The 2012 Mali Uprising: Grievance, Opportunity, and Commitment Problems

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In 2012 the central government of Mali was threatened by ethnic separatists in the country's northern region. The separatist movement enjoyed the support of international terrorist organizations and posed a serious threat to governance in Mali. This paper examines the long and short term causes of the civil war, then enumerates spoilers to lasting peace in the region. The conclusions of the paper are based on academic literature, but general theories about civil war can only go so far in explaining war on a case-by-case basis. Mary Beth Leonard, U.S. Ambassador to Mali during the 2012 crisis, responds to the piece with insights that could only be gained by someone experiencing the conflict firsthand. Ultimately, she is optimistic about a stable future in Mali, provided the international community continues to dedicate diplomatic, financial and material resources to the conflict's resolution.

Why War, Why Now?

Although often lauded as a model of stable democracy in Africa, Mali is no stranger to armed conflict. For more than fifty years, tensions have existed between the central government in Bamako and the Tuaregs, a nomadic Berber people inhabiting the country's northern regions. A civil war began in March 2012 as rebels captured the major northern provinces of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. In April of the same year, Tuareg rebels, in partnership with radical Islamist groups Ansar al-Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA), declared the Independent State of Azawad in Mali's northern region. Considering the country's long and turbulent history, why did conflict escalate to war in 2012 and not before?

Neither greed nor grievance is a sufficient explanation for war in this case. Instead, the conflict was caused by the convergence of long-standing political grievances with opportunities unique to the 2012 environment: governance collapse, the effects of the Libyan civil war, and the rise of Islamist groups in the region.

In this paper, I first establish political exclusion as the ideological motivation of the Tuareg rebels, and then expand upon the short-term factors that made war possible in 2012. Next, I point to international Islamist groups as the main impediment to a durable peace process. Finally, I posit that war could have been avoided through effective implementation of the 1992 National Pact. The case study of Mali demonstrates the destabilizing power of commitment problems and underscores the importance of third parties to the enforcement of peace negotiations.

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Causing the Conflict: Grievance and Opportunity

Ideological Motivations

Tuareg grievances are deeply political. Following the independence of many African countries in the 1960s, Tuareg communities were excluded from the political and economic benefits of the newly formed West African governments.[1] The First Tuareg Rebellion (1962-64) was a response to the discriminatory modernization policies of the southern ethnic groups that dominated the government in Bamako. In the Second Tuareg Rebellion (1990-94), rebels complained of human rights abuses and the government's intentional withholding of food relief following severely disruptive droughts. These uprisings struggled to consolidate strategy, promote recruitment, and coordinate leadership[2] and were consequently crushed by government forces.

The repeated failure of peace settlements following these early conflicts created further distrust between the Tuaregs and the government, causing the rebels to escalate their demands from fair political representation to total autonomy. Stewart points to complaints about the speed and fairness of rebel reintegration into the military following the 1992 National Pact as a contributing factor to this loss of faith in the government.[3] This disaffection led to the formation of the National Liberation Movement of Azawad (known by its French acronym MNLA) in the late 1990s. The MNLA's stated aim is the creation of an independent Tuareg state called Azawad in the country's north.[4] One of the MNLA's first acts was freeing a group of Nigerian Tuaregs who had been arrested for protesting government capture of French aid,[5] suggesting that political ideology was at the root of their formation.

Some scholars question the political motivation of the rebels, pointing instead to supply-induced scarcity (the degradation and depletion of an environmental resource) as the cause of Tuareg aggression. Mabutt (1984) and Oldeman, Hakkeling, and Sombroek (1990) cite the 'desertification' of the Sahel, claiming that forest areas in West Africa are undergoing natural transition from farmland to savannah and then desert, disrupting the agricultural land on which the Tuaregs base their livelihoods.[6] Benjaminsen calls these studies into question, challenging their methodology. More credibly, these policies incited further political grievances. Krings argues that Tuareg grievances *are* related to the disruption of agricultural lifestyles, but due to harmful agricultural policies of the 1960s-1980s rather than environmental change. An unintended consequence of these policies was the mass migration of unemployed young men to Libya, one of the destabilizing factors that primed the country for war in 2012 (discussed later in this paper). Additionally, the embezzlement of relief funds aimed at alleviating the economic effects of the droughts of the 1970s instead caused public outrage among the (predominantly Tuareg) intended recipients of this aid. The embezzled funds were used for the construction of "drought castles" in the wealthier parts of Bamako,[7] a public flaunting of the government's power and indifference toward the Tuaregs.

Enabling Factors

Political grievance among the Tuareg is a necessary backdrop to the 2012 conflict, but does not sufficiently explain why grievances did not manifest into war for decades. In 2012, the balance of power in Mali shifted to favor the rebels, who chose to go to war rather than to negotiate from their position of strength. This choice may have been due to rebel disillusionment with the government's willingness to commit to concessions in the past. Three factors, unique to the Malian environment in 2012, catalyzed this discontent into war.

First, governance collapse inhibited the capacity of the Malian government to prevent the rebel offensive. Jones points to two governance problems that characterize a weak state with emerging anarchy: inability of the government to provide essential services to the population, and inability of state security forces to establish law and order.[8] Both of these conditions were present in Mali at the start of the civil war. A 2013 report by the Congressional Research Service describes the weakness of the government in Bamako, citing "hollowed out state institutions," "a national recession and revenue crisis," and "a regional food security crisis, exacerbated by populations displacements."[9] These conditions satisfy the first criteria of a weak state. On March 22, 2012, President Amadou Toumani Touré was ousted in a military coup due to concerns that the leader was not doing enough to combat the northern rebels.[10] The coup left the country and army deeply divided, inhibiting the effectiveness of state security forces and fulfilling the second of Jones' criteria. The rebels saw an unprecedented opportunity to attack, and they launched their offensive less than one week after President Touré was ousted.

Rebel fighters enjoyed unprecedented internal cohesion and military strength due to the outflow of weapons and fighters following the Libyan civil war. Libyan president Muammar Gaddafi provided active support for disaffected Tuaregs, offering them payment to join his counterrevolutionary army.[11] This offer of steady income and housing appealed to many of the approximated 150,000 externally displaced Malians, who sought refuge in neighboring countries. By the end of the Libyan war in December 2011, 11,230 of these migrants had returned to Mali from Libya.[12] Included in this group was a new generation of "well educated, internet savvy and youthful revolutionaries"[13] who were well versed in revolutionary philosophy and able to communicate in an inclusive and intelligent manner—the strong and cohesive leadership that had been missing from previous revolts. An influx of weapons accompanied the mass migration of people as unsecured Libyan arsenals were raided and sold along Saharan trafficking routes.[14] By early 2012, the MNLA had access to "thousands of arms, including anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons."[15] With these new resources, the MNLA was in a unique position of relative military strength in 2012.

Finally, the rise of Islamist groups in the region allowed the MNLA to establish an alliance of convenience against the government, further shifting the balance of power in their favor. Weak governance allowed the rise of informal trade systems in the north of Mali, greatly benefiting the drug and human trafficking operations that had been expanding exponentially in the region since 2006. The profit-seeking international Islamist groups AQIM and MOJWA took advantage of this opportunity to establish economic footholds in the region. Latin American drug cartels also noticed this security vacuum and, in partnership with AQIM, increasingly used West Africa as a transit point to smuggle cocaine to European markets.[16] The Islamists are well-funded and well-armed (in the past 10 years AQIM has profited more than $200 million USD from kidnapping and ransom operations alone),[17] and share the Tuaregs' goal of keeping Bamako out of the affairs of the north, making them desirable partners for the MNLA. To the Tuareg rebels, Islamist groups provided external support that they had never enjoyed in the past.

Terror in the Sahel: Islamist groups as a spoiler to peaceful settlement

It should be noted that international Islamist groups AQIM and MOJWA are the main impediments to negotiated peace in Mali because, unlike the Tuareg separatists, they have no legitimate interest in a durable settlement. The Bamako government can offer little to the foreign terrorist groups who have no historical claim to the country. In fact, a stable government would actually limit their ability to exploit illegal economic operations in the region. It is hard to imagine a future of cohabitation with the Islamists because their long-term aims are inherently incompatible with the secular goals of both the state and the MNLA. While 90% of the Malian population is Muslim, there is a high likelihood of future conflict between the Sufi majority and the Wahhabi rebel groups - who practice a much more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam calling for the destruction of Sufi shrines[18] – once a settlement deal is reached.

An important distinction must be made between AQIM and MOJWA, who aim to exploit not only Mali, but also the entire region for material gain, and local Islamist movement Ansar al-Dine, which grew out of an MNLA faction and has regional motivations only.[19] Ansar al-Dine is led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a former MNLA leader who split from the group after losing an election for a leadership role in the organization; although his claimed goals are religious, it is likely that this rhetoric is affected as a tool to rally public support and that his true aims are much less radical. Negotiation with Ansar al-Dine is a realistic option for the Malian government.

In light of current circumstances, it is highly unlikely that the Malian government will be able to regain military control of the region and oust the Islamists without external support. AQIM has established deep roots among the local population through intermarriage and acting as a sort of Islamic charity, providing money, medicine, and SIM cards to the inhabitants of northern Mali.[20] AQIM's relationship with the locals will make their removal very difficult without a sustained and informed effort. An international counterterrorism campaign is necessary to remove the Islamist threat before an effective peace deal can be reached; otherwise, any negotiated settlement is not likely to be sustainable.

Preventing War: Failure to Execute the 1992 National Pact

The 2012 civil war may have been avoided with more effective implementation of the 1992 National Pact, which was well designed but poorly executed. The Pact came about as the result of the Tamanrasset Accords of January 1991 intended to end the hostilities of the Second Tuareg Uprising. The government of the Republic of Mali and the representative of the United Movements and Fronts of the Azawad were party to the agreement. The National Pact included provisions that would have directly addressed the main grievances of the separatist rebels and prevented the rise of short-term conflict enablers, including the disarmament and demobilization of combatant and their integration into the Malian armed and civilian forces, the construction of infrastructure in the north to increase investment and catalyze development, and the allocation of "special status" to the three northern provinces of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal.[21] The deal also promised the allocation of 43.7% of the national budget to the north for development efforts.[22]

The failed implementation of the 1992 National Pact was partly intentional (lack of political will) and partly a consequence of strained economic resources. Seely[23] contends that policies of decentralization in the 1990s (including the "special status" provision of the National Pact) were a rational response to prevent separatist movements in the north. President Komaré reasoned that the promise of increased autonomy would placate the rebels, but he had no actual intention of following through with the policies. Even if the government did have the political will to carry out the deal, it did not have the means to do so effectively. At the time, the Malian government faced severe pressure from the International Monetary Fund to cut expenditures, which conflicted with its promise to take on incredibly costly projects such as the reintegration of ex-combatants into civil and military society.[24]

The international community could have feasibly avoided these enforcement problems with the provision of a third party enforcer and a substantial financial commitment. Multiple international actors had an interest in a stable Mali and could act as monitors and enforcers to the settlement. The nations of ECOWAS, a West African regional security organization, have an interest in avoiding a refugee crisis, the spread of crime to their own nations, and rebellions of their own Tuareg populations. France, Mali's former colonial power, has significant economic interests in neighboring Nigeria and therefore an interest in promoting security in the region. Small, successful projects that were executed as a result of the National Pact show how economic aid has been a successful tool for building peace in the north. For example, PAREM, a U.N. funded program, offered $600-700 grants to ex-combatants for projects focused on "livestock, agriculture, commerce, services, and other livelihoods."[25] PAREM successfully channeled money into the northern economy but was constrained by limited management and financial resources.

Averting short-term enablers with the 1992 National Pact

Effective implementation of the 1992 National Pact would have prevented all three of the factors that triggered civil war in 2012. First, governance collapse would have been avoided because the army would not have been divided over the "Tuareg question," the cause of the military coup against President Touré. Instead, the semi-autonomous north would be responsible for its own governance and policing, allowing the government in Bamako to devote its limited resources to development (rather than military) spending. Secondly, if Tuaregs had reasonable economic opportunity and a stake in their local government, the offer of a position in armys like Gadhafi's would be considerably less enticing, preventing the mass return of armed rebels following the Libyan civil war. Finally, a stable north would have prevented the blossoming of illegal economies and the subsequent foreign Islamist presence in the north. Even if Tuareg grievances were not satisfied by the peace deal, the MNLA would be much less likely to incite a war without the confidence offered by the partnership with the well-armed and well-funded religious organizations.

A Stable Future? Creating lasting peace in Mali

Although trust between the two main parties has been compromised due to the repeated failure of past settlements, there is hope for a new treaty to succeed. This is because the government and the MNLA have a shared interest in a stable country and a shared enemy in the Islamist groups. At this point, both sides have incurred significant costs, whereas in past uprisings, the rebels presented a much less intimidating threat to the government. For a new deal to succeed, international intervention (by France, ECOWAS, the African Union, or a multilateral effort) is necessary both to combat terrorism and to ensure that the deal is enforced. Long-term stability will also require significant investment in developing legal economies in the north.

Implications: Resolving Commitment Problems in Civil War

Studying Mali's 2012 civil war is valuable because it demonstrates that even the most thorough and comprehensive peace deal is useless if both parties do not have an incentive to see it carried out. Walter posits that in order for a peace deal to succeed, it must include provisions of both benefit and harm.[26] There was no threat of harm to the Malian government if it did not follow through on its promises in the 1992 National Pact. Yet one should have come from an outside party with vested interests in the region. as the presence of an external enforcer has proven successful in the past. Walter points to the transition from white minority rule to governance by a local majority in Zimbabwe (formerly Rhodesia) as a case in which a commitment problems were overcome by the presence of an outside actor (Britain). The lessons of Mali's troubled history should inform future decision-making about conflict resolution within the country and can contribute to social science debates about civil war settlement.

Notes

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