

BULLETIN

No. 53 (386) • May 22, 2012 • © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Beata Wojna

Mali's Political Crisis and Its International Implications

Kacper Rękawek

Civil war and a coup d'état in Mali constitute a serious threat to the stability of Western Africa, a region bordering the "Arab Spring"-engulfed Northern Africa. The European Union should support African efforts aimed at resolving the crisis, and condition future aid for Mali on the results of political mediation organised by the country's neighbours who are aiming to restore the country back to civilian rule.

Mali is a Western African state inhabited by fourteen and a half million people. Up to 65% of Mali's area is desert and it is one of the poorest countries in the world. However, during the last 20 years it had become a regional leader in democratic transition.

The Tuareg Rebellion in Mali. Ten percent of Malians living in the northeast of the country lead nomadic lives. The mostly white Tuareg constitute the largest group of Malian nomads, who have a history of anti-state rebellions (in 1962–1964, 1990–1995 and 2007–2009) against the dominance of the black Mande tribes that inhabit the country's southern part. The Tuareg rebellions were motivated by unfulfilled promises by the government in Bamako to provide the derelict North with necessary investment.

In October 2011, various armed Tuareg groups formed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), which aims to create an independent Tuareg state (Azawad) in northeast Mali. The main role in the movement's formation was played by Tuareg who had served in the Libyan army and returned home after the fall of Muammar Qaddafi. Their military experience and armaments significantly boosted the capabilities of the Tuareg rebels, who restarted their armed campaign. In late March and early April, troops from the MNLA and other allied Tuareg groups, including the Islamist Ansar Dine (AD, "Defenders of Faith"), captured Mali's three largest northern towns—Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. On 6 April 2012, the MNLA announced an end to military operations and declared Azawad's independence.

The Tuareg Rebellion and International Terrorism. The authorities in Bamako accuse the Tuareg rebels of cooperation with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which is involved in dealing drugs and human trafficking.¹ AD has a distinctively Islamist outlook and openly admits to contact with Al-Qaida's global jihadists. It is not entirely out of the question that both AD and AQIM jointly control large swathes of the seemingly independent Azawad that could be used for the establishment of an Islamist state modelled on the Taliban in Afghanistan, or constitute a springboard for future Al-Qaida terrorist attacks.

Coup d'état in Mali. Initially, the MNLA's successes in the northeastern, isolated part of the country attracted little attention from the government in Bamako, which failed to modernise its armed forces in anticipation of yet another Tuareg rebellion. In March 2012, the government decided to send some troops that had previously been stationed in the southern part of the country to the north. The soldiers resisted, and on 22 March staged a coup d'état against Amadou Toumani Touré, the president of Mali. The mutinous army formed the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CRNDR).

¹ K. Rękawek, "The Threat of Terrorism in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa", *PISM Bulletin*, No. 101 (318), 2 November 2011.

The soldiers won the approval of Malian society, which is disillusioned by 20 years of democratic rule characterised by clientelism, nepotism, and corruption. However, the army's lack of pre-coup preparation for governing the country quickly became apparent, and on 6 April, the CRNDR, in exchange for influence over the process of forming the new government, agreed to hand power back to civilians.

African States' Reactions. The political crisis in Mali was met with an energetic response by neighbouring states, including members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), who introduced economic and political sanctions on Mali. Simultaneously, they became involved in negotiations between the military junta and President Touré's followers, which produced the 6 April agreement on the organisation of a presidential election. ECOWAS members also pledged to defend Mali's territorial integrity and offered to send up to 3,000 troops to the country's northern region. This proposal, however, found no support amongst the Malian junta, whose members questioned the neutrality of ECOWAS-authorized mediators from Burkina Faso and the Ivory Coast who were involved in negotiations between the CRNDR and President Touré.

European Union Involvement in Mali. Mali is not a major EU partner in Africa but its successes in democratisation and economic reform has until recently been portrayed as exemplary for other Western and Central African states. Mali was supposed to receive up to €500 million between 2008 and 2013 from the European Development Fund, mostly for financing transport infrastructure and immediate humanitarian aid. The prolonged civil war and coups d'état in Mali and Guinea Bissau (in April) constitute a threat to the EU's involvement in the region and could suspend the implementation of priorities under the Joint Africa–EU Strategy of 2007 and the EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel of 2011. Both documents call for increasing cooperation between African and European partners to ensure the stability of sub-Saharan Africa. This was to be achieved through an increase in Africa's political and security stability as a result of an improvement in the quality of governance on the continent.

The EU, whose Member States differed in their analyses and involvement in the NATO operation in Libya, is not directly involved in the process of restoring security and stability to Mali. European diplomacy is concentrating on supporting the ECOWAS mediators, who are aiming to implement an agreement on restoring the country to civilian power. The newly formed government, supported by neighbouring states also inhabited by the Tuareg, such as Algeria or Niger, is supposed to concentrate on a long-lasting solution to the Tuareg question while maintaining Mali's territorial integrity. Such a scenario assumes no European power will intervene directly in region as such an involvement, especially in light of the French intervention in the Ivory Coast in 2011, could be regarded as a neo-colonial attempt and one that could dramatically worsen the EU's standing in the region.

Conclusions. Political instability, civil war that could further undermine neighbouring countries, especially Niger, and the emergence of terrorist networks in Western and Central Africa and combated by Algeria, have transformed the Malian crisis into a major international issue.

Neighbouring African states, which are also addressing their own democratic deficits, suffer from ethnic strife, and are fighting the Islamist terrorists of AQIM and such groups as Boko Haram,² have undertaken energetic measures to terminate the crisis in Mali. The EU should support the ECOWAS members' efforts, and condition future aid for Mali on progress in negotiations between the military junta and Malian political forces on the mode of handing power back to civilians. Because of the disintegration of the Malian army, it is necessary to redefine the support it has been receiving under the U.S.-financed Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership. The EU could assist this process mainly through dispatching a civilian mission aimed at enhancing security sector reform (SSR) in the region, in line with the Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel. The success of such reform could stem the threats connected with the rise of organised crime and prevent the creation of terrorist bases in the region that could be used as launch pads for attacks in Northern Africa (Algeria) or in EU Member States.

² K. Rękawek, "The European Union and the Threat of Terrorism from Nigeria", *PISM Bulletin*, No. 39 (372), 12 April 2012.