

NOREF Report

The coup in Mali: the result of a long-term crisis or spillover from the Libyan civil war?

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Executive summary

The current crisis in Mali was not unexpected, although most national and international players were eager to maintain an unrealistic view of political developments in this Sahelian country. This crisis reflects the decay of state institutions and practices: the Malian army collapsed and patronage does not mean democracy. The crisis is built on four dynamics that have their own effects: the debatable implementation of previous peace settlements with the Tuareg insurgency; the growing economic importance of AQIM activities in the Sahelian region; the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya; and the inability or unwillingness of Algeria to play the role of regional hegemon now that its rival (Libya) has stopped doing so.

While the Tuareg rebellion has been able to gain from the collapse of the Malian army in

the north, it should be noted that the many armed groups have different agendas, and position themselves differently towards the local population and the Malian state. What is unclear is whether they will be able to co-exist on the same territory while trafficking and a protection economy are the only sustainable resources.

The jihadi aspect of some components of the insurgency has to be understood in context and should not be seen as erasing social and economic differences in a heterogeneous northern Mali. It proves the successful demonstration effect that small groups such as AQIM and Ansar ed-Din can have. It should also draw more attention to a regional context that could provide radicals with a wider audience and credibility by building opportunistic coalitions.

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The current crisis in Mali is not over, despite the constitutional arrangement that allowed the departure of President Amadou Toumani Touré and the appointment of an interim president, Dioncounda Traoré. The following short analysis tries to make points that should be kept in mind whatever developments occur in the next weeks.

The first casualty of the crisis: a particular image of Malian democracy

After the overthrow of Moussa Traoré in March 1991, most foreign observers perceived Malian politics as a model of democratisation. This image was cultivated until very recently, despite a growing discrepancy with the reality that prevailed. Today, critics point to several issues that should be addressed both nationally and internationally to avoid a democratic stagnation or even a return to more authoritarian political practices in Mali.

At the regional level, various important questions need examining, e.g. those relating to Mali's past relations with the former Libyan president, Muammar Qaddafi (the previous Malian president, Alpha Omar Konare, visited Tripoli more than 50 times while in office), and those relating to the role of Algeria in the region (suspicions of a hidden Algerian agenda do not help in the framing of policy). Many Malian observers feel that the country's political elites have been relying unilaterally on Mali's two neighbours to secure the northern part of the country and address issues that should have been the core duty of the government, such as the Tuareg question and the rigorous enforcement of previous peace settlement (including the funding of devolution and the integration of Tuareg insurgents into the national army).

Former President Touré's presidency was organised on a simple and efficient principle: that of using patronage to co-opt the main parties' leadership to prevent any opposition. This management of the political arena was not the "consensual democracy" some academics have portrayed, but more a subtle way to pre-empt any public debate on governance and corruption. Its outcome was more a democratic stagnation than

a real taking root of democratic practices and institutions in the country.

This system was made possible by the increasing criminalisation of the ruling elites (including the military) in Mali. While little is known about the embezzlement of aid and under-the-table payments by foreign firms over the last decade, allegations about drug trafficking have been numerous in the Malian free media and have systematically targeted the former president's inner circle. Negotiating the release of foreign hostages kidnapped in the Malian Sahel region has also been a profitable business for the negotiators (this has also been observed in Somalia, where law firms facilitating such negotiations may be making as much money as the pirates who kidnap the hostages).

When Touré won the 2002 election, Transparency International ranked Mali 77th of 182 countries in its corruption perceptions index; it had fallen to 118th by 2011. A World Bank study indicates that more than two-thirds of Malian businesses have paid bribes to win bids for government contracts.

The facade of Malian democracy and the government's fight against al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have also provided important diplomatic and aid resources to the state in recent years. These resources were rarely allocated to support either the military apparatus or access to social services in northern Mali, as they were intended. In this context, government corruption has had a direct impact on Mali's national security and its ability to fight regional terrorism in the form of AQIM.

President Touré's behaviour over the last months was marked by his wait-and-see attitude and his reluctance to mobilise accessible international and regional support. History will tell whether this lack of enthusiasm was motivated by the need to protect the golden goose (i.e. that of an ungovernable northern Mali that could attract sizeable international aid to combat instability in the region and where illicit trafficking of all kinds could proceed without difficulty).

The Malian army is the best illustration of this era. While it was apparently receiving significant funding from the authorities and key international

donors, it had not the elementary means to maintain law and order in northern Mali: a lack of fuel and ammunition was the norm, despite the continued deterioration of the security situation in the northern region. The easy victory of Tuareg insurgents in northern Mali in April is primarily the consequence of many officers defecting from the Malian army because of the lack of support from the central government.

This raises an uncomfortable question for France and the U.S., two countries that developed important military co-operation with Mali over the last years because of AQIM's growing activities in northern Mali.

The recent constitutional arrangement should be analysed with caution. The new interim president (and former speaker of parliament) was previously a minister of defence who was not popular in the army while in office. The March 2012 coup was not planned and was more an expression of frustration among rank-and-file soldiers against their general officers, and the military has grievances that need to be addressed sooner rather than later if a lasting stability is to be found. Some of these grievances relate purely to the management of the military regarding the payment of wages and allowances, but others point to the ambiguous enforcement of previous peace settlements with Tuareg insurgencies and the de facto acceptance by the political authorities of different statuses within the army. Providing an adequate answer to this criticism when negotiations begin again is going to be very challenging for the new government.

The Libyan civil war: the trigger for the crisis, but not its creator

Libya played a leading role in pacifying the outburst of violence in northern Mali after 2006 (its role was more debatable in the early 1990s). In order to calm those localised upheavals, Qaddafi used patronage to great effect, paying insurgents to either join the Malian army or his own, while also committing funds for development in Mali.

Given the role being played by Libya in northern Mali, from February 2011 one would have expected that the crisis in Libya would have dire consequences for stability in neighbouring parts of Mali. From the very beginning, those opposed to the Qaddafi regime proved to be staunchly "anti-African", given the latter's perceived loyalty to the deposed president. African workers suffered attacks and property owned by Africans was looted with impunity by anti-Qaddafi forces. Therefore, there was no hope that long-term African residents, especially those involved in the military and security services, would be able to remain in Libya.

Little was done in Mali – in contrast with what happened in Niger – to control the flows of refugees and disarm the former Libyan soldiers who were crossing the Malian border (not all of whom were Tuareg). Is it important to ask whether this was a result of apathy on the part of the Touré government and why it did not respond to various requests made by the army, France and the U.S. to take action.

The arrival of experienced fighters and the widespread access to weapons, ammunition and money were likely triggers to the conflict. However, tensions were brewing in the region for quite some time beforehand and for months Tuareg activists were mobilising and gathering support both within and outside of Mali, because the implementation of the last peace settlement was controversial among them. Politically, it was clear that the situation was once again deteriorating even before the collapse of the Qaddafi regime in Libya.

Conspiracy theories flourish in Bamako about the failure to address the crisis being created by the return of Tuareg soldiers from the collapsed Libyan military to northern Mali. One such theory posits that Western powers were aware of the unfolding crisis, but chose not to act, because they believed that the ex-Libyan soldiers would do better than the poorly organised and funded Malian military in fighting AQIM in the area, at the price of accommodation when political grievances were negotiated with the Malian government. Succinctly put, therefore, the Libyan crisis triggered the crisis in northern Mali, but did not create it.

A last point needs to be made. All ex-Libyan soldiers did not join the so-called Tuareg insurgency. It appears that quite a number joined the government side and may have spontaneously demobilised when they witnessed how the Malian army was in disarray. This behaviour is a reminder that northern Mali is not politically, socially or even ethnically homogeneous, and that the Tuareg themselves are somewhat divided – as witnessed in past uprisings against the Malian government, with some joining the insurgency and others backing Bamako.

The insurgency in north Mali: not (only) Tuareg

The current insurgency in northern Mali is most often perceived as a Tuareg movement. However, it is not. First of all, the Azawad (the territory claimed by the insurgency) is a purely political creation. The name “Azawad” may refer to a small part of what is today the region called Azawad by the insurgents (basically the part of Mali largely limited in the south by the Niger River) and is an implicit reference to nomadism. Azawad is therefore not a territory defined by a past historical moment, nor the alleged territory of the Malian Tuareg. Its foundations are only political, which of course raises several questions on the extent of popular support for and the sustainability of such an entity once the moment of victory is over.

Northern Mali/Azawad is populated by other groups (Songhai, Fulani, Arab Berabiches, Moors, etc.) that in the past often organised themselves to counter the Tuareg claim for secession, since they would have become second-class citizens in any Tuareg-controlled state. While the current (mid-April 2012) situation is unclear, it is possible that many of these minority groups have actually joined the insurgents (as some did in previous uprisings). This behaviour can be explained in different ways. The lack of attention paid in Bamako to the northern part of the country is well established and AQIM’s threat in the region has not changed this. Ex-Libyan soldiers were not all from the Tuareg clans: Malian Arabs and Fulani also served in the Libyan military. The collapse of the Malian garrisons in northern towns likely pushed ex-Libyan soldiers to support

the insurgency, i.e. they adopted an attitude of supporting the winning side in an effort to get what they could out of the situation.

Characterising the rebellion as Tuareg is therefore an illusion made possible by the discrepancy between the leadership and the rank and file of the insurgency. The whole leadership of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) is made up of Tuareg people, while the rank and file of the movement (and the population) is more diverse. All armed groups currently present in northern Mali are recruiting, because confrontations among them are increasingly likely. This recruitment campaign will have major repercussions on the long-term viability of the movement.

There is another interesting social aspect that needs to be investigated more deeply. The Tuareg divide themselves into noble and commoner clans. In past uprisings, noble clans largely sided with the insurgency, while commoner clans most often supported the Malian government. In the current situation, if any antagonism emerges among the Tuareg, it is more likely to be between the younger generations who are very involved in all insurgent groups and older generations who are more moderate in their grievances and less supportive of the armed struggle.

Whatever independence has been declared, without even discussing the AQIM (or the alleged Boko Haram) presence in the region, it is clear that the current victory is not going to go unchallenged for long. Competition among the Tuareg, both within the MNLA and between the MNLA and Ansar ed-Din (see next section), and ethnic polarisations are going to undo much of the current superficial unity. However, this does not mean that the Malian army will be able in the next weeks to reassert the state’s authority in that region. Rather, this would mean that infighting will be the dominant dynamic in the immediate future.

Why the co-existence of various trends (including AQIM) in northern Mali should not be overstated

Kidal and Timbuktu seem to have become the headquarters of all West African jihadi groups. The Western press is enthusiastically warning of a new jihadi threat much closer to Europe than Pakistan or Somalia. This description should be carefully deciphered; if not, one may risk being manipulated by events.

Ansar ed-Din, an armed Salafi movement that recruits Tuaregs and entertains good relations with AQIM, is led by Iyad ag Ghali, a veteran Tuareg figure whose conversion to Salafism and Islamism goes back to 1999. After that period he was so “extremist” that he was for a while working at the Malian Presidency! He entertained (until now) good relations with the Algerian security services and was trusted enough by all to negotiate the release of hostages taken by Islamist groups in the region. Being a leader of the 1990 uprising with a debatable record as a Tuareg commander, he reinvented himself as an Islamist. At times he emphasises that he is a relative of an AQIM commander, Talib Abdelkrim al-Targui (who operates under the command of AQIM Amir Abdelhamid Abu Zeid), and analysts believe that this connection allows him to get reinforcements from AQIM whenever necessary. However, at other times he states his intention to set up an Islamic regime closer in spirit to En-Nadha in Tunisia or the Ikhwan Muslimin in Egypt. Analysts also question his links with Mali’s Haut Conseil Islamique chaired by Mahamadou Dicko, who has been able to impose a redrafting of the liberal Family Code passed by the government in 2009. Iyad ag Ghali is a good illustration of the type of people often needed by Algiers and Bamako to interact with AQIM or the Tuareg to maintain channels of communication.

Whatever his own personal views, it is important to understand why members of Iyad ag Ghali’s movement cannot have been recruited on an ideological basis. He can call on the backing of his own lineage or clan, or the support of the people he fought with in previous episodes of Tuareg insurgency, or simply offer better rewards

than other armed groups. As a consequence, one should not overstress religious commonalities in the public discourses of Ansar ed-Din and AQIM. Moreover, convergences at a political level appear much more fragile and opportunistic in nature.

The co-existence of various movements in the region is likely nothing new. AQIM leaders have been involved in different illicit activities beyond hostage taking for quite some time, and the MNLA and Ansar ed-Din may have recruited members who happen to be relatives. These groups may not be perceived in northern Mali in the way they are by Western governments: contradictions will appear only when they try to properly rule the areas they control militarily.

Weapons tend to give their holders a sense of authority. The enforcement of *sharia* law in Timbuktu may actually be more a deterrent than an incentive for supporting Ansar ed-Din, and the decision looked more like a *fait accompli* than a new organisation of the polity. People will eventually sympathise with the militias who are offering solutions to their day-to-day problems – ideology in such a setting is secondary. Salafism is certainly part of the urban social fabric in northern Mali, but a minority one. Moreover, although the number of its supporters has expanded rapidly in recent years, it is urban rooted, with only a notional presence in rural areas.

Islam in Mali has never been monolithic. The overthrow of the dictatorship in 1992 provided new opportunities for Muslim leaders to express their viewpoints and prove their autonomy from the state in order to increase their access to symbolic or more mundane resources. Increasing interaction with the global economy through the mining industry, tourism (notably from the Gulf) and aid (famines were devastating in northern Mali in the 1970s and 1980s) also created new opportunities for religious transnational actors such as Islamic NGOs to promote their own understanding of Islam in Mali.

While Mali has often been celebrated as a top economic reformer by institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, development benefits were not allocated equally. As a result, in the late 1990s Islam became one of the channels to express disaffection towards a negligent state

that did not deliver on its promises of economic development and never undertook investments or provided social services in the north.

Resolving the crisis: the need first for a settlement in Bamako

The present situation in Azawad is highly volatile and one can predict increased infighting and more instability in the immediate future. Clearly, structural problems are the core issue, and military or religious entrepreneurs who are currently benefitting from the security vacuum in the north will soon be having difficulty managing routine situations there as well.

While the existence of a new, decent and democratic government in Bamako is the first necessity, there cannot be a quick fix for the north. Over the last 15 years local administration and economic reforms have reshaped the repertoire of grievances. The collapse of Libya is an economic disaster for a region that used to get significant resources by smuggling goods and cigarettes through porous borders.

The nature and efficiency of the army has been questioned in recent weeks. The coup will have consequences for the military that extend beyond the issue of the plotters. However, the international polarisation on the subject of AQIM and (relatively) Ansar ed-Din risks providing an unhealthy context for discussing issues that require fairness and tact towards northern groups in terms of the military's role and presence in the region.

Overall, the current crisis highlights how the reality in Mali is far different from the rosier picture that has often been portrayed by donors and Malian elites regarding the state of the economy and democracy in the country. The most important political parties did not endorse the coup, while many smaller movements did. Some analysts explain this as a result of groups fearing that a populist regime could begin arresting political leaders who did not support the coup. It is certain that the message of the coup will not be wasted on the political elite who benefitted most under the old system.

Niger: affected by the situation in Mali, but better able to respond to challenges

Niger will inevitably be affected by events in Mali. Already, a new armed Tuareg organisation has announced that conflict in Niger will begin soon. The emergence of such a new group, whether virtual or real, illustrates the danger of the demonstration effects that small movements such as AQIM, Ansar ed-Din and even the MNLA may have in the wider region. The aftermath of the Libyan crisis has not yet radically affected the political situation in neighbouring countries, but has created a new and potentially destabilising variable in the form of thousands of disenfranchised soldiers who are both well equipped and uncertain of their status. The ability of groups such as AQIM to survive and actually accumulate resources in the current context is a dangerous incentive for other groups to follow in the same direction, with or without a similar ideological agenda.

Yet the Malian scenario is not going to repeat itself in Niger, for both structural reasons and others linked to the present state of affairs. The Tuareg in Niger are much better integrated into the political and economic arena than in Mali. While this argument should not be overstated, Niger's president, prime minister and minister of foreign affairs (the latter two themselves being from the north) have over the years built strong relations between the central government and the Tuareg. The government of Niger has not shown the same negligence and indolence in engaging with the Tuareg as Mali has done.

After a long cycle of crises involving the military, Niger's president, Mahamadou Issoufo, acted decisively when the Libyan civil war started to pre-empt the emergence of armed groups made up of former Libyan soldiers inside Niger. In contrast to Mali, the Nigerien army checked the flows of returnees and confiscated the weapons and military hardware they were bringing with them. However, there are indications that some contingents were able to escape these controls and may in the near future try to create an insurgency in Niger.

Niger's president has also been mobilising support regionally and internationally over the last months. The recent summit with the president of Chad, Idriss Deby Itno, highlights the cautionary approach being adopted by the Nigerien authorities. In the same vein, co-operation with France and the U.S. may also yield some success in avoiding large-scale problems in Niger.

Yet there should be no illusion that Niger will get through the current turmoil without incidents. The question is whether the current regime with its regional and international allies will be able to minimise and contain the effects of such incidents.

The ambiguity of the international response

Malian public opinion is convinced that France is "once more" playing its cards at the cost of Malian sovereignty. Conspiracy theories are flourishing and the love-hate relationship with the former colonial power is as vibrant as ever.

Public statements made by French officials could indeed foster many interpretations. Eventually, there will be a risk that the inability of French diplomacy to force the Malian government to take decisive action or question the lack of results of French military co-operation with Mali will demonstrate France's limited influence in the country and feed speculation that it continues its military co-operation with Mali purely for the sake of not "giving up Mali to the Americans". Moreover, the difficult negotiations for the release of French hostages being held by groups in the region also limit the ability of the French to take any drastic steps in the country. That said, there are indications that many in Paris were not unhappy with the coup and today are sending messages to the MNLA to negotiate a new, more generous peace agreement in northern Mali (but not secession), with a commitment from the "secular" Tuareg insurgents to fight AQIM and Ansar ed-Din.

For its part, the U.S. (via AFRICOM), as a newcomer and generous donor, is perceived more positively. AFRICOM has devoted significant resources (up to \$70 million) to military training and capacity building in the Malian military. However,

critics are pointing to two main shortcomings in U.S. aid to Mali.

The first is that such aid is driven by the AQIM threat and not by a more comprehensive political understanding of the situation both in Mali and northern Mali. In the latter region, ambiguities are numerous and should be properly understood and deconstructed, not framed in too conventional a framework. The "war on terror" has played a very ambivalent role in the Islamic debates in Mali, and the current focus on jihadi organisation while the population is assailed with so many other problems (Mali is still one of the poorest countries in Africa) may actually have already become counterproductive.

This situation may indicate that the dismantling of AQIM and Ansar ed-Din would have to fulfil certain conditions to avoid these groups being seen as respectable and suddenly trustworthy by communities in the region. Looking at U.S. policy in other parts of the continent, there is a strong risk that this may become the case if the U.S. does not begin to think beyond its rigid normative security agenda.

However, there might be some hope from European Union (EU) engagement. The EU has articulated a policy towards the Sahel that takes into account development, security, local administration and engagement. On paper, this is the best that can be achieved if the new government in Mali shows a willingness to address the root causes of the conflict in its northern region. The EU is also seen as more neutral by Malians and unconnected to military interventions. Yet past history shows that the EU needs to act quickly and decisively and avoid getting bogged down in its own bureaucratic processes. In addition, EU actions must appear to be above some of its member states' interests if the EU is to be a real political actor in the Malian context and not simply a source of funding, as has been the case in many other crises.

A lasting settlement: unlikely in the short term

The coup in Bamako provoked the collapse of northern garrisons, and the political map of Mali seems to have changed in a matter of weeks, but this is an illusion.

The new government in Bamako is facing the challenging task of having to address problems that were to a large extent shaped in the 1980s or from the beginning of the democratic period in 1992. It is unlikely that, once the situation is normalised in the capital city, the political elites will retain their stamina for radical reforms and higher moral standards. International aid may actually have a negative impact, since France and the U.S. (plus the Economic Community of

West African States) will again be tasked with solving key Malian challenges, thus eliminating the need for the Malian government to itself find a lasting solution.

The situation in the north will not be normalised in the near term. Insurgent groups will split (especially the MNLA) and fight each other for the control of trade routes and the monopoly of the wider protection economy in the north. Ethnic fragmentation will add an additional complicating factor to the situation. As a result, no serious settlement should be envisioned in the short term. Problems should be prioritised and properly nuanced to avoid creating a new self-fulfilling prophecy of the spread of radical Islamism in the region.

