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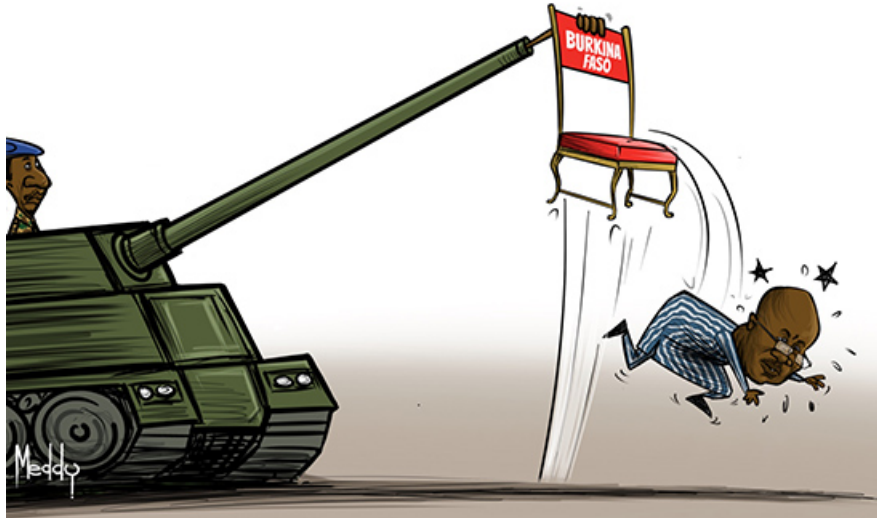
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Nick Turse
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Another US-trained soldier stages another coup in West Africa, this time in Burkina Faso

The leader of a coup in Burkina Faso is the latest in a series of U.S.-trained soldiers who have toppled civilian leaders.



Earlier this week, the military seized power in Burkina Faso, ousting the country's democratically elected president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré.



Protesters in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, showing their support for the military by holding a photo of Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba on Jan. 25, 2022. (Photo: Olympia de Maismont/AFP via Getty Images)

The coup was announced on state television on Monday by a young officer who said the military had suspended the constitution and dissolved the government. At his side was a man dressed in camouflage whom he introduced as the new leader of Burkina Faso: Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, commander of one of the country's three military regions.

Damiba is a soldier with a strong military background thanks largely to the U.S. military, which has a long history of training soldiers in Africa who then stage coups. It turns out Damiba participated in at least half a dozen U.S. training exercises, according to the U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM.

In 2010 and 2020 he participated in an annual special operations training program known as Exercise Flintlock. In 2013 Damiba was accepted into a training and assistance course for contingency operations in Africa, which is a peacekeeping training program funded by the State Department. In 2013 and 2014 Damiba attended the US-sponsored Military Intelligence-Africa Basic Officer course. And in 2018 and 2019 he participated in interventions with a U.S. Department of Defense Civilian Military Support Device in Burkina Faso.

Damiba is just the latest in a carousel of coup leaders in West Africa trained by the U.S. military, where the U.S. has pumped more than a billion dollars in security assistance to promote "[stability](#)" in the region. Since 2008, U.S.-trained officers have attempted at least

nine coups (and have succeeded in at least eight) in five West African countries, including Burkina Faso (three times), Guinea, Mali (three times), Mauritania and Gambia.

Since the 2000s the United States has regularly deployed small teams of commandos to advise, assist, and accompany local forces, including in battle; provided weapons, equipment and aircraft; it has offered many forms of training, including Flintlock, which is conducted by the African Special Operations Command and has focused on enhancing the counter-terrorism capabilities of West African nations, including Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

"When the U.S. prioritizes tactical training, we overlook longer-term goals that could create more stable governments," said Lauren Woods, director of the Security Assistance Monitor, which is a program at the nonprofit Center for International Policy. "We need more transparency and public debate about the foreign military training we provide. And we have to do a much better job of thinking about the long-term risks, including coups and abuses by the forces we train."

AFRICOM stresses that its security cooperation and "[capacity building](#)" activities foster the "development of professional military personnel", disciplined and committed to the well-being of its citizens. "U.S. military training regularly includes modules on the law of armed conflict, submission to civilian control, and respect for human rights," AFRICOM spokeswoman Kelly Cahalan told *The Intercept*. "Military takeovers are incompatible with U.S. military training and education."

But coups by U.S.-trained officers have become increasingly common in Burkina Faso and elsewhere in the region.

Last summer, for example, American Green Berets arrived in Guinea to train a special forces unit led by Colonel [Mamady Doumbouya](#), a young and charismatic officer who had also served in the French Foreign Legion. In September, members of Doumbouya's unit took time out of their ongoing instruction — [tactics in small units](#), tactical attention to combat casualties and the law of armed conflict — to storm the presidential palace and depose the country's 83-year-old president, Alpha Condé. Doumbouya soon [declared himself](#) the new leader of Guinea and the United States ended the training.

In 2020 Colonel [Assimi Goïta](#), who worked for years with U.S. special operations forces, participating in Flintlock training exercises and attending a Joint Special Operations

University seminar at MacDill Air Base in Florida, headed the junta that overthrew the Malian government.

"The act of mutiny in Mali is strongly condemned and incompatible with U.S. military training and education," Marine Corps Lt. Col. Anton T. Semelroth, a Pentagon spokesman, said at the time.

After the coup, Goïta resigned and took over as vice president in a transitional government tasked with returning Mali to civilian rule. But nine months later, he retook power in his [second coup](#).

Goïta was not even the first Malian officer trained by the US to overthrow the country's government. In 2011, when a U.S.-backed uprising in Libya toppled autocrat Muammar Gaddafi, Tuareg fighters in his service looted the regime's weapons depots, traveled to his native Mali and began taking over northern Libya. Angered by his government's ineffective response, Amadou Sanogo — an officer who learned English in Texas, received intelligence training in Arizona and completed basic army infantry officer training in Georgia — took matters into his own hands and overthrew his country's democratically elected government.

"The United States is a great country with a fantastic military," he said after the 2012 coup. "I've tried to put everything I learned there into practice here."

In 2014 another U.S.-trained officer, Lieutenant Colonel [Isaac Zida](#), seized power in Burkina Faso amid popular protests. Two years earlier, when he was older, Zida attended an anti-terrorism training course at MacDill Air Base sponsored by the Joint University of Special Operations and attended a military intelligence course in Botswana funded by the U.S. government.

The following year, another coup d'état in Burkina Faso installed General [Gilbert Diendéré](#). Diendéré had not only participated in a US-led Flintlock counter-terrorism exercise, but also served as a verbatim publicity for it, appearing in an AFRICOM photo addressing Burkinabe soldiers before their deployment to Mali in support of the 2010 Flintlock exercise.



Then-Colonel Major Gilbert Diendéré addresses Burkinabe soldiers ahead of their deployment to Mali in support of AFRICOM's Flintlock 10 exercise in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, on May 1, 2010. (Photo: U.S. Air Force Master Sgt. Jeremiah Erickson, Flintlock 10 Public Affairs)

In 2014, two generations of U.S.-educated officers clashed in The Gambia when a group of U.S.-trained [would-be coup plotters](#) attempted (but failed) to overthrow another U.S.-trained [coup plotter](#), Yahya Jammeh, who had seized power in 1994. The failed rebellion claimed the life of Lamin Sanneh, the alleged ringleader, who had earned a master's degree from Washington National Defense University, D.C.

"I can't help but feel that his education in America somehow influenced his actions," [wrote](#) Jeffrey Meiser, Sanneh's former mentor at the NDU. "I can't help but wonder if the imprint 'the American program' leaves on our foreign students is counterproductive and unethical."

In 2008 *Stars and Stripes* reported that General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, leader of a coup against Mauritania's president-elect, "has worked with U.S. forces training in the African country." Arrested and charged with corruption after a decade of rule, Aziz was recently [released on bail](#) due to his poor health.

U.S.-trained coup plotters are not strictly limited to West Africa. Before Abdel-Fatah el-Sisi deposed Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, he received [basic training](#) at Fort Benning, Georgia, (in 1981) and advanced instruction at the U.S. Army War College (in 2006).

A 2018 study by the military think tank, the Rand Corporation, casts doubt on the idea that U.S. military training breeds coup plotters.



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"There is little evidence that assistance to the security sector in general (measured in dollar terms) is associated with the propensity for coup in Africa," according to the study, which was written for the Office of the Secretary of Defense and noted that there was a "[marginally significant](#)" association in the post-Cold War period.

However, a year earlier, a study by Jonathan Caverley of the U.S. Naval War College and Jesse Savage of Trinity College Dublin in the *Journal of Peace Research*, which analyzed data from 1970 to 2009, [found](#) "a strong relationship between U.S. training of foreign military personnel and military-backed coup attempts." despite the fact that the authors limited their analysis to the International Military Education and Training program, "which explicitly focuses on the promotion of civilian control norms."

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