ARTICLE

Crisis in Mali: Ambivalent Popular Attitudes on the Way Forward

Massa Coulibaly* and Michael Bratton[†]

This article asks what Malians think about their country's political crisis, including its causes, status, and possible solutions. An Afrobarometer survey of public opinion conducted at the end of 2012 finds the electorate in an apprehensive and ambivalent mood. Malians express declining faith in democracy as well as considerable (but diminishing) trust in the army. In a sign of democratic resilience, however, a large and broad majority continues to believe in elections as the best way to reconstitute a government. But only in the context of a stable and intact state – with an inclusive constitutional settlement, trustworthy civilian institutions, and engaged citizenry – will Mali be ready again for routine presidential and legislative elections.

Mali faces a political crisis of multiple dimensions. A poorly planned military coup and the collapse of a corrupt and incompetent civilian regime have together seriously set back the country's progress towards democracy. Moreover, an armed conflict with ethnic separatists and religious extremists in the north has grievously undermined the integrity of the state. These twin political trends – the emergence of an authoritarian regime and the disintegration of state institutions – are deeply interconnected. As noted by a recent contributor to this journal, 'the political chaos in Bamako and the military challenge in the north are undeniably related: confusion about who has legal authority and political power to rule the country hinders efforts to organize a credible effort to reintegrate the north' (Thurston 2012: 4).

In this respect, the political crisis in Mali displays many of the challenges highlighted in the literature on democratization in post-conflict societies (de Zeeuw and Kumar 2006; Flores and Nooruddin 2009; Mehler 2013). Civil conflict leaves in its wake fragile states that are ill prepared to meet popular demands for security, freedom and prosperity and which may even destabilize the region and the world (Curtis 2013). Yet the role of democratization in post-conflict recovery is unclear: Do democratic procedures like elections pave the way to institutional stability and accountable governance? Or does a premature return to open political competition raise social tensions, thus risking renewed political conflict? What, therefore, is the right timetable for the restoration of electoral politics?

On balance, analysts tend to favor phased democratization (Diamond 2006). The first order of business is to reestablish political order by rebuilding the basic capacity of state institutions like the armed forces and the police. But an equally important considera-

* Groupe de recherche en économie appliquée et théorique (GREAT), Mali
  massa@greatmali.net

[†] Michigan State University, U.S.A.
  mbratton@msu.edu

tion is the accountability of the state to civil society, for example through civilian control of these agencies of coercion. The accountability principle requires the convocation of free and fair elections as soon as feasible after the reestablishment of central state authority. It seems unlikely in the short run that Mali can survive intact as a territorial entity or return to a democratic path without international assistance, mainly from the West. But the international community's strategy has been criticized as a standard formula of 'shoot and vote', meaning military pacification followed by elections. Instead, the critics of this approach often argue, 'providing security, feeding people and resettling refugees should take precedence over staging elections' (Thurston, 2012, 6).

While there is merit to this view, it does not take into account the need for political reform or the prevailing preferences of Malian citizens. Where do ordinary people stand with regard to alternate methods – force or negotiation – for resolving armed conflict? How can legitimate authority be reconstituted in Bamako if not through elections? Most importantly, when it comes to charting a way forward, what do Malians themselves prefer – the installation of a newly elected government or the continuation of some form of transitional, even military-backed, regime?

This article asks what Malians think about their country's political crisis, including its causes, status, and possible solutions. An Afrobarometer survey of public opinion conducted at the end of 2012 finds the electorate in an apprehensive and ambivalent mood.[1] A large majority thinks that the country is moving in the wrong direction. They attribute this negative momentum to the incompetence of civilian politicians and the frailty of state institutions. They are split on whether warfare or talks are the best way to put an end to armed insurgency. In searching for solutions, Malians express declining faith in democracy as well as considerable (but diminishing) trust in the army. In a sign of democratic resilience,

however, a large and broad majority continues to believe in elections as the best way to reconstitute a government.

The Survey

The Afrobarometer is an independent, comparative survey research project that documents the public mood on issues of democracy and governance in 35 African countries. Managed by a network of African social scientists, the survey uses trained enumerators to gather information in face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondents' choice. The project employs national probability samples representing the adult population of each country. Data are weighted to represent each respondent proportionally and each country equally.

Three features should be noted about the Round 5 Afrobarometer survey in Mali.

First, fieldwork was conducted from December 16 to 31, 2012. The survey therefore followed the military coup conducted by a group of disgruntled soldiers under Captain Amadou Sanogo on 22 March 2012.[2] It also occurred in the aftermath of the fall of major towns in northern Mali to a coalition of Taureg and Islamist insurgents (April), as well as after a physical assault on the interim civilian president Dioncounda Traoré (May), and the arrest by soldiers and forced resignation of Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra (December). But the survey preceded the advance of *jihadi* fighters on Konna (towards Sévaré, a city with a major airport) and Diabaly, as well as the French-led intervention that repelled them (January 2013). The results reported here therefore represent a snapshot of public opinion at a particularly dire moment midway through a tumultuous period of political instability.

Second, the survey sample (N=1200) was truncated. Due to armed hostilities in the north, the geographical scope of the project was restricted to the six southernmost regions of the country (Bamako, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, and Sikasso). Excluded were Gao, Kidal and Tomboctou regions, which encompass more than 50 per cent

of Mali's land area but less than 10 per cent of its population. One consequence is that ethnic Tauregs and speakers of Tamasheq, as well as other ethnic minorities resident in the Sahara zone, were not sufficiently available for interview. Security conditions permitting, the Afrobarometer intends to include northern cities in a follow-up survey to be conducted later in 2013. Otherwise, the existing sample is representative of all adults, aged 18 and older, in the six southern regions. For that large segment of the Malian population, the data are reliable within a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 per cent at a 95 per cent confidence level.

Third, the Afrobarometer's comparative advantage is to record mass political attitudes towards the regime and the state. Five such surveys in Mali since 2000 allow analysts to track trends over time in these attitudes. But the surveys have less to say about the sources and trajectory of civil conflicts and the role therein of armed forces, whether national or international.

Attitudes to Democracy

Are Malians democrats? As of December 2012, a clear majority (62 per cent) said that they 'prefer democracy to any other forms of government'.[3] But the proportion that expressed allegiance to democracy was down by ten percentage points from 2008 (See **Figure 1**). And almost two out of five adults felt either disillusioned, wondering
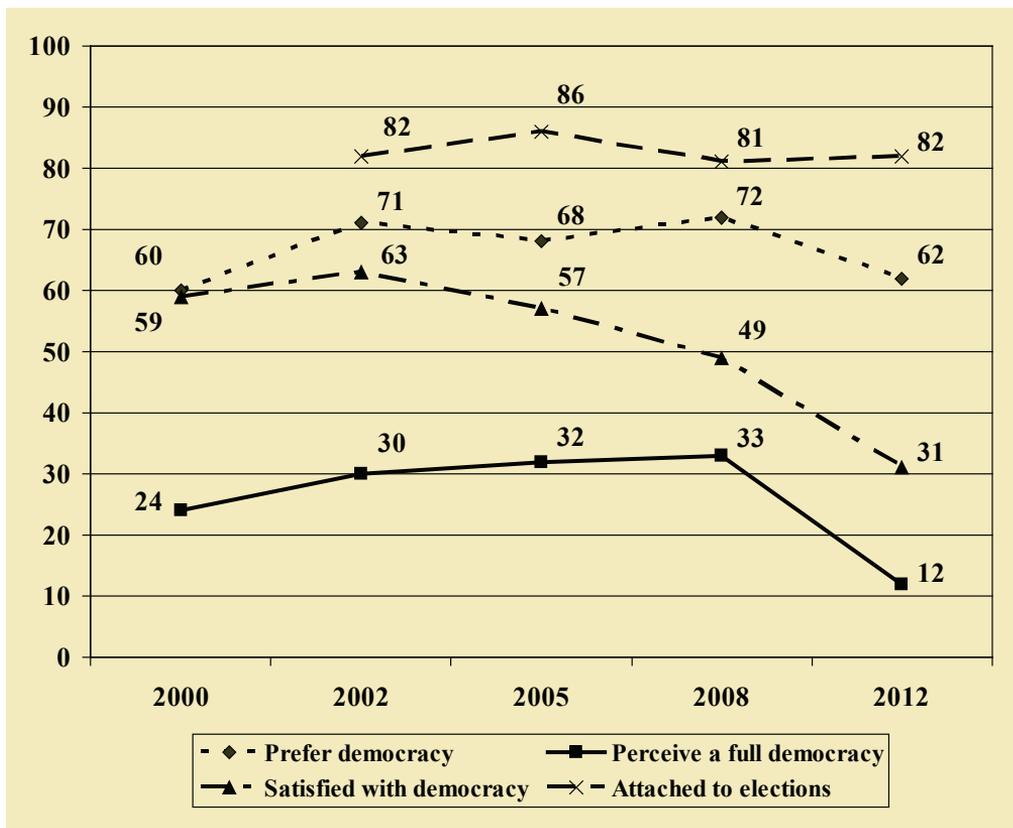

Figure 1: Attitudes to Democracy, Mali 2000–2012*

Percentage of adults who offer this opinion. For question wordings, see text.

*Six regions only in 2012 (Bamako, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, and Sikasso). All nine regions 2000–8.

whether the country's desperate circumstances called for a non-democratic alternative (19 per cent), or ambivalent, claiming that they didn't care what kind of political regime was in office in Bamako (18 per cent).

Malians also recognize that democracy building is a disappearing option in their country. True, the proportion seeing Mali as 'a full democracy' rose gradually between 2000 and 2008.[4] But by the end of 2012, following the fall of a weak civilian administration at the hands of military plotters, just 12 per cent felt this way. This bleak popular assessment of the extent of democracy in Mali compares unfavorably with that of four other West African countries in 2012, where an average 25 per cent of the electorate saw their country as 'a full democracy.'[5]

A downturn in public opinion about democracy is also reflected in popular satisfaction with 'the way democracy works.' After peaking in 2002, this indicator began to decline, plummeting to less than a third of the electorate in 2012. Indeed, the rot set in well before the coup; by 2008, fewer than half of Malians expressed satisfaction with the democratic performance of the Amadou Toumani Touré ('ATT') administration. By this time, almost half of all citizens thought that 'all' or 'most' government officials were 'involved in corruption.' Moreover, the degree to which citizens expressed satisfaction with democracy was negatively associated with these widespread perceptions of official graft.[6]

But Mali's previous reputation as a promising African democracy has not entirely dissolved. Malians remain attached to elections. In 2012, fully 82 per cent continued to favor 'choosing leaders through regular, open and honest elections' rather than some 'other method.' Indeed, competitive elections have become an institutionalized feature of Malian political life, with more than eight out of ten respondents supporting elections in every survey since 2002. And it is noteworthy that a preference for elections cuts across society; it is shared between men and women, young and old, urban and rural, and among all ethnic groups, at least in the six most populous regions of the south.

Attitudes to the Military

How, then, do Malians feel about military rule? A majority (58 per cent) rejects this form of government. But the proportion of the adult population who approve of a regime in which 'the army comes in to govern the country' rose from 25 per cent in 2008 (before the coup) to 34 per cent in 2012 (after the coup) (See **Figure 2**). These data lend credence to early press reports that at least some Malians welcomed the military takeover of government in March 2012, just weeks before the country's next national elections.[7] Relative to other African countries, popular support for military rule in Mali has always been high. In twelve other African countries in 2012, just 11 per cent of the electorate said they would approve a military takeover of government.[8]

That the level of expressed support for military rule is three times higher in Mali than elsewhere in Africa is puzzling in the light of the evident ineptness—on the battlefield and in governance—of the Malian armed forces. But Malians have always placed a considerable degree of trust in military institutions. Around eight out of ten expressed 'quite a lot' or 'a very great deal' of trust in the army from 2000 onwards (the question was not asked in 2008). Their faith was somewhat shaken by the coup of March 2012 because, thereafter, popular trust fell by 20 percentage points (to 67 per cent in December 2012). But two out of three Malians still trusted the military.

A comparison with mass skepticism about civilian politicians helps to put popular support for the military in perspective. In December 2012, fewer than half of adult citizens (43 per cent) expressed trust in the interim civilian president, Diancounda Traoré, who was installed as a compromise candidate following the military coup. A similarly low proportion had confidence in the National Assembly. Thus, when asked to contrast the trustworthiness of civilian and military institutions, Malians apparently feel
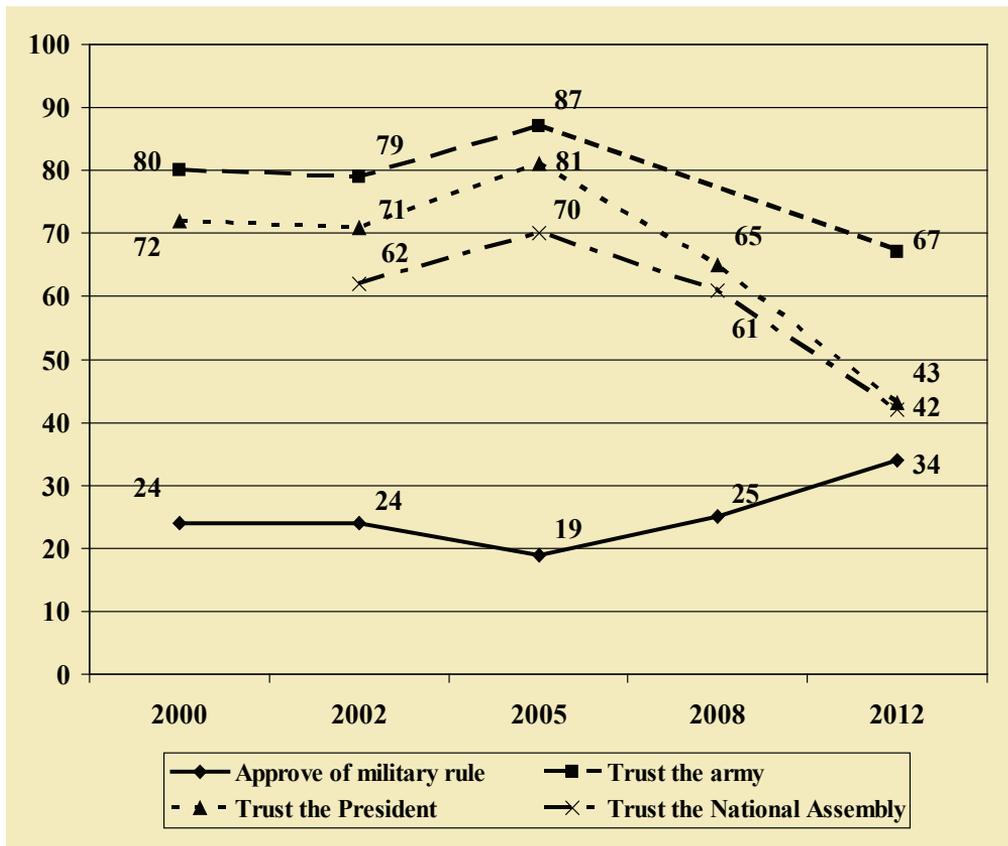
Figure 2: Attitudes to the Military, Mali 2000–2012*

Percentage of adults who offer this opinion. For question wordings, see text.

*Six regions only in 2012 (Bamako, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, and Sikasso). All nine regions 2000–8.

more comfortable with the latter than the former, though it not clear whether they are thinking about the armed forces in a narrow sense as defenders of national security or in a broad sense as leaders of a national political regime.

When asked whether 'the crisis in Mali had changed your perceptions of the army,' however, a majority of survey respondents (55 per cent) offered a positive response. By contrast, only half as many (27 per cent) said that the crisis had improved their perceptions of 'politicians and political parties,' with 71 per cent saying that recent events had caused them to lower their opinions of civilian leaders and institutions.

Attitudes to the State

Despite the fact that insurgents have violated the country's territorial integrity, citizens continue to confer legitimacy on the institutions of the Malian state. The 2012 Afrobarometer survey reveals a 'rally round the flag' effect, at least among the residents of the southern regions of the country. Compared with earlier years, these citizens now indicate a greater willingness than before to comply with the commands of central state institutions, such court decisions, police orders, and requests for tax payment.

Moreover, an overwhelming majority of respondents surveyed (88 per cent) believes that 'it is important to obey the government
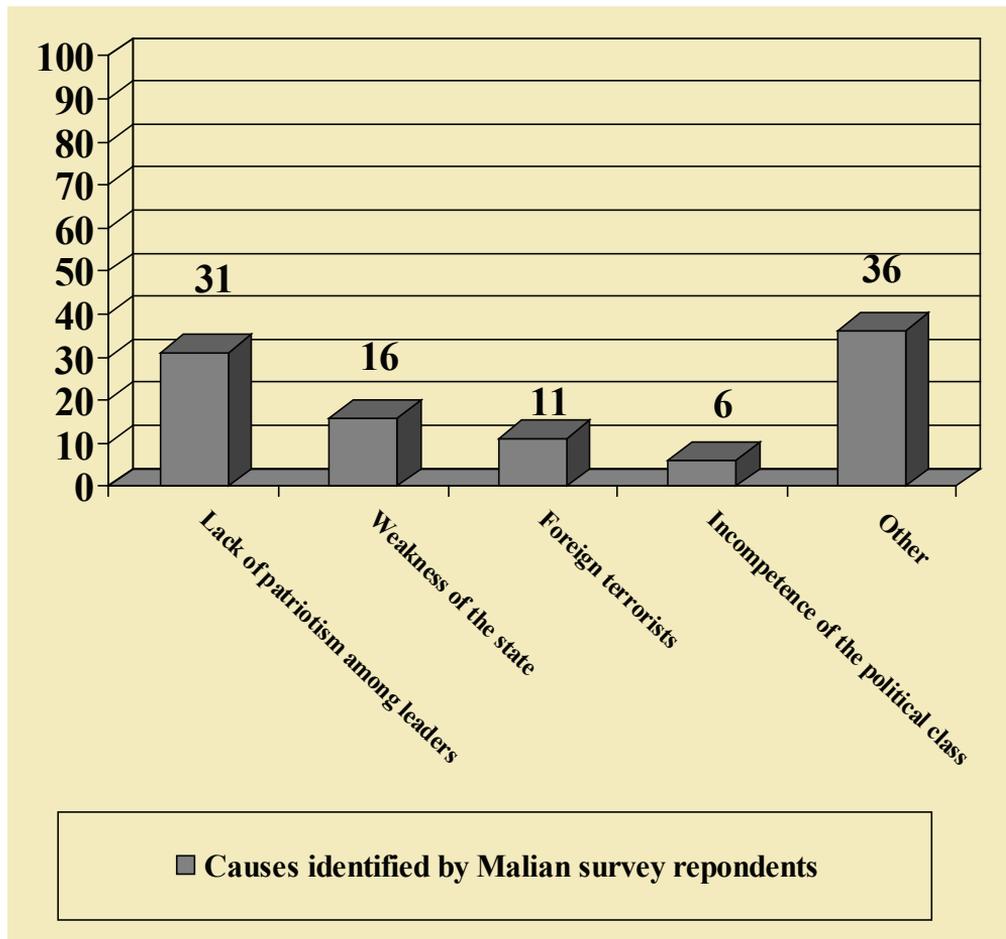
Figure 3: The Perceived Causes of Political Crisis
"What, according to you, is the principal cause of the current crisis in Mali?"
Open-ended question, one answer allowed, coded in the field by interviewers.

in power, no matter who you voted for.' Thus Malians apparently harbor a deferential respect for the authority of the state that has worked to the advantage of military *putchists* and the shaky civilian-military coalition government now in place in Bamako. Apparently, despite their preference for elections, citizens do not condition their popular reverence for state institutions on the way that governments are constituted because they think that the commands of the state must always be obeyed.

In attributing causes to the political crisis in Mali, citizens are prone to blame civilian politicians (See **Figure 3**).[9] They point first to 'a lack of patriotism among leaders,' perhaps implying that civilians in the ATT administration were too complacent when it came to defending the integrity of the state. In a similar vein, respondents also point to 'the incompetence of the political class.' The second most common response is 'the weakness of the state,' by which they may mean the inability of state institutions to respond to challenges from its political environment. Citizens seem to recognize that the capacity of Mali's state institutions has been "eroded from within", by official corruption, ethnic separatism and foreign invasions (Whitehouse 2013). But they prioritize domes-

tic causes as the main drivers of the crisis because only 11 per cent implicate 'foreign terrorists,' a third-ranked factor.

Among all political institutions in Mali—state and non-state—the weakest of all are political parties. Almost three out of five Malians (58 per cent) do not identify with ('feel close to') any political party. As a result, the country suffers a shortage of demand-side institutions capable of linking citizens to the state. Leading politicians, including ATT, ran for office either without party affiliations or at the head of loose and shifting coalitions. As a result, once elections were held, citizens had few institutions at their disposal to offset the top-down orders of a bureaucratic state, even an increasingly weak one.

Which Way Forward?

The Malians interviewed in the latest Afrobarometer survey are disturbed by their country's political distress. As of December 2012, three quarters (75 per cent) said their country was moving 'in the wrong direction.' This single statistic alone indicates that citizens perceive a crisis and seek a way out.

But people are undecided about the best way forward. Asked about their priority solution to 'the current crisis,' Malians express ambivalent views (**Figure 4**). At the end of 2012, a plurality (38 per cent) wanted 'war against the armed groups in the North.' Within this group, however, twice as many preferred the Malian army rather than the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to lead any retaliatory strike. The survey, conducted prior to the French intervention of January 2013, did not ask about France.[10] On the other hand, 29 per cent preferred 'dialogue' among the various combatants, presumably including ethnic militias, Islamist elements, the Malian armed forces, and the remnants of the country's civilian regime. And, recognizing the parlous condition of core administrative institutions, 12 per cent called for a return to 'a strong state.'

A related question asked, 'What is the best way to move beyond a regime that is corrupt and incompetent?' Clearer answers emerge here. Almost half of all survey respondents (48 per cent) opted for elections. And 15 per cent wanted 'respect for the Constitution,' which soldiers had suspended when the army stepped in. Only 7 per cent saw advantage in a military coup. On balance therefore, a majority of the residents of the populous south seek a return to legitimate constitutional rule, almost all of whom consider elections as the best way to get there.

Malians also seem to recognize that the restoration of democratic rule is an essential component in the recovery of an intact and sovereign state. As such, they would probably agree with the Western diplomat who said that, 'stabilization requires an election' and that a fair poll is as important as the army's reconquest of the country's northern half (*The Economist* 2013). But, at the same time they continue to harbor doubts about the competence and probity of civilian politicians, especially in relation to the army, whose leaders they tend to trust more. The convocation of elections in a context of high levels of political instability and low levels of popular confidence in civilian institutions remains one of Mali's largest governance challenges.

Policy Implications

What are the implications of public opinion for policy actors involved in security, governance and development in Mali? What practical prerequisites must be in place before any popular preference for electoral democracy can be credibly met?

First, international and domestic authorities should work together to fill the existing power vacuum and establish a semblance of political order. This will require more than military pacification. Peace negotiations with domestic ethnic minorities – conditional on their disarmament – are essential for creating enough political space for all Malian peoples to express themselves. At minimum, the residents of the north, both within and beyond major population centers, will require opportunities to participate in political life without putting their lives at risk. In this regard, an international sta-
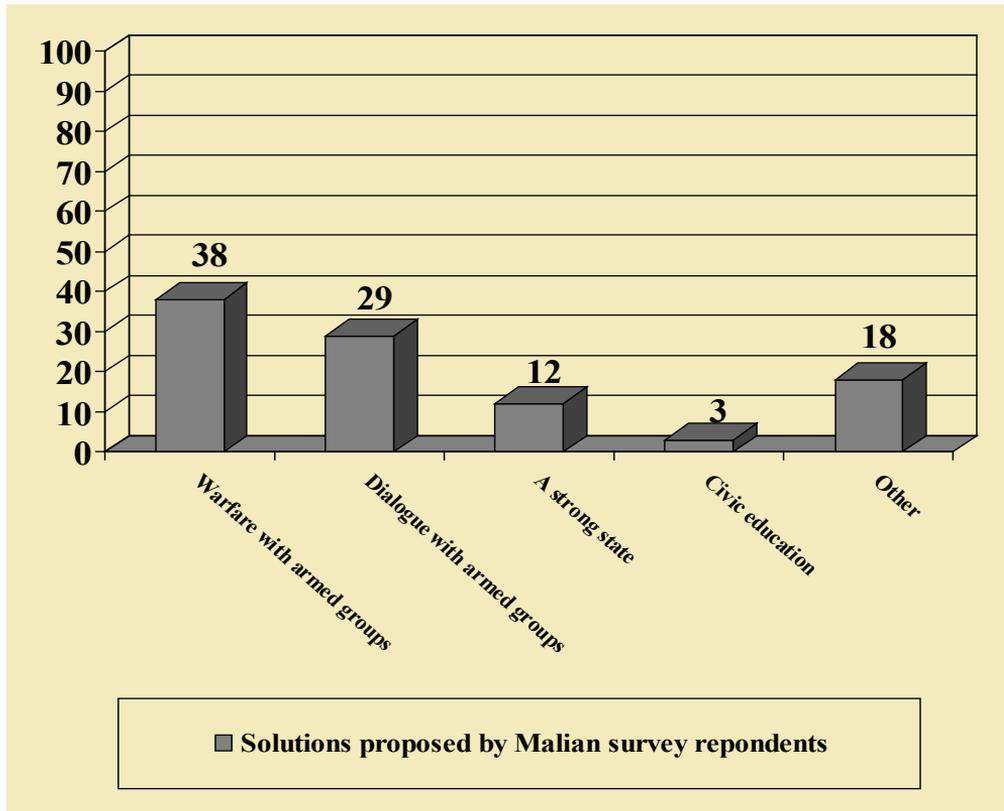
Figure 4: Proposed Solutions to Political Crisis
"In your opinion, through what means can one move beyond the current crisis?"
Open-ended question, one answer allowed, coded in the field by interviewers.

bilization force under the United Nations – including police as well as soldiers – ought to be in place before elections are held (MacFarquhar 2013).

Second, the Malian army must be induced to soon return to barracks. The international community can offer incentives by helping to provide the equipment, training and benefits that the soldiers feel they were previously denied and which were triggering factors in the coup. In return, military commanders must cease the arbitrary dismissal or intimidation of civilian officials and withdraw from political life in order to resume their professional functions as leaders of a national army. The civilians in the present transitional government must take charge of a roadmap to accomplish these tasks, preferably before elections are convened.

Third, the structure of the state requires review and renewal. Ideally, any first election would be to a representative constituent assembly charged to examine constitutional questions including the rule of law, civilian control of the military, regional autonomy, religious freedom, and minority rights. But this approach was apparently rejected, or not considered, in favor of a direct path to presidential and legislative elections under the existing constitution. A thorough review of the basic law will remain necessary after the election, however, and should be conducted with broad popular consultation, including a referendum on any new constitution.

Fourth, civilian leaders should seek to restore popular trust in the political system by building or strengthening institutions responsible for corruption control (for exam-

ple, parliamentary oversight committees and independent commissions) and popular representation (like local government, political parties, and civic associations). Important in this process of institutional development are political parties, which are particularly weak in Mali; yet multi-party dialogue is critical for the protection of human rights, the prevention of conflict, and the conduct of a credible election (ten Hoove and Scholtbach 2008).

Fifth, citizens themselves have critical roles to play. The international community should fund, and non-government organizations should implement, a coordinated campaign of civic education to engage Malians in debates about the importance of elections and the need for constitutional reform. Special attention must be paid to boosting the country's depressingly low voter turnout rates, for example by teaching citizens about their own responsibilities for demanding accountability from elected leaders and equipping them with the necessary informational, organizational and lobbying skills. In the meantime, public opinion research can continue to explore the role of ordinary people in political change and socioeconomic development. Finally, in order to draw the correct lessons, policy makers need to examine their own past performance, especially as it relates helping to offset the stark inequalities in levels of economic and social development between Mali's northern and southern regions.[11]

Of course, elections alone do not a democracy make. Nor does widespread popular support for elections necessarily make Malians democrats. Only in the context of an intact state – with an inclusive constitutional settlement, trustworthy civilian institutions, and an engaged citizenry – will Mali be ready again for routine presidential and legislative elections that lead in a democratic direction.

Notes

[1] The Afrobarometer is a collaborative survey research project conducted by an international network of social scientists. The Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) provides overall project direction. At the regional level, the several Core Partners coordinate survey and other activities: the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. Michigan State University and the University of Cape Town provide analytic and technical support services. The Afrobarometer Network gratefully acknowledges contributions from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. Grants from these donors support research, capacity building and outreach activities in Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6, 2010–15. Afrobarometer researchers, rather than sponsoring agencies, take responsibility for all results and interpretations. For more information, see: www.afrobarometer.org

[2] Whitehouse (2012) summarizes the events surrounding this 'accidental coup,' in which the president and public offered little resistance to a small band of mutineers.

[3] The question asked respondents to choose which of three options was 'closest to your own opinion': (a) 'Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government'; (b) 'In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable,' and; (c) 'For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.'

[4] For more details on earlier Afrobarometer surveys see GREAT 2013.

[5] Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana and Liberia.

[6] Pearson's r = -.129, p <.001.

[7] 'Pressed on All Sides, Coup Leader in Mali is Digging In,' *New York Times*, March 31, 2012.

[8] Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe.

[9] The survey question asked, 'What, according to you, is the principal cause of the current crisis in Mali?'. Only one answer per respondent was recorded.

[10] An April 2012 survey using a quota sample of adult residents of Bamako did ask this question. Whereas 66 percent welcomed military intervention by ECOWAS, only 15 percent said the same about France. And 55 percent thought that France may have been aiding the northern rebels (Guindo 2013).

[11] van de Walle (2013) makes a case that Western donors were complicit in the Mali government's neglect of development in the north.

References

Curtis, D 2013 Post-Conflict Peacebuilding. *Routledge Handbook of African Politics*: London and New York: Routledge: 202–214.

de Zeeuw, J and **Kumar K (eds.)** 2006 *Promoting Democracy in Postconflict Societies*. Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Diamond, L 2006 Promoting Democracy in Post-Conflict and Failed States: Lessons and Challenges. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 2 (1): 93–116.

Economist 2013 Where Have the Jihadists Gone? *The Economist*, 2 February 2013, p. 39.

Flores, T and **Nooruddin I** 2009 Democracy Under the Gun: Understanding Postconflict Economic Recovery. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 53 (1): 3–29.

Groupe de recherche en économie appliquée et théorique (GREAT) 2013 *Mali: Conflits et gouvernance de la sécurité*. Bamako: GREAT, January.

Guindo, S 2012 *Analyse des résultats de l'enquete d'opinion sur la crise malienne*. Bamako: draft manuscript, May.

MacFarquhar, N 2013 U.N. Votes to Establish Peacekeeping Force for Mali. *The New York Times*, 26 April 2013.

Mehler, A 2013 Power-Sharing. *Routledge Handbook of African Politics*: London and New York: Routledge: 189–201.

ten Hoove, L and **Scholtbach, A** 2008 *Democracy and Political Party Assistance in Post-Conflict Societies*. The Hague, Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy.

Thurston, A 2012 Mali: The Disintegration of a 'Model African Democracy'. *Stability* 2 (1): 1–7.

van de Walle, N 2013 Foreign Aid in Dangerous Places: The Donors and Mali's Democracy. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, draft manuscript, February.

Whitehouse, B 2012 What Went Wrong with Mali? *London Review of Books* 34 (16): August.

Whitehouse, B 2013 The Power is in the Street: The Context of State Failure in Mali. Available at http://africaplus.wordpress.com/2013/04/19.