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CRISIS IN MALI: AMBIVALENT POPULAR ATTITUDES ON THE WAY FORWARD

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Mali faces a political crisis of multiple dimensions. A military coup has seriously set back the country's progress towards democracy and an escalating armed conflict has undermined the sovereignty of the state.

This briefing paper assesses public attitudes about democracy and governance in Mali at a difficult time in the country's history. The challenge of rebuilding an effective and accountable government will require visionary national leadership. But it also will require citizens who demand that the country return to a path of sustainable political development. Hence it is important to enquire about what Malians are thinking about the causes and status of—and possible solutions to—their country's political crisis.

An Afrobarometer survey in Mali, conducted at the end of 2012, finds the electorate in an apprehensive and ambivalent mood. A large majority thinks that the country is moving in the wrong direction. They attribute this negative momentum mainly to the incompetence of civilian politicians and the frailty of state institutions. They are split on whether warfare or negotiations are the best way to put an end to armed insurgency. In searching for solutions, Malians express declining faith in democracy as well as high (but diminishing) trust in the military. In a sign of democratic resilience, however, a large majority continues to believe that elections are the best way to reconstitute a government.

The Survey

The Afrobarometer is an African-led, independent, comparative survey research project that documents the public mood on issues of democracy and governance in 35 African countries. The project employs national probability samples representing the adult population of each country. Survey respondents provide answers to questions posed by trained enumerators in face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondents' choice. Data are weighted to represent each respondent and each country equally.

Three features should be noted about the Round 5 Afrobarometer survey in Mali:

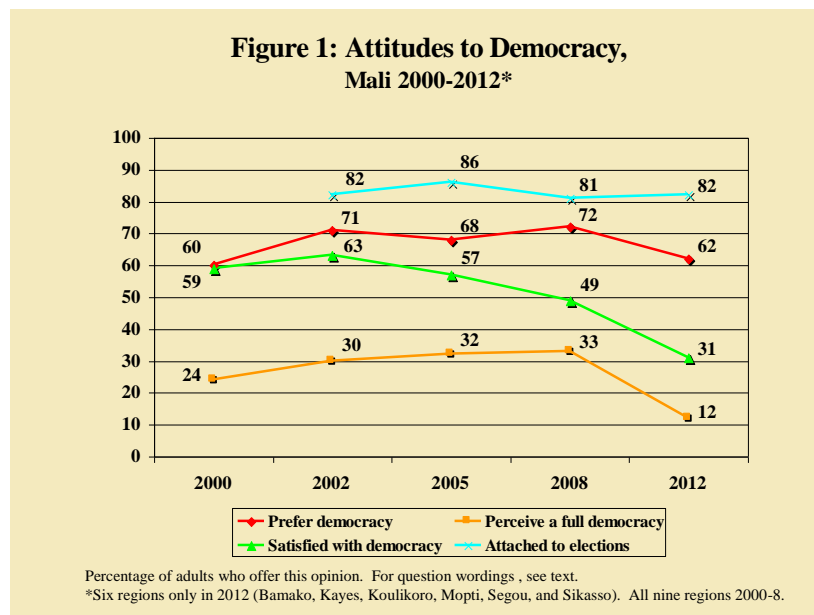
(a) Fieldwork was conducted from December 16 to 31, 2012. The survey therefore followed the military takeover of the government (March 22, 2012) and after the fall of northern Mali to insurgents (April), an attack on the civilian president (May), and the arrest of the prime minister (December 10, 2012). But the survey preceded the military advance of jihadi fighters on Konna and Diabaly and the French-led intervention that repelled them (January 2013). The results reported here therefore represent a snapshot of public opinion at one particular moment amid a tumultuous period of change.

(b) The sample was truncated. Due to armed hostilities in the north, the geographical scope of the survey was restricted to the six southernmost regions of the country (Bamako, Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, and Sikasso). Excluded were Gao, Kidal and Tombouctou regions, which encompass more than 50 percent of Mali’s land area but less than 10 percent of its population. One consequence is that ethnic Tuaregs and speakers of Tamasheq were not interviewed. Otherwise, the sample is representative of the adult population, aged 18 and older, in the six southern regions.

(c) The Afrobarometer’s comparative advantage is to provide information on mass political attitudes towards the regime and the state. The five AB surveys since 2000 allow analysts to track trends over time in these attitudes. But the surveys have less to say about the sources and trajectory of civil conflicts and the role therein of armed forces, whether national or international.

Attitudes to Democracy

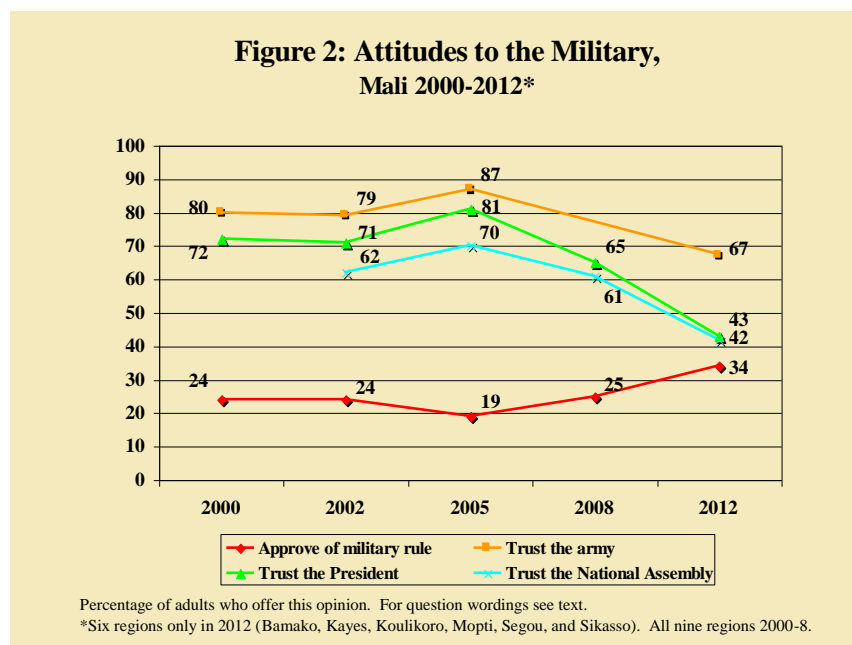
- Are Malians democrats? As of December 2012, a clear majority (62 percent) said that they prefer democracy to other forms of political regime. But the proportion that expressed allegiance to democracy was down by ten percentage points from 2008 (See Figure 1).
- At the same time, Malians recognize that the task of democracy building is hardly complete in their country. True, the proportion seeing Mali as “a full democracy” rose gradually between 2000 and 2008. But by the end of 2012, following the military coup and the partial collapse of the state, just 12 percent saw their country as fully democratic.
- This downturn in public opinion is also reflected in popular satisfaction with “the way democracy works.” After peaking in 2002, this indicator began to decline. By 2008, that is, even before the coup, less than half of Malians expressed satisfaction, in part because of growing discontent with perceived corruption within the Amadou Toumani Traore (“ATT”) administration. By 2012, contentment with democratic practice plummeted even further to less than a third of the electorate.



- Despite losing confidence in the performance of democracy in their country, Malians remain attached to elections. In 2012, fully 82 percent continued to favor “choosing leaders through regular, open and honest elections” rather than some “other method.” Indeed, elections have become an institutionalized feature of Malian political life, with more than eight out of ten respondents supporting elections in every survey since 2002.

Attitudes to the Military

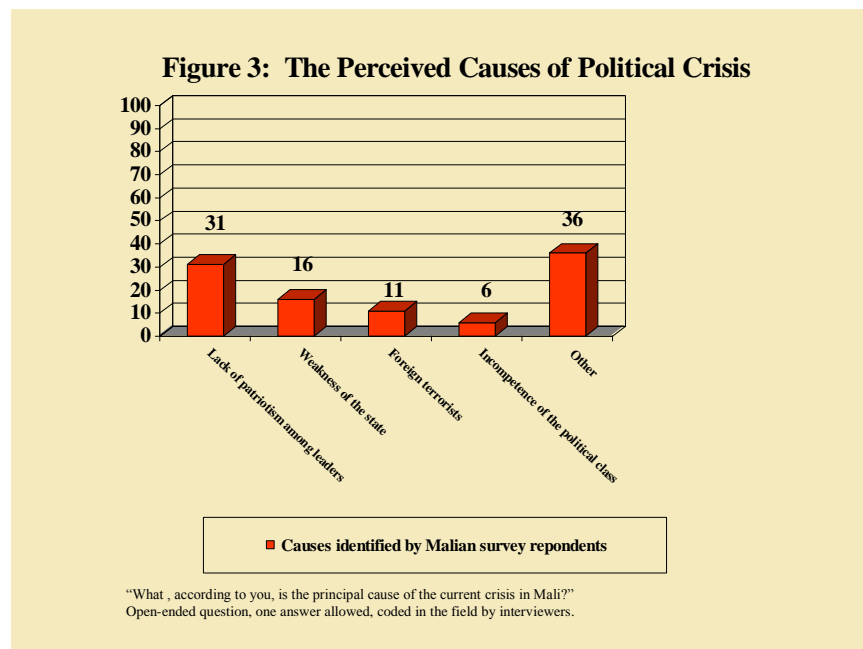
- How, then, do Malians feel about military rule? A majority (58 percent) rejects this form of government. But the proportion of the adult population who approve of a regime in which “the army comes in to govern the country” rose from 25 percent in 2008 (before the coup) to 34 percent in 2012 (after the coup) (See Figure 2).
- Relative to other African countries, popular support for military rule in Mali has always been high. In twelve other African countries in 2012, just 11 percent of the electorate said they would approve a military takeover of government. The high level of expressed support for military rule in Mali is puzzling in the light of the evident ineptness—on the battlefield and in governance—of the armed forces led by Captain Amadou Sanogo.
- Malians have always placed a considerable degree of trust in military institutions. Around eight out of ten expressed “quite a lot” or “a very great deal” of trust in the army from 2000 onwards (question not asked in 2008). This faith was somewhat shaken by the coup of March 2012 because, thereafter, popular trust fell by 20 percentage points (to 67 percent in December 2012). But two out of three Malians still trusted the military.
- Mass attitudes to civilian politicians help to put this result in perspective. In December 2012, fewer than half (43 percent) expressed trust in the interim civilian president installed following the military coup. A similarly low proportion trusted the National Assembly.



- Asked whether “the crisis in Mali had changed your perceptions of the army,” twice as many survey respondents offered a positive response (55 percent) as a negative one (27 percent).

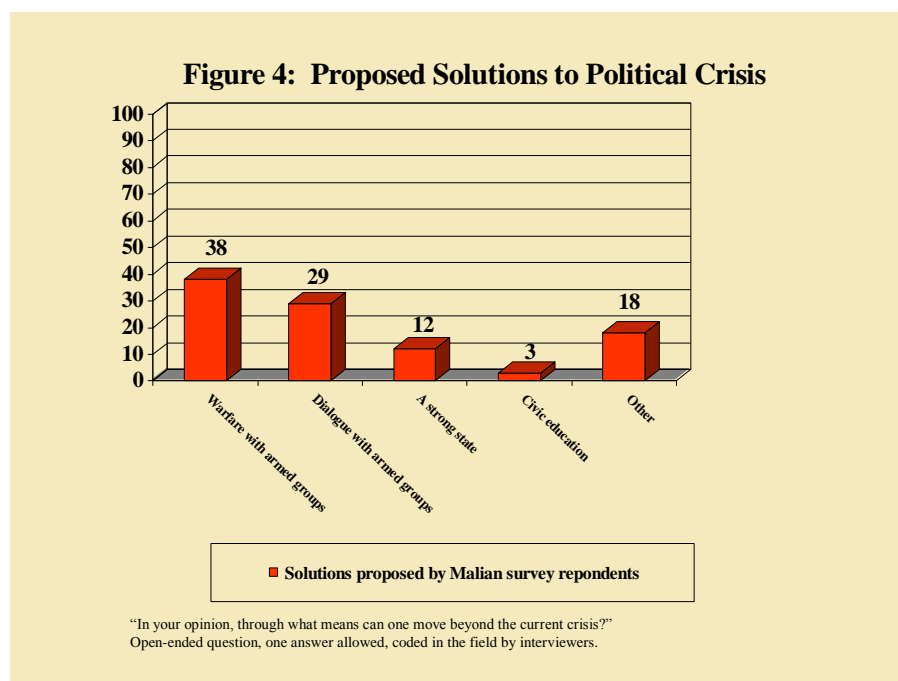
Attitudes to the State

- Despite the fact that insurgents have challenged Mali’s territorial integrity, citizens continue to confer legitimacy on state institutions. The 2012 survey reveals a “rally round the flag” effect, at least among the residents of the southern regions of the country. These citizens indicate a greater willingness to obey court decisions, police orders and requests for tax payment than they did before.
- Moreover, an overwhelming majority of Malians (88 percent) believes that “it is important to obey the government in power, no matter who you voted for.” This result contrasts with the 11 percent minority who contend that “it is not necessary to obey the laws of a government that you did not vote for.”
- In attributing causes to the multifaceted crisis in Mali, citizens are prone to blame politicians (See Figure 3). They point first to “a lack of patriotism among leaders,” perhaps implying that civilians are too complacent when it comes to defending the integrity of the state. In a similar vein, respondents also point to “the incompetence of the political class.” The second most common response is “the weakness of the state,” by which they may mean the inability of state institutions to respond to challenges, including armed attacks, from its political environment. Only third do they mention “foreign terrorists” as a cause of political crisis.
- Among all political institutions in Mali—state and non-state—the weakest of all are political parties. Almost three out of five Malians (58 percent) do not identify with (“feel close to”) any political party. As a result, the country suffers a shortage of demand-side institutions that can link citizens to the state.



Which Way Forward?

- Malians are disturbed by their country's political distress. In December 2012, three quarters (75 percent) said their country was moving "in the wrong direction." This single statistic alone indicates that citizens perceive a crisis and seek a way out.
- But Malians are undecided about the best way forward. Asked about solutions to "the current crisis," they express ambivalent views. In December 2012, a plurality (38 percent) wanted "war against the armed groups in the North" though, within this group, twice as many preferred that any retaliatory strike be led by the Malian army rather than by ECOWAS (the survey did not ask about France). On the other hand, 29 percent preferred "dialogue" between combatants. And 12 percent called for a return to "a strong state." 3 percent called for "civic education" and 18 percent called for "other" solutions.



- A related question asked, "What is the best way to move beyond a regime that is corrupt and incompetent?" Clearer answers emerge here. Almost half of all survey respondents (48 percent) opt for elections. And 15 percent want "respect for the Constitution." Only 7 percent recommend a military coup.
- Importantly, therefore, Malians demand a fresh round of elections that installs a constitutionally legitimate government. They recognize that the restoration of democratic rule is an essential component in the recovery of a stable and sovereign state.
- As such, Malian citizens tend to agree with *The Economist* that, "stabilization requires an election... a fair poll is as important as the army's reconquest of the country's northern half" (February 2, 2013, p.39). But, at the same time they continue to harbor doubts about the competence and probity of civilian politicians, especially in relation to the army, whose leaders they tend to trust more.

About the Afrobarometer

The Afrobarometer is a collaborative survey research project conducted by a network of social scientists from more than 30 African countries. The Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) provides overall project direction. At the regional level, the several Core Partners coordinate survey and other activities: the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Idasa), the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi, Kenya. Michigan State University and the University of Cape Town provide analytic and technical support services. The Afrobarometer Network gratefully acknowledges generous contributions from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, and the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. Grants from these donors support research, capacity building and outreach activities in Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6, 2010-15. For more information, see:

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