

The Conflict in Mali: Causes, Actors, and Challenges

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Introduction

The Republic of Mali is a landlocked country located in the heart of the Sahel region (occupying Western and North-Central Africa), formerly known as French Sudan until its independence in 1960. The country of 21 million is a resource-rich region with its economic reliance on the primary sector, i.e., agriculture and raw materials - particularly gold and cotton (CIA, 2025). Moreover, it is an ethnically diverse country, with the Bambara (33.3%), Fulani (13.3%), and Sarakole (9.8%) being the dominant racial groups (Open Doors International, 2023).

Since its independence, the once democratic West African nation, i.e., Mali, has been marred with conflict and instability. The fragile state has been plagued with conflict drivers such as poor governance and institutional breakdown, widespread insecurity, armed insurgencies, religious and social threat multipliers, geo-strategic factors, and climate hazards. Its precarious situation has been reflected in the Global Peace Index ranking 2024, which ranks it at 154 out of 163 countries, placing it among the most conflict-affected countries (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2024, p. 2). The GPI, a standard for measuring peacefulness, has indicated Mali's low ranking based on three benchmarks, i.e., the level of violence, conflict intensity, and the degree of militarization. Henceforth, the indicators determine that the Mali state has been paralyzed by the in-fighting of armed groups, state forces, and foreign mercenaries, particularly in the North and the Centre.

In this regard, historical precedence commits to the chain of violence witnessed in Mali today. In this regard, the first substantial insurgency by the Tuareg (northern separatist group) occurred during the 1960s under the regime of the dictatorial Mobudo Keita, who was later on ousted in 1968 in a military coup (Barabanova, 2024). The new President Moussa Traore's regime also witnessed significant shortfalls and was deposed after the 1991 Mali revolution. The establishment of democratic rule marked the subsequent decades of the 1990s and 2000s, which were reflected in two elections. Regardless, persistent discriminatory policies against the ethnic groups in the North led to one of the most significant insurgencies and a simultaneous coup in 2012

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organized by Amadou Sanogo (Chauzal & Van Damme, 2015, p. 30). During this time around, the Northern separatists were emboldened by the aid received from non-state actors, i.e., Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AKIM), thus forming an independent state of “Azawad” in the North. This alliance was short-lived as Al-Qaeda started outmaneuvering the rebels by gaining more ground in the North (Congressional Research Service, 2024, p. 02).

Meanwhile, to supplant the Islamist insurgent advance, the French forces were deployed in 2013 to pursue a counterterrorism strategy, followed by a UN-led Peacekeeping mission, i.e., MINUSMA, to help stabilize the country (Klobucista & Bussemaker, 2020). The Malian government, coerced by international pressure, signed an Algerian-mediated peace deal with the ex-separatist in 2015, aimed at addressing the Turaeg ethnic group’s grievances (political and economic) and reestablishing state writ in the Northern region (CFR, 2023). The agreement failed to fulfill the prerequisites, while the armed groups started to assert dominance in Central Mali. On the contrary, the political battleground was fraying due to the democratic backsliding witnessed by the two devastating military coups in 2020 and 2021.

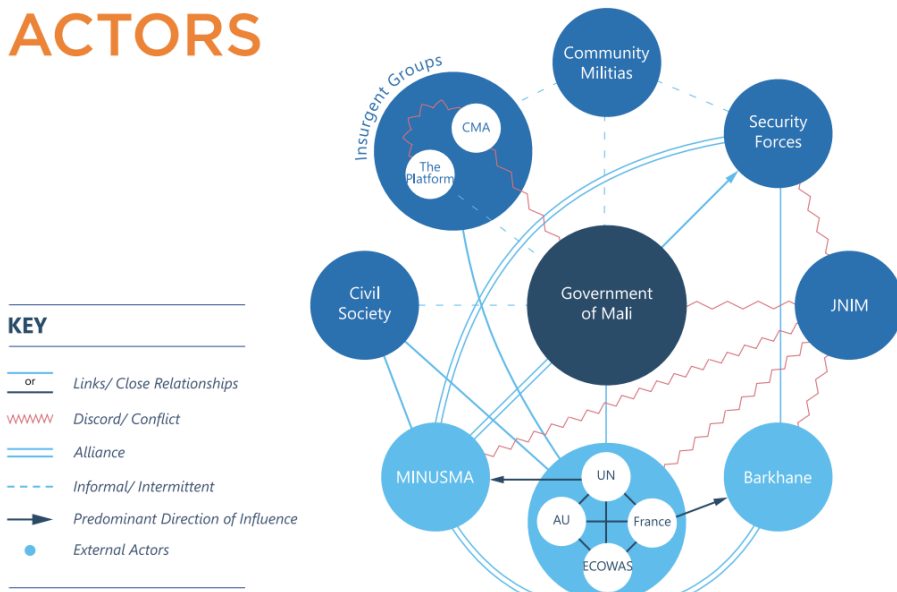
Notwithstanding, the uncertain future of Mali compelled the French forces, the most active aid recipients of the Mali government, to leave in 2022. The exit of the French troops was accompanied by the end of the UN mission, MINUSMA, in 2023. Seeing the Mali government weakened, the new participants, i.e., the Wagner Group (Russian mercenaries), intensified their presence in support of the government. The arrival of the Wagner group signaled a renewed threat for the jihadist groups, which led to some of the deadliest clashes between the incumbent stakeholders, causing immense humanitarian consequences for the state of Mali. Recent clashes in July 2024 highlight the separatists’ victory against the coalition of Malian armed forces and Russia’s Africa Corps, exacerbating security constraints in an already unsteady state (ACLED, 2024).

In this regard, the significance of actors in intensifying conflict in Mali leads us to dissect the positions they hold to protect their security and identity needs. The Malian government and security forces, i.e., the FAMA (national army) and the gendarmerie, are major stakeholders that aim to cease hostilities and assume state writ in the North and South. It heavily relies on international powers to curtail the onslaught and guarantee citizens' security in a limited capacity. More so, the Islamist militants such as the AKIM, Ansar Dine, Jamaat Nosrat Al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), and the Katiba Macina groups, primarily dominant in the north, exploit religious and ethnic divisions to create chaos in the country and invoke their desire to establish Sharia law in Mali (Cold-Ravnkilde & Ba, 2022, p. 22).

Ethnically driven community militias such as Dana Amassagou, Ganda Koy, and Ganda Izo are also pro-active actors who emerged to fight for their ontological and material needs confiscated by the state. Lastly, the international forces, including the AU, ECOWAS, France, and the UN (MINUSMA), play a pivotal role in terms of diplomacy and defusing tensions. The diagram below vouches for the above explanation.

Figure 1. Mapping the actors involved in MALI.

ACTORS



Source: Gebremichael et al (2019, p. 06)

As evident in Mali, these stakeholders are incorporated in an interconnected loop of differing interests that directly and indirectly contribute to conflict drivers. The lack of essential service delivery from the Malian government in the form of food, water, healthcare, security, education, etc., has led to local communities resorting to parallel networks and illegal activities to fulfill their fundamental needs. In addition, the dysfunctional governance system in the North and South has allowed free rein to terrorist groups, insurgents, and proxy forces to exploit the region and gain local favor (Koloma, 2022, p. 06). Limited state presence has manifested corruption and influence peddling, further fragmenting public trust in the Malian government. Notwithstanding, other factors like population growth and unemployment have led to resource competition between the local communities. Adding on, environmental hazards such as erratic rainfalls, floods, and droughts have amplified the existing vulnerabilities of the Mali people, pushing many into poverty and desperation. Relative deprivation and reduced economic opportunities have negatively impacted the youth, thus fostering susceptibility to joining militant factions and engaging in criminality (Gebremichael et al., 2019, p. 04).

Furthermore, Mali’s abundant natural resources like gold have added another dimension to the conflict as radical groups have pounced upon the opportunity to gain control over the lootable resource (FAO, 2021, p. 06). The traditionally tolerant Mali society has been ethnically and religiously polarized by extremist groups, which have assisted in divisive politics and inter-communal distrust. The international and regional actors such as the African Union, ECOWAS, the United Nations, France, and Russia’s competing interests have systematically hindered efforts to resolve the conflict (Koloma, 2022, p. 23). Despite their efforts to secure and preserve peace in Mali, the

differing security strategies have, on the contrary, increased insecurity rather than resolved the root causes of the crisis.

These aggravating factors have not been a result of contemporary violent escalation but have been the product of years of negligence that has caused severe impacts on the social, political, and economic fabric of Mali. In this regard, a dire situation is witnessed in Mali as terrorists, insurgent factions, and government forces alike have committed extreme human rights abuses via unlawful killings, summary executions, destruction of infrastructure, and causing economic disruption through blockades of supply routes. These security risks have hampered humanitarian efforts as the continued crossfire threatens aid responders.

To illustrate the magnitude of conflict, statistics show that over 7.1 million people, including nearly 3.9 million children, require immediate humanitarian assistance (Assessment Capacities Project, 2024, p. 01). As of April 2024, data indicates that around 355,000 people were IDPs (Internally Displaced People) in Mali, amongst which 57% were women and 43% were children. In addition, 388 400 Mali refugees live in neighboring states, with a significant portion residing in Burkina Faso. Moreover, there was a 500% increase in protection incidents underscoring cases of forced marriages, FGM (Female Genital Mutilation), and gender-based violence in conflict-affected regions.

In addition, the basic needs assessment foresees that 7.1 million people face high food insecurity: 3.2 million lack clean water and 11.2 million lack proper sanitation. The continued violence has affected education, with 536,000 students and 10,700 teachers being inadvertently impacted. Assessing the irreversible impact of conflict in Mali, the Human Development Index 2021 marks Mali as one of the poorest countries, with an overall score of 0.428 (BTI, 2024, p. 16). The economic domain is also ripped with challenges such as high unemployment, low industrialization, energy shortages, reliance on imports, inflation coupled with political instability, weak economic planning, and choking sanctions that have diminished any hope of socio-economic development and a stable national economy.

Conclusion

Mali's low ranking, i.e., 154th in the Global Peace Index 2024, reflects the severity and uncertainty of the ongoing crisis. The local and international conflict actors and their clashing interests have fueled insecurity, preventing resolution and reconciliation. The country profile of Mali emphasizes a multifaceted approach to dealing with the root causes of the protracted conflict. To address logistical challenges, the state and the regional and international community must ensure coordinated efforts to strengthen humanitarian action, pursue strategic counter-terrorism strategies, and provide financial resources to address security, humanitarian, and developmental challenges. Notwithstanding, the state must accept responsibility for failing to protect its citizens from violent forces. In this regard, to empower citizens and attain public trust, the Malian government must address long-standing issues such as regional inequalities, underdevelopment, political instability, dysfunctional governance, radical influences and armed insurgency, unemployment, refugees, and IDP dilemma. In this context, it is pertinent that achieving both negative peace (elimination of hostilities) and positive peace (building resilient structures for long-term peace and shared prosperity) should be the ultimate objective of the state (Schiffer, 2020). The rebuilding of Mali and enforcement of legitimacy would be gradual, but consistent and bottom-up approaches may alleviate conflict drivers and ensure sustainable peace.

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