COMMENTARY

Mali: The Disintegration of a "Model African Democracy"

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This commentary examines how Mali entered its current crisis, tracing the fall of the regime of President Amadou Toumani Touré and the rise of armed Islamist groups in northern Mali, as well as the events that led to an armed intervention by France. The piece then discusses some of the conceptual frameworks that could impede effective policy formation in post-conflict Mali. The piece argues that Somalia does not offer a compelling model for Mali. The commentary closes by recommending that the Malian government and its partners should prioritize addressing humanitarian and security concerns in northern Mali over staging elections.

On 17 January 2012, a separatist group in northern Mali, the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), launched a rebellion against the government of President Amadou Toumani Touré. Led by Tuaregs, a politically disenfranchised ethnic group that had organized previous uprisings in Mali and neighboring Niger, the MNLA quickly scored a string of victories. Observers watched to see how Touré – a former general and a supposed symbol of African democracy – would respond. They wondered how the country's next president, the winner of elections scheduled for April 2012, would attempt to placate the Tuaregs, as previous administrations had done. Instead, Mali unraveled, with a coup in March 2012 and the emergence of armed Islamists in the north. As political instability wracked the south, French forces intervened in January 2013 to halt Islamist advances into the Mopti region. The French rapidly reconquered major north-

ern cities. Yet as the Malian government and its partners move to reunify and rebuild the country, flawed assumptions and imported models risk undermining reconstruction and sowing seeds of future conflict.

Mali's rebellion began with the MNLA's uprising against Touré, but neither the MNLA nor Touré remained a central player in it for long. Disgruntled Malian soldiers, embarrassed by their losses to the MNLA, charged that the government had failed to properly equip and fund them. A mutiny in March 2012 escalated into a successful coup against Touré (Schneider 2012). As it turned out, the image of Touré as a great statesman – an image not wholly undeserved, given that he relinquished power after leading a coup in 1991, and seemed willing to respect term limits and do so again before the March 2012 coup – had blinded outsiders to rot in his administration. Systemic corruption and broken promises had weakened the military, hollowed out government institutions, and left northern communities bristling with resentment (Whitehouse 2012).

The mutineers-turned-putschists spoke of retaking the north, but once in power

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they made no immediate move to do so. The MNLA, left with a freer hand, declared independence for the north. But the ostensibly secular rebels soon found themselves sidelined by a coalition of armed Islamists. This coalition includes the Tuareg-led Ansar al Din (Arabic for "Defenders of the Faith"), an Al Qa'ida franchise called Al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and an AQIM splinter group called the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA). The MNLA had robbed and raped civilians, creating political space for Islamists to offer northern communities a version of law and order. Islamist justice horrified some, including thousands who fled into southern Mali and neighboring countries. But others were grateful for Islamists' efforts to distribute aid and punish crime. Islamists outmaneuvered the MNLA politically and militarily. By summer 2012, the Islamist coalition controlled the northern provincial capitals of Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu.

In the capital Bamako, with soldiers in charge, presidential elections were cancelled. Facing sanctions from the regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), coup leader Captain Amadou Sanogo ceded official power in April 2012 to a transitional civilian administration headed by President Dioncounda Traoré and Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra. But Sanogo continued to influence politics. Sanogo loyalists obtained key cabinet posts (Dicko 2012). Sanogo's supporters proved willing to intimidate civilian leaders who displeased the Captain. In May, pro-Sanogo demonstrators beat Traoré so badly that he was flown to France for extended treatment. On 10–11 December, soldiers arrested Diarra and forced him to resign.

Outside forces strove to stabilize Bamako politics while searching for a way to reintegrate northern Mali. As ECOWAS negotiators met with Ansar al Din representatives in Burkina Faso, attempting to convince Ansar al Din to renounce links with AQIM and make peace with Bamako, ECOWAS com-

manders sketched plans for war. ECOWAS's efforts in 2012 overcame initial skepticism from Washington, DC and Paris about the group's capacity to organize an intervention. Plans to deploy an external force were ratified first by ECOWAS, then by the African Union, and, finally, in December 2012 by the United Nations Security Council.

In the latter half of 2012, a de facto partition of Mali held. Islamist forces conducted sporadic attacks, capturing Douentza from a local garrison in September, and taking the towns of Lere and Menaka from the MNLA in November. But at year's end clashes were limited.

In early January 2013, planning for an external intervention was overtaken by events. Islamist fighters attacked towns in the central region of Mopti, perhaps hoping to capture key infrastructure, like an airport in Sevaré, which outside commanders hoped to use in staging their coming intervention. The Islamist advance evoked a swift response from Mali's former colonial ruler France, which retains a strong political and security role in Francophone Africa. Within days, French planes were bombing northern targets. By January 30, French and Malian soldiers recaptured Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. Troops from ECOWAS and Chad moved to join the French, with the idea that after securing the north militarily, France would leave West African governments and Bamako to reassert political order.

The battle for Mopti and the resulting French intervention underscored a key lesson of the Malian crisis: the rapid, unpredictable nature of events. Every twist of Mali's tragedy can be explained with the benefit of hindsight, from the way regime corruption weakened and angered the army to the way that the MNLA's brutality created political opportunity for Islamists. But the thread of continuity in events in Mali in 2012–2013 has been the way that each new status quo fragments and shifts, rendering figures like Diarra powerful one month and irrelevant the next, and raising hopes of progress only to dash

them soon after. In December, Ansar al Din delegates in Burkina Faso signed a ceasefire deal with the Malian government. In early January 2013, further talks were delayed, the ceasefire in shambles. Policymaking has sometimes moved too slowly to help Mali's allies in addressing the country's crises.

By the end of January 2013, French and Malian advances had dealt powerful blows to Islamist forces. Yet a key question remained unaddressed: Who will rule Mali both during and after the intervention? Eyeing a model that supposedly succeeded in Somalia – involving African peacekeepers and Western funds – French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and other senior French officials have expressed their intention to head for the exits once Mali's territorial integrity is re-established. Even then, Western governments will likely continue to influence efforts at political reconstruction in Mali. Yet two of the main tools the Western powers have in their toolkit for dealing with rebellions against weak states – elections and military might – seem insufficient for solving Mali's problems.

Shoot and vote

In the last decade, a number of countries in the greater Middle East and Africa have experienced versions of a model that might be called, in plain English, "shoot and vote." Outside policymakers assert that outfighting rebel groups will create security, while elections will produce governments with the legitimacy to consolidate military gains. Outside powers have prodded destabilized countries to hold elections in the midst of wartime or immediately after major hostilities. Throughout 2012, the US government favored such an approach in Mali, urging the country to stage "national elections" as soon as possible.

Outside policymakers have touted Somalia in particular as a model for Mali. Once the French intervention in Mali began, US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Johnnie Carson told journalists on

16 January, "The kind of support we would give to the ECOWAS states and others in the African theater [in Mali] is very, very similar to what we have done in support of the [African Union Mission in Somalia, or AMISOM] effort in Somalia" (Shinkman 2013).

One problem with using Somalia as a model for Mali is that the trajectory of external military interventions – plural – in Somalia bears little resemblance to the present and expected experience of Mali. Somalia has seen occupation by its neighbor Ethiopia from 2006 to 2009, the deployment of primarily Ugandan and Burundian soldiers as part of AMISOM from December 2007 to the present, and an invasion by Kenyan Defense Forces (KDF) in October 2011 (KDF units in Somalia officially joined AMISOM in July 2012). Since 2009, Ethiopian soldiers have continued making periodic incursions into Somali territory. Unlike in Mali, where outside policymakers hope African troops will maintain French gains, in Somalia African troops have retaken territory at different paces. Ethiopian and Kenyan troops have largely acted on their own countries' behalf rather than as part of a unified mission.

It is, moreover, premature and reductive to call Somalia a success. First, the Ethiopian occupation from 2006–2009, which aimed to break the power of an Islamist group called the Union of Islamic Courts, was brutal (Hassan and Lefkow 2007). This brutality appears to have driven recruits to Al Shabab, the youth militia of the Courts and a dominant force in southern Somalia after Ethiopia's withdrawal (Bruton 2009). Outside intervention, in other words, played a role in intensifying the conflict in Somalia.

Second, despite military gains by AMISOM and other actors, reconquered areas lack credible, effective governance. The central government, which has yet to fully secure the capital Mogadishu, has frequently been distracted by its own internal struggles. Somalia's Transitional Federal Government conducted a multi-stage political transition in summer and fall 2012 to produce a new

parliament and president. The transition fell months behind schedule. More importantly, it left core political questions, such as how the central government will share power with local communities, unresolved. The destabilizing effects of political confusion have become apparent in Kismayo, a port city and former al Shabab stronghold captured by the KDF in September 2012. In reconquered Kismayo, groups aspiring to influence politics include the central government, the Ras Kamboni militia, the Kenyan government, the Ethiopian government, clans, and local politicians who support the idea of creating a semi-autonomous territory called "Jubaland" (Thomas III 2013). Before invoking Somalia as a model for Mali, it is appropriate to ask how well Somalia's political class is able to resolve conflicts between localities and the center. As analyst Kate Mrkvicka writes, "Somalia will only thrive if, and when, a permanent and legitimate political solution can be reached, which requires either a government capable of integrating all clan- and religious-based entities, or a government powerful enough to tamp down future extremism. Any solution that stops short of these objectives will leave the door open for insurgency and violence to return" (Mrkvicka 2012).

Third, security has not yet returned to Somalia. Assassination attempts against President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud on 12 September 2012 and against Prime Minister Abdi Farah Shirdon on 29 January 2013 have underscored how fragile electoral legitimacy can be in conflict zones. As Mali plans for elections in July 2013, its partners should bear in mind that elections – events meant to build national unity or at least resolve political contestation – can produce difficult questions about representation and inclusivity. Somalia's political transition in 2012 had its roots in antidemocratic processes – agreements brokered between different factions rather than voted on by a plebiscite, meetings of "clan elders," (RBC Radio 2012) and a compromise between the outgoing president and prime minister to delay presidential elections from August 2011 to August 2012 (Ahmed and Sheikh 2011). The antidemocratic deals that paved the way for an ostensibly democratic transition call the new government's representativeness into question.

Returning to Mali, there are reasons policymakers want to "shoot and vote." The political chaos in Bamako and the military challenge in the north are undeniably interrelated: confusion about who has the legal authority and the political power to rule the country hinders efforts to organize a credible effort to reintegrate the north. But "shoot and vote" seems unlikely to solve Mali's problems, especially in the long term. If Mali holds elections as soon as July 2013, how will election organizers enfranchise northern communities emerging from Islamist control? Will elections include the more than 400,000 Malians who have been displaced from their homes, and the 300,000 more who may be displaced in the coming months (Reuters 2013)? Could the resulting government earn legitimacy and exercise power without interference from the military or other potential spoilers? Elections could do more political harm than good. Yet without political clarity in Bamako, military efforts to retake the north could stumble, either in the execution or in the aftermath of the fight, as the center attempts to re-establish governance. Either outcome could increase the dangers of protracted conflict in the region.

The cyclical nature of conflict in Mali further challenges the idea that an election and a war will stabilize the country. The rebellion of 2012–2013 reflects grievances that went unresolved after the end of the 2006–2009 rebellion, which in turn drew on grievances unaddressed after a series of rebellions from 1990 to 1996 and memories of the Malian government's repression of a rebellion in the early 1960s. The MNLA invoked a century of discontent with administrations in Bamako, whom they accuse of discriminating against Tuaregs and abandoning nomads to drought and poverty. Some northerners may welcome

the chance to vote for a new government in the south, but Mali's next government must make a long-term commitment to the full economic and political integration of the north if it hopes to avoid another war in five, ten, or twenty years.

Perhaps an election and an occupation could initiate a long-term shift in relations between Bamako and the north. But policymakers often confuse elections with democracy, and ceasefires with peace. Libya's July 2012 elections, held a mere ten months after the death of ousted leader Colonel Muammar Qadhafi, were greeted with optimism and praise. Yet by the start of 2013, such optimism already seemed inflated, as militias refused to disarm, assassins targeted politicians, and areas like Benghazi continued to challenge central government control. Put differently, war and elections are political processes that address macro-level questions about who will wield formal power. But the solutions to instability lie more in addressing micro-level political questions: Who gets a job? Who gets a gun? Who gets a say?

Rigid categories obscure complexity
Beyond the limitations of "shoot and vote," devising policy solutions to Mali's crises faces another challenge: policymakers' tendency to rely on simplified and unhelpful categories for understanding the conflict.

How we describe actors and events in Mali has consequences. With the eclipse of the MNLA by an Islamist coalition including Arabs, Fulani, and others, speaking of a "Tuareg rebellion" already seems antiquated. Equating northern Mali with Tuaregs, and Tuaregs with rebellion, is dangerous. For one thing, this equation encourages policymakers to conclude that the MNLA are the "right kind" of Tuaregs. Policymakers then conclude that with outside support, the MNLA could provide a workable military and political alternative to the Islamists. This line of thinking presumes that the MNLA can speak for the north. But the MNLA already lost control of the situation once, partly due to its brutality against civilians. Can they provide credible political leadership if given a second chance?

The equation of Tuaregs with rebels also ignores undercurrents of ethnic tension. As communities in the north and south come to blame Tuaregs for the country's problems, and as current conflicts awaken memories of earlier ethnic violence, incidents of ethnic violence have broken out in reconquered areas like Timbuktu and Gao (IRIN 2013). The Songhai militia Ganda Koy, which the government has attempted to mobilize against northern rebels, targeted Tuaregs in the 1990s, and could do so again (Tinti 2012). It will be a grim irony if Western policymakers, who initially categorized the northern rebellion as ethnic, now ignore ethnicity while concentrating on Islamism.

Another unhelpful category is locality. Keen to separate "local" from "foreign" fighters, policymakers – including officials at dialogues with Ansar al Din in Burkina Faso – have often treated Ansar al Din as a group with genuine local roots, while treating its Islamist partners as foreign to Mali. Such categorizations ignore the seemingly fluid nature of membership between Ansar al Din, AQIM, and MUJWA. When and if it comes time to demobilize or reintegrate Islamist fighters, rigid ideas of who is local or foreign may hinder dialogue and reconciliation. In sum, policymakers who put northern Malian movements into sharply defined categories may find that the borders blur again and again.

Conclusion and recommendations
Mali fell apart quickly, but it cannot be reassembled quickly. Hundreds of thousands of displaced northerners cannot return home overnight; some will never return to their homes. Ethnic tensions, economic grievances, political anger, and religious fervor will not fade immediately once battlefields are cleared, deals are inked, or election results are announced. Mali needs outside help. But it needs a kind of help that practices patience

and engages complexity. Rather than rushing to pick political winners and go through the motions of democracy, Mali's partners should think carefully and inclusively about how to lay the foundations for long-term reconciliation and participatory politics.

Going beyond "shoot and vote" will require investment and imagination. Providing security, feeding people, and resettling refugees should take precedence over staging elections. Policymakers should devise a reconstruction and employment program for northern Malian communities on the scale of neighboring Niger's $2.5 billion, five-year Security and Development Strategy, launched in 2012. Rather than seeking one partner or proxy to rule the north, diplomats should talk with all willing parties and craft inclusive political frameworks. In the south, Mali's partners should acknowledge Captain Sanogo's influence in Malian politics and include his faction in political consultations. And the would-be midwives of Mali's rebirth should, above all, study the country's past, in order to avoid nurturing future grievances and conflicts.

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