

Mali unmasked: resistance, collusion, collaboration

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■ Executive summary

The Islamist rebels are no longer in control of northern Mali, but the crisis is far from over. The north is currently so factionalised that no united position exists as a viable platform for negotiations with Bamako. The political situation in Bamako is similar: political groups have taken a range of positions regarding the March 21st 2012 coup, the transitional government, negotiations with the north and the international intervention. These issues will likely be further politicised prior to the elections planned for July 31st 2013, which will make it even harder to agree on a national platform for peace, reconciliation and dialogue. The internal divisions of the Malian army are also affecting the situation negatively. The conflict, coming on top of the 2011-12 drought, has resulted in a complex humanitarian emergency, with 430,000 externally or internally displaced refugees. Due to the volatile situation in Mali, most refugees will not return in the immediate future, suggesting that the country and the region are facing a protracted refugee crisis. In light of this it is important that the international community should continue to stay engaged in supplying relief and development assistance, and in efforts to achieve peace and reconciliation.

Introduction: make or break?

The French military intervention in Mali has beaten back the Islamist rebels' offensive and taken nominal control of the cities of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. However, a number of challenges remain. The Islamists are not beaten, even if they have taken losses. They still have the capacity to resist and also to strike inside towns under French control. Thus, controlling this vast territory will be much more difficult for the French intervention force and its allies in the joint Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)-African Union mission and the Malian army than capturing it.

It is tempting to compare the current situation in northern Mali to the conflict in the 1990s; however, the crisis is no longer local. It has been internationalised through criminal networks and "global jihad". Not only is the conflict in the north far more complex than in the past, but the political situation has also changed after the military coup of March 21st 2012. As the country prepares for elections in line with the "Road Map to Democracy", the issue of negotiations with the north will become politicised, because some actors reject any kind of negotiated settlement with the rebels. This means that it will be difficult to return to the compromise of the 1990s that established the National Pact and the Governance and Decentralisation Programme. The crisis is therefore severe and previous experience of

reform indicates that conducting combined political democratisation, economic liberalisation and administrative decentralisation in a weak state such as Mali runs the risk of being hijacked by a combination of national elites and regional "big men". This is precisely what happened in the 1990s, and events last year are an unintended consequence of this. 2013 is therefore a year of make or break for Mali. If the right decisions are taken and implemented thoroughly, Mali could break away from its troubled past of mismanagement, corruption and abuse of power. If not, 2013 could also mark the beginning of a further weakening of the Malian state.

This report will therefore analyse the causes of the crisis with an emphasis on Kidal, because this is the area from which all Tuareg rebellions have been launched. The strategies of key actors will be scrutinised and a review of the humanitarian situation will be conducted before the report is concluded with some conclusions and suggested guidelines for concerned stakeholders.

The report is based on a series of in-depth interviews conducted in Mali in February 2013. These interviews were conducted on the basis of the Chatham House Rule: the information provided was recorded and used in the report, but no single person was quoted directly.

The crisis in the north

The conflict in northern Mali is not new: several Tuareg rebellions have taken place in the past. The first occurred in the early 1960s and the second in the early 1990s. However, because the National Pact of 1992 failed to produce tangible results on the ground, a new rebellion emerged in 2006. It was initially small until Tuaregs returned from post-Gaddafi Libya with a lot of arms, but little else. This gave new momentum to the idea of an armed struggle for a Tuareg homeland of Azawad and the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was established.

However, what little that may have existed of Tuareg unity quickly disappeared and as the MNLA fighters who had returned from Libya looted and the Malian army ran away, other forces stepped in and effectively sidelined the MNLA. These forces were the Tuareg Islamist organisation Ansar ed-Din, led by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a veteran Tuareg rebel from the 1990s, and two other regional movements: al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). The latter two are not Tuareg movements, but both of them – and AQIM in particular – have been present in this area for such a long time (from around 1998) that they cannot be seen merely as alien invading forces. Rather, they have become an integral part of the conflict mosaic of northern Mali as it is encapsulated in local power struggles and power configurations.

The Kidal predicament

Northern Mali is not a coherent polity. The area is mainly inhabited by Tuaregs, but there are also minority Arab populations and further south towards the river Niger there are also populations of Songray and Peul. Few of these agree to Tuareg demands for autonomy or independence from Mali.

Traditional divisions across lineages, nobility and ethnicity further increased after the implementation of the National Pact, which not only created a new local state administration, but also paved the way for more informal trade, and even narco-trafficking and regional Islamist rebels. Nowhere is this more evident than in the most traditional Tuareg settlement, the town and region of Kidal. Here a power struggle broke out between traditional leaders and a generation of emerging leaders who were not from the traditional ruling lineages, but were a mixture of ex-rebels and drug traffickers. Thus the Kidal predicament is just as much about intra-Tuareg tension as it is a conflict with the Malian state. The National Pact of 1992 enabled some regional “big men” to gain positions of power and privilege based on which they could extract handsome rents from the state and return rents to the Bamako political elite that allowed this to happen. Large amounts of money have been deployed to northern Mali, but without many tangible results on the ground. These processes have created and

exacerbated tensions among the Tuaregs that have torn the social fabric apart.

After the National Pact of 1992 two main actors were competing for influence and power in Kidal. These were the traditional rulers of the Ifoghas clan and the rebel leader Iyad Ag Ghaly, who belongs to a lesser branch of the Ifoghas. The Ifoghas is the dominant Tuareg clan in the Kidal region and has ruled this vast area since the arrival of the French in the early 1900s, but has also taken part in all the Tuareg rebellions. In late 2011 Alghabass Ag Intalla, the son of the chief of the Ifoghas, Intalla Ag Attaher, was nominated as the heir to this position, and when the rebellion broke out in January 2012, Ag Attaher denounced Ag Ghaly as its leader. This was most likely what initially propelled Ag Ghaly to form Ansar ed-Din. The reasons why Ag Intalla later joined him in Ansar ed-Din are still unclear. Some say it was due to Ag Ghaly’s ability to organise the rebellion and the failure of the MNLA, whereas others suggest that his father placed him there to prevent Ag Ghaly from leading the Ifoghas and the people of the area into an alliance with Islamist forces that, if carried through to its ultimate conclusion, would make any future negotiated settlement with the Malian state impossible.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that a group under Ag Intalla’s leadership broke away from Ansar ed-Din after the In Aménas attack and formed a new group, the Islamic Movement for Azawad (IMA), claiming that they were denouncing terrorism and were ready for dialogue.

All of this suggests that much of the root of the current crisis is to be found in an internal power struggle where the heart of the matter was who should be the main local focal point for the state and thereby also control the connection to Bamako. Thus, whereas the National Pact was formulated to solve a national problem, this solution created a local problem that later would grow to once more become a national one. Islamists and narco-traffickers used this internal conflict and the tensions it created to their advantage. This explains the logic of the local drugs economy and that of the collusion between the “petit patrons” of northern Mali and the “grand patrons” of Bamako.

This set-up was, however, unsustainable, and the initial chaos of the MNLA rebellion seriously weakened this platform of informal and illicit governance. The initial MNLA combatants were all of Tuareg origin, but a good number of them had stayed in Algeria and Libya for a considerable time and some were even born in Libya, but after the fall of Qaddafi they all returned to Mali. This may help explain the chaos, and the looting, killings and sexual violence they committed among what should have been their own kin. Thus, not only Ansar ed-Din, but also AQIM and MUJAO may have been deeper integrated into local communities than the rank-and-file members of the MNLA. The political leaders of the MNLA may have had an agenda of Tuareg nationalism, but for many among the

rank and file the main interest may have been opportunism.

Trade, support and protection: AQIM strategies for integration

When AQIM started to materialise in northern Mali it had money from hostage-taking, and money matters a lot in a place where the traditional role of the *chef du village* was diminishing rapidly, but new systems of governance had not replaced traditional rule. The history of AQIM's mission creep in the region of Timbuktu is therefore instructive. Already in 1998 AQIM people (then known as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat) started to arrive in the Timbuktu area, and they began their approach to the local population as honest and good-minded traders. For example, when they wanted to buy a goat they asked the price and when the local owner said CFA 25,000, they offered to pay CFA 50,000.

They bought themselves goodwill, friendship and networks by distributing money, handing out medicine, treating the sick, and buying SIM cards and airtime for people, and also married into poor local lineages, deliberately taking the side of the poor. Thus, in many ways they acted as an Islamic charity, but an armed one.

AQIM's penetration of the Timbuktu region has therefore been going on for more than a decade, but its tactics gradually changed from distributing money and small benefits only to also arguing strongly for its interpretation of the virtues of Islam. In order to achieve this, it also established alliances with local marabouts (religious teachers) and made them preach its brand of Islam. Thus, it utilised a pre-existing traditional structure of cultural importance, but without much real power, for its own purpose and transformed it by empowering "its marabouts" by giving them cars, money, weapons and bodyguards.

After the MNLA offensive AQIM also offered people protection. In Timbuktu it communicated a "green" cell phone number to people that they could call if they were harassed by MNLA members and/or ordinary bandits. The AQIM strategy was therefore a careful and gradual one of integration and penetration into local communities based on a combination of military, political, religious (the importance of being pious), economic and humanitarian means, whereas all the MNLA really had were arms. AQIM should therefore not be seen as an invading external force only, but as an actor that over time has managed in many ways to become a part of local communities. This is also partly true for MUJAO: there is undoubtedly some local support for it in and around the city of Gao, but its style of insurgency governance is also more haphazard and violent than AQIM's. As a much younger organisation made up of elements from within Mali and the region at large, it also consists of various groups that need to demonstrate their militant Salafist credentials. It is therefore no coincidence

that whereas AQIM only carried out one amputation as part of its implementation of *sharia* law in Timbuktu, MUJAO carried out 15 in Gao. However, even if MUJAO is more of a youthful firebrand insurgency, its ability to carry out attacks in Gao after French forces took control of the town indicates a certain level of civilian support, because these attacks were made possible through arms hidden among the civilian population.

The problem of the Malian army

The issue of the Malian army is a problem that goes much deeper than just the lack of training that the planned European Union Mission to Mali suggests. It may need more up-to-date training and equipment, but the structural problem is the lack of a unified national moral compass to underwrite its military operations. The army is divided between the "red berets", i.e. the paratroopers and presidential guard that still have some degree of loyalty to the previous president, Amadou Toumani Touré, and the "green berets" who appointed Captain Amadou Sanogo as their "leader" during the 2012 coup. This is also not a new conflict, but one that erupted during Touré's rule: as a former paratrooper himself, he was seen as giving privileges to the "red berets". It is also unfortunately already clear that the Malian army has committed human rights abuses in the areas it has recaptured from the Islamists, and more technical training will not necessarily solve this problem.

Emerging cleavages in the political landscape

Fragmentation is not only a challenge in Mali's northern periphery; it is just as much the case in Bamako and the south. After the coup, Captain Sanogo reluctantly returned power to a handpicked civilian government. However, this government is at best a caretaker, fragmented between various civilian and military groups. As the country moves towards the elections planned for July 31st 2013 political tensions will almost certainly increase, because there is clearly the danger that competing political groups will attempt to outbid one another in terms of hardline positions on the "northern question".

The March 2012 coup transformed the political landscape, resulting in divergent positions on the coup, the transition and the question of negotiations with the north. There are several groups, but the three presented here are among the most important. These are (1) the United Front to Safeguard Democracy and the Republic (FDR), (2) the Alliance Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) and (3) the Co-ordination of Patriotic Organisations in Mali (COPAM).

The FDR consists of a number of parties and civilian organisations, including the largest party, the Alliance for Democracy in Mali. The FDR is opposed to the coup and Captain Sanogo, and has also called for the resignation of interim prime minister Diarra. On the issue of the north,

the FDR does not rule out dialogue, but not with armed actors, and sees the territorial integrity and secular nature of the Malian state as non-negotiable. The FDR also takes the position that numerically the north and the Tuaregs are well integrated into the political system because the last National Assembly had 19 representatives from the north, 11 of whom were of Tuareg or Arab ethnic origin. The FDR supports the international intervention as a means of ending the transition and returning the country to democratic rule.

The IBK is a coalition of different groups that support former prime minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, a leading presidential candidate. Originally a part of the FDR, the IBK broke away in April 2012, but still shares the FDR's opposition to the coup and to Captain Sanogo and his allies, and argues for a swift return to democracy. For our purposes, what separates this group from the FDR is its position on negotiations with the north and its views on the international intervention. It says an absolute "no" to any negotiations with armed groups and claims that people involved with the MNLA and IMA are not eligible to stand for election. The IBK's position on the international intervention is more ambiguous. Reluctantly it supports it, but also expresses some concerns, the major fear being that France and ECOWAS will force through negotiations with the MNLA as an exit strategy.

Of the major political coalitions, COPAM is the one most closely affiliated to Captain Sanogo and his allies in the military. COPAM has organised large demonstrations in Bamako calling for the resignation of the interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, and opposing the international military intervention. It is not against a military solution, but argues that it must be a Malian one, because it fears that France will force through an agreement leading to the "balkanisation" of the country. This group is a strange mix of former student activists from the 1990s, including the old radical leader Oumar Mariko, and various populist groups arguing for a Malian nationalism based on the black population's autochthonous claim to its right to control the state, with the unifying factor being a common anti-neocolonial rhetoric. The former Songray militia Ghanda Koy, which fought against the Tuareg rebels in the 1990s, is, if not formally a part of COPAM, at least associated with it. COPAM supported the coup, seeing it as an opportunity for a political reconfiguration of the country and as a way of cleansing the state of all representatives of what it characterises as the criminal Touré regime. As some COPAM members explained, "the coup failed, but only because it failed to constitute a clear break with the past". COPAM is therefore critical of the transitional government and has repeatedly called for its resignation. It does not recognise the "Roadmap to Democracy" and argues that elections should not be held before an extensive process of national consultations has been conducted. Concerning negotiations with the north, COPAM rules this out completely. The only options are either military victory or that the northern-based rebels surrender. As a mix of leftist political radicals

and populists with a nationalist agenda, COPAM is a strange feature of the Malian political landscape and it is hard to estimate the strength of its support base. However, as recent experience from Côte d'Ivoire and Laurent Gbagbo's political rhetoric have shown, such a cocktail can not only constitute a real political force, but also potentially be quite destructive. There is clearly a possibility that COPAM's radical discourse will have an impact on the elections and make a negotiated settlement with the north difficult to achieve.

The humanitarian situation

The current crisis in Mali has created a complex emergency because it coincided with an already existing food insecurity emergency in the north due to the severe drought of 2011-12 throughout the Sahel region. Since January 2012 more than 400,000 people, mainly women and children, have fled the conflict zone in the north. The UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that there are more than 260,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), mainly in Bamako, Segou and Mopti. Most of these IDPs are staying with host families, and both IDPs and hosts face severe food shortages and health-care access problems. IDPs have mainly lost their livelihood sources and their children's educational opportunities.

OCHA estimates that about 170,000 refugees, mainly women and children, have fled to refugee camps in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. However, conditions in these camps are difficult because the receiving countries are themselves confronted with poverty, food insecurity and a lack of basic services. Levels of malnutrition among children are reported to be high. As of February 2013 only 4.6% of the \$13.73 billion in aid that is required has been funded.

For the population that has remained in the north, the situation is characterised by insecurity, lack of food and water, and the disruption of all local government services. The UN has not operated directly in the north during the past year, but some work has been conducted through partner NGOs that have distributed some food rations and run some basic health services. According to an informant from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), in Timbuktu it managed to have a relatively cordial relationship with AQIM that made it possible to operate a hospital and also deliver some food rations, because AQIM by and large accepted MSF's principles of independence, neutrality and impartiality in its operations. To the extent that it is possible to evaluate the humanitarian situation, it seems reasonable to suggest that it is best in Timbuktu, because the town and area are quite peaceful, and the most precarious in Gao and Kidal. In Gao insecurity is due to continued MUJAO attacks and in Kidal due to a combination of the uncertainty over who actually controls the town (e.g. the MNLA, IMA or the French/international force) and the fact that the major supply route to Kidal via the Algerian border is still closed.

Even if a few IDPs and refugees have returned, there is every reason to believe that Mali is facing a protracted refugee/IDP crisis because the military situation in the north is still uncertain and the political situation in Bamako may make a negotiated settlement difficult.

Conclusions: anticipating challenges and solutions?

The events of 2012 have unmasked Mali. What was a showcase of democracy and good governance proved to be a mask for institutional weakness, mismanagement, and collusion between regional and national “big men” interests that paid little respect to human security and development.

In the north there is little, if any, agreement around a common position among the inhabitants because the area is far from constituting a coherent polity and is fragmented along a number of lines. This is also the case in Bamako. The various political groups have different views on the coup, the issue of dialogue with the north and the international intervention, and it is very likely that these issues will be further politicised as the country moves towards new elections. This may make it even more difficult to find a platform for negotiations, which is one important reason why the National Pact of the 1990s cannot serve as a blueprint for a solution to the current crisis.

It is difficult to see how the militant Islamists groups can be part of a national dialogue on peace and reconciliation, but concerned stakeholders also need to realise that these groups are not merely an alien element in northern Mali, but have relatively successfully integrated themselves into local communities. The Malian army may need both training and new equipment, but until it is brought under better political control it is difficult to see how it can become part of the solution and not part of the problem, as is currently the case.

Taking this situation into consideration, there is every reason to believe that in the future Mali will be facing a protracted IDP and refugee crisis, even if the international

intervention manages to seriously weaken the rebels. Some refugees will return, but the majority will remain in camps or local host communities and will see the situation as too volatile to warrant their return. This means that the international community must be prepared to deliver humanitarian assistance for quite some time. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that the refugee camps are situated in poor countries and that the international community should ease the burden of hosting them. Concerning the IDPs, most of these live among local host communities and in order not to play into the hands of actors who would like to politicise this issue, it is important that relief should target the communities in which the IDPs live and not individual IDPs.

The road ahead will be difficult and it is only the Malians themselves who can find a solution to the problems the country faces. However, concerned external stakeholders can also play a role. There is clearly a need for peace and reconciliation efforts in both the north and south. Northern-based actors need to find a common position that can be an acceptable platform for dialogue with Bamako, and stakeholders with knowledge of the area can contribute to this. Engaging the various political groups and their positions in Bamako may help them to find a common platform concerning the “northern question”. In this regard, it is important to be as inclusive as possible and to make an effort to include groups like COPAM in this process. It is much better to bring them in and thus make them responsible for the outcome than to keep them outside, which will only strengthen the hardliners.

Mali has received considerable foreign assistance in the past. Unfortunately, this did not prevent the current crisis, and some reflection concerning how this aid was actually used may be necessary. However, as the current crisis illustrates, turning one’s back on the country will only create more problems in the future. This is therefore not the time to disengage from Mali, but to stay focused on its many challenges and help it break with the past. 2013 is a make-or-break year for Mali, and the international community can contribute to making this year a window of opportunity and not the beginning of the further weakening of the Malian state. ■

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