

Introduction: Mali, the 2020 Crisis

The crisis in Mali is a crisis of the Sahel region. It is a crisis that is intrinsically linked to a larger process of dislocation that has engulfed the north-west African region since 2011. It is partly an orchestrated dislocation, partly the inevitable outcome of deeply flawed governance regimes. The French government armed the National Transitional Council of Libya following the murder of Muammar Gaddafi, in which France had played a decisive role. The surge of armed militancy and terrorist attacks that ensued has weakened an already fragile security context, particularly in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali. Further, a complex multilateral intervention has created overlapping governance structures. In fact, since the Sahel was elevated as the new frontier in the war against terrorism, there has been a proliferation of security initiatives with different, and at times antagonistic, policy purposes; these have inevitably produced the conditions for further insecurity.

Military intervention in particular juxtaposes security governance with the normal governance logics; it creates zones of lawlessness, justifies the containment of entire communities and stigmatises ways of life. Further, the security of the interveners themselves becomes the starting point for thinking about the problematique of security for the Sahel whose specificity has been diffused by the language of anti-terrorism. It is worrying in fact that all major donor states and agencies have become 'security actors' in the Sahel.

The geopolitical dimension of the Malian dilemma cannot be overstated. As Oumar Ba aptly notes in his contribution, 'no diagnostic of the Malian sociopolitical malaise is complete without taking international actors into consideration: if they have not made a volatile situation worse, they have at least utterly failed to improve the situation'. Kodjo Tchioffo shows how Mali's relationship with its external donors is extremely fraught. He suggests that residual colonial power and structural dependency have come to skew the selection process of the political leadership over time. In fact, as Tchioffo cogently describes, Mali's

relationship with external partners is a deeply unequal and problematic relationship that has led to 'a perverse alignment [of Malian leaders] with foreign interests to the detriment of the common good'. The very practice of democracy and its possibility are folded into such a logic. The political elite carries out electoral formalities to mollify external pressure whilst turning their back on the fundamental issues they are mandated to govern.

Democracy, what democracy?

Since 2012, Malians—and, by extension, Mali as a country—have been plunged into a radically precarious state. Governance has been reduced to a series of off-the-cuff strategies to minimise disruption and mitigate instability. It is done without direction or a vision for the future. It has been based on the distribution of privileges and perverse incentives. Every Malian government since the return to civilian rule in the 1990s has demonstrated that the legitimacy of its leaders is purely formal and based on a fragile constitutional order.

Like his peers amongst West African political elites, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) failed to respond to the imperative of ethical governance that would have mitigated the dire effects of decades of harsh structural adjustment policies. What Madina Thiam calls 'state politics of harm and neglect' has become the hallmark of governance in postcolonial Mali. Two consequences of the policy of neglect are apparent in the complex web of violence that has spread through central Mali over the past few years. First, the Katiba Macina and other armed groups have occupied the space created by an absentee state, as Amadou Diallo shows meticulously in his piece. Yida Seydou Diall in turn examines how the katiba expanded its rule in the Niger Inland Delta. In addition to administering justice and imposing a new social etiquette, the katiba levies taxes, organises trade, agriculture, and regulate access to pastures. Second, the all-securitarian approach to the governance problem in general has resulted in deadly campaigns directed against specific communities

as the state has sought to beef up the reach of the national army (FAMA) with the constitution and/or support of militias. In central Mali, state neglect and impoverishment have helped to fuel astonishing levels of violence among neighbours. In fact, as Bréma Ely Dicko and Modibo Galy Cissé suggest in their papers, intercommunal violence is tolerated, if not fomented, by political leaders. Cissé explains that accumulated resentment against Bamako, the FAMA and local elites (Diowro) not only created the conditions for violent conflict in the bourgou, but also sowed the seeds of a full-blown crisis that led eventually to the demise of the IBK government.

In relation to the above, Rahmane Idrissa notes in his analysis the increasingly contentious nature of democratic practice in Francophone Africa. The heightened stakes associated with electoral success, the ineluctability of conflict, the hardening of identities in pursuit of power and the erasure of consensus have congealed into a messy mix.

Francophone Africa is the most impoverished region of the world and the increasing violence of Malian politics is directly linked to its postcolonial condition. It is a condition created by structural dependency and economic stagnation. By and large, successive Malian governments have failed to devise a coherent and autonomous economic policy to tap into Mali's tremendous resources in order to meet its people's basic needs for food, health services and infrastructure. As is the case for the rest of Francophone Africa, Mali has no handle on its economy and therefore does not have the means to respond to these needs. The structural problems to overcome are vast and the recent political crisis is merely a manifestation of fundamental issues that have remained unresolved for far too long, issues that another government of transition is not likely to change.

The idea, therefore, that Malians' present dilemma is a choice between democracy and military rule is at best simplistic. The movement of popular protests and civil disobedience that culminated with the August 2020 coup has to be understood as part of a quest for meaningful democracy. This quest emerged on the back of successive electoral bouts that had been certified 'free and fair' by national, regional and international election observers. Ousmane A. Diallo draws attention to the fundamentally problematic conception that has governed democratisation in Mali over the past few decades: its dynamism is measured by the possibility of holding regular elections designed to rubber stamp the legitimacy of the elected by the

'international community', even as the disconnect with Malians' demand for public goods has become formidably greater.

After Crisis, the Military

Both governing and opposition parties in Mali share the same culture and aspiration; they operate in the same 'habitus', as Rahmane Idrissa insightfully notes. They may be in disagreement over the rules of the game, but as Bréma Ely Dicko and Kawélé Togola explain, they are united in their relentlessly opportunistic and extractive approach to democracy.

Mali has been in transition since 2012 but its political leadership has been acting as if the country was not on the brink of collapse. Eight years have thus gone to waste. In the calls for a return to a 'constitutional order' with the same crop of people, and the rush to hold yet another round of elections in the name of the restoration of 'stability', many Malians see a perfect recipe for another disaster.

No wonder therefore that Malians' trust in the military is unlike any other in a public institution, as the Afrobarometer survey of March–April 2020 shows.¹ However, coups provide a moment of precarious thought. In this particular case, the precariousness of thought spans both a difficulty to grasp the impoverished logic of past political arrangements and a dearth of vision for a fitting governance model.

If many have come to see the military as a 'regulator' of political impasses, it is also expected that the period of transition they inaugurate will be an opportunity to explore meaningful change, as Siba Grovogui and Kawélé Togola state. However, on one hand, the momentum that jolted the military into action to adjudicate the political deadlock has been compressed, and then distorted. On the other hand, as the terms of the transition are negotiated behind closed doors, and familiar faces promise different futures whilst chairs are shuffled, the roots of discontent are likely to be bypassed yet again as care for people's original concerns fade.

The 'national consultations' initiated by the military leadership have foundered on the terms of the transition. The military's suggestion to rewrite the Constitution is not without merit. However, the team of 'experts' they have mobilised—made up of legal and military experts—is neither equipped nor endowed with the right kind of vision to rethink a relevant Constitution for Mali's postcolonial condition.

A problem of governance?

In the midst of the crisis, the fire that devastated the Kayes archives constitutes a powerful symbol of the state of deliquescence of Malian post-independence institutions, Madina Thiam suggests. The archives held an important part of the rich history of the cosmopolitan town that sits at the crossroads of colonial expansion from the Atlantic into the hinterland. Like the ransacking of the Ahmed Baba library in Timbuktu a few years earlier, the Kayes fire obliterated vital cultural and historical resources. Yet, the issues of memory and cognition cannot be divorced from the practice of democracy. Neither is the archive separable from the practice of sovereignty, because the categories of understanding it gives access to provide insights into the dilemmas and complexities that weave through the history of various communities in the region.

As Oumar Ba aptly shows in his piece, the crisis in Mali is a crisis with many entanglements. Whilst endemic instability and violence cannot be reduced to a problem of governance, their regularity is repeatedly met by public demands for a return to an ethical model of government. Rahmane Idrissa and Aly Tounkara therefore suggest that we need to have a historical as well as regional understanding of the Malian condition, and we have to see its political crisis in the broader context of a vexed process of state-building and democratisation in postcolonial Africa. Mali is a place of contestation of various cultures, various ways of life and various conceptions of belonging.

In this fraught context, ECOWAS was seen to be an adjudicator of a tense process. Contrary to the expectations of the majority of West Africans, however, ECOWAS has relied on a textbook, conservative and elitist approach to democratisation. In fact, its strategy to ratchet up pressure on the military leadership using economic sanctions has antagonised many Malians.

Is there a way out of the current impasse? Ousmane A. Diallo calls for the organisation of a series of Assises de la gouvernance, but what shape and form should these deliberations take? Beyond the protests that have been directed at the electoral process around the legislative elections of March/April 2020 and the legitimacy of the Constitutional Court, Malians have been seeking to explore and extend democratic possibilities, to have more and better democracy. Such substantive democracy would need to overcome the poor response of successive Malian governments; it would need to provide the space for rethinking the framework for civil rights in a new constitutional order. For Siba Grovogui, a reformed constitutional order would need to reflect the actual aspirations of a society that has rarely been able to articulate a path for self-governance since formal independence was achieved in 1960.

Note

1. According to an Afrobarometer survey, March–April 2020, eight out of ten people surveyed indicated their trust in the military. The breakdown for regions is the following: 69% of respondents in Gao; 64% in Mopti. Contrast this with trust in the President (47%); in fact, support for the President has been at its lowest (38%) over the past ten years; trust in legislators stood at 37%, in the ruling coalition at 38% and in opposition political parties at 36%. See Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 386, ‘Maliens, though eager for change from failing state and economy, still demand democracy’, <http://www.afrobarometer.org/publications/ad386-maliens-though-eager-change-failing-state-and-economy-still-demand-democracy>.

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