

Combatting Insecurity in Mali



Great Mosque of Djenne, Mali: [Image Source](#)

Executive Summary

Multiple interwoven crises currently engulf Mali. The United Nations reports that over 370,000 Malians have been displaced from their homes and over 750,000 are designated as food insecure. Female-headed households are twice as likely to face food insecurity, exacerbating gender inequalities. Poverty is on the rise. Unemployment and shuttered schools have left youth with few opportunities to improve their futures. Frustration with political leadership and local conditions make youth susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups that target state outposts and personnel while fomenting intercommunal violence. International actors should focus on supporting efforts to improve government transparency and accountability. Widespread impunity has led to very little confidence in the institutions of government and the country's political leadership. Governance structures are weak and critics have called for President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's resignation. More civilians died in Mali in 2019 than in any year since the 2012 coup d'état. Domestic leadership and international intervention, alongside cooperation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force (including Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso), have failed to stop the spread of insecurity. The result is a fragile and volatile environment. Military force cannot succeed without coordinated development and governance support that will get at the heart of the ongoing crises.

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The Unraveling of Democracy

In 2010, Mali celebrated 50 years of independence from French colonial rule. In 1991, Mali's autocratic President Moussa Traoré was overthrown and in 1992 a new constitution was adopted, making way for free and fair elections. Mali became a donor darling and a model for democracy in Africa. By 2012, the country was in freefall. A separatist uprising was rapidly gaining territory in Northern Mali and a bungling military captain Amadou H. Sanogo had just overthrown President Amadou Toumani Touré, a few weeks before scheduled elections to select his successor.

After the 2011 NATO strikes on Libya and collapse of Qaddafi's regime, well-armed Tuareg soldiers returned to Mali. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) was formed to establish a Tuareg state of Azawad that included Northern Mali. The Tuareg rebels were better armed than Malian soldiers and far more committed to their cause. The predominately secularist MNLA was soon overtaken by Ansar Dine, a local movement led by Iyad Ag Ghali, that sought to create an Islamic caliphate. Iyad Ag Ghali, a former Malian diplomat, soon joined forces with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Al Qaeda and a number of Tuareg elites saw the instability that followed Qaddafi's overthrow as an opportunity to spread their own influence in the region. In January 2013, interim Malian President Dioncounda Traoré asked for immediate French military intervention after the central Malian town of Konna fell to Islamist extremists thereby threatening the airbase in nearby Sévaré. *Operation Serval* was launched to stop the Islamists' territorial advance towards the Malian capital Bamako.

How did Mali fall so far so fast? From 2002 to 2012, democratically elected President Touré had squandered most of his popular support. Under his "politics of consensus" he undermined the political opposition and built a coalition of elites, many of whom blatantly devoured government resources for their own benefit. Despite creating anti-corruption programs, there was little accountability for political elites, civil servants, police, and judicial sector employees. Corruption was rampant. A decentralization program, designed in the 1990s, created over 700 municipalities with locally elected officials. Decentralization was meant to bring governance closer to the people but it only brought corruption closer to home. Government officials at the local and national levels were rarely accountable to their constituents and there were sharp resource disparities among municipalities. Growing inequality fed anger and frustration by those with few opportunities. Today, Mali is ranked 184 out of 189 countries by the UN Human Development Index, a comprehensive measure of development that includes education, per capita income and life expectancy and other indicators.

Politiki a man yi (Politics are bad) is a common saying in Mali, revealing the popular perception towards politicians. Malian politics is dominated by a ruling elite with very few opportunities for outsiders. Presidents Konaré, Touré, Keita are all elder statesmen of Malian politics. Elections in Mali have been held regularly, with the exception of delays that were the result of insecurity in the North. While legislative elections that had been delayed for years have finally been held, the head of the opposition, Soumaila Cissé of the Union for the Republic and Democracy (URD) and other opposition candidates were kidnapped and participation was low. Even when elections are held, vote buying is commonplace and voter rolls are notoriously inaccurate. Election workers and polling places are targeted by insurgents. In the current state of heightened insecurity in the North and central part of the country, polls are often closed thereby limiting voter participation.

Religion, Ethnicity and Politics

Mali is a secular state and over 90% of Malians identify as Muslim. Political parties based on ethnicity or religion are not permitted. Mali is ethnically diverse and has, for the most part, avoided widespread ethnic conflict. The centuries old cultural practice of *sanankuya*, or joking cousins, is built on a jovial, and tension diffusing, joking relationship between ethnic groups.

Tuareg have been excluded politically and, over the years, have demanded integration into the governmental structures as well as increased funding for development and infrastructure in the North. Following Tuareg revolts in the 1990s an agreement was made to integrate Tuareg into the Malian Army (FAMA) and, through administrative decentralization, to provide more opportunities for self-governance. These agreements were never fully implemented. Tuareg have faced systemic discrimination, and failed integration increased tensions among Tuareg themselves by privileging one clan over another.

The 2015 Peace Accord, officially called the “Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali Resulting from the Algiers Process” has also not been fully implemented. Not only were key stake holders such as Islamists, civil society, women, and youth excluded, but the agreement focused on the North and failed to address central Mali, which is now a hot spot. Centering on decentralization and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, the agreement did not address longstanding governance issues, including but not limited to, corruption, a weak justice system, and government impunity.

Intercommunal conflict flared in the mid-1990s and has been on the rise again. These conflicts are not the result of deep-rooted ethnic tensions, but are evidence of anger over poor regulation of development and land access. In addition, ethnic violence is instigated by actors who seek to destabilize the region. The Macina Liberation Front, led by Amadou Koufa, has provoked ethnic tensions and enflamed local conflicts. This destabilization allows the MLF to recruit followers and create safe havens. The group’s name is derived from the 19th century Fulani empire of Macina and seeks to reclaim a “glorious past” to the detriment of Mali.

2019 was particularly deadly. Pro-government Dogon self-defense militias have engaged in reciprocal massacres with Fulani in central Mali. Government policies have long privileged sedentary farmers as opposed to nomadic herding communities, namely the Fulani. Representatives of the state have also become targets. Hostilities over land use and water access are increasing and local authorities and/or the state do not have the legitimacy to navigate these tensions and regulate resource access.

The Fulani are frequently labeled terrorists and targeted regardless of any affiliations. “Good guys” and “bad guys” are created to benefit certain groups and bolster their power. The very term “terrorist” is unclear and the Malian government, and others, have used this to annihilate those to whom they are opposed. The Malian government’s support of Dogon militias has enflamed tensions between Fulani and Dogon communities which only serves to increase recruitment of Fulani into extremist groups.

The Long Road Ahead and Recommendations

Mali's crisis is grounded in local actors with local histories. Al Qaeda affiliated Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and the Islamic State did not create the crisis in Mali. They did, however, exacerbate problems and offer opportunities for local actors to affiliate themselves with large, powerful organizations. The French *Operation Serval* successfully pushed back an advance of Islamist militants in 2013. In 2014 *Serval* drew to a close and the French created a regional *Operation Barkhane* to fight terrorism across the Sahel region. The G5 Sahel Joint Force was created to carry the weight of the fight against terrorism and to promote security and development. It has never worked particularly well, although over time regional states, working together to secure the region, may be the best-case scenario. The G5 Sahel leaders argue that they need more funding. Given the history of lack of transparency and accountability, France and others are hesitant, for good reason, to provide a steady flow of funds to the G5. For decades counter-terrorism initiatives have been a source of funding, training, and weapons to governments of the Sahel. When the state and its security apparatus is viewed with suspicion by the population at large then flooding them with money is not effective. While the G5 initiative is a step in the right direction, current governments are working with, rather than standing up to, France and its allies, who are seen by most Malians as contributing to the current security problem. In 2013, French troops were greeted by Malians waving French flags in the streets. In the past 7 years, violence has not only increased, but encroached on places that were, only a few years ago, relatively safe. Despite protests across Mali calling for the departure of European and UN forces from the country, the G5 and Malian armed forces are in no position to effectively combat the insurgent groups that are active in the country.

Mali's problems are political and economic. It is unclear how external actors can effectively stabilize the country in order for the larger, deeply-rooted problems to be addressed. The political system has been undermined by an environment in which the state is a ticket to wealth. A civil service job or a position in the army are coveted for the resources they bring. These jobs are often acquired through nepotism or by paying one's way through qualifying exams, exacerbating inequalities. Legitimate governance means youth and the population at large have a stake in the direction of the country. This cannot be achieved without building confidence and engaging local actors who are committed to equitable growth. Corruption and a lack of accountability has left many Malians suspicious of state actors.

Power dynamics in Mali are not easily compartmentalized into either ethnic violence or terrorism. Those deploying to Mali are walking into a complex web of relationships. Local actors and extremist organizations have mutated and shifted alliances over time. Additionally, we must consider that perhaps the G5 has an interest in NOT resolving the ongoing security conflicts. Counter-terrorism initiatives have long been a source of money, training and weaponry for regional actors. In a country of just 19 million inhabitants, over 3 million people per year have required humanitarian assistance since 2012. Population displacement, poverty, and food insecurity increase anger with the government which in turn may increase recruits to extremist groups. Sexual and gender based violence is high and also rises with displacement and food insecurity. Violence is spreading in the region and threatens to move to coastal areas. A 2019 kidnapping in Northern Benin and increasing deadly attacks in Burkina Faso are examples of growing threats.

European forces and the United Nations must make concrete steps to support peaceful development across Mali. The European Sahel Alliance coordinates support for Malians. Its current priorities of youth employment, education and training; agriculture, rural development and food security; energy and climate; governance; decentralization and support for basic services; and internal security should be conducted with the collaboration and integration of local actors from the bottom-up. Local community associations, including women's associations, are crucial and can play important roles in mediation, dialogue, disarmament and re-integration. Empowering local actors and tackling corrupt governance are integral to ending the multiple crises enveloping Mali today.