



# 33

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## MALI: The Collapse of a Success Story

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**Mali is a landlocked country in West Africa, bordered by Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal and Mauritania. Its size is just over 1,240,000 square kilometres and its population, 14.5 million. Its northern regions reach deep into the Sahara, while the southern part of the country, where most Malians live, is defined by the Niger and Sénégal rivers. The country's economy is centered on agriculture and fishing, gold mining and salt. About half the population lives below the international poverty line.**

**In January 2012, an armed conflict broke out in northern Mali, where Tuareg rebels, allied with Islamist forces, took control of the region and declared the secession of a new state, Azawad. The conflict was complicated by a military coup in Bamako in March and later fighting between Tuareg and Islamist rebels. In response to Islamist territorial gains, France launched Opération Serval in January 2013. A month later, Malian and French forces had recaptured most of the north and presidential and legislative elections were scheduled for July.**

**Juan Garrigues is cautious when assessing French intervention: after its first media-frenzy stages, it has now officially entered the gradual military pull-out phase. But this is not, not even remotely, the end of the story – or so it seems.**

### What is the situation today?

The French reckoned that there were about two thousand jihadists in northern Mali. According to their calculations, they have killed about seven hundred of them and captured another two hundred. The intervention has succeeded in halting the advance to the south of the Islamist alliance and in dividing it. The coup d'état which ousted President Amadou Toumani Touré in March (following complaints from the Malian Army that it was ill-equipped to fight the insurgents, who had benefited from an influx of heavy weaponry from the 2011 Libyan civil war) led to a power vacuum phase in Bamako. This was taken advantage of by the Islamist alliance to advance towards the capital. The Islamists, whose avowed goal is implementing sharia in Mali, were stopped by the French intervention. But it is unclear where the missing jihadists are (1.100, according to French calculations, who could be in Algeria and Mauritania, but mostly regrouping in southern Libya) and what they plan to do next. But it seems likely that those who have

returned to their homes in Algeria or Mauritania or are hiding in southern Libya, are simply regrouping to continue their fight. So, while the short-term goals of the intervention have been met – stopping the jihadists move southwards-, the long term consequences remain uncertain. The United Nations are sending in (as from 1<sup>st</sup> July) a stabilization mission by the name of MINUSMA (11,200 soldiers, 1,440 police officers and civilian experts) with the aim of helping to reestablish state control throughout the country and to support Malian authorities in the political transition process. But most observers are quite skeptical: such a vast and geographically complex region is extremely difficult to control and the mission itself will become a perfect target for the Islamists. Some go as far as to say that MINUSMA will be more of a problem than a solution, and that it risks being counterproductive, given the characteristics of the troops involved (African and generally unprofessional) and the impact of a large mission that will create an artificial parallel economy open to abuses. The Islamists' presence in northern Mali has also had the effect of exacerbating local ethnic divisions, increasing the fragility of the situation.

### **Is there danger of a quagmire?**

France is pulling out its military (3 out of 4 soldiers are out already, one thousand are left) but will carry on with its counter-terrorist activities in the field. François Hollande has declared that France has no intention to stay and does not want to be the policeman of Africa, but that it will stay on (French intervention is limited to Mali) “as long as necessary”. Depending on how you define it, this could be a long time. The Algerian factor is key. Algeria is the undisputed regional power: its armed forces are by far the largest and best-equipped and its officials have a long experience in dealing with Tuareg rebellions and know all the actors involved. Algeria first opposed French intervention, but ended up authorizing fly routes and sealing its border with Mali to keep out jihadists. For the situation to be seriously addressed in the region, Algeria's active cooperation is crucial. France has also been helped by US drones in Niger, which have provided vital information. Mauritania, like Algeria, first opposed the intervention, but later supported it and is now contributing troops to MINUSMA. Military support from Chad has also been critical in the Kidal region, where some of the hardest fighting with jihadists has taken place. Finally, Burkina Faso's role as mediator with the Tuareg has produced (on 16 June) a provisional agreement between the transitional government in Bamako and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) to allow Malian troops to enter Kidal. All these actors will continue to play relevant roles in Mali. But to what extent will France remain there militarily is still unclear. One key factor for Paris will be Niger's stability, where French uranium plants are essential for the country's energy needs. Recent attacks to these plants are certainly a matter of great concern for French policy makers.

### **What are the Tuareg up to, after parting ways with the Islamists?**

The Tuareg people have been marginalized, economically and politically by the Malian state for decades – during which several rebellions have taken place, notably in 1992. The Tuareg saw in the power vacuum in Bamako an opportunity to right their historical grievances. They pushed for independence, but knowing full well that this was a maximalist claim - from which they have duly retreated since and are now back to a more moderate position, seeking greater political decentralization and increased economic resources. In Niger, the situation of the Tuareg minority is quite different: they are socially, economically and politically better integrated (the current Prime Minister, Brigi Rafini, is an ethnic Tuareg), and so the stability of the country is, in this sense, more sound. In any case, the major challenge for the Tuareg and the governments of Mali and Niger is their weak economic base. Mali is consistently among the last five or six lowest-ranked

countries in the United Nations' Human Development Index (Niger is last) and is totally dependent on foreign aid. Its population is dispersed in a vast landscape. It has very few resources. For a long time, however, Mali was presented by western donors and locals as a success story: a poor but stable democratic country. This image has collapsed at an astonishing speed, putting into question a foreign aid system which has been supporting unsustainable and often corrupt structures, both political and economic. What sort of a system are we currently heading to? Is it going to be a more decentralized model? The reality is that there are no real state institutions to speak of in much of the north of the country. It is therefore likely that Tuareg grievances will continue, as will alliances of convenience with the jihadists and criminal organizations

### **What do international players have to say?**

The US is almost exclusively interested in security matters – i.e. to prevent the creation of a safe haven for jihadists. Interest in the region is mainly a European affair, for some very good reasons. The Sahel comprises very poor countries with populations that are growing at the fastest pace in the world (they will increase fourfold by the end of the century), and this means increasing migration pressures on Europe. Europe has a long-term vested interest in helping to establish stable and sustainable governments in the region. But to what extent this interest will translate into commitments and resources is still very much up in the air. The French expected more help from countries such as Spain – which has always claimed the importance of the Sahel – during the intervention. And while over 4 billion euros were committed to Mali by international donors, most of these funds are still pending .

### **How does instability in the region affect the political transitions in the Maghreb?**

It affects the political and economic situation of the Maghreb countries in many different ways. Jihadist groups present in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, or even Egypt alter the security situation and the political debate in these countries, which are already struggling with their transitional process. Moreover, their links with criminal organizations and their activities (such as drug-trafficking and kidnapping) means, first, that governments have to devote more of their scarce resources to reinforce security, and second, that an underground economy distorts the functioning of these countries' economies. As has happened in Tunisia and Egypt, concerns over insecurity can also virtually paralyze their main industry: tourism.

### **Are there really going to be elections soon?**

They are due to be held on 28 July. But there is an on-going debate: Does it really make sense to hold elections at such short notice, when everybody knows that the logistics will be almost impossible to handle with such little time left? And what about the displaced population (353.000) and the refugees (174.000): can these elections be fair without many of their votes? Finally, how can voting take place in the Kidal region, where there is hardly any presence of the Malian state? On the other hand, those in favor of holding elections as soon as possible, ask: Can the provisional government in Bamako, which lacks democratic legitimacy, tackle the pressing, hard issues facing the country? Will waiting a few months solve the problems for holding elections? All things being equal, is it not better to have an elected government than a non-elected one as soon as possible? There are good arguments on both sides, but it now looks likely that elections will take place on the established date, as France favours.