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Why Peace Negotiations in Mali Will Not Succeed

Ever since Azawad rebels rejected a UN-brokered deal in March, the peace process in Mali has gone nowhere. Restarting it isn't the only problem, though. As Sofia Sebastian sees it, true peace won't come to the country until the links between rebel groups and transnational criminal networks are effectively broken.

By Sofia Sebastian for ISN

The peace process in Mali is at a standstill. The fifth round of negotiations between the Mali government and rebel groups from the northern region resulted in the preliminary signing of a peace agreement by the government in early March. The rebels, however, demanded additional time for deliberation and ultimately rejected the deal because it did not meet their demands for autonomy in the north. Addressing the conflict over the institutional status of northern Mali has been a priority for the international community. While the focus on the political dialogue must continue, no solution will be viable until the nexus between criminality and violent extremism in the north is eliminated, and the links between rebel groups and transnational criminal networks are curtailed.

Mali's peace process

The origins of the current crisis in Mali date back to early 2012, when rebels launched a campaign to take control of northern Mali and establish an independent republic, known as Azawad. As this campaign unfolded, a group of poorly equipped young officers, who were disenchanted with an army racked by corruption and nepotism, launched a military coup. The government fell a few days later, and rebels seized the opportunity to declare the independence of northern Mali on April 6, 2012. A political agreement brokered by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) restored the constitutional order, but developments in the north took a turn for the worse. In mid-2012, an alliance of local and foreign extremist organizations ousted the rebels that had earlier claimed control, and imposed Sharia law.

Military advances by the extremists towards Bamako in early 2013 triggered an intervention by the French, followed closely by the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) that provided additional support. The French intervention rebuffed the extremists' advances and paved the way for intensive mediation efforts by ECOWAS between the government and rebel groups, resulting in the signing of the Ouagadougou Preliminary Agreement in July. The accord called for the immediate cessation of hostilities, the holding of national elections, and the initiation of a political

dialogue aimed at achieving a final agreement on the institutional status of northern Mali. In the meantime, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was deployed, taking over from the African-led peacekeeping mission that struggled with financial and logistical problems. The UN peacekeeping mission was mandated to support the political dialogue, protect civilians and contribute to the stabilization of the northern territory.

In July 2013, MINUSMA successfully supported national elections. Peace talks, however, ultimately stalled, and no progress was made until a year later when the government and rebel groups signed a roadmap for the peace process, in large part owing to mediation by Algeria. Following several rounds of negotiations marked by increasing tension and military confrontation between the Malian government and the rebels, the government signed the peace proposal on March 1, 2015. Rebel organizations, however, rejected the settlement and demanded further talks.

The many dimensions of the Malian crisis

In its current iteration, the peace process in Mali is fundamentally flawed. The first problem is that negotiations are merely intended to address one facet of a multidimensional crisis: the divide between the rebels in the north (demanding more autonomy), and the government in the south (unwilling to cede political and economic control). The crisis, however, is the result of broader conflict dynamics, including inter-communal tensions, violent extremism, organized crime, deep-seated corruption, fragile institutions and rampant factionalism resulting from deep divisions within Malian society along ethnic, tribal, and clan lines. For the past few months, insecurity in northern Mali has dramatically increased. Clashes between different rebel factions, banditry and terrorist attacks are all on the rise. In the absence of a holistic approach covering the spectrum of conflict dynamics, and engaging a broader range of stakeholders, the peace process cannot deliver a sustainable peace.

The second problem is that the peace process is based on a framework that disregards the links between rebel organizations, organized crime, and terrorism. This alliance was critical, for example, during the revolt in 2012 when divisions between the two main rebel groups at the time, the MNLA (le Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l'Azawad) and Ansar Dine, resulted in the latter seeking a military alliance with terrorist organizations that ultimately defeated the more moderate MNLA. Today, there are complex associations between rebels groups, organized crime networks, and terrorist organizations, underpinned by shared strategic interests and economic opportunities associated with drug trafficking.

These dynamics have affected the peace process in different ways. They have distorted the nature of the negotiations, transformed the interests at stake, and changed the balance of power between the armed groups involved. Competition for control of trafficking routes, for example, has enhanced divisions and armed clashes within and between different rebel factions. It has also aggravated the problem of armed fragmentation and factionalism, with individuals and factions constantly switching alliances for economic gain and strategic advantage. In this context, as the International Crisis Group has argued in an open letter to the UN Security Council, mediators may find themselves talking to interlocutors who are not capable of making "realistic or coherent claims."

International response

The international response to these developments has been limited. Mediators, for example, have turned a blind eye to the links between rebel groups and organized crime in the belief that engagement with these organizations is unavoidable if efforts to undermine extremists are to be effective.

From an operational standpoint, while the UN Security Council resolution that authorized MINUSMA acknowledged the roles of transnational crime and terrorism in the Malian conflict, the mission was not mandated to address these issues (given that peacekeeping missions are often over-extended and under-resourced, this was, to a certain degree, understandable). The mission's police, for example, have no authority to arrest suspected criminals or to assist with border security. Instead, they are assisting local police with capacity-building through a UN Police Transnational Organized Crime Cell co-located with Malian counterparts, but progress has been slow. The UN Secretary-General observed in December 2014 that transnational organized crime units in Mali remained ineffective due to a lack of resources.

In June, the UN Security Council will consider expanding MINUSMA's mandate. It could use this opportunity to provide further responsibilities and resources to the mission or to independent bodies working alongside the mission to combat organized crime and terrorism. For example, it could establish an [expert group](#) to investigate the activities and identities of those involved with transnational organized crime and terrorist networks (as recommended by the UN Secretary-General prior to the establishment of MINUSMA). The Security Council should also grant operational support responsibilities to the mission's police component, and emphasize a regional approach to tackling transnational threats and border security in the region. Strengthening mechanisms for information sharing and coordination on the ground would also be significant. Some of these issues were addressed in the UN Integrated Sahel Strategy launched in December of 2013, but additional resources and political commitment from member states are urgently required.

In his latest report on the situation in Mali, the UN Secretary-General noted that extremism, illegal trafficking, and organized crime could only be countered through a viable political process. While efforts to advance the political dialogue must continue, the UN Security Council must emphasize other aspects of the Malian crisis when it adopts the new resolution for MINUSMA in June. Unless the Security Council and other stakeholders recognize the critical roles of transnational crime and violent extremism in Mali, conflict resolution efforts will be inconsistent, hazardous, and unlikely to bring long-term stability.

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