



Centre for Democracy & Development
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Briefing Paper



CUTS, BANS AND TENSIONS: FRANCO-MALIAN RELATIONS IN 2022

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On 16 November France announced the suspension of its public development aid to Mali, citing potential risks of its misappropriation and the deployment of the Russian paramilitary group Wagner by the ruling military regime. France's decision to cut development aid followed its decision to pull out its Barkhane military operation from the country in August 2022.

In response, the Malian government banned, with immediate effect, all activities carried out by NGOs operating in Mali with funding, material or technical support from France. This includes those operating in the humanitarian sector. For the Malian military leaders, the decision to cut French development aid whilst maintaining funding for NGOs represented a sidelining of their authority in the provision of goods and services to residents.

A press release signed by interim Prime Minister Colonel Abdoulaye Maiga, dismissed France's announcement as "a non-event", and "a subterfuge intended to deceive and manipulate national and international public opinion for the purpose of destabilising and isolating Mali." A government spokesperson added that the rebuilding of Mali follows three major principles; "respect for the sovereignty of Mali; respect for the choices of partners and the strategic choices made by Mali; and taking into account the vital interests of the Malian people in decisions."

SIMMERING TENSIONS

Franco-Malian relations have deteriorated gradually since Colonel Assimi Goita toppled late President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in an August 2020 coup, and then led another coup against the ensuing transitional government in May 2021. When President Emmanuel Macron announced in June 2021 that France would be reducing its military presence – Operation Barkhane - in Mali, the authorities viewed this as a betrayal.

The Barkhane force, which is headquartered in Chad, has 4,500 soldiers, 1,500 of which were previously stationed in Mali. Barkhane is also operating in Niger where it has fighter aircraft and bases for intelligence collection. The [European Council of Foreign Relations estimates](#) that Barkhane, which was the largest French overseas operation, cost France about €600 million every year since its inception. Barkhane replaced Operation Serval in 2014, an earlier military operation with 1,700 soldiers which began operating in Mali in 2013 at the request of the then civilian government to counter the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA in French), a Tuareg separatist movement in northern Mali.

In September 2021, Prime Minister Chogel, described the move to draw down the operation as “an abandonment in full flight.” Also in 2021, [in a letter to the United Nations](#), Mali accused France of violating its airspace and supplying weapons to terrorist organisations. In response, French Defense Minister, Florence Parly, called the remarks “indecent” and “unacceptable”, whilst Emmanuel Macron referred to the statement as “shameful”. Simmering tensions were behind Mali’s decision to expel the French ambassador in January 2022. In March 2022, the military leaders suspended, initially temporarily, France 24 and Radio France International, for promoting ‘propaganda’ that alleged that the Malian military had committed abuses against civilians

in their anti-terrorist war. The two broadcasters were permanently banned in April.


Another source of tension has been the growing presence of Russia. Despite the presence of Barkhane since 2014, Mali and France have struggled to find coherence and effectiveness in their joint military effort to stem violent groups linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. As a result, the Malian military regime has sought to diversify its partnerships with Russian private mercenary group Wagner emerging as a preferred option. Although the transitional government has denied Wagner is operating in the country, [referring only to Russian military instructors](#).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MALIANS

France, in abruptly suspending its foreign aid, and Mali, in its reaction to the suspension, have not fully considered the immediate impact of their action on the Malian people.

France's development aid has supported Mali in key areas such as infrastructure, human and rural development, and governance. In 2019 this [amounted to €100 million](#) according to the French development agency (AFD). The suspension of this level of aid will likely present a major shortfall in the 2023 budget. Mali's recent budget deficits - 6.1% in 2020 and 4.7% in 2021 - are [the worst since 2012](#) according to the Central Bank of West African States. Far from being a "non-event" this recent development will have real implications on the ground especially in the humanitarian sector.

However, the Malian administration has argued that it must demonstrate its sovereignty if it wants to throw off the relics of French neocolonialism. A narrative for which a degree of



popular support exists. Youth dissatisfaction with their country's democratic institutions inability to deliver the anticipated public goods and services, and above all guarantee security, has nurtured local forces that support the agenda of the military regime. Mali may be experimenting with a new form of self-determination by rejecting French hegemony, but this quest for sovereignty has a high cost.

France is a major contributor to civil society and NGOs in Mali. The idea that if France is not going to support the government, it should not be allowed to intervene in the country through NGO partners is likely to significantly impact on service delivery, the space for civic activism and the ongoing humanitarian response. Several NGOs, including Médecins du Monde Belgique, have already issued statements indicating that they are immediately stopping their work in the country to comply with the new directive.

Furthermore, the NGO sector is a significant employer in the country. According to unofficial estimates, over 10,000 Malians who were formally employed in NGOs have, or could, lose their jobs. For a country in an asymmetric war where unemployment and underemployment rates in both rural and urban areas are very high - according to 2020 Afrobarometer data [at least 4% of Malians are unemployed and 34% of those who have a job are underemployed](#) - this is a further complication.


THE FUTURE

Mali is fast becoming a lone wolf in its quest of self-determination in a West Africa that is more and more challenged by non-state armed forces. During the recent Accra Summit for example, Mali was a notable absentee, preferring to adopt cautious reservation in joining an initiative likely backed by Western donors including France. The Accra Initiative was to be a cooperative and collaborative security mechanism to prevent the spill over of terrorism from the Sahel and to fight cross border criminality.

The major question now is whether the Malian regimes move to cut ties with its former colonial power will herald a new dawn for a self-centered development or further isolate the country and push it to tighten its relations with less democratic regimes such as China and Russia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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