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State Fragility in Mali

The Soumaïla Cissé kidnapping in perspective

Soumaïla Cissé's kidnapping in Mali shines a spotlight on how the country's conflict hotspots are carved up into micro-zones of control and influence, which actors navigate on the basis of imperfect and constantly changing information. Resolving Mali's crises will require a meaningful set of political settlements at the hyper-local level. The contested government response to the kidnapping shows that even if the Malian state is weak, the authorities nevertheless have considerable scope for making choices. The attempt to free Cissé has deepened existing competitions between the president's team and various counter-elites. With Cissé's kidnapping becoming a symbol of Mali's crisis, policy makers should harmonise all credible efforts to secure his release.

Introduction

On 25 March, the formal head of Mali's political opposition, Soumaïla Cissé, was kidnapped in the Niafunké administrative district of the Timbuktu Region. The kidnapping came on the eve of legislative elections whose outcome ultimately maintained the presidency's control of the National Assembly, but which also generated substantial anti-government protests.

Cissé's kidnapping shines a spotlight on how the country's conflict hotspots are carved up into micro-zones of control and influence, which actors navigate on the basis of imperfect and constantly changing information. Although it makes sense for policy makers and analysts to talk about 'northern Mali' or 'central Mali' as a shorthand, such mental maps should not determine policy frameworks; truly resolving Mali's crises will require a meaningful set of political settlements at the hyper-local level.

The response to the kidnapping further shows that even if the Malian state is weak, the authorities nevertheless have considerable scope for making choices. The attempt to free Cissé has deepened existing competitions between the president's team and various counter-elites. With Cissé's kidnapping becoming a symbol of Mali's crisis, however, policy makers should harmonise all credible efforts to secure his release.

Zones of control

Mali has been gripped by conflict since a rebellion began in the northern region of Kidal in January 2012 and spread to other northern regions, including Timbuktu. That conflict was itself a successor to earlier, multi-sided rebellions in the 1990s

and 2000s.¹ Since 2012, the conflict has broadened, spreading from northern Mali into central Mali. Meanwhile, the conflict has grown progressively more fragmented, with ex-rebels, community-based armed groups, violent extremists, and state security forces all competing for control. There have been more than 8,000 fatalities.

Parts of the north and the centre are partitioned into zones of de facto control by individual armed groups, many of which represent particular ethnic, tribal or clan constituencies. These groups' military aspects overlap with other modes of power; the leaders of armed groups sometimes also hold elected office, and/or serve as traditional authorities,² and/or have other types of formal or informal relationships with the central Malian state. Certain 'wartime political orders'³ can persist for years; the most prominent example is the control that the foremost ex-rebel bloc, the Coordination of Movements of Azawad or CMA, exercises in the town of Kidal.

In some zones, however, bids for control are short-lived, fluid and incomplete. Rival forces test each other's power, whether through overt military clashes, elections or economic rivalries, or by competing for allies and patrons. Meanwhile, existing groups fragment, creating new complexities as parent organisations and their offshoots then readjust and compete. The formidable presence of extremists in parts of the north and centre adds another layer of complexity and uncertainty; extremists

attack, intimidate, coerce, and even build alliances with other armed groups, depending on the circumstances at the hyper-local level.⁴ Extremists in turn are susceptible to fragmentation, a problem that has been besetting the prominent extremist leader Amadou Kouffa (formally part of al-Qaida's local hierarchy, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wa-I-Muslimin or JNIM) as he loses some defectors to the local Islamic State affiliate, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara or ISGS.⁵

Micro-level political variations

This micro-level variation in terms of who controls what, and how fully, helps to explain what apparently happened with Cissé's kidnapping. Cissé was in Niafunké, his home district, while campaigning as a parliamentary candidate for his party, l'Union pour la république et la démocratie (the Union for the Republic and Democracy, URD). Cissé was there in advance of the first round of Mali's legislative elections on 29 March (the second round occurred on 19 April). At the time of writing, Cissé is still in captivity, long after the members of Mali's Sixth National Assembly – minus Cissé – took their seats. Most observers believe Cissé is being held by extremists under the command of Amadou Kouffa.

As Cissé campaigned in the Niafunké district, he passed between different armed groups' zones of control. As of approximately 18 March, Cissé was campaigning around Léré, a town approximately 100 kilometres west-southwest of the town of Niafunké, the administrative centre of its eponymous

1 Lecocq, B., 2010, *Disputed Desert: Decolonization, Competing Nationalisms and Tuareg Rebellions in Mali*. Leiden: Brill.

2 Molenaar, F. et al., August 2019, 'The Status Quo Defied: The legitimacy of traditional authorities in areas of limited statehood in Mali, Niger and Libya.' Clingendael Institute. Available at: https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2019/legitimacy_traditional_authorities_mali_niger_libya/.

3 Staniland, P., June 2012, 'States, insurgents, and wartime political orders', *Perspectives on Politics* 10:2. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/states-insurgents-and-wartime-political-orders/AADC0592A9ABC2EABB155CA022C2C665>.

4 Thurston, A., 23 January 2019, 'Timbuktu: A Laboratory for Jihadists Experimenting with Politics'. War on the Rocks. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2019/01/timbuktu-a-laboratory-for-jihadists-experimenting-with-politics/>.

5 *Jeune Afrique*, 21 February 2020, 'Au Mali, le jihadiste Amadou Kouffa sous la pression de l'État islamique au grand Sahara'. Available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/899684/politique/au-mali-le-jihadiste-amadou-kouffa-sous-la-pression-de-letat-islamique-au-grand-sahara/>.

district. In Léré, Cissé was under the protection of the Coalition du Peuple de l'Azawad (Coalition for the People of Azawad, CPA),⁶ a Timbuktu-based, Tuareg-led militia created in 2014 as a breakaway from one of the main northern ex-rebel movements.⁷

Yet when Cissé sought to campaign in Koumaira, a town approximately 21 kilometres southeast of the town of Niafunké, his party negotiated directly with extremists for access. Cissé refused an escort from government security forces,⁸ perhaps due to concern that such an escort would create the wrong picture when campaigning in a conflict zone. According to one account, Cissé's people brokered a deal with one extremist faction – that the candidate could come to Koumaira, but his meetings would feature neither music nor mixed-gender gatherings. Cissé was then kidnapped en route to Koumaira, possibly by another extremist unit.⁹

In other words, while attempting to navigate between the multiple political micro-orders that comprise not just the Timbuktu Region but one of its administrative districts, Cissé became vulnerable. Cissé, it should

be stressed, is no political novice – his kidnapping cannot be attributed to naiveté. Other prominent politicians in Niafunké also fell into different traps there. Eight days before Cissé's kidnapping, one of his chief rivals in the district, the ruling party's candidate Mohamed ag Ahmed, was himself seized by kidnapers of unclear affiliation, only to be released within 48 hours.¹⁰

Yet another victim of kidnapping was Koumaira's Mayor Amadou Kalossi, a key figure in this story. Prior to 25 March, he apparently gave Cissé assurances that it was safe to visit the town; then, after Cissé's kidnapping, Kalossi attempted to negotiate Cissé's release, only to be kidnapped in turn himself. He was not released until early May. Kalossi, one journalist commented, 'certainly played a game that completely overwhelmed him'.¹¹ As actors operate with imperfect information in a kaleidoscopic environment of rival armed groups' control, they expose themselves to profound risks. The southern part of the Timbuktu Region, moreover, is one of the most sensitive zones in the whole conflict, situated at the intersection of northern militia politics and mass violence in the centre.

Difficult negotiations

Once in the custody of Amadou Kouffa's men, Cissé was not killed – in fact, only one bodyguard was killed during the initial seizure, and all the other members of Cissé's delegation were released relatively swiftly. For all their rhetorical hostility to a government and a political class they denounce as French puppets, Mali's extremists routinely exhibit some form of restraint. For various reasons, Cissé is more valuable to extremists alive than dead. A press report from mid-May stated that

6 Sahelien, 3 April 2020, 'Mali: Two Candidates in the Parliamentarian Elections Kidnapped During the Electoral Campaign, Still Not Found'. Available at: <https://sahelien.com/en/mali-two-candidates-in-the-parliamentarian-elections-kidnapped-during-the-electoral-campaign-still-not-found/>.

7 For background on the CPA, see Roger, B., 19 March 2014, 'Mali : Ibrahim Ag Mohamed Assaleh créé la Coalition du peuple pour l'Azawad (CPA)'. *Jeune Afrique*. Available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/164896/politique/mali-ibrahim-ag-mohamed-assaleh-cr-la-coalition-du-peuple-pour-l-azawad-cpa/>.

8 Dubois, O., 22 April 2020, 'Mali: "Enlevé en même temps que Soumaïla Cissé, voilà ce que j'ai vu"'. *Le Point*. Available at: https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-enleve-en-meme-temps-que-soumaïla-cisse-voila-ce-que-j-ai-vu-22-04-2020-2372501_3826.php.

9 *Jeune Afrique*, 10 April 2020, 'Mali: Amadou Kolossi, médiateur pour la libération de Soumaïla Cissé, pris à son tour en otage'. Available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/925598/politique/mali-amadou-kolossi-mediateur-pour-la-liberation-de-soumaïla-cisse-pris-a-son-tour-en-otage/>.

10 Sahelien, 'Mali: Two Candidates in the Parliamentarian Elections Kidnapped'. See also *Nord-Sud Journal*, 18 March 2020, 'Législatives à Niafunké: Mohamed Ag Ahmed, le candidat du RPM, enlevé'. Available at: <http://news.abamako.com/h/231467.html>.

11 Dubois, 'Mali: "Enlevé en même temps que Soumaïla Cissé, voilà ce que j'ai vu"'. Available at: https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/mali-enleve-en-meme-temps-que-soumaïla-cisse-voila-ce-que-j-ai-vu-22-04-2020-2372501_3826.php.

he was suffering malnutrition as well as difficulty walking, due to long periods spent chained to a tree, but that he remained alive.¹²

It is still unclear why Cissé's companions were released; one theory is that extremists set them free as a sign of good faith, and/or because Cissé was the real prize and holding the others was a logistical encumbrance.¹³ Obviously, extremists seek to use Cissé as a bargaining chip. In fact, his kidnapping comes at a particularly sensitive time: earlier this year, both the government and the JNIM leadership indicated at least a theoretical willingness to negotiate with one another. One report even states that extremists have described Cissé's opposition to such a dialogue as one of their reasons for kidnapping him: 'Now that he is in our hands,' Kouffa's men allegedly said, 'he will understand that it's necessary to talk with us.'¹⁴

Whether and how Cissé's kidnapping will affect the broader prospects for negotiation between JNIM and the Malian government remains unclear, however. The idea of negotiations has gained some momentum since 2017, when it featured prominently among recommendations coming out of the Conference of National Understanding. Yet for key Malian elites and for international actors such as France, the kidnapping could solidify JNIM's image as uncompromising and untrustworthy, reducing the potential political space for negotiations and reaffirming French convictions that the

war must be pursued to its bitter end.¹⁵ Meanwhile, JNIM's seeming openness to negotiations has evoked bitter denunciation from the Islamic State, which accuses JNIM's Iyad ag Ghali and Kouffa of exploiting the present opening with the Malian state to launch a long-premeditated war on ISGS.¹⁶

Amadou Kouffa may also be considering the perception of the situation vis-à-vis his own supporters. On the one hand, taking a prominent hostage could reinforce his credibility as a hardliner, particularly with those fighters and field commanders tempted to defect to ISGS; the kidnapping could even be an indication that JNIM will, due to internal pressure and scepticism, eventually drop its willingness to negotiate. On the other hand, the kidnapping of Cissé could be a bridge too far for some members of the group: one source suggests that kidnapping Cissé had already hurt Kouffa's popularity among the Peul, the ethnic group to which both he and Cissé belong;¹⁷ killing Cissé could provoke even more of a backlash.

The Peul, as Malian anthropologist Modibo Ghaly Cissé and others have argued, are in an extraordinarily sensitive and complicated position within Mali and within the Sahel's conflicts more broadly. With a 'disproportionate presence' among JNIM and ISGS recruits, Modibo Cissé writes, the Peul as a whole have faced tragic and deadly stigmatisation, leading to collective punishment against the Peul from state security forces and community-based armed groups in both Mali and Burkina Faso; Peul

12 *Jeune Afrique*, 14 May 2020, 'Mali: les conditions de détention de Soumaïla Cissé, toujours aux mains des jihadistes'. Available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/945581/politique/mali-les-conditions-de-detention-de-soumaila-cisse-toujours-aux-mains-des-jihadistes/>.

13 Dubois, 'Mali: "Enlevé en même temps que Soumaïla Cissé, voilà ce que j'ai vu"'. Available at: <https://www.le360.ma/mali/politique/2020/03/28/29981-mali-les-jihadistes-expliquent-pourquoi-ils-ont-enleve-le-chef-de-lopposition-29981>.

14 Konaté, D., 28 March 2020, 'Mali: Les jihadistes expliquent pourquoi ils ont enlevé le chef de l'opposition'. *Le 360*. Available at: <https://www.le360.ma/mali/politique/2020/03/28/29981-mali-les-jihadistes-expliquent-pourquoi-ils-ont-enleve-le-chef-de-lopposition-29981>.

15 For a discussion of France's posture vis-à-vis negotiations, see Thurston, A., 16 April 2020, 'France Should Give Mali Space to Negotiate with Jihadists'. *War on the Rocks*. Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/04/france-should-give-mali-space-to-negotiate-with-jihadists/>.

16 Islamic State, 7 May 2020, 'Al-Hamla al-Salibiyya 'ala Gharb Ifriqiya', *Al-Naba'* 233, p. 13. Available at: <https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/pda/2020/05/The-Islamic-State-al-Nabā-Newsletter-233.pdf>.

17 El Heïb, M., 16 April 2020, 'Mali: Amadou Kouffa, chef de la katiba-macina'. *Mali Actu*. Available at: <https://maliactu.net/mali-amadou-kouffa-chef-de-la-katiba-macina/>.

leaders 'are faced with the dual challenge of defusing the group-wide stigmatisation while stemming further recruitment from militant groups'.¹⁸

Kouffa, as the analyst Andrew Lebovich comments, has 'frequently alternated between his role as a regional jihadist commander...and that as a Peul leader'.¹⁹ Kouffa has resisted being pigeonholed as an ethnic sectionalist, but at the same time he appears very sensitive to issues that affect the Peul community specifically. He is, furthermore, sensitive to criticism from Peul elites.²⁰ In this context, killing Soumaïla Cissé may be further than Kouffa is willing to go, in part because of the backlash he would face from other Peul leaders and in part because it might have unpredictable consequences even among his own fighters. The point is that extremists are not aloof from wider conflict dynamics; they too must consider the positions of other actors within evolving wartime orders.

The structure of state weakness in Mali

Governing elites, even when they run states with limited resources and whose authority is under significant internal attack, may cede authority over some domains, strategically or reluctantly, while clinging to authority in other domains. It is not simply the absence of the Malian state from the conflict zones, but also the decisions authorities make

about when to act energetically and when not to that have shaped Cissé's kidnapping and its aftermath. Unlike in the North and Central regions, where the state has a very limited presence, decisions that can be made unilaterally in the capital – when to hold elections and referenda, whom to bring into and out of the cabinet, etc – are easier to control.

When the Malian government decided to hold legislative elections in March/April 2020 – one of the many decisions that indirectly contributed to Cissé's kidnapping, by incentivising candidates to campaign amid a conflict – the government was exercising considerable agency. On two prior occasions, the government had postponed the elections, originally scheduled for late 2018. By delaying, the government put the legislature into a constitutional grey area, with deputies serving well past their allotted five-year terms.

If the decisions to postpone were controversial, so too was the decision to forge ahead this time: multiple voices sounded the alarm about how the incipient COVID-19 outbreak in the country could intersect disastrously with the voting. Yet the government, first by delaying and then later by moving forward, repeatedly aligned the legislative calendar with its own interests. Why push ahead with elections? Part of the explanation is that the state is strongly oriented to Western audiences who are in turn enamoured of the performance of a particular kind of statehood in Mali.²¹ The current Malian government's core task, from the perspective of Western policy makers, is to stabilise the country – and for Western powers and the United Nations, a 2015 peace agreement known as the Algiers Accord is the presumed key

18 Cissé, M., 22 April 2020. 'Understanding Fulani Perspectives on the Sahel Crisis'. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/understanding-fulani-perspectives-sahel-crisis/>.

19 Lebovich, A., 13 December 2018, 'The Death of a Jihadist: A Chance to Curb Mali's Conflict'. European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_death_of_a_jihadist_a_chance_to_curb_malis_conflict.

20 *Journal du Mali*, 31 May 2018, 'Pr Ali Nouhoum Diallo: "Si j'avais 16 ou 17 ans aujourd'hui, je prendrai les armes"'. Available at: <http://bamada.net/pr-ali-nouhoum-diallo-si-javais-16-ou-17-ans-aujourd'hui-je-prendrai-les-armes>.

21 Craven-Matthews, C. and Englebert, P., 2018, 'A Potemkin State in the Sahel? The empirical and the fictional in Malian state reconstruction'. *African Security* 11:1, pp. 1-31. See also Lebovich, A. and G. Mann, 9 August 2018, 'Sahel or High Water: Mali's Political Fatalism'. European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_sahel_or_high_water_mali_political_fatalism.

to stability. Implementation of the Accord has been fraught, slow and contested from the beginning, and both the signatories and various Western observers are openly frustrated with the process.²² Holding the elections was a way for the authorities to demonstrate progress on one front even as progress on other issues, such as the full deployment of ‘reconstituted’ army units in the north, remains elusive. Meanwhile, it is even possible that the context of COVID-19 made the government more rather than less willing to let the legislative contest go forward. As Kars de Bruijne and Loïc Bisson recently argued, across West Africa governments are using the pandemic response to their political advantage, including in the context of elections: ‘Holding elections amidst the COVID-19 crisis will likely result in lower voter turn-out, restrict public manifestations and campaigning, move campaigns online and derail electoral processes such as voter registration.’²³

Malian authorities can act with confidence that key Western powers will accept the results, even of elections held in abysmal conditions. The international community accepted Keïta’s re-election in 2018, even though over 700 polling stations in the Mopti Region and elsewhere were forced to close under threat of violence during the first round of voting.²⁴ The international community has also accepted this year’s legislative elections in which violence, the

virus and voter apathy held reported turnout to barely more than 10% in certain localities, notably the capital.²⁵

Malian authorities can be less confident that opposition leaders and grassroots pressure will not disrupt their plans – a proposed 2017 constitutional referendum, which would have created a senate and given the president power to appoint a substantial portion of its members – had to be withdrawn in the face of pressure from multiple directions. Yet the recent legislative elections, however flawed, give the government momentum to try the referendum again. The government is ultimately willing to accept that these decisions will produce substantial costs, mostly borne by others.

A contested government response

The complexities of state weakness have also shown through in the government’s response to Cissé’s kidnapping. On 31 March, the government set up a ‘crisis cell,’ headed by a former prime minister, to work for Cissé’s liberation.²⁶ It was not until 21 April that the government finished staffing the committee, mostly with military officers. One Malian journalist commented, ‘If these colonels were capable of doing something, they would have already done it for the soldiers killed each day. President [Keïta] ought to set up a commission of wise men from the north and the centre. If not, end of story.’²⁷

Such a comment speaks to the wider tensions regarding who can actually solve crises. For example, some observers see

22 See The Carter Center, January 2020, ‘Report of the Independent Observer on the Implementation of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, Emanating from the Algiers Process: Evaluation of Implementation in 2019’. Available at: https://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/peace/conflict_resolution/mali-independent-observer-report-eng-jan-2020.pdf.

23 De Bruijne, K. and Bisson, L., 27 May 2020, ‘States, Not Jihadis, Exploiting Corona Crisis in West Africa’. Clingendael Institute/ACLEDE. Available at: <https://spectator.clingendael.org/en/publication/states-not-jihadis-exploiting-corona-crisis-west-africa>.

24 Malian Ministry of Territorial Administration and Development, August 2018, ‘Liste des centres et des bureaux où les électeurs n’ont pas pu voter pour diverses raisons’. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1BzzcldcMI3mYqz9VEhnzNWBjCXONprp/view>.

25 Daniel, S., 20 April 2020, ‘Législatives au Mali: le RPM en net recul à Bamako, selon les résultats provisoires’. RFI. Available at: <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200420-legislatives-mali-resultats-provisoires-bamako-rpm-recul>.

26 Jigi, 31 March 2020, Twitter. Available at: <https://twitter.com/JigiAfrica/status/1245133648908767232>.

27 Ag Isaa, H., 23 April 2020, Twitter. Available at: <https://mobile.twitter.com/housseyneag/status/1253450845510868993>.

the controversial cleric Mahmoud Dicko as a key potential mediator between the state and extremists, a role that he has played intermittently since 2012. Yet the president's relations with Dicko are fraught. In early 2018, a new prime minister appointed by Keïta stripped Dicko of his role of 'good offices' for mediating the conflict in central Mali, even though Kouffa had named Dicko as one of the few major clerics he would consider speaking with. Dicko cannot personally solve the conflict and some Malians and foreigners regard him with considerable suspicion, but his removal speaks to the ways in which successful mediation in the centre might actually threaten the governing elite's authority and interests.

Beyond Dicko, the effort to free Cissé is generating substantial competition – one observer counted roughly 20 parallel efforts to free the detained politician, with the most prominent efforts being the government's, the URD's, Dicko's, and those of the prominent Peul politician and lawyer Hassan Barry.²⁸ The government's reasons for appointing colonels and not 'wise men,' and for allowing dispersed efforts to persist rather than coordinating them, may have to do with a calculation of whom to empower and how, even at a moment of severe crisis. Empowering Dicko, for example, could have wider political ramifications – long known for being outspoken on social and political issues, Dicko has become an even more explicitly political figure since creating his Coordination des Mouvements, associations et sympathisants (Coordination of Movements, Associations and Sympathisers, CMAS), a kind of proto-political party, last year. On 5 June, CMAS and others organised a rally calling for Keïta's resignation. In this context, the government may even prefer to see some other actor's negotiation efforts succeed at liberating Cissé than to have Dicko, or a URD leader, be the face of the government's effort.

28 Dubois, 'Mali : « Enlevé en même temps que Soumaïla Cissé, voilà ce que j'ai vu ».'

Meanwhile, Cissé's family told Al Jazeera in early May that they did not hear from the committee for five weeks after its creation, and that even then, communication from the government was minimal.²⁹ The family also, rumour has it, paid as much as 40 million FCFA to an individual who claimed he could secure Cissé's release, but then disappeared³⁰ – a micro example of how there are war economies that feed on the conflict at micro and macro levels. Cissé's wife was received by President Keïta, who proclaimed, 'Mali will do everything so that my brother Soumaïla comes back to us quickly',³¹ but actions have thus far spoken louder than words. Some of these dynamics reflect the weak capacity of the state, but they also reflect conscious choices made by the governing elite about how to approach this crisis. It appears unlikely that the government is consciously choosing to let Cissé languish in captivity, and it appears even less likely that the government had a hand, active or passive, in his kidnapping. Yet the government's response also bespeaks a lack of urgency, which is not the only option available.

Beyond venality as an explanation

Is this because the people in charge of Mali are bad people? Western discourses on state weakness often pathologize non-Western elites, and particularly African elites. Much of the talk of 'good governance' coming out of Western government, think tank and non-governmental organisation documents reads, at least to this cynical

29 Thomas-Johnson, A., 5 May 2020, 'Family of Seized Soumaïla Cisse Says Mali Gov't "Moving Too Slow"'. Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/family-seized-soumaïla-cisse-mali-gov-moving-slow-200504054720164.html>.

30 Walid Le Berbère, Twitter, 6 May 2020. Available at: https://mobile.twitter.com/walid_leberbere/status/1258184778085535749.

31 Daniel, S., 25 April 2020, 'Mali: un mois après son enlèvement, que devient Soumaïla Cissé?' Available at: <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200425-mali-mois-enlevement-devient-soumaïla-cisse>.

observer, as a moral condemnation of non-Western governments, a suggestion that the only truly missing ingredient in any conflict zone or underdeveloped country is political will. For example, two leading experts in Washington recently wrote, ‘In too many African contexts, terrorists easily step in to establish themselves as a viable alternative to the government when those in power are corrupt, venal, and direct security forces to kill and abuse civilians for political gain.’³² Yet this explanation can be, at most, only part of the equation.

For one thing, corruption and venality do not always exacerbate state fragility or generate security force abuses; for another thing, not all leaders who preside over fragile, abusive states appear to be personally corrupt, venal, or Machiavellian. The idea that all abuses or all failures come from the top also appears untenable; the point about state weakness is, rather, that elites with very limited resources and options have to strategically weigh different priorities. In this, the governing elites are much more often reacting than acting.

Consider, too, the unpopularity of the political class as a whole. One December 2019 poll conducted in Bamako found that Keïta and Cissé had favourability ratings of 26.5% and 31% respectively (the same poll showed Mahmoud Dicko having a nearly 73% favourability rating, and similar scores for other prominent Malian clerics).³³ In the

first round of the 2018 presidential elections, Keïta was the rare West African incumbent to slip below 50%, but Cissé did markedly worse, claiming less than 20% of the vote as given by official results. Malians are not broadly enthusiastic about either politician. Nor do they embrace any other politician among the country’s familiar faces. There has been markedly low turnout in Malian elections dating back to the advent of multi-party contests in 1992, pointing to a wider popular disenchantment with politicians and the electoral process. Ironically, even as Cissé’s captivity highlights Mali’s state weakness, his URD party’s performance in the recent legislative elections – winning just 19 seats, an increase of only three over its 2013 total – highlights the lack of a popular political alternative among Mali’s parties.

Both Keïta and Cissé are widely unpopular, yet they have been the most prominent faces of Malian politics throughout the post-2012 period. Why? Part of this situation reflects the enduring, institutionalised influence of a political class whose makeup has shifted relatively little since the transition to democracy in the 1990s. As in other countries in the region and around the world, the same networks have dominated politics in the country for decades, and getting into power requires participating to some extent in those networks. Relatively few Malians possess the varied forms of capital – advanced university degrees, professional experiences in trade unions or banks, or connections to international development institutions, not to mention access to considerable campaign funds³⁴ – that have underpinned many of the top politicians’ careers. Those faces who seem to represent an alternative to the system, moreover, are often still embedded within it; the radio broadcaster and anti-corruption activist Ras Bath, for example, is the son of a former cabinet minister.

32 Devermont, J. and Steadman, L., 18 May 2020, ‘Defending the U.S. Military Presence in Africa for Reasons Beyond Counterterrorism’. Lawfare. Available at: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/defending-us-military-presence-africa-reasons-beyond-counterterrorism>.

33 Sidiki, G., 26 December 2019, ‘Mali: Sondage d’opinion sur la lutte contre la corruption et cote de popularité des personnalités’. Mali Actu. Available at: <https://maliactu.net/mali-sondage-dopinion-sur-la-lutte-contre-la-corruption-et-cote-de-popularite-des-personnalites-265-pour-ibk-311-soumalla-cisseet-60-boubou-cisse/>. See also Klatt, C., March 2020, ‘Mali-Mètre : Enquête d’opinion publique: “Que pensent les Malien(ne)s?”’. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Available at: http://www.fes-mali.org/images/Rapport_Final_Malimetre_N11_Site.pdf.

34 Keita, A. et al., October 2019, ‘Étude nationale sur le coût financier des campagnes électorales et des mandats électifs au Mali’. Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy and Odyssee. Available at: <https://nimd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/ETUDE-COUT-POLITIQUE-MALI.pdf>.

In other words, if Keïta were not president, it is highly likely that someone like him would be. Financial, historical and political structures – all of them bigger than individual venality or lack thereof – facilitate the rise of such figures to power. Moreover, the country's elites make decisions that are shaped not just by their own personal interests, but more broadly by the incentives that the situation imposes on them: control what they can, and try to avoid empowering others too much when it comes to situations that slip out of their control.

The legislative elections again illustrate this dynamic. The government set the terms of the elections, determining when they took place and shaping much of the outcome. As in past elections, there have been serious allegations of tampering, for example from journalists questioning the 'North Korean scores' reported in parts of the north³⁵ – where incumbents and others running on the ruling party's ticket obtained mandates of over 90% in some cases. Most questionably, the final results as proclaimed by the Constitutional Court gave Keïta's Rally for Mali (RPM) party 51 seats instead of the 41 it had won according to provisional results, overturning some of the RPM's apparent losses in Bamako and elsewhere in the south. Keïta and his son Karim then reportedly oversaw the election of an ally, the deputy Moussa Timbiné, as the new president of the National Assembly.³⁶ Timbiné is not merely an RPM member but one of the Bamako deputies whose victory was only announced at the last minute by the Court. Controlling the country's formal institutions allows incumbents tremendous

power even as their authority is challenged and rebuked over a majority of the country's territory, and even in parts of Bamako itself.

Notably, among the 134 (out of 147) deputies who voted for Timbiné's installation as speaker there were, it seems, at least some of the 19 deputies for the URD, Cissé's party. On certain questions in Malian politics, there is, effectively, unanimity – even if the URD leadership belatedly apologised to its supporters for not opposing Timbiné's selection.³⁷ A Malian commentator asks, 'Will the URD finally suspend its participation in the rest of the work for setting up the office of the National Assembly, in protest against the situation of Soumaïla Cissé?'³⁸ The answer, it appears, is no. Ironically, then, the most prominent opposition leader in Mali has been kidnapped, but it is simultaneously possible to say that Mali – with or without Cissé on the scene – has no real opposition.

Yet the government could not control the reaction to the elections. When the results were proclaimed, serious protests broke out, challenging not just the 10-seat increase for the RPM but also a host of socio-economic and political grievances ranging from unpaid salaries to unfulfilled promises on infrastructure. The unrest turned particularly severe in Kayes, a southern regional capital, after a policeman shot a young man on 11 May. In Mali, state weakness means that the elites shape an election, much of the population rejects it while decrying the status quo as a whole, but then both the election results and the status quo stand – for now.

35 Daniel, S., 3 April 2020, 'Mali: dix-sept députés élus au premier tour, une participation de 35.7%'. RFI. Available at: <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20200403-mali-dix-sept-deputes-elus-premier-tour-participation>.

36 Diamoutene, S., 11 May 2020, 'Assemblée nationale : l'honorable Moussa Timbiné élu président avec 134 voix'. Maliweb. Available at: <https://www.maliweb.net/politique/assemblee-nationale-lhonorable-moussa-timbine-elu-president-avec-134-voix-2873432.html>.

37 *Le Combat*, 18 May 2020, 'Choix des députés de l'opposition pour Moussa Timbiné: Le directoire de l'URD "confesse ses erreurs"'. Available at: <http://bamada.net/choix-des-deputes-de-lopposition-pour-moussa-timbine-le-directoire-de-lurd-confesse-ses-erreurs>.

38 Sissoko, Y., 18 May 2020. 'Un gouvernement de large ouverture sans l'URD: La libération de Soumaïla Cissé devrait être la seule préoccupation de son parti'. Inf@sept. Available at: <https://www.maliweb.net/politique/un-gouvernement-de-large-ouverture-sans-lurd-la-liberation-de-soumaïla-cisse-devrait-etre-la-seule-preoccupation-de-son-parti-2874795.html>.

Final remarks for policy makers

In this sense, Cissé's kidnapping symbolises the functional dysfunction of Mali: if, as one hopes, he is released safely, he will nevertheless likely return to a political environment little different from the one he left. In this environment, the majority of people are dissatisfied, formal political rituals provide little opportunity for effecting change, conflicts continue unabated, and the elite remains relatively unscathed.

The kidnapping will likely reinforce a growing sense among observers and commentators that the peace process is insufficient for addressing Mali's conflicts.³⁹ After all,






neither the armed groups who protected Cissé in parts of Timbuktu, nor those who ultimately kidnapped him, are part of the peace process. Nor do elections provide a sufficient outlet for the many political claims and constituencies competing nationally or even within a single administrative district such as Niafunké. Stabilising Mali will require mechanisms that somehow reduce rather than promote fragmentation; unfortunately, what those mechanisms are is far from obvious, and both the political class and the structures that sustain that class are struggling to generate solutions to Mali's problems.

39 Devermont, J. and Harris, M., 15 April 2020, 'Why Mali Needs a New Peace Deal'. Center for Strategic and International Studies. Available at: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/why-mali-needs-new-peace-deal>.

About the Clingendael Institute

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