

# THE COLONEL WHO SEIZED POWER

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In December 2021, Burkina Faso's then President Roch Christian Kabore appointed the little-known Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba as the commander of the country's third military region, responsible for security in the capital Ouagadougou. Mr. Kabore was under pressure from both the civilians and the military to strengthen security in the wake of repeated attacks by Islamist militants. In November, some 49 military officers and four civilians were killed in a jihadist attack in the northern town Inata, which had triggered protests.

Mr. Kabore betted on Lt. Col. Damiba to bolster counter-terror measures as well as shore up support for his government among the soldiers. Seven weeks later, Lt. Col. Damiba, wearing military fatigues and a red beret, appeared on the national TV with a caption next to him, who announced that the military had deposed Mr. Kabore as President and suspended the Constitution. Lt. Col. Damiba, who celebrated his 41st birthday just three weeks earlier, is the new ruler of the West African country. Mr. Kabore is now a prisoner of the junta.

Mr. Kabore was first elected President in 2015 at a time when Burkina Faso was undergoing a painful transition to elected democracy from the dictatorship of Blaise Compaoré, whose regime fell in 2014. In 2015, the military had carried out a coup, but it was so unpopular that the Generals returned power to the transitional government after a few days. This led to the election of Mr. Kabore. But Mr. Kabore's political rise was also marked by growing of Islamist violence across the Sahel. Burkina Faso was the hardest hit. In the past six years, some 2,000 people were killed and about 1.5 million were displaced by Islamist insurgency.

Mr. Kabore was re-elected in 2020, but the government's growing inability to check violence and increasing number of corruption allegations have turned him unpopular. Lt. Col. Damiba seized on this public resentment against the government to topple it through a mutiny last week. And unlike in 2015, the coup was greeted by demonstrators in the streets of Ouagadougou.

Lt. Col. Damiba's military career is similar to that of the other elites in the Burkinabe military. He studied at a military academy in France, the former colonial ruler of Burkina Faso, and was a member of the infamous Regiment of Presidential Security (RPS), the presidential guard of the former dictator Mr. Compaore.

## Training in U.S.

Between 2010 and 2020, Lt. Col. Damiba got military training in several programmes in the U.S. He was posted to the northeastern town of Dori as Commander of the 11th Infantry Commando Regiment (RIC) and to the northern town of Ouahigouya as Commander of the 12th RIC before he was promoted by Mr. Kabore. Last year, he published a book on the growing jihadist violence in the Sahel titled, *West African Armies and Terrorism: Uncertain Responses*.

In his first public address after the coup, the writer-colonel said his key priority would be to defeat the jihadists. But it would not be easy given that jihadists, belonging to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, have established widespread networks across the Sahel, particularly in West Africa. The junta will also have to deal with the geopolitical dynamics of the region. France has a military presence in West Africa, but despite French counter-terrorism measures, Islamist violence has only increased in recent years. This prompted several countries in the region to turn to Russia for help. The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company, has already

deployed paramilitaries in Mali, Libya and the Central African Republic to fight the Islamists.

One of the last decisions of President Kabore was to refuse a request from the Burkinabe military to take help from Russia. Lt. Col. Damiba met Mr. Kabore earlier this month asking him to engage the Wagner Group to strengthen its counter-terror measures. But Mr. Kabore shot down the request because “he didn't want to run into any problems with the West for aligning with Russia”, an official close to the former President was quoted as saying by the *Daily Beast* .

In his address to the nation, Lt. Col. Damiba said Burkina Faso needed “international partners more than ever” to “exit this crisis as soon as possible”. But he didn't specify who he is referring to — the West, African nations or Russia?

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