

'THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE NORTH, ITS THE SOUTH'

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I've been to Mali twice this year, helping the UN to set up its political office in Bamako and develop a strategic plan for the office. In the course of our work we met a wide range of groups, religious and secular, pro-coup and anti-coup, supportive of the government and opposed to the government. The groups included women, youth, religious leaders, elected officials and organisations working in the North. We were not able to go to the North itself because of security considerations.

Based on this experience, I will offer some reflections under the following headings: the primacy of politics; the transformation of the army; national dialogue, reconciliation and trauma; the so-called Taureg problem; how not do elections; and the role of external actors.

The primacy of politics

The French military intervention in January and February this year ended the occupation of northern Mali by rebel movements and jihadists. When I was in Bamako at the end of February, organisations across the political spectrum applauded France as Mali's saviour and liberator. There had been a grave danger that the jihadists would seize Bamako, thereby seize the state, and turn the country into a fundamentalist political entity. A Muslim leader said to us: 'France saved Mali, saved our way of life, saved Islam itself'.

The people we met conveyed a deep sense of existential trauma: not only had the territorial integrity and the independence of their country been severely compromised, but the Malian security forces and other state authorities had proved incapable of even retarding, let alone preventing or stopping, the onslaught and its inexorable progress towards the capital city.

Notwithstanding the French victory, however, the security situation in the North remains precarious. Even with the regaining of full territorial integrity, there are many daunting threats: weapons proliferation; the danger of reprisals against those who joined the rebellion;

the withdrawal of terrorists from towns into desert areas; and the enormous problem of drug smuggling, which contributed to the rebellion and has sorely undermined governance and development.

In short, there remains an urgent need to ensure the long-term stability of the North, safeguard the physical security of communities there and, in particular, prevent terrorist attacks.

But this security imperative should not detract from the primacy of politics in Mali (as in all countries) in both the short-term and the long-term. There is an on-going debate within the UN on the main thrust of the organisation's role in Mali. The French position emphasises boots on the ground in a major, long-term stabilisation deployment. This position looks set to prevail over those who want less emphasis on the military and more emphasis on the political. The consequent risk is that the political challenges of Mali will be subordinate to the military deployment and will be neglected by the UN.

The 'primacy of politics' in Mali relates to three major challenges in particular: reconciliation and national dialogue; strengthening the capacity of state institutions; and building the legitimacy of these institutions and the political system. I will say more about aspects of these challenges in due course.

But first I want to reinforce the point about the primacy of politics. Properly understood, the coup, the rebellion, the weapons proliferation, the drug smuggling and the other elements of the precarious security situation in the North are manifestations of a crisis of governance. They are substantial problems in their own right, of course, but they are also manifestations of a deeper and more fundamental problem. As many of our interlocutors in Mali put it, the fundamental problem is that 'the political system is broken'. One leader made the point metaphorically: 'the problem is not the North, it's the South'.

The crisis of governance encompasses endemic corruption, weak state capacity and the low level of legitimacy of state institutions and the political system. The extent of corruption, we were told, allowed the Islamists to present themselves as a pure alternative to the state. And corruption had also engulfed the army, contributing to its weakness.

Strengthening state capacity and building the legitimacy of the state and the political system are long-term, protracted and conflictual endeavours. If they are not successful, there will be

a high risk of further crises in the future. There is a big warning here to international actors that want to rush the process and, as discussed later, hold elections prematurely.

The transformation of the army

Among the state institutions that require reorientation and transformation, the army is among the most important. The coup in March 2012 was a strange affair, an accidental coup if you like. A group of junior officers mounted a public demonstration outside the presidential palace, protesting against the government's failure to provide the army with proper equipment and technical support. The army had recently suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the rebels in the North and the protesting soldiers attributed this to the government's neglect of the military. The soldiers decided on the spur of the moment to enter the palace. When President Toure fled, they found themselves holding the seat of power in a literal sense. Was it therefore possible to hold the seat of power substantively, that is, via a coup? The soldiers were unsure and phoned Capt Amadou Sanogo, a training officer, and asked him to hurry over. After taking a shower, he headed off to the palace and the coup was realised.

Civil-relations relations in Mali were much more complicated than suggested by this story but the story serves to illustrate the acute weakness of the state, able to be captured so easily by a small group of junior officers.

The ECOWAS mediation after the coup was not in fact a mediation among the Malian stakeholders but rather a negotiation between the Burkina Faso mediator and Capt Sanogo. As a result of the mediation, the army is no longer formally in power. But it is, along with the Prime Minister and the President, one of the three de facto centres of powers in Mali.

Surprisingly, the UN and other international actors are not addressing the challenge of sorting out the army. Some of the international actors who are based in Mali are averse to working with the army, as a matter of principle, because it is led by putschists. Yet this is surely a strong reason to be working with the army rather than ignoring it! The putschists are not going to suddenly vanish of their own accord.

Other international actors, especially those who are fixated on the problem of stabilising the North by military means, believe that the primary challenge is train and equip the Malian army so that it can deploy in the North and back up the French troops and AFISMA or a UN force. This perspective is also mistaken. The business of transforming the Malian army is

primarily a political endeavour rather than a technical one. Above all, it entails the long-term project of inculcating a proper sense of military professionalism, which includes subordination to the civil authority and respect for human rights and the rules of war, as well as unity, cohesion, discipline and integrity of command. The current situation is too tense and sensitive to begin working directly on transformation. The first step is to bring the army into the national dialogue in a transparent manner and to facilitate a dialogue within the army.

National dialogue, reconciliation and trauma

There is a very high level of polarisation and antagonism between various political and social groups as well as between and within communities. The cleavages are not only North-South but also within the North and within the South. And there is a high level of physical, psychological and existential trauma as a result of the rebellion, the occupation of the North and the human rights abuses and atrocities that were committed. It is hard to see how Malian society can return to normality without a painful and prolonged process of dialogue.

The Roadmap for the Transition, drawn up by the President and approved by Parliament, refers to the establishment of a commission for national dialogue. In truth, the dialogue that is needed is not only a national dialogue but also multiple dialogues between and within communities and between various actors, including the military. These dialogues should be initiated and facilitated by local actors rather than external actors. The local actors – who include community leaders, religious groups and elected officials such as mayors – have the knowledge, understanding and affinity that external actors lack. The role of the UN and other external actors should be to support these local facilitators.

All the organisations we met in Bamako supported dialogue, negotiations and reconciliation. But most of them were opposed to these processes being inclusive of all relevant groups. There is strong resistance to negotiations with the MNLA. (Negotiations with jihadist groups currently appear to be inconceivable and it was not possible to even talk about this in Bamako). The resistance to negotiations with the MNLA stems from a visceral antagonism to rebels who plunged the country into chaos. There is little or no sympathy for any grievances they might have.

The transitional government, for its part, has stated that it is open to negotiations with the MNLA but it will no doubt be worried about a popular backlash against the talks and any concessions that come from them. The delicate balance required here is to promote

inclusivity and address genuine grievances without appearing to be rewarding or pandering to those who took up arms. A related dilemma is the question of amnesty and impunity. We encountered vehement opposition to impunity, which is always a sensitive and complicated topic in post-conflict societies. Yet without some form of amnesty, there will be no adequate reintegration of rebel fighters into their communities.

The so-called Taureg problem

Wrapped up in the complexities of negotiations, reconciliation and amnesty is the so-called Taureg problem. The simplistic perception conveyed by some Western media is that the historical and contemporary marginalisation of the Taureg people in northern Mali was the primary cause of the rebellion.

In Bamako we encountered strong contrary views. We were told repeatedly, even by delegations that included Tauregs, that there is no discrimination against the Taureg; if anything, the Taureg have been the beneficiaries of positive affirmative action since the ending of the previous northern rebellion in 1992. There is a problem of underdevelopment but this afflicts the South as much as the North and, in the North, it afflicts all ethnic groups. So why, our interlocutors asked, did the Taureg alone take up arms? There was no objective basis for the rebellion. Instead, as one community leader asserted, 'the MNLA is the spoiled child of the Republic'.

We also heard a more extreme view, thick with hatred and racism: the Taureg are anti-black; they are lazy rather than discriminated against; the problem is that they believe they were born to be chiefs and this is threatened by democracy, where authority at the local level now derives from the ballot; and democracy and modernisation have threatened the Taureg's practice of slavery. This view was so unabashedly racist that it was reminiscent of apartheid-era South Africa!

Among policy think tanks like the International Crisis Group and the Social Science Research Council in New York, the argument is that we are oversimplifying matters to talk about the rebellion as a 'Taureg problem'. This ignores the political, religious, clan and class differences within the Taureg community. My own impression is that there is not a good enough understanding of the complexities of intra- and inter-community dynamics in the North.

How not to do elections

The timing of elections poses a dilemma. External actors are pushing very hard for elections to take place soon, and the President of Mali has scheduled elections for July 2013. Many of our interlocutors in Bamako felt that this was a far-fetched, if not dangerous, proposition.

On the one hand, elections are urgently needed in order to restore democracy and constitutional order, to establish the legitimacy and authority of the government and to mark an end to the transition.

On the other hand, there are many concerns that conditions are not yet right for elections. First, the country is too polarised and traumatised. In the absence of reconciliation, there is little space for constructive political debate. Elections might provoke violent conflict. Second, elections in a democratic society are not intended merely to provide an opportunity to cast a vote; more fundamentally, they are an opportunity to debate and select political ideas, programmes and leaders. It will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to have free political contestation in the North and, in particular, in refugee camps and among the internally displaced people. Third, there has consistently been a low turnout at previous elections in Mali, reflecting a lack of popular confidence in the electoral process and political system. In the absence of major reform, this problem will be even greater with the forthcoming election.

Fourth, the corrupt and flawed political system was one of the major causes of both the coup and the rebellion. There is a danger that premature elections will simply perpetuate that system. This perspective is held most strongly by those who supported or are at least sympathetic to the coup.

The bottom line is that credible elections will help to create a legitimate government but elections that lack credibility will be counter-productive, provoking conflict and resulting in a government that lacks legitimacy. In light of these concerns, the challenge of elections should be viewed principally as one of creating the right conditions rather than simply a matter of timing.

External actors

The political crisis of Mali cannot be solved by external actors. It can only be solved by domestic actors. In the political realm, the function of the UN and other external actors should be to support local actors and not attempt to do things on their behalf. Like it or not, the external organisations should therefore be patient. Political decisions in Mali are likely to

be taken slowly because of the fragility of the situation, the absence of a national consensus and the lack of a strong national leadership.

The UN and other external actors will become part of the problem rather than part of the solution if they are too impatient, if they are unresponsive to Malian needs and requests, and if they design their projects and programmes on the basis of instructions, checklists and templates from UN headquarters in New York, rather than on the basis of the Malian reality.