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By: TA | AP Insight

Coup in Guinea-Bissau - electoral crisis or consolidation of military regimes in West Africa?

Soldiers in Guinea-Bissau on Thursday announced a new junta leader, cementing a forceful takeover of power that began after a disputed presidential election, in what the main opposition candidate called a ploy to prevent him from taking over power.

The military high command in the West African nation inaugurated Gen. Horta Inta-A as the head of the military government, which will oversee a one-year transition period, according to a declaration broadcast on state television.

Guinea-Bissau, one of the world's poorest countries, has been dogged by coups and attempted coups since its independence from Portugal more than 50 years ago, including a coup attempt in October.

The country of 2.2 million people is known as a hub for drug trafficking between Latin America and Europe, a trend that experts say has fueled its political crises.

"The inability of political actors to stem the deterioration of the political climate ultimately prompted the intervention of the armed forces," said Inta-A, who was the army chief of staff until the coup and a close ally of deposed President Umaro Sissoco Embaló.

Embaló's whereabouts remained unknown Thursday. He told French media Wednesday that he was arrested by soldiers as gunshots rang out near the presidential palace.

The Chairperson of the African Union Commission Mahmoud Ali Youssouf condemned the coup, calling for the respect of the electoral process and for the unconditional release of President Embaló and other detained officials.

In a statement, Youssouf said the AU was ready to work with partners to restore stability and safeguard the democratic process.

Election defeat

South Africa also joined other African countries in condemning the coup and called for "the immediate restoration of democracy and completion of the electoral process."

France also called for the respect for the constitutional order and democracy in the country.

The opposition, meanwhile, alleged Embaló had fabricated the coup to avoid an election defeat in Sunday's closely contested presidential vote.

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The military takeover and the reported arrest of Embaló were "fabricated" to disrupt election results expected Thursday, according to his rival Fernando Dias, who, like Embaló, claimed to have won the vote.

The Associated Press could not independently verify the claims by Dias, a member of the Social Renewal Party.

The opposition African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde, along with Dias, had called on residents to stage protests against the coup and demand publication of the election results.

But on Thursday morning, activities appeared to be normal in the capital Bissau, with businesses and public transport gradually picking up.

The latest in a string of coups

The coup is the latest in a surge of military takeovers in West Africa, where democracy recently has been challenged by disputed elections that analysts say could embolden militaries.

It followed presidential and legislative elections which were held at a critical time for

the African country as Embaló, a 53-year-old former army general, faced a legitimacy crisis.

Gunshots rang out in the main city of Bissau on Wednesday just days after the tense presidential election

The opposition said his tenure had long expired and refused to recognize him as president.

The coup and past ones in Guinea-Bissau are tied to “how much (state) institutions have been undermined and weakened,” said Beverly Ochieng, a senior security analyst at the consultancy Control Risks.

Under Embaló, she said, “the legislature was dissolved unilaterally, the judiciary was operating under capacity, and there were deep-seated sentiments around political influence.”

Gunshots rang out in the main city of Bissau on Wednesday just days after the tense presidential election, which Embaló and Dias both claimed to have won.

In a scene that has become familiar in the region, military officers appeared on state television and claimed they had seized power while the election commission’s office was sealed.

Dias, 47, said in a video statement that he escaped custody "through a back door” after reports he was arrested by soldiers. He vowed to fight back.

“Umaro lost the elections, and instead of accepting the result, he fabricated a coup d’état,” Dias said. “Once again, we, we have been the target of a false coup d’état. ... We will liberate ourselves.”

The military officers who announced they had deposed the president cited the “discovery of an ongoing plan ... to manipulate electoral results," according to a spokesperson, Dinis N’Tchama, who was flanked by others during the televised statement.

The “scheme was set up by some national politicians with the participation of a well-known drug lord, and domestic and foreign nationals,” N’Tchama said.