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Mats Utas

Mali: Towards a neo-trusteeship? (by Yvan Guichaoua)

Posted on [February 26, 2013](#)

This is the second part of a two-part analysis of the present situation in Mali. Part I, entitled “Mali: the fallacy of ungoverned space” is available [here](#).

Preventing the fall of Bamako into Islamist hands is the official trigger of the French military campaign in Mali, which kicked off on January 11th and soon drove out Islamist forces from northern Mali main cities. Whether the Islamists really had the intention to seize Bamako is unclear. Taking control of Sevare and its strategic airport, 600 km northeast of the capital, might have been their main goal. But at the same time, French security sources argue, [a coup in Bamako was being fomented by ex-junta affiliates](#), meant to ‘connect’ with the Islamists’ offensive southward conducted by Ansar Eddine. Hence the immediacy of France’s heavy-handed response. It is premature to make this narrative historical truth but this is a plausible one.

What can be held for certain at this stage is that the French initiative was driven by security concerns, above any others. Long before the intervention, while the US insisted that organizing elections was a pre-requisite for the recovery of Mali’s territorial integrity, France prioritised the quick military option, fearing a ‘sanctuarisation’ of Jihadist forces in the middle of West Africa, with potential devastating contagious effects, including terrorist attack on the French soil. Addressing Mali’s profound political predicament was seen as a less urgent task, even though the official plan was to pursue a ‘two-track’ approach, political and military.

Mali’s political predicament has been identified [in my previous post](#) as a poisonous system of governance linking Bamako to northern elites, silencing grassroots aspirations. Building legitimate political representation from within to prevent the resuscitation of yesterday’s ghosts is the challenge ahead. This daunting task will certainly necessitate wide, bottom-up consultations; micro-level peace-building efforts; the reactivation and eventual reconfiguration of decentralisation policies; ambitious infrastructural investments; highly sensitive discussions over the composition of security forces and their territorial deployment; religious dialogue; and, of course, electoral processes. Discussions over these issues have timidly started.

But on the ground, the military campaign is not over and its strategic imperatives and orientations, under French auspices, are critically shaping the political landscape in which these peace-building efforts are expected to develop. French intervention, *volens nolens*, produces provisional winners and losers and builds up a temporary order that should not pre-empt the collectively desirable inclusive political arrangements.

France has decided to ally with the Tuareg secular insurgency that started it all one year ago, the *Mouvement national the liberation de l’Azawad* (MNLA). MNLA’s constant pro-West stance, meant to reap the dividends of the anti-terror agenda, is finally rewarded, to Bamako authorities’ (still discrete) chagrin. But it is rewarded for strategic reasons, by the French military more than by the French diplomacy. The MNLA offers the intel and the local auxiliaries France needs on the ground, notably because France has eight citizens detained by Al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb in the area. The political consequence is that Kidal, where the MNLA and the *Mouvement islamique de l’Azawad* (MIA – an offshoot of Ansar Eddine whose members were originally in the MNLA) are

based, is still a no-go area for the Malian army. This situation has a good side as the undisciplined, unaccountable Malian army terrifies Tuareg populations, for good reasons. Yet it artificially co-opts two armed groups whose representativeness among the Tuareg constituency is questionable and whose record of violence in the past months needs to be scrutinised.

The political configuration in Gao is different. Elhadj Ag Gamou, a loyalist Tuareg officer whose forces had to stay in Niger, at the periphery of the Malian arena, after being defeated by the MNLA has made a come-back. Whether he asked France for permission to do so is unclear but at least French forces let it happen. The return of Gamou possibly prevents the proliferation of revenge killings against 'light skinned' populations in Gao but again poses a political problem. Gamou was a central actor in the 'remote control' type of governance established by Mali's former regime, which he took advantage of, notably against rival factions of the Tuareg complex political architecture.

Timbuktu offers another, more complicated, picture. There, the French have arrived with the Malian army, in a place where Arabs form a large share of the population. The result has been immediate: shops owned by Arabs have been looted; reprisal killings have been perpetrated by the army; some members of the Arab community have disappeared. Arabs have massively left Timbuktu and have found refuge 70km north of the city, with no possibility to access livelihoods, their leaders – whom I had the opportunity to talk to directly – say. Why didn't France adopt in Timbuktu the logic of co-optation it more or less deliberately adopted in Kidal and Gao? Ould Meydou, an Arab colonel who fought back the MNLA alongside Ag Gamou under the command of the demised Amadou Toumani Toure's regime last year, was a natural candidate to lead the Malian army back in Timbuktu. Not bringing back Ould Meydou on the map was possibly an obligation Paris had to compose with, to avoid dangerous tensions with the ex-junta that deposed Toure. The consequence is that Arab leaders now not only fear for the survival of their constituency but complain that France is discriminating against them despite their original commitment to Mali's territorial integrity. They go as far as suggesting that they could revive some self-defence groups of their own active in the past. Other community leaders, not yet official partners of the country's 'liberation', are complaining too, like [Mossa Ag Intazoume](#) leader of the Bellahs, the former 'slaves' of the Tuareg.

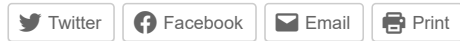
France intervention is removing the lid on complex and heated intercommunity dynamics. It eventually grants artificial legitimacy *from outside* to zealous local military auxiliaries while ignoring others. This state of affairs may inflame intergroup tensions in the short term, which Jihadist groups could use as leverage for their own insurgency, as the [confused battle in In-Khalil](#) between the MNLA and the *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad*, an Arab movement suspected of entertaining ties with AQIM, seems to indicate. France intervention also provokes extrajudicial violence, as the [exactions of the Malian army demonstrate](#). It may ultimately empower illegitimate figures, simply owing their privileged position to their savviness in dealing with Westerners.

France has pledged not to stay forever and hopes to be replaced by UN-led peacekeeping forces soon. But the latter – whose chain of command and modalities of interaction with the Malian army need to be seriously worked out – may impose their own layer of governance, based on their institutional understanding of the meandering and volatile local situation. A [neo-trusteeship](#), as seminally conceptualised by James Fearon and David Laitin a decade ago in other contexts, may arise. This ruling system which classically distributes power among various institutional actors, under the auspices of multilateral organisations, is likely to be replete with local partners legitimate to the eyes of the West but not to the eyes of the populations. Worse, it could impede the emergence of bottom-up initiatives. To put this risk at bay, it is important to introduce now a genuinely inclusive participatory

political process among Mali's northern communities. But stopping violence against civilians immediately is an utter necessity.

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1 Response to *Mali: Towards a neo-trusteeship? (by Yvan Guichaoua)*



Olli Teirilä says:

March 20, 2013 at 9:24 pm

Very good piece, managing to take a multi-dimensional look at the problems in Mali. I had the privilege of hearing the writer's comments recently at a seminar in Helsinki and I have to say that I share his views completely.

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Mats Utas

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