



The Many Entanglements of the Malian Conflict

Mali's most recent turmoil and the protests and social unrest that precipitated the removal of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) result from years of the compounding effects of insecurity, communal violence, corruption scandals and institutional instability at the highest level of government. The aftermath of the contested legislative elections and the controversial Constitutional Court's ruling, which annulled some results and awarded additional seats to IBK's party, set

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in motion a popular movement that ultimately laid the groundwork for the military to seize power—once again. This short analysis focuses on the external interventions in the Malian state and argues that 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.

The trouble with peacekeeping

Six out of the thirteen current UN peacekeeping operations are located on the African continent. It is true that these missions in Africa tend to operate in very difficult conditions, which hampers their effectiveness in carrying out

their mandates. For instance, initially, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was able to help strengthen peace stability in northern Mali while also aiding the return of refugees and assisting in the peace process that culminated in the 2015 Algiers Agreement. Since 2016, however, this progress has been rolled back, as central Mali too has been engulfed by intercommunal violence, and attacks on military outposts in the border areas between Mali and Niger continue to inflict heavy casualties on national armies.

As the second-largest UN peace-keeping operation, with more than 15,000 personnel, the UN mission in Mali is also currently the world's deadliest peacekeeping mission, sustaining an extraordinary number of fatalities (Sieff & Hahn 2017). MINUSMA is based mostly in larger towns, and it has a very limited presence in the central regions of Mali where non-state armed actors are the most active. Interviews and focus groups conducted in Mali by the Effectiveness of Peace Operations Network (EPON) reveal that local populations 'feel the Mission is no longer able to improve peace and stability in Mali' (Van der Lijn et al. 2019). As the study indicates, 'MINUSMA's response to the asymmetric threats it faces has often been the bunkerisation in "supercamps" and in military bases and allocating significant resources to convoy protection' (Van der Lijn et al 2019: 76) What does that say when a UN peacekeeping mission spends significant resources on protecting itself rather than the local populations?

Additionally, the 'bunkerisation' of the UN mission in Mali means it is impossible to develop a people-centred approach which

could meaningfully have a positive impact on the lives of Malians. MINUSMA's legitimacy is also negatively affected by its association with the G5 Sahel Joint Force; it provides the latter with operational and logistical support and shares facilities with the French Operation Barkhane in some locations.

Moreover, as UN peacekeeping operations increasingly rely on contracted private military and security companies (PMSCs), their security practices produce ever more unintended negative consequences, such as the perpetuation of insecurity through the emergence of a local security economy and reproducing forms of security that are opposed to the aims of protecting civilians and facilitating peace (Krahmann & Leander 2019). For all these reasons, it should not come as a surprise that local populations would feel that the UN operations in Mali are not improving peace or stability.

State of delinquency and counter-terrorism/insurgency lab

Mali has been in a chronic state of delinquency. Over the past few years, perpetual strikes have paralysed main sectors of the administration and the state's ability to deliver services (Maïga 2020). Add to this an inadequate response to the massacres of civilian populations as a result of intercommunal violence, the socioeconomic effects of Covid19, and the belief that the most recent parliamentary electoral results were not a reflection of the citizens' choices, IBK's rule was untenable. Something had to give.

Meanwhile, the international community's response remained fixated on counter-terrorism. Yet,

even in the realm of security, the biggest purveyors of violence in Mali are not those commonly labelled 'terrorists' by the international community. In fact, communal militias were responsible for more than half of all civilian deaths in the first trimester of this year (ACLED 2020a) and state violence against civilians is endemic (ACLED 2020b). This is but one of many problems with the international community's approach in Mali and across the Sahel. Moreover, when the international community adopts empty slogans such as 'good governance' and 'supporting state capacity', the fact that citizens may perceive the 'state' mainly through its capacity to inflict harm is often ignored.

As Thurston (2020) highlights, too, the multiplying effect of the international community's interventions in Mali and across the Sahel is staggering. Acronyms and new programmes are constantly added, and very rarely do any of them get downgraded or abandoned. So, the Malian landscape is dotted with a who's who of acronyms and operation names: MINUSMA, Barkhane, EUTM, G5, Coalition for the Sahel, Takuba, Sahel Alliance, P3S (Lebovich 2020).

Intervention by other means

The interventionist approach to the Malian crisis also extends beyond the usual suspects. The International Criminal Court (ICC) and UNESCO, too, have made their share of interventions that addressed the concerns and priorities of the interveners rather than the needs of Malians. The ICC intervention stems from a 2012 request by an interim government under President Dioncounda Traore, which was struggling for legitimacy in a highly fluid political and security environment (Ba 2020a: 144–45).

The ICC, facing its own legitimacy crisis and having suffered many recent setbacks, welcomed the invitation and focused its investigations on the jihadists and the destruction of cultural heritage, at the expense of other crimes committed during the 2012 rebellion and the jihadist takeover in the north and its aftermath. This again shows the extent to which the interventionist approach from the international community follows its own logics, which are often at odds with the concerns of Malian citizens (Ba 2019, 2020b).

What do Malians want?

A few years ago, Madina Thiam (2015) remarked that it has become customary to discuss Mali while simultaneously ignoring Mali, because an 'empire state of mind' places the Western agenda at the centre of the analysis and (counter) interventionist debates and policies. In the end, however, we all ought to return to the basics: What do Malians want? What are their legitimate demands and concerns? Where do their priorities lie? In the aftermath of the removal of IBK, for instance, ECOWAS pushed for a swift return to constitutional order. Yet, many Malians want to free themselves from the 'tyranny of urgency' (Maïga 2020). In the end, the legitimate demands and concerns of Malian citizens must take precedence over the interests of regional and international actors.

An Afrobarometer survey conducted in March–April 2020 reveals that the military is one of the most respected institutions in Mali, with eight out of ten citizens saying that they trust the military (more than religious leaders and all political institutions) (Coulibaly, Logan & Gyimah-Boadi 2020). The survey also shows that 69 per cent of Malians reject military rule and prefer democracy. This points to the

need for a well-planned transition, which should not be constrained by the diktat of ECOWAS. Because, indeed, a transition well planned has better chances of having lasting positive effects than a rushed one. Public support and positivity towards the military, however, should not obfuscate the human rights abuses and extrajudicial killings perpetrated by the Malian security forces (Amnesty International 2020), who, ultimately, will need to be held accountable by Malians themselves.

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