

Mali's struggle: not simply of their own making

Mali serves as yet another reminder of both the power of strategic nonviolent action and the consequences of foreign powers seeking to impose military solutions on complex political problems.

In examining the political crises which have gripped Mali in recent months, it is important not to fall into simplistic analyses of dysfunctional or “failed” African states. Indeed, the Malian people have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to mobilize civil society and build stable democratic governance despite a history of enormous poverty, ethnic divisions, and foreign intervention.

In 1991, more than two decades prior to similar pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Malians engaged in a massive nonviolent resistance campaign that brought down the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré. A broad mobilization of trade unionists, peasants, students, teachers, and others – supported by griots (traditional singing storytellers) who would sing allegorical songs regarding historical freedom struggles – created a mass movement throughout the country. Despite the absence of Facebook or the Internet, virtually no international media coverage, and the massacre of hundreds of peaceful protesters, this popular civil insurrection succeeded not only in ousting a repressive and corrupt regime, but ushered in more than two decades of democratic rule.

Despite corruption, poverty, and a weak infrastructure, Mali was widely considered to be the most stable and democratic country in West Africa. In order to educate and promote the rights and duties of its citizens, the government implemented a program called the “Decentralization Mission” in 1993 to encourage popular participation in local and regional elections. Independent radio stations and newspapers emerged and the country experienced lively and open political debate.

The events surrounding the nonviolent revolution of 1991 were regularly commemorated, with the anniversary of the March 26 massacre a national holiday. A series of monuments in the capital of Bamako also commemorate the pro-democracy struggle.

In the years since the 1991 revolution, even contentious politics was expressed largely nonviolently. There were several periods of student-led protests in the 1990s against high unemployment and other negative effects of structural adjustment programmes imposed by international financial institutions, contributing to the fall of one government through a ‘no confidence’ vote in parliament. The tradition of nonviolent resistance against authoritarianism came to the fore in 2001 when a proposed constitutional referendum put forward by President Alpha Oumar Konare was called off after a series of protests by those fearing it would have threatened the country’s independent judiciary and effectively make the president immune to prosecution. Additional protests against neo-liberal economic policies erupted in 2005. Hundreds peacefully demonstrated against the 2006 visit by then-French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy in protest at his tough policies against immigrants. That same year, Mali hosted the World Social Forum, a mass gathering of thousands of activists from hundreds of civil society organizations.

A number of studies have demonstrated how dictatorships overthrown through largely nonviolent civil insurrections are far more likely to evolve into stable democracies than dictatorships ousted through armed revolution or foreign intervention. Mali appeared to be a prime example of this phenomenon.

Indeed, soon after the March Revolution of 1991, the Malian government negotiated a peace agreement with armed Tuareg rebels in which they agreed to end their rebellion in return for a degree of autonomy. In March 1996, there was a massive ceremonial burning of the rebels' surrendered weapons in Bamako.

So, what led to the coup d'état and secessionist crisis?

Unlike the positive contagion from Tunisia's nonviolent insurrection, neighbouring Libya's armed insurrection appears to have launched a far more negative trend. Indeed, a major reason for the African Union's opposition to the NATO-led war in Libya was out of concern for the risk of spreading instability to neighbouring Africa countries.

When last year's initially nonviolent uprising in Libya against the Gaddafi regime turned to armed struggle, resulting in even greater government repression and thereby prompting NATO intervention, disparate armed groups—including Tuareg tribesmen—ended up liberating major stores of armaments. These vast caches of weapons were passed on to Tuaregs in Mali who, now having the means to effectively challenge the Malian government militarily, resumed their long-dormant rebellion under the leadership of National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).

Charging that the civilian government was not being tough enough against the rebels, US-trained Army Captain Amadou Sanogo and other officers staged a coup on March 22 and called for US intervention along the lines of Afghanistan and the "war on terror."

Sanogo's training in the United States is just one small part of a decade of US training of armies in the Sahel, increasing the militarization of this impoverished region and the influence of armed forces relative to civilian leaders. [Gregory Mann](#), writing in *Foreign Policy*, notes how "a decade of American investment in special forces training, co-operation between Sahalien armies and the United States and counter-terrorism programmes of all sorts run by both the State Department and the Pentagon has, at best, failed to prevent a new disaster in the desert and, at worst, sowed its seeds."

Rather than responding violently to the coup, thousands of Malians in Bamako and elsewhere took to the streets demanding a return to democracy, members of the deposed civilian cabinet went on a hunger strike, and many civil servants and others refused to cooperate with the military regime. Meanwhile, both western and African countries imposed sanctions against the illegitimate government.

Most problematically, however, Tuareg rebels, taking advantage of the political divisions in the capital, consolidated their hold on the northern part of the country by capturing its remaining towns and declaring an independent state. The MNLA's victories also led various Islamist militias, including extremists allied with Al-Qaeda, to seize a number of towns and impose their rigid ideological agenda.

The combination of internal and external pressures led Sanogo to agree to step down and allow for the restoration of a civilian government in early April. The deposed president, Amadou Toumani Touré, who had become increasingly unpopular and whose term was set to expire in a few months, had agreed to step aside in favour of National Assembly president Dioncounda Traoré. Despite formally handing over power on April 12, however, the junta continued to arrest opponents and still wields considerable influence. Scattered fighting between rival armed forces erupted in the capital last week. Meanwhile, extremist Islamic militias in the north, taking advantage of the country's chaos, have reportedly been destroying historic shrines and other cultural landmarks they consider idolatrous in Timbuktu and other northern cities.

The question now is whether the Malians can build upon their rich history of democratic governance and nonviolent resistance to regain their country's once admired stability and freedom or whether the recent tragic events, fomented in part by misguided western policies, will be too serious from which to easily recover. In any case, Mali serves as yet another reminder of both the power of strategic nonviolent action and the consequences of foreign powers seeking to impose military solutions to complex political problems.