

Building a Durable Peace in Mali

SUSANNA D. WING

Associate Professor of Political Science, Haverford College, USA

For two decades Mali was a preeminent symbol of democracy in Africa. Despite its considerable achievements Malian democracy was not without its flaws. Frustration with the political class, for example, was palpable among the country's citizenry. Recent events raise grave concerns over the country's future. As a result of the March 2012 coup, led by Captain Amadou Sanogo, the country is now divided in two. Nearly one half million Malians have been displaced and the possibility of regional military intervention and internal civil war looms. As Malians face a deepening humanitarian crisis the international community searches for an effective response to the country's precipitous fall. Building a durable resolution to the crisis will involve a mix of factors. Even as the long-term solution to these divisions must be rooted in indigenous Malian realities, it is not clear the crisis can be resolved without outside intervention. The Malian political class is divided and interim President Dioncounda Traoré scrambles to build a "government of National Unity" before another looming ECOWAS deadline.

Sanogo claimed the coup was necessary in order to effectively secure northern Mali. The Army had been humiliated and lacked food and equipment in the fight against Tuareg separatist rebels (primarily the MNLA,

National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad). Ironically, within days of the coup the MNLA took advantage of the ensuing chaos in the south and soon controlled the major northern towns of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal. At the same time, the Islamist group Ansar Dine, led by Iyad Ag Ghali (a veteran Tuareg rebel) allied with the MNLA but soon out-maneuvered and overpowered them, gaining control of the key towns once held by the MNLA.

Although Gaddafi's fall and an influx of armed mercenaries hastened the coup and the rapid northern occupation, the conflict over territory in that region has a long history that has been inadequately addressed by governments in Bamako. Early attempts to integrate Tuareg into the military and to promote local governance through decentralization were never sufficient or effective and tensions smoldered. At least three Islamist organizations are now operating in northern Mali: Ansar Dine, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Unity Movement for Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). Fighters have systematically destroyed mausoleums in Timbuktu and in Aguelhok occupying fighters stoned a couple charged with adultery. Fears of terrorism or of the destruction of cultural treasures fuel international outrage while the hundreds of thousands of lives that have



been turned upside down by this crisis only sporadically are considered by the popular press.

The regional response to the Malian crisis has been clear. ECOWAS imposed sanctions in record time after the coup, sending the message that the overthrow of a democratically elected President would not forever be accepted in the region (this of course raised eyebrows in Mali and elsewhere as the ECOWAS Mediator Blaise Compaoré came to power in Burkina Faso by coup in 1987). Progress has been slow. Sanogo has stepped off center stage to make way for a civilian government but his current role is unclear and it has been reported that his supporters are terrorizing critics of the coup. Interim President Dioncounda Traoré returned to Bamako on July 27 after two months recovering in France from a brutal attack at the Presidential palace. He appears poised to move ahead with the transition. Clearly, a solution to the crisis in the north requires stability in the south.

The African Union and ECOWAS have demanded the creation of a government of National Unity (including representatives of MNLA, Ansar Dine and perhaps even MUJWA) by mid-August or sanctions will be imposed. According to some reports, the MNLA is no longer demanding the independence of Azawad as their primary goal, signaling they may settle for a federal solution. The MNLA is internally divided with some members outside the region expressing different goals than those on the ground in northern Mali. Strategically, the leadership of the MNLA appears to be allying itself with the government in Bamako and the international community against what is understood as terrorism (AQIM and MUJWA in particular). Given the resounding refusal of the international community to recognize Azawad and their inability to retain control of captured towns, the MNLA has little power and few choices. If the MNLA backs away from demands for an independent Azawad, the territorial integrity of Mali may emerge intact. Unless solutions to

Tuareg concerns over development and integration are addressed, however, this will be yet another of a series of catastrophically ineffectively resolved Tuareg rebellions in the north.

Mali is not another Afghanistan. Although the Sahara provides a safe haven for AQIM, all of Mali's neighbors see them as a threat to security in the region and want to put an end to their activities. AQIM simply does not have neighboring allies that they can depend on to look the other way as supplies flow through the territory.

It is not impossible to bring fighters and supplies into Mali but a concerted effort in the region to seal the borders could minimize this. The imposition of sharia in the north has led to deaths and threats of amputation. Many Malians live in fear, reminding us of brutal years of human rights abuses under the Taliban when religion became a harsh weapon of discipline against the people. Although action in the north may be imminent, a military solution will not resolve the underlying forces that fuel this conflict. Militarization, indeed, will likely produce either short-term hollow victories or long term sporadic fighting and destruction in the already fragile region.

Lasting peace is possible if dialogue can produce substantive change. Is it too late? The key players in these interlocked crises may be unable to step

away from their stances long enough to make room to hear the positions of others. The diversity of interests within the Tuareg, Islamist groups (which of course also include Tuareg), and Mali's political class only complicates the situation. Clan rivalries exist among the Tuareg and finding a solution to appease all clans will not be simple. Mali's own political class continues to undermine the possibility for stability in the south as factions remain deeply divided. If Mali could achieve peace without military intervention it would be a major breakthrough and a sign that the country is relying on its political and cultural heritage of dialogue to get through this tumultuous time. It may in fact be that Mali

Mali is not another Afghanistan. Although the Sahara provides a safe haven for AQIM, all of Mali's neighbors see them as a threat to security in the region and want to put an end to their activities. AQIM simply does not have neighboring allies that they can depend on to look the other way as supplies flow through the territory. It is not impossible to bring fighters and supplies into Mali but a concerted effort in the region to seal the borders could minimize this.



is too far down the path of dissolution and the influx of foreign interests will overshadow any possibility for real negotiation. These foreign interests include Western powers and the counter-terrorism agenda as well as those who hope to establish an Islamic state in the Sahel. The African Union insists that negotiations include Ansar Dine, MNLA, members from civil society, and the High Islamic Council and perhaps even MUJWA. To sit at the negotiating table, however, is to recognize your opponent. Many Malians view the actions of Ansar Dine, the MNLA and MUJWA as treasonous and therefore unworthy of recognition. The presence of AQIM may mean that Ansar Dine, for instance, becomes the lesser

evil in the north, if their interests and finances can be separated in any meaningful way from AQIM and MUJWA. Many Malians are frustrated by the continuing instability and would like to see a swift military response to restore the country's territorial integrity. Although the current situation is untenable, a hasty military action would be disastrous. AU and ECOWAS are wise to demand that concrete steps towards stability in the south be made immediately. Advances in the south will heighten chances for successful negotiations in the north. Whatever the current divides, Mali's long-term future must be as an intact whole nation.

EDITOR | Paulo Gorjão
ASSISTANT EDITORS | Kai Thaler • Sean Goforth

DESIGN | Atelier Teresa Cardoso Bastos

Portuguese Institute of International Relations and Security (IPRIS)
Rua Vitorino Nemésio, 5 - 1750-306 Lisboa
PORTUGAL

<http://www.ipris.org>
email: ipris@ipris.org

IPRIS Viewpoints is a publication of IPRIS.
The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IPRIS.

Gold Sponsor

Silver Sponsor

Partner

