

PRACTICE NOTE

French Military Intervention in Mali: Inevitable, Consensual yet Insufficient

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This practice note offers an account of France's military intervention in Mali¹ launched on 11 January 2013. Firstly, it provides an analysis of the events that led up to the dual crisis in the country's northern and southern regions and to a new wave of armed conflict between government and rebel forces. Then, it is argued that although the French military intervention was framed as inevitable and based on a broad consensus, it will nevertheless be insufficient to address the root sociopolitical causes of Mali's multidimensional crisis.

How It All Started in Bamako: A Counterproductive Coup

Despite the focus of media coverage on its northern territories, Mali's current political crisis began in Bamako with a counterproductive coup aimed at restoring State authority which had been lost to "rebel" groups in the North. Paradoxically, this led to a further loss of sovereign State control in the region and ultimately to the country's de facto partition.

Despite the somewhat unexpected nature of the coup, it occurred in a context of great uncertainty and deterioration of governance. By the end of 2011, the Malian army had been attacked by Tuareg fighters in several locations and cities in the North (Tinzawaten, Tessalit). Some Malian soldiers were kidnapped or killed in Aguel'hoc, and the army was forced to leave. In an attempt to mask this series of defeats, the government opted for a "strategic retreat" from the area. On 2 February, a group of mothers and wives of

Malian soldiers marched to the Presidential palace demanding additional resources and support for the troops from the government led by President Amadou Toumani Touré (hereafter referred to as ATT, as is common in Mali). In hindsight, this event appears to have been an attempted wake-up call to the President, as well as an early forewarning of the coup.

On 21 March, the Minister of Defence visited the military barracks in Kati, located 15 km away from the capital city, to discuss the situation at hand. The enraged soldiers threw rocks at the Minister and his team, and their bodyguards were forced to fire shots in the air in order to secure the Minister's exit from the barracks. A modest number of disaffected soldiers then marched from the nearby barracks of Kita to the highest seats of State power in Bamako, on Koulouba hill. The soldiers were able to make their way into the palace at around 9:00 pm, due to the weakness of the President's response and that of State institutions more generally (Siméant and Traoré 2012). However, ATT, protected by his presidential guard, known as the Red Berets, had already fled. The mutineers pro-

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ceeded to take control of the State television service, arrest several personalities from the former regime, announce the suspension of the Constitution and the dissolution of the government and create the National Committee for the Reestablishment of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (NCRDRS) with the objective of “saving what is left of the Republic”. As is often the case, the military junta was initially welcomed by the population. The capture and imprisonment of several politicians widely regarded as corrupt – in addition to their promises to deal more firmly with the situation in the North – earned Captain Sanogo and his crew of Green Berets a certain degree of respect from Malian civil society.

But in the aftermath of the March 2012 military coup, the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad* (MNLA) – an insurgent movement led by Tuareg leaders – took advantage of the political vacuum created in Bamako in order to conquer the North. In an alliance with Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), they took control of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu by April 1st. Rivalries between the various rebel groups soon began to show. By 2 April 2012, the MNLA had been driven from Timbuktu by Ansar Dine and AQIM, and later from Gao, Timbuktu (22 and 28 June respectively) and Menaka (16 November) by the *Mouvement pour l’Unité et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest* (MUJAO) after intense fighting. Yet the resulting declaration of an independent Azawad by the MNLA on April 6th is related to a longstanding predicament in the North.

Geographically, Azawad as understood by Tuareg leaders includes the Septentrional parts of Mali lying beyond the Niger river: the whole administrative regions of Kidal, Gao, Timbuktu and a piece of Mopti region). French historian Pierre Boilley and Roland Marchal have shown that Azawad is “a purely political creation” and is not based on cultural or linguistic factors (the Tuareg are not the majority in the area, which is also home to Arabs, Songhai and Peuls) or a historical precedent.

The Root Causes of the Conflict in the North: Beyond the Islamist Threat

To understand the origins of this crisis, it is important to go beyond the media’s focus on the recent “Islamist threat” in the Sahel. The MNLA is the product of the movements that have been leading Tuareg revolts against the central government since Mali’s independence in 1960. The French colonial policy consisted of strictly distinguishing between and applying differential rule to nomadic and sedentary, black and lighter-skinned populations (Grémont 2012). Gregory Mann (2012) has shown that at independence, the Tuareg were disappointed that the French did not keep their promise to create a separate Saharan territory for them where, as they wished, they would not be ruled by Blacks. In postcolonial Mali, disputes over access to resources and land distribution became increasingly common within the increasingly sedentary Tuareg community, which faced chronic drought (Bouhleb-Hardy 2009). Tuareg leaders have increasingly demanded greater development of the North and the region’s effective inclusion in the national agenda. In 2012, the MNLA demanded regional self-determination and the organisation of a referendum for the independence of Azawad.

Since independence, the approach of the Malian State in the face of the successive Tuareg uprisings has been three-fold. In 1963 it boiled down to the use of force and repression. In the early 1990s, the government attempted to co-opt the Tuareg (Seely 2001) and to improve their integration and representation within the State through decentralisation, demobilisation and development programs. After 2006, ATT was perceived to have tacitly adopted a “laissez faire” approach to the management of the North, but all of these measures appear to have aggravated tensions in the long run. Indeed, traditional Tuareg figures or “Big Men” (those of noble lineage and/or combat experience in the rebellions of the early 1990s) successfully capitalised on the dividends of peace, including: electoral mandates in the new

local communes (after 1998), resources for development projects and arrangements for the integration of Tuareg fighters into the Malian army (Boàs 2012, Grémont 2012). Many frustrated youths left Mali, but some continued the struggle under new modalities, seizing new opportunities offered by a changing regional context. These include, for instance, connections with AQIM and/or with transnational criminal networks (e.g., the smuggling of bootleg cigarettes, migrants and drugs to Europe (Marchal 2012, Boàs 2012, Grémont 2012).

The proliferation of insurgent movements in northern Mali in the 2000s – and the presence of Islamists amongst them, be they Malian or foreign – is a consequence of these recent developments. Ansar-Dine's leadership is mainly Tuareg but the movement's rank and file includes many local Arabs. It is headed by Iyad Ag Ghaly, a nobleman from Kidal whom, following a stay in Saudi Arabia, became a "born-again Salafist" and played the "Islamic law and order" card in northern Mali upon his return (Grémont 2012). His religious credentials made his movement appear more predictable than the MNLA, whose fighters had mistreated and pillaged the northern populations – especially the non-Tuareg ones – over the past decade (Marchal 2012). Gao-based MUJAO has specialised in the kidnapping of Algerians and Westerners, and in drug smuggling. According to Roland Marchal (2012), it is a splinter group from AQIM; MUJAO became frustrated with AQIM's efforts to take root in the Sahel and of its doctrine of centralised decision making and decentralised execution.

Despite the aforementioned distinctive features, membership within these groups is fluid; frontiers between them are porous, and the alliances between them are constantly changing. In late May, the MNLA and Ansar-Dine failed to join forces or harmonise their agendas in order to establish an "Islamic State of Azawad" in northern Mali. Ferdaous Bouhleb-Hardy has argued that what separated the two organisations were not debates over secularism or Islamic

extremism but rather disagreements concerning the concrete manner of implementing Sharia law and the composition of their potential joint bureau. She also asserts that the MNLA and Ansar-Dine are very close in terms of their membership, which has been construed by family bonds and local alliances (Meddeb 2012).

The complexity of the alliances between the various rebel groups and their shifting agendas partly explains the difficulty in finding a political solution to the crisis. Another reason is the weakness of political power in Bamako since the coup. The coup has indeed left Mali deeply divided, but not amongst the cleavages usually mentioned (i.e., North and South, democrats and others, or secular and extreme Muslims). The nature of these Malian political divisions is explored below.

Military Cast Shadow Power over Transitional Authorities

Soon after 22 March, clashes broke out between demonstrators opposing the junta and those supporting it. The pro-putsch camp assembled within the *Coordination des organisations patriotiques du Mali* and the association Yèrèwolo Ton, both of which had been excluded from the political system during ATT's rule. Conversely, the country's political class and its main trade unions, which merged within the *Front uni pour la sauvegarde de la démocratie et la République* (FDR), condemned the coup and demanded the immediate recovery of Mali's "constitutional order" and "territorial integrity". Their position was supported by the country's international partners. It should be noted that the coup did not confront "democrats" with "non democrats". It was welcomed, amongst others, by alter-globalisation activist Aminata Dramane Traoré, and also by Oumar Mariko, a former leader of the student movement (which was instrumental in the toppling of Moussa Traoré's military dictatorship), and the head of the far-left *Parti pour la Solidarité Africaine, la Démocratie et l'Indépendance*. All of these public figures believed the coup

offered an opportunity to end ATT's regime and establish a "genuine" democracy in Mali.

The Government has remained deeply fragmented and fragile, too. As a result of the occupation of the North and of the pressure applied by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the NCRDRS agreed to transfer power to an interim, civilian government on 6 April 2012. But since then, the interim authorities have faced many challenges, including weak legitimacy and the shadow cast over them by the powerful Captain Sanogo.

Some contextualisation is necessary. A presidential election had been due to take place in Mali in April 2012. It therefore proved difficult to appoint a consensual interim authority in the aftermath of the coup. Dioncounda Traoré, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (1994–1997) and President of the National Assembly (2007–2012), was appointed as interim President. Since 2000, he had been heading ADEMA (*Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali*), the party that was largely responsible for the fall of military dictator Moussa Traoré and fundamental in the democratic transition. The party has since been accused by many Malians of mismanagement and corruption (Couloubaly 2004, Doumbi-Fakoly 2004), and has become increasingly divided by various leadership battles. For all these reasons, Traoré was not perceived as being substantially different from the previous regime, and certainly was not considered a consensual figure in the post-coup scenario; however, a recent survey of 384 people in the district of Bamako conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation between 13 and 20 February shows that he has gained greater trust by Malian citizens in the past months (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2013).

Dr. Cheick Modibo Diarra, a former NASA astrophysicist and Microsoft Africa executive, was appointed Prime minister. Due to the international nature of his career, Diarra's reputation had not been tainted by the rampant corruption of ATT's regime, and he

seemed able to deal with Mali's international partners. His being the son-in-law of ex-president General Moussa Traoré also contributed to his appointment by the military leadership. But his refusal to appoint many career politicians to ministerial positions, favouring figures close to himself and Captain Sanogo instead, soon left Diarra in a vulnerable position in the corridors of power in Bamako.

Despite the formal transfer of power to the civilian authorities, Captain Sanogo and his Kati-based Green Berets have since maintained shadow power over the transitional authorities and have interfered in the political arena, thus limiting the authority of the latter and leaving little room to maneuver in dealing with the country's complex and unstable situation. On 21 May 2012, Traoré was assaulted in his office by pro-putsch protesters. He was treated for his injuries in Paris and only agreed to return to Mali on 27 July, after the junta firmly committed to guaranteeing his physical safety. The Captain also acted autonomously from the executive branch, promoting his supporters to positions of high rank within the military institution, and extra-judicially arresting, torturing or killing dozens of Red Berets (members of the presidential guard who supported President ATT throughout the coup and staged an unsuccessful "counter-coup" on 30 April).

For several months, the question of how to regain control of the North remained a major point of disagreement. The junta rejected the idea of receiving any external support or intervention, asserting notions of sovereignty and non-interference. Hence, Diarra's invitation in September to all those who were willing and able to contribute to restoring Mali's territorial integrity was met with great disapproval. By refusing to withdraw his candidacy from the upcoming presidential elections, the interim prime minister gave the ex-junta the excuse it needed to drive him out of office (i.e., on the grounds that he was using the transition as a springboard for his own political ambitions). On

11 December, he abandoned his mandate on national television, having been arrested the night before by soldiers acting under the orders of Captain Sanogo.

Diango Cissoko replaced Diarra as of December 2012. He had enjoyed a long and successful career as both a civil servant and a politician in the successive political regimes, including the military one. He served as General Secretary of dictator Moussa Traoré's presidency during the particularly violent and repressive years, as a director of the Prime Minister's cabinet after the democratic transition, and then as the General Secretary of the Presidency and as National Mediator under ATT. The ex-junta maintained three key ministers in the reshuffled government: those of Home Security, Justice and Territorial Administration.

By the beginning of 2013, the situation had not yet been clarified or completely stabilised. The divisions within the army appeared to have been resolved when 28 detained Red Berets were released (30 January). However, the Green Berets launched a violent raid upon the Red Berets at their Djicoroni camp eight days later. Traoré appointed Sanogo as President of the Military Committee for the Monitoring and Reform of the Armed Forces on 15 February, in an attempt to offer him an honourable political exit whilst also removing him from the military barracks in Kati and limiting his role to a military one. Sanogo promised not to run for in the July 2013 elections.

The Failure to Reach a Political Solution

In the context of escalating tensions, the potential for a political solution to the conflict in the North was discarded, and combat operations began again in early January 2013.

In late 2012, plans for a national conference that would address the pressing issues of the day – the elaboration of a roadmap for the political transition, the liberation of the North and the organisation of elections – became deadlocked due to profound dif-

ferences over the nature (constitutive or consultative) of the conference and who would participate in it. The government was unable to draw up a consensual list of participants, and influential opposition groups in Bamako threatened to boycott the process since they did not deem it transparent or inclusive enough (United Nations 2012).

More importantly, discussions between the conflicting parties could not take place since the coup had left the transitional authorities unable to act – both militarily and politically. The army was unable to “liberate the North” on its own, and yet the ex-junta continued to refuse any form of foreign support. Meanwhile, the political impasse in Bamako prevented the discussion of the core elements of the rebel groups' agendas – the secular nature of the Malian State, its composition, etc. – leaving little room for trade-offs. The sincerity of the rebels' pledges to reach a peaceful solution to the crisis was also called into question.

Talks with the armed groups produced poor outcomes. The civilian government was unable to effectively negotiate with them since it did not have the political backing needed to make concessions, and the mediations offered by ECOWAS and the United Nations also failed. The legitimacy of ECOWAS' official mediator in the Malian crisis, President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, was challenged by many Malians, who argued that a dictator that has been in power since 1987 is unqualified to promote the reestablishment of democracy in Mali. They also accused him of hijacking his role in the conflict to consolidate his power in Burkina Faso and improve his relationship with France. By the spring of 2012, he was suspected of supporting the rebels and was later reproached for holding discussions with the rebel groups without involving the Malian government. Mali's neighbour, Algeria, which is not a member of ECOWAS but a key regional power, tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with Ansar-Dine and refused any external intervention until early 2013.

The United Nations pursued a two-track approach – both political and military – aimed at pressuring the Malian authorities to address the long-standing grievances of the northern communities before taking military action. The United Nations also attempted to offer a diplomatic option to those willing to distance themselves from terrorist acts. In a report published in late November, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon warned of the risks associated with launching a poorly prepared intervention in Mali (United Nations 2012). The report was met with indignation and misunderstanding in Bamako. But on 20 December 2012, the UN adopted Resolution 2085, which approved the deployment of an African military force in Mali.

The announcement that African troops would logistically not be prepared for battle until September 2013 certainly encouraged the rebels to take action as soon as possible. In early January 2013, Ansar-Dine broke the ceasefire, on the grounds that the government was not committed to the negotiations and was instead committing violence and employing mercenaries in the North. They subsequently attacked army bases in Konna and attempted to attack the military airport of Sévaré and the city of Mopti. The Malian army escaped from harm once again, whilst demonstrating their flaws (i.e., the lack of training, organisation, resources, leadership and unity). These latest events were what finally made a military intervention by the French possible. Its commencement was officially announced on 11 January 2013, two days after an official visit to Paris by Traoré.

The French Intervention: Inevitable, Consensual, yet Insufficient

Considering that the African force could not be ready before September 2013, and that NATO had refused to intervene in Mali, Traoré visited his French counterpart in Paris on 9 January. Two days later, President François Hollande announced the start of Operation Serval.

Operation Serval received a great deal of support, both nationally – even Captain Sanogo immediately approved it – and internationally. Mahamadou Issoufou, President of Niger, argued that the operation in Mali was “the most popular of all French interventions in Africa”. This consensus can be explained by the recent dramatic turn of events, and the way in which the intervention was legitimised. The consensus was reached by means of legal and political arguments, and communication strategies deployed both in Mali and in France.

The interim authorities were successful in framing the military intervention of Mali’s former colonial power as an inevitable option and the “least bad” scenario, and justified it on behalf of national sovereignty, unity and “territorial integrity”. Since Mopti harbours the last military post up North, it was argued that if the rebels breached it, they would then face few obstacles should they want to head towards Bamako and establish an Islamic Republic of Mali. According to Roland Marchal, the will and capacities of armed groups to do so were clearly over-stated.² Interim authorities clearly capitalised on a widespread perception of an Islamist threat, and it effectively garnered international support for the Malian government at a time when its domestic standing was doubtful. Indeed, in the days prior to Operation Serval, Bamako was shaken by large scale marches, and the mission temporarily silenced the voices of those who were demanding the organisation of the continuously postponed “*concertations nationales*” (national consultations). Interim authorities and the Malian media were careful to speak of a Malian-French operation when it was clear that French soldiers were leading the combat operations.

On the French side, the reference to an “Islamist threat” was determinant in motivating, shaping and legitimising intervention. Its first official rationale was to protect the existence of an African partner. Only later did the French authorities use somehow uncritically the terrorism terminology of US

former President George W. Bush. The presence of Islamists allied with Tuareg rebels was instrumental in framing the crisis in Mali as a threat for European and African security while at the same time denying French support to President Bozizé against armed groups in the Central African Republic³.

When fighting started, an image of the consensus surrounding the intervention was displayed by means of a cautious *mise en scène* of people waving French flags in Bamako and cheering upon the arrival of Malian and French soldiers in the liberated northern cities. This *mise en scène* was facilitated by the declaration of a “state of emergency” on 11 January 2013 in Mali. Additionally, both Malian and French journalists were denied free access to the North. In late May 2013, the most vocal critics of the intervention in Mali, alter-globalist Aminata Traoré and Oumar Dicko, head of far-left party *Solidarité Africaine pour la Démocratie et l'Indépendance*, who had supported the 2012 putsch, were denied a visa to France and Germany - where they had been invited to talk about the situation in their country - by a French diplomatic initiative.

Regardless of the carefully crafted communication strategies, the majority of Malians truly welcomed the French troops, and 97 per cent of those consulted in a poll carried out in Southern Mali in February 2013 approved French intervention (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2013). This can be explained by the fact that populations were traumatised and exhausted after months of partition and occupation of the North, and disappointed by their political leaders and their management of the crisis.

From a legal perspective, the French justified their intervention in virtue of UN resolution 2085 and Article 51 of the UN Charter (the principle of legitimate defense). This is ambiguous since the UN allowed the deployment of an *African* force in Mali. Although the interim authorities did not enjoy full democratic legitimacy – precisely because they had not been elected – the notion of a

consensual intervention seemed guaranteed by the fact that Traoré had asked the French for their support. Finally, Hollande cautiously avoided justifying the intervention on the grounds of the defense agreements signed between France and some of her African ex-colonies at independence, in order to avoid being accused of neo-colonialism (Roucaute 2012).

Employing a combination of aerial bombings and ground troops, the operation was spectacularly quick in chasing the Islamists out of the northern cities. The rebels opposed little resistance, preferring to escape and avoid direct combat with the French troops in the cities. Since January 2013, troops from Niger, Nigeria, Togo and Senegal have been posted in Bamako. Chadian soldiers patrol Kidal, since the MNLA did not let the Malian army in, and killed several chiefs of AQIM. During the “liberation” process, many thefts perpetrated by the army – and civilian assaults on alleged rebel supporters and lighter skinned individuals – have been reported. The government has finally adopted a roadmap for the political transition, and elections are supposed to be held in July 2013. On 28 February 2013, during a summit held in Abidjan, ECOWAS decided that the interim authorities would stay in power until then. The second phase has involved chasing out the remaining insurgents from the freed cities (especially Gao) and from the mountains of Adrar where they have retreated.

- The military operation supported by 4,000 French soldiers and 2,000 Chadian troops was spectacularly quick in freeing Northern cities. Some analysts or members of the French military *milieu* further consider that the French operation may serve as “a blueprint for future operations”, i.e. launched upon African demand and approved by the international community (especially the UN), targeted and quick thanks to sophisticated technological means to combat

new security threats like terrorism, and based on a political and operational “partnership” with African governments and troops (Bryant 2013). Serval also served to send a message to the French army that, despite announced budget cuts, “Africa would remain a defense priority for France” and that France was meant and legitimate to lead direct operations on the continent due to its bases and unique deployment capacities. North Africa and the Sahel were identified as a “key geographic priority” in France’s *Livre blanc 2013 de la défense et de la sécurité nationale* released on 29 April (Bryant 2013).

- Political authorities are eager to present the operation in Mali as a turning point in French-Malian, and more broadly French-African relationships, too. During a joint speech delivered in Bamako’s Independence Square on 3 February 2013, Presidents Traoré and Hollande warned that despite quick military victory, more efforts will be needed to come to terms with “extremism” and “obscurantism”. The Malian president thanked the French army for their quick assistance to Malian soldiers and praised the *grandeur* of France, the land of human rights and the 1789 revolution. He also said his “brother” Hollande was at home in Mali. The latter encouraged Malians to fight terrorism, which he associated to a “second independence”, thus comparing today’s *djihad* with yesterday’s colonialism. But applause in the audience reached their climax when the French President said: “I remember that when France was attacked, when she was looking for assistance and allies, when she was threatened, when her territorial unity was at stake, who came to support her then? Africa did, Mali did, thank to Mali. Today we are reimbursing our debt to Mali”. Here Hollande claimed to put an end to the Sarkozy era while foster reconciliation⁴ and to the

neo-colonial and sometimes mafiaesque practices of *françafrique*.

- However, I argue that Opération Serval will not suffice to successfully resolve the Malian crisis. Previous experiences related to the “war on terror” in other countries usually proved more complex than initially estimated and were even counterproductive in some cases. Indeed, many obstacles and sources of uncertainty remain. Armed groups have apparently avoided direct confrontation with the French army and may be re-organising in other countries. French authorities claim that hundreds of rebels have died in the past months; but Kidal is still under partial control of the MNLA and its new branch, the MIA, and other cities are not fully secured. In the past months, insurgent elements have launched gun attacks in Timbuktu and Gao and have carried out suicide bombings – a novelty in Malian history. During the ‘liberation’ process, many acts of extortion and illegal killing were reported. Tensions between communities are also on the rise (International Crisis Group 2013).
- For many, the organisation of elections in July 2013, as envisaged in the roadmap for the transition adopted by the government in July 2012, is unrealistic, since the electoral register is outdated and contested, and since the 500,000 Malians who have fled to neighbouring countries may not be able to cast their vote. A National Commission for Dialogue and Reconciliation has been set up but its cost, mandate and composition are contested both in Bamako and in the North.

While France and Chad announced the progressive retreat of their troops, the deployment of a UN mission to Mali called MINUSMA was authorised by Resolution 2100 on 25 April. Placed under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, it will seek to “stabilise

the key population centres”, especially in the North of Mali, to “deter threats and take active steps to prevent the return of armed elements to those areas” and to facilitate the “reestablishment of State authority throughout the country”.

Despite the unprecedented consensus that has sustained the resolution at the Security Council, experts and the UN Secretary-General himself have warned that it would be the first time that the blue helmets would confront terrorists like members of Al-Qaeda. In addition, MINUSMA is supposed to count on 11,000 blue helmets, which means that 5,000 troops are missing. Integrating the 6,000 African troops already posted in Mali into a multilateral mission with a new mandate, and finding 5,000 well-trained soldiers to complement it will not be easy. Moreover, in every UN mission, coordinating troops from various countries with distinct experiences, professional cultures and working languages is a difficult task, especially as the Malian army remains poorly equipped and trained to efficiently lead operations. European and German training to the Malian military have started in April but add to the risk of proliferation of ill-coordinated initiatives. Finally, it is interesting to note that, according to the opinion survey carried out by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2013), blue helmets are a priori less welcome than French or American soldiers.

On the non-military front, it must be recalled that despite their recent transformation and criminalisation, the Tuareg rebellions have historically been due to problems of marginalisation and representation. And beyond the armed Tuareg movements, many northern citizens (including non-Tuareg) do not feel adequately represented or integrated into the nation – starting with its South-oriented official history.

The crisis is deep, multi-dimensional and is not limited to the North. When Captain Sanogo orchestrated the coup in March 2012, President ATT had by then lost most of his support country-wide. The regime had

been unsuccessful in guiding and supervising the reform of the cotton sector, which had affected producers in the Sikasso area. It had also adjudicated vast areas of fertile land near the Office du Niger to international companies in uneven and opaque circumstances. Pressured by European donors, the President decided to reform the family code in 2009, in order to provide more rights to women (amongst other things) but was forced to back off after a fierce, two-year battle against thousands of civil society organisations mobilised by reformist Imams. The corruption of high-ranking generals – suspected of having “eaten” the millions of dollars provided to them by the United States in the context of military cooperation in the Sahel – was a central grievance of the putschists and their supporters. Another issue of complaint was ATT’s “weak” management of the northern predicament, which culminated with the repatriation of Qaddafi’s Malian ex-mercenaries without being disarmed upon their arrival. The President and his “clan” were accused of having connections with and protecting drug traffickers. Finally, the political system of “consensus” established by Touré in 2002, which was based on a coalition of all the political parties and some civil society representatives, dramatically reduced the possibility of any meaningful political opposition. Most of the candidates competing in the 2012 presidential elections had at some point worked in ATT’s successive governments, which means that there is very little chance for a real change in the political tide. For this reason, political parties as a whole are deemed opportunistic, and they have been deeply discredited. Polls show a drop in citizen patience and satisfaction with the way democracy works in Mali since 2001 (for a synthesis, see Coulibaly and Bratton 2013).

The critical assessment of ATT’s regime has, to a great extent, been temporarily brushed aside due to the implementation of *Opération Serval*, but it must not be forgotten if Mali’s unity, stability and democracy are to be established on solid grounds in the near future. A

critical assessment of aid is needed, too, for the current crisis is also one of “donor-driven ownership” (Bergamaschi 2008). That is, how have international efforts to build a State – to counter poverty and promote aid effectiveness – feed into the current situation? One must recall that Mali was long a “darling” of the Western aid establishment and a key success story. Such a critique is necessary to better equip donors be able to create the conditions under which all Malians will feel represented in their nation, protected by their State and better able to counter Big Men all around the country in the post-intervention scenario (Bergamaschi 2013).

Notes

- ¹ The author thanks her research assistant, Louisa Clow Fernández and the anonymous reviewers of the journal *Stability*.
- ² During a conference called « Interventions au Mali et enjeux régionaux » held at Centre d’Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris, 11 February 2013 : <http://www.sciencespo.fr/cei/fr/content/interventions-au-mali-et-enjeux-regionaux>
- ³ President Hollande justified this differentiated treatment by arguing that President Bozizé was facing an internal political threat and that, as far as France was concerned, influence was preferable to old habits of direct intervention.
- ⁴ The President’s controversial discourse in Dakar in 2007 had created turmoil and indignation amongst French and African leaders, civil societies and intellectuals. Also, French-Malian diplomatic relations had deteriorated in the late 2000s, after ATT’s constant refusal to sign “re-admission” agreements with the French government for the joint management of migration.

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