



Mali: filling the void

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Mali, from model of democracy to a deep political, institutional crisis and war in the course of a few months. This policy brief offers an analysis of the Malian conflict looking into the national political dimension as well as the entire region where already present dynamics were reinforced by the Libyan war of 2011. It also looks into the regional and international response mechanisms.

Introduction

When a Tuareg rebellion erupted in Northern Mali in the course of January 2012 it was hard to predict that the entire Malian state would be engulfed in its severest political crisis since its existence. The lack of an adequate military and political response by the dysfunctional and largely corrupt Malian state and President Amadou Toumani Touré 'ATT' would lead to a military coup a few months later. The demoralized army and the political uncertainty in Bamako opened the way for the instable collaboration of Malian (Tuareg) and regional armed and Islamist groups: MNLA¹, AQIM², Ansar Dine and MUJAO³ to take over the entire North of the country. After the coup Bamako remained politically paralyzed. It would take an offensive to the South by the Islamist groups early 2013, threatening the collapse of what remained of the Malian state and rendering even more daunting an international intervention, to disrupt the uneasy

status quo that had started to take root. The French government reacted swiftly and decisively in launching a major military operation, involving up to 4.000 troops, to re-establish control of the population centers in the North and deal a blow to the Islamist/terrorist groups that had taken control over the area. Opération Serval, was to provide a serious stimulus for the deployment of a regional African force: AFISMA⁴. It also hastened the development of the contours of a Malian transitional roadmap adopted by Parliament at the end of January 2013. At the end of April, in order to assure a politically stronger and financially sustainable international presence, the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission was decided. National elections are to be held in July, dates pushed in the roadmap and widely adopted by the international community. Respect of this date remains uncertain as the crisis – especially in the Northern city of Kidal, is far from being resolved. It is also debatable whether this ambitious timeframe will facilitate the national political process. It and the establishment and reinforcement of national and regional capabilities to face the remaining presence of armed groups still have to begin. As the nature of the (international) effort will become increasingly political, the space for such a political role will rapidly decrease. The elections will see to that as the nationalist fervor leaves little room and wish for maneuver. Soon, the international community will discover the lack of political will for changes.

A crisis 'in' or 'of' Mali

Over the course of the past decade, the Malian state had been hollowed out by massive corruption at the

¹ Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad

² Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

³ Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa

⁴ African-led International Support Mission to Mali

top levels of the government. It also remained largely passive in dealing with the growing presence of AQIM & co in the North. The gaping void between declarations and actions left a vast space for a range of insurgent groups and criminal networks, often in collusion with state officials. Or, as Marchal states, this was “the golden goose”⁵ that needed to be protected. While Malian democracy proved in reality to be little more than a *fata morgana*, its largely positive image was manifestly stronger (or considered more important) than the growing frustrations the countries’ leadership caused. This proved to be a costly mistake by international and local actors alike as the state capsized when confronted with a sizeable storm. Three distinct crises can be distinguished: (1) a profound crisis of weak institutions and corruption; (2) the lack of proper management of decentralization and representation in the North and (3) a lack of development⁶ reinforcing the effects of both previous issues.

The UN SG report of 26 March 2013 makes little excuses for the current crisis in Mali “The coup d’état of 22 March 2012 and the crisis in Northern Mali are, in large measure but not exclusively, manifestations of a crisis of governance that encompasses endemic corruption, weak state capacity to deliver basic services and the low level of legitimacy of state institutions and the political system⁷.” The general crisis of governance affecting all other issues concerns a profound crisis of the Malian state. In that sense it’s more a crisis of Mali than a crisis in Mali. The statistics on voter turnout should already have indicated that something was amiss: in 2007, the last Presidential elections, participation did not exceed 36,2% and previous elections were not better – in 2002 when ATT was first elected, a staggering 28% of the 38,3% voter turnout were declared invalid or blank⁸. Despite these stark figures and numerous reports on the large scale of corruption and total inefficiency of the state, Mali was continuously considered a good student. An otherwise critical and balanced report by the German Bertelsmann Stiftung, published in 2012 stated: “Mali’s transition to democracy is

widely considered one of the most successful in sub-Saharan Africa, and the country is one of six Muslim democracies worldwide⁹...”

International actors are not without blame in contributing to this problem as the Bertelsmann report states: “*The government is under substantial pressure to reconcile its own interests with the policy ideas of the international community. Democratic accountability is often (...) undermined by the government’s need to satisfy donors’ interest which might diverge from the peoples’ concerns*¹⁰.” This question is especially hard to manage in a country where at least 40% of the government budget is donor-funded. Some serious lessons have to be learned here, especially since the impact on poverty reduction is scarcely apparent. The Brussels donor conference of 15 May 2013 endorsed the Malian “Plan for the Sustainable Recovery of Mali” and pledged a total of €3.25 billion for the next two years.

As to the question concerning the management of decentralization and the political representation and participation of the different components of Malian society, including the Tuareg, while the effective tendency for independence, an ‘Azawad republic’ may be limited, the reaction in Bamako and elsewhere towards the Tuareg has been a clear demonstration of the need for a new, internal reconciliation and possible further decentralization process. Tensions between Tuareg and ‘Arab’ communities are also high as the incidents North of Timbuktu early May 2013 demonstrate. The different communities themselves are also heavily divided and in addition to a national process, local reconciliation and an effective effort on development will be of vital importance.

The March 21 coup followed an increasing tension between the President and Malian troops confronted with a quickly deteriorating situation on the battlefield against the MNLA and collaborating armed groups, particularly destabilizing was the massacre in the Aguelhok military camp on 24 January 2012¹¹. There was a growing feeling of resentment and anti-Tuareg feeling within the ranks. The government and President were accused of negligence and not providing the army with the

⁵ Marchal R., The coup in Mali: the result of a long-term crisis or spillover from the Libyan civil war? Noref Report, May 2012, pp. 2.

⁶ Mali is one of the most aid dependent countries worldwide with an estimated 77% of the population living under the international poverty line, negative growth figures in 2012.

⁷ United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Mali, 26 March 2013 (S/2013/189) pp. 6.

⁸ Figures consulted at <http://africanelections.tripod.com/ml.html> (African Elections Database), last consulted on 14 May 2013.

⁹ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2012 – Mali Country Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012. pp. 2. (www.bti-project.org)

¹⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2012 – Mali Country Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2012. pp. 27.

¹¹ Aguelhok was the scene of heavy fighting, on 24 January dozens of Malian soldiers were executed following surrender.

resources necessary to adequately deal with the crisis. The combination of defeat, desertion, incompetence and the general breakdown of command in the army, without adequate political reaction resulted in the spontaneous, unplanned coup leadership of which would be claimed by Captain Sanogo. The mutineers did manage to mobilise considerable popular support and maintained a largely nationalist discourse, opposing regional and international military interventions.

The regional dimension – no lack of fragility

In the Sahel-Sahara region most states and especially Libya, Chad, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger and Mauritania remain vulnerable to terrorism, political unrest, violent conflict and even implosion. Most have a history of violent conflict and fragile pacification processes. They remain recruiting grounds for a plethora of terror groups and insurgencies such as AQIM, Boko Haram and MUJAO. These groups find their breeding ground in the dire socio-economic conditions in the region and the lack of perspective for the rising number of unemployed youth, but also in the lack of political space and the type of governance in the region. This phenomenon and regional as well as international awareness on it are not new and different plans and policies had been developed and launched to try and deal with the problems – these include military and police training and equipment programs, regional collaboration platforms, widespread and resource intensive development and humanitarian programs, counter-narcotics and smuggling initiatives etc. The sum of these initiatives, plans and strategies has clearly not been capable of preventing the very rapid implosion of Mali. The generally passive attitude (and complicity) by the Malian government frustrated both them and regional partners¹². Equally poor and fragile states in the region such as Niger and Mauritania proved to be more responsive to the growing security threat and both seriously boosted investment in their security forces.

The fragility of the Sahel is reinforced by the lack of political dialogue and collaboration between North African states. In particular the tension between Morocco and Algeria presents a serious challenge for the Sahel/Sahara region. The region and the international community at large were largely

unprepared for the impact of the removal of Libyan leader Khadafi in 2011. It created a new geopolitical order in the entire region that still has to settle. The reactions to the implosion of Mali and even the removal of Bozizé in the Central African Republic are all linked to strategies to fill this vacuum. Khadafi acted as the regional 'pompiers pyromane' and his political and security impact was felt throughout the Sahel region. He bankrolled governments - building up a clientelistic network, supported armed groups and held numerous investments throughout the region. Currently, Libya is in total turmoil and a serious source of concern for its neighbors and the international community. There is no functioning government exercising territorial control, the security system is very weak and its weapons stocks and combatants are on the market. The AU's attitude towards the Libya war was quite different, the organisation and several of its key members were opposed to the Western strategy of regime change. Some, including Algeria were aware of the potential consequences. However little to no action was taken at the level of the AU, REC's¹³ and individual states¹⁴, to stop and disarm the groups of fighters and weapons or to reinforce security dialogue and coordination to deal with the void.

The network built around AQIM is a clear embodiment of the regional dimension. The In Amanas hostage crisis of January 2013 and recent AQIM activity in Tunisia serve as stark warnings of the continued risk for regional contagion. As does the MUJAO attack on Agadez in May 2013. These groups profit from the lack of territorial control of regional states, the existence of numerous local conflicts, illicit trafficking routes etc. to get well established.

Despite some initiatives, Algeria's position in the Mali crisis can at best be described as ambivalent. To improve collaboration between regional states Algiers established the CEMOC¹⁵ in April 2010. It is still in existence but performs no meaningful role. Because of its attitude, increasingly Algeria considered Mali 'the weak link' in the region. Disposing of a large and capable military it has continuously refused to agree with the concept of a regional military intervention – generally in line with its general attitude on the matter. It may certainly

¹² This situation caused, amongst other actions, several incursions by the Mauritanian security forces without the approval of the Malian government.

¹³ Regional Economic Communities

¹⁴ With the exception of Niger.

¹⁵ Comité d'état-major conjoint, based in Tamanrasset.

also have dreaded the deployment of French forces in support of such a regional deployment. The result has however been the opposite - France has entered in force and will remain deployed in Mali for the foreseeable future, effectively sidelining the major political and military power in the region.

Serval and the end of the military and political stalemate

As a reaction to an important offensive to the South by Ansar Dina, MUJAO and AQIM, France launched 'Opération Serval' on 11 January 2013. The terror groups offensive quickly derouted the Malian army and may have eyed Bamako but it would – if it had not been checked – have seriously hindered the launch of a military operation to liberate the North. It would also have seriously further complicated the political situation in Mali – potentially leading to a new coup as the political impact of the new defeat of Malian forces would have been huge. Political dynamics in Bamako had thus far remained paralyzed by power struggles within an unstable triangle of president Traoré, the former junta and the prime minister¹⁶.

With little surprise, within a few weeks the more than 4.000 French troops had succeeded in the 3 declared missions: stopping the offensive South that would have fundamentally threatened the core of the Malian state making any response strategy even more costly and complex; liberating the main population centers in the Northern part of the country and breaking the stronghold of AQIM in the Northern mountains of the 'Adrar des Ifoghas'. Following this initial phase, France maintains pressure on the Islamist militia groups and continues to search for traces of the French nationals held hostage by them. Largely symbolically the French military has tried to include the largely defunct Malian army in its operations - with the notable exception of the Northern city of Kidal, where the French army worked with the MNLA and affiliates. With the exception of the Chadian army¹⁷ - the French military bore the brunt of the operations. The West-African troops of AFISMA that are deploying since January only have a limited operational capability. The continued - albeit slowly reducing - physical presence of the

French army, its logistics, intelligence capacity, firepower (including crucial helicopter gunships) and command and control capacity remain a necessity to maintain the results of the effort. This is also underscored by the French support in countering insurgent attacks that have taken place in the cities of Gao and Timbuktu. Malian forces in both cases were incapable of stopping small but well prepared groups of fighters.

The recurrent attacks on Malian and international forces in Mali are a reminder that the insurgent groups still represent a potentially potent actor both in Mali and in the wider region. Certainly during the first days of Opération Serval and in the elimination of the Adrar AQIM stronghold damage has been done, but the fighters have reverted to small scale insurgent tactics, immerse in the population and profit from the porosity of the borders. They are likely to remain an actor in Mali but remain a dangerous regional phenomenon, exploiting vulnerabilities as was the case with the double attack in Niger on 23 May 2013 – attacking a military barracks in Agadez and an Areva installation in Arlit. The assailants were beaten back with the support of French special forces.

Back to the past?

The spirit of the "roadmap for the transition" adopted by the Malian Parliament on 29 January 2013 clearly radiates the wish from "the Malian political system" to return to business as usual as soon as possible. Hence, a very ambitious electoral calendar, planning elections before the end of July 2013 and an extremely small opening for a political process on a limited number of clearly defined issues¹⁸. The question remains however if this roadmap and the pursued strategy have any bearing on the realities on the ground and whether they deal with the clear political and security crises that have been revealed since January 2012. There was no real consultation before the adoption of the roadmap, it happened almost immediately following Opération Serval. There was a need for the Malian political leadership to show something after months of internal bickering between the president, Captain Sanogo¹⁹ and the prime minister. Despite the power

¹⁶ In December 2012, the initially appointed Prime Minister Diarra was arrested by troops belonging to Captain Sanogo and was later replaced by the current Prime Minister Sissoko.

¹⁷ After an initial national phase, the Chadian forces were nominally integrated in AFISMA.

¹⁸ The text clearly states that the discussion could be on 1) the deepening of the decentralisation process, 2) specific regional considerations in the implementation of public policies and 3) the development of infrastructure in the fields of facilitating access and the exploitation of natural resources.

¹⁹ Captain Sanogo is currently in charge of the Comité militaire de suivi de la réforme des forces de défense et de sécurité » and thus effectively of army reform, creating somewhat of a complicated relation between this institution and international donors.

struggle in Bamako there seems to be a broad consensus on a refusal to widen the base of negotiations with the Tuareg, especially the MNLA. On 13 May the Malian President appointed a special advisor, Tiébilé Dramé²⁰ as a focal point for peace initiatives in the North. At the regional level, Blaise Compaoré, President of Burkina Faso is again engaged as mediator – focusing on finding a solution for the situation in Kidal where the government demands for the Malian army to deploy before the elections.

The humiliated army is still anxious for revenge and early signs of Malian army attitudes when re-occupying territory liberated by French forces indicate a serious risk for human rights violations that would have a profound effect on any political process. This is particularly worrying in Kidal as a showdown between the government and Tuareg factions might become unavoidable. Such a confrontation might also cause a regional effect²¹. There is a reconfiguration within the Tuareg groups, with the recent creation of the ‘Haut Conseil pour l’Unité de l’Azawad’ (HCUA) where the earlier created MIA²² and former MNLA have found a new home, it is led by the traditional chief of the Ifoghas community. Thus, the MNLA seems confronted with increasing internal divergences²³ further fragilising its position. HCUA and MNLA refuse to have Malian troops in Kidal. A consensus might include the deployment of civilian administration and the securisation of the elections by the UN and French forces.

The Mali crisis and the African intervention

Considerable criticism has been expressed on the military capabilities of ECOWAS and the AFISMA mission in Mali: it is slow to deploy, lacks logistical capability, has weak command and control capacity, lacks intelligence capabilities, and the operational experience and quality of the troops is considered rather limited. Early April 2013 this view was also expressed by a senior US defence department official²⁴. There were however little illusions across the board on the operational capabilities of the

African-Standby-Forces that are supposed to be fully operational by 2015. The gaps identified for the AFISMA mission are coherent with earlier assessments and the general lack of resources at the disposal of the AU and REC’s. This is also the case in the AMISOM mission in Somalia, where African troops engage in offensive operations against the Al-Shabaab militias. This dependency creates not only serious operational problems, but – more important – seriously degrades the political role of African institutions at the international and even continental level, where the Libya intervention serves as potent example.

In effect, a decade after the launch of APSA²⁵ and despite some relative success stories, such as the intervention in Burundi, an effective, African-led and owned crisis response mechanism largely remains an illusion. At the start of the Mali crisis, the AU was still reeling from the political debacle of the Libya conflict and was embroiled in a leadership crisis.

The primary role for REC’s in dealing with crises within their region has – once again – received a severe credibility blow in the Mali crisis. This is especially painful since ECOWAS is generally considered one of the more advanced, stronger REC’s – with a complicated relationship with the AU in Addis. After an initial demonstration of unity in condemning the March 2012 coup and successively reaching an agreement in April to bring back a civilian government, ECOWAS lacked a clear orientation and strategy on the crisis. The dispersed marching order is in itself not a novelty as neighboring countries most often have a different sensitivity to a political and security crisis. It exposes vulnerabilities, as in the case of Niger but also creates opportunity for regional strongmen to claim or confirm regional leadership ambitions. The latter is the case with Burkina Faso, that took the lead of a rather isolated negotiation attempt with a selection of the actors involved in the Mali crisis. Neighbors despite these differences are off course of key importance in the development and deployment of political and security interventions – but the framework through which they act may have to be offset by stronger institutions. As a further complication REC’s as is the case here, often don’t include the entire neighborhood. Current practice seems to move in the direction of creating ever-more ad-hoc institutional

²⁰ Dramé is a candidate for the Presidential elections for the PARENA party.

²¹ This is particularly dangerous in regard to Niger. There had been indications that troops from Niger would have to refrain from getting caught in confrontations with the MNLA as it could upset the domestic balance.

²² Mouvement Islamique de l’Azawad (offshoot from Ansar Dine).

²³ For an analysis of internal dynamics: Carayol R.; Mali Sables mouvants, Jeune Afrique n°2733, 26 May 2013, pp. 34-37.

²⁴ <http://www.france24.com/en/20130410-usa-slams-africa-force-ecowas-france-troop-withdrawal> (last accessed, 2 May 2013)

²⁵ African Peace and Security Architecture

arrangements, all with very limited capabilities and little political clout, allowing for sophisticated forum-shopping.

For its offensive capability AFISMA had to rely on Chad that had rapidly mobilized 2000 troops, led by the son of President Déby. It was a demonstration of the capacity and political willingness of the Déby government to increase its regional status and invest in its bilateral relations with France. It seems to be a growing phenomenon, following the example of Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi that armies become successful commodities generating political capital. It also allows for the governments concerned not to have to engage in too far-reaching and potentially destabilizing demobilization exercises.

Enter the UN

On 25 April, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolution 2100²⁶ establishing a 12.600 strong peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA²⁷. The missions' planned launch date, depending on circumstances, is 1 July 2013 and the mandate is concentrated on supporting the political process in Mali – in collaboration with the AU and ECOWAS. It will take over from AFISMA and the previously established UNOM political mission. The mission is mandated to support the government in extending state administration throughout the country and is allowed to use force to stabilize key population centres, especially in the North of the country. In support of the mission – but acting independently the French army will maintain, as was foreseen about 1.000 troops in Mali, it is mandated as such by the UNSC. French troops will continue to engage in anti-terrorist and counter-insurgency operations. MINUSMA will have a peacekeeping and not a peace enforcement role. Its mandate further includes support to the transitional roadmap, including the political dialogue and support to rebuilding state capacities i.e. in the field of SSR. In the meantime, funding, staffing and monitoring (human rights) of AFISMA will remain an issue.

Conclusion

International attention and investment in the Mali crisis is mainly linked with the threat of the country and sub-region developing into a new base for

global terror networks linked to Al-Qaeda. This threat has clearly not been definitively neutralized, but Opération Serval has dealt it a considerable blow. Continued presence of international forces (mainly French in the offensive role and the US with drones) in Mali and the region and investment in regional security mechanisms and capabilities will however be needed for the long term. The crisis has clearly been the result of the erosion of the Malian state throughout the past decade, but also the effect of the Libyan war and its ill-considered consequences and the lack of functioning regional security mechanisms have created the conditions for the rapid implosion.

The long and necessary reconstruction project of the Malian state where national and local conflicts meet will require an increased role for the AU and in particular the UN. The enthusiasm for change, as noticed in Bamako, is rather limited and is likely to decrease further still – as the issues get closer to home dealing with national cohesion, governance, corruption and decentralization. As the current, politically dangerous tensions with the MNLA in Kidal demonstrate, this will require a hands-on approach by the international community. The sensitivity of the issues, especially towards 'the Tuareg' could easily enflame popular sentiment. The real work in Mali only has to begin. The terror networks have also not been defeated and still pose a very real threat that could easily disrupt the national political process. Therefore the reform of the Malian security system, with some sort of oversight by the UN in the deployment of security forces is crucial.

The attitude of the region will be important in this internal political process. Minorities and a multitude of actors will look with a great interest to what is going on and change will instill both fear and hope – often in unexpected corners. There is therefore a risk of regional meddling and implication in the domestic political processes to further national or local political, economic and security interests. Divergences in the regional strategy for dealing with Mali's armed groups was already clear in the mediation process led by Blaise Compaore, President of Burkina Faso in the course of 2012.

Improving regional collaboration will require a serious effort from the P5 to work on stabilizing North Africa and especially to work on the relationship between Morocco and Algeria. Europe also has no longer the means to engage in the type

²⁶ UNSC 2100(2013), 25 April 2013

²⁷ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali

of cowboy politics that has been exhibited in Libya. It has left us wanting of a meaningful, strategic and shared action plan for the post-Khadafi Sahel/Sahara. The EU Sahel strategy lacks political clout and is little more than a comprehensive wish list. The lackluster engagement by EU member states in the CSDP missions in Niger and Mali is also a sign that the EU is not willing, despite the massive engagement of France, to take the lead in the region.

The African response to Mali and other crises on the continent will have to be studied hard as from the current dynamics it is all but certain that the continent is moving in the direction of its ambitions. Outside actors such as the EU and UN should probably invest more effort in a real political dialogue with African institutions, but Africa will have to invest more in its proper capabilities. As in the case of Libya, Africa still has difficulty in persuading its partners that it is a credible interlocutor. The analysis might be correct but it puts little on the table to back it up.

The Malian case should serve as a dire warning that – despite the information being largely available, proper analysis of structural fragility and – dear it be said – meaningful early action is still very far from being realized.

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