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Crisis in Mali: Root Causes and Long-Term Solutions

Summary

- The international focus on counterterrorism and regime change in Mali risks obscuring the long-term political root causes of the current crisis.

- There is national consensus that decentralization is the key to enhancing the political power of marginalized localities and improving security in the high-risk northern zone.

- Prospects for strengthening the state and promoting national unity via decentralization are coming under threat by an increasing politicization of ethnic divisions.

Introduction

In 2012, struck with an ethnic insurgency, coup d'etat, and an al-Qaida-linked land grab within months of one another, Mali descended into statelessness and lost control of two-thirds of its territory with dizzying speed. Just one year later, territorial integrity is almost completely recovered thanks to a French-led intervention that killed, detained, and dispersed the al-Qaida-linked radicals. Presidential elections are expected to restore legitimate state leadership as soon as July.

Do these steps resolve the crisis? Even as such immediate objectives may be in reach, it is essential to understand the root causes in order to achieve solutions for the long term.

In short, power and resources must be transferred from the centralized state to outlying territories, where local actors attribute insecurity and underdevelopment to their lack of political agency. Decentralization is one long-term strategy to empower local collectivities, integrate northern fighters into state security structures, and protect the fragile state against destabilizing blowback. The rebellions of 1991 and 2012 almost immediately preceded military coups in the capital of Bamako, suggesting that the central government has as much to gain from democratizing northern regions as do local collectivities. But any peacebuilding effort must be carefully considered, given the challenges that ethnic tensions pose to the pursuit of a genuinely democratic national unity strategy.

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The Quest for Decentralization

Mali inherited its centralized Jacobin state apparatus from French colonial rule, which lasted from 1892 until 1960. In the 1990s, after decades of dictatorship and rising political tensions in the north, the state embarked on a mission to transform itself by devolving power away from Bamako. The immediate catalyst was northern rebels' demands for greater authority, but the policy was viewed as a means to strengthen the country's overall political administration by giving each of the seven regions more autonomy from the capital. In theory, local centers of power would improve representation and awareness of particular local needs, enhance legitimacy and efficiency in governance, and strengthen security.

Decentralization was first enshrined as a national goal in the National Pact peace accord signed by Bamako and Tuareg rebel factions in 1992. With the 1991 Tamanrasset Peace Accord and 1992 National Pact, rebels renounced their independence claim in exchange for, among other provisions, commitments to integrate ex-combatants into the armed forces and to create new local, regional, and inter-regional administrative structures. "For the first time, governments were integrating the safeguarding of cultural diversity as one of the founding principles of the democracy," wrote Malian anthropologist Naffet Keita, on the National Pact.[1] Decentralization was the subject of popular participation in political debate, resulting in the first democratic municipal elections in 1999. After decades of rule by the south and its military, these elections in fact transferred power to local northern candidates, in particular the Songhai and Tuaregs.

But northern communities felt that, despite noticeable improvements in access to healthcare and education, decentralizing reforms were incompletely implemented. A 1997 USAID evaluation identified scarcity of resources and bureaucratic resistance among central government ministries as well as state-appointed administrators as major obstacles to implementation.[2] Structural adjustment programs had weakened state planning capacity and boosted aid dependency.

"In reality, power stayed as it had been before," said Ibrahim ag Youssef, a Tuareg professor from Timbuktu who advised the United Nations Development Program coordinator on implementation of the National Pact. He described a clientelist system where state-appointed prefects and sub-prefects continued to steer local politics and stifle newly-created local structures of representation. "All the power is in the hands of the president: he distributes carrots, that's it. So everyone wants to be near the one who is distributing the carrots," he said.

The Quest for Security Sector Reform

Security reforms also accompanied the political project to decentralize. By 1999, the Malian military had successfully integrated combatants and ex-rebel leaders into top posts, making former rebels responsible for maintaining security in the north despite deep-seated fears that training and arming erstwhile rebels was not in its long-term interest. By 2006, roughly 1,500 ex-combatants had been integrated into military service, with 150 others integrated into civil service. Although the 2012 rebellion triggered numerous defections, ex-rebel Colonels Elaji Gamou (Tuareg) and Abderrahman Ould Meydou (Arab) remained loyal to the Malian government and are currently key figures in combating terrorist groups and mediating between northern and southern communities. Proving that their fidelity to the Malian state supersedes tribal and ethnic ties sets a paradigm for a new generation of young fighters.

But limited reforms to make the security sector more inclusive and representative failed to prevent insecurity in northern Mali from skyrocketing. In fact, demilitarization of northern areas associated with the National Pact enabled ex-combatants to link up with cocaine traffickers operating out of Guinea-Bissau. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) set up a base in the secluded Tegharghar Mountains, from which it was able to launch hostage-taking operations and work with local groups. By 2010, widespread evidence of state complicity with organized crime and AQIM had undermined civilian confidence that the central government could be counted on for protection.[3] In 2011, Mali launched an ambitious donor-funded 50 million euro Special Program for Peace, Security, and Development in Northern Mali (PSPSDN) to create 11 new secure development and governance centers at strategic locations in northern Mali, where security forces would be stationed while infrastructure projects were carried out.[4] The goal was to reassert the state's security and administrative presence in a zone from which it had retreated, but local populations felt excluded from the process and fearful of renewed militarization by a state they

perceived as harmful and corrupt.[5] Future efforts to integrate the north into a national framework for politics and security will only succeed to the extent to which they foster inclusion and representation of diverse northern populations.

Politicization of Ethnicities Threatens Peacebuilding Efforts

The apparent secessionism of Tuareg insurgents in 2012 was in fact a negotiating tactic to press for greater autonomy in managing their region, and a strategy to push for an eventual referendum. "We can be economically independent without cutting the territory in two. We want autonomy, with our own government, our own ministers, our own budget," Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA) Cabinet member Nina Wallet Intalou said in an interview.

Although Mali's Tuaregs have been described as "a nation without a state," multiple tribal and fractional fault lines and inter-ethnic rivalries prevent them from unifying behind a single coherent strategy. The Malian state, like the French colonial authorities before it, employs a strategy of exploiting inter- and intra-ethnic divisions of northern populations, a scheme it has deployed in three northern rebellions prior to 2012, and one it is likely to make use of again.[6] The chief risk to peace efforts and decentralization as a long-term political solution is the exploitation of ethnic or tribal divisions, which France, Mali, and the MNLA are all already engaging in to varying degrees. "The feeling of belonging to different tribes is reinforced instead of weakening, and the feeling of belonging to the national community contracts, sometimes in a blood bath," writes Keita, describing a rising trend of ethnic communitarianism in Mali that runs counter to the power-sharing logic of decentralization.[7]

Despite failing to exercise military control over most of it, the MNLA has repeatedly laid claim to the three northern regions of Mali, which it calls "Azawad." The movement's claims to represent all Azawadians are not to be taken seriously. Northern Mali is ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, a feature in which most northern and southern Malians take pride; Tuaregs do not constitute an ethnic majority among the diverse population.

The French-led intervention already shows signs of electrifying inter- and intra-ethnic divisions. France's fast-moving offensive cleared all non-state militants from Gao and Timbuktu but allowed a special status for MNLA combatants who seized control of Kidal after Islamists were forced to retreat. "Some French decision-makers think the MNLA could be effective in defeating AQIM and liberating the hostages," one Malian minister said in an interview. Moussa ag Assarid, the MNLA spokesman in Paris, said there was "coordination" between the MNLA and French forces in Kidal.[8] "I say this for today, as I say it for tomorrow: the Tuaregs, except for those who let themselves be indoctrinated by terrorist groups which we firmly condemn, are our friends," French defense minister Jean-Yves le Drian told France 24.[9] Malians view the de facto special status of Kidal, the only of the three northern power centers into which Malian soldiers still have not entered, as inconsistent with France's stated goal of restoring the country's territorial integrity, and as proof of French meddling. In the meantime, thanks to the continued absence of both jihadi extremists and state forces, the MNLA has appointed a regional governor for Kidal and begun issuing drivers with papers from their Internal Security Department, with a stamp reading "The Azawad State: Unity, Freedom, Security."[10] Meanwhile, Malian soldiers, regaining access to the northern regions of Gao and Timbuktu, have perpetrated torture, summary executions, and forced disappearances of Tuaregs and suspected Islamists.[11]

With the exception of the MNLA, which represents neither all northern Malians, nor many Tuaregs, a strong will for national unity exists despite the complex and delicate tribal, ethnic, and political landscape. Songhais, Arabs, and many Tuaregs feel that the MNLA's pursuit of negotiated autonomy will fail to reflect this diversity. Any moves that favor Tuareg hegemony, or hegemony

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of certain Tuareg tribes, as a tactic for devolving power away from Bamako and granting autonomy to northern regions will guarantee inter- and intra-ethnic conflict between Tuaregs, Arabs, and Songhais, each of which has armed militias on the ground.

Conclusion

Decentralizing governance and security sector reform in Mali over the past two decades has made limited but real progress, which may be measured by the welcomed municipal elections and emerging leadership of northern military units who remained loyal to the state during the outbreak of last year's rebellion. The French-led intervention broke the grip of radical groups on the northern territory but the continued existence of mainly Tuareg armed non-state actors threatens most peacebuilding efforts. These groups reflect the lack of local authority. Yet, at the same time, empowering them as partners in counterterrorism or recognizing them as political leaders of the northern zone is not in the interest of long-term democratization, and could further politicize ethnic divisions and jeopardize national unity.

Ultimately, the success of peacebuilding in Mali will depend upon the extent to which it achieves, in the words of Keita, a "horizontal integration of the heterogeneous communities of the interior."[12]

Notes

1. Keita, N., "Sanctuarisation de l'AQMI et les 'dires' de l'Etat dans l'espace Saharo-sahelien au Mali," (working paper), 2012.

2. Lippman, H. & Lewis, B., "Democratic Decentralization in Mali: A Work in Progress," CDIE Impact Evaluation, 1998 No 2.

3. For a detailed, meticulous account of this: Lacher, W., "Organized Crime and Conflict in the Sahel-Sahara Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 13, 2012, http://bit.ly/10yYjgB.

4. For more on the PSPSDN, see: Wing, S., "Mali's Precarious Democracy and the Causes of Conflict," United States Institute of Peace, April 2013, http://bit.ly/102SEJI.

5. Lacher, Ibid.

6. For a thorough tracing of colonial and state exploitations of tribal and fractional divisions, see Gremont, C, "Touaregs et Arabes dans les forces armees coloniales et maliennes; une histoire de trompe l'oeil," IFRI Programme Afrique subsaharienne, 2010.

7. Keita, Ibid.

8. "French troops enter last Islamist stronghold in northern Mali," Reuters, January 30, 2013, http://nbcnews.to/XQWZly.

9. «Le MNLA, un nouvel allié pour l'armée française » , Allemandou, S., France 24, January 23, 2013, http://f24.my/XQXfki.

10. "Tuareg rebels seek to stamp control on northern Mali," Penney, J., Reuters, March 15, 2013, http://reut.rs/XQXr39.

11. For more on this: "Mali: Prosecute Soldiers for Abuses," Human Rights Watch, February 21, 2013, http://bit.ly/10z2FV4.

12. Keita, Ibid.