

## **MALI KURA, MALI FANGA** **THE POLITICAL TRAJECTORY OF MALI UNDER MILITARY RULE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

How did military dominance come about in Mali following the coups of 2020 and 2021? What shifts has the situation brought about in terms of civil-military relations? What effects have these political changes had on the economies of violence in the Sahel region? Beyond the reality of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's regime, we are seeing the results of the nation's disillusionment at play, following the unfulfilled promises of the post-1991 democratic opening. Ten years after the 2012 coup, the rule of violence has been sustained by (counter)insurgency logics and has since escalated. This state of affairs helps us understand the population's support for the coups in 2020 and 2021, based on the nation's desire for a *Mali Kura*, a new Mali. The *Mali Fanga*, a war-waging narrative upheld by the military transitional government and which is presumed effective, explains the rationale underlying Mali's response to its various crises. The current results of this approach boil down to the strengthening of authoritarianism, an exacerbation of the economies of violence and a strategic shift that counts on the unpopularity of France's presence in the Sahel. After being waged for ten years, the "war on terror" in the Sahel region has had lasting effects and has only worsened the rule of violence. In a context marked by one-upmanship, the Malian transitional government and its martial approach are receiving support from Wagner, a Russian private military company. Thus, Mali's current trajectory raises questions concerning the country's socio-political order, the future of conflict resolution and the configuration of power in the long run.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, Mali's socio-political timeline took a new turn, as a profound wave of protests swept away the regime led by Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) (2013-2020) after the latter was elected for a second term. In August, a military coup led by senior Malian officers harnessed the people's demand for change, installing a transitional government formally led by civilians. As political differences amounted, the very same officers then overthrew the civilian-led government in May 2021. Since then, Colonel Assimi Goïta stands as President of the transition, heading a government characterized by an increased military presence.

The coups resulted from national/international failures to respond to Mali's various crises, ten years after the 2012 coup against Amadou Toumani Touré. These successive upsets highlight the sheer exhaustion of this mode of government, an inability to resolve the conflicts in northern and central Mali, as well as pre-existing tensions in the rural world amid profound social transformations.<sup>1</sup> These structural weaknesses in contemporary Mali help us understand the resilience of jihadist insurgencies in rural areas. Thus, the economies of violence in Mali and the Sahel region have worsened considerably in recent years.

Once elected in 2013, IBK's regime was supposed to implement a number of reforms, bringing about the long-term resolution of the Malian conflict by relying on the success of French military operation "Serval". In reality, international intervention mainly shielded Malian elites, through a security rent of extraversion<sup>2</sup> that rewarded the latter for seeking external protection against insurgencies. At the same time, international players promoted a "return of the State" to rural areas where jihadist insurgencies have flourished – a return rendered impossible under the country's current structural state.<sup>3</sup>

In 2020, the wave of protests against IBK gave rise – in both the popular and political spheres – to a desire for a *Mali Kura*, a new Mali, which became a national slogan. This new vision featured a variety of aspirations: to act upon the socio-political crises that fostered devastating economies of violence in many parts of the country; to oust the nation's delegitimized political class; and to respond to popular social demands. Since 2020, the military transitional government has utilized this feeling of hope, whilst opening up the country's political landscape to a nationalist discourse. This approach has slowly been gaining momentum, particularly after France's decision to reconfigure "Operation Barkhane" in June 2021, which led French bases to close in northern Mali (Kidal, Tessalit and Timbuktu).

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1. Marie Derrider, *Élites, élections et transformations du politique au Mali [Elites, Elections and Political Transformations in Mali]*, Paris, Karthala, 2021; Marie Brossier, Cédric Jourde and Modibo Ghaly Cissé, "Relations de pouvoir locales, logiques de violence et participation politique en milieu peul (Région de Mopti)" [Local power relations, logics of violence and political participation in Fulani society (Mopti region)], "Projet Mali" Report, Montréal, Centre FrancoPaix en résolution des conflits et missions de paix, 2018; Jean-François Bayart, Ibrahima Poudiougou and Giovanni Zanoletti, *L'État de distorsion en Afrique de l'Ouest [The Distortion State in West Africa]*, Paris, Karthala, 2019.

2. Jean-François Bayart, "Africa in the world: A history of extraversion", *African Affairs*, 99:395, p. 217-267.

3. Alexander Thurston, "[The Hollowness of 'Governance Talk' in and about the Sahel](#)", Commentary, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 2021.

Spurred by Mali's widely held perception of international counter-terrorism policies as lacking results,<sup>4</sup> this strategic decision marked the partial ending of the security rent for Malian elites. The ensuing tensions triggered a strategic shift in Mali, accompanied by the arrival of Wagner – a Russian private military company (PMC) – and an increasingly martial approach towards combatting insurgencies in the center of the country. This political climate finally led to the total withdrawal of Operation Barkhane, which was announced in February 2022 and took effect in August of the same year.

In the context of increasing military domination, the movement for a *Mali Kura* represents – in parts of Mali,<sup>5</sup> at least – the notion of *fanga*<sup>6</sup> (i.e. brutal force or war) as a means of governing, highlighting “the rhetoric of warlike power.”<sup>7</sup> How did military dominance come about in Mali following the coups of 2020 and 2021? What shifts has the situation brought about in terms of civil-military relations? What effects have these political changes had on the economies of violence in the Sahel region?

Since the 2020 military takeover, the people's desire for a *Mali Kura* has given rise to great expectations. The roots of the legitimacy crisis that undermined IBK's regime – and the nation's skepticism towards post-colonial forms of government – run deep. In this context, civil-military relations have changed, with increasing levels of authoritarian pressure and practices from past regimes being repeated. The Malian transitional government's military domination is part of a major strategic shift, as it reinforces the rule and economies of violence by launching exacerbated coercive responses. The prospect of conflict resolution therefore seems increasingly unattainable. Thus, the military transition raises existential questions about the future of Mali's socio-political order.<sup>8</sup>

## DISILLUSIONMENT AND COUPS IN MALI

Beyond the reality of IBK's regime, we are seeing the results of the nation's disillusionment at play, following the unfulfilled promises of the post-1991 democratic opening. When it comes to curbing the rule of violence on the ground, these past three decades of democratic openness have proven inconclusive. This explains the initial popularity of the coups in Mali. IBK's unpopularity stemmed from the army's sheer lack of results – particularly in central Mali – despite massive investments in the military, as well as from the nation's social and political crises. The distrust in the old political class – *Mali Koro* – and in its

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4. Yvan Guichaoua and Lamine Savané, “[Mali. Où va la 'rectification'?](#)” [Mali: Where is the “rectification” headed?], *Afrique XXI*, August 2, 2022.

5. The Bambara term *fanga* is particularly meaningful in southern Mali.

6. Which can also mean political power or authority.

7. Jean-Loup Amselle, “[Rhétoriques du pouvoir au Mali](#)” [The rhetoric of power in Mali], *Condition humaine / conditions politiques*, 3, 2022.

8. Based on 27 interviews conducted in Bamako, Mali, in August 2021, with defense and security force officers, political and government officials, civil society leaders, international representatives from NGOs and French military officers. I would hereby like to thank all the participants in the symposium on “*The future of security assistance in the Sahel*” held from July 11 to 13, 2022 – organized by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, IRSEM and IHEDN. I also thank those present at the seminar on the readjustment of France's strategy regarding the countries in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea – held on June 1, 2022, by the AFD, Expertise France, DGRIS, MEAE and IRSEM.

willingness to return to power was illustrated by the “coup within the coup” waged against the transitional government in 2021. This goes to show that a large portion of Malians presumed that the military was able to manage the multiple crises in the Sahel region. The *Mouvement du 5 juin-Rassemblement des forces patriotiques* (Movement of June 5 – Gathering of Patriotic Forces, or M5-RFP) played a major role in raising popular support for the first coup. Amid this tense political context, marked by massive strikes and a severe security crisis following numerous losses among Malian forces, the political faces of M5-RFP acted as the spokespersons for the upheaval against the authorities, thereby legitimizing the coup in 2020 – though it may not necessarily have been M5-RFP’s initial intention.

## A political system on the verge of collapse

During the Cold War, following the socialist episode headed by Modibo Keita (1960-1968), Mali was dominated by a “praetorian State” with Moussa Traoré at its helm (1968-1991). These periods of authoritarian domination<sup>10</sup> point to the continuity between the colonial and postcolonial eras. In a structural context defined by economic dependence, Malian elites devised means to secure support through extraversion. Despite the democratic opening of 1991 – achieved through strong popular demand – the nation’s power structure was unable to change; during the period of structural adjustment that followed the Cold War, the State’s dependence on external aid grew, while the people’s demands for social justice remained unmet. This left increasingly glaring gaps in the nation’s fabric, ones that religious groups would soon partially fill in.

These years of structural adjustment left the State with little room for maneuver, while the democratization process increased citizens’ expectations, namely regarding the country’s failing education system. Long considered a “donor darling”,<sup>11</sup> Mali remains a highly aid-dependent State with a transnational administrative apparatus. The elites (politicians, major economic players, etc.) enjoy a very low tax rate. This social class therefore has no interest in strengthening the State,<sup>12</sup> except perhaps when it comes to over-investing in the army. The combination of the nation’s strong economic growth and formal democracy has not allowed for an inclusive socio-political space to develop, resulting in one of the lowest voter turnouts in the surrounding region<sup>13</sup>: “If we are here, then our politics have failed.”<sup>14</sup>

IBK’s regime lacked legitimacy, due to a deep feeling of weariness among the public that eventually led the regime’s political enemies to multiply: “After August 2020, the

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9. Marc-André Boisvert, *The Malian Armed Forces and its discontents: Civil-military relations, cohesion and the resilience of a postcolonial military institution in the aftermath of the 2012 crisis*, Doctorate thesis, University of East Anglia, 2019, p. 92.

10. Bruce Whitehouse, “Mali: Collapse and Instability”, in Leonardo A. Villalón, *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, 2021.

11. Isaline Bergamaschi, “The Fall of a Donor Darling: The Role of Aid in Mali’s Crisis”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 52:3, 2014, p. 347-378.

12. Adam Baczko et Gilles Dorronsoro, “[Mali: À refuser la réforme, les élites politiques maliennes risquent la révolution](#)” [Mali: By refusing reform, Malian political elites risk revolution], *Le Monde*, July 8, 2021.

13. Bruce Whitehouse, “Mali: Collapse and Instability”.

14. Interview (notes), Colonel Major of the Malian Army, Bamako, August 27, 2021.

country was ungovernable. Someone had to make a move.”<sup>15</sup> Following the 2020 elections, which were marred by numerous accusations of fraud, IBK’s political regime was on the brink of collapse. The 2020 coup was in some ways a post-election crisis: a large portion of the political class saw the composition of the nation’s Legislative Assembly as illegitimate or, to put it differently, as “the heart of the problem.”<sup>16</sup>

The slogan for IBK’s 2013 presidential campaign was “Mali first”. It was then mocked by using the expression “My family first”, which illustrated the public’s perception of his regime. The phrase pointed to a moral scandal<sup>17</sup> that led to IBK’s son Karim Keita – who served as President of the National Assembly’s Defense Committee – and the former president’s wife being widely despised. The 2020 coup followed the emergence of social demands, ones that had remained unmet since 1991.<sup>18</sup>

IBK’s regime mainly replicated past practices without seriously implementing the Algiers Agreement (2015), while securing funding through international support for counterterrorism and increasing the nation’s defense budget. Its relationship with international stakeholders amounted to “simulating a partnership with external supporters, one that was not actually based on common goals or interests.”<sup>19</sup>

## Massive investments in the security sector

Despite the nation’s army having massively increased in size, the regime allowed the security situation in the center of the country to deteriorate severely. Meanwhile, corruption scandals were constantly being uncovered: “Most of Mali’s corruption is concentrated in the security sector. When you start to look into it, everything is ‘classified’. Our society is sick and the army is a part of it.”<sup>20</sup> The military planning law instated in 2015 raised great hopes. Yet, it was marred by serious scandals – mainly uncovered by the Office of the Auditor General – including numerous instances of overbilling and embezzlement. This type of practice is deeply rooted in Mali and was replicated and sustained throughout the nation’s democratization period. The financial weight of the nation’s defense sector had also taken on impressive proportions: in 2010, the army’s budget totaled US\$146 million; in 2017, it had risen to US\$458 million, representing 22% of Mali’s national budget.<sup>21</sup> This surge in the military’s budget allowed for a substantial increase in personnel. The army’s recruitment procedures, however, are clearly based on nepotism.<sup>22</sup>

Demands made by non-commissioned officers from the “*militariat*”<sup>23</sup> – a class that emerged during the 2012 coup – led to reforms aimed at improving living and working

15. Interview (notes), UN employee, Bamako, August 23, 2021.

16. Interview (notes), Politician and former Minister in several governments, Bamako, August 27, 2021.

17. *Jeune Afrique*, “[Mali: des vidéos privées du fils du président IBK créent la controverse](#)” [Mali: Private videos of President IBK’s son spark controversy], July 3, 2020.

18. Interview (notes), Head of a human rights organization, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

19. Denis M. Tull, “[Mali: The uncertain prospects of intervention](#)”, SWP-Megatrends Afrika, Policy Brief No. 1, 2022.

20. Interview (notes), UN employee, Bamako, August 23, 2021.

21. Marc-André Boisvert, *The Malian Armed Forces and its discontents*, p. 273.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 296-299.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

conditions in the Malian military. Under IBK, army personnel experienced significant imbalances in terms of ethnic inclusion, with a high percentage of recruits originating from communities in the south and center of the country (Bambara, Malinké and Bobo). The main communities from northern Mali (Songhai, Fulani, Arab and Tamashek) were poorly represented. The army's budget increase also allowed numerous generals<sup>24</sup> to be appointed. Meanwhile, the families of soldiers who fell on the front line expressed their indignation regarding the army's defeats: "The children of the poor are the ones being sent to the front."<sup>25</sup>

## The 2020 coup

In stark contrast with the coup in 2012, the 2020 coup was methodically planned out. It stemmed from negotiations that are thought to have involved key parts of the Malian security apparatus. Many interviewees saw the coup as a form of arrangement between the main bodies of the Malian army, including at least some negotiations with State Security personnel: "It wasn't a coup, but an arrangement within the military. The colonels decided to oust the generals appointed under IBK, as well as the presidential family."<sup>26</sup>

In addition to popular distrust, there are many theories regarding the triggers underlying the 2020 coup, particularly about existing alliances among the elites being reshaped to IBK's detriment. Interviewees regularly referred to a UN report from June 2020 on the involvement of high-ranking officials in drug trafficking, which cited former Head of State Security and former National Guard Commander Moussa Diawara. In interviews, Diawara's role came up often: "You can't form a coup without him."<sup>27</sup>

The debate is still ongoing regarding the degree to which key parts of the Malian security apparatus were involved in preparing the coup. Nevertheless, in the run-up to the coup, a consensus was reached within the army. The rift between green and red berets – which was prominent in 2012 – was no longer an issue, thereby highlighting the central role played by the National Guard (whose members included two of the five colonels in the coup: current Minister of Defense Sadio Camara and current Director of State Security Modibo Koné).

## M5-RFP: A powerful co-opted mobilization

M5-RFP was backed by influential clerics such as Imam Mahmoud Dicko and acted as both a coalition for the opposition and a mouthpiece for political – and even moral – criticism of the political class under IBK. In 2020, members of M5-RFP rallied around a nationalist agenda, calling international interventions in Mali an interference; all agreed to denounce the State's management of the national defense policy.

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24. Interview (notes), Head of a development NGO, Bamako, August 25, 2021.

25. Interview (notes), Head of an independent administrative authority, Bamako, August 24, 2021.

26. Interview (notes), Researcher, Bamako, August 24, 2021.

27. Interview (notes), Gendarmerie Colonel, August 23, 2021.

At the time of the 2020 coup, M5-RFP consisted of three main branches:<sup>28</sup>

1) The Coordinated movements, associations and sympathizers (CMAS) linked to influential Imam Mahmoud Dicko;<sup>29</sup> 2) A set of groups forming an “anti-globalization left”,<sup>30</sup> sporting nationalist ideals (refusing the Algiers Agreement, for example) and fundamentally opposing French intervention. It was spearheaded by Cheikh Oumar Sissoko’s *Espoir Mali Koura* (Hope for Mali Koura, or EMK), the *Groupe des patriotes du Mali* (Mali Patriot Group, or GPM) and *Yèrèwolo*,<sup>31</sup> led by Adama Ben Diarra – aka “Ben the Brain” – who was once a close associate of the Malian left’s historical opponent Oumar Mariko;<sup>32</sup> 3) The *Front pour la sauvegarde de la démocratie* (Front for the Safeguard of Democracy, or FSD) led by the late Soumaïla Cissé.

While most members of M5-RFP welcomed the fall of the regime, some felt that the military junta lacked the legitimacy required to lead the overthrowing of IBK. After the coup in August 2020, while the political class was slow to react and distrustful of the military, M5-RFP stood as the only real political force to openly and audibly criticize the civil-military transition. At the time, M5’s leaders criticized the consultation sessions for the transition charter (calling it a sham), the founding of the National Transitional Council (calling it unrepresentative) and the overarching role of the military within the transitional government.

Despite their initial criticism towards the transition, key players from M5-RFP were co-opted into the government, including current Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga in particular, who assumed his position during the “coup within the coup” in 2021. Other factions followed suit, including some of the groups mentioned above, such as *Yèrèwolo-Debout sur les Remparts* (Dignified Men-Standing on the Ramparts). Due to medical issues, the Prime Minister was temporarily replaced by Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga on August 22, 2022. Nevertheless, within M5-RFP, a sizeable fringe remains critical of the government. Imam Mahmoud Dicko, who was initially a central part of M5-RFP, has since distanced himself from the movement. Meanwhile, a number of clerics – including the Sheriff of Nioro form a patronage network in the political landscape, part of which supports the transition.

The current division within M5-RFP – between co-opted players and members that remain critical of the military transition – means that the movement is no longer a united political force. M5-RFP members who hold nationalist views and stand against international intervention – from France in particular – support the transitional government and even request the departure of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization

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28. Sebastian Elischer, “Populist civil society, the Wagner Group and postcoup politics in Mali”, *West African Papers*, No. 36, Paris, OECD, 2022.

29. During our interviews, several people emphasized the fact that the tensions between IBK and Imam Dicko (the latter having originally supported IBK during the 2013 elections) stemmed from Dicko perceiving the State as being mismanaged, as well as from specific disagreements with the Prime Minister over political and financial matters in 2020. Imam Dicko did not necessarily want IBK to resign or be overthrown, as the situation would have slipped out of his reach.

30. Sebastian Elischer, “Populist civil society, the Wagner Group and postcoup politics in Mali”, p. 18.

31. Suspected of being close to the Russian “Prigozhin galaxy”; see Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, *La Russie au Mali: une présence bicéphale [A foreign policy by proxies? The two side of Russia’s presence in Mali]*, Report No. 97, IRSEM, 2022.

32. Currently under pressure from the transitional government for his criticism towards the latter.

Mission in Mali<sup>33</sup> (MINUSMA). The transitional government supports and/or finances movements such as *Yèrèwolo*, who advocate the extension of the transition period, a strategic break with France, as well as general defiance towards a variety of international players, whilst strengthening Mali's bonds with Russia. Today, this is the main political orientation of the *Mali Kura*.

## **MALI FANGA: A RECONFIGURATION OF CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

The colonels who formed the coup were initially perceived as setting up a “clean-up transition.”<sup>34</sup> How has the transition reconfigured civil-military relations? What reforms have appeared since the transition two years ago? The military's access to power certainly differs from the two previous coups. Among Malian citizens, the military's drive to secure patronage networks is jokingly referred to as: “The Colonel will become Head of the mosque.” The transitional government has indeed worked on reforms, especially since the “coup within the coup”, yet is increasingly being exposed for its inability to curb the security crisis and to promote conflict resolution.

### **The military takes charge**

The five senior colonels from the *Conseil national pour le salut du peuple* (National Council for the Salvation of the People, or CNSP) who set up the military coup in August 2020 were mainly senior field officers. They were trained at Kati Military Academy and had undergone training abroad. They were young (the oldest was 43) and discreet, yet were supported by their troops after having commanded field units in the north and center of Mali (“the colonels controlled their units, that was their strength”<sup>35</sup>). Several interviewees emphasized that the colonels were supported by part of the senior military hierarchy, and that several of them were close to former Director of State Security Moussa Diawara: “They [the colonels] carried out the coup, but did not plan the coup.”<sup>36</sup>

The President of the CNSP, Colonel Assimi Goïta (Commander of the Autonomous Special Forces Battalion), was once Vice-President of the transition. Since the “coup within the coup” in May 2021, he has assumed the role of President of the transition. The Vice-President of the CNSP, Colonel Malick Diaw (former Deputy Commander of the Kati military zone), is now the President of the National Transition Council (CNT), which acts as the transitional government's legislative body. In addition to Mali's current temporary Prime Minister, three other CNSP members were given a central role: Colonel Major Ismaël

33. Deutsche Welle (DW), [Au Mali, décryptage des objectifs du mouvement Yèrèwolo](#) [Mali: Deciphering the objectives of the Yèrèwolo movement], August 5, 2022.

34. Interview (notes), Political leader of *Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad* (Coordination of Movements in Azawad, or CMA) No. 2, September 2, 2021.

35. Interview (notes), UN employee, Bamako, August 23, 2021.

36. Interview (notes), Politician and former Minister of several governments, Bamako, August 27, 2021.

Wagué is now Minister of Reconciliation, Peace and National Cohesion, Colonel Sadio Camara (former Director of Kati Military Academy) has become the all-important Minister of Defense,<sup>37</sup> and Colonel Major Modibo Koné is now Director of State Security.

Based on the pioneering work of A. Perlmutter,<sup>38</sup> S. Elischer identifies three types of players in the context of military transitions: rulers, arbitrators and independents.<sup>39</sup> Rulers are highly skeptical of civilians' ability to provide effective leadership. In the long run, they expect to benefit – both politically and materially – from the military's rule. Arbitrators, on the other hand, favor a return to civilian rule. Independents are officers who are undecided regarding the regime's future political trajectory and the role of the armed forces within it. For now, the military junta's government features all three types, to varying degrees.

The overthrows of Moussa Traoré in 1991 and Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) in 2012 were dominated by political “arbitrators” from the military, which allowed for a rapid transition towards elections and a civilian government, with the nation's political class assuming the main role. This time around, the nature of the military transition was somewhat different. Several interviewees (military and non-military) pointed to the weakening of the army amid structural adjustments under Alpha Oumar Konaré, to army management under ATT and, finally, to the lack of progress over the past ten years as reasons for the national army losing its grasp on national security, thereby justifying the need for the military to “regain control”.

Many Malians perceive the military as trying to get its hands on State patronage networks, by appointing their clients at all levels of the State<sup>40</sup>: “it's their turn.”<sup>41</sup> In 2021, the staff at Gabriel Touré Hospital in Bamako rose up following the appointment of a military officer as their Director, instead of a respected personality from the field. Many also questioned the fact that officers were being appointed as governors in various regions in the south of the country, while civilians were being appointed in the North. Thus, military personnel were appointed to positions – perceived as being financially beneficial to them<sup>42</sup> – in the South, as well as within the CNT.

The transitional military government seeks to delay the date of the next elections, as it is reluctant to see the old political class return to power. Yet it also acts as an arbitrator, having finally proposed – after lengthy negotiations with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – a timetable for various elections, set to be held between 2023 and 2024 (the last of which being the presidential election). On June 24, 2022, it also promulgated a new electoral law, one that may allow the military to be eligible. Thus, the military's

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37. Yvan Guichaoua and Lamine Savané, “[Mali. Où va la ‘rectification’?](#)” [Mali: Where is the “rectification” headed?].

38. Amos Perlmutter, “The Praetorian State and the Praetorian Army”, *Comparative Politics*, 1:3, 1969, p. 382-404.

39. Sebastian Elischer, “Military in Sahelian Politics”, in Leonardo A. Villalón, *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel*, 2021, p. 3.

40. *Jeune Afrique*, “[Mali: de la présidence aux gouvernorats, les militaires ont-ils désormais la main sur toute l'administration?](#)” [Mali: From the presidency to the governorates. Does the military now have control over the entire administration?], August 26, 2022.

41. Interview (notes), Head of an independent administrative authority, August 24, 2021.

42. Interview (notes), Researcher, Bamako, August 24, 2021.

true intentions remain unclear regarding the possibility of Mali's return to a multiparty political system.

Were it to hold the elections, the military may also set up a long-term political regime in the form of an "electoral autocracy",<sup>43</sup> in which the ruling party benefits from the State's financial, coercive and symbolic resources to gain a significant advantage over its opponents. In 2023, various (new?) political parties may well bring these political reconfigurations to light.

## A will to reform?

During its first year, the transitional military government launched legal investigations under the guise of the fight against corruption. So far, however, these investigations have mainly resulted in political opponents being removed, without legal proceedings being duly completed. The launch of other investigations to fight impunity (against Boubou Cissé, Moussa Diawara, "FORSAT" Commander Oumar Samaké and Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga, who died in custody) was openly welcomed in Bamako. It is still too early to determine whether the government is willing to make real political changes, as these investigations are selective and used as political tools.

The transitional government also voted in a number of reforms perceived to be "popular", based on controversial "moral panics",<sup>44</sup> such as a decree banning the "importation, distribution, sale and use" of hookah or shisha pipes, sentencing offenders to prison time. The transitional government also moved towards this type of reform after the Minister of Justice mentioned a proposed ban on homosexuality.<sup>45</sup> These issues must also be considered in light of the weight of religious players.

The CNT is intended to act as a legislative body of the military transition. In practice, it is above all a co-opting tool, "a legal instrument that calms politics down [...] it is better than nothing."<sup>46</sup> The CNT could in fact be described as a pseudo-legislative body, insofar as its representativeness is highly questionable (in the absence of a constituency and due to the military being over-represented), but also due to it mainly being used to validate the transitional government's policies. Nevertheless, CNT President Malick Diaw has been at odds with Prime Minister Maïga on several occasions. The CNT may even constitute a counter-power within the transition, although this issue is up for debate.<sup>47</sup> As a matter of fact, the CNT played an important role in opposing – and extensively amending – the Prime Minister's draft electoral law.

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43. Nicolas Van de Walle, "Conclusion: Democracy fatigue and the ghost of modernization theory", in T. Hagmann and F. Reyntjens (eds), *Aid and Authoritarianism in Africa: Development without democracy*, Uppsala and London, Zed Books, 2016, p. 161.

44. Stanley Cohen, *Folks devils and moral panics* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.), London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

45. RFI, "[L'homosexualité pourrait bientôt être interdite et sanctionnée au Mali](#)" [Homosexuality could soon be banned and penalized in Mali], August 23, 2022.

46. Interview (notes), Politician and former Minister in several governments, Bamako, August 27, 2021.

47. *Jeune Afrique*, "[Mali: Malick Diaw, au-dessus de tout soupçon?](#)" [Mali: Is Malick Diaw above suspicion?], July 1, 2022.

In the context of the transition, electoral reform has been the most important achievement in terms of policy, yet remains to be implemented following tense negotiations with ECOWAS. These tensions led the country to face sanctions, including a six-month financial and economic embargo by ECOWAS, which was lifted on July 3, 2022, following the promulgation of the new electoral law. From a political standpoint, the CNT's amendments to the final version of this law were seen as a slap in the Prime Minister's face. More importantly, the law allows members of the junta to run in the elections by leaving the armed forces four months beforehand, in contradiction with the 2020 transition charter.<sup>48</sup> Article 3 of the new electoral law created an Independent Election Management Authority (AIGE): this body resulted from demands made by civil society organizations and is set to take over the main role of the Ministry of Territorial Administration, which fostered tensions during the transition. Nevertheless, one of the major foreseeable issues with the AIGE concerns the way its members will be appointed.

## An exposed army

The army has put itself in a strenuous position: it is currently grappling with transition management, has been undergoing major restructuring for several years, is fighting a difficult war in the center and north of the country and has also come under serious threat in the south. One of the central issues put forward by the movement of discontent against IBK was the armed forces' lacking ability to improve the security crisis: when the Afrobarometer survey – conducted between March and April 2020 on a representative, random and stratified sample<sup>49</sup> – asked “What are the most important national problems for the government to address?”, the item “crime and insecurity” was by far the most common initial response (23.8%), ahead of education (14.6%). In the same survey, over 70% of respondents had a negative opinion of the government's ability to prevent or resolve violent conflicts.<sup>50</sup>

In this context, reforms in the security sector constitute the main expectation faced by the transitional government. The choice of placing senior officers at the head of the army – generally selected based on their level of competence – has been praised, including by French military officials, who have emphasized their quality as technicians.<sup>51</sup> While the unity of the armed forces was remarkable during the 2020 coup, the transitional government has since widened a pre-existing fault line in the fabric of the Malian army: senior officers on the ground, who were promoted to manage the transition, are in disagreement with the soldiers deployed in the north and center of Mali. In 2021, the Boni attack in central Mali showed that untrained officers had been promoted to risky operational positions, thereby bringing to light certain tensions between officers in Bamako and soldiers in the field. When

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48. *Jeune Afrique*, “[Mali: la nouvelle loi électorale, du pain bénit pour la junte d'Assimi Goïta](#)” [Mali: The new electoral law, a true blessing for Assimi Goïta's junta], August 30, 2022.

49. *Afrobarometer*, “[Afrobarometer Round 8](#)”, 2020, p. 11.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

51. Interview (notes), French Army Colonel, Bamako, August 24, 2021; Interview (notes), French Army General, Bamako, August 28, 2021.

higher-ups flew in to visit the troops in the area, the soldiers protested, while the families of dead soldiers refused to see military social services in Bamako.<sup>52</sup> If military defeats on the ground continue to mount, these types of conflicts may well escalate.

The 2020 coup also opened up a new fault line: around 100 senior officers, who held positions of high responsibility under IBK, were sidelined and remained unassigned. In addition to being a potential loss of human resources, their sidelining may lead further tensions to arise within the armed forces. The last fault line mentioned during our interviews – prior to Operation Barkhane leaving Mali – was the rift between Francophile officers and those hostile to France’s presence. From an operational standpoint, the creation of inter-army tactical units was imperfect and faced technical, logistical and human resource issues: “Members of a same unit don’t know each other.”<sup>53</sup>

In 2021, the army’s respect for operational cycles had improved. Cases of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) abusing civilians were also declining during several quarters of 2020-2021.<sup>54</sup> Yet, since Wagner’s coercive approach came into play, this trend has been reversed (as explained below). In recent years, the security sector’s significant budget increase allowed for some progress to be made in terms of working and social conditions among the ranks. However, results remain limited: salaries are not effectively accounted for, the actual number of soldiers is still unknown and superiors continue to “tap in” to army bonuses and supplies: “It’s being grabbed up by the higher-ups [...] colonels are having buildings and farms built, which raises questions.”<sup>55</sup>

## MILITARY DOMINATION AND STRATEGIC SHIFTS

The “coup within the coup” in May 2021 overthrew transitional President Bah N’Daw and his Prime Minister Moctar Ouane. This second coup in only two years reinforced the military’s dominance over the Malian transition. The coup primarily stemmed from deep political differences between the transition’s two civilian leaders and the military junta. Politically, this “coup within the coup” also led to the outright assimilation of M5-RFP and its nationalist vision, which consisted in rejecting – in a burst of authoritarian hardening – the strategic alliances the country had established since 2012. In 2021, the transitional government chose to impede French Operation Barkhane and formed a strategic partnership with Russia, thereby further highlighting Mali’s deteriorating relationship with France and the country’s long-term dynamics.

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52. Interview (notes), Head of a human rights organization, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

53. Interview (notes), Malian Army Colonel No. 1, Bamako, August 27, 2021.

54. Interview (notes), Researcher specialized in the protection of civilians, Bamako, September 2, 2021.

55. Interview (notes), Head of a human rights organization, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

## The acceleration of military domination

The second coup in 2021 was triggered by the civilian leadership's attempt to reorganize the cabinet; it tried to remove Defense Minister Sadio Camara – a central and highly respected player in the transition process.<sup>56</sup> For several months prior, there had also been major disagreements over the date of the presidential elections: ECOWAS was initially promised that it would be held in February 2022, a promise to which the military junta was strongly opposed.

The colonels taking part in the transition increasingly perceived the transitional government's civilian leaders as being close to France and, therefore, as constituting a “counter-power.”<sup>57</sup> This situation coincided with the accelerated deterioration of Franco-Malian relations, following the announcement of Operation Barkhane being reconfigured in June 2021, which led French bases to close in northern Mali: “Macron thought he could rely on him [the civilian President of the transition, Bah N'Daw] to eject the military. The military felt threatened.”<sup>58</sup>

Beyond this international conflict, negotiations were also underway regarding the goals of the military transition. Mali's deteriorating security situation and the inefficiency of FAMA's response, combined with announcements regarding the reconfiguration of France's presence in June 2021, put the transitional government's political back up against the wall. In August 2021, a high-ranking Malian officer testified: “The junta is afraid... they are surrounded by wolves.”<sup>59</sup>

With Operation Barkhane's bases being closed in northern Mali, as announced in June 2021, the members of the transitional government no longer perceived the former colonial power as being able to ensure the regime's protection. This mainly explains the startling declaration made by Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga, who stood at the United Nations' podium on September 25, 2021, and accused France of “bailing out in mid-air”: “Maliens took these announcements very badly.”<sup>60</sup>

Ten years of French operations in Mali revealed that elites showed little interest in offering a substantial response to jihadist insurgencies. Thus, Malian elites' support for Operation Barkhane was primarily motivated by their own protection against insurgencies. Finally, several members of the junta, as well as the Prime Minister, had affinities with Russia and shared a feeling of resentment towards France's intervention – at least in part. In this context, the Malian transitional government saw the unpopularity of foreign intervention as an opportunity, allowing it to secure obvious political gains by questioning the nation's bond with France.

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56. Yvan Guichaoua and Lamine Savané, “[Mali. Où va la ‘rectification’?](#)” [Mali: Where is the “rectification” headed?].

57. Interview (notes), Gendarmerie Colonel, August 23, 2021.

58. Interview (notes), CMA Political leader No. 1, September 2, 2021. A similar conclusion was drawn in Yvan Guichaoua and Lamine Savané, “[Mali. Où va la ‘rectification’?](#)” [Mali: Where is the “rectification” headed?].

59. Interview (notes), Malian General, Bamako, September 2, 2021.

60. Ibid.

M5-RFP's assimilation was also a way of neutralizing the only serious threat posed by a socio-political movement outside of power, in addition to the group's shared vision concerning ongoing tensions between France and Mali: "Within M5-RFP, there are those who believe that the transition really began in 2021, that the rebuilding process requires profound reforms and that the transitional period should be extended. Dissenters, on the other hand, fear the return of Moussa Traoré's regime. There is also the fear that members of the former regime, who stole billions, will corrupt the elections and make a comeback."<sup>61</sup>

Thus, a form of interdependence is being built, one that prevents Choguel Kokalla Maïga from posing a true threat to the military transition.<sup>62</sup> Meanwhile, the transitional government also capitalizes on conflicts among the nation's religious entities. Imam Mahmoud Dicko was marginalized due to his stance against Mali's strategic shift, while the transitional government drew closer to the Sheriff of Nioro.<sup>63</sup> Finally, in 2021, the former political class under IBK was met with increasing pressure: legal investigations were launched and arrest warrants were issued,<sup>64</sup> particularly against Boubou Cissé and Karim Keita, who are currently in exile in Côte d'Ivoire. Given the recent case of 49 Ivorian soldiers – a number that was soon reduced to 46 – being incarcerated in Bamako,<sup>65</sup> Mali is now in a position to use the extradition of Ivorian soldiers as a bargaining chip.

## Mali's strategic shift

France's perceived lack of legitimacy in the fight against terrorism has been utilized by Mali's elites. In fact, the latter played both sides in an effort to secure political funding. The narrative surrounding the war on terror has created disproportionate expectations on the ground. Malian citizens are exasperated by the deteriorating security situation, thereby fueling resentment towards France and opening the public up to alternatives put forth by other players. The military transitional government is not only making a strategic gamble; its stance is also a political gamble founded upon this heart-felt resentment, which – after ten years of interventions in the Sahel region – is undeniably high in Mali and in the Sahel. In recent months, provisional Prime Minister Colonel Abdoulaye Maïga and the Malian diplomatic world have unremittingly brought up this topic, repeatedly using the term "French junta" at the United Nations and multiplying their defamatory accusations against France.

In the Sahel region, resentment against France is not only linked to the security situation's continuous deterioration over the past decade, but also to the specificities of France's relationship with its former colonies, be it politically, socially or militarily. These sensitive issues have

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61. Interview (notes), Specialist from the security sector, Bamako, August 25, 2021.

62. Interview (notes), Gendarmerie Colonel, August 23, 2021.

63. *Jeune Afrique*, "[Mali: le chérif de Nioro, faiseur de présidents](#)" [Mali: The Sheriff of Nioro, maker of presidents], June 8, 2022.

64. *Jeune Afrique*, "[Mali: discrétion, exil ou détention... Que deviennent les caciques de l'ère IBK?](#)" [Mali: Discretion, exile or detention... What happens to the overlords of the IBK era?], August 30, 2022.

65. *Le Monde* and AFP, "[La Côte d'Ivoire dénonce une "prise d'otage" de ses soldats par le Mali](#)" [Côte d'Ivoire decries its soldiers being "taken hostage" by Mali], September 12, 2022.

permeated Sahelian countries for several years,<sup>66</sup> as previously illustrated in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>67</sup> Sahelian countries – especially their educated middle classes – have noted, for example, the near disappearance of French technical assistance in Africa since the 1980s and 1990s. Softer forms of assistance, particularly in the fields of culture and higher education, have also nearly disappeared. In addition, younger generations are highly resentful towards the tightening of migration policies in West Africa. What's more, the end of the Cold War exposed the dilemma of either protecting political regimes perceived as friendly or committing to the spreading of democratic values in Africa.<sup>68</sup> These days in Bamako, this ambiguity is jokingly illustrated by saying that in the Sahel, there are “*halal*” (licit) putschists like Mahamat Idriss Déby in Chad, and “*haram*” (illicit) putschists like Assimi Goïta in Mali.

In 2021, our interviews revealed that there were debates within the Malian army regarding France's presence. Some saw it as necessary to lead the fight against jihadist insurgent groups. Others saw France's presence as being no longer necessary – an increasingly widespread opinion after ten years of failed attempts, as well as being due to other ideological tenets. A third, more pragmatic group was in favor of the reconfiguration of Operation Barkhane announced in 2021. Thus, in August 2021, right before the acceleration of the diplomatic crisis that led to Barkhane's departure, a Malian Colonel stated: “Barkhane being toned down is a very good thing. The results are mixed. We don't need many men. We need to be light on the ground. [...] We need agility, air power and intelligence when it comes to our strikes.”<sup>69</sup>

Many observers with an eye on Malian politics have pointed out a sheer decrease in the social acceptance of France's intervention: “Some people think that it will leave a big void, others say that our partnering forces weren't of much use anyway [...]. Many think that Mali must take its destiny into its own hands.”<sup>70</sup> Others saw Barkhane's rejection as an opportunity for the military to review the nation's core anti-terrorism strategy: “Barkhane's departure and the failure of the military approach are an opportunity.”<sup>71</sup>

Opinion polls<sup>72</sup> show the rapid decline in the nation's opinion of France's intervention in Mali: in February 2013, “the French military intervention for the liberation of northern Mali” received 97% favorable opinions,<sup>73</sup> compared to 56% in 2014 for “Operations Serval and Barkhane to secure the northern regions”;<sup>74</sup> at the end of 2019, 79.3% of individuals did

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66. Rahmane Idrissa, “[Du sentiment antifrçais au Sahel](#)” [On the Sahel's anti-French sentiment], *La Gazette perpendiculaire*, November 22, 2021.

67. Richard Banégas, “Côte d'Ivoire: les jeunes “se lèvent en hommes”. Anticolonialisme et ultranationalisme chez les Jeunes patriotes d'Abidjan” [Côte d'Ivoire: The youth “rises up as men”. Anticolonialism and ultranationalism among Abidjan's Young Patriots], *Les études du CERI*, No. 137, 2007; Bruno Charbonneau, “The Imperial Legacy of International Peacebuilding: The Case of Francophone Africa”, *Review of International Studies*, 40:3, 2014, p. 607-630.

68. Laurent Bansept and Élie Tenenbaum, “[Après Barkhane: repenser la posture stratégique française en Afrique de l'Ouest](#)” [After Barkhane: Rethinking France's strategic approach in West Africa], Strategic analysis No. 109, IFRI, May 2022.

69. Interview (notes), Malian Army Colonel, August 30, 2021.

70. Interview (notes), Head of a human rights organization, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

71. Ibid.

72. Mali-Mètre surveys have been criticized for being exclusively conducted in Mali's regional capitals, which may lead to an imbalance between urban and rural opinions.

73. Fondation Friedrich-Ebert, “[Enquête d'opinion “Que pensent les Maliens?”](#)” [Opinion Survey: “What are the Malians' thoughts?”], Bamako, Mali-Mètre No. 2, 2013, p. 27.

74. Fondation Friedrich-Ebert, “[Enquête d'opinion “Que pensent les Maliens?”](#)” [Opinion Survey: “What are the Malians' thoughts?”], Bamako, Mali-Mètre No. 5, 2014, p. 49.

not have “confidence in Barkhane’s ability to fight terrorism.”<sup>75</sup> In this final poll, the main criticism regarding France’s intervention was that the French were “complicit with armed groups.”<sup>76</sup> Results vary depending on the area, but this decline in support is widespread. Decisions concerning the nation’s “strategic shift” (Barkhane’s withdrawal and the arrival of Russian PMC Wagner) seem to be popular overall, though results also vary depending on the region: in April 2022, 52% of Malians felt that the withdrawal of Operation Barkhane would have a positive effect on their region’s security.<sup>77</sup>

The “informational practices” carried out – particularly by Russia – against France’s military presence in Africa sought to capitalize on these years of resentment. Whilst negotiations took place between the military transitional government and Russian players in order to strengthen their strategic partnership and ultimately allow the arrival of PMC Wagner, an informational strategy was set up by what is known as the “Prigozhin galaxy”, named after Yevgeny Prigozhin, “sponsor of the Wagner group and a key player in Russia’s African policy.”<sup>78</sup> This strategy includes distributing and relaying disinformation online, while legitimizing Russian players and denigrating France’s presence.

According to Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, “influence entrepreneurs” harness vast online networks (online activists, bloggers and even online newspapers like MaliJet) to construct “strategic narratives”, thereby replicating the tactics used in the Central African Republic.<sup>79</sup> They are also reaching out to pro-transition “civil society groups”<sup>80</sup> such as *Yérèwolo*. This informational content is then relayed by Malians supporting the transitional government’s strategic choices, as well as through disinformation activities, i.e. “informational attacks”. This is particularly true of the extreme affair that arose in Gossi in April 2022.<sup>81</sup>

Amid the public’s distrust towards external intervention (and the sharp decline in support for MINUSMA over the years), Russian security companies readily responded to the nation’s demand for a Malian military transition. By handing power over to a figure that mainly proved hostile towards Mali’s partnership with France, the “coup within the coup” of May 24, 2021, exacerbated preexisting tensions between the military junta and the former colonial power. France’s decision to condemn the second coup while supporting the “dynastic” military transition in Chad, followed by the announcement of Operation Barkhane’s reconfiguration in June 2021, also sparked a diplomatic crisis. Meanwhile, the transitional government repeatedly stoked the flames. The situation definitively escalated in late 2021, with Mali’s decision to bring in Russian PMC Wagner. This led the French

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75. Fondation Friedrich-Ebert, “[Enquête d’opinion “Que pensent les Maliens?”](#)” [Opinion Survey: “What are the Malians’ thoughts?”], Bamako, Mali-Mètre No. 11, 2020, p. 65.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

77. Fondation Friedrich-Ebert, “[Enquête d’opinion “Que pensent les Maliens?”](#)” [Opinion Survey: “What are the Malians’ thoughts?”], Bamako, Mali-Mètre No. 13, 2022, p. 4.

78. Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, “[La Russie au Mali: une présence bicéphale](#)” [*A foreign policy by proxies? The two side of Russia’s presence in Mali*], p. 2.

79. Maxime Audinet, “[Le Lion, l’Ours et les Hyènes: Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l’influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone](#)” [*The Lion, the Bear and the Hyenas: Players, Practices and Narratives of Russia’s Informational Influence in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa*], Report No. 83, IRSEM, 2021.

80. Interview (notes), Gendarmerie Colonel, August 23, 2021.

81. *Jeune Afrique*, “[Mali: à Gossi, la France accuse Wagner “d’attaque informationnelle”](#)” [Mali: In Gossi, France accuses Wagner of conducting an “informational attack”], April 22, 2022.

military and its partners involved in the fight against armed jihadist groups to withdraw from Mali on 17 February 2022.

## THE ESCALATION OF THE RULE OF VIOLENCE AND THE QUESTION OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Terrorism and counter-terrorism play a fundamental role in maintaining the rule and economies of violence in a seemingly endless downward spiral. The “war on terror” in the Sahel has had lasting effects. In this context of escalation, the Malian transitional government has secured Russian support via PMC Wagner, which is currently upholding the government’s martial approach. This raises questions regarding the sustainability of Mali’s socio-political trajectory and the nation’s will to resolve conflicts.

### The escalation of the rule of violence

The Malian national armies’ counterinsurgency practices and the “militianization of the war on terror”<sup>82</sup> constitute a profound source of insecurity among civilians. In recent years, law enforcement (military and police) in Sahelian States has been responsible for an increasing number of civilian casualties in Mali,<sup>83</sup> Burkina Faso,<sup>84</sup> Niger<sup>85</sup> and northern Nigeria.<sup>86</sup> This counterinsurgency approach thereby contributes to armed forces being built up for the purpose of occupation.

This situation has been playing out for years, particularly in central Mali, an area in which IBK’s regime wanted little to no intervention by France’s Operation Barkhane: “The military does not stay for long; when it leaves, locals will take revenge, like they did in Assongo.”<sup>87</sup> When the military abuses its power, the justice system fails to make major moves. The same goes for the country’s legal approach to tackling terrorism: “When the State advances on armed groups, it cannot go too far, because otherwise it would have to address the military [...]. Joining armed groups is also a way for locals to take revenge for the lack of justice following the military’s wrongdoings.”<sup>88</sup>

Meanwhile, armed jihadist groups are becoming increasingly violent: “So far, in 2022, deaths due to militant Islamist violence are already higher than ever before and are expected

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82. Tanguy Quidelleur, “Les dividendes de “la guerre contre le terrorisme”: milicianization, États et interventions internationales au Mali et au Burkina Faso” [Dividends from “the war on terror”: Milicianization, States and international intervention in Mali and Burkina Faso], *Cultures & Conflits*, 125:1, 2022, p. 115-138.

83. @J\_LuengoCabrera, “[Mali: civilian fatalities by attributed perpetrator](#)”, Twitter, January 26, 2021.

84. @J\_LuengoCabrera. “[Burkina Faso: civilian fatalities by attributed perpetrator](#)”, Twitter, January 26, 2021.

85. @J\_LuengoCabrera, “[Niger: civilian fatalities by attributed perpetrator](#)”, Twitter, January 26, 2021.

86. Amnesty International, *Stars on their shoulders. Blood on their hands. War crimes committed by the Nigerian military*, 2015.

87. Interview (notes), Manager of the Peace and Conflict NGO, Bamako, August 26, 2021.

88. Interview (notes), Head of a human rights organization, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

to increase by nearly 150% compared to 2021.<sup>89</sup> Attacks by groups in southern Mali, close to the nation's capital, are also reaching unprecedented numbers. Recent attacks on Kati military base, near Bamako, in August 2022 by the Macina Liberation Front (a member of the *Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin*, or JNIM Coalition) illustrated the group's potential for causing serious harm.

Under the military transitional government, the spiral continues to build, with violence against civilians and numbers of displaced citizens reaching unprecedented levels in 2021 and 2022.<sup>90</sup> Charles Grémont showed how groups and individuals in the Ménaka region of northern Mali, near the border with Niger, have coped with this context of insecurity: "First and foremost, people are seeking to protect themselves, to survive in a climate of widespread and often unpredictable violence."<sup>91</sup> This situation has led "new kinds of violence" to emerge between groups and individuals, built upon age-old disagreements: this was the case during the conflict between Dawsahaq and Fulani herders, in a context of ever-increasing pressure on the nation's pastoral land. Though these types of tension were already present before the conflict in 2012,<sup>92</sup> they have since been exacerbated by the rule of violence established during the conflict.

Thus, the "war on terror" in the Sahel has produced long-lasting effects. International and (trans)national players play an important role in upholding the rule of violence that "normalize the use of force on the basis of claims about its necessity for the possibility of politics",<sup>93</sup> while prioritizing military responses to multifaceted crises. On the political front, the state of affairs in the Sahel eventually gave rise to the military coups in Mali and Burkina Faso. In West Africa, since the end of the Cold War, there has been an overall increase in mutinies. What's more, the military still plays an essential role in politics, despite the presence of multiparty systems.<sup>94</sup> Senior officers, who attended top American or French military schools, use well-equipped and trained units to carry out political coups, as we have seen in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea in recent years.

## A martial approach

For many years now, Malian elites – supported by part of the public – have been more than willing to quell various crises (in northern Mali, in the tri-border area and in central Mali) through violence, i.e. by offering a purely martial response. Elites regularly requested that Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA take on a more offensive approach to fighting

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89. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "[Mali's Militant Islamist Insurgency at Bamako's Doorstep](#)", Infographic, August 29, 2021.

90. @J\_LuengoCabrera, "[Mali: violence against civilians & internally displaced persons](#)", Twitter, August 25, 2022.

91. Charles Grémont, "Dans le piège des offres de violence. Concurrences, protections et représailles dans la région de Ménaka (Nord-Mali, 2000-2018)" [Trapped in the rule of violence: Competition, protection and retaliation in the Ménaka region (northern Mali, 2000-2018)], *Hérodote*, No. 172, 2019, p. 47.

92. Marie Derrider, *Élites, élections et transformations du politique au Mali* [Elites, Elections and Political Shifts in Mali].

93. Bruno Charbonneau, "Counter-insurgency governance in the Sahel", *International Affairs*, No. 97, 2021, p. 1812.

94. Maggie Dwyer, *Soldiers in Revolt: Army Mutinies in Africa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.

armed groups. The Malian army's discourse regarding its own "increase in power" constituted one of the military government's main narratives. Armed groups remain in charge in certain areas, particularly General Gamou's *Groupe Autodéfense Touareg Imghad et Alliés* (Imghad Tuareg and Allies Self-Defense Group, or GATIA). In the highly compromised region of Ménaka, in the context of the departure of Operation Barkhane, armed groups from *la Plateforme*<sup>95</sup> (the Platform, a group of pro-government militias) are being mobilized. Meanwhile, the *Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad* (Coordination of Movements in Azawad, or CMA) also appears to be mobilizing in the area.

For Mali's ruling elite, counterinsurgency support through Wagner is particularly enticing, as it merely requires monetary compensation. This situation also arose in other conflicts (e.g. the Central African Republic). In the spring of 2022, the Wagner group already had over 1,000 soldiers on the ground in Mali. Wagner's primary mission is to conduct joint interventions with the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) against the Macina Liberation Front (or *Katiba Macina*) in the center of the country, an area in which jihadist insurgencies and a cycle of violence perpetrated by militias have raged for several years. So far, the FAMA/Wagner partnership has heightened the tensions among local communities, due to these joint operations specifically targeting communities such as the Fulani. This approach leads to higher recruitment rates among armed jihadist groups and increases the population's mistrust toward Malian authorities. Since it began operating in Mali, the Wagner group appears to have made "efforts in terms of tact"<sup>96</sup> compared to its previous interventions. Mali and Russia have only officially acknowledged the presence of "Russian instructors". Meanwhile, the details of Wagner's Malian funding remain opaque.<sup>97</sup>

The Moura massacre<sup>98</sup> caused 300 deaths, making it the partnership's bloodiest campaign to date in central Mali. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) reports "nearly 500 civilian casualties from these attacks", while "71% of all instances of political violence involving the Wagner group in Mali have resulted in violence against civilians."<sup>99</sup> Reports and investigations regarding abuse, torture, looting and, more recently, sexual violence against civilians<sup>100</sup> abound. Nevertheless, the transitional authorities do not regard these misdeeds as anomalous, but as legitimate acts of repression against their enemies. Part of the public supports these methods, yet this opinion varies depending on the community; many villages in the center of the country are afraid of becoming the next "Moura". Representatives from these villages and other communities in Bamako are currently trying to get their voices heard by the transitional government.

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95. RFI, "[Au Mali, Ménaka se prépare au prochain assaut terroriste de l'EIGS](#)" [In Mali, Ménaka is preparing for the next EIGS terrorist assault], October 4, 2022.

96. Maxime Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, *La Russie au Mali: une présence bicéphale [A foreign policy by proxies? The two sides of Russia's presence in Mali]*, p. 15.

97. Ibid., p. 16; *Jeune Afrique*, "[Mali: comment Wagner compte faire main basse sur des mines d'or](#)" [Mali: How Wagner plans to get its hands on gold mines], September 7, 2022.

98. Human Rights Watch, "[Mali: Massacre perpétré par l'armée et des soldats étrangers](#)" [Mali: Bloodbath perpetrated by the army and foreign soldiers], April 5, 2022.

99. ACLED, "Les opérations du groupe Wagner en Afrique" [The Wagner Group's operations in Africa], August 30, 2022.

100. *Jeune Afrique*, "[Mali: à Nia Ouro, les hommes de Wagner "ont arraché les pagennes des femmes et les ont violées"](#)" [Mali: In Nia Ouro, Wagner's men "tore off women's loincloths and raped them"], September 8, 2022.

## Mali's socio-political order and conflict resolution

This critical escalation of violence helps mask the nation's lack of progress in terms of long-lasting conflict resolution. According to our interviewees, there are many challenges. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) process in northern and central Mali is making little to no progress: "the delay in the DDR process is the main reason the security situation is deteriorating";<sup>101</sup> "DDR is important, but weapons are circulating; that's the main problem."<sup>102</sup> In northern Mali, a member of the CMA reported that the "operational coordination mechanism is not making any progress", that there is no consensus regarding target quotas for the signatories of the Algiers Agreement and that the troops aren't recruiting. This goes to show the lack of political will.<sup>103</sup> In Mopti, in the center of the country, the special DDR process is not moving forward either: "Signatory groups are complaining that the DDR process is slow and costly. Candidates want to join the army, but have no interest in social reintegration. There are identification problems; people buy weapons to obtain the status of ex-combatants under false pretenses."<sup>104</sup>

In the security sector, the *Plan de sécurisation intégrée des régions du centre* (Security plan for the central region, or PSIRC) is reported to have difficulties moving forward due to tensions between the military and the police.<sup>105</sup> The fight against impunity was cited as being a recurring problem, one that leads to a significant lack of trust between the armed forces and the population. Some people feel that security indicators themselves need to change: "It should be the number of open schools, access to fairs (markets) and agricultural fields."<sup>106</sup> Others pointed out that elections won't do much good: "Before holding elections, we need to renegotiate with local communities regarding the State's role. This should include a mechanism for dialogue at the local level to understand how communities perceive the State."<sup>107</sup>

One of the most pressing – and deeply rooted – issues is possibly the current rise in tension in northern Mali. Politically, the Algiers Agreement – signed under international pressure – are not being fulfilled. The lack of results from the DDR process and development projects in the North, as well as disagreements on how to organize the security sector in this region, illustrate deep differences: "To us, the FAMa is like an enemy army; they treat us like jihadists [...]. Therefore, we want a reformed army, with local people."<sup>108</sup> Relations between the CMA and the JNIM are ambiguous – "neither peace nor war"<sup>109</sup> – but there is still fear that the JNIM will regain strength and re-impose its rule over Kidal, the political center of northern Mali. These imbalances became accentuated following the departure of Operation Barkhane, which acted as a counterweight to JNIM in the region. The current

101. Interview (notes), Police Commissioner, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

102. Interview (notes), Malian army colonel, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

103. Interview (notes), CMA Leader No. 1, Bamako, September 1, 2021.

104. Interview (notes), Conflict resolution NGO Leader, August 27, 2021.

105. Interview (notes), Peace and Conflict NGO Manager, Bamako, August 26, 2021.

106. Interview (notes), Head of a human rights organization, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

107. Interview (notes), Head of a development NGO, Bamako, August 25, 2021.

108. Interview (notes), CMA Leader No. 1, Bamako, September 1, 2021.

109. Interview (notes), CMA Leader No. 2, Bamako, September 2, 2021.

advance of the État islamique dans le Grand Sahara (Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, or EIGS) may also lead to greater imbalance.

Jihadist insurgencies in Mali raise the issue of emerging political orders that can compete with the State in the long run.<sup>110</sup> Since the jihadist's military defeat during the recapture of Malian territory by Operation Serval, these insurgencies have mainly been rural. Networks of decentralized battalions (*katiba*) report to a central authority via local leaders, the "*markaz* chiefs". The latter collect the *zakat* – the Islamic tax – and conduct justice with the help of Islamic judges, the *qadis*.<sup>111</sup> The emergence of these political structures does not necessarily mean that such groups are seeking to build a State: "These groups aren't necessarily working towards permanent territorial control, as this would entail certain costs, but rather towards obtaining social control over targeted populations."<sup>112</sup> However, the possibility of permanent territorial control cannot be ruled out.

These players maneuver at the intersection between their own religious doctrine and popular demand on the ground; they thereby propose a locally adapted political alternative to the State.<sup>113</sup> Among certain communities, these "entrepreneurs of violence" are sometimes perceived as being more effective than national or international players. This is namely the case in Tillabéri, Niger, due to the "violent rejection of a dysfunctional, distant, weak and often coercive mode of State governance."<sup>114</sup> However, these modes of government remain sporadic and primarily rely on the coercion of civilians, who are forced to renegotiate their social position on a daily basis.

"Negotiations" with jihadist insurgencies has been a recurring subject in Mali for several years now. Yet the ramifications of this topic extend beyond the mere political or moral issues of having "secular" State players negotiate with "jihadists". First of all, past negotiations in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have underscored the importance – and so far, the absence, except perhaps in Niger – of a working national strategy to strike up a dialogue with these groups. Overall, local negotiations – inspired by "peace from below" peace-building policies – have not yet been successful, as Alexander Thurston has pointed out.

In terms of social acceptance, negotiating with jihadists creates debates and ambiguities among Malians: "The idea of *Shari'a* law being implemented, even at the local level, is criticized because we are in a secular country [...]. Yet demands for change could be heeded, like calls to re-organize the justice system."<sup>115</sup> Thus, *shari'a* is "not a fixed object to which Muslims relate, but rather a discursive field that is objectified and utilized."<sup>116</sup>

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110. Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, "Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel: A Hybrid Political Order in the Making", *The International Spectator*, 55:4, 2020, p. 1-17; Georg Klute, "Postface: Emerging Orders in the Sahel?", *The International Spectator*, 55:4, 2020, p. 133-136.

111. Natasja Rupesinghe, Mikael Hibernag Naghizadeh and Corentin Cohen, "[Reviewing Jihadist Governance in the Sahel](#)", Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Working paper, 894, 2021.

112. Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, "Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel", p. 13.

113. Alexander Thurston, *Jihadists of North Africa and the Sahel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

114. Morten Bøås, Abdoul Wakhab Cissé and Laouali Mahamane, "Explaining Violence in Tillabéri: Insurgent Appropriation of Local Grievances?", *The International Spectator*, 55:4, 2020, p. 130.

115. Interview (notes), Malian Army Commander, Bamako, August 30, 2021.

116. Alexander Thurston, "Illiberalism and post-conflict settlements with jihadists: a Malian case study", *Third World Quarterly*, 43:10, 2022, p. 2405.

In a scenario where no single player is able to set up a stable socio-political order, Malian elites, international players and jihadists may be brought to seek “[...] imperfect compromises, with politico-religious figures playing a growing role.”<sup>117</sup> In essence, such negotiations may pose existential questions regarding the future of democratization and political liberalism in the Sahel: “what if local voices care more about reducing violence than about liberalism as an end-state? What if ‘civil society’ and ‘extremists’ agree on the political salience of ethnicity and on the broad aim of Islamising State and society (further)?”<sup>118</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The post-colonial model of government was unable to reinvent itself despite democratization, particularly as Mali’s rural and urban environments underwent social transformations. Thus, the sheer exhaustion of the Malian political system paved the way for a new project, the *Mali Kura*. The latter led to a discourse marked by profound State reform, a martial approach to tackle multidimensional conflicts and the concept of electoral democracy being questioned and replaced by a mode of government based on self-proclaimed efficiency. Popular support for the transitional government’s war-waging *Mali Fanga* narrative explains the nature of the nation’s response to the Malian crises. Yet this approach merely resulted in a headlong authoritarian rush, with an escalation of the rule and economies of violence. This led also to skepticism toward international interventions and past strategic partnerships.

It is still too early to know whether the military will accept to take on the role of mere “arbitrator” of the political game – by holding elections and allowing the return of a civilian government – or whether it will strive to become the nation’s long-term leader. Everything seems to point to the military securing a significant political position in the long run, whether or not the electoral calendar and laws are implemented in coming years. However, the army is deeply entrenched in simultaneous security challenges in central, northern and now southern Mali. Despite the military having acquired an inordinate share of the State’s budget, the army’s long-term popularity remains questionable.

Mali’s recent strategic choices are likely to continue to exacerbate the rule and economies of violence that have plagued the Sahel for the past decade. What’s more, Russian military support in Mali may also increase in coming months. Nevertheless, this strategic gamble is undermined by the war in Ukraine, which creates a great deal of uncertainty. In Sahelian countries, Russian players are implementing a narrative that portrays them as agents of change, while seducing the ruling elites with “counterinsurgency solutions” that require nothing more than monetary compensation. This leads to immediate symbolic and strategic gains for these Russian players.

The Russian narrative is simple, yet effective, as many Malians do not understand the rationale underlying the presence of international players such as France or MINUSMA.

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117. Morten Bøås and Francesco Stazzari, “Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel”, p. 14.

118. Alexander Thurston, “Illiberalism and post-conflict settlements with jihadists”, p. 2404.

Thus, Malians generally consider the latter as being useless at best or, at worst, as having come only to serve their own interests, thereby giving rise to all sorts of fantasies. The majority of Malian citizens does not believe, or no longer believes, international narratives that promote democracy and the return of the State.

The military transitional government's political trajectory relies upon denying the failure of military-centric approaches, which leads to an escalation of violence. Thus, existential questions regarding post-colonial mode of government remain unanswered. Beyond Mali's politico-religious issues, certain regions of Mali and the Sahel are subjected to reinforced heterarchical social orders and a weakened State structure.<sup>119</sup> These political configurations built on interdependent relationships are – once again – becoming a defining part of Mali's government and power structure.<sup>120</sup>

In a scenario where no single player is able to set up a stable socio-political order, through violence and/or negotiations, this situation may heighten the contrast between urban centers and rural areas, as well as lead entire regions of Mali to grow more distant from the State.

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119. Morten Bøås and Francesco Strazzari, "Governance, Fragility and Insurgency in the Sahel", p. 14.

120. Norbert Elias, *Qu'est-ce que la sociologie? [What is sociology?]*, La Tour-d'Aigues, Éd. de l'Aube, 1993, p. 159.