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With the armed insurgency and coup d'état in Mali last year, the country's fragile democratic development was seriously hampered. Obvious warning signs like deteriorating socio-economic conditions and widespread corruption were sadly neglected. The country itself and ECOWAS are now facing critical challenges in turning things for the better. No stakeholder in the country should be left outside this process.

Challenges in Mali

Historic duty to ensure peace

Kwesi Aning and Festus Aubyn

Recent years have seen significant gains made in consolidating peace and democracy in the West African sub-region. This development, however, had a serious setback in 2012, caused by an armed insurgency in northern Mali and a coup d'état in the capital city, Bamako. In this article, we analyse the responses of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as the proximal sub-regional organisation to this dual crisis. Specifically, we assess the strengths and weaknesses of the ECOWAS responses to the crises in Mali, evaluate what the French intervention means for the leadership of ECOWAS on the Malian crises and identify some possible challenges that the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) may have to confront in order to bring stability to the country.

The article proceeds in three sections. First, a brief background to the crisis in Mali is provided. This is followed by an assessment of ECOWAS responses to the political quagmire in the country, and the article concludes with some pragmatic proposals for how the role of ECOWAS in finding a peaceful negotiated settlement in Mali should evolve.

A nation divided?

Emboldened by the presence of well-equipped combatants returning from Libya in the wake of the fall of Gaddafi's regime in 2011, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) initiated a series of attacks against government forces in northern Mali. These attacks were carried out along with other Islamic armed groups, including Ansar Dine, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Subsequently, a mutiny by disaffected soldiers from the units defeated by the armed groups in the north resulted in an overthrow of Mali's President Ahmadou Toumani Touré in a military coup d'état led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo.

Although what prompted the coup was a rising tide of discontent over the government's failure to equip the military to effectively deal with the northern "separatist" insurrection by Tuareg rebels, we contend that poor governance and grievances over deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the country inspired the military takeover. That is, prior to the coup, the indicators were evident, and though they pointed to a country that was sitting on a time bomb and waiting to explode, no proactive measures were put in place to address them.[1] These early warning signs included concerns over the poor political and military management of the Tuareg rebellion, issues of widespread corruption in government, nepotism, mismanagement of natural resources, deteriorating socio-economic conditions and proliferation of arms from the Sahel region.[2]

With all these deep-seated issues, it is not out of place to assert that Mali was a nation in crisis long before the coup. We argue that the military junta, which eventually became known as the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDRE), just tapped into these long-simmering problems and staged a popular coup d'état. But this notwithstanding, the fact remains that the coup was misguided and an affront to Malian democracy. Moreover, it undermined ECOWAS efforts and gains over the last two decades towards entrenching a democratic culture and the rule of law in the sub-region.

Until the French led-intervention in January 2013, Mali was divided into two, with the transitional government controlling the south and the north being dominated by a multitude of radical and extremist groups, comprising MNLA together with Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM. For the nine month period that these groups occupied northern Mali, they wreaked havoc and imposed strict sharia law on the local population. Human Rights Watch reports indicated despicable human rights abuses by the Islamist rebels, such as rape, arresting unveiled women, stoning unmarried couples to death, publicly flogging smokers, amputating limbs of suspected thieves, and recruiting child soldiers.[3] Following a joint assault on the town of Konna, 700 km from Bamako by AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine, in early January 2013, Mali's interim president, Dioncounda Traoré, requested the French to assist in fighting the rebels and to liberate all the occupied regions. After weeks of several air raids by French air forces, a majority of the occupied territories were recaptured by the French and Mali forces, pushing the rebels further to the desert regions near the Algerian border, with some even fleeing to neighbouring countries.

The coup d'état received a "unanimous" condemnation internationally, especially from ECOWAS and the African Union (AU). Consistent with its principle of zero tolerance for power obtained by unconstitutional means, as

enshrined in the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS reacted promptly to the unconstitutional changes of government in the country.

Complex dilemmas facing ECOWAS

In Mali, two complex political and security dilemmas awaited ECOWAS. The first was how to swiftly return the country back to constitutional rule and the second how to restore the territorial integrity by recapturing the northern part of the country. In dealing with the former challenge, ECOWAS first suspended Mali's membership and threatened to impose political, diplomatic, economic and financial sanctions on the CNRDRE and its associates, should they fail to restore constitutional order.[4] Additionally, the President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, was appointed as the ECOWAS mediator for the crises. Following the failure of the CNRDRE to relinquish power, ECOWAS imposed sanctions, including a travel ban on members of the CNRDRE, closing all borders of member states with Mali, except for humanitarian purposes, and freezing the assets of the leaders of the CNRDRE and its associates, as well as the accounts of Mali held at the Central Bank of West African States.[5]

Frightened by the consequences of the sanctions, the CNRDRE agreed to sign a framework agreement that was brokered by the ECOWAS mediator, and in return ECOWAS lifted the sanctions. Under the framework agreement, President Touré resigned in the beginning of 2012, and the Speaker of the National Assembly, Dioncounda Traoré, was designated as the interim President for a 40-day period in accordance with the Malian Constitution.[6] A transitional government was also formed with Cheick Modibo Diarra as interim Prime Minister, whose main task was to organise elections and to resolve the security and humanitarian crises in the northern part of the country.[7]

However, the framework agreement failed to clearly define the role of the CNRDRE in the transition, timelines for the transition and the modalities for the organisation of the elections.[8] Furthermore, in defiance of the principles in the AU Constitutive Act, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance and other relevant instruments on unconstitutional changes of government, the putschists were granted amnesty and immunity from any prosecution. Taken together, these limitations served to frustrate not only the work of the transitional government but also the ECOWAS mediation efforts, as the CNRDRE interfered in the transition process by undertaking arbitrary and unilateral actions.[9] Subsequently, ECOWAS had to extend the duration of the transitional period to 12 months, during which it was expected that presidential elections would be organised. However, in spring 2013 the feasibility of this transition period is yet to be determined, with the volatile and highly unpredictable security situation in the country.

Two track approach

With respect to the separatist rebellion in northern Mali, the response by ECOWAS has followed a two-track approach



PHOTO: BRAHIMA OUEDRAOGO/IRIN

Poor governance and a deteriorating socio-economic situation paved the way for the armed insurgency and military coup in Mali in 2012. The Islamist group Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa is in control of much of northern Mali and has imposed sharia law.

of negotiating with the groups that are open to dialogue, along with the deployment of a 3,000-strong military force as part of AFISMA.[10] Seeking a negotiated solution, the ECOWAS mediator has, together with other regional leaders, engaged in series of dialogues with the MNLA and Ansar Dine to adopt a common platform to negotiate with the transitional authorities. The groups were also urged to distance themselves from terrorist and organised criminal networks, like AQIM and its affiliate groups.[11] In response, the two groups also pledged their commitment to a negotiated solution to the crises, and the Ansar Dine, for example, issued a statement to distance itself from AQIM.[12] While the dialogue process has so far yielded some positive results, the negotiations committee that was envisaged, to complement the ECOWAS mediation efforts by facilitating the direct negotiations between the transitional authorities and groups in the north, is yet to become a reality. Moreover, the ECOWAS mediation efforts have also failed to involve civil society groups and the local communities, thereby undermining the local ownership of the process.

Apart from the mediation efforts, ECOWAS forces have also been deployed to Mali as part of AFISMA to support the Malian authorities to regain the occupied regions in the north, dismantle the terrorist and criminal networks and effectively restore the authority of the state over its entire territory.[13] But arguably, the deployment of AFISMA occurred rather too late, creating a void that was subsequently exploited by the French. The abject failure of ECOWAS and the AU, especially to promptly come up with a detailed, definitive African plan to resolve the crisis before the unilateral intervention by France, has exposed the limitations of both institutions in bridging the gap between early warning and early response. It has also demonstrated the mismatch between the slow political decision-making and swift deployment capacity. This has indeed raised important questions about the maxim of 'African solutions to African problems', as the intervention exposed the weakness of ECOWAS and the AU in dealing with their own problems and the fact that Africans still require external support in order to effectively mount peace-enforcement operations on the continent.[14]

Need for political solutions

Moreover, the indications that AFISMA would soon be transferred to a UN peacekeeping mission further highlight the inability of Africans to sustain longer-term operations on the continent without external support. But though humanitarian reasons and the quest to protect Mali's territorial integrity have been cited as the prime motivation for the French intervention, we argue that there are other important issues that cannot be glossed over. Some of these issues include the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the pursuit of French economic interests in the form of protecting the oil and uranium resources in Mali, Niger and the Sahel region as a whole. Arguably, these issues also formed part of the pivotal consideration for the French intervention. And many Africans see this as yet another sign of the continued domination by former colonial powers of former colonies. Again, while the intervention may have served a purpose of protecting the sovereignty of Mali and the short-term cessation of atrocities, it did little to address the underlying causes of the conflict.

In this regard, political solutions will be necessary in order to usher in relative peace and stability in Mali. This will entail establishing a legitimate government in Bamako, addressing the governance deficits or grievances of the Tuaregs and the provision of humanitarian aid. Evidently, it is these unresolved issues that will confront AFISMA's operations, together with many other challenges, such as liberating areas that are yet not free from AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine control, stabilising and securing the liberated areas and state institutions, undertaking security sector reforms, and dealing with the threat of organised crime. Successfully undertaking these tasks will be the litmus test for ECOWAS and the AU. After failing to intervene swiftly in Mali, both organisations now have the historic duty to ensure that peace and genuine democracy come to Mali whilst curtailing the real threat of Islamic extremism in the sub-region.

Crucial collaboration

Drawing some critical lessons from Afghanistan, Iraq and even Libya shows that it will take a great deal of sustained effort and cooperation by all stakeholders to bring long-term stability to Mali. Hence, ECOWAS needs to effectively collaborate with the AU, the United Nations, the European Union, France, the United States and other bilateral partners to help establish a legitimate government, undertake security-sector reforms and build strong governance institutions in the country.

Concerning the situation in the north, the transitional government should be supported to restore national cohesion by facilitating direct dialogue with the Tuareg groups for a peaceful settlement. In doing this, all other stakeholders, such as civil society organisations and the local communities in the north, should be included. They must be deeply involved in any initiative to bring peace to the country. Lastly, it is imperative that the dialogue processes are accompanied by the implementation of policies that would facilitate socio-economic development across the country to reduce poverty, unemployment and the horizontal inequalities.

1 See WANEP, "MALI: Managing the Damage of a Complex", http://www.wanep.org, accessed 3 October 2012

2 ibid

3 Human Rights Watch, "Mali: Islamist Armed Groups Spread Fear in North", http://www.hrw.org, accessed 12 October 2012

4 See ECOWAS Press Release N°: 092/2012 "Emergency Mini-Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government on the Situation in Mali", 30 March 2012.

5 ibid

6 United Nations Security Council (2012a), Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa, New York: United Nations

7 United Nations Security Council (2012b), Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Mali, New York: United Nations

8 See Kwesi Aning, Frank Okyere & Mustapha Abdallah, "Addressing Emerging Security Threats in Post-Gaddafi Sahel and the ECOWAS Response to the Malian Crisis" KAIPTC Policy Brief 1/May 2012

9 ECOWAS Press Release N°: 128/2012 ECOWAS Leaders Agree New Measures to Restore Peace to Guinea Bissau, Mali, 4 May 2012

10 PSC/PR/COMM.2(CCCXLI)

11 United Nations Security Council, (2012b), op. cit.

12 ibid

13 PSC/PR/COMM.2(CCCXLI)

14 See Mehari T. Maru, 'AFISMA: Military ahead of Politics' http://studies.aljazeera.net, accessed 3 April 2013