

Briefing on political transitions in Africa

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Tomorrow (20 May), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1211th session to receive updates on countries undergoing political transitions, including Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Gabon.

The session will commence with opening remarks by Innocent Shiyo, Permanent Representative of the United Republic of Tanzania to the AU and PSC Chairperson for May 2024. This will be followed by a statement by Bankole Adeoye, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS). As the concerned regional economic communities (RECs), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) may participate in the session.

The last time the PSC met to discuss political transitions was on 21 December 2023, when it engaged Guinea, Mali and Burkina Faso in an informal consultation. On 23 October 2023, the PSC also received updates on the situation in Gabon and Niger at its 1180th session. During that session, PSC members emphasized the need for informal consultations with the member states undergoing political transition, in line with the relevant provisions of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance to support them in restoring constitutional order and identifying issues that require timely interventions.

Reports indicate that the security situation in Burkina Faso worsened since the coup in 2022 with an upsurge of terrorist attacks and an increasing number of civilian casualties. Burkina Faso is facing the twin challenges of constitutional crisis induced by the coup and even more worryingly the spike in conflict involving terrorist groups. Despite the grave

threat that the expansion of terrorist violence poses both to Burkina Faso and the region, it receives no meaningful AU support in its efforts to contain this menace. While it is understandable, much of the focus of the policy engagement of the AU on Burkina Faso has a singular focus on restoration of constitutional order. The lack of adequate attention to the terrorism dimension makes the engagement on restoration of constitutional order disconnected from the totality of the reality in Burkina Faso. The coup leaders had agreed on a 24-month transition period with the ECOWAS to restore constitutional order. With the end of this transitional timeline fast approaching, however, the country did not make any preparations to organize elections. It comes as no surprise that the transitional government appears to have prioritized its offensive operations against terrorist groups and decided in September 2023 to postpone the elections indefinitely.

Burkina Faso aligned itself with Mali and Niger to form the Alliance of Sahel States in October 2023. This is aimed at coordinating their efforts in the fight against the threat of terrorism in the region and defending themselves from any possible external intervention. It happened against the backdrop of an ECOWAS decision to intervene militarily in Niger following the July 2023 coup. Subsequently, the three countries notified ECOWAS of their decision to withdraw from the community. In its extraordinary summit in February, ECOWAS examined the political, security, socio-economic, and financial implications of this decision and instructed the ECOWAS Commission to engage the AU, UN, and other partners on the matter to convince the three member states to remain in the Community.

Additionally, Burkina Faso and Niger withdrew from the Group of Five for the Sahel (G-5 Sahel) joining Mali which withdrew earlier. In a joint statement they issued in December 2023, the remaining two other members, Chad and Mauritania,

expressed their readiness to dissolve the G5 Sahel following the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to withdraw from the group. According to the G5 Sahel founding document, the alliance can be dissolved at the request of at least three member states. These developments continue to unfold in the context of deepening geopolitical tussle between western powers that historically exerted enormous influence on the region and Russia that is emerging as a significant player as the military administrations reportedly wish to chart a more autonomous path. France and the US are scaling back their military presence in the region, while Russia is increasing military cooperation with the three countries.

In January, the Malian authorities ended the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. The decision was made after Malian forces with the support of the Wagner group, a Russian security company renamed recently as Africa Corps after the death of its leader, took over major cities and towns in northern Mali at the end of last year from Tuareg separatist groups following MINUSMA's departure. The decision also came amid heightened diplomatic tension with Algeria, which played an important role in facilitating the Algiers agreement. Following recent attacks by Malian forces on southern Mauritanian villages pursuing Tuareg armed groups, it appears that tensions are also rising between Mali and Mauritania.

The Malian authorities replaced the peace agreement with a national dialogue to promote peace and reconciliation. The month-long dialogue process concluded on 10 May with recommendations including extending the transition period for three more years and allowing the leader of the transitional government, Colonel Assimi Goita, to run for elections. However, armed groups were not involved in the process and the Malian opposition parties and civil society groups boycotted it.

Mali was expected to hold elections in February in line with

the agreement reached with ECOWAS but, in September 2023, the Malian authorities postponed the elections indefinitely. This is the second time they postponed the election after their first promise to hold an election in February 2022 prompting ECOWAS to impose sanctions on the country. In February 2024, ECOWAS decided to ease the sanctions signaling its willingness to engage with the Malian authorities. In June 2023, Mali adopted a new electoral law and conducted a referendum, but the Malian opposition and civil society expressed serious concerns about the lack of credibility of the process. In April, the military leaders suspended all political activities and clamped down on opposition figures, journalists, and human rights activists.

Following the July 2023 coup in Niger, the coup leaders had proposed a three-year transition period but did not provide further details. They did not also agree on a transitional arrangement with ECOWAS similar to the one Burkina Faso and Mali did. ECOWAS, which imposed sanctions on Niger and threatened to take military action, subsequently lifted the economic and financial sanctions imposed on Niger in February. In an admission of the inadequacy of an approach that singularly focused on the coups and explaining the need for lifting the sanctions on the three central Sahelian states, Nigeria's President in his address to the ECOWAS summit that lifted the sanctions pointed out that 'the complexities of the issues at hand necessitate a comprehensive and collaborative approach.'

In its last meeting on the situation in Niger in October, the PSC expressed deep concern over the lack of a clear, practical, and time-bound timetable for the implementation of the transition period in Niger, particularly the holding of a national dialogue and elections to facilitate the swift return to constitutional order. It also requested the AU Commission to appoint a High-Level Representative for Niger and deploy a high-level mission to Niger to determine the country's needs

for the return to constitutional order and assist the transitional Government in organizing national dialogue which the Nigerien authorities announced in July 2023. The AU Commission has as yet to act on this decision of the PSC.

Like Mali and Burkina Faso, Guinea's coup leaders agreed to a 24-month transition period with ECOWAS. Based on this agreement, the country is expected to organize elections by the end of this year. However, Guinea has not made the necessary preparations to hold elections. In February, ECOWAS decided to lift the financial and economic sanctions imposed on Guinea. Nevertheless, the Guinean authorities suddenly dissolved the transitional government indicating their intention to postpone the elections until at least 2025. Guineans have been holding protests against the authorities, expressing frustration over the lack of progress in restoring constitutional order, and the main Guinean opposition coalition strongly opposed postponing the elections.

Gabon's transitional authorities have now announced plans to hold elections in August 2025. They also convened an inclusive national dialogue in April which saw the participation of more than 600 people, including opposition and civil society representatives. The meeting reportedly concluded with several recommendations, including a two-year transition period, and a seven-year presidential term renewable once. It seems, however, that the proposal to suspend political parties until the issuance of stricter political rules was controversial.

Subsequently, a new constitution is expected to be submitted for a referendum to pave the way for elections at the end of the transition period. During the last quarter of 2023, the transitional government's leader, General Brice Nguema was on a regional tour that took him to several ECCAS member states to seek their support for lifting the suspensions imposed by ECCAS and the PSC. In his campaign for the lifting of suspension and a clear attempt to achieve a treatment similar to that of Chad's, the General met with the leadership in

Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic (CAR), Equatorial Guinea and the Republic of Congo, two of which are members of the PSC. In its ordinary summit held in Equatorial Guinea on 9 March, ECCAS decided to lift the suspensions imposed on Gabon and temporarily relocate the ECCAS headquarters to Malabo. The summit also instructed the President of the ECCAS Commission to undertake an advocacy mission to the AU and the UN to explain this decision.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communiqué. The PSC is expected to reaffirm AU's zero tolerance of unconstitutional changes of government and urge all member states currently undergoing political transitions to pave the way for quick restoration of constitutional order, including through the adoption and proper implementation of clear transition timetables. The PSC may urge Mali to lift the ban on political activities and end repression against human rights activists. It may express concern over the repeated postponement of elections by a number of countries undergoing political transitions and call on the transitional leaders to commit to the timely conduct of elections to enable handover of power to a legitimate civilian leadership elected by citizens. It may also reiterate its call for the AU Commission to develop tailored support programs for the countries in transition, in conjunction with the relevant RECs, to provide the necessary political and diplomatic accompaniment and technical support with respect to issues related to national reconciliation, governance, security sector reform (SSR) and other relevant areas. It may further call on the AU Commission to undertake an assessment of how the fight against terrorism and the accompanying insecurity in the central Sahelian countries affects efforts for making progress towards constitutional order and submit a report outlining how the effort for restoring constitutional order can be pursued along with provision of support by the AU together with ECOWAS for the fight against terrorism.