The challenges facing Mali's new interim government

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Following the recent regional elections of 20th November 2016, interim regional authorities were prevented from being installed in Timbuktu on 6th March 2017. Armed groups reportedly surrounded the city and threatened to take it over in order to stop them from taking their place (Reuters for VOA, 2017). This election was intended to provide order after years of lawlessness and widespread instability following a military coup and secession of the northern regions which left a political vacuum in Mali (Nossiter, 2012). The new interim government now faces the enormous challenge of maintaining stability in a country rife with armed militias, competing factions, and economic disparity. Moreover, considering that previous elections were marred with fraud (Baxter, 2002), the government must prove its legitimacy. This is a challenge as the country was only recently unified in July 2015 (Malkom X, 2016). In the recent election, 688 of 703 municipalities officially participated and some 40 municipalities were prevented from taking part securely; voters who were able to participate reported intimidation or prevention at the polling stations (Chauzal, et al., 2016).

Mali has struggled with maintaining unity since it claimed independence from France in 1960. Much like many other former colonial countries, Mali was formed as an artificial state with borders which crossed ethnic, tribal and community lines (Alcalde, 2013). Most notably, many different ethnicities live within Mali's borders; thus, the country lacks a strong and coherent national identity. Since independence, the dominant tribe - the Bamara people - have held presidential power. This has been much to the distaste of rival ethnicities such as the Songhi and the Tuareg of northern Mali who staged a failed uprising in 1962-64, subsequently quelled by the much stronger central army (Al Jazeera, 2013). The Tuareg were forced to live under the authority of the government and this stoked much resentment due to its extremely centralised nature as well as economic mismanagement, corruption, and drastic inequality (Alcalde, 2013). The second Tuareg rebellion took place in 1990 and led to

what is known in Mali as the 'March Revolution'; a military coup following widespread protests followed by the first democratic elections in Mali were held in 1992. In 2006, a peace agreement between the Tuareg and the government theoretically provided the northern territories more autonomy. However, in practice, corruption and rife within the central government rendered the agreement somewhat symbolic. The slow pace of reform, centralised politics and increasingly repressive policies led to another revolt in 2007. This revolt was reconciled with a peace deal in 2009, however the Tuareg forces were divided over this (Alcalde, 2013). This could have led to the success of the 2012 uprising. They thought that the rebellion forces were weakened thus weren't prepared for a northern rebellion. Moreover, the Touré government, whilst framing itself as a break from the old order, was corrupt and repressive as previous governments were. In addition, Touré himself was instrumental in the 1991 coup against previous president, Traore (Bensimon, 2013). He had been in power since 1968 after also staging a successful military coup against the first president of Mali.

Nevertheless, the desire for autonomy maintained itself in skirmishes and a sustained uprising in 2012. The fall of the Qaddhafi regime in 2011 signalled the return of approximately 8000 Malian soldiers, trained by Libya's various militias, and the permeable borders across the Sahara meant that weaponry was easily transported too. These fighters formed militias such as the Mouvement National de la Libération d'Azawad (MNLA) and Islamist group, Ansar al-Dine. Azawad is the name of the northern regions which comprises two-thirds of Malian territory. This uprising began in January and was led by the MNLA who declared autonomy in April (BBC, 2012). On 23rd March 2013, the military staged a coup ousting the Touré government and installing a military junta. This was ostensibly due to the ineptitude with which the government was dealing with the Tuareg uprising (Al Jazeera, 2013). The Tuareg rebellion took advantage of the weakened government forces and the fact that some, more rural civil servants were fleeing their posts, allowing for them to take control (Alcalde, 2013). This movement was supported by jihadi groups in the north such as Ansar al-Dine and they eventually 'hijacked' the region's autonomy by taking control of Azawad and forcefully implementing Shari'a law. The north soon became a 'jihadi sanctuary' as it provided a safe space for training, kidnapping, and trafficking of both legitimate and illegitimate goods from cigarettes to weapons (Alcalde, 2013).

Since 2012, ECOWAS, the UN under the guise of MINUSMA, and other international actors, notably France, have assisted Mali in its fight to regain authority, reconcile and re-stabilise. The French-led Operation Serval removed the Islamist groups in the northern territories and allowed for the gradual reinstatement of the regional authorities. Corruption means that the governmental and judiciary institutions are weak, thus justice is hard to find for the victims of regime or rebel violence during the uprising. Additionally, the country is facing a shortage of basic healthcare and education, especially in the northern regions where schools are not all back to full functionality since the rebellion.

For the government to guide this transitionary period smoothly, it is imperative that it establishes a common national identity. This is evident with the demands of secession from the northern territories and some groups continued struggle for autonomy. Furthermore, the peace agreement neglects the central regions of the country which could become a source of contention as the centre is densely populated and is vital to the economy. Additionally, it is home to ethnic minorities such as the Fulanis and should this inequitable economic and political situation remain, it is not unlikely that they will also take up arms to attempt to subvert the national hierarchy (International Crisis Group, 2017). Moreover, the violence between 2012 and 2016 meant that thousands of people fled their homes to other Malian cities, but mostly to neighbouring countries. A veritable humanitarian crisis took hold in Mali with the economy in recession (Alcalde, 2013) and a food shortage caused by drought (Toulmin, 2016). Thus, the new interim government has many challenges to face in Mali between now and the upcoming elections. Should they be able to foster a sense of national unity and identity, cease corrupt activity and improve the economy, a stable peace may well be on its way.

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