Five Years after the Bamako Peace Agreement: Where is Mali Heading?

By Wendyam Herve Lankoande

Executive Summary

Where is Mali heading five years after the agreement for peace and reconciliation? Though basic, this question is worth posing at a time when Mali is on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). If there is one major takeaway that needs highlighting, it is that the counter-terrorism agenda that the Malian authorities and their international counterparts have been pursuing over the last seven years has done little to advance the country’s state building process. This policy brief highlights some of the key state building conundrums that Mali faces such as the eroding capacity of the central administration, the fragmentation of the security and justice sectors as well as identity divisions. It calls for reducing institutional and identity heterogeneity to bring Malians to the same plane if violence is to be replaced with peace, stability and prosperity. The 2015 Peace Agreement, if not aligned with a national ambitious plan to erect a functional statehood, will unlikely prevent the country from relapsing into violence in the long-term.

Background

In June 2020, the United Nations Security Council is expected to adopt a resolution renewing the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) for another year. As a reminder, the mission was deployed in April 2013 with the primary mandate to stabilize Mali and restore the authority and the sovereignty of the state throughout its national territory. Five years later, it is evident that the country is still engulfed in the vicious circles of conflict and fragility. The resurgence...
of local conflicts around the central government’s management of natural resources adds another layer of complexity to the current quagmire. The fight against the ongoing jihadi insurgency that Malians and their regional and international partners have been pursuing has done little to advance the Malian statehood, at least for now. Mainly confined to Northern and Central Mali until now, the battle front has been moving to Western Mali with the sporadic attacks that have been recorded in the region of Koulikoro, Kayes and Sikasso. Nearly 300 civilian fatalities were reported in the first three months of 2020. The international forces, once hailed as heroes, are now perceived by some Malians as part of the problem and under the firing line of the jihadi groups. A large section of Malians does not still understand why the MINUSMA, which had inserted itself in a war situation, refuses to engage in a combat mission.

To substantiate this rather bleak outlook, the parties to the conflict could argue that institutional-building not only takes a long time but also consumes resources. They could even invoke the progress made over recent months to meet benchmarks of the Peace Agreement including the redeployment of reconstituted Malian armed forces to Northern Mali, a high-level workshop on women’s participation in the peace process, and the recent legislative elections. Still, this does not fully abate the deep-seated frustrations from the international community. Such a frustration is justifiable as five years after the signing of the Peace Agreement, the international community has little to show for the colossal resources it has invested in the conflict. Moreover, the international actors’ abusive reference to the concept of appropriation has not helped to mitigate the frustrations of a large segment of the Malians who view the agreement as exclusive elite pact and a bonus to signatory armed groups.

In this brief, I argue that any hasty implementation of the Agreement will not preserve Mali from future political turbulences; it will only retard another spectrum of large-scale political violence if foundational governance issues are left unaddressed. Therefore, instead of holding the Peace Agreement sacred, which its critics see as drawing heavily on past recipes, the international community should rather view it as means of supporting and advancing the Malian state-making endeavor.

This policy brief highlights some of the key governance deficiencies that have impeded the Malian state building project. Though there has been a consensus on the necessity of ‘bringing the state back’ in the post-conflict reconstruction programme in Mali, the current approach has failed to generate rule centralisation fundamental to the erection of a stable political order. Given the limited space available, this policy brief aims to scrutinize some of the state building challenges that Mali faces, namely, the eroding capacity of the central administration, the fragmentation of security sector as well as identity divisions.

Finally, recommendations are provided to the Malian stakeholders as well as to their international counterparts to advance the Malian statehood and give a chance to peace.

Rebooting Mali’s Central Administration

Rebuilding a functional bureaucracy is part of the state reconstruction agenda in Mali. In any political setting, the central administration provides a key basis for statehood as the ruling elites rely on it to enforce and broadcast the rules of the game as well as to execute policies throughout the national territory. One of the key factors often pointed out to highlight the recurrent pattern of rebellions in Northern Mali relates to the deficiencies and the limited reach of the central administration. Instead of developing effective administrative structures, the central government has for decades entertained patronage networks and relied on a de facto indirect rule system to maintain a semblance of peace and stability in this part of the territory. To take corrective measures to this state of affairs, the 2014 Government Action Plan acknowledged the necessity of “setting up strong and credible institutions, restoring the safety of people and goods across the territory”. However, such an ambition may not take shape given the limited efficiency of the central administration acknowledged by international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The limited reach of the central government administration has enabled armed groups of all stripes to become part and parcel of political governance at the grassroots level. As of March 2020, the percentage of civil administrators present at their duty stations in Northern Mali was revolving around 23 per cent. In Central Mali, as of January 2020, the number of civil administrators present at their duty stations had decreased to 27 per cent from 30 per cent in November 2019. This has led armed groups and traditional and religious authorities to continue assuming administrative prerogatives like mediating community conflicts and providing public services in some municipalities by making use of their organizational capacity. This hampers the ability of the central government to control territory and exercise social control in local communities that live far from the political center.
That non-state actors supplement the central administration in the provision of public goods is not proper to Northern and Central Mali. The central government should take a broad perspective in its attempt to redeploy the state throughout the national territory. Though largely benefiting from the remittances from its diaspora, the western region of Kayes and Sikasso, which witnessed some attacks over the past months, speaks in favor of boosting human development indices in all Mali's peripheral areas.

Another conundrum that the ruling elites should consider fixing remains to be the erosion of trust between state agents and local communities. For a number of civil servants, being posted outside major urban areas is perceived as an administrative sanction rather than a means of advancing the central state reach. In the hinterlands, some villagers see state representatives only at election times and when they collect taxes. Even worse, some of them end up looting local communities instead of providing public goods. This does not facilitate the penetration of the state in the hinterlands and the creation of loyal fellowship crucial to any state building project. Malian actors and the international counterparts have often presented decentralisation as a genuine means of bringing governance closer to the people and improving the social contract. However, the risk associated with decentralizing a fragile state like Mali is that it can favor the emergence and strengthening of a sub-regime with a patchwork of local big men that can challenge the purpose of the whole process.

Moreover, strengthening the state administration requires sound fiscal policies and the fight against corruption. When President Keita took office, he erected the fight against corruption as one of the milestones of his presidency, designating 2014 as the year of fight against corruption. In 2014, the Malian National Assembly passed a law against illicit enrichment, and the government created a Central Office for the Fight against Corruption, in addition to the existing Bureau of Vérificateur Général, which was set up in 2003. However, despite this institutional artifice, corruption continues unabated across the state bureaucracy. Its ramifications can be traced to transnational organised undertakings that remain to be another challenge for the consolidation of Malian statehood in terms of co-opting opponents. On Transparency International's 2019 Corruption Perceptions Index, Mali scored 29 out of 100; the scale ranges from 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Translated into country rankings, Mali was ranked 130/180. Allegations of corruption within the armed forces' rank in a context of warfare further weaken the trust between the officer corps and the rank and file soldiers, on the one hand, and the army and civilians, on the other hand. Overall, the rampant corruption in the different spheres of governance has seriously corroded public confidence in state institutions and discouraged foreign investments in the country in a time when a productive economy remains imperative for rebuilding and consolidating the state.

In the same vein, the homogenization of the justice sector remains a priority if the Malian elites want to give a chance to peace and stability. The Malian formal justice system coexists with customary and religious justice mechanisms. In areas where the state has retreated, i.e., areas of limited statehood, customary and religious justice systems prevail. With the state-sanctioned justice viewed as expensive, corrupt, inaccessible and alien to the local culture, local communities do not hesitate to swift to customary justice to solve their disputes. Even worse, in the eyes of certain local communities, modern justice remains an "institution that tears down social fabric and disrespects traditions and values". The 2019 Afro Barometer's outcome regarding Malians adherence to the formal justice speaks to itself. Of the total of Malians interviewed, 55% and 59% respectively estimated that the police and magistrates were the most corrupt institutions against 14% for traditional leaders. For instance, the limited presence of formal state justice in Northern Mali has led to the dominance of customary justice systems. Replacing the hybridity with hegemony in the justice sector will bring Malians to the same institutional plane.

On the Imperative of Homogenizing the Means of Coercion

The provision of security across the Malian territory remains to be a central component of the Malian state reconstruction. Despite the palette of priorities in the current post-conflict agenda, the Malian political elites and the international community all converged on the need to rebuilding the Malian security sector. The UNSC resolution on Mali (Resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013) identified ‘the training, consolidation and redeployment’ of the Malian armed forces as ‘vital to ensure Mali’s long-term security and stability’. This has resulted in the proliferation of security assistance initiatives. While the Joint Forces of GS Sahel, the French Barkhane mission, and the soon to be deployed European Takuba Task Force are engaged in a combat mission against jihadi groups role along with their Malian partners, MINUSMA remains committed to peace-building, peace enforcement and the protection of civilians. As of March 2020, the EUTM had trained about 15,000 Malian personnel. This makes the European Union the largest provider of capacity-building in Mali.
However, if the aim of the international security assistance is to enable the Malian forces to restore Mali’s territorial integrity, then much remains to be done. Some localities in Northern Mali are still under the de facto control of non-state armed groups. Jihadi groups have become resilient and ambitious in their targets. Attacks against military camps of Mondoro and Boulekessi are indicators of the increasing operational capacity of the jihadi fighters. In light of the jihadi push, the demands for security gains imposed on the Malian army have in some cases resulted in abuses. Moreover, the Malian armed forces’ ability to control and pacify the national territory is put under test as the Coordination of Azawad Movements, one of the signatories of the Peace Agreement, continues to expand its security operation to Acharouchou, northeast of Timbuktu towards Gourma and Menaka.

This is part of the armed group’s aspirations of political and territorial control of these areas, anything which is incompatible with the erection of nationwide and homogenised system of security and defense. With the ‘reconstituted’ armed forces now in charge of providing security in Malian northern cities, there should be some arrangement to submit them to the same set of rules and chain of command and rotate them in the different regions of Mali.

The unconvincing security response from the Malian defense and security forces seems to have consecrated the hybridization of the Malian security in a context of the resurgence of local conflicts. Mali’s vigilante problem is not new. It started in the early 1990’s when confronted by the second wave of the Tuareg rebellion, the central government and the central government resorted to ethnic militias like Ganda Koy to project the state power and exercise social control in Northern Mali. With the extension of the battlefield to Central Mali over the recent years, a wide range of community-based armed groups armed groups, the Fulani, Bambara and Dogons among others have emerged to protect their properties as well as their respective communities in a conflict that eminently has local roots. Though the central government in Bamako has reaffirmed its commitment to disarming vigilantes, these groups have used the lack of justice and protection of their respective communities to justify their existence.

From what follows, there is a strong prima facie evidence that the Malian government should have favored the formation of a coherent national army and effective national police instead of relying on the diversity of scattered and locally coordinated vigilante groups who remain unpredictable in the use of violence and contribute to further undermining of the social fabric.

From these lines, it follows that reforming the Malian security sector is a prerequisite to projecting the state power across the national territory. Since the early 2000s, several initiatives on security sector reform (SSR) have been launched in Mali, although none led to a substantial reform of the sector. The advent of the 2011 crisis and the election of the president in 2013 made SSR a priority reiterated in the Bamako Peace Agreement. However, as highlighted by some observers, capacity-building seems to have been privileged by both the Malian authorities and the external interveners. This has to do with the volatile security landscape and the central government’s urgent need to achieve quick security gains.

In addition to giving priority to recruitment, equipment and issues pertaining to DDR, the central government should undertake structural reforms in the security sector to help the Malian defense and security forces rise from the ashes. The fight against corruption, the professionalisation of recruitment, human resources and career management procedures, logistics and the chain of command are all urgent issues that the Malian ruling elites should address. Fixing the issue related to the chain of commands is crucial as some leaders of the armed groups are reluctant to accept a clear severing of command and control over their combatants who had been integrated into the national armed forces. In a context marked by the increasing popular defiance vis-à-vis the defense and security forces in war zones, improving the civil-military relations could facilitate the redeployment of the states throughout Mali’s peripheral zones. These are challenges that cannot be properly dealt with through capacity-building.

More than National Reconciliation, Mali Needs an Overarching National Identity

Like many other post-conflict reconstruction sectors, nation-building seems to be missing from the Malian state reconstruction project. A national identity that transcends the different ethnic identities remains vital for insuring peace and stability in Mali: "Where the sentiment of nationality exists in any force, there is a prima facie case for uniting all the members of the same nationality under the same government, and a government to themselves apart." Put differently, state-building is unlikely to succeed without nation-building, nation-building being defined as a political process designed to develop a shared sense of political community that is capable of binding together the population of a given territory. The deadly sin common to states in context of fragility, like Mali, remains that they often host communities with few shared institutions, limited common experience and no unifying identity.
Aware of the shallow foundation of the inherited colonial state, the immediate post-independence and socialist administration of President Modibo Keita understood the necessity of building a common and an overarching national identity. In order to elevate national identity over narrow sub-national and ethnic identities, the Modibo's administration resorted to a wide range of state-issued policies. Under his leadership, banks were nationalised and village cooperatives created. Except the Amenokal in Kidal, which was maintained, his administration abolished chieftaincy throughout the Malian territory to eliminate internal sources of pre-colonial political legitimacy while submitting Malians to common myths. His attempt to forge a Malian common identity, however, did not survive the collapse of his administration.

The identity fragmentation and lack of social cohesion have provided a fertile soil to the different rebellions that have characterised post-independence Mali. The 2011 crisis during which the Azawad denomination was coined to refer to a ‘socio-cultural reality shared by the different populations of Northern Mali’ is a testimony that the central government in Bamako should consent to some colossal efforts to turn Bambaras, Tuaregs, Fulanis, etc. into Malians. This will prevent identity division to be instrumentalised by political entrepreneurs. The Malian ruling elites have always highlighted the unitary character of the Malian state echoed by the country’s national anthem ‘Un Peuple, Une foi, Un But’ without necessarily consenting to efforts made to boost their state of union. The Ministry for National Reconciliation and Social Cohesion has been created to implement the government’s policy in the field of social cohesion and national reconciliation. In 2017, the Malian government organised an Inclusive National Dialogue at which some participants proposed the revision of the Peace Agreement as well a dialogue with jihadi groups.

However, it is worth noting that reconciliation and social cohesion are not to be conflated. More than national reconciliation, the goal of which is to allow Malians to live together despite their identity differences, the ruling elites should devise a political and ideological project with the aim of forging a shared national identity on a national scale. If in some countries, forging a common and overarching political identity was made possible through warfare, it seems that in Mali, other avenues should be exploited. Religion, communication and education constitute possible canons to be exploited to broadcast a Malian national identity throughout its territory. This project requires a visionary political agenda and a state-issued ideological framework supported by the international community which must be attentive to local Malian specificities.

Conclusion

The road to peace and stability is still a long one in Mali. The current efforts that the international community has consented to seem to have privileged the pursuit of a counter-terrorism agenda as Mali is now portrayed as an epicenter of jihadism. This is not to suggest that jihadi groups that attempt to disrupt the reconstruction program are not a challenge worth dealing with. However, by solely placing the cursor on jihadi groups, there is a risk that the ruling elites and the international community divert their attention away to other crucial governance issues. The redeployment of the state in Mali’s areas of limited statehood will not be feasible without a building and consolidation of administrative structures. This will allow the government not only to improve the livelihoods of local communities in these areas but also to collect taxes, which remain a key pillar for advancing statehood and participatory citizenship in Mali.

Moreover, though the Peace Agreement has given a ‘new lease life to Mali’\textsuperscript{[50]}, linking the country’s fate to the Agreement will barely resolve the key challenges it has been facing, especially if it is considered by the different Malian stakeholders as another framework to share the cake. For one, the multiethnic character of the country reaffirmed in the Peace Agreement does not help in creating a new Mali where national allegiance transcends ethnic loyalties. For another, the ruling elites have perverted decentralisation and have tended to view it as a means to co-opt and entertain existing patronage networks without developing and consolidating local administrative structures. Civil servants remain the state pilgrims in the different administrative regions of Mali and they are part of the state-building equation. The Malian stakeholders and their international counterparts should do what it takes to prevent the country from experiencing another rebellion episode by pursuing a realistic and at the same time an ambitious state-building reconstruction program.
Recommendations

▶ Though the redeployment of the state across the Malian territory constitutes one of the core priorities of the Peace Agreement, there is no clear and comprehensive strategy to make this happen. Instead of capacity-building, there are structural reforms that the Malian authorities, with the support of the international community, should undertake to reboot the central state administration and harmonise the security and as well as the justice sectors. A Malian capable administration will facilitate the collection of taxes, the provision of public goods and the creation of loyal fellowship vital to any statehood project.

▶ Instead of preaching reconciliation and tolerance as reflected in the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, the Malian ruling elites should promote national symbols and a common history that could help Malians transcend their differences. While the international community has been supporting the Malian ruling elites in rebuilding their state, it should consider putting the latter in the driving seat and allow them to set their own agenda regarding state-building.

▶ Northern political elites should be encouraged to join existing political parties or establish political parties with national roots. Establishing political parties with diverse membership and solid political agendas will contribute to transcending narrow sub-national identity lines and setting the foundations of democratic governance. That could help reduce the Tuareg leaders’ propensity to pursue their interests through warfare.

▶ Any state-building project requires a productive economy. Instead of relying on international charity to (re)build their state, the Malian ruling elites should consider setting an ambitious agenda to extract existing resources and assets to boost viable local economic structures in Northern Mali. This, from the economic perspective, could help link up the south with the north which for the moment remains open to countries like Algeria. An integrated economic circuit will also help reduce and disrupt existing parallel shadow economic networks that undermine the Malian state capacity.
Endnotes


About the Author

Wendyam Hervé Lankoandé was a Research Consultant at the Institute for Peace and Security Studies. Over the last three years, Wendyam worked in research and analytical capacity for a wide range of organisations including, Clingendael, Swisspeace, Interpeace and the Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security. Wendyam holds a BA in European and International Studies from Sorbonne Nouvelle and a MA in Strategic Studies from Paris 13 University. His work has largely focused on issues pertaining to peace-building, governance and nation building in West Africa, with a particular interest in their interrelation and connection to state fragility.