

The Mali situation as I understand it- March 28, 2012

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This is my summary of the events that have been taking place in Mali over the last week and gives some background. I have been following it closely on the web and by talking to people both in the US and in Mali. I have even been driven to Twitter this week!



Rebellion in the North

There is a rebellion in the north of Mali. This is an ongoing dispute that periodically becomes violent. Some Tuareg groups want an independent homeland to be called Azawad. The group leading the rebellion is the MNLA (Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad). The Tuaregs aren't united behind this idea. There are other peoples who live in the area. In the current fighting with 200,000 refugees and internally displaced people, the area has been largely emptied of its population.

There was a long association between Mali and Libya. Gaddafi's mother was Tuareg. Gaddafi funded many huge infrastructure projects in Mali and the rest of the region. Gaddafi was liked in Mali. Many Malians worked in Libya, a wealthy country in the region. And many Tuareg were soldiers in Gaddafi's army.

What is new in the rebellion this time is that with the fall of Gaddafi, the Tuareg soldiers from his army came back to Mali with sophisticated heavy weapons. They renewed the rebellion in January, 2012. The Malian army had no arms to match the materiel of the rebels. They were losing territory. They were being slaughtered and humiliated.

Early in the fighting in the north, about 100 Malian soldiers were captured by the rebels, their hands were tied and their throats were cut. The mothers and wives of Malian army soldiers, marched on the Presidential Palace to

demand that the Malian soldiers be better equipped and fed. There was a televised meeting between the women and ATT, the president.

Since Mali and Libya don't share a border, how did the rebels and their arms get back to Mali? Probably thru Algeria. And why were they allowed to enter Malian territory with the arms?

The area is also a major drug smuggling route.

There is an Al Qaeda affiliated group, AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Maghreb) , that operates in the area. The MNLA denies association with Al Qaeda.

There is also prospecting for big oil that has been going on in the area for years. No one is talking about this.

Another complication in the north and throughout Mali is that the rains were bad this year and the harvest was meager.

Presidential Election

There was a presidential election scheduled for the end of April. The current/deposed president, Amadou Toumani Toure (ATT) was term limited out and wasn't running. He had about 6 weeks left in his term.

ATT, a general, himself led a coup in 1991 to depose Moussa Traore, a military dictator who had been in power for 23 years. This was part of a popular uprising. There was a National Conference which wrote a new constitution. ATT stepped aside, there was an election and Alpha Oumar Konare (Alpha or AOK) came to power. Alpha served 2 5year terms as per the term limits in the constitution. Then ATT resigned from the military, got elected and is now at the end of his 2nd term.

Why a coup a month before the election? Odd.

The Coup - Wednesday, March 21, 2012



"In a moment a declaration from the military." This message was on the screen of the TV channel for about 7 hours the night of March 21/22. All the while the station was broadcasting music videos, including this one of Salif Keita, shot in Paris.

On the afternoon of March 21st, lower level soldiers staged the coup. The coup took place on exactly the 21st anniversary of the overthrow of the dictator by ATT. The soldiers left their military base a Kati, a town 15 km north of Bamako. There were unhappy about the handling of the war. There was fighting around the presidential palace- Koulouba, soldiers took over the national TV station- ORTM and sealed the borders, shut down the airport. An Air France flight from Paris to Bamako was turned around and sent back to Paris 2/3 of the way to Bamako.

A few soldiers have been killed in the coup. I've heard 3, I've also heard 10, I've heard whispers of more. The soldiers rode around in pickup trucks firing into the air. There was looting of stores for a few days. Gasoline stations were closed. Prices for gas spiked on the black market. All the government ministers were arrested including in the regions outside of Bamako. Some of their houses were looted. There was a curfew.

The general population has not been menaced. People stayed home thru the weekend and Monday, March 26, was a national holiday to commemorate the 1991 overthrow of the dictator and the establishment of the democracy. On Tuesday government workers went back to work. It seems that Bamako has gone back to "normal."

ATT himself was not hear from or seen until an interview published in RFI (Radio France International) today. It was first rumored that he was in the American Embassy. This has since been denied. Then he was rumored to be with his old unit at a military base in Bamako (Djikoroni Para). Today's interview says that he is in Mali but out of Bamako, that he is not under arrest and that he and his family are in good health.

The leader of the coup is Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo. He was trained in the US. He and his spokes person have appeared daily on ORTM to issue declarations and trumpet their support. They show a parade of associations, groups and personalities who have come that day to confer with the coup leaders. Their statements of support for the junta are broadcast in the nightly news.

Reaction

There has been an outpouring of condemnation from abroad including the Malian diaspora. The US, France and others have suspended aid. Mali has been expelled from the Africa Union and ECOWAS. The coup was condemned at the UN. There was a demonstration of 1,000 - 2,000 people in Bamako on Monday. People speak of the destruction of the constitutional order and the institutions that have developed over the last 20 years. The seizure of power by force is an atrocity.

There has been the public parade of support for the coup on TV. Inside Mali, people speak of the failures of the government and the political class- wide spread corruption, broken education system, high cost of living, the failure to deal with the rebellion in the north. They say that it wasn't a "real" democracy. Does that exist? How will the junta pay the workers who went back to work on Tuesday? And what will they say then?

Next

ECOWAS - Economic Community Of West African States, held a meeting in Abidjan yesterday. They issued a strong statement condemning the coup. They will send a delegation to Mali tomorrow. They have hinted at military intervention.



Josephine Baker in Mali, 1962