenaries like Wagner, a state can become involved in a conflict without being formally a party to it. Thus, states can easily claim that they are not parties to the conflict. This situation removes the responsibility and accountability of the states. Moreover, when such actors are brought into armed conflicts, they are prolonged, and the risk of war crimes increases. In reality, these organizations do not have any motivation to end the conflict. The biggest motivation of soldiers of such group is money.

There are also comments that Russia has attempted to boost its influence both in the region and in Burkina Faso, not only militarily, but also digitally. It is claimed that before the last coup in Burkina Faso, Russia was fueling anti-French sentiment through its activist groups on social media for months.

It is known that France, which always has its "colonial identity" in the continent, struggles in determining its African strategy. The road map in France's new African plan, where it has lost the power of many countries, is not clear. Niger and Benin are among the countries that cooperate with France in the region. However, despite France, Benin can still make attempts to purchase unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) from Turkey and China. Realizing that its influence in the region is gradually falling, France is trying to revise its relations with the countries of the region. In this context, France, which prioritizes Niger and Chad as a Sahel base, supports these countries militarily and politically. Increasing security concerns and economic crisis in Burkina Faso, due to the former military administration's failure to prevent terrorist attacks and its close ties with France, also caused France to appear responsible in the eyes of the people of the country. Declining in popularity, France seems to have lost in Burkina Faso for the time being.

It is among the predictions that this power struggle between France and Russia will complicate the

establishment of the security environment in the region through proxy wars. Shortly before, France has been accused by Mali of providing weapons and resources to separatist groups in the country. Similarly, the relations of Burkina Faso's new junta with Russia may push France to support opposing groups in Burkina Faso. In this case, it can be said that the conflicts in the country will get even worse and acts of violence will continue.

The inability of the new junta administration to prevent the escape of former leader Damiba justifies the potential of a counter-coup risk. The overthrown leader Damiba may pull some military units to his side if he receives support from France. However, this does not seem possible for now, because the new leader Traore keeps his tight control over state institutions and society.

Above all, the solution to the African problems is not to be found in Paris or Moscow. Obviously, Vladimir Putin is no more concerned about the African continent than Emmanuel Macron. Both mostly use Africa as part of their battle against each other. As in the days of the Cold War, Africa is tearing itself apart to go one way or the other. It is in this that the soldiers who call themselves revolutionaries while reproducing this rigid binary logic need to be careful. The tasks must be well shared, and the soldiers must strive to restore the integrity of their constantly trimmed territories. Armies should come out of the palaces and desert, teeming cities. They should go to the front line, face the desert and face the terrorists and guarantee the life of their people, not their commanders. France and Russia are waging a proxy war for their own interests in the region, and they are waging this war mostly over the very people of the region. In the end, the losers are the people of the region. Changing this vicious circle depends on the understanding that armies exist to protect their country, not to rule it.

## Sources

Africanews. (2022). *Ibrahim Traoré appointed President of Burkina Faso*. Release date: 06.10.2022. Access date: 22.10.2022.

Arieff, A. (2022). *Burkina Faso: Conflict and Military Rule*. Congressional Research Service, In Focus 10434.

Bensimon, C. and Chatelot, C. (2022). *How Russia advances its pawns in Africa, from Mali to Burkina Faso?*. Le Monde. Release date: 04.10.2022. Access date: 22.10.2022.

Brooke-Holland, L. (2022). *Burkina Faso: Second coup of 2022*. House of Commons Library, Research Briefing 09633.

Dala, M. (2022). *Afrika kıtasındaki Rus-Fransız çekişmesinin yeni adresi: Burkina Faso*. Anadolu Agency. Release date: 04.10.2022. Access date: 22.10.2022.

France 24. (2022). *Burkina Faso army captain announces overthrow of military government*. Release date: 30.09.2022. Access date: 22.10.2022.

Jones, M. (2022). *Rusya neden Burkina Faso'daki darbeye sevindi?*. BBC. Release date: 11.10.2022. Access date: 22.10.2022.

UIN HL5998: Question for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. (2022). *Burkina Faso: Politics and Government*. Release date: 04.02.2022. Access date: 22.10.2022.