THE COUP IN MALI — BACKGROUND AND FOREGROUND

By Harvey Glickman

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The recent coup in Mali not only revealed the fragility of African electoral democracies—something of a trend in recent years after decades of instability and military rule—but it also exposed a kind of domino effect of the North African “Arab spring” in the countries of “the Sahel,” just south, west to east, straddling the Sahara desert.

We need to see the Mali coup in the context of mounting challenges by forces of separatism as well as radical jihadism. All the African countries with large Muslim populations (nearly all of them except South Africa and its neighbors) face problems similar to Mali, in varying degree.

African countries, for the most part, reflect imposed colonial boundaries, encasing multiple ethno-political entities. The Tuareg (sometimes called Berber) people, Muslims in the Malian north, are neither Arabs nor black Africans. A desert people, they and related peoples have sporadically claimed autonomy and separate status in Mali and in the neighboring states of Algeria, Morocco, Western Sahara, Mauritania, Niger and Libya. Under various labels, they have been struggling against the Malian central government—dominated by black African southerners—since 1963. In 1958, even before the 1960 decolonization, the Tuareg thought they and the French had negotiated their own country in the desert. Subsequent uprisings were suppressed by the Malian government in 1990, 2000, 2006 and 2009. Decentralization agreements and a special status negotiated for the north never achieved implementation. The army failed to integrate Tuareg officers into its ranks and was involved in harassing Tuareg civilians.

The last Tuareg leader, Ibrahim Ag Bahanga, fled to Libya, where it is rumored some of his followers helped the Qaddafi government until it crumbled. Ag Bahanga and hundreds of Tuareg then returned to Mali, this time replete with various weapons, including heavy artillery.

In parallel developments, leaders of the regional al-Qaeda organization in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) moved into the region. Another group, which split from AQIM over grievances of black African members, the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of Algerian diplomats from the town of Gao, in northwest Mali. Boko Haram, a jihadist group in Northern Nigeria—responsible for several bombings and killings in the past year in several northern Nigerian cities—seems to moving into Gao, as well.

The March 20, 2012, coup reflects the alleged failure of the Mali government to adequately support the military in its struggle against the Tuareg rebels, the “National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad” (MNLA in its French acronym). It is not clear why the military coup leaders—middle level officers—chose the month before an election to seize power. President Amadou Toumani Toure (popularly known as “A.T.T.”) had served two terms and would not succeed himself. Political paralysis in the capital, Bamako, and the withdrawal of the military from the north, permitted MNLA to take over three important towns, including the storied Timbuktu. On April 2, 2012, Ansar Dine, an Islamist group, supported by AQIM, declared Shari’a the official law of the three towns. On April 6, 2012, the MNLA announced a new country, “Azawad” in Mali’s three northern administrative counties. (It is possible that under international law MNLA has that “right,” since at the time, no national constitution was in effect.)

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which acts as a regional political and military pressure group and peace-keeping agency, imposed sanctions on Mali. On April 6 an agreement was reached with ECOWAS in which Malian President Toure and the coup leaders both agreed to step aside. The constitution will be reinstated and Dioncounda Traore, the former speaker of Mali’s National Assembly, becomes the new head of state. ECOWAS will lift sanctions and offer logistical support to help reverse the rebel gains. ECOWAS has ordered the study of the possibility of intervention by 3,000
troops from the region, with possible French logistical support. It is not clear whether this means actual military intervention. Past negotiations with MNLA create a certain credibility for their claims of some sort of autonomy. The ECOWAS countries disagree about the extent of military support. Algeria’s Minister for African Affairs, Abdelkader Messahel, in a recent regional meeting, stated, “The solution can only be a political one… It cannot be the result of a military effort.”

Mali’s neighbors, like most African states, are wary of demands for autonomy. After years of insisting on the integrity of colonial boundaries inherited, the past decade has seen the creation of South Sudan and the effective splitting of Somalia into three state-like entities. The creation of Azawad would grant some legitimacy to other continuing claims of autonomy, e.g., Casamance rebels in Senegal, Polisario in Western Sahara—not to speak of extremist grievances in Northern Nigeria. The issue of regional separatism bleeds into the mounting presence of radical Islamist groups in the north of Mali, willing to commit acts of terrorism.

MNLA, however, must be separated from jihadist Islamist groups. Since the outset of hostilities, the MNLA’s political wing has emphasized that its goal is a secular state. “We do not agree with the ideology of these groups, we are against their extremist desires for Azawad and we will deal with them in due course,” said MNLA spokesman Moussa Ag Acharatoumane. However, the Tuareg leader, Iyad Ag Ghali, a former leader in earlier rebellions, announced a new group, Ansar Dine (“Defenders of Faith”), whose goal is to establish Shari’a in northern Mali.

One former Tuareg leader in the neighboring country of Niger stated, “If they don’t take out Iyad soon, the MNLA are going to have a serious problem; he will single-handedly destroy their movement.” Iyad commands only a few hundred followers but his influence reportedly extends to several MNLA commanders, to drug smugglers and small, splinter al-Qaeda-like groups in the region.

The MNLA, apparently, is unable to push Ansar Dine and other “terrorist groups” out of the conflict areas. MNLA leaders seem to be pursuing a strategy of establishing their control in the region before dealing with the Islamists. The problem, however, is that the personal connections of Islamist groups with MNLA unit may overcome secularist proclivities on the part of the Azawad “nationalists.” Another militia has already sprung up in Timbuktu, “the Azawad National Liberation Front (FLNA).” The Islamists’ forces may grow amidst disorder and the frustrations of separatists.

Time is not on the side of restoration of the integrity of Mali and liquidation of jihadist Islamism in the region. New al Qaeda-type franchises will probably emerge in the Sahel region. The new Mali government, with (or perhaps through) ECOWAS, the US, and its European allies, all need to co-operate to address the demands of MNLA as well as the threat of AQIM.

At present Mali faces a humanitarian crisis: cutbacks in trade and foreign assistance at the moment of threatened drought. Added to its current political crisis, that is a recipe for more difficulties.

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http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/04/20124152956363410.html
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