Mats Utas

Mali: the fallacy of ungoverned spaces (by Yvan Guichaoua)

Posted on February 14, 2013

This is the first part of a two-part analysis of the present situation in Mali. Part II, entitled "Mali: toward a neo-trusteeship?" will explore the responses to Mali's crisis.

Repeatedly in the past weeks, UK Prime Minister David Cameron called northern Mali an 'ungoverned space', indulging in the classic intellectual shortcut used by those looking for easy explanations of the territorial entrenchment of irregular armed groups, including Al Qaeda-affiliated ones, in Africa and beyond. Such an assumption leads to dangerous misconceptions of political and social realities of Mali.

Crucially, it suggests that terrorists have established their stronghold in a political vacuum. The implication is that those who have shaped the political environment leading to the resumption of a separatist Tuareg insurgency in January 2012 followed by its replacement by a coalition of Al Qaeda affiliated groups and Salafist Tuareg, are automatically exonerated from their responsibility in Mali's present state of affairs.

Why did Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) prosper in northern Mali, to gradually become the dominant force that took control of two-thirds of the national territory between April 2012 and January 2013? The answer is only marginally linked to the emptiness of the Sahara desert or its rough terrain. The Mauritanian or the Nigerien deserts display characteristics similar to that of Mali but it was the latter that was chosen as a refuge by the Algerian Salafists who fled their home country in 2003 and later founded AQIM in Mali.

The reasons why they did so and subsequently expanded their influence are detailed in a report by the International Crisis Group I had the opportunity to work on. AQIM's presence in northern Mali has been tolerated for years by authorities in Bamako. It was first assumed by Western powers that a lack of national military capacity caused Bamako's passiveness towards AQIM. But as foreign anti-terror assistance poured into Mali and produced no tangible reduction of the terrorist threat, Western donors gradually doubted the authenticity of Malian authorities' commitment to confront AQIM. Quite schizophrenically, they also fuelled this stasis by paying generous ransoms to AQIM for the release of their hostages, hence propping up a profitable business not only lining the pockets of the Jihadists but also those of the middlemen involved in the liberation negotiations. Iyad Ag Ghaly, who later became the dreaded leader of Ansar Eddine – one of the prominent Islamist groups which took control of Mali in 2012 -, was one of these middlemen. He was working hand in hand with the Malian regime at the time, which also took its share of the hostage money.

The rise of AQIM under Bamako's lenient eyes was paralleled by a nefarious evolution of relations between the central authorities and their tumultuous north, regularly shaken by Tuareg rebellions since Independence from France in 1960. Over the last five decades, Tuareg militants have claimed for more autonomy and more development for their region, without managing to build a consensus among their heterogeneous Tuareg constituency and even less so among the highly diverse non-Tuareg communities living in the north, notably Arab, Songhay or Fulani.

Between 2006 and 2009, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, a young Tuareg officer turned rebel from the Kidal region, showed particular resistance to any settlement with the central authorities. To mitigate the troubles Bahanga and his men were causing, the Malian government armed militias, recruited among northern communities and clientele networks at odds with Bahanga's agenda. They happily used the protection of the state as a lever for their sectional interests, including cross-border drug-trafficking. In the years preceding the insurgency of the secular separatist *Mouvement national de liberation de l'Azawad* (MNLA) – to a large extent Bahanga's baby – informal armed groups proliferated under Bamako's auspices, as part of a loose system of governance providing a semblance of order. This system collapsed as the MNLA, invigorated by the bounty of Libyan open arms depots, drove out the Malian army from the north in early 2012. But a large share of its actors resurfaced with a vengeance as the separatists entered Timbuktu and Gao: in a dramatic shift of loyalty, they abandoned their allegiance to Bamako and aligned with the AQIM-led coalition that eventually chased away the MNLA and took control of the north.

The Islamists, now officially sworn enemies of the French and the Malian army, are the contingent creatures of the governance system put in place in the past years by a web of converging political and economic interests bridging Mali's capital Bamako, and the northern provinces of Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. The de facto partition of Mali of the last months did not occur because of characteristics typical of northern Mali's 'ungoverned space'; it occurred because of poisonous relations established between the north and the south.

Following the 'ungoverned spaces' approach is thus likely to yield unwelcomed solutions to the crisis. It contains a built-in response to the conundrum it names: to repel terrorists, it suggests, let's replace the political void they have taken advantage of by the deployment of the legitimate administration! As, to international donors, legitimacy is overwhelmingly considered to be located in central authorities, this would entail rebuilding Mali by relying on the very powerbrokers and representatives in Bamako who bear a huge responsibility in the country's present crisis. Giving back to Mali the chunk of territory forcibly detached from it by Tuareg separatists, then occupied by allied Islamist groups, without drastically reconsidering the country's north-south relations would be foolish.

In the past years, northern Mali has in fact been a heavily governed space, yet not by the standards of a rational legal system. This system of governance was adverse to development and only benefitted a few, in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal, but, also, crucially, in Bamako. The challenge that Malians now face is not about deploying on its territory a chimerical Weberian administration. It is about giving a voice, particularly in the north, to those whose lives have been confiscated by criminalised elites and their armed proxies.

Yvan Guichaoua is a Lecturer in Politics and International Development, UEA. He has conducted research in Niger, Mali and Côte d'Ivoire and is a main source of knowledge on conflicts in francophone West Africa.

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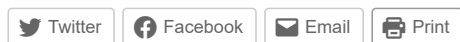
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5 Responses to *Mali: the fallacy of ungoverned spaces (by Yvan Guichaoua)*

Phil Vernon *says:*

February 15, 2013 at 3:47 pm

Reblogged this on Phil Vernon's blog and commented:

A good corrective to the lazy and usually inaccurate concept of "ungoverned space" by Yvan Guichaoua. It links nicely to my previous blog post on the use of inaccurate language and of how lazy language leads to misdiagnosis and the wroing approach. http://philvernon.net/2012/12/29/the-anti-lexicon-of-peacebuilding-listening-to-edward-said-and-george-orwell/

In Afghanistan it always puzzles me that the Taleban are described as insurgents by foreign armies who invaded the country and drove them from power. I hold no brief for the Taleban but is "counter-insurgency" the right way to describe the ISAF approach to them? Likewise, are the areas of Pakistan where the Taleban is, "ungoverned"? I think not.

Reply

Abdoulaye Toure *says:*

February 16, 2013 at 12:03 pm

sorry, I have to write my comments in French, so that sure to write what want to say.

Le Premier Ministre a raison d'une part, car l'Etat malien n'a pas les moyens, encore moins une armee capable de controler cette partie du territoire. En 2004, j'ai personnellement enquete sur les conflits potentiels dans cette zone et je me suis rendu compte que AQMI etait deja fortement implante dans cette partie du Mali. Un haut grade de l'armee malienne me confiait a l'epoque: "C'est la coexistance pacifique. Comme ils ne s'attaquent pas a nous, nous les lessons tranqule' mais la realite est que l'armee malienne ne pouvait pas les affronter.

Aussi, les populations du Nord, particulierement les songhai, les belah et les peulh sont pris entre les actions intenpestives des touareg (a peine 30% de la population du Nord), l'incapacite de l'armee et les jihadistes. La prise en otage du gouvernement de Bamako par un Capitaine est revelateur.

Reply

Yvan Guichaoua *says:*

February 20, 2013 at 8:31 pm

Cher Abdoulaye,

Merci pour votre commentaire. Je crois que la question du manque de capacité ne couvre qu'une partie du problème. Elle a été prépondérante au début, sans doute, mais elle s'est atténuée à mesure que la France ou les États-Unis renforçaient l'armée malienne. Par la suite, il semble que ce ne sont pas les capacités militaires qui ont fait défaut mais bien un volonté politique ferme de la part du régime ATT dans la lutte contre AQMI. D'autant que la 'coexistence pacifique' n'a pas tenu si longtemps (assassinat de Lamana à Tombouctou, enlèvement de Camatte à Menaka etc.).

Reply

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