COMMENTARY

Mali: Visions of War

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Political elites in Bamako articulate different understandings of the war in northern Mali[1], though share the same view on the restoration of Malian sovereignty. Those visions are deeply rooted in an assessment of the past failed peace agreements with Tuareg groups, a focus on social and ethnic differentiations that emphasize the role of Kidal and the will to avoid major reforms in dealing with key issues such as the efficiency of the political system, the role of Islam in the Malian polity and the complicated relations between Bamako and its neighbours. The status of AQIM in the current crisis, contrary to the international narrative, is downplayed while other armed groups, in particular the MNLA, are seen as the real, and, often, only threat.

Three months after the French military intervention started in Mali, Malian political elites still struggle to grasp the changes and the new agenda created by this event. Politics has not evolved sufficiently to address a number of challenges created by the military successes achieved by the French and Chadian contingents. The discrepancy between military progress and political stasis may be the most important problem today for the international community in Mali.

To the despair of the French diplomacy, reforms are talked about but not enforced. The date for national elections, by the end of July, has gone from tentative to necessary because French President François Hollande, in a hardly diplomatic manner, has made the deadline inescapable. National dialogue and reconciliation have not really taken off, as most politicians in Bamako prefer to focus on their refusal to offer impunity for crimes committed by armed groups in the North

(though they do not address crimes committed by the state in the North).

Yet, improvements also are visible. The population in the North is no longer hostage to the various armed groups, and daily activities are carried out without the tensions and constraints felt over the past several months. Yet, as described below, security is still fragile. Timbuktu and Gao have had to cope with significant security incidents which obliged the French troops to again intervene in the city and eventually carry out a large-scale military operation (Operation Gustav) to identify the locations of Jihadi arsenals in the outskirts of those cities. Additional people have also fled to refugee camps in neighbouring countries, hardy an illustration of an overall security improvement.

The French military presence in the North and the celebrated defeat of the armed groups there are pervasive within conversations in Bamako. France is (still) popular in the capital city. Yet, this positive stance toward France is increasingly undermined by the fact that the Malian army has not been authorised to – nor is it able to – put boots on the ground in Kidal. The French army is

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perceived as using the MNLA as surrogate force at the cost of Malian sovereignty, whatever the truth is.[2] The likelihood of Malian soldiers' misbehaviour is not even considered. Victory expressed by the presence of Malian army should not have any limit.

However, many politicians are willing to talk about the crisis in the North in order to explain what happened and how in a matter of weeks the central state and its army became irrelevant in that region. No one denies the trauma that was provoked by the coup in March 2012 and the "invasion" of the country early 2012 by the Tuareg and Islamist armed groups, allegedly coming from Libya and Algeria.

This paper sheds light on the way the crisis in the North is currently interpreted in Bamako by the political elites. Based on interviews in Mali in March, it raises questions and, if data are correct, implies different ways to address the war according to local history and in a way that goes beyond the presumed ideological divide between so-called Salafi-Jihadi militants and the rest of the population. The conclusion sums up challenges that the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission should overcome.

Settling Scores

Conversations on the crisis in the North are not a purely academic exercise, as there is a need to draw conclusions and recommendations for how to proceed in the near-term future. Let me first underline that in most interviews, the term "jihadi" was not mentioned; instead, the term "terrorist" was. For many politicians, "Jihad" has positive connotations (it is part of the religious dogma). Such a difference with Western politicians goes beyond mere rhetoric and should not be taken too lightly. Two points emerged recurrently and should be analysed.

The first one is best summed up in the following quotation: "the MNLA is the first terrorist movement".[3] The MNLA is indeed seen as the group that triggered the crisis in northern Mali and which, specifically,

killed 82 soldiers who had surrendered in Aguelhoc in January 2012.[4] This first bloody incident was followed by other sinister violations of the civilian populations' basic rights, especially in the area around Gao. Such allegations (some well-founded, others more fictitious) provide the ground for Malian officials' position that, unlike in the past, impunity for war-time crimes will not be accepted this time, a clear criticism of the 2006 Algiers Agreement that provided an amnesty for Tuareg fighters. Arrest warrants have been issued, but they target only leaders of armed groups and not Malian army officers, who again appear likely to escape accountability for recent and past crimes.

The second point derives in no small part from this first point. That is, many quarters of the Malian political arena today articulate a radical claim that justice must be achieved before anything occurs in relation to reconciliation. International actors will, thus, have to explain the need for reconciliation and justice to authorities in Mali in a better manner than they have done thus far. This task is made even more complex because of the international community's current focus on human rights violations perpetrated by the Malian army. A number of Malian and international observers do not contest the reality of such violations, which have been well documented by international NGOs such as Human Rights Watch, but feel uneasy since those abuses committed by the MNLA have been often played down by Western media and were significantly bloodier (over the last year).

Such an imbalance echoes a conspiracy theory widely believed in Bamako. According to this theory, the MNLA has always benefited from the complacency of international (and particularly French) media. There is thus no will to revisit history and the multiple mass killings by the Malian army and its surrogate forces over the last decades.

Such a claim is rather unsurprising. Even in South Africa many victims of apartheid were less than enthusiastic about the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and, as the family of the anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko killed while in police custody emphasised, were willing to go to court and get those guilty punished as any other criminal. Only the expectation of a compensation, the African National Congress (ANC) hegemony on anti-apartheid groups and the moral stance of Desmond Tutu convinced reluctant victims to endorse the TRC process.

It would be very positive if leading politicians in Bamako acknowledge past bloody incidents not as a way to say that wrongdoings have been committed by all sides but to emphasize that the Malian state should behave differently with its own citizens and that, indeed, northern Mali is part of Mali.

There is another dimension crucial in understanding the current mood among some in Mali: the feeling that trust was betrayed. For instance, many MNLA cadres before the crisis had been elected into significant positions (e.g., as members of parliament and so on) or were promoted to become army officers. However, they left to join the rebellion without having raised their grievances through formal channels despite having the ability to do so.[5] The betrayal inside the army is judged with even greater severity. Many explain the collapse of the army in the North not as a result of the strength of the armed groups but as an outcome of betrayal of Tuareg officers in the Malian army who shifted sides without any warning after looting equipment and ammunitions from the barracks.

Again, there is some truth in those descriptions, but that explanation falls short if one attempts to portray military defections among Tuareg officers as the main reason for the military's collapse in the North. The Aguelhoc tragedy also played a great role in the weakening of the army's moral. In addition, the embezzlement of military contracts was overlooked; up to 60% of the money allocated to contractors to buy weapons had been misappropriated by leading officials and middlemen.[6]

A Defeat of Radical Islam?

While a debate on the role of Islam in politics was prominent throughout the crisis, the French military intervention seems to have basically frozen that conversation. In interviews, no one raised this issue; when prompted, responses were very similar: the debate is over and Mali is and will be a secular state.

Such unanimity should not be misunderstood and considered to be the final answer to this recurrent question which pervades all Muslim societies of West Africa. Public opinion and the elites' mood is based on a number of assumptions and balances of force that may change with time.

The first fact, acknowledged in most interviews, is that the Islamist armed groups in the North were able to build a real constituency over time. Had those groups been less violent, they would have enjoyed support far beyond the territory they occupied.

Of course, not all armed groups are similar, and their behaviour was not identical in all of the regions and cities which they took over. People wanted justice, and Shari'a represented this call for a better world in a context in which state officials are often perceived as corrupt, biased and unfair to large sections of the population.

Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Emir of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), strongly criticised his colleagues in North Mali by summer 2012, if one can believe documents found in Gao (after the French intervention liberated it). In those documents, he supported the view that the most important goal was to keep popular support even at the risk of 'sweetening' the interpretation of Shari'a law which those movements sought to implement. For reasons that need further clarification, neither the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) nor Ansar ed-Din followed his well-thought-out advice.

While the lay population had no problem with Shari'a (already enforced for private matters) as such, they were surprised and

then infuriated by the simplistic understanding of the Divine Law enforced by the armed groups. All educated Muslims know that *huddud* (physical punishment for violations of Shari'a) cannot be applied without a number of conditions that are very hard to fulfil in the current world. The extremism of their social behaviour against sport, music and Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqa*) put many Islamists at loggerheads with lay people. Cutting hands and stoning women were widely deemed unacceptable.

Another reason was often mentioned in the interviews and reflects a call for equality that the Islamist militant groups were unable or unwilling to fully accept. Whenever one of their fighters committed a crime or an offense, the commander was reluctant to punish him as required by his understanding of Shari'a. The commander more than often advocated for that man to be posted elsewhere. That behaviour fundamentally undermined the militants' credibility among the population.

There is a third dimension that would benefit from further evidence[7]. For instance, in Gao area, the MUJAO sympathised with the Wahhabi community and promoted Wahhabi preachers who had been settled there for years. By associating themselves with a minority faction, which was not seen sympathetically by others, MUJAO also appeared to be defending one specific and marginal trend within Islam (and not Islam as such).

In Bamako, the chairman of the *Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali*, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, immediately endorsed the French intervention in January and by doing so just destroyed his political credibility throughout the crisis. Imam Dicko's statement – followed by a long silence – closes a period of Wahhabi dominance in Bamako politics that started with his election at the HCIM in 2008 and was illustrated by his ability to stop a reform of the Family Code and the appointment in 2012 of a Minister for Religious Affairs supportive of his views.

So, with such an accumulation of wrongdoings, one may indeed expect the defeat of Salafi supporters who are promoting a radical overhaul of Malian politics. While this may be true, one should look differently at this issue and assess the political weight of Islam in Malian politics. If re-framed that way, the answer to the question is less clear. The Islamic awakening in Mali took off while economic liberalisation was being enforced in the 1980s. It was not stopped by political liberalisation in the 1990s. Islamic associations became prominent actors in social welfare, education and eventually even in political conversations, as most political parties were mere electoral machines geared to win elections and benefit from State privileges without any genuine political agenda. The Malian constitution is very secular, but real life for the population is much less so. This growing Islamic influence in Mali is rooted in a call for better social justice, a will to reassert ethical values in response to growing corruption in all spheres of life and a claim for a national identity (Holder 2009).

None of those arguments have been challenged by the military intervention in the North or the violent offenses perpetrated by armed groups. The near collapse of the educational system and the often complicated relations between some leading politicians, the Wahhabi community and Gulf States provide systemic reasons to believe that the Islamic debate has not been closed for long.

One Conflict and Many Different Wars

At a time when the international community intends to open its toolbox on Mali and start talking about reconciliation, Malian analysts offer important food for thought. For them, there is a strong consensus that the crisis in the North took different shapes and that the Jihadi armed groups represented different threats according to the specific location in question.

If one follows this line of analysis, AQIM was a marginal group that became prominent for reasons that are very much linked to the posture of the Algerian State and the ability to organise in a more efficient man-

ner the protection economy of all traffics in that part of the Sahara and Sahel. Simply stated, former President Amadou Toumani Touré did not act against AQIM for years because he was convinced that the Algerians[8] were allowing the Malian Tuareg rebels to operate without much constraint. This loose proxy war – with Mali enabling Tuareg rebels and Algeria enabling AQIM – was based on a number of accepted rules. For instance, hostages were not taken from Mali, and the Presidency got its share of the benefits. What is sure is that in the late 2000s, AQIM was a group of less than 100 men and the Tuareg rebels obtained their supplies from Algeria.[9]

The competition between the MNLA and Ansar ed-Din is described as a multiple-layer struggle mostly focussed on Tuareg rivalries in the Kidal region. Islamism in that area is not seen as the real issue but rather as a way to cover cruder competitions. First, the succession of the traditional Tuareg leader of Kidal, the Amenokal, is shedding light on the way potential candidates behaved in the crisis. Second, closely related, there is also a competition between noble lineages including those of Iyad ag Ghali (Ansar ed-Din leader) and Ibrahim ag Bahanga,[10] who was the main inspiring force behind the MNLA. Third, there are divisions between noble, vassal and captive Tuareg clans which go back to the 1990s (Klute 2007).[11] Last and not least, one should also emphasise generational rivalry, as the MNLA at first tried to organise itself among a younger and better educated generation. To a large extent, those tensions explain why experts in Bamako are very cautious about the notion of a single, unified MNLA and pretend that that group functioned more as an umbrella for many smaller armed factions. Such factions are seen as having bound together and sided with the MNLA or Ansar ed-Din at different moments during this recent crisis because of family or tribal bonds (more than for ideology).

This discussion has strategic implications for the future because the roots of the conflict – beyond the abyssal lack of interest of Bamako to address the situation in that part of the country – to a large extent should determine representation during any future dialogue and reconciliation process.

If the Tuareg/Kidal issue is seen as having little to do with radical militant Islam, a complete and separate appraisal of the jihadi threat is needed. MUJAO, for many Malian observers, indeed represents a more genuine terrorist movement with impressive skills. Tactically, the MUJAO played its card in Gao very well because it let the MNLA Tuaregs harass the population before intervening and restoring law and order. Although the international media talked about this group as deeply involved in drug trafficking (not untrue indeed), it enlarged its constituency much beyond its core Arab group. It indeed recruited massively among the Peulh and Songhay, especially those who belonged to former captive lineages using their hostility against the Tuareg, Songhay nationalism, and the prospect to be well paid as recruiting arguments.[12]

Their modus operandi on many aspects was not different from that used by Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen in Somalia. The land issue also played a role (as in Timbuktu, in a different political setting). The MUJAO period in Gao also sheds light on the competition between Arab tribes in the area (Kenta versus Berabiche and Lamhar Telemsi group) (Scheele 2009).

Northern Mali society (not to mention the other parts of the country) is not only divided by ethnicity but also by social status. In all ethnic groups, noble, vassal and former slave population coexist. Implications vary with ethnicity but those differences are somewhat justified by diverse symbolic accesses to Islam and Islamic knowledge. For instance, Kunta Arabs claim to descent from the Prophet and this fact justifies their noble status. To a certain extent, those jihadi groups provided a new opportunity to dismantle those social inequalities. By rooting their ideology and aims to Islam and Jihad, the radical Islamist armed groups were credible enough to challenge that social hierarchy.

Those remarks should be read for what they are: a sketchy explanation of complex social processes. They need to be substantiated with more fieldwork. The fact that those elements were debated in Bamako could have different explanations. It is a way to get a better grasp on something people failed to understand when the crisis erupted in spring 2012. Another explanation is that those social hierarchies – often with different implications, though they are described with the same words – still feed deep social grievances in Mali, especially among the youth. Nevertheless, those partial explanations should be investigated because they will help move beyond the simplistic ideological debates which portray the MNLA as secular and the others as Jihadi-Salafi.

Conclusion

Is the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission fit for the task at hand? It took nearly three months to get members of that commission appointed, and the current list sounds like a bad joke. If reconciliation is at stake, the list of the commission members should reflect that agenda and strike for inclusivity. Of 30 members, only three are Tuareg (and settled for decades in Bamako) and four are Arabs, not the best way to engage radical Tuareg nationalists in the North. In the same way, the budget allocated to the Commission by the Malian state is about 25 million CFA Francs (less than €40,000), an amount not high enough to pay the salaries of the staff for a month.[13] Clearly, the implicit message is that, if the international community wants this to happen, it will have to pay for the Commission.

Is such a Commission the best way to reconcile communities? Political savvy would seem to suggest regional committees which would gather together once most regional issues have been settled. Problems within communities are as important as problems between communities or relations with the state. Such a process would have allowed people in the "political South" to also raise their grievances on, for instance, the way for instance decentralisation did not meet their expectations, corruption among local notables and so on.

Of course, this debate belongs to the Malian population, not to foreigners; but one may wish not to repeat what happened unsuccessfully in many conflicts: a very centralised approach by such a national commission funded by the international community and a chaotic and unmonitored work by international NGOs (i.e., organising meetings here and seminars there with all kinds of people to please their donors but with no accountability to the Malians).

A key aspect in the reconciliation process will be development, and one may fear again that the international community will pledge large amounts of money for pet-projects rather than adopting a sober approach to economic recovery. Again, the Bamako government is sending a wrong signal since it prepared a master plan based on the food processing industry and decentralisation, hardly an approach that will raise attention in the North.

One should remember that the "Marshall Plan for the North" in 2011 failed for two fundamental reasons. It was thought that security should come first (as the *doxa* says); hence, the plan started with new barracks construction, which hardened the Tuareg opposition and pushed the civilian activists to support armed struggle. The main contracts were awarded to companies managed by relatives of high officials (including the minister in charge) and/or by enterprises that used that opportunity to launder money.

Would the next international gathering on Mali on 15 May be able to deliver better?

Notes
[1] This paper is part of a larger study commissioned by the NIS Foundation, Oslo. It also used data gathered in Bamako in

March 2013. The author is sole responsible for the views and opinions mentioned in this text.

2 French officials strongly deny any alliance. They claim that moving on the same territory, they avoid confrontation. A maybe more accurate -but non official- version is that the French Special Forces indeed worked alongside some MNLA fighters (who were previously cleared from any misbehaviour). As they paid little attention to the city of Kidal and more on the Adrar Mountains, MNLA fighters were able to take over that town without French reaction.

3 Sometimes, this statement reflects a defence of President ATT gesture against Algeria. ATT was for good and bad reasons convinced that from 2005 onwards, the Tuareg rebels were operating under an implicit gentlemen agreement with Algiers. This, in his view, justified his wait-and-see policy against the GSPC soon to become AQIM. The self-serving dimension of that argument should not be missed.

4 Military analysts intend to believe that AQIM contingent fought in Aguelhoc, MNLA troops providing mostly a backup. Because of their losses, the AQIM militants decided to execute all Malian soldiers when they surrendered after nearly one week of fighting. MNLA officers did not stop these executions. Except Menaka, most of the victories claimed by the MNLA were actually fought by a coalition of militants who belonged to AQIM, Ansar ed-Din and MUJAO.

5 "He [a Tuareg MP] came to me to say goodbye because he wanted to join the rebellion. When I asked why he was going there, he said that if South Sudan got it, the Tuareg people can get it. Our Tuareg country is very rich and it will be recognised as South Sudan has been", interview Bamako

6 Interviews with military officers, Bamako.

7 This analysis should be confirmed by other interviews.

8 By Algerians, analysts sometimes mean the state, sometime the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité and sometime a mix of state officials and the military.

9 The Kidal region of Mali is polarized by Algeria.

10 He was killed in an alleged car accident in August 2011.

11 For a historical background, see Lecocq (2005).

12 Interviews Bamako. A MUJAO cell made up of Peulh was dismantled in Bamako late April 2013. Peulh in Gao area are often mistakingly taken for Songhay as they speak their language. See also on this issue Pelckmans (2012).

13 Figures were provided in a closed door seminar at the Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI) on 22 April 2013.

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