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Mali update

Since we last went to a press the crisis in Mali has intensified dramatically. With Bamako, the capital, in the grip of political paralysis and the vast northern region under the uncontested control of an Islamist insurgency, the prospects for the third-largest country in Africa returning to political normalcy appear more remote than ever.

1. The one seemingly bright spot on this dismal canvas was the Junta's acceptance, on May 20^h, of the 12-month duration¹ mandated by ECOWAS for the caretaker government headed by interim President Dionkunda Traoré. But this acquiescence came at the price of significant concessions to the Junta², in particular the guarantee of immunity from prosecution extended for "all acts" committed in connection with the March 22nd *coup d'état*.³

2. Worse, almost immediately after this "break-through" – i.e. on May 21st – the capital was paralyzed by *a wave of demonstrations against the extension of the caretaker government's term⁴ to 12 months*. In the day's most serious incident⁵ a mob overran the palace⁶ and proceeded to ransack the office of the President.

Knocked unconscious in the fracas, Traoré was hospitalized over night then spirited off to a 'safe house' from where he was flown to Paris 'for further tests'. Two weeks later he remains in the French capital – "resting", by all accounts⁷.

3. The call for demonstrations had been issued by MP 22 and COPAM⁸ the two mass movements that sprang up in support of the March 22nd coup and thus would have been perceived as enjoying the implicit endorsement of the junta. Nevertheless video footage of the protesters broadcast by the BBC suggested an exercise in 'people power', with the streets of Bamako occupied by an animated crowd of men and women, whose age ranged from late teens to early sixties.

The protesters' singular focus appeared to be the *interim President* who was *denounced as a relic of the discredited ATT regime, under which he had served as the Speaker of the National Assembly*⁹.

¹ As will be recalled (*see Mali update, 05/04/12*), the Junta had insisted on the transition period being limited to the 40 days stipulated in the 1992 Constitution.

² In an obvious *quid pro quo* the relevant bill was approved by the National Assembly on May 19th, i.e. less than 24 hours before Capt. Sanogo endorsed the transition timetable.

³ At the same time the Assembly conferred on Capt. Sanogo the status of "former head of state" which *ipso facto* entitled him to a villa, security detail, two vehicles and a pension.

⁴ The constitutionally stipulated transition period of 40 days would have expired on May 22nd.

⁵ While a second group of demonstrators blocked one of the capital's three bridges over the Niger, a third proceeded to the Kati barracks where they attempted to present a petition calling upon Capt. Sanogo to assume office upon the expiration of the constitutionally mandated transition period. Sanogo declined to meet with them.

⁶ It remains unclear how the mob was able to surprise, let alone overwhelm the security detail at the hill-top Palace.

⁷ It is worth recalling that Traoré had actually offered to resign during the stand-off over the duration of the transition period.

⁸ Respectively, the Mouvement populaire du 22 (mars) and the Conseil d'organisations patriotiques du Mali.

⁹ i.e. the President's constitutional heir-apparent.

4. In other words, regardless of the junta's medium-term objectives, *a non-negligible segment of public opinion appears to oppose the center-piece of ECOWAS' diffident 'strategy'*. This is clearly a recipe for a protracted stalemate in the search for political normalization – itself a *sine qua non* for any attempt to bring the vast northern region back under the control of the government in Bamako.

5. During the two months since the Tuareg insurgency seized control of Northern Mali, *the region's isolation has become progressively more entrenched, as has its subjection to the islamist ideology championed by Ansar al Dine (AaD) and its allies AQIM and MUJAO*. Sharia has been declared the law of the land in Timbuktu and Gao and Kidal¹⁰ and on May 5th members of AaD destroyed the tomb of one of the 333 saints buried in Timbuktu¹¹ on the grounds that its veneration by local residents constituted idolatry. On May 15th a convoy delivering food and medicines from Bamako was held up outside the gates of Timbuktu because AaD objected to the inclusion of women in the municipal reception committee¹².

6. A month ago your correspondent warned that it was the islamist AaD that was increasingly calling the shots in the occupied North. Even though it had initially joined the Tuareg rebellion as a junior partner, AaD soon gained the upper hand over the avowedly secular MNLA which had actually launched the insurgency. This was largely because the former was by far the better armed and financed of the two movements - thanks in no small measure to the support of its natural ally, AQIM.

7. Three weeks ago *the MNLA, weakened by the steady defection of its fighters to the ranks of AaD and desperate to salvage some vestigial role in the Azawad territory entered unification talks with its islamist allies*. In spite of the apparently irreconcilable differences between the two groups¹³, an agreement in principle was announced in Gao on May 26th ¹⁴, with a formal communique due to be issued “shortly thereafter”. The definitive agreement still had not materialized 72 hours later¹⁵.

8. Finally on June 1st, in a belated *volte-face*, the MNLA repudiated the agreement-in-principle - ostensibly in response to strong grass-roots objections to the retreat from the movement's historically secular stance¹⁶.

¹⁰ Respectively, the capitals of the three administrative regions that make up northern Mali.

¹¹ Like the Buddhas at Bamiyan destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, UNESCO had classified each of the tombs as a World Heritage site.

¹² Another example of the scope of the islamist threat is the presence on the outskirts of Timbuktu of a military training camp with Pakistani instructors, to which local youths are lured by the promise of weekly stipends of up to CFA 2,000 (i.e. US\$3.85). Meanwhile AaD has imposed and vigorously enforced prohibitions against playing soccer, listening to music and even watching television throughout the region.

¹³ e.g. AaD's rejection of the secular Azawad entity favored by the MNLA in favor of an Islamic Republic, governed on the basis of sharia law and covering the whole of Mali.

¹⁴ It is a measure of Ecowas' political bankruptcy that the sub-regional organization publicly welcomed this announcement on the farcical grounds that this would make it easier to negotiate a settlement. See statement by Ecowas mediator Djibril Bassolé, reported by AFP in “*Les islamistes incontournables après la fusion de groupes armés dans le Nord*”, published May 27, 2012.

¹⁵ In the interim, however, a parallel meeting being held in Timbuktu between Ansar al Dine and AQIM⁷ concluded with an agreement formalizing the modalities of their cooperation⁸. This arrangement flew in the face of one of the MNLA's key demands in its negotiations with AaD, namely that the latter sever its ties with AQIM.

¹⁶ In an interview with Radio France International an unnamed MNLA official went so far as to admit that the merger with AaD had only been embarked upon in an attempt to prevent their youths from joining the islamists. See “*Le MNLA rejette la fusion avec les islamistes d'Ansar Dine*” published by RFI on June 1, 2012.

However a more likely explanation is that the dramatic decision was taken under pressure from *the governments of Mauritania and Algeria*, each of which *had looked with favor*¹⁷ *on the MNLA's occupation of the virtual terra nullius that was Mali's neglected northern region* – since this would deprive AQIM of its principal safe haven. A formal merger with AQIM's ally AaD would therefore have been deemed unacceptable by *both countries, which reportedly threatened to end their tacit cooperation with the movement and expel all MNLA officials*¹⁸.

9. As it seeks to regroup from this strategic blunder, the challenge for the MNLA, will clearly be to re-establish itself as a credible bulwark against the Islamist threat in the Sahara. While the movement has belatedly recognized which side of its bread is buttered its weak military position vis-à-vis its AaD - and even more so AQIM - means that it will have progressively less to offer its Algerian and Mauritanian patrons. *The movement's medium-term future is therefore very much in question*¹⁹.

10. Eleven weeks after Mali's coup, *the ship of state appears dangerously adrift*, with the civilian administration to which the Junta reluctantly handed over in early April assuming the role of bystander rather than governing authority. Having met only sporadically since it was sworn in, the Cabinet has embarked on no meaningful initiatives, much less addressed itself to the formidable challenge of reintegrating the secessionist North.

It will be recalled that *the caretaker government's raison d'être is to revise the electoral roll and organize the conduct of national elections*²⁰. Based on its performance to date there is nothing to suggest that the administration headed by Cheikh Modibo Diarra²¹ can accomplish this mission within the prescribed transition period - which sets the stage for a fresh constitutional crisis 10 months from now.

¹⁷ Not only is the MNLA's political bureau based in Nouakchott, as is most of its leadership, but it is reportedly able to count on the technical assistance of a group of Mauritanian military officers. Its injured fighters meanwhile are routinely evacuated to the Algerian border town of Tamanrasset for treatment.

¹⁸ See "MNLA-Ansar Eddine : Les raisons profondes du clash", in *L'Indépendant*, published on June 4, 2012.

¹⁹ It will be recalled that during the first half of April, MNLA played a key role in evacuating – to Algeria and Mauritania, as it happens - a number of Europeans who had found themselves stranded in northern Mali and were at obvious risk of being abducted and then traded to AQIM as hostages. The MNLA has enjoyed no such successes since then. In particular, its high-profile attempt to negotiate the release of the Algerian consular officials abducted by Islamists on April 4th collapsed in an embarrassing shambles.

²⁰ See Articles 5 & 6 of Framework agreement concluded on April 1, 2012 between the CNDRE (i.e. Junta) and the Ecowas Mediator.

²¹ i.e. The technocrat Prime Minister whose support in the National Assembly is reportedly ebbing fast.

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