

# The coup d'état in Mali – Synchronizing African Facts with European Conceptions

## A short introduction

Mali, the eighth largest African country with an area of approximately 1,240,000 square kilometers is landlocked with the river Niger as its major water-transit route. This main waterway flows from the southern part up to the centrally located Timbuktu and then crosses the border to the country Niger. It is an arid country that can be divided into the northern part, where the desert Sahara is mainly dominant; and a sub-tropical southern part, where livestock as well as cotton and other raw materials for further industrial processing are available. Additionally, the country is rich in gold and uranium, hosting various international mining companies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around 18 million people are living in the country<sup>1</sup>, but actual data remains very vague due to the ongoing conflict. The life expectancy is around 58 years for both men and women, and in terms of development, the World Bank ranked it 182nd in international comparison<sup>2</sup>. Its inhabitants are most often divided into nine major ethnic groups. The Bambara make for 34.1% of the total population. Subsequently rank the Fulani (or Peul) with 14.7%, closely followed by Sarakole people with 10.8%. Among the smaller ethnic groups are the Senufo with 10.5%, and the Dogon are believed to represent around 8.9% and the Malinke 8.7% of the total population. Smaller groups are the Bobo with around 2.9%, the Songhai with approximately 1.6% and the Tuareg people with 0.9% of the total population<sup>3</sup>.

## A Flashback of 2012

On March 21<sup>st</sup> 2012 Captain Amadou Sanogo surrounded, together with his soldiers, the Malian Presidential Palace and announced that he was taking over power of the country. The main reasons for the military coup d'état in Mali were the lack

of support of the government for the army in fighting the ongoing Tuareg rebellion in the Northern provinces (Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu), a spiral of poverty, and a series of corruption scandals<sup>4</sup>. During the turmoil at the end of March 2012, a series of events happened that would further shape the political and social landscape for the following years. As the putsch did not receive as much resistance as outside observers expected, many political and military figures fled the country, including the General of the Armed Forces, who abandoned his post; soldiers rioted in Gao and by the end of the day, the National Broadcast was surrounded and taken off-air.

As massive mutinies and lootings committed by soldiers became state of the art, Sanogo stepped down from power two weeks after seizing it<sup>5</sup>. The international community, surprised by the dynamics of the event and the support (especially in the North) from the population, called it a disaster for Western Africa and the country itself, being one of the most advanced in terms of political dialogue. Already at the beginning of the crisis, Islamist groups merged with or mingled around the original rebellion (which now used the name 'Azawad National Liberation Army' or MNLA), Ansar Dine, a close affiliate to Al-Qaeda.

During the chaos in Bamako and the absence of an elected government, the rebellion in the North gained massive ground, starting a series of attacks and finally seizing the three Northern Provinces; during the next year, they would be in charge and even try to create their own state, 'Azawad'<sup>6</sup>. What initially started as an ethnic diversion of the country; a Tuareg-controlled, Arab-orientated North and a mostly ethnically mixed, African-orientated South, quickly turned into an African version of the Caliphate, with all sorts of extremists trying to improve their power position.

In the nexus of the Libyan Civil War, which meant the influx of weapons, men and ideologies into Mali, first voices raised their concern about the situation. Mali, being now completely destabilized, could serve as a new hub and recruiting area for mainly jihadist-affiliated transnational terrorism.

The recent military mutiny in Mali surprised many Western states and led to a political shock in Europe. Unsurprisingly, the leaders of the coup d'état had been condemned by many politicians and a call for normalization, including the restoration of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita's (the elected president of the Republic of Mali, mostly referred to as IBK) rule, was immediately demanded<sup>7</sup>. Even though IBK resigned as of August 24<sup>th</sup>, his international backup, especially from France, hasn't diminished. Despite the illegitimate overthrow of a legally elected government, the bulk of the Malian population is still supporting the coup, as civil unrest or resistance against the events cannot be observed on any noteworthy scale. Due to the low level of acceptance of Keita's rule over the years (only 6.3% of the population was pleased with his administrative achievements<sup>8</sup>), backup from the population and civil resistance to a violent removal of the actual government is more than unlikely. To the contrary, the Malian Armed Forces have since many years been seen as one of the main reasons for why the country has not fallen completely apart. The outstandingly positive view of the Malian Security Forces, with more than 92.1% of the population being 'very pleased' or 'pleased'<sup>9</sup> with its work, will not suffer in the near future. Similar to the events in 2012, the Malian Armed Forces can be seen as litmus test, as last possible option if political wishful thinking and blood proven reality are gaping too far away. What we see at present day is a choreography that hasn't changed to the charade in 2012, when Captain Amadou Sanogo had surrounded the Presidential

Palace and announced his takeover of power. Instead of openly attacking the interim government at the political level, dialogue would be a more fruitful option.

Why should the international community deal with putschists, when there is an already elected and recognized government to talk with? The answer to this question is concealed under several layers, which all affect each other. First, since 2012, a division of the country had accelerated and could become a real threat to the stability of Mali. As during the first military revolution in 2012, the Armed Forces had suffered heavy losses in the Northern, mostly Tuareg backed uprising and their retreat from the provinces Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu was just a matter of time. This made it necessary that French and later on soldiers under UN-flag had to fight the rebels, leading to a devastation of the already shackled infrastructure. In addition to foreign military forces, various NGOs entered the country, with the purpose of increasing the level of everyday life and avoiding a threatening famine in the country. But due to the militarization of the northern parts, NGOs stayed mostly in the south of Mali, leading to a 'democratic fatigue' of the population because of their effort to transform this area into a zone of liberal free market trade<sup>10</sup>. Working against this division of the country into a militarized North and a free-trade South should be of utmost importance.

Second, most parts of the population want to pursue three goals: peace and stability (which they probably will get if the international community is willing to accept a change under this circumstances), employment for their children, and a good harvest, combined with food security<sup>11</sup>. As the aid development work of the last eight years constantly tried to ignore this fact, the unrest among the population had grown and change was inevitably to come. The hopes of a huge percentage of the Malian population rests now in the hands of the interim government, and to delegitimize it before it could even begin to act would be seen as a de-legitimization of the Armed Forces themselves, which is in the eyes of the Malians the most im-

portant actor they can trust for the sake of security of the region<sup>12</sup>. The international approach to the interim government could ease the path towards winning the hearts and minds of the Malians, but it could also close it.

Third, ethnic unrests have been an issue since the creation of the Azawad-State in the North of the country, mainly influenced by terrorist organizations, which cleverly played off groups against each other in order to reach their own goals<sup>13</sup>. Currently, their impact cannot be underestimated, as the seed of hate that was planted by them years ago now has been given additional fertilizer due to man-induced climate change in the so-called pastoral belt, a soon-to-come conflict shoreline ranging from Mauretania to the Arabian Peninsula, which straightly passes through Mali as well<sup>14</sup>. Climate change is heavily influencing the annual migration routes of livestock-keeping parts of the population, as pasture lands fell more and more victim to an ongoing desertification. Consequentially there is a run between different factions for the best lands to raise their livestock and tensions with farmers naturally occur. It would be too simplistic to boil the ethnic tensions down to a farmer versus pastoral conflict, but the harsh reality is that parts of the population are simply relying on producing rarely enough for their own subsistence and cannot afford any interference or shortcuts. Radicals, such as Amadu Kufa, are specialized in fomenting different ethnic groups against each other, and even if he would be removed, surely someone would take his place soon enough.

### Actors on the spot

**EUTM Mali:** The European Union Training Mission in Mali is one of the main actors on behalf of the European Union (EU). It was introduced with the decision of the Council of the European Union 2013/34/CFSP on 17th January 2013<sup>15</sup> and its mandate is renewed every two years. The primary task is defined in Article 1 and encompasses two main goals that shall be achieved through military training and advice to the Malian Armed Forces as well as training in

other fields, such as logistics or protection of civilians. As the task has changed over the years and the mandate broadened, the nature of EUTM Mali has evolved. Currently, 620 soldiers are deployed from 22 EU-countries and 5 non-EU-countries (Serbia, Albania, Moldova, Georgia and Montenegro). The implementation of the mission was originally introduced on an invitation of the Malian government.

**MINUSMA:** The United Nations-led peace-keeping mission in Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) is the biggest international military component in the country. Adopted by the UN Security Council resolution 2100 on 25th April 2013, the mission originally deployed 12.500 persons, of which 11.200 had been soldiers to take over the African Union led mission (AFISMA), which tried to fight the rebellion in the North but failed<sup>16</sup>. Currently, the number of troops has grown up to 16.000 and is labeled as being the most dangerous UN mission in the world<sup>17</sup>. Since its implementation in 2013, it ranks at 4th place regarding the death toll of all UN-missions<sup>18</sup> and is likely to gain the sad 1st place in the foreseeable future.

**AFISMA:** The African-led International Support Mission to Mali, AFISMA, was deployed on 20th of December 2012 for an initial period of one year based on the UN Security Council Resolution 2085. At this time, no one was expecting to face a severe resistance from the Tuareg rebellion, and the presence of international terror organizations was underestimated. But the originally planned troop contribution of around 3.300 soldiers from the African Union was way too little to counter the advance of the northern rebellion, and so ECOWAS provided another 3.000 soldiers<sup>19</sup> in February 2013, making the mission twice as big as originally planned. As the number had grown quickly, a swift response on the logistical and financial side was needed, but the mission failed to do so, and the rebel groups advanced far into the South until they were close to Bamako. Only due to a French intervention, which will later be known as 'Operation Serval', the rebels were forced to withdraw,

and AFISMA's authority was transferred from the AU to the UN (MINUSMA) with 1st of July 2013.

**EUCAP SAHEL Mali:** The European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali was initiated after an invitation of the Republic of Mali, and with Council decision 2014/219/CFSP at 15th of April 2014 approved. After one year, it was finally launched and 100 professionals were deployed in January 2015 and aimed to support, advice and assist the Malian National Police and implementing a security reform. After the first 18 months of the mission, a strategic reorientation was necessary, as the security situation further declined. First, the Mandate was extended for another 24 months (and is still valid until today) and second, the fight against terrorism became a new main pillar in the framework.

**G5 SAHEL Joint Force:** The G5 Sahel is a regional organization in Africa that was launched in 2014 with the participation of Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad. Originally implemented to combat insecurity and poverty, it transformed fast into a security-centered community and with Security Council Resolution 2359, the UN approved the creation of a Joint Force under such a security-framework and gave green light for its implementation. The G5-Sahel Joint Force is a 5000-soldier strong multinational army that tries to combine its efforts in fighting terrorism and deploy forces in a coordinated way together with other actors, especially France and the UN.

**Operation Serval:** was a French military intervention that aimed at forcing the withdrawal of the rebels and support AFISMA. Its launch on 11th of January 2013 led to a nominal restoration of Malian territorial integrity, first in the South and center, during the following months also in the North<sup>20</sup>. In the initial phase, only a dozen Special Operation Forces had been on the spot to secure the main airports, to allow power projection with French fighter aircrafts and helicopters. But as soon as boots were on the ground, France sent more and more soldiers to assist AFISMA, and at the end of January 2013, up to 4000 French soldiers from all branches fought in

the country, only to withdraw at the beginning of March 2013. On 31st of July 2014, the operation officially ceased<sup>21</sup>.

**Operation Barkhane:** is the nominal successor of Operation Serval, as it is also a French military intervention. But contrary to its predecessor, Barkhane has a much larger area of operation, encompassing the whole area of the G5 Sahel countries. Implemented on 1st of August 2014, the mission that features 4,500 soldiers is dedicated to fight transnational terrorism and train soldiers of the G5-Sahel countries in counter-terrorism tactics. Being deployed across the 5 countries of the Sahel zone, France has boots on the ground as well as a permanent presence of 17 fighter aircrafts, 19 helicopters, 3 drones and up to 10 airplanes for tactical transportation of soldiers to hotspots. The mission is still active<sup>22</sup>.

### International Involvement?

Unfortunately, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) already announced that they will not accept the interim government and want to return Keita into office. With Jonathan Goodluck, Nigeria's former president, as current special envoy to Mali<sup>23</sup>, the odds for a fast rapprochement between the two entities is rather low. As the mediation team of ECOWAS, led by Goodluck, did not hesitate to overtly consider sanctions against the junta, a common ground in the negotiations will be hard to find<sup>24, 25</sup>. But should ECOWAS really be the first responder? From a political perspective, and simply through their geographical location, an instable Mali would have massive spillover effects on most of the ECOWAS members and their, not always undisputed, governments. Their urge for a fast and hard response is understandable but inherits some possible setbacks. ECOWAS already tried to help and stabilize the country in 2012, but their conduct in this pursuit was more than questionable.

As their first ultimatum to the interim government (which included a full hand-over of the army rule back to democratic principles) passed, they arranged directly

with Sanogo during the transition towards a new government, promising Sanogo benefits such as political influence and financial rewards, which were immediately retrieved, sparking a distrust within the Army towards International Organizations<sup>26</sup>. Moreover, ECOWAS tried to mediate between the armed groups of the North and the relatively weak interim government in the South, but the outcome was badly mismanaged. Even with the support of AFISMA, an African Union led stabilization mission, the troops suffered severe setbacks and had to watch the rebels advancing down to Bamako.

Together with the military defeat in the North against the Tuareg uprising, ECOWAS handed quickly over to the United Nations and their implemented Mission, MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali). France, as former colonial power, additionally installed two counter-terrorism missions, Operation Serval, which ultimately blocked the rebel advance on Bamako and ended in 2014; and Operation Barkhane, which encompasses the whole Sahel area and is still active to date.

### Impact on Europe

Some could say that the current turmoil will be of short duration, as France is likely to intervene. Others might tend to over-exaggerate the magnitude of current developments and frame it as a destabilizing event that could disrupt the order in the whole Sahel zone. I tend to avoid both versions. First, the change of leadership in Bamako has a relatively small impact on the security situation in Kidal or Timbuktu. As the North has for several years been 'terra incognita', nothing will change in the event of a new political landscape. Already in 2017, FRONTEX assessed Mali as the new hub for migrants that reached Europe<sup>27</sup>, as the Agadez-Route through Nigeria got more and more controlled by authorities. The new migration flow that directly went through the already uncontrolled North created a series of economic side effects, from providing migrants with transport capacities to the emergence of a whole smuggling industry, including taxes

and revenues from migrants. It is unlikely that this part of the economy will drastically change or even disappear due to a new government. But it is possible that this part of the shadow economy will grow in the near future. Looking at the figures of the last nine years, Malian refugees had increased tenfold since 2010, peaking in 2014 with more than 13.000 asylum applications in the European Union<sup>28</sup>. The number has slightly decreased due to the efforts in putting an end to the Mediterranean crossing, but if the struggle for everyday survival in Mali will not be ended soon, more are likely to come.

From an economic point of view, French energy provider Areva, specializing in nuclear energy, has several mining sites in Mali. Their loss would account for 20% of all French Uranium imports, which in return provides for around 85% of France's energy<sup>29</sup>. But not only would the French capital market heavily suffer from a total loss of control of Malian resources. Mali holds copper and silver deposits that are far from being exploited, and international syndicates, where even German or British companies hold stakes, are doing their best to win the scramble for Mali's resources.

Austria has sent military personnel to train the Malian Armed Forces in basic military skills, as part of EUTM Mali. Being part of the Common Security and Defense Policy of the EU (CSDP), EUTM Mali was intended to strengthen the security situation and to teach Malian soldiers military skills. Austria's participation in this mission is crucial for sharpening the country's profile in international engagements, especially after the overhasty withdrawal from the Golan Heights during the Syrian Civil War. Another impulsive retreat would cause reasonable questions in terms of reliability and esteem, not to mention international reputation.

### What will be...?

The political change, induced by the Malian Armed Forces, can be seen as a collective blowing off of steam; one that was utterly overdue. In the short run,

nothing will likely change, as international forces are already on the spot, struggling to fight extremists in the North and stopping smugglers and migrants from doing their business as usual. What can and most likely will happen in the near future is that casualties and attacks will rise, as more people will use the unstable situation in order to set off on their precarious journey to Europe, therefore leading to a growth in the human trafficking industry. However, the most important thing that should also happen in the near future is a re-evaluation of Europe's involvement in the country, as massive efforts and tremendous sums had been invested for relatively little outcome.

As the recent events have shown, Europe is still in favor of IBK, or at least his government, demanding that a restoration of order and democracy has to come as soon as possible. The EUTM as well as EUCAP<sup>30</sup> being temporarily put on hold, can be interpreted as a rejection of the people in power. This act is truly understandable, as a direct acceptance of a military-induced putsch would serve as role-model for others, but it also won't make winning the hearts and minds of the Malian population easier. Instead of openly attacking the interim military leadership, all negotiation channels should be held open, as the current putschists are well aware that they can't hold their position forever. Sooner or later, we might see a transition from the current leader, Colonel Assimi Goïta<sup>31</sup>, towards a civil authority. As the new government may include former military leaders, sanctions that are outspoken now may hinder a further dialogue in the future. Furthermore, Goïta and the others are well aware that their putsch had created a kind of power-vacuum, which could be easily filled by those they were trained to fight. Thus, it is in their interest to keep the turmoil as short as possible, not only because they could lose the backup of the population if the security situation declines rapidly.

Another key topic that has to be dealt with immediately is the question of how we would like to see a future Mali. Is it really necessary to transport the Westphalian

model of the nation state to all corners of the world? Surely, Western powers are accustomed to talk to peers, reference objects that they treat as equal. But is the model of the European state truly the same as it is in West Africa? Perhaps, it is time to recalibrate European expectations and concepts about state authority as they are perceived in Europe and try to get accustomed to the possibility that the model of the all-present nation state, which served Europe well, is not applicable to every corner of the world.

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