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Position Paper

The Crisis in Mali: Coup and Secession Quandary

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Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-44663454
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
<http://studies.aljazeera.net>

According to their statements, Mali's military has executed a coup to ensure the unity of the country. What they have actually done is to have practically facilitated secession, as they now face immense internal and external pressures forcing them to hand over power to civilian authorities in the region. Now the country will face division from a position of weakness and what may have been considered a problem similar to those faced in the past, may end up changing the country for good.

The crisis in Mali: coup and secession quandary

Two major events occurred in the Republic of Mali in West Africa over the past two weeks that have drawn the country, as well as Africa's Sahel region, into a major crisis. The first of these events was the military coup carried out against the government of President Amadou Toumani Touré. The coup immobilised the constitutional institutions of the country, and subsequently did not receive any international recognition.

The second event was that the National Movement for the Liberation of Azwad (MNLA), along with three other jihadist movements (al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Ansar al-Din and the al-Jihad wa al-Tawhid Movement in West Africa), took control of the north of the country, especially the three main urban centers of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. After taking control, the MNLA announced that it had ceased operations, declaring the independence of the area as, in its words, the homeland of the Azwad people. This act of secession has also not been recognised by the international community.

In their statements, the military officers who carried out the coup have asserted that the coup was in protest against the country's political and military leaderships' betrayal in the fight against the MNLA. The officers claim that Touré's government did not provide enough arms and support for these battles with the rebels, while the leadership itself was endemically corrupt and ultimately unable to lead the military operations against the rebels.

The coup, however, has had an effect opposite to that asserted by those who carried it out. The coup has eliminated legitimate political leadership; split the military into a camp that supports the coup on the one hand and another that opposes it; and drained the energies of those who executed the coup who are now burdened with the task of securing their newly acquired authority. This has weakened the Malian troops fighting in the north, allowing the MNLA to seize the opportunity by taking control of the entire north of the country within three days, and almost without a fight.

Risks resulting from the crisis

The crisis has posed serious risks to the Republic of Mali, its neighboring African countries, and international players with influence in the region.

For the Republic of Mali, the main threat is that of the country being split into two states, as well as the possibility of the eruption of a civil war if the officers who executed the coup do not fulfill their pledge to hand over power to the head of the parliament and restore the primacy of the constitution.

As for neighboring African countries, the emergence of an Azwad state sets a very dangerous precedent; especially one that may be followed by the Tuareg in adjacent countries such as Algeria and Niger. Moreover, the participation of Jihadist movements alongside the Azwad movement, all of which call for the establishment of an Islamic state (the Ansar Movement setting its sights upon Mali alone, while al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the al-Jihad wa al-Tawhid Movement aiming to establish such a state throughout west Africa), may transform northern Mali into a center of jihadist activity for the entire Sahel and West Africa region. This centre is an immediate threat to countries and international interests in the region. This is particularly dangerous in that the area could potentially be used as a base from which to launch attacks beyond the region – in cooperation with jihadist movements in Africa and the rest of the world.

Likely scenarios

It seems that two main factors will play a determining role in the emergence of different resulting scenarios. The first of these is the return of the primacy of the constitution in Mali, and the second is the reunification of the country by ending the secession of areas under the MNLA's control. Both factors are interlinked, but the form that the solution will take will be determined by which factor, the return of the constitutional order or the termination of MNLA control in the north, will take priority. This in turn will be determined by the stakes represented by each option, the capabilities of the parties concerned, and therefore the desired solution.

The type of response to the risks posed by the situation, and possible outcomes are related to the parties' capabilities, namely: the coup leaders do not seem to be capable of bringing the north under their control, so they have called on international powers to attack the MNLA, accusing it of being a terrorist group allied with al Qaeda. As such, the new group in power recognises its inability to ensure the unity of the country. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is backed by the African Union, the UN Security Council, France and the United States. ECOWAS has indicated its intention to take military action to stop the advance of the MNLA towards the capital Bamako; a purely defensive position. On its own, ECOWAS does not seem to be in a position to attack the MNLA and reunify Mali.

The most powerful country among Mali's neighbors, Algeria, acts through the joint anti-terrorism force. This body, however, has not worked cooperatively since its inception, with Algeria being the main active party, and unilaterally so. Algeria opposes foreign intervention in Mali, particularly French intervention, and thereby refrains from interfering militarily itself. This has historically been Algeria's approach in dealing with the situation in northern Mali—for fear that a war would spread to its interior—preferring to mediate between the Malian government and the Azwad in search of a political solution that integrates Azwad into the Malian state. As for the jihadist movements, Algeria's strategy historically has not been one that has sought their elimination, but rather their containment so they would not expand towards the north of the country.

None of the parties to the crisis seem to have the intention of bringing about a military solution to resolve the secession issue for the time being. Moreover, they are unable to do so because the major powers, such as France and the U.S., reject such action for primarily domestic political reasons; promising nothing more than logistical support for African forces. ECOWAS forces cannot on their own confront the MNLA forces, for it has only pledged to mobilise about 2,000 soldiers, and would need Malian forces to achieve victory and take control of the situation afterwards. The Malian forces themselves need time to get reorganised and rearmed, and to boost morale amongst their troops. The priority for those who took power in the wake of the coup has not been the confrontation with the MNLA in the north, but rather solidifying control and authority first, to be followed by the transfer of power to civilian authorities in the current phase.

The military option to reincorporate the north of Mali requires Malian troops, and Mali's cooperation requires a solution to the problem of the coup. The focus, then, will be first to resolve this issue, not only to provide the political legitimacy of an internally and externally recognized government for military action, but also in order to reach a political solution to which a legitimate Malian government would be party - after ceasing MNLA control in the north of the country.

What strengthens this order of events, solving the problem of the coup first before setting out to end MNLA control, is that the MNLA has announced that it has halted its southward advance towards the capital Bamako. It has also begun to distance itself from the jihadist movements. Indeed, a possible scenario is an exchange between recognition of the MNLA, and the group severing its ties with its Islamist partners. The MNLA is a secular movement with objectives limited to political power within the borders of Mali, unlike the jihadist movements that want to change society and the state, whether in Mali or beyond. Disagreement between the MNLA and the jihadist groups is inevitable.

In conclusion, the priority will likely be an effort towards a political solution, as indicated by the coup-leaders' agreement to hand over power to the head of the parliament so that the country's political regime can be reorganised in a way that allows it to wage the battle ahead. At the same time, larger powers, such as the U.S., perhaps acting through Algeria, will pressure the MNLA to distance itself from jihadist movements in exchange for help in obtaining some form of self-government within Mali.

This arrangement will require a long period of time: for legitimacy to be restored to the political regime in Mali whilst pressure is placed on the MNLA to distance itself from jihadist movements. What is most likely is that the various political forces will come to an agreement with the coup leaders to form a unity government as a first step, with the postponement of presidential elections for two reasons:

1. Northern Mali is beyond the control of Bamako and will exclude northerners from the vote; and
2. Holding an election limited to the southern electorate would entrench the country's internal political division, rendering the elected president the leader of only a part of the country.

Also during this phase, the army will be reorganised after the defeat it suffered in the north and the fissures caused by the coup. Mali, however, will not be able to confront the separatists alone, and will need regional military and political support. The MNLA has become stronger than the Malian army, as evidenced by the MNLA's victories over Bamako's main forces after thousands of the MNLA fighters returned from Libya equipped with advanced weapons after the fall of Gaddafi. At the same time, however, the secession of northern Mali poses a danger to the unity of neighboring countries that, as a result, have a vested interest in Mali's reunification. Therefore, the interests of the countries in the region will converge on intervention in Mali to end the secession and to reach a political solution. This will not return the situation in Mali to what it was before, but will likely incorporate some form of self-government in the north because the balance of power has changed now that Azwad power has grown and taken control over the north of the country.

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