ASR Forum on Mali

Introduction: Hope, Despair, and the Future of Mali

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Introduction

It has been five years since a coup d'état was staged in Mali by disgruntled military personnel on March 22, 2012, putting an end to nearly twenty years of procedural democracy for this West African state. Amidst the chaos of the coup, the government lost control of the northern two-thirds of the country to a variety of armed groups, including ethnically based separatists, internally and externally backed Islamists, and drug traffickers. Less than a month after the coup, the principal Tuareg (Tamasheq) rebel movement announced its secession from Mali and the formation of a new state it called Azawad. Not long after, the coup leader in the south agreed to step down from power and a series of interim governments ensued. The Tuareg rebellion

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in the north metamorphosed into a jihad led by non-Tuareg groups that took over power in the regional capitals and imposed an extreme version of Shari'a law. The newly declared Azawad nation fell to the control of jihadists within six months. International negotiations and the intervention of forces from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) failed to stop the hostilities. (For much more detail on this history, see Lecocq and Klute [2013].) The jihadist armed groups began pushing south in January 2013, moving into territory long thought to be the stronghold of the government and immune to instability, and for the first time since it gained independence from the former colonial power, Mali asked France to intervene militarily on its territory. Operation Serval, a combined effort of the Malian and French armies, eventually reclaimed the major northern cities for the Malian state in the first quarter of 2013.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was authorized in April that year. Two months later, a cease-fire agreement had been signed and presidential elections were held. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) was sworn in on September 4, 2013, and remains in power to this day.

While there is now some semblance of a Malian state, most Malians and outside observers would agree that the situation is far from normal or sustainable. Corruption continues to be a problem, which both limits popular support for the regime and hampers its ability to govern. Furthermore, French and international military troops and peacekeepers remain in Mali, with no sign of leaving anytime soon (Gaffey 2016). Most disturbingly, instability and periodic attacks by rebel groups continue to roil the country. While these strikes are more frequent in the north, attacks in the capital city, Bamako, in 2015–2016—including a hotel shooting that killed nineteen people—have kept many international donors and nongovernmental organizations at bay.

What happened in Mali in 2012–2013, and in subsequent years, was and is of great concern to those who study the country and have close ties to its people. But trying to understand the situation in Mali is also important to African studies more broadly for a number of reasons. First, given the high number of weak or minimalist states in the African context, the ability of these entities to govern or the likelihood of their devolving into non-states is important to understand. Second, Mali has a lot to teach us in general about democracy-building campaigns in the African context. While the country once was held up as a donor darling and symbol of African democracy, the situation unraveled so quickly and completely in 2012 that it astonished observers, including many Mali specialists (Lecocq et al. 2013). Third, Mali's experience sheds light on how people cope and maintain livelihoods under challenging circumstances, something that is increasingly important in a world where insecurity is becoming more frequent. Fourth, Mali helps us better understand the local actors who can help to build and sustain peace and what role ancient traditional notions of status and honor can play in that process. Finally, this case illuminates how outside organizations might be a constructive or destabilizing force for weak states.

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Africanist scholars with particular expertise in the history, politics, anthropology, and geography of Mali gathered at the 2013 annual meeting of the African Studies Association in Baltimore, Maryland, to debate these and other questions at a roundtable organized by the co-authors entitled the "Future of Mali." The articles in this *ASR* Forum resulted from that discussion.

Geography and Demographics

All of the articles in this Forum refer to the north versus the south of Mali. For that matter, many Malians also use such geographical tags in everyday conversation. The problem in both cases is that everyone has a slightly different understanding of where the south ends and the north begins. For the purposes of this Forum, "the north," or northern Mali, is defined as the area that was controlled by various armed groups between March 2012 and January 2013 (see map, which also shows the locations of insurgent attacks that took place throughout the country up until the time of publication). This extends from the northern areas of central Mali's Mopti region to Taoudenit in the north and Gao in the east. Some will likely disagree with aspects of this demarcation, but this has been a zone of persistent insecurity and numerous violent attacks that have adversely affected political participation, personal autonomy, religious and cultural freedoms, mobility, and food security. Northern Mali is lightly populated relative to the southern parts of country. Of the most affected areas, the Mopti region is by far the most populated at two million people, followed by the northern regions of Timbuktu (682,000), Gao (544,000), and Taodenit, Menaka, and Kidal (68,000). The majority of Mali's citizens (the remaining 12 million people) live in its southern regions (DNP 2015).

Several authors also make reference to different ethnic groups in their writing. Mali is diverse ethnically and has a long history of relatively peaceful interethnic relations. This diversity is partially reflected in the country's thirteen national languages. To simplify matters, one may think of certain ethnic clusters. The Mande speakers include the Bamana, Malinke, and Sarakole. They account for just over 50 percent of the total population, principally reside in the southern regions, are farmers, and have a history of controlling the major posts in government. The Peulh (or Fulani) are extremely widespread (but dominate in the Mopti region), engage in agropastoralism, and account for about 15 percent of the population. The Voltaic groups, including the Senufo, Minianka, and Bobo, are farmers historically, largely reside in the southern Sikasso region, and make up approximately 13 percent of the population. The Songhay historically live along the upper arc of the Niger River, farm rice and wheat, and constitute 1.6 percent of the population (CIA 2016). The Tuareg live in the northern regions (especially Timbuktu, Gao, Menaka, Taoudenit, and Kidal), traditionally engage in pastoralism, and make up roughly 0.9 percent of the population (although this proportion is politically contested). The remaining 15 percent of the population is made up of such groups as

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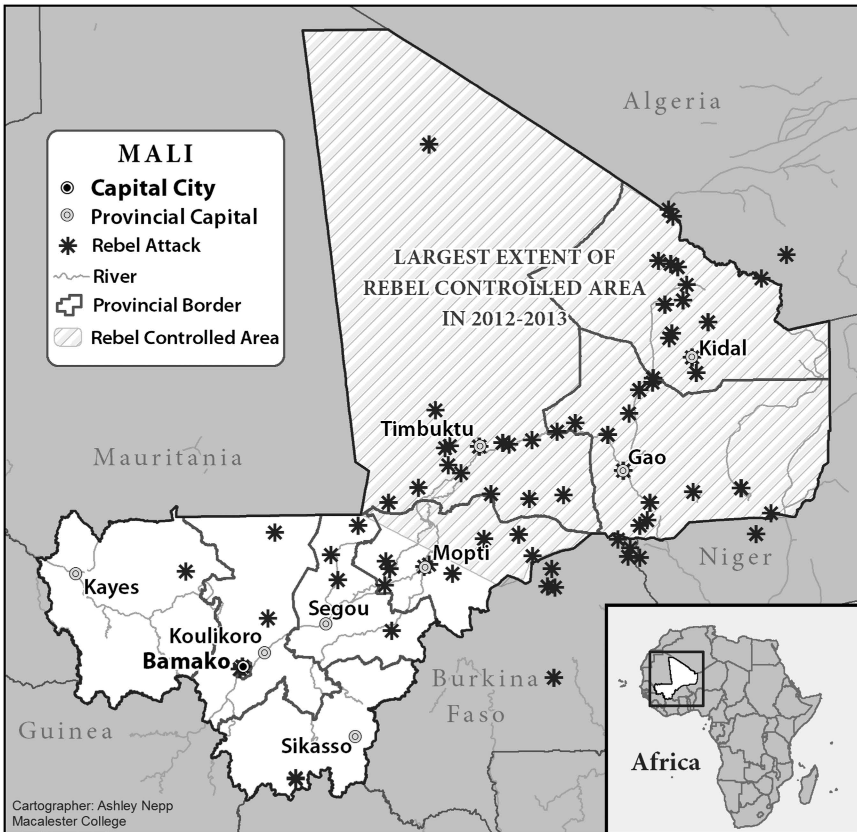
The Territory of Mali with Areas under Rebel Control in 2012–2013, and Insurgent Attacks in 2014–2016



Source: Based in part on data from ACLED (2017)

the Dogon farmers, as well as the Bozo and Somono (fisherfolk). Related to ethnicity is a history of slavery by some ethnic groups. Despite slavery having been outlawed by the French in 1905 and again declared illegal since independence in 1960, strong cultural and linguistic ties persist between former slaves and their patrons. In southern Mali, descendants of former slaves form one of the three principal castes; in the north, their status is still the subject of considerable controversy. Most notable of these in the discussions in this Forum are the Tuareg and their former slaves, known as the Bellah.

Background to the 2012–2013 Coup and Rebellion

After achieving independence from France in 1960, the Republic of Mali embarked on thirty years of challenging governance. The country's first president, the pan-Africanist and socialist leaning Modibo Keita, increasingly embraced one-party rule until he was ousted in a bloodless coup in 1968 by

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Moussa Traoré. General Traoré's military regime was marked by sporadic attempts at economic reform (at the behest of donors), political repression, significant droughts in the 1970s and '80s, and three coup attempts. His government was further weakened by what LeCoq and Klute (2013:426) call a "low-intensity conflict" in 1990 when a group of Tuareg rebels created the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MPLA), which caused him to send two-thirds of his army to the north. Even though a cease-fire agreement was signed, Traoré's government would soon fall. Widespread antigovernment protests in 1991 led to a popularly backed coup on March 26, 1991, followed by a one-year transitional government and a new constitution. In 1992 the former university professor and archaeologist Alpha Oumar Konaré won Mali's first democratic multiparty presidential election since independence and then was reelected for a second term in 1997. In 2002 Amadou Toumani Touré (known as ATT), a retired general of the army's parachute regiment who led the army in arresting Moussa Traoré to end the 1991 popular uprising and become the transitional leader, was elected president and would serve nearly two full terms until he in turn lost power in a coup on March 22, 2012. During the democratic period from 1992 to 2012, Mali was regarded as one of the most politically and socially stable countries in Africa and was the darling of the donor community. Despite a façade of political health and vitality, corruption gradually grew during this period (especially after 2002), government service provision declined, and the long simmering conflict with the Tuareg population in the north heated up again.

In late 2011 and early 2012 the Malian military suffered a string of stunning defeats in the north of the country, including one at Aguelhok on January 17, 2012, where nearly one hundred Malian soldiers reportedly ran out of ammunition and were massacred. Just three months prior to this incident, on October 20, 2011, Libyan rebels, with U.S. and French backing, had hunted down and killed Libyan President Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. His heavily armed soldiers had included a large contingent of Tuareg fighters, many of whom fled to Mali. This injected fresh energy and armaments into some elements of the Tuareg resistance movement, a factor that likely exacerbated the already weak position of the Malian military. In the face of these losses, the Malian military increasingly grew frustrated with the leadership of President Touré. As Bruce Whitehouse describes in his article in this Forum, the events leading up to the change in power in March 2012 almost constituted a coup by accident. Following failed negotiations about better support for the military, soldiers began marching from their barracks in Kati on the capital city, Bamako. As the situation got out of hand, ATT and his guard fled the presidential palace. The Constitution was suspended, and the military took control of the government under the leadership of Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, who formed a junta, the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDR). On April 8, 2012, ATT formally resigned from the presidency. Under pressure of sanctions from ECOWAS, the junta restored the Constitution, which called for the

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president of the National Assembly, Dioncounda Traoré, to assume the presidency of the country. Within days he was attacked in turn and fled the country. For the next year a series of failed governments ensued until the relative calm brought by Operation Serval in the north, and the establishment of MINUSMA in the south, led to the 2013 cease-fire, which made it possible to hold the elections that brought Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (known as IBK) to the presidency.

The Current Situation

IBK's tenure has not been a peaceful one: the cease-fire was broken by October 2013 and the response was a surge of Malian and U.N. troops to the north to fight a variety of armed groups that included ethnic rebels, Islamist jihadis, and the various configurations thereof controlling the northern regions (LeCoq et al. 2013; Hüsken & Klute 2015). A number of other treaties have been signed and broken. Operation Serval in Mali has become Operation Barkhane, spread across the five countries the Tuareg inhabit. A peace agreement developed through rounds and rounds of negotiations in Algiers in 2015 was finally signed by all the parties, but since that time the constituencies of the northern signatories have come under question, leading to doubts about the authority of the parties to represent the populations on the ground. (For a fuller discussion of these events, see the entire 2015 special issue of *African Security* edited by Whitehouse and Stazzani, as well as Camara [2016] and Lebovich [2016]). This Forum addresses themes perceived by the authors as important to understanding the crisis as it developed during 2012–2013 and what it may portend for the future. We recognize, however, that until the crisis is finally resolved there is much more that must wait to be written.

Forum Themes

Bruce Whitehouse happened to be living in Bamako as a Fulbright scholar when the coup d'état occurred in March 2012. While many observers were shocked and surprised by the events that unfolded in this period, he was one of the few scholars who articulated and interpreted (for Anglophone audiences) the southern Malian public's unhappiness with the regime in more or less real time via media interventions and his blog (Whitehouse 2017a). The public's disaffection with the Malian state included frustration with the political process, weak rule of law, and inadequate delivery of basic services. For his contribution to this Forum (2017b, 15–35), Whitehouse focuses on political activists based in Bamako. He assesses Malian civil society's response to the political situation since the March 2012 military coup and considers prospects for wider political engagement by the Malian public.

Mali's 2012 coup d'état and subsequent rebellion created much hardship for those living in the northern and southern parts of the country.

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In this Forum, William Moseley (2017, 37–51) explores the changes that occurred during the period of uncertainty in the country, the role of the minimalist state, and the implications of these conditions for future development initiatives. He argues that the way in which Mali muddled through the 2012–2013 period has left two distinct aid landscapes: a militarized northern region where aid from donors is focused on antiterrorism, and a southern zone dominated by cotton farming, artisanal gold mining, and public–private partnerships in the development sector.

Since Mali's independence in 1960, the Tuareg have staged successive rebellions, with the major ones occurring in 1963, 1990, 2006, and 2012. While discussions of "the Tuareg issue" have sometimes led both the Malian and the international press to make inaccurate generalizations, Kassim Kone suggests in his article (2017, 53–75) that almost all of the armed conflicts over the past fifty years in Mali have involved the Tuareg ethnic group. As such, many Malians hold the Tuareg people responsible for the destruction of life and human rights violations that have taken place since the beginning of 2012. Kone focuses on the events of 2012 and their aftermath, exploring some of the social, cultural, and political differences between northern Tuareg and southern peoples, Bamana in particular. He explores two questions. First, is there something about Tuareg society, culture, and politics that is incompatible with the Republic of Mali? Second, if the answer to the first question is no, then how and why has the Malian government failed to address this issue through the successive regimes since independence?

In some ways, Susan Rasmussen's article (2017, 77–100) may be seen as the counterpart to Kone's. She offers a critique of widely disseminated portrayals of northern Malian Tuareg by outside media. She questions portrayals of all Tuareg as warriors and criminals and the projection of pseudoscientific concepts of race onto relationships between Tuareg and other Malians (recalling the now discredited colonial "Hamitic Myth" in Rwanda). She analyzes local oral historical accounts that present themes of Mali as both a "protected fortress" and a "welcoming crossroads," a country that both resists and absorbs intruders, and that also express concepts of identity based on language, culture, and flexible social affiliation. Her observations are based partly on interviews with internationally known local musicians, poets, and performers who function as mediating "third voices." She concludes with a discussion of the wider implications of these findings for notions of voice, authority, and the mutual construction of ideas of Africa.

Barbara Hoffman's article (2017, 101–122) also addresses the theme of mediating third voices. Hoffman notes that every ethnic group in Mali has at least one social category of specialists in conflict mediation and resolution. These are casted groups whose duties include the maintenance of a moral as well as structural social order, even in times of great turmoil. She references recent research on the activities of these actors showing that the role of traditional mediator has not vanished, but it has evolved through

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bureaucratic institutionalization. In her article she presents a rich case study on the formation of RECOTRADE, the largest nongovernmental organization of traditional communicators in West Africa, demonstrating how this traditional institution is keeping pace with the political and civil development of the country.

Given the continuing violence and turmoil in Mali, it is easy to be pessimistic about the future of the country. In fact, Whitehouse begins this Forum with a cautionary tale about the overly optimistic, and simplifying, donor narrative of Mali's political health in the two decades preceding the March 2012 coup d'état. However, while the authors in this Forum have spent some time dissecting what exactly happened in Mali over the past five years since the coup, they also describe signs of hope that may point the way forward.

Whitehouse discusses how, after a return to quasi political normalcy in late 2013, some Malians began to pursue new ways of engaging the state and fellow citizens to address the root causes of their country's ills. By exposing the flaws of the Malian political system to both national and international scrutiny, these engagements opened a space in which new forms of public discourse and political participation became possible. With the further roll back of the already weak Malian state, local people and local government, as Moseley shows us, adapted and muddled through. Indeed, the reality is that many Malians have been coping and adapting to difficult political and climatic circumstances for centuries. As such, it is not surprising that local societies have developed cultural institutions that aid with coping and adaptation. Both Rasmussen's and Hoffman's articles on traditional communicators, or mediating third voices, allow us to see how conflict, be it ethnically, religiously, or politically based, may be resolved. On this issue, however, Kone's article is perhaps the most pessimistic, because it points to deep divisions between a northern Tuareg view of affairs and a southern, Bamana take on the country's political history. But even Kone acknowledges that Mali's political leaders have often taken the easy way out by buying off a corrupt Tuareg elite rather than really addressing the development challenges that continue to plague the north of the country.

Conclusion

As Whitehouse (2017) notes near the end of his article, "the 2013 election did not deliver the political transformation so many Malians desperately hoped for" (30). While elections may be important, they do not offer, in and of themselves, salvation or transformation. Real political change is often risky and may require a crisis as a catalyst. Since Mali is still in the midst of the crisis, we would argue that the window of opportunity remains open for change. To date, however, members of Mali's political elite have largely tried to recreate the old system, and they have been aided and abetted in this process by outside powers that are anxious to stabilize Mali in the hope that it will become a bulwark against terrorist activity. Real political transformation

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starts from the bottom up and builds on local traditions and institutions, as well as new forms of engagement. While the essential building blocks for this change are present in Malian society, as Kone argues, the easy, superficial, or short-term solutions need to give way, to harder, but longer lasting approaches. Outsiders could be useful here, but Malians need to take the lead and must have the courage to say "no" to donors when they are not being constructive. Aid organizations must also learn from Mali's experience, in which an (arguably) flimsy house has been quickly rebuilt on a shaky foundation. New construction always looks impressive in the aftermath of a disaster, but it raises a lot of questions when we see it swaying in the storm five years on. It will be necessary to rebuild from the bottom up, once the terrain stops being rocked by the blasts of terror.

Mali has been in a state of emergency almost continuously since the 2013 cease-fire was broken. In addition to the ongoing hostilities in the north, a series of terrorist attacks in the south have struck targets from the border of Côte d'Ivoire to the heart of Bamako. As of early 2017, the situation in Mali remains quite tenuous. As we write, the regional capital of Gao is reeling from the shock of a suicide car bombing of the Joint Operational Mechanism base where a mixture of former rebels, progovernment militia members, Malian army, and MINUSMA personnel were gathered before setting off on the joint patrols mandated by the Algiers Accords (Thurston 2017). At least fifty people died immediately. The number of injured is still being counted, and the Malian Office of Radio and Television (ORTM) is broadcasting the songs of Bazoumana Sissoko—as they always do in times of war.

Acknowledgments

As other colleagues who have written jointly on the crisis in Mali have done before (e.g., LeCoq et al. 2013), the co-authors wish to acknowledge the equal division of labor that has resulted in this article and this Forum by granting each other the right to claim primary authorship over this article in personal bibliographies. We are grateful for the support of *ASR* editors Elliot Fratkin and Sean Redding for bringing this Forum to press, as well as for the editorial assistance of Ella Kusnetz.

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