

THE CRISIS IN MALI

ORIGINS, DEVELOPMENTS AND THE IMPACT ON THE SUB-REGION

Bakary Sambe

The West African country of Mali is undergoing a deep crisis that threatens its territorial integrity, and therefore its sovereignty, and that has worrying implications for large swathes of the Sahel and West Africa as a whole. The fall of President Amadou Toumani Touré prompted a national strike which in turn triggered an institutional crisis that has been made worse through the annexing of northern Mali by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). Resolving the crisis has been made more difficult by the number of different actors and groups involved, especially Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Recently, the conflict has also taken on a sub-regional dimension with the founding of the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). The sub-region faces many challenges in trying to resolve a conflict that raises many questions about the African state's very survival and the clash between the principle of sovereignty and transnational non-institutional actors.



Dr. Bakary Sambe is a specialist in transnational networks at the Centre d'Etude des Religions at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis, Senegal, and Senior Fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels.

POLITICS AND SECURITY POLICY – A TANGLED SITUATION

On 17 January 2012, Mali's armed forces were driven out of the north of the country by an armed uprising. On 22 March, President Touré was ousted. The central government quickly crumbled in the wake of these two events. Immediately after the start of the crisis, the question of external military intervention was raised, with all its attendant risks and uncertainties. Some observers are of the opinion that the international community should seek to resolve the conflict through negotiation. In contrast, others believe the onus is on the Economic Community of West African States

(ECOWAS) to seek some form of resolution that takes the social balance of power into account in order not to deepen existing divisions within Malian society. The overriding goal must be to lend credibility to political institutions in Mali in order to guarantee a period of transition, during which the country's order and security, badly shaken by the national strike and the occupation of northern Mali, can be successfully restored. A large number of West Africa's decision-makers are in favour of the implementation of concerted security measures at a continental level, in order to ensure that northern Mali under the influence of armed groups does not become a new epicentre for the war on terrorism.



The President failed to realise that his army would be facing better-equipped Tuareg troops after the war in Libya. | Source: Magharebia / flickr (CC BY).

The terms for a handover of power agreed after long drawn-out negotiations between ECOWAS and the military junta led by Amadou Haya Sanogo have so far failed to bring a return to political order in the country. Meanwhile, the military has been garnering support from certain sections of society by exploiting the people's widespread sense of dissatisfaction with the Touré government. Even the current transitional president Dioncounda Traoré is finding it difficult to shake off the negative image of the Touré government that – paradoxically – tarnishes him. Prior to the national strike of the previous March, Traoré had been the

Speaker of Parliament. On 21 May 2012, the presidential palace on the Koulouba hill was stormed by what appears to have been supporters of the coup. They assaulted the transitional president, who had to be taken to France for medical treatment. There are clear signs that the country's military apparatus is disintegrating, while the transitional government under Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra is simultaneously getting weaker, making it highly unlikely that the country's territorial integrity can be restored by Mali's armed forces. Military experts in the region all seem to agree that there are significant risks in trying to restore the country's territorial integrity this way, and the problem could spread beyond Mali's borders and seriously affect the balance of power in the sub-region.

In the north of the country, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) is now virtually non-existent in political terms. They have been driven out by an armed Islamist group under the leadership of Iyad Ag Ghaly, a Tuareg leader looking to avenge his marginalisation brought about by the founding of the MNLA. Ag Ghaly, who was the instigator of the Tuareg rebellion in the early 1990s and appointed to the position of Vice Consul to Jeddah by Touré in 1999, has gradually turned more and more to religion and become increasingly fundamentalist. The 50-year-old Ag Ghaly is a member of the Ifogha tribal group that live in the Kidal region. With the help of elements of the al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) organisation he was able to take the town of Timbuktu and to bring the north of the country under the control of his Ansar Dine group. After 3 April there were reports that the man believed to be the leader of the AQIM, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (known as "one-eye"), had been seen in the town. According to rumours, which were denied by one of Timbuktu's religious leaders, the most senior AQIM leaders in the Sahel, Abu Zeid, Belmokhtar and Yahya Abu Al-Hammam, had met with the imams of the town's three largest mosques.

With the help of al-Qaida Ag Ghaly was able to take the town of Timbuktu and to bring the north of Mali under the control of his Ansar Dine group.

In order to consolidate his position, Iyad Ag Ghaly did in fact quickly turn to Timbuktu's imams in order to ask for their support in introducing Sharia law. Ansar Dine's strategy has echoes of that employed by the Taliban in

Afghanistan. With the help of the AQIM, Ag Ghaly's militia quickly restored order and provided the people with food, giving themselves the appearance of being the new "saviours" of a northern Mali that for a long time had led a somewhat shadowy existence.

In this way, the Ansar Dine leader was able to make pacts with various armed groups that were already in the area – the Arab militias, the Tuareg that had operated in Bamako in the past with the support of the government, but mostly with the AQIM, who had been responsible for numerous abductions and murders of western citizens in Mauritania, Mali and Niger. In addition to mounting repeated attacks on the regular armed forces in the region, al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb is also involved in a wide range of illegal business and cross-border criminal activities.

For this reason, many observers see the vast region of northern Mali as a potential gathering place for Jihadists from all manner of backgrounds. There is no doubt that the disintegration of the Malian military apparatus following the fall of President Touré has contributed to the ease with which these developments have taken place. The Ansar Dine has made good use of the AQIM's logistical structures in order to remain mobile. Security sources are reporting that West African foreigners are already being trained in Jihadist training camps in northern Mali. Although a modicum of peace returned to the country in July, it would appear that Islamist plans for a full takeover of Mali are still very real. Once the Malian armed forces have totally vacated the northern part of the country, the AQIM will become a potential threat to neighbouring countries. In the summer of 2011 it looked as though the AQIM had been driven back to their retreats in the Sahel following battles with both Malian and Mauritanian troops. Now they have much more room to manoeuvre, and could even launch an attack against Mauritania, something which has always been a goal of the AQIM in the Sahel. If Ansar Dine had the whole country under its control, it could provide its allies with bases from which to launch attacks on Senegal, Burkina Faso or even the Ivory Coast. The roots of this tangled situation that could help to destabilise the whole sub-region can be traced back to a number of historical and political factors.

THE ROOTS OF MALI'S POLITICAL WEAKNESSES

Like all former colonies, Mali has had to deal with a political heritage that is detrimental to its territorial cohesion. Added to this are ethnic factors that stand in the way of harmonious cooperation between all parts of the country.

The Unsolved Nomad Issue

Mali faces the problem of trying to achieve the kind of homogeneity that is dictated by the 19th century concept of the nation state. The principle of creating an abstract citizenship was never likely to be possible given the historical constraints (slavery, colonialism, etc.)

and the loss of socio-economic structures due to the artificial drawing of borders. When they gained their independence, the African countries adopted the principle of the "inviolability of colonial borders". Nobody had an answer to the question of how the various peoples with their different socio-economic realities could be reconciled with each other. In the 1970s, when the Sahel, and therefore Mali itself, was afflicted by a series of droughts, those sections of the population that were worst affected by the catastrophe felt they had been sidelined and abandoned by the central government.

In the 1970s, when Mali was afflicted by a series of droughts, sections of the population felt they had been forsaken and abandoned by the central government.

In Mali it was the Tuareg tribal groups that were most affected. These nomads tend not to restrict themselves to the "artificial" borders, but inhabit a territory that stretches beyond the country's official lands. The fragmentation of these peoples over several neighbouring states was not even taken into consideration when the central administration of an independent Mali was set up. The Malian state has failed from the very beginning to develop a socio-economic model that can sensibly accommodate the differences and differing needs of the many ethnic groups that make up the country's population. This situation has been made worse by global economic developments and the structural demands placed on the country by donor nations. There were uprisings in the Tuareg-inhabited northern part of the country as far back as the 1960s, which had much to do with the close ethnic ties between the people there and those of the border regions, including those of Niger

Transnational protest movements resulted in a weakening of those countries affected by them and the creation of huge lawless areas.

and Libya. These protests were given huge amounts of support from Libya under Muammar Gaddafi. These transnational protest movements resulted in a weakening of those countries affected by them and the creation of huge lawless areas that were no longer willing to submit to control by whichever country (Mali, Niger, Mauritania). The situation in Mali, therefore, has been made more complicated by a certain political instability and lack of continuity, although the hopes for a successful democratic future for the country remain unaffected.

Mali: Crises and Contradictions in an Emerging "Democracy"

In 1991, the dictator Moussa Traoré was deposed by General Amadou Toumani Touré, generally referred to by his initials ATT. He introduced what for Africa was a model process of democratisation. Following the upheavals, ATT did not take part in the elections in which Alpha Oumar Konaré was democratically elected to the presidency. Konaré went on to serve for the maximum two terms allowed. During this time, Mali was one of Africa's very few democratic states.

ATT returned to politics and was elected again in the 2002 elections after his earlier voluntary retirement from politics had been roundly praised by the international community. ATT pursued a policy of decentralisation, granted greater autonomy to certain regions and signed peace agreements with representatives of the Tuareg people. But the protests continued despite all the agreements, especially the treaty on the integration of Tuareg "rebels", who had been disarmed in a climate of trust that satisfied all the parties. The situation began to worsen and external influences added to internal political problems. The difficulties associated with controlling such a huge country soon became clear, exacerbated by the desertion of formerly integrated Tuareg rebels from the Malian army.

The outbreak of civil war in Libya complicated matters even further because Libya had long been considered a natural place of refuge for MNLA fighters. This would explain why many Tuareg could be found amongst the troops loyal to Gaddafi. The return of Tuareg fighters to Mali was seen by

some observers as evidence of political weakness on the part of ATT, while others felt it was understandable, as the Malian president was seeking to work towards peace and reconciliation. What ATT failed to realise was that his army would soon be facing ranks of better-equipped Tuareg, who were armed to the teeth. All of these factors added to what was clearly a failed attempt to deal with the Tuareg issue, especially the lack of willingness on the part of the government to invest in the north of the country (unlike Niger, for example).

From this point onwards, the weaknesses of an army that had been thrown off balance were clear for all to see. Under ATT, the army had around fifty cosseted generals, who had never really seen a battlefield close up, leading badly neglected soldiers who were not adequately equipped for fighting in such a vast country.

This is the main reason behind the military debacle in the battle with the MNLA rebels. Did ATT not consider these factors when he let the veterans of the Libyan civil war return to the country in triumph, while Libya's other neighbours, Niger and Chad, were insisting on disarming the heavily armed troops that were returning home? This apparent lack of a broader perspective goes some way to explaining why ATT's time in office was about to come to an end. But it was the role of the army that was key to the onset of this crisis, with all its painful consequences – a crisis that has really only just begun.

A CONFLICT WITH SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR HUMAN SECURITY IN THE SAHEL

Following the defeat of the Malian army in the north of the country, the whole Sahel now faces a number of threats. Even before the defeat, this huge area between northern Mali and West Africa, which extends as far as Morocco and Egypt, was always home to illegal trade and smuggling. Various incidents, such as the famous or indeed infamous landing in 2009 of a plane full of drugs from South America known as Air Cocaine on a prepared runway in Mali, made it obvious that the central government was not able to control all of the country. Islamist groups and drug dealers alike find the area to be the perfect no man's land for

The porousness of the borders and the cooperation between radical Islamists and drug dealers have created a “lawless zone” in the vast expanse of the Sahel.

carrying out illegal trade, abductions and the training of Jihad fighters. The porousness of the borders and the obvious cooperation between radical Islamists and drug dealers

have created a “lawless zone” in the vast expanse of the Sahel.¹ Recent incidents such as the kidnapping of hostages, numerous murders and the attacks on Mauritania suggest that these groups are well organised and under nobody’s control. Meanwhile, drought and the food shortages that accompany it have added to the human security problems in the area.

Most observers are agreed that the situation in the whole of the sub-region will only get worse if the crisis is prolonged by some form of military intervention with an uncertain outcome. According to the latest estimates by the United Nations, almost a million Senegalese in the Sahel are affected by food shortages. Refugees are streaming into other countries such as Niger and Mauritania, which is having an impact on the political equilibrium in these countries.

At this point in time, it is not possible to judge the consequences of the part played by neighbouring Senegal, especially on the issue of welcoming ATT in exile. Is this likely to be good or bad for the Bamako-Dakar axis? Much will depend on the long-term fate of the military junta.

There have already been “indirect effects” of the crisis at diplomatic level in the Sahel, with the forceful return to the sub-regional stage of the Ivory Coast, Senegal’s main rival in the region. This rivalry, which is being played out as part of the process of seeking a potential resolution to the conflict, will highlight whether ECOWAS is actually capable of dealing with a multi-dimensional conflict.

THE SECURITY RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH AN ISLAMIC RADICALISATION OF THE SAHEL

What makes the Sahel unique is its position at the interface between the Arab world and Sub-Saharan Africa. It is of course subject to Arab influences, such as the

1 | Hacem Ould Lebatt, “Généalogie d’Al-Qaida au Maghreb islamique”, *Les Cahiers de la Revue Défense Nationale*, Paris, May 2011.

instrumentalisation of religion for all sorts of different purposes.² The long-held illusion of a Sub-Saharan region that is immune to the influences and movements that permeate the Arab or Muslim world has been roundly contradicted both by history and the events that we have witnessed since the end of the global East-West conflict. In reality, the Sahara has never been so much an insurmountable obstacle as an “inland sea that has always invited people to travel from one coast to the other”, as it was once described by Henri Labouret.



Malian people protest against al-Qaida and Sharia law. | Source: Magharebia / flickr (CC BY).

Once the AQIM started to emerge within Maghreb society, there was always the likelihood that they would extend their area of activity into the southern Sahara. Added to this is the fact that a certain geopolitical reorientation has made the Sahel area into an attractive region from both a strategic and economic standpoint, especially because of its extensive mineral and energy resources. The clash of differing interests in the region was always going to lead to trouble. The battle for ideological influence between competing religious models is only going to make matters worse. The numerous warnings of the dangers of such an ideological confrontation will be the subject of much debate

2 | Cf. Bakary Sambe, “L’islam dans les relations arabo-africaines”, Institut d’Études politiques de Lyon 2, Lyon, 2003, 28.

in light of the emergence of radical Islamic groups and above all the terrorist activities and hostage-takings in this vast region with its porous borders.

THE OLD PLAN OF CREATING A WAHHABI DOMINION IN THE SAHEL

Some organisations from Saudi Arabia, under the guise of being NGOs, have been trying to pave the way for the spread of Wahhabi ideology. They question the traditional, fraternal form of Islam that is practised in many areas of the Sahel.³ The advocates of international Wahhabism have long been working on a plan to create a Wahhabi sphere of influence in Africa. However, in spite of numerous warning

The main area of influence of radical Islam can be clearly recognised. The line passes through the northern provinces of Nigeria, through the countries of Niger and Mali, and into Senegal.

signs, nothing has been done to put a stop to these developments, which are now causing concerns in every country within the Sahel. The main area of influence of radical Islam can now be clearly recognised. Starting with the Eritrea-Khartoum axis, which encircles "Christian" Ethiopia, the line passes through N'Djamena and the northern provinces of Nigeria, where Sharia law is practised, on through the countries of Niger and Mali, which have been jolted by Islamism, and finally into Senegal. Dakar has twice held the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) summit, and it is also home to the headquarters of the Muslim World League. So far, these Islamic organisations, funded by donations from the Arab world, have contented themselves with competing with government activities linked to education and welfare, especially as the governments in the respective countries are struggling to meet the needs of their own people.

However, the recent tumult in the sub-region and the consequences of the alliance between Jihadist groups and al-Qaida mean that these movements are becoming a cause for concern. Because the Salafi and Wahhabi ideology with its Jihadist and violent tendencies is firmly rooted in the sub-region, it can only be a matter of time before individual people or groups decide to act on their beliefs.

3 | Cf. Bakary Sambe, "Pour une ré-étude de l'islam au Sud du Sahara", *Prologues, revue maghrébine du livre*, No. 34, 2005, 18.

THE SAHEL AS A TARGET FOR TERRORISM

The AQIM is attempting to thwart the interests of the West through its terrorist activities. Despite some similarities to Mali, Senegal seems to be in a somewhat different position in this context. Although the country has strong ties to Arab and Islamic countries and organisation in Africa (OIC, ISESCO, Muslim World League and the Libyan World Islamic Call Society), it still remains a traditional ally of the West. The same could also be said of Mauritania, Chad and Niger. These Sahel countries are similar to certain Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia), in that they are considered “agents of the West” by al-Qaida.

Any clear analysis of this situation must not only take into account these geopolitical aspects, but also the ideological and sociological dimensions of such a multi-faceted phenomenon. However, at present this does not seem to be happening amongst the security services in the Sahel countries, even though the question must surely be asked whether the region isn’t providing the perfect breeding ground for groups like the AQIM. There is plenty of evidence that two types of networks could emerge at any time in the Sahel: ideological and operational. This could happen in spite of the fact that the countries are supposed to be protected by a traditional, fraternal system of Islam that has now become a target for Islamists (Timbuktu) and that has traditionally been seen as a form of protection against radicalisation.

The fraternal system of Islam, that has traditionally been seen as a form of protection against radicalisation, has now become a target for Islamists.

French experts in African Islam see religion in Senegal as being split into two parts: on the one side, fraternal Islam, and on the other reform-oriented movements such as those with links to the Muslim Brotherhood or to Saudi-based Salafist-Wahhabi groups that question and oppose this type of Islam. So far, not enough attention has been given to these developments and to the way each group has infiltrated the other’s movement, nor to the different agendas being pursued by some of the key individuals concerned.

THE SAHEL: HAS IT ALREADY BEEN CONQUERED IDEOLOGICALLY?

Many people still believe in a fraternal Sufi Islam, which can act as a bulwark against Islamic extremism. Brotherhood, which still plays an important role in countries like Senegal, is of much less significance in Mali or Niger, where the Islamic University of the Sahel is under the ideological control of Wahhabists.

It is true that there are people like the marabouts and other religious leaders in Senegal who are trying to use the social work carried out by Islamic organisations to combat the influence of Wahhabist ideological offensives that are largely funded by petrodollars. These organisations are especially active in those areas where the welfare state is proving to be particularly inadequate, such as education and social welfare. Many sources of funding have dried up since the attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent increase in surveillance and monitoring, not least because the assets of many donors, especially in the Gulf region (Saudi Arabia, the Emirates) were frozen.

However, it is often forgotten that the emergence of an Arabic-speaking elite (Niger, Mali, Senegal, Chad) coming out of Arab and/or Islamic universities is challenging the hegemony of French-speaking officials who are held

Mythical "Islamic conscience" has been turned into a genuine political movement, which incorporates various ideologies: Salafism, Wahhabism plus a vague kind of Shiism or Jihadism.

responsible for the failure of these countries since independence, and there is a growing belief in a mythical "Islamic conscience" that is pervading all spheres, including that of fraternal Islam. This myth has been turned into a genuine political movement, which incorporates various external ideologies: Salafism, Wahhabism plus a vague kind of Shiism or Jihadism. Added to this is the fact that many people are disappointed by fraternal Sufi Islam, which has all too often simply gone along with the political rulers, and are increasingly turning to a "rational" Islam in line with their colonial heritage. This new kind of Islam is recruiting more and more of its supporters from the French-speaking elite. Paradoxically, this has led to an "elitisation" of extremism and the creation of a kind of "Engineers' Islam" of the sort that is prevalent in Algeria and the Middle East.

This Sahel-wide movement is markedly susceptible to the demands of global Islamism (the Palestine issue, anti-Americanism). As a fringe group, its ranks have been filled by those who have been marginalised by prevailing social and economic circumstances and the dramatic consequences of the economic crisis, exacerbated by the growing gulf between the ruling classes and the impoverished people. This creates the ideal sociological and ideological breeding ground for groups like the AQIM.

The countries in the Sahel do not appear to grasp the potential danger of such a dynamic and have not taken these religious aspects into consideration when formulating their security policies. Every now and then, Western allies will sound the alarm. Meanwhile, a significant number of experts are warning of the danger of creating a dual education system split into institutional education run by the state and a parallel education culture ("Arab schools" and "Koran schools"), which is not overseen by the state. This will not only cause problems in the medium-term, but could create a social divide, with the result that we will end up with nation states that lack any real national cohesion.

Experts are warning of the danger of creating a dual education system split into institutional education run by the state and a parallel education culture.

The crisis in Mali has raised a whole series of questions about the ability of the states in the region to survive, take responsibility for their citizens and provide security for them. For this reason, it is considered absolutely vital to find a solution to the crisis, with the help of all of Mali's neighbouring states. In spite of all the diplomatic rivalries and the efforts directed at becoming the leading nation in the sub-region, all the countries do genuinely seem interested in trying to find a quick solution to the crisis, even if this is not likely to be easy.

RESOLVING THE CRISIS IN MALI: A PIECE OF DIPLOMATIC MAGIC ON THE PART OF ECOWAS?

The influence that ECOWAS can exert in this crisis is a result of the principle of subsidiarity. International and regional organisations are the first point of contact when it comes to the avoidance, resolution or management of crises within their sphere of influence. However, in this case their crisis management seems to be very confused and

ECOWAS clearly has no concrete strategy. In the run-up to the crisis, no preventive measures were implemented to support the Malian army against the “invaders”, even though, in theory, ECOWAS had an early warning system in place. ECOWAS are being blamed for the fact that Mali waited a long time before finally launching a concerted military counter-offensive on 3 September – presumably out of pride on the part of the transitional government (not on the part of the military). Throughout the crisis there have been any number of summit meetings at the highest levels but none of them have resulted in any tangible progress.

Much of what has happened points to a lack of clear strategy on the part of ECOWAS. One major problem is the recognition of the military junta under Captain Sanogo. The appeal to the UN Security Council to give the green light to military intervention by the community of states is clear evidence of a chronic lack of preparation. The appeal was rejected by the Security Council on account of a “lack of clear military strategy on the part of ECOWAS”.

Chad was never included in the ECOWAS negotiations at a sub-regional level, which explains why it is reluctant to become involved.

There is also the sensitive issue of arms that were earmarked for Mali being withheld in the capital cities of some of the ECOWAS member states. Chad, which has observer status in ECOWAS, and whose army is well-versed in desert combat, was never included in the ECOWAS negotiations at a sub-regional level, which explains why it is reluctant to become involved and why there is now something of a crisis of confidence amongst the various countries.

ECOWAS could enhance its reputation with a successful military intervention. However, this might be difficult to achieve when the Algeria factor is taken into account. Without logistical support from Algeria, it will not be possible to guarantee a successful military operation in northern Mali. It was Algeria that was able to stop Gaddafi infiltrating northern Mali over the years. Another reason why ECOWAS may not succeed is the organisation’s latest institutional crisis that has had a negative impact on its involvement in the Mali situation. ECOWAS will only really be able to save face with the help of other strategic partners (USA, France, UN, AU and EU). Those involved are still a long way from finding a solution to a multi-faceted problem that presents a major threat to the stability of the whole of West Africa.

SUMMARY

The diplomatic failures in the sub-region, the lack of proper monitoring and surveillance by certain secret service organisations – which became clear following the trading of Iranian weapons (Senegal-Gambia) – and the establishment of Jihadist training camps in northern Mali all suggest that the countries of the Sahel will be unable to influence the current situation to any great extent. The fact that many of the affected countries are considered to be in the Western camp (with the USA and France), and especially in light of all the numerous French interests in the French-speaking part of Africa, makes the Sahel a natural target. Added to this is the fact that the economic and social crisis makes the region vulnerable to ideological change. It is also prey to unofficial networks that are bound to be exploited by Jihadist groups such as the AQIM, Ansar Dine and the new Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA).

For all these reasons, the whole sub-region finds itself facing a geopolitical situation that is bound to lead to an examination of prevailing security paradigms and of approaches towards the viability of political spheres: a clash between the states' principle of sovereignty and the trans-nationality of the various actors that is bound to put all previous notions of the nation state squarely under the microscope.