



“WE WANT A MALI FOR THE MALIANS”

THE FUTURE OF THE PEACE PROCESS IN MALI

Freelance journalist, Odile Jolys, interviews Alexander Thurston¹

In 2012 Tuareg separatists, initially fighting alongside jihadists, occupied the North of Mali. In late spring, the jihadists took over the rebellion and sidelined the separatists. In January 2013 the jihadists advanced into central Mali and appeared to threaten the Malian capital Bamako, where the government had been overthrown in a military coup. France intervened militarily, with the backing of the African Union and the United Nations. French and African forces quickly regained control of northern Malian cities, but were unable to eradicate jihadism in the north or to bring an enduring peace to a deeply fragmented region.

Five years later foreign soldiers, the French Operation Barkhane and the UN-Mission (MINUSMA) are still in the country but insecurity has grown along with intensified terror attacks on civilians in Mali and neighboring countries.

Alexander Thurston explains the situation in Mali today and sheds light on the ongoing peace process.

THREE YEARS AFTER SIGNING THE ALGIERS PEACE ACCORD, WHERE ARE WE TODAY?

A major crisis in the North of Mali persists alongside a deteriorating security situation in the center of the country, particularly in the Mopti region and the north-eastern part of Segou. The security situation is dire. Although some steps have been taken to implement the peace accord, progress is very slow.

For example, one major peace accord proposal was joint patrols under the auspices of the Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination (MOC).² Last year, following the formation of the MOC in Gao, there was a major suicide bombing that killed

¹ Alexander Thurston is Assistant Professor in the African Studies Program at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. He is a specialist on Islam and politics in West and North Africa, and recently published *“Boko Haram. The History of an African Jihadist Movement, Princeton University Press 2017”*.

² The MOC (Mécanisme Opérationnel de Coordination) in Gao. The MOC is made up of 600 combatants from armed groups, who are signatories to the peace accord, and the Malian state soldiers.

60 people. Each step is very tricky, given that spoilers attempted to sabotage progress and given the mistrust between the various signatories to the accord.

Demobilisation and disarmament are very difficult to achieve. Convincing people to give up their weapons for payment could result in them taking the money and buying more weapons. If you attempt to take the weapons by force, you could face serious violence. How to convince people to abandon armed conflict, and what the right incentives are to achieve demobilisation and disarmament are the burning questions. If people are armed, they have the capacity to pressure communities and government. As violence creeps down from the north to the south of Mali, there are actually more militias now than some years ago.

Another key step towards implementation was to establish interim authorities in the main cities. But some of the office bearers cannot move to the region because of instability and violence. There is still a long way to go. People are frustrated yet reluctant to abandon the peace accord signed in 2015 in Algiers. Some want amendments but few of the major signatories want to scrap it in its entirety and start again.

HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THE ALMOST COMPLETE STANDSTILL WHEN IT COMES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PEACE ACCORD?

There is plenty of blame, accusations and suspicion. The main ex-rebel group of the North, the CMA³ feels the government has not played its part. There is also a coalition of pro-government militias called the *plateforme* that considers itself marginalized in the peace process, even though it was a signatory to the peace accord. Groups

belonging to the *plateforme* regard the peace accord as primarily an agreement between the government and the Tuareg and Arab elite, rather than encompassing the will of all ethnic groups and civil society in the north. The government, mainly people from the South, feel the ex-rebels have not been sincere. There is discord within the CMA itself and within the *plateforme*, although both were signatories to the peace accord. In the mix too, are recently formed ethnic or tribal armed groups, who try to get recognized in order to be integrated into the peace process. The proliferation of these small armed groups increasingly complicates the peace process.

WHY IS THE SECURITY SITUATION DETERIORATING IN THE CENTRE OF MALI?

The 2012 rebellion fanned the embers of historical tensions into a larger fire. Simmering tensions were about natural resources, land conflict, mainly between farmers and herders, and conflict between herders and people who control pastures. Herders gain access to pastures by paying per cow, which invariably leads to disputes about price. There is conflict between ethnic groups and conflict among the Peul, one of the main ethnic groups in central Mali. Also, many people in the center feel that there is a cabal of oligarchical politicians collaborating to take money from them. Another major problem is widespread corruption. People go to the authorities hoping to resolve disputes over land and rights in a fair and equitable manner but the authorities are corrupt and settle disputes in favour of the highest bidder.

In 2012, people started to form armed groups or join the rebellion. After the French intervention, the Malian army who returned with the French troops, treated the population badly. In this

³ The CMA (*Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad*) is a signatory to the peace accord.

atmosphere, the jihadists are seeking to build broad-based support among the local population of the center by pitting social juniors against the elites, and by proposing alternative systems for managing resources.

WHAT ABOUT THE NEWLY DEVELOPED CONFLICT BETWEEN PEUL AND DOGON ARMED GROUPS? DO WE HAVE AN ETHNIC CONFLICT DEVELOPING IN MALI?

The conflict is not ethnic at heart, but it activates and hardens ethnic identities as it spreads. As communities begin to feel themselves under threat, they take up arms. In some parts of Mopti, Peul and Dogon have lived side by side for years, but in the current atmosphere of insecurity and tension, ethnic-based militias have appeared.

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS ARE PLANNED FOR JULY. DO YOU THINK THE CURRENT MALIAN PRESIDENT STILL HAS ENOUGH LEGITIMACY TO RUN THE PEACE PROCESS IN A POSITIVE WAY?

If we have elections this year, the President may or may not run for a second term. The consensus among people I have spoken to is that he is unpopular and broadly regarded as corrupt. Others think he has not done enough. People find him detached from the peace process and failed to bring peace to the country. At the same time, incumbent presidents have major advantages and he may prevail in the elections even despite his unpopularity.

There is still disagreement between the ex-rebels and the government about the electoral code itself, as well as about the plan for securing the elections. If such issues are not addressed to the satisfaction of both sides, uncertainty will increase closer to the elections. Additionally, the ex-rebels will want to

know what happens if the president leaves power. Will his successor respect the peace accord? There are also many other obstacles to holding elections this year. In some regions, it will be difficult to cast a vote because of lack of security. Meanwhile, how will refugees cast their votes?

WHAT ABOUT THE ROLE OF ALGERIA, MEDIATOR OF THE PEACE PROCESS, AND FRANCE? WHO HAS SOLDIERS ON THE GROUND IN THE COUNTRY? MANY MALIANS COMPLAIN THAT THEY ARE NOT REALLY THE ONES WHO WILL DECIDE THEIR OWN FUTURE. WHAT DO YOU THINK?

That is something that came up often in my interviews. People are very suspicious of France and Algeria. They accuse both countries of playing all kinds of games in northern Mali. I'm not necessarily convinced that Algeria or France have hidden agendas, as some may suggest. But I think it's very significant that many Malians feel that way. People really mistrust Algeria and France. Algeria has taken a major role as the mediator in the peace process, but if people don't trust the mediator, it greatly complicates things. Meanwhile, people say France is interested in natural resources still to be discovered in the Sahara desert. They are talking about uranium, oil, etc. They feel that France particularly favours the Tuareg, are emotionally committed to the MNLA⁴, or say that France wants Mali to be weak and divided.

In 2013 when there was the French military intervention, they were initially very popular. People were on the streets with French flags, welcoming the French troops. But now we see growing resentment towards France and the French.

⁴ MNLA (*Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad*) created in 2011. This political and military organisation, comprising mostly Tuaregs, was one of the armed groups that occupied the North of Mali. At the time they fought for an independent state of AZAWAD.

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE PUBLIC OPINION REGARDING THE STRONG FOREIGN MILITARY PRESENCE IN THE COUNTRY?

Many Malians don't really trust operation Barkhane, the French military operation against jihadists in the Sahel region. Many people are confused because the violence they face in their communities is committed by local criminals or ethnic militias groups. This is the real source of insecurity in many people's lives.

They see Barkhane concentrating on terrorists, jihadists, and they don't understand why the French soldiers don't address their problems.

People think the French have a secret agreement with the Tuareg rebels and with the MNLA particularly in Kidal.⁵ One person I spoke to called Kidal a French protectorate. So definitely, there is resentment, a lot of accusations and mistrust.

But people also feel the security situation is very bad, which is true. It's hard to know, without having opinion polls, what people really think. However, in my opinion the majority of people don't necessarily want the multinational forces to leave. They may want them to behave in a different way. They want the state to take control and they want better governance. People also express concern about the labyrinth of different groups operating in the same zone, you may have, for example, MINUSMA, Barkhane, the Malian military forces and the European training mission⁶. All this also creates ambiguity and resentment towards the security forces.

In a nutshell, I really don't know how many people would really be ready for the French military and

MINUSMA to withdraw from the country. As the security situation in Mali and other parts of the Sahel deteriorates, there is all the more reason for them to stay. This despite questions around why, with all this assistance, the security situation is worsening.

THE G5-SAHEL-INITIATIVE, WHICH INCLUDES MAURITANIA, MALI, BURKINA FASO, NIGER AND CHAD, AIMS TO FIGHT THE JIHADIST IN THE REGION ALONG WITH THE FRENCH OPERATION, BARKHANE. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT TOGETHER THEY HAVE THE POWER TO STOP THE JIHADISTS?

I'm not convinced they do, because we are only talking about 5 000 soldiers for the whole region, even if they concentrate solely on Mali and the border regions to Burkina Faso and Niger. While I don't think more soldiers is the answer, I also don't think 5 000 soldiers are enough to accomplish what the G-5's backers hope to achieve. There is optimism and hope that the G5 will offer the French troops a possible way out of Mali but I don't think it will really work. The French will likely feel obliged to stay.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ADVANCE THE PEACE PROCESS IN MALI?

In my view the solution is to accelerate the political process. There is no military solution to the crisis. What can be done is to include as many people as possible in the peace process, including the jihadists. The first step is to reopen dialogue. It's a controversial idea in Mali and it's not well liked in Paris or Washington either. But I think there needs to be dialogue with the jihadists, particularly with

⁵ Kidal is a city in the North of Mali that was occupied by armed groups in 2012. Currently, the French operation Barkhane operates in the area. The Malian army is not present.

⁶ *European Union Training Mission Mali* (EUTM) is training Malian soldiers. Since 2016, the EUTM is also located in the North of Mali. The UN mission permits only training in self-defence.

Ag Ghali⁷ and also with Amadou Koufa⁸. Some people believe that Koufa is controlled by Ag Ghali. So Ag Ghali is really the key to the situation. Koufa and Ag Ghali are both Malians. Some of the jihadists are Algerians. Malians who want dialogue say that the Malian government should talk to whoever is Malian.

The French government is publicly against dialogue with the jihadists. There was a conference of national understanding last year and they made a formal recommendation that there should be dialogue with Koufa and Ag Ghali. The French government immediately said no. In the eyes of the French it's a struggle against terrorism. The Malian president was possibly initially open to the idea, but changed his mind after France expressed an unwillingness to speak to Koufa and Ag Ghali. Both the US-government and the United Nations run black lists of people belonging to Al Qaida, ISIS, etc. Ag Ghali is on the list. The Americans don't necessarily say don't talk to them, but putting them on the black list sends a message that complicates dialogue. My first recommendation is for western governments to change their attitudes on this question. Everybody has suggestions about what the Malian government could or should do, but the western governments need to be more self-critical about their positions in the Malian crisis. Meanwhile, if the Malian government talks to the jihadists, that doesn't mean it is necessarily giving something away - just start the conversation and see what transpires. If the jihadists demand the application of the Sharia throughout Mali, or that all foreigners have to leave the country, of course Malians and the international community should not accept this. But it's worth starting the

dialogue to determine whether they are any possible areas of negotiation and settlement.

THE AIM OF THE PEACE PROCESS IS TO GET THE MALIAN STATE IN CONTROL OF ALL PARTS OF ITS TERRITORY BUT WE ALSO KNOW ABOUT THE BAD REPUTATION OF THE MALIAN STATE WHEN IT COMES TO INEFFICIENCY, CORRUPTION, ETC. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS?

A lot of people mistrust the state but everybody, except the jihadists, call for a return of the state (although many CMA members want there to be a special status, either autonomy or something like it, for Kidal). People want the return of the state but a just and fair one that provides security, so this will be a long journey.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE TRADITIONAL AUTHORITIES, CAN WE REBUILD THE STATE FROM BELOW?

Perhaps, but it has to be a fair state at the local level as well. For example, in the centre of the country, there is not just conflict between some Peul and other ethnic groups, there are conflicts among the Peul themselves. One part of the conflict is a widespread feeling that traditional leaders, elected officials, and state authorities within the Peul community have been bribed as well. So in some areas, the justice system is part of the problem. If local justice should be the vehicle for bringing peace, it has to be seen by the people as fair. Local authorities can't take the side of the rich. Additionally, for justice to proceed there has to be security and the question is who will provide the security. Local militia are often a cause of rather than a solution to violence. Even if there is a

⁷ Iyad Ag Ghali is a Tuareg leader, who participated in the Tuareg-rebellion in the 1990s and got close to the jihadist movements in the region. In 2012 he created Ansar Dine, a salafist jihadist group that took part in the invasion of the North of Mali. He claimed responsibility for the March 2018 attacks on the French embassy in Ouagadougou and the headquarters of the armed forces of Burkina Faso.

⁸ Amadou Koufa is Peul from the Mopti-region. He took part in the invasion in 2012 of the North of Mali with Iyad Ag Ghali. In 2015 he created the group (*le front de liberation de la macina*) a salafist jihadist group.

local solution to insecurity, the central state also has a role to play.

WHAT KIND OF MALI DO THE MALIANS WANT?

There are still hard-core separatists among the MNLA, who want a new country in the north called Azawad. And a number of groups among the CMA that want more autonomy, either serious regionalisation or federalism. Many people in the center of the country want the return of the state. Then, of course, there are some jihadists who want their own hardline vision of sharia law and an Islamic state.

In some quarters, including among secularists and intellectuals, there is the idea that Mali should be

rethought. The cultural domination by certain ethnic groups should change. Such thinkers want more inclusivity, more diversity. For example, one Malian intellectual I met suggested that the capital of Mali be relocated to a symbolically central location. I don't think it's going to happen but it's an interesting idea. It's a thought on the symbolic level, expressing the feeling that Mali's diversity has been insufficiently institutionalized.

Moreover, a number of people have said to me that they are bothered by all the discussion around ethnicity. Considerable attention is now paid to the ethnic backgrounds of people. People are more and more conscious of ethnic issues. But on the other side, you repeatedly meet people who say they want a Mali where they are just Malians.

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ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG
WEST AFRICA

Sotrac-Mermoz Villa 43 BP : 25013 | Dakar-Sénégal
Téléphone: +221 33 869 75 19 | Fax: +221 33 824 19 95 | Website: www.rosalux.sn

ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG