NORTHERN MALI 2012: THE SHORT-LIVED TRIUMPH OF IRREDENTISM*

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Abstract

Strengthened by weapons from Libya, the rebellion beginning in Mali in January 2012 finally gave a Tuareg-dominated irredentist movement control of Northern Mali in the fourth rebellion since independence. The Movement for the National Liberation (MNLA) called this area *Azawad*, proclaiming it as independent. Although it was to be a multi-ethnic country, the MNLA remained dominated by the Tuareg. Discontent among Malian officers during the fight against the rebels produced a *coup d'état*, undermining the military command structure, which greatly contributed to the rebels' success. An unavowed alliance existed with AQIM (Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb) and the Tuareg Islamist group Ansar Dine. The latter and the AQIM-offshoot, MUJAO (the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa), eventually drove the MNLA from Northern Mali. Increasingly, the Islamists imposed an extreme version of sharia, adding to the mass flight of refugees. Negotiations between the interim Malian government, the MNLA and the Ansar Dine still continued until the latter and AQIM moved towards Southern Mali. The perceived threat made the Malian government request French assistance. The intervention gradually drove the Islamists from the country, enabling the restoration of the state in Northern Mali. The conflict reveals underlying features of the political situation in Northern Mali, and highlights how the Tuareg and Northern

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Malians have responded to the state's shortcomings through rebellion. Access to the state passes through privileged individuals. Rebels have been drawn closer to the state after conflicts, with only some benefitting from this arrangement. This is mirrored at a local level, with public figures and their followers enjoying the closest relation to the state. Producing widespread discontent, this situation is marked by insecurity because of a weak state presence. Misgivings have fed into new rebellions. Weak state control also allowed the AQIM to engage in hostage taking and for smuggling to expand. This volatile situation produced the latest rebellion. An improved connection to the state for Northern Mali and a strong state presence are necessary to counteract the factors responsible for repeated conflict.

1. Introduction

Four rebellions led by Tuareg have taken place in Northern Mali. The most recent rebellion that broke out in January 2012 gave the rebels territorial control, enabling them to declare independence. While all or most previous rebellions were concerned with autonomy, only the latest rebellion had independence as a stated primary goal. Tuareg from the Kidal region of North-Eastern Mali have led rebellions against the Malian state since 1963, alleging discrimination and marginalisation. The first rebellion was quashed, setting in motion an exodus of Tuareg from the affected area that continued to supply exile Tuareg disposed to foment uprisings. However, subsequent rebellions ended in peace agreements, even if preceded by drawn-out fighting and complex emergencies. The difference between previous conflicts and the January 2012 rebellion in terms of the ability and determination to demand independence thus calls for an explanation. I shall argue that a weak state presence in Northern Mali is what generally led to the repeated rebellions. But only with the state's collapse in 2012 was the immediate opportunity created to claim independence.

In addition, the rebels' initial success was owed to exceptional circumstances. Tuareg having served as soldiers for Gaddafi returned to Mali during the last few months of 2011 with numerous weapons and heavy armament, and bolstered hard-liners from the rebellion of 2006. Organised as the MNLA (*Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad*), these rebels enjoyed enough military success to produce massive discontent within the army leading to a military *coup d'état*. It

upset the chain of command of the Malian army. The rebels could thus advance while meeting scant resistance, take control of the regional capitals of Northern Mali, and declare this territory an independent state, Azawad.

Other factors contributed to this outcome. An Islamist Tuareg group, the Ansar Dine, emerged shortly after the MNLA. It had a different agenda not independence, but instead sharia in all of Mali. The MNLA tried to extricate itself and rejected any notion of connections to Islamists, particularly the AQIM (Al-Qaida of the Islamic Maghreb). However, as I shall show, testimonies and evidence increasingly appeared, suggesting at the very least a tactical alliance with AQIM. In fact, the ability of the MNLA to establish territorial control was in large part due to the military strength of AQIM.

At the same time, the presence of AQIM had been growing over the past decade, as it lost ground in Algeria and increasingly sought refuge in Mali. Efforts at dislodging it were only partially successful, the Malian state in Northern Mali being of limited capacity. Security problems pre-dated AQIM with complaints of insufficient state efforts in Northern Mali quoted by the MNLA as justification for their struggle.

Yet despite the MNLA's insistence on independence, they started participating in attempts at negotiations shortly after their military victory. The Ansar Dine joined in not long after. Other Northern Malians, Tuareg and Arabs still expressed support for the Malian state, and some were even organised in movements to restore what they termed 'security' to Northern Mali.

The state in Northern Mali dissipated because of its limited capacity. The aim of the present article is to show the peculiar character of the Malian state on its northern periphery in relation to a decades-long series of conflicts, and how its weakness allowed the rebellion of 2012 to become a short-lived success in terms of territorial control. It is therefore focussed on the first half of 2012 and on the combination of factors, including the Libyan connection, as well as the Islamists that either rekindled the impetus towards rebellion from the previous conflict of 2006 to 2009, or contributed to the rebels' success.

As concerns subsequent events, from late June 2012 onwards, the MNLA were displaced from Northern Mali by the Islamists. The latter became notorious for intensified implementation of their rigid interpretation of sharia. Negotiations by the MNLA and the Ansar Dine with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) still

continued, but were largely rendered void when Ansar Dine and the other Islamists moved towards Southern Mali. The perceived threat ushered in French intervention at the request of the interim Malian government. Defeating and driving back the Islamists, French and allied Chadian forces have gradually been replaced by West African and Malian forces. Elections were scheduled for July 2013, while negotiations were taking place between Malian authorities and the MNLA.

All of this thus raises the issue of the restoration of the Malian state. Ironically, restoring such a minimal state should not pose too great a demand. The real challenge, in addition to improving the security situation so as to stop organisations like AQIM from thriving, is to develop the state to a point where it is no longer an alien body in Northern Mali, appearing as a target for armed opposition and secessionist groups.

Addressing the latter issue will necessitate an examination of earlier rebellions. In so doing, I shall briefly consider how an incomplete state presence produces tensions resulting in periodic uprisings. I shall then look more closely at the events of the latest rebellion and their peculiarities. In conclusion, suggestions will be put forward regarding how to integrate Northern Mali more fully to counteract recurring conflict.

2. Rebellions in Northern Mali

Not long after the independence of Mali, tensions were mounting in the north-eastern corner bordering on Algeria. Tuareg in the present-day Kidal region entered into an uprising against the Malian authorities. It grew out of confrontations with a limited number of Tuareg discontent with the post-colonial regime. Not enjoying much direct participation, and never spreading beyond the Kidal area, the rebellion was savagely crushed, making rebels and other victims flee to Libya (Boilley 1999). There they would plot revenge, while being bolstered by a steady trickle of more migrants escaping the Sahelian droughts of the 1970s (Bellil and Dida 1995).

Niger saw her share of refugees from the Sahelian droughts, too. In both Mali and Niger, the northern parts of the countries where the Tuareg lived were most severely affected. Diversion of aid intensified criticism of the authorities. In Mali, one spoke of the infamous *'villas de*

la faim' built with the proceeds of diverted aid. Nigerien and Malian Tuareg thus experienced a community of exile both in Algeria where many sought refuge, and in Libya. Drought refugees from Mali and Niger, and particularly the initial Malian rebels, began developing plans for independence during their exile in Libya. These Tuareg, who were joined by some Arabs from Mali, were initially supported by Gaddafi, at least in theory, but he soon withdrew his support altogether (Boilley 1999). However, on the basis of his erstwhile promises, he managed to enlist Tuareg to serve in his Islamic legion, employing them in Chad and Lebanon (Bourgeot 1995).

The association with Gaddafi was thus combat experience. By 1990, it came to serve as a set of circumstances that contributed to launching a rebellion. Algeria insisted on the repatriation of Malians and Nigeriens (Deschamps 2000), who had a large and growing presence in the country since the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s. They were mostly Tuareg and Arabs, and some had connections to people lobbying for the cause of the Tuareg in Libya. Many were simply migrants, but often with an undefined status. While the Malians were massed along the Algerian border receiving little support, the Nigeriens were packed into repatriation sites.

It should be noted that there were misgivings on the part of other Nigeriens and particularly the Nigerien authorities against the Tuareg because of earlier attacks emanating from the Tuareg separatists in Libya. For instance, a small-scale Tuareg-led attack inside Niger took place in 1985 (Deschamps 2000; Djibo 2002). The operation was unsuccessful and did not lead to any large-scale rebellion. In addition, the Tuareg had been involved in an attempted *coup d'état* in 1976, although only some of the participants were Tuareg (Deschamps 2000).

Cramped living conditions and a lack of resources for the returnees to Niger sparked clashes between the young Tuareg and Nigerien armed forces at Tchin Tabaraden. There were numerous casualties, ranging from some 60 to more than a thousand, depending on the sources (Dayak 1992; Salifou 1993; Deschamps 2000). Some of the Tuareg involved in the clashes were arrested over the border in Mali and jailed in the town of Menaka.

Led by the man who became the first leader of the rebellion of the 1990s and the later leader of the Ansar Dine, Iyad ag Ghali, Malian Tuareg attacked the jail soon after, killing several soldiers and liberating the prisoners (Boilley 1999; Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998). Imme-

diately afterwards, they officially launched their rebellion. For about six months, they staved off the Malian army in the inaccessible Adghagh mountains, inflicting some severe defeats.

Significantly, the rebellion in Niger followed just over a year later. It was most extensive in the region of Agadez and the territory of the Tuareg Kel Denneg. Other Tuareg areas further south were largely unaffected by the rebellion, which was on a smaller scale than the one in Mali. It did not produce as serious a polarisation as in Mali, and neither a refugee crisis on the same scale. Negotiations took place in several phases, resulting in the most important Tuareg rebel groups entering into a peace process from 1995, while other groups in the region of Agadez kept up the struggle, by then localised, until 1998. At any rate, the two conflicts followed separate courses from the beginning, the rebels in either country engaging with its respective government (Deschamps 2000). However, a pro-Tuareg lobby based in France reported on both conflicts, but with an emphasis on events in Niger. Their publications promoted the idea of a common Tuareg cause, notions taken up by European activists (Casajus 1995).

Returning to the rebellion in Mali, the Malian government, unable to fight the rebels and being confronted by ever louder protests from the pro-democracy movements in Bamako, agreed to negotiate with the rebels. In early 1991, a treaty was signed at Tamanrasset. Arabs with a comparable experience of exile had formed a separate movement, participated in the rebellion almost from the beginning and were a signatory to the treaty. The rebels had brandished ideas about a political entity called Azawad, inhabited by Tuareg and also Arabs. These ethnic groups, they claimed, had been discriminated against by the Malian state. Yet, they also put forward arguments regarding the economic marginalisation of Northern Mali. Thus, in negotiations, independence was not foremost among the rebels' demands. Instead, they started out by demanding increased state transfers and investments in Northern Mali and a number of positions in the state apparatus, including several ministerial posts (Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998). Eventually, they were offered positions in the state and in the army, taking up almost half of the country's development budget (Diarrah 1991; Klute and Von Trotha 2000).

The treaty was never implemented. The single-party regime of Moussa Traoré was overturned after his brutal repression of the demonstrations which culminated in a military *coup d'état*. By 1992 the military

had established a transition government and handed over power to an elected president and national assembly. Shortly thereafter, a new treaty, the National Pact, was in place with the rebels pledging increased state transfers as well as positions in the state and in the army. Rebels were to be integrated into the armed forces, while rebel leaders obtained various positions, including one ministerial post which would be held by a Tuareg until 1997 (Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998). In the transition government, the Tuareg and the Arab rebels held one ministerial post each (Diarrah 1991). In addition, an assembly was to be created for the three Northern regions, with certain rights regarding policy and international cooperation (Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998).

A steadily deteriorating security situation, sparked in turn by a growing number of rebel movements with their own demands and aspirations, meant that the National Pact was only partly implemented. New rebel movements emerged, in part as a result of the struggle for positions in the state, and the rebels demanding ever-increasing numbers of people to be integrated into the armed forces. Integration of ex-rebels caused discontent and at times clashes within the army (Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998).

The problems of integration, combined with on-going banditry linked to the rebels, or made possible by the security situation, spurred Songhay officers deserting from the army to form a movement for self-defence, the Ganda Koy. Direct confrontations between ethnic groups had taken place since 1991, feeding a flight of refugees, predominantly 'Red' Tuareg and Arabs, who were identified by other Malians and the army as supporting the rebels. Such confrontations now intensified and in 1994 reached a stage of a massive refugee crisis, and a cycle of violence between the armed groups opposing one other (Gaasholt 2011). During this time, battles also broke out between different rebel movements (Klute 1995; Klute and Von Trotha 2000). However, Iyad ag Ghali's movement remained attached to the National Pact and thus sided with the Malian government, and single-handedly defeated one of the other Tuareg rebel movements (Gaasholt 2011; Klute 1995; Klute and Von Trotha 2000).

Yet, in the midst of the crisis, a rapprochement was reached between some Songhay and Tuareg groups. One by one, rebel groups were brought closer to the government, and laid down their weapons. Arms from the conflict were burnt at a ceremony in Timbuktu in 1996, the Flame of Peace monument now commemorating this event. The

rebels, including the Ganda Koy, became integrated into the army, while rebel leaders obtained positions in the state apparatus (Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998; Gaasholt 2011).

Erstwhile notions of autonomy among the rebels receded. No assembly was created for Northern Mali and instead, autonomy was extended to all of Mali through a process of decentralisation. This should both have completed the democratisation by creating locally elected councils, and safeguarded local and regional autonomy by allowing rule in alignment with local and indigenous practices (Poulton and Ag Youssouf 1998; Mission de Décentralisation 1998).

As the rebellion had ended without the promise of autonomy for Azawad or Northern Mali having been reached, and with most benefits accruing to the most active rebels, many people complained of the self-serving deviation from the true aims of the struggle by those desiring positions. However, this was also regarded as beneficial, as it improved the representation of Tuareg and Arabs in the state, whereas until then they had only limited presence. Indeed, the rebels had never couched their struggle exclusively, or even predominantly, in terms of irredentism and ethnic group membership, but on the basis of what they saw as decades of neglect of Northern Mali and poor representation of inhabitants originating in that part of the country.

3. Incomplete incorporation and insecurity

Improved representation, and the promised autonomy delivered by the decentralisation, were however largely part of a configuration in continuity with previous modes of rule. At local levels, and all through the colonial and post-colonial regimes, the state administration had always relied upon local leaders as their conduits, because of limited centralised capacity. Local chiefs were made extensions of the state administration, passing on the state's decisions. Despite the inherent ambiguity of the role between an external power and one's own people, these positions could be sufficiently beneficial for potential candidates to seek them out and build connections, and for the state administration to obtain them (Gaasholt 2011; cf Klute 1995). Such organisation provided only the barest minimum of security and state provision, with substantive development efforts and effective incorporation into the state still lacking.

In principle, decentralisation empowered local constituencies to

make decisions, bringing into state administration new personnel. In reality, however, local leaders who had long associations with the state now entered municipal councils and continued their association with the state administration, aid agencies and local people of wealth and influence. These dynamics were fed by a strong dependence on externally derived inputs. Northern Mali had suffered from droughts in the 1970s and1980s which had affected the primary economic activity of pastoralism, which is supplemented by limited agriculture, itself drought-prone. As observed at a local level during fieldwork, pastoralism depended upon contributions from the outside. In addition to development and political channels, these derived from trade, labour migration and widespread smuggling.

Thus, the new municipalities were rarely in a position to take on the new responsibilities transferred to them as a result of decentralisation. In fact, as they were put in charge of expensive fields such as health and education, the decentralisation in part came to resemble an off-loading of tasks by the central government onto the municipalities. As a result, the dependence on inputs from the outside increased. As observed in my fieldwork location, Gossi, midway between Gao and Timbuktu, this led to the forging of numerous alliances between local leaders, traders, non-governmental organisation (NGO) staff and the state administration. Such alliances, while not fixed, crystallised through the well-connected who were involved in several fields. Cooperating to capture, and divert, public and development funds, they became more closely allied, while passing on the benefits primarily to their own individual associates. The well-connected thus appeared as a circle of chiefs associated with the state administration. They and those connected to them enjoyed the benefits, while those further away from this constellation might be passed over entirely.

Likewise, in a situation of insecurity after the rebellion, with many weapons in civilian hands and numerous thefts of vehicles and livestock, security was unequally administered. Military units were stationed in towns and cities, leaving rural people to their own devices, when they were not exposed to extortion by armed forces members. In towns like my fieldwork location, armed force members, frequently undisciplined, exploited local people who had few connections and no one to protect them. Once more, the ones with connections to local leaders and the state administration were safe from such abuses.

The association with the state through local leaders produced a

highly imperfect form of incorporation of peripheral constituencies in Mali, those in Northern Mali in general, and particularly regions inhabited by the Tuareg. Despite loud exclamations of discontent with this state of affairs, it persisted. But quite tellingly, the armed forces demonstrated their ability to defend their arsenals, frequent targets of attack and supply of armaments for the rebels. It appeared almost as a tacit admission of the limitations to the present arrangement, where the armed forces only controlled central nodes of the territory and were under threat from possible new uprisings (Gaasholt 2003/2004). Ironically, these might have had an impact on the armed forces themselves. Within the space of a few years, a new rebellion arose out of such an attack, while gradually Algerian Islamists, the future AQIM established themselves in the vast Northern Mali, largely escaping state control.

4. New rebellion and AQIM

In 2006, ex-rebels integrated in the Malian army took control of the arsenal in Kidal while many more deserted with their service weapons. Accusing the Malian government of not honouring pledges of investments in Northern Mali, they launched a new rebellion. Quite soon an agreement was reached, based on the National Pact of 1992. Problems with implementation and the persistent demands of hard-liners regarding army withdrawal prolonged the conflict until early in 2009, when the remaining rebels were defeated by the Malian army. Foremost among its soldiers were integrated Tuareg and Arab ex-rebels. The defeated rebels withdrew to Libya.

The bulk of the rebels once more argued in terms of unequal access to the Malian state. Only among people presumably associated with the hard-liners notions circulated of a Saharan and Sahelian state carved out from Malian and Nigerien territory. There were links at the time with the almost simultaneous Tuareg rebellion in Niger, at least in the form of contacts between personnel. In operational and political terms, the rebellions were directed against each country's respective government, just as in the 1990s. In this context, the hard-liners insisted on military withdrawal. The rebels' involvement in smuggling makes it likely that this insistence was also designed to remove an obstacle to smuggling operations in the Kidal region. In keeping with the analysis in the preceding section, the Kidal region, with an economy almost

exclusively based on pastoralism, depended strongly on outside inputs. Connection to the state through state transfers and the army constituted one source of inputs, with smuggling the other.

Before the hard-liners suffered their military defeat and withdrew to Libya, they clashed several times with the encroaching AQIM. Defeating them in combat and driving them to marginal areas, but never entirely out of Mali, the rebels boasted of having accomplished that which the Malian army had proved incapable of. They could thus pose as Malian patriots, arguing that they had preserved Mali from the Islamist threat. Consequently, they demanded better treatment, in the form of assistance for their region of origin.

While this illustrates how ambiguous any notion of secessionism was at the time, by the same token it reduces the validity of speculations emerging during this rebellion of connections between the rebels and AQIM. Since 2003 at least, the Algerian group then known as GSPC (*Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat*) used Mali as a refuge, as they were losing ground in Algeria and being pushed out by the Algerian military. The GSPC grew out of the civil war in Algeria. Initially, it was a splinter group of the Group *Islamique Armée* (GIA), formed in 1998 by people opposed to the GIA's tactics of terror against civilians. At the same time, while some GIA members accepted the amnesty offered by the Algerian authorities for what remained of Islamist groups under heavy pressure from the Algerian army, the GSPC vowed to continue their struggle (Le Sueur 2010). Later, with operations still continuing inside Algeria, Northern Mali afforded the GSPC respite from the Algerian authorities, while they engaged in activities of an increasingly criminal nature.

In 2003, the GSPC abducted 32 German tourists in Southern Algeria and transported them to the remote desert of Northern Mali. The Malian government was instrumental in obtaining the release of the hostages, who were repatriated from Bamako. In the following years, more abductions took place in North and West Africa, the hostages often being held for extended periods in Mali and Niger. Military cooperation between the countries in the region was envisaged and frequently discussed, but only partly implemented. Even so, the United States (US) established an observation post in Timbuktu and engaged in military cooperation and exercises in Mali from 2005 onwards, quite explicitly to address the Islamist threat. As has been pointed out by Lecocq and Schrijver (2007) mere technical observations, however

technologically sophisticated, in this case employing drones, cannot replace direct knowledge of the area, and the US presence made surprisingly limited impact.

In 2007, the GSPC changed its name to AQIM and thereby broadcast its desire to appear as affiliated with Al-Qaeda (Le Sueur 2010). While there were contacts with the Al-Qaeda leadership, there was little in the way of actual operational cooperation.[1)] In Mali, on the other hand, and on a more individual level, there was evidence of connections between AQIM and various Malian actors. For example, cocaine smuggling received considerable attention with a large seizure on the Algerian border in 2008 and 2009. A plane was brought down in the vicinity of Gao, which was supposed to have contained a large shipment of cocaine. On the whole, not many definite observations emerged about the drugs trade, while my informants claimed that it was carried on within closed circles. This was in contrast to the 'ordinary' smuggling in tea, sugar and cigarettes, which was almost tolerated. In the context of the death of the former president, Amadou Toumani Touré, allegations increasingly appeared of collusion between Malian officials and AQIM in the drugs trade. AQIM was in any case assumed to be involved in 'ordinary' smuggling activities. Considering the latter, and the heavy involvement of many rebels in smuggling in Mali, cooperation on an individual basis by rebels, Malian officials and AQIM members appeared to be the most likely, rather than by entire groups or even government agencies.

As a consequence, there was a steadily more pronounced presence of AQIM in Mali. In 2009, AQIM members were assumed to have allied themselves with families in Timbuktu, even marrying into them. Clashes then took place with Malian soldiers, many of them Arabs, who stood up to AQIM. A colonel was murdered inside Timbuktu, and a detachment sent after AQIM perished in an ambush. While creating a great disturbance at the time, AQIM's presence did not expand any further. Instead, by June 2011 military cooperation between Mali and Mauritania made it possible to destroy an AQIM base west of Timbuktu close to the border between the two countries. It is worth noting that the Mauritanian forces attacked inside Mali and ensured the outcome, a degree of cooperation that was never reached with Algeria.[2)]

AQIM's presence in the vicinity of the cities of Northern Mali was reduced. However, Islamic networks were active in Northern Mali, having recruited Iyad ag Ghali, the rebel leader of 1990, before the

rebellion of 2006. Unlike AQIM, these were not networks of radical Islam (cf Lecocq and Schrijver 2007). In 2012, however, Iyad ag Ghali, still recognised for his role as historic leader of the rebellion of the 1990s, appeared at the head of an Islamist Tuareg rebel group, the Ansar Dine. Its connections to AQIM within the context of the latest rebellion are of the greatest relevance.

5. Libyan weapons, demands for independence and Islamism

Undeniably, the latest rebellion received a boost from Libyan arsenals. However, soldiers once having served Gaddafi and returning to Libya with heavy armaments did not of themselves organise an independence movement. That was the work of those who also returned from Libya, and were the entourage of the leader of hard-liners from the 2006 rebellion, Ibrahim ag Bahanga. Before that conflict, he had been involved in localised clashes and even a micro-rebellion concerned with control over a municipality (cf Gaasholt 2003/2004). He died in Libya in August 2011 under circumstances not fully revealed. His associates formed a movement in October 2011, the MNLA,[3)] and soon put forward a programme denouncing the 'colonial' regime of Mali over Northern Mali with attendant discrimination and marginalisation, and their aims to liberate this area to create the state of Azawad. The inability of the Malian state to deliver development and security, and its corrupt nature, all of which were demonstrated by its collusion with drug traffickers and AQIM, were further arguments in favour of Azawad. If they ruled themselves, the people of Azawad would have an equitable form of government and address the security problems of which AQIM was an example. According to the MNLA, this was not a Tuareg undertaking, but concerned all the peoples of Azawad, the Songhay, the Fulani and the Arabs. It remained that very few Songhay or Fulani joined the MNLA, although one Songhay was a member of the MNLA executive council of Azawad. But for the most part, the MNLA was dominated by Tuareg and Arabs.

In January 2012, they went on the offensive, taking control of several peripheral towns that the army units simply abandoned. But some attacks were characterised by more intensity, such as when the rebels attacked the camp of Aguelhoc and the Malian army suffered

numerous casualties. At that time, the presence of Islamists alongside the MNLA was soon rumoured. Responding in all likelihood to the loss of life at Aguelhoc, soldiers and civilians in the camp of Kati outside Bamako demonstrated, demanding better support and equipment. Tuareg inhabitants were attacked and had their homes and businesses looted. The same soon happened in Bamako, making Tuareg and Arabs flee from all over Southern Mali, fearing a repetition of the persecution of the 1990s. The president called for calm and told people not to identify all 'Red' people with the rebels. But he and the authorities had to stand up to further unrest and demonstrations in Bamako, including demonstrations led by the wives of soldiers who appeared in front of the presidential palace, demanding increased support for their husbands.

Meanwhile, in Northern Mali, Iyad ag Ghali, the historic leader of the 1990s rebellion, appeared at the head of an Islamist Tuareg rebel group. The group did not want independence, but instead the introduction of sharia in all of Mali. Initially, in late 2011, Iyad ag Ghali, a former Malian consul in Saudi Arabia, had sought to negotiate with the MNLA on behalf of the Malian government. Failing to make any progress, and also to gain a position in the MNLA leadership, Iyad ag Ghali formed the Ansar Dine.[4)] In 2007, he had negotiated with the rebels on the part of the Malian government. Although at the height of that conflict he became associated with the rebellion for a while, even entertaining relations with ag Bahanga, his subsequent dissociation from the hard-liners was sufficiently marked for him to be perceived as having acted as a go-between, and to obtain the post of consul at Jeddah in Saudi Arabia.

From February to March 2012, a drawn-out battle was under way for the control of the strategic camp of Amachach next to the border town of Tessalit close to Algeria. The fighting went on for weeks, with the garrison desperately waiting for supplies and reinforcements from Kidal. During this time, the MNLA emphatically denied any link to the Ansar Dine, let alone AQIM, and instead presented themselves as a bulwark against Islamism. They claimed that if given their own state, they would take care of AQIM and remove the Islamist threat once and for all. Reports from local contexts, especially after the fall of the camp to the rebels, told a different story. An Arab soldier of my acquaintance, who was wounded during the fighting, told how he and the other soldiers had heard and seen the Islamists. They were not Malian but North African, and thus decidedly of AQIM. They possessed

superior fire power, subjecting the army to a barrage of fire such as he had never seen. Much of the heavy armament was clearly in the hands of AQIM rather than the two Tuareg rebel groups, making it clear that AQIM lent crucial support to them. At this stage, these groups fought alongside each other rather than against each other, despite their different military strengths.

The immediate reason for the fall of Amachach was the failure of a Malian Tuareg Major-Colonel, Elhadj ag Gamou, to reach the camp with his men, as he was blocked by the rebels. Frustration was now growing inside the Malian army with the way in which the campaign against the rebels was organised. Junior officers carried out a *coup d'état* on 22 March 2012, removing President Amoudou Toumani Touré and dissolving the parliament. They justified their action with reference to poor military leadership and insufficient equipment to take on the rebels. Afterwards, the junta fought to retain its power, although under pressure from ECOWAS, an interim government was put in place. The intervention, however, only paved the road for the rebels. One week after the *coup d'état*, the rebels began their advance and took control of the three capitals in the northern regions in as many days, from 30 March until 1 April 2012. The MNLA then declared the independent state of Azawad on 6 April 2012.

The rebels met with little if any resistance during their advance. The chain of command of the army evaporated when the regime of President Amadou Toumani Touré was toppled. Army units, cut off from central command, simply withdrew, with some Tuareg and Arabs passing over to the rebels, at least temporarily. An Arab soldier stationed in Gao at the time claimed that only a few shots were fired, and that there was very little resistance. He escaped to Algeria shortly afterwards.

Once the rebels had taken control of the regional capitals, the two Tuareg movements attempted to express their ideological inclinations through various actions. The MNLA removed symbols of the Malian state, hoisting their flag in all prominent places. The Ansar Dine attacked bars and destroyed the merchandise, while attempting to impose other supposedly Islamic regulations as well. There were reports of floggings for being scantily dressed, and amputations and executions for theft and looting.

On the whole, the manner of control of the two Tuareg movements and their human rights record shortly after the moment of con-

quest were extremely ambiguous. The MNLA busied itself declaring independence and trying to organise its own institutions. At the same time, its members looted banks and public institutions, to the point of leaving medical staff, and even patients, destitute at the hospital in Gao. Several incidences of rape were attributed to the MNLA, alongside Arab militias originally allied to the Malian army. The Ansar Dine, on the other hand, tried to impose some order and to clamp down on looting, if necessary by harsh means. But they extended those means through their practice of sharia, exposing civilians to severe corporal punishments. Not long after the conquest of Northern Mali, a couple in Timbuktu was sentenced to a hundred lashes for having a child out of wedlock. Through threats and violence the Ansar Dine tried to ban television, music, dancing and football. On several occasions, demonstrations erupted, some of them violent, showing the unpopularity of the Ansar Dine.

Furthermore, the Ansar Dine was backed by AQIM. My earlier fieldwork location, Gossi, was visited by AQIM members who discouraged people from partaking in the forms of entertainment just mentioned. But Gossi was initially under the control of the MNLA, and while AQIM members freely visited, they did not remain to enforce their decisions. During this period, it had become generally accepted that the Ansar Dine entertained multiple links to AQIM (cf Lecocq, Mann *et al* 2013). In addition, the presence of radical Islamists was enlarged by the arrival of Boko Haram members in Gao and the operations of a splinter group from AQIM, the MUJAO. While the Boko Haram did not make any more headlines, the MUJAO was stopped from blowing up the airport in Gao by the MNLA. They were also considered to be responsible for the highly publicised abduction of the Algerian consul and his staff.

AQIM was well-known for their involvement in smuggling and abductions, with several kidnappings in November 2011 attributed to them. In addition to the known criminal activities of the different groups, there was the issue of their respective areas of influence. My reports indicated that the MNLA primarily controlled the area south of the Niger Bend. AQIM, allied to the Ansar Dine, was said to control Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, allowing the Ansar Dine to implement their programme of Islamism. There was admittedly an MNLA presence in Timbuktu, but the power was in the hands of the Ansar Dine and their AQIM allies. The MNLA was also present in Gao, where they organised

a congress to establish the institutions of the state of Azawad, being engaged in drawn-out discussions with the Ansar Dine regarding the place of Islam in the new state. For a while the MNLA and the Ansar Dine tried to cooperate after reaching an agreement, but the attempt was abandoned. Not long afterwards, there was instead shooting between MNLA and Ansar Dine members in Timbuktu.

The MNLA also replaced positions made vacant by fleeing Malian officials, as only some Northern Malians, including Tuareg, remained in such positions after the rebel advance. But in Timbuktu, the Ansar Dine controlled most positions, and some were known to have been allotted by them to AQIM members. In an interview the MNLA, demonstrably the weaker party, was challenged regarding their relationship to AQIM, which they always portrayed as the enemy. As long as the agreement with the Ansar Dine lasted, the MNLA claimed to deal only with them, saying that any connection between the Ansar Dine and AQIM did not concern the MNLA! Against such statements must be set the respective strength of the different groups. In addition to evidence of AQIM's participation at Aguelhoc and Amachach, and their greater military strength both then and afterwards, their contribution was considered crucial by several of my informants at the time of the conquest of the regional capitals. In other words, despite the MNLA's posture, there was much to suggest at the very least a tactical alliance not just with the Ansar Dine, but also with AQIM.

The contrasting stances of these different groups were nevertheless genuine enough. However, just as some of them exhibited a taste for material gain, characteristics attributed by the MNLA to the corrupt 'Mali', they were also flexible when it came to alliances and even negotiations. Despite their intransigence as concerned independence, the MNLA entered into informal talks shortly after their declaration of independence. Although independence was non-negotiable, the talks became more formal during May 2012, being conducted with ECOWAS. Shortly afterwards, the Ansar Dine joined in. The range of the relationships of these two Tuareg rebel movements thus became wider still.

On the whole, the rebels appeared to enjoy little support among Northern Malians. Few Songhay and Fulani joined the rebel movements despite the MNLA's claims to fight for all the ethnic groups of Northern Mali. Much of the population fled, partly to avoid being identified with the rebels, but they expressed little support for them. An Arab

militia desired to restore security to Northern Mali rather than achieve independence, while the Major-Colonel Ag Gamou only feigned joining the MNLA to avoid bloodshed. Afterwards, he was based in Niger with some 600 Tuareg soldiers, wishing to enter Mali to fight to restore the Malian state according to him, although one should not overlook the long-standing rivalry between his Tuareg sub-group and the one of Iyad ag Ghali.

The positions of Northern Malians and of Tuareg thus varied considerably between civilians, rebels and Islamists. Not only that, but there were not necessarily always clear differences between any one of these categories. Militia members and soldiers became refugees while some joined the rebels, and rebels drifted between the MNLA and the Ansar Dine. Furthermore, by entering into negotiations, although insisting on independence, the MNLA conveyed mixed signals, conceivably suggesting that parts of the MNLA were of the notion that independence was a bargaining chip.

6. Later developments

Subsequently, in late June 2012, the MNLA was driven from Gao by the MUJAO. This organisation grew in strength, recruiting Northern Malians of all ethnic groups, including Songhay and Fulani. Eventually, the MNLA was displaced from Northern Mali altogether. AQIM strengthened their control over Timbuktu, while the MUJAO largely dominated Gao. In this way, the Ansar Dine's influence was reduced, leaving them Kidal as the only place exclusively under their direct control, although connections, even regarding policy, were supposed to exist, not least through Iyad ag Ghali who had sustained contacts with the AQIM leadership in Timbuktu. Islamists stepped up their enforcement of sharia, which was interpreted in very strict terms. Sufi shrines were destroyed in Timbuktu. All forms of entertainment were banned, extending to dance, music and football, with people in Gossi, for instance, having the SIM cards of their mobile phones confiscated to prevent them from downloading music. Harsh corporal punishments intensified, with numerous amputations for theft, and lashings for fornication and consumption of alcohol. A couple were stoned to death in the Kidal region, at that time under the control of the Ansar Dine. The incident was interpreted by some as a settling of local scores. Similar allegations appeared regarding amputations, which were passed for

unconnected people accused of thieving, but not for the Islamists and the rebels themselves.

The programme did not go unopposed, with young people in Gao demonstrating, and even organising a football match to show that they did not favour nor fear the Islamists' project. Tuareg women in Kidal arranged characteristic Tuareg dances, once more to defy the Islamists. Islamists, however, retained enough control to impose their views in the larger cities, the women for the most part resigning themselves to donning clothes covering their heads and entire bodies. In smaller towns and rural areas, the Islamist presence was not as permanent, resulting in a partial imposition of the Islamists' brand of sharia.

Nevertheless, ECOWAS and the United Nations (UN) favoured negotiations, which meant that talks between the MNLA and the Ansar Dine with ECOWAS continued to advance. Neither the MUJAO nor AQIM itself, were ever considered as credible partners for negotiations. AQIM, and by extension the MUJAO, were listed as terrorist groups, and this excluded both international organisations and the interim Malian government from engaging with them. Clear albeit ineffective condemnation was issued from the international community regarding the human rights abuses of the Islamists and their destructive actions in Timbuktu. However, the Ansar Dine, partly involved in these activities, was allowed to enter into negotiations. The MNLA too had been indicted for their transgressions, but had nevertheless been deemed appropriate for negotiations as soon as they expressed such a desire. In contrast to AQIM and the MUJAO, the MNLA and Ansar Dine were considered as Malian groups. They expressed political agendas, whether independence or large autonomy or else sharia in all of Mali. They sought recognition from the wider world by claiming independence, or by attempting to exert sufficient pressure to advance the programme of introducing Islamic legislation in Mali. By contrast, AQIM and the MUJAO did not publicise their political aims to the same extent, diffusing them through the media and on the internet, but appeared content to advance their programme of Islamism on a largely captive population in a territory that they now controlled. They did not seem to want to negotiate with any agencies external to Northern Mali, including the interim Malian government, or to make demands that reflected their political goals.

With respect to the MNLA, ambiguous and contradictory statements were issued from different parts of the movement regarding the

issue of independence, with some claiming that they had abandoned it, while the central leadership was still presenting it as non-negotiable. A splinter group of the MNLA, the *Front Populaire pour l'Azawad* (FPA) that mostly consisted of Tuareg, emerged in September 2012 and dismissed independence as a viable option.

However, negotiations lost their relevance when the Ansar Dine and AQIM moved towards Southern Mali in January 2013. Their occupying the town of Konna not far from the important cities of Mopti and Sévaré was perceived as a sufficient threat by the Malian interim government to request French intervention. Supported by the Chadian army, the French rapidly drove the Islamists back to North-Eastern Mali, where there was a drawn-out process to secure the area. A few suicide attacks were carried out by Islamists, with limited effect.

The long-prepared ECOWAS AFISMA (African-led International Support Mission to Mali) force had gradually taken over alongside the Malian armed forces. All the foreign troops present were supposed to form part of a UN mandated force, the MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), although funding had been delayed. The date set for the presidential and parliamentary elections was 28 July 2013.

However, as late as early June 2013, the Malian army still did not control all of Mali. It was accused of having committed human rights abuses, abducting and killing Tuareg and Arab civilians. Thus, in the Kidal region, the MNLA continued to deny entry to the Malian army, after having accepted the French and the Chadians. A splinter group of the Ansar Dine had already appeared, the *Mouvement Islamique de l'Azawad* (MIA), and opened negotiations with the Malian government. Increasingly, the MNLA expressed a similar desire, although maintaining the notion of autonomy as the basis for negotiations. Meanwhile, rebels defecting from the MNLA and other remaining groups, but also important regional groupings, formed the *Haut Conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA) to further talks with the government. The MIA was absorbed by the HCUA, which soon formed a common platform for negotiations with the MNLA *vis-à-vis* the Malian government.

Earlier, Major-Colonel Ag Gamou had advanced on Kidal, wishing to reintroduce the Malian army into the Kidal region. He later once more assumed his earlier rank and position in the Malian army, and participated in the army's operations in the direction of the Kidal region.

Yet further complications were caused by fights between the MNLA and the *Mouvement Arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA), a movement deriving from an important Arab militia of 2012. But eventually, the Malian army advanced towards Kidal, taking control of the town of Anefis south of Kidal after an armed confrontation with the MNLA. Nevertheless, negotiations began in Ouagadougou with ECOWAS mediation only a few days later.

On the northern periphery of the Malian state, particularly in its most remote areas, struggles continue for influence between local groups of different interests and orientation. Yet, they all now engage, willingly or more reluctantly, with the Malian state, reintroducing the logic of the relationship to the state, and by the same token, all its shortcomings.

7. Conclusion

Northern Mali has experienced several Tuareg-led rebellions. The particularities of the last one do not preclude comparison with earlier conflicts, nor should they obscure the obvious link to the previous rebellion. The participation of Islamists presents a new phenomenon, but some of them issued from among earlier Malian rebels, while the others hijacked the MNLA's struggle. The defining feature of the latter's endeavour was the insistence on independence. In the past, independence was usually couched as autonomy, and featured as only one of several claims of the rebels. It would appear that having experienced an obtrusive state presence, they demanded that the state should loosen its grip, but also that it should offer something in return for its presence, rather than just representing an obstacle and an alien body. This mattered even more as the rebels' home areas were dependent on outside inputs, ultimately obtained by insisting on increased transfers from the state and greater participation in it.

Clearly, in the most recent rebellion, the MNLA at least appeared different in orientation to the previous ones. Still made up of rebels who had earlier accepted to integrate the Malian state against the promise of an increased share of the state's resources, they were in fact the kernel of hard-liners from the previous rebellion who insisted on a diminished army presence. However, they were not above material considerations. Some had a past in smuggling, and many of them proved highly susceptible to the prospect of booty. They relied on a

tactical alliance with AQIM — which they denied — to achieve their goals, at the cost of becoming the weaker party. As in earlier rebellions, changes of allegiance took place, this time by defectors from the MNLA, and even the MNLA itself, who as of June 2013 were in negotiations with the Malian government. Any remaining hard-liners have been side-tracked, while all the other Islamists have largely been driven from Mali by the French and Chadian forces. Control has gradually been handed over to the underfunded AFISMA force and to the Malian armed forces, still characterised by poor organisation and indiscipline, hence the accusations of attacks on Tuareg and Arab civilians. Meanwhile, funding and the organisation of a force mandated by the UN, the MINUSMA, were awaited.

This is indicative of a significant overall challenge. The Malian state has consistently suffered from severely limited capacity in the northern regions. *Vis-à-vis* radical Islamists and criminal activities, vast Saharan areas will always be difficult to police, and this can only be successfully undertaken through regional cooperation. Of course, a proper presence of people and of authority in Northern Mali will be necessary to avoid the kind of power vacuum that has allowed for the gradual implantation of AQIM. In a larger perspective, this will also be necessary, not only to counteract new rebellions, but to address the underlying causes producing a succession of rebellions. For the moment, considering the limited state presence in Northern Mali, it should be possible to re-establish the state, as happened after the rebellion of the 1990s. But the relative ease with which it can be restored is indicative of limitations. Simultaneously, the weakness of the regional economy makes the state and external agencies too important and too coveted. A restoration of the state in Northern Mali must therefore involve the promotion of an enabling state which can simultaneously stimulate and diversify the regional economy. The dependence on the state as a provider of resources might thus diminish. The question remains whether it is sufficient to shift the attention away from the state as the focal point for political struggle and opposition.

Endnotes

1. In an early phase, GSPC networks in Western Europe and North America with people trained by the Al-Qaeda were involved in attempted terrorist attacks in the United States and in Spain (Le Sueur 2010).

2. Earlier attacks in 2010 were the sole initiative of the Mauritanian army, as were later attacks in 2011 and 2012. The Malian government was frequently only informed after the fact but did not object to the later ones. The actual strike in June 2011 was initiated by the Mauritanians. Mauritanian and Malian forces both participated in operations to secure the area afterwards. Mauritanian and Malian military leadership were engaged in joint planning before this operation.
3. The *Mouvement National de l'Azawad* was formed in October 2010 by various interest groups from among Northern Malian Tuareg (Lecocq, Mann *et al* 2013) and fed into the MNLA, which was largely dominated by participants from the previous conflict, in addition to other Tuareg and Arabs leaving Libya after the fall of Gaddafi.
4. Lecocq, Mann *et al* (2013) argue that it was Iyad ag Ghali's failure to advance his Islamist programme among the MNLA's leadership in November 2011 that led him to form the Ansar Dine. The authors also provide more detail on the strategies of Iyad ag Ghali during the latest conflict and the character of his Islamists leanings.

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