

The Recurrent Security Crisis in Mali and the Role of the African Union

BY PIERRE BUYOYA

This paper looks at the recurring security crises in Northern Mali since the independence of the country in September 1960. It is structured around three main sections. In the first, I provide a brief historical overview of the repeated security crises in the country, particularly in its northern regions, through the four main waves of these crises, highlighting their main explanatory factors and triggers and paying particular attention to the current and fourth wave that started in late 2011. The second section considers the efforts of various regional and international actors in the resolution of the current wave – both political/diplomatic and military – with a focus on those of the African Union (AU). In the third and concluding section, I take stock of all the above and try to draw some lessons that could be learned from these crises and the efforts of various actors.

Brief History of the Malian Crises

Mali won independence from France on September 22, 1960. This came after a short-lived union with Senegal in the “Mali Federation” that had been proclaimed a few months earlier and from which Senegal had withdrawn. Composed of a vast territorial space of 1,240,192 square kilometers, Mali is landlocked, and about two-thirds of its landmass is desert or semi-desert. Its three northern regions (Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal), constituting two-thirds of its territory, are home to less than 25 percent of its population. One of the demographic groups inhabiting this region is

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called Kel Tamasheq, the people speaking Tamasheq, popularly known outside the group as “Tuareg.”¹ The Tuareg are a largely nomadic, pastoralist (camel herding) population of the North African Berber culture and language. They tend to have lighter skin color than the rest of the Malian population, apart from the Arabs. In the current post-colonial settings of Western and Northern Africa, Tuareg are found in Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya and Burkina Faso.

Various cycles of armed rebellions have been recorded in the north of post-independence Mali and are described by many as “Tuareg rebellions,” as they originated from Tuareg-dominated areas and were composed mainly, but not wholly, of elements of Tuareg identity. There have been four such cycles: the 1963-64 revolts known in Tuareg milieus as

Alfellaga; the 1990s rebellion (1990-1996) known by some locals as *Al-Jebha*; the 2006-07 cycle; and the current cycle that began in late 2011/early 2012. Let us look at these waves in more detail.

The First Rebellion, 1963

The first wave of armed rebellion in northern Mali occurred between May 1963 and August 1964. Led by Zeyd ag Attaher and Elledi ag Alla, some historical accounts argue that the aim of the revolt was to obtain independence for a “Kel Tamasheq” state separate from Mali, although others see it as a mere “revolt.” In either case, it was a rebellion against the Malian state. Those who argue that it was a rebellion for independence cite the widely held belief in Tuareg quarters that the French



Tuareg militants seen driving near Timbuktu, May 7, 2012

colonial authorities had promised an independent Tuareg state and that their inclusion in post-colonial Mali was either a betrayal of this promise or a temporary arrangement. What is clear however, and seems to be a matter of consensus, is that there was resentment amongst many Tuareg vis-à-vis the administrative authorities of the newly independent Mali. The latter had taken measures that led to a change in the political order of the Tuareg world which had initially been shaped by colonial administration, but which now consisted of a central government ruling from Bamako, more than 1000 km away in the south. There was also an alteration in the social structure of Tuareg society whereby some people – including within the larger Kel Tamasheq group – that were otherwise considered as lower castes, became equal or even rulers of “noble” or higher strata.

Apparently, the lack of quality developmental projects in spite of the taxes and customs duties collected in the region, and the relations between security forces and the civilian population did not help matters. To many Tuareg, the security forces of the newly independent state were behaving like the colonial-era police officers and gendarmes. It was therefore not a surprise that one of the leaders of this revolt, Elledi ag Alla, was the son of Alla ag Albachir, the “rebellious” or “outlaw” Tuareg man who had refused to obey either the French colonial administration or the traditional order represented by the *Amenokal* (Chief). The colonial administration arrested and beheaded him in July 1954, exposing his body to the public to convince them of his death and warn them against any revolt. The Malian authorities terminated this first revolt/rebellion in blood. There was no need for a peace agreement.

The Second Rebellion, 1990

The second rebellion was launched in mid-1990, a period that coincided with a tumultuous moment in Malian political life in Bamako, culminating in a March 1991 military coup. A similar rebellion also broke out at the same time in northern Niger. Spearheaded by the Popular Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement populaire de l’Azawad* – MPA) and the Arab Islamic Front of Azawad (*Front islamique arabe de l’Azawad* – FIAA), the leaders of this rebellion expressed a clear separatist agenda, calling for an independent territory that would be called Azawad. Many of the fighters of this movement and others that were created had come from Libya and other countries of the region. They had left Mali partly due to severe droughts that afflicted both Mali and Niger in the 1970s. Against the backdrop of earlier discontents linked to perceived or real marginalization and the repression of the 1963-64 revolt, many of those that found themselves in Libya were enlisted in Qaddafi’s revolutionary wars in various places, including in Chad in the 1980s.

Using the skills and military experience that they returned with, as well as the organization, the apparent popular adherence and the resources that they had, this rebel movement registered a series of military victories against the national army. Thus, unlike the previous revolt, the rebellion was ended through two main peace agreements with the Malian state, generally facilitated by Algeria: the Tamanrasset Agreement (January 1991) and the National Pact (April 1992), culminating in the 26 March, 1996, “Flame of Peace” during which about 3000 weapons were symbolically burned in the marketplace of

Timbuktu, marking the end of the rebellion and the beginning of national reconciliation.

The Third Rebellion, 2006

The National Pact provided for a strong decentralization of the Malian state and devolution of power and resources to local authorities. It also led to the disarmament, demobilization and the reintegration (DDR), mainly in the various units of the defense and security services, of former combatants of armed groups. Claiming the violation of the terms of this agreement, a renegade Tuareg soldier who had been integrated into the army within the framework of this DDR process, Ibrahim ag Bahanga, launched a “rebellion” in mid-2006 against Malian troops in the region of Kidal.

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This rebellion did not have the same popular support that the previous and current cycles of rebellions had and have among the Tuareg population. In fact, the overwhelming majority of Tuareg disowned his actions, considering him and his Democratic Alliance of 23 May for Change (*Alliance démocratique du 23 mai pour le changement*) as fringe elements that did not represent the community or its interests. It was nevertheless the subject of the Algiers Accords of July 2006.

Despite this agreement, ag Bahanga and his men resumed attacks against government positions in May 2007, withdrawing from the peace process in September of that year. He continued these attacks until he was

apparently subdued and forced out of the country in early 2009. Many analysts suggest that he fled to Libya where he remained until early 2011 when he returned to Mali. He died in a car accident in northern Mali in August, 2011, shortly before the start of the current wave of rebellion.

The Fourth Rebellion, 2011

The current and fourth cycle of armed rebellions in northern Mali began in late 2011 and had the additional aspect of being mixed with criminal and terrorist activities. With some differences in their declared strategic and ideological drives, as well as the characteristics of their actions, there were four main groups acting in this initial period of insecurity: the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), Ansar Dine, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). Particularly from January 2012, these groups intensified their attacks and occupied all three northern regions of Mali (Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal) by mid-April 2012.²

Having conquered the northern regions, with the support of Ansar Dine, the MNLA proclaimed an “independent secular AZAWAD” in the north, claiming that the Tuareg population is marginalized in Malian society and that earlier agreements to address this issue were not honored by the central authorities in Bamako, claims reminiscent of those voiced to justify the rebellions of the 1990s. It should be noted, at this stage, that there was a subsequent institutional crisis occasioned by the March 22, 2012 coup d’état in Bamako, which overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré, about a month before the presidential elections. With the disarray that this brought in the government’s

actions, the institutional crisis contributed significantly to the rapid successes of the armed movements in their occupation of the northern regions, which occurred in a matter of a few days following the coup.

As in the 1990s movements, although to a different degree, the MNLA that spearheaded the armed rebellion was comprised mainly of combatants that had fought in Libya and had returned to Mali with their arms following the downfall of the Qaddafi regime in October 2011. The 2011 civil war in Libya, therefore, played an important triggering and/or aggravating role in the resurgence of armed rebellion in Mali. But there are other factors that must be taken into account in any attempt to explain the situation. Among these, one could mention the weakness of the state security apparatus and forces that were unable to defeat the armed groups.

With the collapse of the state presence in northern Mali, the armed groups had greater latitude to pursue their criminal and terrorist activities. This is perhaps what drove their daring attempt to extend their occupation southwards in the first week of January 2013. This strategically-miscalculated move justified the deployment of a French military operation called "Serval" around January 10, 2013. It also accelerated the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission for Mali (AFISMA) from mid-January 2013. By March 2013, one could argue, all three northern regions had been liberated from armed groups, except the MNLA, because the French military operation had approached it in a different manner, sparing it from any attack.

As this group was opposed to the redeployment of the Malian state authority and its Security and Defense Forces in the region of Kidal, there was a need to engage in

negotiations with the MNLA group and others that adopted the same position, hence the Ouagadougou Agreement of June 18, 2013. This agreement, whose full title is "*Preliminary Agreement to Presidential Elections and Inclusive Peace Talks in Mali*," allowed the holding of presidential and legislative elections throughout the country. Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, the

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current president, emerged victorious in the run-off of the presidential poll held on August 11, 2013. The Ouagadougou Agreement also permitted a timid and gradual redeployment of state authority in regions where it was absent because of the armed conflict in the north. This brought about a lull in the conflict, as the armed movements awaited the launch of the inclusive talks called for in the Ouagadougou Agreement to address the root causes of the conflict. The talks were to start about two months after the formation of the new government following the August 2013 presidential elections. However, with the delay in the launch of this process, a visit of the Malian Prime Minister to Kidal on May 16, 2014, to which the MNLA, still armed and present in the city, was opposed, triggered violent confrontations between rebel forces and

the national army, resulting in great losses in the governmental camp, as well as among civilians. An attempted attack by government forces on May 21, 2014, aimed at regaining control of the situation, ended in yet another rebel victory. This did, however, give renewed impetus to the peace process, leading to the on-going Algiers process that started on June 16, 2014.

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Efforts of the African Union in Resolving the Malian Crises

Discussions about the efforts of the AU – and of other actors – to resolve the Malian crises concern mainly the fourth and current wave of armed rebellion in the north of the country. With regional and even global implications given the terrorism element in the conflict, efforts have been holistic both in terms of the range of actors and the scope of responses. As the AU works with other actors, particularly Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the United Nations (UN), I shall not distinguish between the various actors as such, as their efforts are complementary and often intertwined. I will nevertheless focus on the AU and categorize efforts in terms of their diplomatic, political, and military nature.

Diplomatic and Political Efforts

Diplomatic and political efforts in the Malian crisis began in early 2012 through the various summits of ECOWAS and meetings of the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the AU. Already in December 2011, in anticipation of potential regional ramifications of the Libyan crisis, the AU Commission (AUC) and the UN Secretariat jointly undertook a multidisciplinary fact-finding mission in the Sahel region from December 7 to 23. On March 14-15, 2012, the two institutions organized a joint experts meeting in Addis Ababa that analyzed the report of this fact-finding mission and developed a series of recommendations on how best the AU and the UN, working together with countries of the region and other international partners, could assist in addressing the numerous challenges identified in the Sahel region.

In the context of growing concern at the turn of events in northern Mali, the PSC held a ministerial level meeting in Bamako, on March 20, 2013, to examine and endorse the conclusions of this joint AU-UN experts meeting. With the military coup, ECOWAS and the AU not only condemned the unconstitutional change of government, particularly occurring as it did at a time when they were striving to address the armed rebellion in the north, they also made concerted efforts towards the restoration of constitutional order in the country. ECOWAS had appointed President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso as its official mediator in the Malian crisis. The latter managed to negotiate a Framework Agreement for the restoration of constitutional order, which was signed on April 6, 2012, with the military junta. In accordance with the Malian Constitution, this Agreement saw the transfer

of power from the head of the military junta, Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, to the Speaker of Parliament, Dioncounda Traoré.

In June 2012, a Support and Follow-up Group on the Situation in Mali (SFG) was established under the co-chairmanship of the AU, ECOWAS, and the UN. The SFG held its inaugural meeting in Abidjan on June 7, 2012. This meeting, and subsequent ones, ensured a more inclusive and coherent transitional government in Mali, which was important for the success of other aspects of the international community's engagement in the country.

The AU and ECOWAS also decided to engage in dialogue with the armed groups, while not excluding the military option in support of the diplomatic one, or in case the latter failed. After these groups had indicated their readiness to negotiate under the mediation of ECOWAS, the Mediator urged them to clearly articulate their demands for the dialogue with the Malian authorities. More formal talks were held in December 2012, which were interrupted by the aforementioned attempt by armed groups to move southwards in early January 2013, and the subsequent international military intervention.

In summary, between April 2012 and September 2014 the PSC held no less than eight meetings on Mali and the Sahel, including one at the level of Heads of States and Government, on January 25, 2013. The latest such meeting was held on September 16, 2014. Meanwhile, the SFG held five meetings between June 2012 and November 2013. ECOWAS also held several summits, including emergency ones, during the same period.

The Algiers Process, 2014

It is these efforts that led to the signing of the Ouagadougou Agreement on June 18, 2013, in

the negotiation of which I played an active role as a member of the "college of international facilitators" that assisted the Burkinabe mediators. I have already mentioned some of the fruits of this Agreement and the challenges it faced in the implementation of some of the clauses, particularly with regard to the start of the inclusive peace talks. At this point, it is worth recalling that these inclusive peace talks effectively started on June 16, 2014, as noted earlier. The efforts made by Algeria enabled the actual launching of this process with the support of a number of regional and international organizations (i.e. the AU, ECOWAS, UN, European Union, and the Organization of

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Islamic Cooperation) and the following four countries of the region; Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger. After several weeks of preliminary work, particularly with armed movements, the Algerian authorities assembled in Algiers from July 7-14, 2014, a group of experts representing the aforementioned regional and international organizations and the countries of the region in order to prepare the inclusive talks through a "Draft Roadmap of Negotiations within the framework of the Algiers Process."

On July 16, 2014, a ministerial meeting involving all these actors considered the draft roadmap prepared by the experts, which was

eventually adopted and signed by the Parties (the Malian Government and the armed movements) on July 24, 2014. This Roadmap spelled out the basic principles and references of the talks and determined the different issues to be discussed in order to resolve the Malian conflict. It established the format of the talks and the composition of the Mediation team led by Algeria but including the representatives of the aforementioned five regional and international organizations and the four countries of the region. It also identified the parties to the talks and laid down a calendar for them that provides for a process lasting approximately 100 days, subdivided into different phases marked by periods of suspension or consultation on the ground in Mali. Indeed, after a pause in the process from July 26, the phase of the actual talks was launched on September 1, 2014, starting with a week-long

hearing of civil society organizations identified by all the parties, which is a novelty compared to all the previous peace processes in Mali.

Military Efforts

The AU and ECOWAS had a two-fold approach to the situation in Mali: giving priority to diplomatic and political efforts, while preparing for an eventual military intervention should the first option fail. This explains the preparations for a military deployment in parallel to diplomatic efforts. First, ECOWAS took steps towards the deployment of a stabilization force in Mali (MICEMA) from early 2012. With the active involvement of the AU, UN, and other partners, a number of planning meetings were convened for this. As time passed, however, it was decided to broaden the scope of the mission from a regional level to a continental one. Chad and other countries outside



Assisting the French in Mali

of West Africa had expressed readiness to contribute and it was observed that the involvement of countries such as Mauritania and Algeria, which are also outside of the ECOWAS space, was crucial for the success of efforts in Mali.

Thus, in accordance with the relevant decisions of ECOWAS, the PSC, and UN Security Council Resolution 2085 of December 20, 2012, it was decided to deploy AFISMA. The Mission was mandated, among other things, to support Mali in recovering its territories under the control of terrorist and armed groups, maintain security, and consolidate state authority throughout the country. It was also tasked with supporting the Malian authorities in creating a secure environment for the civilian-led delivery of humanitarian assistance and the voluntary return of internally displaced persons and refugees. I had the honor of heading this Mission, in addition to my capacity as the High Representative of the AU for Mali and the Sahel. As an illustration of how the AU worked together with ECOWAS, the latter's Special Representative in Mali became my deputy as Head of AFISMA, and the civilian personnel of the Mission were deployed from both the AU and ECOWAS Commissions.

UN Security Council Resolution 2100 (2013) of April 25, 2013, transformed AFISMA into the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was deployed from July 1, 2013, with an authorized troop ceiling of 11,200 military and 1,440 police personnel. It essentially absorbed the military and police personnel of AFISMA before integrating new elements, and was therefore a "re-hatting" process. Security Council Resolution 2164 (2014)

of June 25, 2014, extended the mandate of MINUSMA by one year.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

Northern Mali has been a theatre for recurring armed rebellions since its independence in 1960. These crises have their roots in the question of political governance, particularly the issue of management of the ethnic diversity of Malian society, economic governance – in that corruption has hindered the undertaking of many meaningful developmental projects – and the weakness and limited resources of the state. Any attempt to find a lasting solution to these recurrent crises must therefore address these issues.

The criminal and terrorist dimension in the 2011 crisis added to its complexity. The flourishing of terrorism and other forms of transnational organized crime in the Sahara in the build-up to and during this crisis in Mali brought to the fore some of the main challenges facing the region that make it difficult to police effectively.

The criminal and terrorist dimension in the 2011 crisis added to its complexity. The flourishing of terrorism and other forms of transnational organized crime in the Sahara in the build-up to and during this crisis in Mali brought to the fore some of the main challenges facing the region that make it difficult to police effectively. These challenges include the following: (i) the desert nature of much of the region; (ii) the fact that many parts of it, particularly in the Timbuktu and Kidal regions of Mali, the southern parts of Algeria and the northern regions of Niger, are sparsely if at all populated; and (iii) lack of adequate financial

and logistical resources at the disposal of governments of the region, particularly Mali and Niger. Some observers have added the apparent complicity of some local communities or even some government agents with the rebels and traffickers. One important lesson here is the need for regional cooperation, for no single country can face, on its own, the whole gamut of these challenges.

This is why the AU Commission and the AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL), which I have headed since its establishment in August 2013, strive to convince the countries of the region to engage in more collaborative work, through what is known as the Nouakchott Process, which was initiated by the AU Commission in March 2013. This Process brings together the chiefs of intelligence and security services of the countries of the region every two months to discuss the challenges and strategies for strengthening regional cooperation in the areas of information-sharing, border control, and the fight against terrorism, amongst others. The AU is now working on a generic concept of operations for the effective establishment of joint patrols and mixed units along the borders.

International involvement in Mali has been remarkable, as shown above, and crucial in the resolution of the complex crises that began in late 2011. This makes Mali very fortunate compared to other countries in similar situations. What this proves, and the lesson to be drawn, is, that when there is a combination of efforts by the various regional and international actors concerned, the chances of success are greater, particularly when there is coordination among them. The Support and Follow-up Group was a successful mechanism to ensure the coordination of efforts of the international community. Another illustration of this

international coordination is the collegial way in which the Ouagadougou Agreement was negotiated and the way in which the Algiers Process is being facilitated. This approach ensures effective complementarity between the various actors and their comparative advantages.

Another important lesson to be learned, particularly from the latest Malian crisis, is the acknowledgment of the multidimensional nature of the crisis. This explains why various actors seem to have adopted holistic programs for addressing the root causes of the crisis in Mali, where these causes have manifested themselves into an armed rebellion, but also in other countries where different interventions are aimed at structural conflict prevention. This is very clear in the focus of the Sahel strategies developed by a number of regional and international organizations, particularly the AU, ECOWAS, the UN, and the EU. Almost all of them have identified issues of governance, security and development as their main pillars. The hope is that these strategies are effectively implemented, with true national appropriation and in a context of genuine coordination between all the actors. Should this happen, chances are great that some of the root causes of recurring conflicts in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel-Saharan region will be transformed into opportunities for the countries and the people of the region. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ “Tuareg” is plural of the Arabic term “Targui”. It should not therefore take “s” to signify plurality.

² Other groups later emerged, generally as a result of splits with or metamorphoses from groups, particularly in the course of 2013 and 2014.