

# "A FESTIVAL OF BRIGANDS": IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY IN MALI

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## **Abstract**

Mali's *coup d'état* in March 2012 and the subsequent occupation of northern Mali by Islamist and separatist rebels took many observers by surprise. How could an erstwhile model of peaceful democratic transition collapse so swiftly? Why did so few ordinary Malians stand up in defence of their 20-year-old democracy? Combining accounts from Malian and foreign journalists with observations made in Bamako leading up to and during the dramatic events of early 2012, this article assesses the failures of Mali's pre-*coup* political system. A combination of the tenuous rule of law, weak state institutions, and perceptions of systemic corruption deeply eroded Malians' faith in their democracy. The junta that ousted Mali's elected president in March 2012, despite its international isolation, skillfully manipulated public frustrations with the government as well as local symbols and discourses pertaining to heroic leaders to gain support and legitimacy at home. The crisis in Mali was preceded by certain warning signs, some of which might be applied to gauge the health of democratic transitions elsewhere in Africa.

## **1. Introduction: A surprise collapse**

Mali is a nation with a proud history, of legendary empires and kings dating back over centuries, of vast quantities of gold and of fabled conquests. Since its independence from France in 1960, however, Mali has been a beggar on the world stage, among the poorest of the world's

modern nation-states. In terms of climate and geography, its people face daunting handicaps: malaria is endemic, regular droughts threaten agricultural production in southern Mali, while in its arid northern regions farming is only possible in a few irrigated zones along the Niger River. The country has always been highly dependent on foreign aid, annual disbursements of which ranged between US\$500 and \$1 000 million in constant dollar values, amounting to 12 per cent of gross national income in 2009 (Van de Walle 2012: 3-4).

Nonetheless, for most of the last two decades Mali was widely hailed as a good example in an otherwise troubled region. In 1991 a popular uprising culminating in a *coup* mounted by an army colonel named Amadou Touré (usually known in Mali as 'ATT') ended the 23-year reign of General Moussa Traoré, the country's autocratic president. An era of multiparty politics and liberalisation followed the adoption of a new constitution in 1992. Alpha Konaré, who won free presidential elections that year, reformed state institutions and negotiated an end to a long-simmering rebellion by nomadic Tuareg in the north, where no central government had ever had much control. Konaré stepped down in 2002, respecting a constitutional two-term limit. The election to succeed him was won by ATT, whom many Malians fondly remembered for driving out dictatorship 11 years earlier. He belonged to no political party, and characterised his governing style as consensus-based rather than partisan. He was elected to a second five-year term in 2007.

In sub-Saharan Africa, where heads of state routinely change their constitutions to acquire more power or remain in office indefinitely, Mali stood out. Most observers believed the country had successfully negotiated the transition to democracy. Malians were still poor under Konaré and ATT, but were believed to be subject to the rule of law rather than the whims of Big Men. Mali was stable and, most foreign observers (including me) believed, heading in the right direction — toward a more responsive government, greater freedom, and better lives for its citizens. Mali was a donor favourite and an international tourist destination, the venue of trendy cultural and music festivals.

Then, on 21 March 2012, Malian troops at the barracks in Kati, just outside the capital city Bamako, launched a mutiny after a visit by their defence minister. The issue appeared to be the government's two-month old campaign against a resurgent Tuareg rebellion in the north: rank-and-file soldiers distrusted their commanders and accused

officials in Bamako of withholding equipment and support. After one contingent of mutineers took over the state broadcasting facility in the afternoon, another stormed the presidential palace. President Touré went into hiding, just weeks before scheduled elections to choose his successor (*Jeune Afrique* 2012b).

Maliens who tuned in to state television the next morning saw what looked like a throwback to an Africa of decades past, as a lieutenant in camouflage fatigues announced the suspension of the constitution and the creation of a ruling military authority, "putting an end to the incompetent and disavowed regime of Mr. Amadou Toumani Touré" (ORTM 2012). An army captain, his camouflage cap pulled low over his eyes, then read a brief appeal for calm; a caption identified him as Amadou Haya Sanogo, the leader of Mali's new ruling junta.

Governments throughout Africa, Europe and North America, along with international organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), quickly condemned the Bamako *coup*. Under the chairmanship of Alassane Ouattara, President of Côte d'Ivoire, ECOWAS led the international response, implementing economic sanctions and diplomatic mediation to restore Mali's constitutional rule. Two weeks after the *coup*, the junta bowed to pressure from abroad and signed an agreement to relinquish power to a civilian caretaker administration (BBC 2012).

Yet Maliens were, by and large, relieved to see ATT gone (see discussion in Hagberg and Körling 2012: 117-118). Despite having twice won elections, the president's popular support had all but evaporated by the beginning of 2012. Meanwhile, since launching the *March coup d'état*, Sanogo has gained widespread appeal and respect among ordinary Maliens, especially in Bamako, and long after formally handing power over to civilian officials, he exercised considerable authority behind the scenes of Mali's transitional government. Doubts over Sanogo's lingering political influence vanished on 11 December 2012 when Mali's prime minister, Cheikh Modibo Diarra, abruptly resigned after being arrested by soldiers and taken to a late-night meeting with the junta leader in Kati (Associated Press 2012). Although Sanogo's opposition to international military intervention left him politically weakened in the wake of France's Operation Serval in early 2013, he nonetheless has maintained a high profile in Malian media (both public and private). His support remains particularly strong in Kati, where the army

base's school was subsequently renamed after him, and where officials have continued referring to him as 'his excellency' (*Le Républicain* 2013). In August 2013 Mali's interim government provoked consternation abroad by promoting then-Captain Sanogo to the rank of four-star general (Bloomberg News 2013).

Concurrent with the collapse of the country's 20-year-old democratic institutions, the takeover of the northern half of Malian territory in late March and early April by an unstable alliance of Islamists and Tuareg nationalists precipitated a major crisis, appearing to signal Mali's entry into the category of failed African states and prompting scores of commentators (for example, Wallerstein 2012) to wonder whether Mali was becoming "the next Afghanistan". Why did an erstwhile model of peaceful democratic transition collapse so swiftly? How was Sanogo, a previously unknown junior military officer, able to command public loyalty and even admiration after interrupting that transition process? To answer these questions, and reflect on what the answers mean for the future of democracy in Mali, I review reporting from the Malian and foreign media, combined with observations I made in Bamako during the months preceding and immediately following the *coup*.

## **2. ATT and the decline of the Malian state**

When Amadou Toumani Touré was first elected to the presidency in May 2002, with nearly two-thirds of the vote, Mali's international reputation was on an upward trajectory. For the first time, the country had successfully hosted the continent's premier international football tournament, the African Cup of Nations, a few months earlier. The economy was growing, and the country's mood was optimistic. The electoral process itself raised some concern: voter turnout was low, and the Carter Center, while describing the poll as "peaceful, well managed and conducted in a spirit of transparency", expressed reservations over "the accuracy and reliability of the reported results" (Carter Center 2002). Still, it was obvious that ATT had substantial support both at home and abroad as he began his first term of office.

Malian government statistics show several early signs of progress under ATT's rule, including numerous road-building projects linking previously isolated rural areas with the national highway system, increased access to electricity in Bamako and district capitals, rapidly rising

rates of motorcycle and mobile phone ownership among the population, and a nation-wide drop in the rate of extreme poverty, from 32 per cent in 2001 to 24 per cent in 2006. The rate of primary school enrolment rose during the same period from 31 to 55 per cent (INSTAT 2011).

Such figures, while plausible and probably accurate, nonetheless masked deep-rooted problems within the Malian state. ATT, who had campaigned for the presidency as an independent candidate, pursued a strategy he called "the politics of consensus", ostensibly enabling him to work with everyone, transcend partisan divisions and advance the public interest. This approach, however, also entailed the co-optation of Mali's political parties and the suppression of dissenting voices within government (Vaudais and Chauzal 2006); over time it helped foster an inability to address pressing issues, and a progressive concentration of power in an already strong executive. There was no substantive debate about policy or legislation, the National Assembly became a rubber stamp for presidential initiatives, and serious political opposition to ATT virtually disappeared (RFI 2012).

In September 2006, as ATT's first term was drawing to a close, a slender book by an author writing under the pen name of 'Le Sphinx' was published in Paris. Entitled *ATT-cratie : La promotion d'un homme et de son clan* ("ATT-cracy: The promotion of a man and his clan"), the text accused Mali's president of an array of faults ranging from ineptitude to venality. A Bamako editorialist at the time described *ATT-cratie* as depicting "a corrupt Mali, without vision and without ambition, ruled by a clan of predators, of parvenus with impunity, a Mali where the only merit is now called nepotism, patronage, regionalism and mediocrity" (*Info Matin* 2006). Poorly written and consisting mainly of innuendo, the book was easy for government apologists to dismiss as a crude smear attempt, yet it captured a growing disillusionment with ATT and his rule, and became the buzz of Bamako's private media. A second volume, even more slender than the first, followed in early 2007, just in time for the presidential election (see Le Sphinx 2006 and 2007). Despite this negative publicity, ATT handily won re-election, officially garnering 71 per cent of ballots in the first round of voting. Turnout remained low, and complaints of rigging by the few opposition parties fielding candidates fell on deaf ears abroad.

During ATT's second term, murmurs of discontent reached a crescendo as the progress realised in the early years of his rule ground to a halt. Between 2006 and 2010, national poverty rates stagnated,

as did primary school enrolment; in Bamako, the latter actually dropped by 10 per cent (INSTAT 2011). The nation's under-resourced, strike-prone public school system had become thoroughly dysfunctional, students were not acquiring basic skills (only a small fraction of candidates passed the annual *baccalaureate* exam), and in any case graduates had few employment prospects in the formal sector, leaving parents to wonder what was the point of sending their children to school. It became easy to believe that a predatory cabal around the head of state, like that described in the pages of *ATT-cratie*, had vitiated the state's capacity to serve the public's needs.

Government corruption, long a common complaint among Malians, now emerged as a major problem, amid perceptions that ATT's penchant for building consensus made him unwilling to confront growing levels of venality in his own entourage. "Under ATT there is no more morality in politics", declared *Le Sphinx* (2007: 22), adding that corruption had become "the favourite sport of a good many citizens or politicians". In 2010, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria suspended its aid to Mali after discovering that senior officials in the Malian government had embezzled millions of dollars of the Global Fund's grants to the country (*Jeune Afrique* 2010).<sup>1)</sup> The idea that corruption went unchecked at the highest levels of the state gained popular currency, undermining the president's legitimacy. Throughout Bamako and its burgeoning peripheral quarters, expensive homes were being built for members of the state-connected elite, who drove the dusty streets in luxury 4x4 vehicles, the cost of which is simply incomprehensible to ordinary Malians. In early 2011, ATT fired his respected auditor-general, Sidi Sosso Diarra, after the latter had reportedly exposed the scale of impropriety in Mali's public finances. This move only fuelled suspicions that the president was refusing to address the problem — perhaps because he was too deeply implicated in it himself (see discussion in Gavelle *et al* 2013).

One symptom of the systemic corruption afflicting the Malian state, a symptom affecting urban and rural residents alike, is the phenomenon known as *l'expropriation foncière* — land expropriation. Articles about real estate speculation, shady land deals, and the forced removal of residents from their land are now a recurring feature in the Malian press. For the wealthy and politically connected, obtaining official title to a desired plot of land, even one legally occupied by someone else, became a simple matter of paying off the right local authorities.

Land disputes sometimes turned deadly, and those chased off their property found the courts unwilling to come to their aid. In 2010 a civil society umbrella group dedicated to defending *les droits des démunis* (the rights of the landless) began organising protests against the Malian state, and threatened to sue in the ECOWAS Court of Justice in a bid to force authorities to respect the law (*Les Echos* 2010).

The breakdown of law and order, long tenuous even in the capital city, began to make life more dangerous for many urban residents. A wave of armed robberies swept Bamako after 2010, particularly targeting the city's ubiquitous Chinese-made Tian Ma 'Power K' motorcycles (a model known locally as *le Djakarta*), difficult to trace and simple to re-sell. The following year saw the resurrection in Bamako of a practice known as 'Article 320', introduced during the chaotic days after the fall of Moussa Traoré in 1991, when mobs would douse accused thieves in petrol and set them alight. (The name derived from the combined cost of a litre of petrol and a box of matches in local francs at the time.) Although this practice subsided in the mid-1990s as the state reasserted its authority, ineptitude and corruption in law enforcement brought it back during ATT's second term. By late 2011, a large number of people in Bamako had lost faith in their justice system's ability and even willingness to punish wrongdoers. Violent criminals were not the only victims of vigilantism: one man was killed for allegedly stealing two sacks of charcoal from a residential courtyard. Other incidents saw mobs confront police who had robbery suspects already in custody, demanding that they be turned over to face immediate punishment. Many urban residents believed that criminal suspects, if they failed to bribe their way out of custody, would be set free by corrupt judges. "The harshest sentence issued in the last court session against confessed armed robbers ... was no more than five years suspended", a Bamako journalist observed (*Le Combat* 2011). "One notes bitterly that at least two out of five criminals are repeat offenders whose sentences were never completed. In light of all these failures of the system, should we be surprised to see populations taking their security into their own hands?" In the first two months of 2012 alone, I read of seven such instances of deadly vigilante justice in Bamako newspapers.<sup>2)</sup>

The gangrene of corruption had also spread to Mali's armed forces. *Le Sphinx* alleged that ATT had stocked the command structure of the military and state security services with officers whose only merit

was their loyalty to him. "These potbellied colonels and generals", he wrote, spend more time "with businessmen, or are more concerned with the re-election of General ATT, than with the living and working conditions of their own troops" (2007: 46). Many observers accused military commanders of recruiting personnel based on their family connections rather than their qualifications: in February 2012, for example, a Malian journalist estimated that "over 90 per cent of the soldier corps are children whose parents are in the upper echelons of the Malian army" (*L'Indépendant* 2012). A member of *Les Sofas de la République*, a politically engaged collective of artists and rappers, told a Bamako radio station that the recruitment process "was full of nepotism. Fathers of children who had not gone to school went to see their soldier relatives or members of the same party to ask them to recruit their son into the army, the police, the gendarmerie etc. That's how the people have perpetuated corruption" (Radio Nyetaa 2012). Officers embezzled funds set aside for buying and maintaining equipment, and granted promotions in exchange for cash (*Jeune Afrique* 2012a; 2012c). The military command structure became increasingly top-heavy: whereas Mali's previous presidents had named 18 generals to the security services over 42 years, ATT named 36 in less than a decade (*Le Monde-Duniya* 2012). Soldiers' mistrust of their senior officers and of civilian authorities has been a recurring theme since the *coup*, and persists despite subsequent efforts by the European Union (EU) to rebuild the Malian army (*Jeune Afrique* 2013).

Throughout this period of state decline, ATT sought closer ties with Libya. He hosted Libyan President Muammar Qaddafi in Mali several times — visits during which, *Le Sphinx* complained acerbically, the Libyan leader "acted as though he was on conquered territory, or in a Libyan province" (2006: 124). The Libyan Arab African Investment Company (LAAICO) became one of the top sources of foreign investment in Mali, buying up Bamako's largest hotels. Libya's largest investment in Mali, however, was the 'Malibya project', a plan to farm rice on 100 000 hectares of irrigated land in the Segou Region north of the Niger River. The 2008 agreement signed with ATT's government granted Libya a 50-year lease on this vast area, plus a 30-year exemption from all taxes and duties associated with the project, leading some to describe the venture as a 'land grab' (*Guardian* 2010, Oakland Institute 2011). Libyan money financed the grand mosque in the city of Segou as well as new public buildings in Bamako, most



notably *la Cité Administrative*, a huge ministerial office complex on the Niger's left bank. (While *la Cité* was initially dedicated to Qaddafi, the plaque bearing his name was removed after he was driven from power in late August 2011.)

In Mali's northern regions, despite a series of peace treaties — never fully implemented — between Tuareg rebels and the central government, violence remained "an integral part of politics and everyday life" (Lecocq 2010: 375) both during and after Konaré's presidency. Following Qaddafi's death in October 2011, hundreds of Malian Tuareg fighters who had spent years in the Libyan army returned to Mali with large quantities of advanced weaponry. ATT, always the willing negotiator, sent emissaries to the northern town of Kidal in hopes of enticing these returnees to join the Malian army, prompting many Malians to complain of a double standard. "Since we came back to Mali, not one government official has visited us", a representative of Malian deportees from Libya told a Bamako newspaper. "When the Libyan soldiers of Malian nationality arrived in Kidal, they received every honour. Six government ministers brought them the support of the president of the republic; 50 tonnes of rice; 500 boxes of dates and 50 million CFA francs [approx. US\$100 000]" (*L'Indépendant* 2011; see also Gary-Toukara 2013). Southern perceptions of Tuareg rebels as "the spoiled children of the republic" were only exacerbated. In any case, the warm welcome was for naught: many of the returning fighters joined a new Tuareg separatist group, the *Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad* or MNLA, bringing their weapons with them. The MNLA, in concert with Islamist groups operating in the area, swiftly gained ground against the Malian army (*New York Times* 2012). While ATT and others blamed his country's destabilisation on NATO's Libyan intervention, the fact remained that Mali's army — and state — had grown too weak to face up to this new threat. A combination of factors, many of them of his own making, had made the Malian president's position untenable.

### **3. Of heroes and agents of disequilibrium**

Beginning as a mutiny at the Kati army barracks, the *coup d'état* that toppled ATT from power on 21 March 2012 turned the junior army officer who led the putsch into an instant celebrity in Bamako. Amadou Haya Sanogo, at 39, had already spent most of his life in the army.

After attending a military-run primary school in Kati, 14 kilometres north-west of Bamako, he joined the army as an enlisted man. As he worked his way up the ranks, gaining promotions to sergeant, lieutenant and finally captain, he attended at least five United States (US) Department of Defense-sponsored training courses in the US. His last assignment before the *coup* was as an English instructor for the army, a capacity in which rank-and-file troops came to know and trust him. Suspicious of their colonels and generals, the mutineers picked Sanogo to lead their new junta, dubbed the *Comité National pour le Redressement de la Démocratie et la Restauration de l'Etat* (National Committee for Recovering Democracy and Restoring the State), or CNRDRE. He was the group's ranking officer.

So hollow had the Malian state become that once the head of state vanished into the night, there was little support left for Mali's republican institutions. The military, security services, police and state media immediately lined up behind the junta, which dissolved Mali's 1992 constitution. Nobody seemed to want ATT back: Malians who spoke up for a return to constitutional rule sought a legitimate way to replace him, not restore him to office. Their voices were met, however, by louder ones calling for the old institutions to be abolished and new ones built from scratch; members of this latter camp cast the advocates of constitutionalism as beneficiaries of the corrupt old regime.

The *coup* leaders' motives have been the object of much speculation, both in Mali and abroad. In his first televised interview on 22 March, Captain Sanogo offered multiple justifications for the *coup*. After speaking briefly about the government's failing campaign in the north, he devoted considerable time to other problems: the broken public education system, nepotism in civil service recruitment, and joblessness. He described the mutineers' demands for improved living and working conditions as "our first mission", to enthusiastic applause from the troops alongside him. He vowed to hold officials of the ATT regime accountable for their misdeeds (Africable 2012a). Sanogo would later characterise Mali's democratic edifice under ATT as a sagging wall that he and his men had knocked down in order to build anew. He insisted that the *coup* had not derailed Mali's democracy, but had been a necessary act to save it. During a televised interview in May, he asked rhetorically,

When at a high level of state responsibility, you allow yourself to

look a citizen in the eyes and lie to him, when you allow yourself to rig elections, when you allow yourself to buy elections, when you allow yourself to buy his conscience and lead him toward what is not good for him, is that what you call democracy? No! [...] When a government in place doesn't really serve the mission it ought to serve for its country, to save the people, is that a democracy? When elected officials are willing to use any means — money, weapons, plots — to achieve their personal goals, is that a democracy? I would say no, but now the people have a chance to restore this democracy. (Africable 2012b)

The notion that their democratic system was an empty shell resonated with many Malians, whose pride in their collective achievements since the early 1990s had ebbed considerably during ATT's presidency. Well before the *coup*, many suspected that cynical politicians, seeking to keep themselves or their associates in power, had orchestrated what Le Sphinx called "electoral masquerades" (2006: 16) disguised as fair elections, and acted as puppets of foreign (particularly French) influence. Sanogo and his CNRDRE junta found support from Mali's "anti-globalisation left" (Mann 2012; Gavelle *et al* 2013), the leaders of which saw the old regime in similar terms. One Malian university professor and public intellectual described ATT's rule as "a veritable festival of brigands, to such a degree that the people became nostalgic for dictatorship. To want to return to such institutions, so rejected by the people, is that democracy?" (N'Diaye 2012).

A large number of Malians therefore wanted to turn the page on what they considered a failed experiment, and hailed Captain Sanogo and the CNRDRE as heroes who could deliver their country from sham democracy and outside domination. In the weeks and months following the *coup*, as the junta carried out extra-legal arrests of persons connected to ATT's government, including several top generals, ex-ministers, and the man responsible for overseeing Libyan investments in Mali, the campaign to stamp out the traces of the old regime had considerable public support.

To understand the construction of political legitimacy in southern Mali, it is vital to appreciate the degree to which daily life and politics there play out within the context of the region's oral histories. These narratives are particularly meaningful for peoples of Mande origin (that is, members of the Bamanan and Maninka groups, who constitute the largest portion of southern Mali's population, and whose languages

are dominant in those areas). The heroic figure, or *ngana* in the Bamanan language, is central in these narratives. The Mande hero is best known through legends of Sunjata Keyita, the 13th-century founder of the Empire of Mali, of warriors like Sunjata's general Tura Magan Tarawélé, and of rulers like Da Monzon Jara, leader of the Bamanan Empire in the late 18th and early 19th century. These heroes' names survive in contemporary Mali not only through oral histories and praise songs by the region's griots, but increasingly through popular music, videos and films. For Mande peoples, this body of legends is like an oral charter that forms the basis of local authorities' political legitimacy. It is probably not coincidental that Modibo Keita, Mali's first president, was a descendant of the emperor Sunjata, or that the man who ousted him from power, Moussa Traoré, traced his own ancestry to Sunjata's general Tura Magan, who rebelled against Sunjata's authority. Both presidents built popular mandates at least partially on the foundations laid by their legendary ancestors (see Johnson 1999, Sidibé 2012).

The hero in Mande legends is a destabilising force in society, someone who strikes against and sometimes overturns the prevailing regime. He — for the Mande hero is always male — acts as an "agent of disequilibrium" (Bird and Kendall 1980: 13), someone who "resists the pull of the established social order" and brings about momentous changes, "even if these changes are potentially destructive" (Bird and Kendall 1980: 15). The hero is a complex figure whose reputation depends on violating society's usual codes of conduct. He must defy social norms — especially existing power hierarchies — in order to acquire a name for himself and establish a new order. His heroic deeds, moreover, always unleash dangerous forces that may be beyond his control.

In the wake of the *coup d'état*, Sanogo skilfully used the media, particularly state television, to portray himself as someone in line with Mali's tradition of heroes. He constructed his public image around the heroic figure, in opposition to base politicians, associating himself with hunters and religious figures believed capable of harnessing the invisible forces (*nyama*) that undergird worldly power in Mande cosmology. He sought to convince his Malian audience that he had the necessary qualifications, both natural and supernatural, to lead the country through its time of tribulation.<sup>3)</sup>

In Mali, a leader's political legitimacy may depend as much or even more on appeals to heroic narratives than on written political texts.

For Malians supporting Sanogo and his junta, the fact that ATT was Mali's duly elected, constitutionally and internationally recognised head of state was irrelevant; in their eyes, his failings as a leader, and his own disrespect for the law, had rendered his rule illegitimate. They could grant legitimacy to Captain Sanogo, on the other hand, not only because he spoke the rhetoric of restoring true democracy and eliminating corruption, but also because he appeared to conform to the standards of *nganaya*, the heroism of the man destined for greatness, strong enough to control the unruly events and forces set loose by his ascent to power.

"For this people of Mali, to identify and identify with a hero, a *ngana* or *ngana minè ngana* [hero of heroes], is no less than a matter of psychological survival", writes Sidibé (2012). "Never mind democratic norms, international condemnation of the *coup d'état*, [or] religious respect for a constitution which they disregard from start to finish". ATT, unlike some of his predecessors, had no ancestral heroic appeal to build his political career upon, and his ascribed status worked against him rather than for him. According to Le Sphinx, as an *homme de caste* or member of a hereditary low-status group in Malian society, ATT could never move the country forward, since "the initiatives of an *homme de caste* are always destined for failure" (2006: 13).

#### 4. W(h)ither the democratic state in Mali?

By mid-2013, French-led military intervention had succeeded in suppressing (but not eradicating) the threat posed by Islamist rebels in northern Mali. Meanwhile, the Malian government signed preliminary accords with separatist Tuareg rebels to allow national elections and pave the way for future talks. Following new presidential elections, Malians hoped to put a painful chapter of their country's history behind them, and avoid the mistakes of Mali's pre-*coup* political system.

What lessons can we learn from the failure of Mali's political system in 2012? The question of how to assess governance in poor, conflict-prone societies has never been more critical. In this regard, I would like to highlight three 'red flags' that went largely unremarked upon by scholars and policymakers in the years leading up to Mali's present crisis, and propose that they might serve as useful warning signs in similar contexts.

The first is the question of voter turnout, which for Malian pres-

idential elections before the *coup* peaked at 39 per cent (2002). Voter participation was the lowest in West Africa, where recent turnout rates for presidential polls has stood at 49 per cent in Niger (2011), 65 per cent in Mauritania (2009), 68 per cent in Guinea (2010), 73 per cent in Ghana (2008), and 81 per cent in Côte d'Ivoire (2010). Malian citizens' meagre engagement in the electoral process should have indicated the degree of popular disaffection with, if not indifference to, the country's democratic system. In this regard, Liberia's dramatic decline in voter turnout, from 61 per cent in 2005 to 39 per cent in 2011, serves as a stark cause for concern; meanwhile, the nearly 50 per cent turnout rate of Mali's 2013 presidential election offers some grounds for optimism.<sup>4)</sup>

The second red flag concerns land expropriation. While it may be difficult to gauge this phenomenon, which is undoubtedly linked to rapid urban growth as well as state corruption, it is not impossible. Political scientists, for example, may be able to track trends in court cases involving land disputes. The proliferation of local civil society organisations serving those who view themselves as victims of expropriation could provide another metric in this regard; Bamako alone now counts several dozen such groups. States in which the property rights of citizens (and non-citizens) are increasingly violated will likely prove to be states whose political systems are in danger of collapse.

Finally, the issue of law enforcement and vigilante justice presents a third potential warning signal. The apparent rise in the number of cases of mob violence against suspected criminals in Bamako in 2011 and early 2012 — which, again, might be hard to quantify definitively — suggests that the breakdown of the rule of law in Mali's capital had reached a critical point. Public authorities' perceived unwillingness to deal with criminality surely contributed to the demise of ATT's regime and the overall lack of support for existing governance structures. Respect for property rights and the basic guarantee of law and order should be minimal criteria for evaluating the health of any ostensibly inclusive system of government (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

As for the future of democratic rule in Mali, the fall of ATT and the rise of the junta raise the question of whether formal institution-building processes can achieve durable success in the absence of validating cultural narratives. Malians are by no means opposed to modern constitutional governance and popular selection of political leaders, but the failure of the modern state to deliver on its promises and uphold the rule of law over the last decade has eroded public support

for these liberal institutions, and empowered religious leaders with their own political agendas. In societies like Mali where ascribed status continues to be a significant factor in the way individuals evaluate one another and their contributions to society, the most successful leaders may prove to be those who can make persuasive appeals to existing cultural discourses about power. These discourses are shaped by local religious beliefs, understandings of history and ancestry, and conceptions of honour, heroism, and destiny. As President Amadou Touré learned in 2012, Malian politicians ignore them at their peril.

## Endnotes

1. This crime remains unpunished: Oumar Ibrahim Touré, ATT's health minister at the time of the scandal, was later exonerated by a Bamako court of corruption charges; he went on to found his own political party and even ran for president in 2013.
2. For details on mob justice in Bamako during this period, see <http://bridgesfrombamako.com/2012/04/12/vigilante-democracy/>.
3. For a more in-depth analysis of the Mande hero complex and Sanogo's public image, see Whitehouse (2012).
4. Voter turnout figures are from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <http://www.idea.int/vt/>.

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