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# Addressing an Imploding Mali

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In northern Mali, Ansar Dine, a radical Islamist group with claimed ties to al-Qaeda, has turned against the principal indigenous Tuareg separatist movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA). For now, Ansar Dine has the upper hand but with shallow indigenous roots. Thousands of Malians are fleeing the fighting and Ansar Dine's harsh regime. In Bamako, Mali's capital, a brokered settlement between the military junta and an interim civilian government of the elites is not working. Throughout the country, drought and a plague of locusts are adding to the humanitarian disaster. A way forward would include a political settlement between the junta and the elites in Bamako and between the capital and the indigenous secessionists. That would require Bamako to drive a wedge between the NMLA and Ansar Dine. For now, rather than support military intervention in the North, the international community should move quickly to address the immediate humanitarian needs.

## **Mali's Power Vacuum**

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Mali had been democratic in form, but its governance was dominated by weak elite patronage networks facilitating personal enrichment but not social or economic development. The system especially short-changed the Tuareg-dominated north, where there has long been a low-level secessionist insurgency. After Muammar al-Qaddafi's fall in 2011, access to uncontrolled Libyan weapons transformed that insurgency into a well-armed rebellion that the Bamako government of President Amadou Toure could not contain. The Tuaregs, led by the NMLA, loosely allied with radical Islamic groups, including Ansar Dine, expelled the Malian forces from the north, and proclaimed the independence of a new state, Azawad.

A junior officer coup with popular, anti-elite support in Bamako in April overthrew Toure's government, ostensibly because of its military incompetence. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), opposed to coups and secessionist movements, brokered a deal that

resulted in an interim civilian government headed by Dioncounda Traore, the former leader of the National Assembly. Subsequently, a mob apparently supporting the junta and seeing Traore as part of the Toure clique invaded the presidential palace and beat the elderly interim president severely. Traore has only now returned to Bamako from medical treatment in France. The junta and the civilian government exercise ill-defined parallel authority. But, in effect, there is a power vacuum in Bamako.

In the north, Ansar Dine appears to have little public support. Islam in Mali is more than a thousand years old; it has long been a center of Islamic high culture, as the monuments in Timbuktu and elsewhere testify. Malians have little to learn about Islam from Salafists. There have been popular demonstrations against Ansar Dine. Resorting to the destruction of monuments in Timbuktu and the stoning of an unmarried couple before a compelled 300 witnesses are forms of terrorism that signal Ansar Dine's vulnerability as well as its fanaticism.

### **A Growing Humanitarian Crisis**

A government that commands popular support and the restoration of the territorial integrity of Mali are the goals. The ECOWAS effort to broker the departure of the military junta and the return of civilian government has failed. The visceral opposition by ECOWAS leaders to military coups may be in the way of achieving a genuinely brokered solution in Bamako.

ECOWAS leaders are also frightened of a jihadist Islamic presence in northern Mali that could threaten their own governments. There is the prospect that factional fighting in the north will result in more refugee flows into their own poor countries. According to the United Nations, some 250,000 Malians have already fled to other countries since March, and 167,000 are internally displaced. And ECOWAS states too face the prospect of food insecurity resulting from drought. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates more than ten million people need emergency assistance in the western Sahel because of poor rainfall, failed harvests, and conflict.

A paralyzed government in Bamako and jihadist Islamic domination in the north will also inhibit the delivery of international food assistance. And funding is tight. According to a UNHCR spokesman on August 1, the agency has received only one-third of the funds needed to assist uprooted Malians.

ECOWAS appears to see northern Mali as a security problem. It has pledged some 3,000 troops to a Malian effort to retake the north. The French have also offered ECOWAS some assistance, but the paralyzed Bamako government has issued no invitation to ECOWAS. Azawad is a vast desert with only a few population centers. It is inconceivable that a military force, even if well trained and equipped, could successfully defeat the Tuaregs on their home ground. No Malian military force ever has.

## **ECOWAS and the International Community**

Mali is imploding because of the failure of its politics and the opening that it provided to radical jihadist groups, and because of its failure to address the deep-seated discontent of the north. Only Malians can save Mali. But Mali's friends can encourage and support a political process that establishes a credible government in Bamako and begin the process of restoring the country's territorial integrity.

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Given the visceral suspicion of Western intervention in West Africa in the aftermath of the French role in Cote d'Ivoire and NATO's campaign in Libya, it is ECOWAS that needs to take the lead in breaking the stalemate in Bamako. ECOWAS should re-engage in political horse-trading that might lead to an effective interim government and holds out the promise of credible elections within a year. However, its involvement should be more transparent, and its consultations should be broader than they were when it brokered the original agreement between the junta and the civilians. ECOWAS should recognize that popular support for the coup makers cannot be wished away.

With respect to the north, ECOWAS and the international community should accept the reality that regional and ethnic alienation cannot be solved through the use of security forces, and the Tuaregs and Ansar Dine cannot be defeated militarily on the edge of the Sahara. ECOWAS, with the support of the international community, especially France and the United States, should facilitate a dialogue between the Bamako government and the NMLA. Initially, the goal should be to isolate Ansar Dine. Long-term northern grievances can probably best be addressed by formulas that grant the region substantial autonomy. The Bamako government has, in effect, reneged on such agreements in the past. ECOWAS and the international community should prevent that from happening again.

In the short term, Mali and the region faces a humanitarian disaster resulting from the flow of refugees and food shortages caused by drought. The developed world needs to immediately increase the funding levels of the various UN agencies charged with relief. Western donors should also recognize that food aid deliveries to parts of northern Mali that are controlled by jihadists are a humanitarian imperative.