
Mali after the Elections: Next Steps and Priorities for Progress

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Introduction

This document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 15 October 2013, which looked at the prospects for Mali following the 2013 elections.

The situation in Mali has improved over the past year, with presidential elections, increased state capacity and an improved security situation, but the country still faces a number of challenges. These are particularly prevalent in the north, where food insecurity and the presence of jihadist and armed groups creates instability, but national issues of reconciliation and regional pressures also need to be addressed. Progress in Mali seems a possibility, though, and effective natural resource governance is one of the keys to both development and opening dialogue between different groups.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Paul Melly

Paul Melly stated that the situation in Mali has changed greatly from January 2012, when the north was occupied by jihadist groups. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) had planned an intervention, but the response so far has been slow and ECOWAS lacks the necessary capacity. He noted that despite improvements in the situation, the transitional government remains fragile, with a continued struggle for power in the north between Tuareg rebels and the military.

The speaker discussed some of the improvements that have taken place in Mali. Presidential elections were recently held, in which Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta received the majority of votes. These elections were a step in the right direction, and the first round had a higher turnout than normal, of around 50 per cent. However, he noted that despite the high percentage of the population registering to vote, many were unable to do so, as they remain in refugee camps.

Furthermore, a military presence has been established in the north of Mali in response to the returning Jihadist groups, and a governor has been reinstated in the northern town of Kidal. A national debate on the truth and reconciliation process has been established, with the mandate extended to include justice. Talks are underway with non-jihadist armed groups, such as the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Arab Movement of Azawad (MAA). These militia groups represent segments of the Sahel population. The government is returning to normal functioning, with state and financial institutions beginning to show signs of increased efficiency and capacity. Additionally, the army's influence has been reduced and it is increasingly under the government's control.

Despite these positive developments, the speaker emphasized that a lot remains to be done in improving Mali's security. In the last 10 months, two bombings have taken place in Gao and Timbuktu. Mokhtar Belmokhtar, who has links to the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), has formed a new group, which is responsible for planning terrorist attacks in Niger. More troops are expected from France and the United Nations, but because of the size of the territory covered, the large military presence may not be able to halt sporadic terrorist attacks and bring an end to the violence.

The speaker noted Mali's strained relations with its immediate neighbours. Mali has a poor relationship with the Mauritanian government, which has been accused of sponsoring jihadist groups in the country; a claim supported by the United Nations. Similarly, Mali has a difficult relationship with Algeria. This has been damaged by repeated attacks by terrorist groups assumed to be based in Algeria.

The speaker underlined the fragility of the current negotiation process. Despite the temporary ceasefire of armed groups, it is unclear how the government will reach a political arrangement without giving the northeast a special status. This has created a high expectation amongst Tuareg groups. He noted that MNLA does not represent the entire population of Kidal, despite presenting themselves as a wider voice.

This large number of issues Mali faces puts the president under enormous pressure. The south is pushing to end fighting in the north, whilst the north is bitter about the events of 2012 and the Tuaregs are resentful of the continued military presence in their region.

The north views MNLA governance as chaotic, whereas jihadist rule was seen as harsh but structured. There are social issues in the north that the president needs to address; one of the biggest of these is the development of a viable economy in the region. With the agricultural sector in decline, disbanded and marginalized insurgents in the north will have reduced livelihood opportunities, and may be forced to turn to drug smuggling and other such crimes. Armed groups are traditionally incorporated into the army at the end of a conflict. However, while the integration of MNLA members has been suggested, there are concerns that they may once again defect.

Despite these challenges, the speaker stated that there are reasons to be positive. The elections were conducted in a reasonably fair manner, with limited interference from the international community. This indicates a positive degree of state capacity. Revenue collection continued throughout the transition period, and the economy is once again beginning to grow. Security conditions in Bamako are relatively stable, which is encouraging for investment and tourism. He explained that President Keïta has also shown himself to be a shrewd politician who acts quickly in a crisis and who has successfully formed a government of capable technocrats and younger politicians. The foreign minister, for example, is a former Arab rebel who understands the Tuaregs. The speaker noted that international donors pledged €2.35 billion to Mali, and stated that such support from the international community will be crucial for improving the situation in Mali. He concluded by expressing confidence that slow progress will be possible in Mali.

Elias Fon

Elias Fon examined Mali's political transition from interim President Dioncounda Traoré to President Keïta. He stated that this took place smoothly and the international community felt that Mali's transition was stable.

The coup and the armed conflict in Mali have impacted on humanitarian aid and international assistance in West Africa. The speaker noted that the conflict has led to food insecurity and suggested that this is an area in which the international community could help President Keïta successfully manage Mali's natural resources. Food insecurity in Mali and across the Sahel has previously led to instability. Most of the food in Mali is produced in the south, as the north only receives one and a half months of rain each year. Drought is a big issue for the north and he noted that this may have caused some of the grievances contributing to rebel activity in the region. He suggested that food security could be improved by developing education, infrastructure and health care centres.

The speaker queried the capacity of the armed rebel groups in the north and the south of the country. He stated that none of these were able to mobilize Malians on a larger scale. Insurgents who were captured explained that they had been forced to join the armed groups or were motivated by financial considerations.

Mr Fon highlighted the huge challenge the newly elected president will face in trying to integrate the north into the reconciliation process. He stated that it is difficult to envisage a situation in which all of the

different groups will agree to a dialogue. He concluded however that Mali has the potential to be rich, possessing natural resources and abundant water in the south. This should be used to encourage groups to engage in discussions about peace.

Summary of questions and answers

Questions

Could you comment on the process of decentralization, especially on the distribution of funds, and whether French intervention has moved this process further along?

Is there evidence that jihadist groups are receiving monetary support from foreign links?

Paul Melly

Paul Melly noted that the discussions on decentralization are currently underway and the details are not yet clear. While it is often suggested that France is not very supportive of decentralization, he stated that this is a false perception. France will provide technical military assistance to Mali if decentralization takes place. However, it is important to note that while decentralization will offer a solution to the problems in the north, a deal with the MNLA and the Tuareg elite would marginalize other groups in the region. It would be preferable to deal with the MNLA through formal mechanisms, and working through local elected leaders will increase legitimacy.

He added that there have been rumours that rebel groups, such as MUJAO, have been receiving money from Qatar for the rebellion. This is unlikely as the Qatari royal family is very close to the West, especially France. However religious Qatari families may be independently funding groups.

Questions

What is the significance of the recent visit of Morocco's King Mohammed VI for the people of Mali?

Could you elaborate on the regional dimension and the role ECOWAS is playing in the post-electoral situation?

Paul Melly

Paul Melly stated that the King of Morocco's visit to Mali was significant as Morocco's involvement in Mali is very important. The two countries have a bilateral relationship, and have transport and communication links. The visit helped strengthen the two countries' relationship and presented a coherent front. President Keita has a better relationship with Morocco than that of the previous transitional government. The strong relationship between Mali and Morocco is especially important given the growing distrust between Mali and some of its neighbouring countries, especially Algeria, where resentment has developed regarding Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the lack of border control.

Elias Fon

Elias Fon noted that Mali was one of the few countries to continue supporting Morocco after its withdrawal from the African Union. He stated that decentralization is closely linked to the reconciliation process. He questioned whether it is too soon for the president to begin Mali's decentralization process. If

the president wishes to unite the country, decentralization should come later; otherwise there is the risk that the north may feel isolated and excluded from the process of reconciliation.

Mali can rely on support from ECOWAS, which in turn is supported by the African Union. However, the question remains as to whether ECOWAS can speak freely.

Question

How much of the money in circulation in Mali comes directly from the proceeds of criminal activities such as cigarette smuggling and kidnapping?

How are discussions between the government and rebel movements progressing?

Are difficulties to be expected regarding the situation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their return to the north?

Paul Melly

Rebels groups are financed through criminal proceeds such as drug trafficking and ransoms paid for the release of hostages. This is one of the reasons why President François Hollande of France will not pay for the release of hostages, as it is an important source of funding for the rebel groups.

He stated that there is direct negotiation between the rebels and the government. However, the rebel groups only represent some sectors of the society. The government has announced a national consultation of decentralization, which will involve all communities. There are a lot of community reconciliation processes in place as well, and a new reconciliation minister has been appointed.

Elias Fon

While many IDPs are happy to go back to the north, Elias Fon noted that they fear the instability will return. No one has been able to assure them of peace and stability in the region. However, he speculated that IDPs could still return.

Regarding the funding of rebels and President Keïta's talks with the rebels, he explained that there are leaders abroad who can act as representatives for militia movements. He stated that the president should consider including people from outside of Mali. It is important to include everyone in the dialogues; otherwise it will be difficult to reassure the IDPs that they are returning to peace.