Consolidating Peace in Mali

By Eric Muller
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*Mali sits in a precarious position following the 2012-13 crisis that resulted in France's military intervention. Much of the political and structural problems that led to the country's near collapse remain largely unchanged. This piece provides a useful overview of the challenges facing Mali's government, and has therefore been republished here as a **CSG Insight**.*

Mali faced a serious existential crisis in 2012. Its political institutions all but collapsed following a military coup, even as its sovereignty was under threat by a secessionist insurgency and Islamist military offensive. In the north, the Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) had declared independence after forcing out the Malian army. With no military presence in the north, Islamists fighting under the banner of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in

West Africa (MUJAO), and Ansar Dine began a push towards the capital. Until it was stopped by an international intervention, the Islamist advance had paralyzed the country.

Yet, over a year after the international community intervened to restore stability in Mali, the country's future remains uncertain. The French-led stability operation in 2013 may have prevented the country's immediate collapse, but it did little to alter any of the structural realities that triggered this series of crises in the first place. As a result, the path to a peaceful and prosperous Mali remains fraught with a host of political, regional, economic, and governance challenges, any one of which could stall its recovery.

Although relatively stable, in recent months Mali has witnessed a fresh round of tension across the north, including episodes of intercommunal violence, armed banditry, attacks by

jihadi groups, and recurrent skirmishes between armed groups and Mali's security forces. As the International Crisis Group reported in January, "seeds of a more devastating conflict are being planted…. Peaceful coexistence between communities remains a distant dream." Violent clashes on July 11, 2014 indicate that the country's security situation remains volatile.

Of significant concern is the continued presence of armed groups throughout the country, which range from the separatist MNLA, criminal networks engaged in smuggling and kidnapping, as well as the three major Islamist factions (AQIM, MUJAO, and Ansar Dine). Despite an ongoing peace process and the presence of international troops, many of these groups have not been brought under control. There has been no meaningful disarmament, while a process of "cantonment" endorsed by the UN

Security Council as part of Resolution 2164 has failed to be implemented. Even French and UN forces have struggled over the past months to consolidate security gains. While none of the armed groups are as strong as they were before the international intervention, some are more than capable of playing spoiler to the government and its international partners' efforts at moving the country forward.

Mali's partners also face a difficult situation, and possess limited capacity to support the government, which has become increasingly reliant on its international interlocutors. Perhaps the best example is France, which after boldly proclaiming that that its involvement would last only a matter of weeks, has been unable to extricate itself from the country. Even with 1,600 soldiers still deployed in Mali, France has been drawn into a number of other hotspots, including the Central Africa Republic (CAR). Its mission in Mali is financially and materially stretched, and any new funding commitments are unlikely to materialize.

Complications have also arisen with regional actors. In January, representatives of Mali's governing regime requested that Algeria play a more prominent role in mediating between the government and armed groups. This was widely interpreted as an effort by the government of Mali to replace the official mediator appointed by ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States), Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, who was viewed as too accommodating of the rebels.

Other neighbours have proven less helpful. Following the 2011 overthrow of Libyan strongman Muammar Gaddafi, an influx of heavily armed Tuareg fighters and illicit weapons into Mali played a direct role in facilitating the MNLA's initial insurrection. Even today, weak border controls along the Libya-southern Algeria-Mali corridor allow Islamist groups like AQIM to move with relative ease across the region.

France has played an important role in Mali's transition, negotiating an initial ceasefire between the government and rebels, and preventing the rebels from taking Timbuktu. The government of Mali will face serious obstacles if it is unable to cope without French support and backing. There does not seem to be another international actor able or willing to fill a potential French void. The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabi-

lization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) is similarly stretched. It has been on the ground since July 2013 but lacks the resources to play a decisive role.

With inconsistent international and regional support, ensuring the success of Mali's transition will fall largely on the government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK). However, a number of questions remain about IBK's government, which has replicated many of the previous regime's bad habits. IBK's transgressions include an unhealthy reliance on nepotism and corruption, as well as lavish spending. A notorious example occurred in May when the International Monetary Fund was forced to suspend its general budget support to Mali after news emerged that the government had purchased a new presidential jet for 40 million USD.

Old habits have also died hard regarding the government's handling of the country's north. While the government has made some attempts to foster a truly representative and genuine national dialogue about the country's future, some analysts argue that the government is recycling old clientelist tactics. Critics point to recent legislative elections, when the president and his allies identified

and supported a number of candidates linked to armed groups, as part of a plan to divide and eventually weaken the northern opposition.

The current situation in the north remains the most significant obstacle to consolidating peace in Mali. Rather than relying on the clientelist divide-and-rule tactics of the past, the government needs to pursue a truly inclusive process of engagement. It especially needs to focus on including the separatist MNLA in any discussions about the country's future. Up until peace talks that began on July 16th in Algeria, the government had relied primarily on France to deal with the rebels. Merely prioritizing security stability in the country's north will not be sufficient to consolidate peace in Mali. While the government has held a series of regional conferences on decentralization and the future of the north in 2013, they were predominantly top-down affairs, which northern groups refused to attend, dismissing the meetings as holding no room for true dialogue.

In addition to fostering a truly inclusive national dialogue, the government will also need to focus on economic development and restoration of basic services to the country's north. Both of these issues have presented as obstacles to national unity, and the government's ability to restore prosperity and stability. They have also fractured the social contract between northern citizens and the government that claims to represent them. The result has been a sense of northern alienation that has prevented the government from reclaiming preeminence in this region.

Key to addressing the concerns of northern Mali is dealing with the clear economic disparity between the country's north and south. Mali's north has always been economically disadvantaged compared to the south – though neither are particularly well-off, given the country's gross national income per capita in 2013 of only 670 USD. This situation has only been exacerbated by international donors. As aid money poured into the country, it went primarily to the south where the security situation was less fluid than the north. As a result, while the southern economy has experienced a gradual resurgence, northern economic growth has been sluggish.

Significant challenges remain in Mali. Nevertheless, the government does have an important opportunity to bring closure to many of the structural and systemic issues that led to its political downfall in 2012-13. However, it will require the government to shirk the culture of business-as-usual and truly engage with the entire country.

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