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Mali

What future for Mali?

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In Mali, the seizure of power by the military on 18 August, 2020 opens a new page in a country which is experiencing an unprecedented crisis. The situation continues to deteriorate seriously.

The proportion of the population living below the poverty line reached 41.1% in 2019 and could increase by another 800,000 people in 2020. The course of the coup proves that it was carefully prepared. On 18 August, the mutineers simultaneously seized the Kati and N'Tominkorobougou barracks, while troops were sent to arrest key figures of the regime, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK), his prime minister Boubou Cissé as well as Foreign Minister Tiébilé Dramé, Finance Minister Abdoulaye Daffé, and general Ibrahim Dahirou Dembelé, the Minister of Defence.

A putsch amid popular discontent

Immediately, the authors of the coup d'état proclaimed the creation of a National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) and arranged for Keïta himself to announce his resignation and that of his government, as well as the dissolution of the national assembly, thus allowing the maintenance of a constitutional veneer, even if that does not fool anyone. If the putschists are for the most part senior officers, they are not however integrated into the inner circle of the regime's personalities. Some of them led the war against the rebels in northern Mali, such as Colonel Assimi Goïta, president of the CNSP, who was the Commander of the autonomous battalion of special forces and fought the jihadists in the north of the country from 2002 to 2008. The number two in the CNSP, Malick Diaw, was deputy commander of the military zone of Kati, and is considered as the linchpin of the coup. CNSP spokesperson Ismaël Wagué was the deputy chief of staff of the air force.

To paraphrase an advertisement from a high-tech multinational: the people dreamed of it, the putschists realized it, except that in this case, the people did not only dream, they massively mobilized against the regime with massive demonstrations. The trigger for this mobilization, which began at the beginning of June, was the decision by the Constitutional Council to modify the results of the parliamentary elections in some thirty constituencies in favour of regime candidates. The abstention rate for the first round of the 2018 presidential elections was 57% and for the second round it was over 65%. This abstention was maintained during the last parliamentary elections demonstrating the lack of interest of the population in a largely discredited political class. The massive mobilizations were organized by the Mouvement du 5 Juin - Rassemblement des Forces Patriotiques (M5-RFP), an aggregation of different parties, unions and activist civil society organizations, against the government and for Keïta's resignation. The only response from the government was a fierce crackdown with a death toll of 11 and more than a hundred injured. IBK did not hesitate to use the Special Anti-Terrorism Force (FORSAT) which fired live ammunition into the crowd in an attempt to quell the protests.

While in 2013, IBK had represented hope and won the presidential elections easily, he continued to disappoint by failing to make any important decisions capable of solving the country's problems. His government and his relatives have been tainted by corruption cases that have ripped through political life. Among others, the overbilling of the purchase of the presidential plane, the purchases of luxury 4X4s distributed to his entourage, not to mention his Patek Philippe watch at more than 80,000 euros and the behaviour of his son, Karim Keïta, who shamelessly displays his luxurious lifestyle on social networks, while nearly half of the population lives below the poverty line. A UN investigation revealed that the high military hierarchy like General Kéba Sangaré, chief of staff of the army, has continued to torpedo the Algiers peace accords, and to take irresponsible decisions by lifting the protection of the village of Ogossagou, which was nevertheless threatened by armed militias. Hours after the Malian army left, the

village was attacked, killing 35 civilians and 19 missing. This village was already mourning the massacre of 160 people a year ago. If General Sangaré has been relieved of his post, this type of individual continues repressive policies at the highest level of the state. It is therefore a beleaguered, corrupt and incapable regime that has come to an end.

A dramatic situation for the people

Whether in the economic, social or security areas, all the indicators are red. According to the latest report from the United Nations Secretary, the situation is deteriorating considerably. "The number of internally displaced persons in Mali increased to 239,484 from 218,000 in March". The Algiers peace accords which date from 20 June, 2015 have stalled, and the two most important measures have not been carried out: "delays in the administrative and territorial restructuring and the challenges facing the redeployment of reconstituted units of the army to the north of the country were identified as the main obstacles to the implementation of the Agreement". The situation in the north of the country is now a sort of grey area where armed groups, whether or not they are signatories to the peace agreement, Islamists or communal groups, are mostly engaged in various trafficking activities. A situation which results in part from the French military intervention within the framework of Operation Serval. Indeed, the first consequence was the scattering of Islamist fighters over the entire Sahel region, the second is linked to reliance on the armed forces of the MNLA separatists and then, with operation Barkhane, on pro-government militias to fight against the jihadists at the expense of a policy of general disarmament.

There are two Islamist groups: the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (The Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims - GSIM) affiliated with Al Qaeda and led by Iyad Ag Ghali and the Islamic State of Greater Sahara. In addition, there are armed groups that are federated in several organizations. On the government side, there is the Platform of Self-Defence Movements called "the Platform", while on the rebel side there is the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and finally, the Coordination of Entente Movements bringing together fighters from the first two groups. Between all these groups, the borders are largely porous and alliances are forged and untied at the whim of the clan chiefs.

The violence that was confined to the north has spread for several years to the centre of the country and the situation is only worsening with inter-communal clashes but also within communities. Conflicts are mainly due to access to resources, whether water or grazing, between the Fulani, who are mostly pastoralists, and other communities that depend on agriculture or fishing. The clashes become bloody because weapons of war are numerous and circulate easily in the country, the absence of a state which can act as regulator and mediator allows the Islamists to prosper by inserting themselves in conflicts and by exacerbating them. Not a month goes by without witnessing attacks and reprisals from community armed militias such as "Dan Nan Ambassagou" or Islamists. In any case, it is the civilians who pay the heaviest price.

The stronger the military pressure, the more the country sinks into crisis with dramatic consequences for the people. Human rights violations, such as killings, looting, kidnappings, disappearances, and forced recruitment including that of children are committed by armed groups but also by government forces: "MINUSMA documented 535 violations and abuses, 412 more than in the previous reporting period, including 275 abuses by armed groups and 163 by the national forces." [1] The cases listed only partially reflect the situation due to the multiplicity of government armies operating in the Sahel: the Malian army, the G5 Sahel joint force which brings together elements of the armies of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Chad, the UN force MINUSMA, the Takuba group of forces made up of soldiers from the European Union, the French army forces of Operation Barkhane and the forces of the various Sahelian countries who have a right of pursuit of 50 kilometres, recently increased to 100, beyond their borders. When abuses against civilians are committed, it is difficult to know who is responsible, as the soldiers of the Sahelian armies integrated into the G5 force do not have any distinctive sign. As for the French armed forces, they work and

rely on certain armed groups responsible for crimes, for example the Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés (GATIA).

Mali has gradually descended into a spiral of violence. It is no longer a few jihadists who carry out attacks, but rather armed groups who profit from initially political and economic problems. The crisis of capitalism in Africa and notoriously in the Sahel with its climatic, economic, social and now health repercussions exacerbates communal tensions. Military responses, whether Malian or Western, do not change the situation but make it worse. As Sahelian activist civil society organizations point out: "Military resources have so far failed to ensure the protection of all populations without discrimination and have even led to numerous abuses against civilians.... States must be able to analyse the situations which lead people to join armed groups..." [2] This situation of latent war in the north and the centre of the country has consequences at the social level, the health centres no longer function and the schools are deserted, so before the Covid-19 crisis, nearly 1,261 schools were closed for security reasons. The prices of foodstuffs continue to rise due to the difficulties of transport. The Covid-19 epidemic has exacerbated the shortage. The United Nations considers that "food insecurity affects 3.5 million people, of whom 757,000 are in a serious situation". We can better understand the anger of Malians against the government and its president IBK and the favourable reception of the coup d'état in contrast to the positions of the international community.

The hypocrites' ball

The putsch was condemned unanimously; however, certain nuances appear. Thus France is asking for the return of civilians to power without mentioning IBK, unlike ECOWAS. This organization, which brings together the heads of state of West African countries, demands "the reestablishment of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita as President of the Republic, in accordance with the constitutional provisions of his country".

Among these great defenders of the constitutional order, we find Alassane Ouattara and Alpha Condé who changed the constitution of their country to stand for election or Faure Gnassingbé who came to power by a coup and who is in his fourth term through rigged elections. Their solemn declaration in defence of the Constitution of Mali would make us smile if there were not significant consequences behind it. ECOWAS has declared "the closure of all land and air borders as well as the cessation of all economic, financial and commercial flows and transactions with the exception of basic foodstuffs, medicines, fuel, and electricity. between member countries and Mali. We invite all partners to do the same". [3] Mali is a landlocked country dependent on border countries for its supply. An embargo would only make the situation even more difficult.

In Africa coups succeed one another but are not alike. There are coups d'état which put an end to democratic experiments as was the case in 2008 in Mauritania where General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz took power to end arrests for embezzlement, or that of Blaise Compaoré to overthrow Thomas Sankara. There are other coups that bring down dictatorships or hated regimes that remain in place through repression. Mali is an example. The end of Moussa Traore's dictatorship in 1991 was through a combination of mass movements and a military coup. Amadou Haya Sanogo's coup in 2012 ended the corrupt regime of Amadou Toumani Touré. This type of coup d'état is always ambivalent since on the one hand it rids the country of corrupt leaders but on the other it replaces the people and their organization, dispossessing them of their victory, and can lead to serious abuses.

A complex situation for struggles

The M5-RFP did not support the coup but has welcomed IBK's departure from the presidency, considering this resignation to be the result of the people's struggle and declaring itself ready to work with the military. From the point of view of popular mobilization, the situation remains complex. The leadership of the protest remains in the hands of

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a particularly backward religious leader and demagogue, Imam Mahmoud Dicko. He supported the former dictator Moussa Traoré, fought against the change in the Family Code giving more rights to women and propelled IBK to power in the first presidential election. In the M5-RFP, Dicko's organization, the Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathizers (CMAS) has a very important weight and politicians like Choguel Maiga, Mountaga Tall or Modibo Sidibé who have participated more or less in all the regimes are not sizeable enough to provide a counterbalance. Now the military has taken a decisive position in the Malian political spectrum. Between these two poles, Imam Dicko and the coup plotters, it will be difficult for progressive political parties and militant civil society organizations to make their voices heard when substantive political and economic choices have to be made.

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[1] https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_476.pdf

[2] <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2012-Jul-JointStatement-Mali-Peoples-Coalition-Fr.pdf>

[3] As of 8 September, 2020, ECOWAS had abandoned the demand that IBK be returned to power, but continued to demand a civilian transition in less than 12 months, in the absence of which sanctions would be maintained, indeed strengthened.