



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN-SOCIAL SCIENCE: F
POLITICAL SCIENCE

Volume 16 Issue 3 Version 1.0 Year 2016

Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal

Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA)

Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

French–Western Intervention in Mali: A Pandora’s Box?

By Eneemaku Idachaba

University of Ibadan

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GJHSS-F Classification : FOR Code: 360199p



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French – Western Intervention in Mali: A Pandora's Box?

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I. INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, the idealist intentions which gave birth to the UN and which are laid out in the Charter have not always been rigorously enforced or respected. Human rights laws are flouted by many states and the principle of self-interest is too often the driving force behind foreign policy decisions. Over the years Security Council members have periodically used their power and influence to further their own interests, at the cost of others. In particular during the Cold War years, the US and USSR in effect waged a “Third World War” through the many proxy civil wars and conflicts in the territories of other states. For instance, the Iran – Iraq war was beneficial to Western countries in pursuit of their own national interests. On the one hand, their interests were economic as they were selling arms in both states and making large profits. On the other hand, they had political interests as well, for both Iran and Iraq were regarded as dangerous nations with excessive military power.

Moreover, the challenges that have arisen in the Post-Cold War include the difficulties in tackling internal conflicts and civil wars effectively. Given that the UN system is predicated on the principle of non-interference in a state's “domestic affairs,” it has no mandate to intervene in internal conflicts without the express invitation and consent of the state or unless the UN Security Council deems there is a danger to international

peace and security. More often than not, except under humanitarian law, the UN is trapped in a paradox.¹ The question therefore, is, can the UN override the wishes of the governments of its members States to intervene and mediate in conflict where the disenfranchised population is challenging the legitimacy of that government? In other words, what is the optimal time for intervention before violence breaks out or later on? When does it become absolutely necessary? Who should intervene and at what stage? Why was it that the Malian conflicts were not prevented? What is the capacity of existing international organisations and structures to tackle the range of internal conflicts that have become prevalent in recent years? How possible, then, are the prevention of violent conflict and the elimination of warfare? These are issues explored in this article.

Intervention depends largely on two important factors, namely, whether the UN has a mandate to involve itself, and whether there is sufficient political will from within the international community. Hence when security and economic interests are threatened, the international community can be swiftly galvanized into action. In the absence of such threat, intervention frequently relies on pressure exerted by the wide public or pressure groups and lobbies.² Unfortunately, the consequences of intervening in such an arbitrary and spontaneous fashion can be disastrous. So, even with political will, adhoc interventions lacking clear objectives or understanding of a situation can exacerbate a crisis. Rarely, these days can a single government or international organisation act independently in any field without repercussions.³

For decades, Africa has been described by the West as a demoniac continent. In order to justify military intervention and imperialist expansion, Africa is again being depicted as the theatre of instability, violence and terrorism. The idea of imminent threat, a term in international law was articulated prior to the war against the people of Iraq consequent upon information that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Ten years after, with millions of

¹ Rupesinghe, K. etal 1998. *Civil War, Civil Peace: An Introduction to Conflict Resolution*. London: Pluto Press.

² WPR Article: *Global Insider: Despite Early Success, France's Mali Challenge is Long-Term*,” *World Politics review*. Com 2004-3-08.

³ Elangovan, E. 1995. *Managerial Third Party Dispute Intervention: A Prescriptive Model of Strategy Selection*. *Academy of Management Journal*.

people killed or displaced in Iraq, we now realize that the case for war had been presented with unclear motives and dubious evidence. As stated recently by US Senator Christopher Coons, in Bamako, al Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) posed a “very real threat to Africa, the US and the wider world”. By implication, this means that there is a new propaganda war, that jihadists across the Sahel pose an imminent threat to the US. But in reality who or what is this AQIM? What are its origins? What are their sources of sustenance, sponsorship and logistics? The widely circulated reports about terrorism in the Sahel, al-Qaeda in the Horn of Africa and the spread of Islamic terrorists across the length and breadth of Africa and the notion that AQIM was on the verge of overrunning Mali and West Africa had been promoted by France to justify the military intervention under the banner of Operation Serval. France has dispatched approximately 4,000 troops to repel jihadists who have taken over northern Mali.⁴

a) A Preliminary Overview

Mali an erstwhile French Colony, is a West African nation that has often been cited as a democratic model of sort. In March 2012, mutinous soldiers in Bamako, the capital, rose up in a coup d'état in anger, and overthrew the elected government of President Amadou Toumani Toure. The soldiers were angry over the government's ineffective handling of a rebellion by nomadic Tuareg rebels in the Malian vast northern desert. Within a short period after the coup, the Tuareg rebels first seized much of the north and were themselves pushed out by Islamist extremists. This development raised worries around the world about the creation of a potential sanctuary for terrorists. A mid military coup led by a US trained officer that overthrew the elected Malian government: Tuareg separatists in the northern regions of the country apparently loosely allied with various Islamist factions declared independence from the regime in Bamako with Mali's military reluctant to act decisively, France began a military intervention in January, 2013. After a round of air strikes failed to dislodge the rebels, the French military deployed ground troops and prepared for a lengthy effort to retake the country's north raising fears of a potentially much broader North African conflict.⁵

Following the seizure of a number of towns and the desecration of cultural centres by the jihadists, international opinion was sufficiently outraged to silence criticisms of the French intervention. On the other hand, emergent African opinion was divided over this intervention as France promoted the idea through a

massive propaganda and disinformation campaign that it was “invited” by the government of Mali. Furthermore, select pictures of Malian citizens celebrating the routing of the jihadists from towns that have been seized since January 12, 2013, gave legitimacy to the idea that Africans welcome the French military intervention. Yet, after this mingled “successful” intervention, Western media outlets are replete with tales that it is the alliance between France and its allies along with the US that can protect this region of Africa from being over-run by terrorists. This portends, without a doubt, another looming protracted war involving innocent Malians unless a viable regional solution can be implemented without delay.⁶ This assertion is based on the fact that in little over a year, Mali has plunged from rebellion to coup into a full-blown conflict in what could evolve into a contagious regional crisis.

The intensity of civil discontent concentrated in the long contested northern regions of Mali was obvious following a popular rebellion amongst the Tuaregs against an embattled government rapidly losing its grip on political power. In the heat of an endemic economic crisis and demands for sweeping political reform to address corruption, favouritism in making political appointment and lack of democratic representation, the government crumbled consequent upon a swift military coup, leaving a fragile interim government to head off a mushrooming northern insurgency. At this particular juncture, French military intervention, then appeared inevitable especially after a rebel advance towards the capital city of Bamako. However, the prospects of a French-led military operation appeared unfavourable to the Malian government. Moreso, when the UN, and notably ECOWAS and the African Union (AU) only months earlier placed in motion strategies for regional intervention. The hijacking of the Tuareg rebellion led by the MLNA, by radical Islamist groups proved to be a major catalyst for French involvement.⁷

The problems being faced by Malian people is more Malian than French. The Malians are being used and instigated by external forces with their consent. By implication Mali suffers from the plague of modern neocolonialism, subjugation and exploitation making it incapable of independent development. On the one hand, the conflict has been instigated internally by the scramble for power and resources which took on ethnic/regional and religious colourations.⁸ The conflict parties were divided into Christian held south and Muslim held north. On the other hand the conflict was ignited by France's overwhelming influence in the affairs of the country through propagation of its interests – subjugation and exploitation of Malian resources.

⁴ Serge, D. 2012. “Mali's Isolated Junta Seeks Help to Stop Tuareg Juggernaut” *Modern Ghana.com Retrieved 2012*. See France: How was it dragged into the Malian Conflict” BBC News 2013.

⁵ “Facts: Islamic groups present in Northern Mali. Google News. *Agence France-Presse*. 2013. See David, Lewis and Adams, Diarra. “Mali Coup Leader Seeks help as Rebels Seize Towns.” Reuters 2012.

⁶ “Five more African Countries Pledge to send Troops into Mali: Nigerian Minister. *NZWeek Retrieved 2013*.

⁷ Felix Bate 2013. “France Bombs Mali Rebels: African States Ready Troops”. *Reuters: Retrieved 2013*.

⁸ “France Begins Mali Military Intervention Plan” *Reuters 2013*.

Furthermore, French is interested in monitoring the activities in Mali in order to control the political leadership to ensure they play according to the French script. To say that, France, Mali’s erstwhile colonial master, remains the nation’s most intimate associate backer is putting it mildly. However, France intervened for peace because of its commitments to maintain a peaceful country where continued exploitation of its resources will be unhindered. This further points to the fact that France has always dominated and intervened in virtually all aspects in the affairs of Mali through direct military, political social and economic matters. In the same vein, France has an overwhelming interest in Mali, and maintains a stronghold of its economy – commerce and currency which vitiates national dependence favours France to the detriment of Mali and tends to limit or mar the development possibilities of the latter.

b) *Conflict in Northern Mali: The Heart of the Matter*

Since January 2012, several insurgent groups have been fighting and campaigning against the Malian government for independence or greater autonomy for Azawad, an area in the northern part of Mali. President Amadou Tourmani Toure was ousted in a coup d’etat over his handling of the crisis, barely one month before a presidential election was to have been held. The soldiers, calling themselves the National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDR) took control and suspended the Malian constitution.⁹ The mutineers cited Toure’s alleged poor handling of the insurgency coupled with the lack of equipment for the Malian Army as their reasons for the coup. However, the coup was “unanimously condemned” by the international community, including the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the AU, and the ECOWAS, the latter giving CNDR 72 hours ultimatum to relinquish control or be sanctioned.

Consequent upon the attendant instability following the coup, Mali’s three largest northern cities, namely, Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu were overrun by the pro-independence rebels. The National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) an organisation fighting to make Azawad an independent territory for the Tuareg people took control of the area by April, 2012, called off its offensive and proclaimed Azawad’s independence from Mali.¹⁰ The MNLA was initially backed by the Islamist group, Ansar Dine, but the relationship broke off when the latter began to impose strict “Sharia Law,” resulting into conflicting visions for the intended new state of Azawad. At this point, the government of Mali, asked for foreign military help in

order to retake the north. On 11 January 2013, the French military began operations against the Islamists. Other forces from African Union (AU) were deployed shortly after. With help from the international coalition, the Islamist held territory were retaken by the Malian military.

Despite previous difficulty in maintaining alliance between secular and Islamist factions, the MNLA allied itself with the Islamist groups, Ansar Dine and AQIM and began the 2012, northern Mali conflict. It was alleged that after the end of the Libyan Civil War, an influx of weaponry led to the arming of the Tuaregs in their demand for independence for the Azawad. Worse still, the leader of the MNLA, Bilal Ag Acherif was reported to have said that the onus was on Mali to either give the Saharan people their self-determination or they would take it themselves. Similarly, the leader of Ansar Dine Islamist groups has been reported to be linked to AQIM.¹¹

c) *The West and Mali: So much to do, and so hard to do*

Failing to learn the difficult lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan European nations led by France and in unison with the US have become entangled in what may turn out to become a Pandora’s Box or protracted military intervention with disastrous implications for the long term, peace, security and development for the people of Mali. This places under question the viability of short-term or quick fix military action in the region. It is pertinent to note that the justification for a new counter-terrorism front are primarily driven by the consolidation of US AFRIGOM where Africa’s militarization has been steadily pursued in tandem with the protection of the region’s vast natural resources as a key strategic priority. Most third World countries today have been tuned to depend on the developed countries for sustenance, a system which increases the rate of exploitation and underdevelopment. In Africa, most countries depend on their former colonial authorities for sustenance which includes political, economic, military and social aid. In other words, wealthy nations actively counter attempts by dependent countries to resist their influences by means of economic sanctions or the use of military force.¹²

West Africa has experienced catastrophic crisis whose cause may be traceable to the squabble for wealth, power and resources. The massive exploitation of resources by the former colonial powers and the control of every aspect of life by these powers have increasingly generated conflict in the region. It is often argued that France more than any other former colonial

⁹ “Mali Tuareg Rebels’ call on Independence Rejected” BBC 2012. Retrieved 6 April, 2012. See also Andy Morgan 2012. “The Causes of the Uprising in Northern Mali” Think Africa Press. Retrieved March 2012.

¹⁰ “Tuareg Rebels Declare the Independence of Azawad, North of Mali” Al Arabia 2012. Retrieved 6 April, 2012.

¹¹ Ibrahim, Jibrin 2012. “West Africa: Mali and the Azawad Question,” *All Africa.com*. Retrieved 2 April, 2012. See also Marc F. 2012. Mali: A case study of a complex African Crisis. *Marcfonbaustier.tumblr.com*.

¹² Peter, W. 2002: Understanding Conflict resolution: War, Peace and the Global System. *London: Sage Publishing*.

power has openly controlled the affairs and administration of its former colonies. Thus, the phrase “neocolonialism” was coined in the early 1960s to buttress this antecedent by Nkrumah of Ghana. It was argued that France uses mercenaries to maintain friendly governments or overthrow unfriendly ones in its former colonies. A classic illustration used to define modern neocolonialism is “Francafrique”, a term that refers to the continuing close relationship between France and some leaders of its former African colonies. Leaders often mentioned were Omar Bongo of Gabon, Felix Houphouet-Boigny, of Cote d'Ivoire, Gnassingbe Eyadema of Togo, Denis Sasson-Nguesso of the republic of Congo, Idriss Deby of Chad, and Hamani Diori of Niger to mention just a few.¹³

Following requests from both the Malian government and ECOWAS, for foreign military intervention on October, 2012 the UNSC, under chapter IV of the UN Charter, unanimously passed a ‘French resolution’ approving an African-led force to assist the Malian army in combating the islamist militants. Ironically, the UN, while authorizing the planning of force and dedicating its resources to the same planning, UNSC resolution 2071, does not authorize the deployment of force.¹⁴ However, UNSC resolution 2085 authorises the deployment of an African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) for a period of one year. In addition, during the AU Summit held on 27 January, 2013 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the outgoing chairperson of the organisation, Thomas Boni Yayi, the President of Benin, told fellow leaders that their response to the Malian conflict has been too slow, and thanked France, the country’s former colonial ruler, for taking the lead in its military intervention there.¹⁵

d) *Intervention in Mali: A Pandora's Box or Cornucopia?*

The military intervention in Mali by President Francois Hollande’s government to support a military coup-installed regime and supported by the UN and Obama has resulted in civilian massacres and possibly war crimes. This was followed by the largely discredited peace prize awarded Hollande by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) for his “valuable contribution to peace and stability in Africa”. Of course, that contribution was the French government’s bloody military campaign that began earlier in defence of the illegitimate regime ruling parts of Mali out of the capital city of Bamako. Hence, the armed intervention in Mali – justified under the guise

of fighting Islamic extremism defending democracy”, and enforcing UN decrees which included aerial bombings of rebel targets and thousands of French troops deployed on the ground. Even as France claims to be waging a war on terror in Mali, it has been among the most loudest supporters of ruthless Islamic jihad in Syria targeting the secular dictatorship of Bashir al-Assad. In a statement released by the UN after a jury’s meeting: “*Having assessed the dangers and the repercussions of the situation on Africa and on Mali in particular, as well as on the rest of the world, the jury appreciated the solidarity shown by France to the people of Africa.*” The jury also cited Hollande’s efforts to unify the poverty stricken African nation, condemning the alleged “violation of Mali’s territorial integrity” by secessionist rebels in the north. The long oppressed nomadic tribesmen, who have been seeking an independent state for generations, would have to succumb to the internationally backed central regime or face invasion. By the end of the year 2012, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution calling for armed international intervention in Mali to oust the ragtag rebels. Previously, the UN had approved military invasion in northern Africa involving the French government to support self-described al-Qaeda leaders in Libya against the late strongman, Muammar Gadhafi.¹⁶

Citing other experts, Newman opined that the bizarre but brutal military campaign-based almost entirely on fantasy and fiction – could have something to do with promoting the new French Rafale fighter jet or other nefarious machinations. France invaded the African country of Mali under false pretense, with no legal justification leaving a bloody trail of that nation’s destruction lying in the wake. McAdams writes, “War is peace and it brings bigger dividends.” Marc Travedic sounds the alarm about the potential blow back from this controversial invasion. A UK based author and radio host, Jason Liosatos in a widely cited analysis of the UN announcement contends that the French invasion of its former colony was really about securing resources rather than terror. It suffices to say that looking at the facts and reality, there is a great difference between cynicism and reality. It appears that the UN and its allies will continue rewarding those who faithfully advance statism and globalism with dubious awards – regardless of how many people are killed or how absurd it may sound to clear thinking and sane individuals. The same European nations that helped

¹³ Barongo, Y. 1980. Neocolonialism and African Politics: A Survey of the Impact of Neocolonialism on African Political Behaviour. *New York: Vantage Press.*

¹⁴ Serge, D. 2012 Op cit. See “UN Security Council aims for Intervention in Mali:” *Tapai Times* via AFP 2012. See also “UN Adopts Resolution on Northern Council Paves way for Possible Intervention Force in Northern Mali” *United Nations* 2012.

¹⁵ Salima, T. 2012. “The Limits of Military Intervention.” *El Watan* Archived from the original.

¹⁶ Newman, Alex 2013. A Foreign Correspondent for the New American is Currently based in Europe: *anewman@the newamerican. Com.* See also Mark, D.: *BBC International Development Correspondents* 2013.

fight the Taliban in Afghanistan have financed terrorist in Africa by paying ransoms for hostages.¹⁷

The threat to severe airbase, the biggest in central Mali, appears to have been what made French move. Of course, it is possible there were also other sparks to the war between the French and the Islamists. The West sometimes attributed an extremist image of the Islamists. One implication of this is that while the French military may have scored impressive short-term success, AQIM and its allies will almost certainly be back to try to re-implement their plans at a later date. Hence, a Pandora's box or a source of more troubles. Worse still, in retaliation, militants in Algeria seized dozens of hostages at an internationally managed gas field, leading to the deaths of hostages and kidnappers among others.

In addition, the hijacking of the MNLA-led Tuareg rebellion by radical Islamists groups proved to be the catalyst for French involvement. However, claims of Mali's imminent collapse into a terrorist stronghold capable of launching attacks against the West appear at best speculative and at worst negligent considering the recent history of the abortive war on terror so far.

e) *Conflict Intervention: A Conceptual Discourse*

Conflict intervention entails third parties coming into a particular conflict through mediation, conciliation and/or forceful means. Albert describes a third party intervener into a conflict as an unbiased and neutral person, government, organisation or institution who is interested in peaceful settlement of the conflict.¹⁸ According to him, if the third party is biased and not neutral then such intervention is not credible. A third party therefore, should not take side with either of the parties involved in a conflict and should be willing to discharge their responsibility without fear or favour. Kriesberg identifies four basic attributes of third party intervention in conflict, namely, impartiality and creditability, independence, degree of prestige and authority, required skills and flexibility. Where this is not the case, intervention is biased. A third party must not have an interest in the conflict.¹⁹ They must also not come into the conflict with a conceptual framework upon which they intend to execute their task. Similarly, and above all, a third party must be fair, unprejudiced, objectives, equitable and disinterested. Measuring by these criteria, the French and, of course, Western intervention in Mali is far from meeting these conditions.

¹⁷ "International Condemnation for Mali Coup – Africa," *Al Jazeera*. 2012. See West African ECOWAS Leaders Impose Mali Sanctions" BBC 2013. See ECOWAS Gives Mali Leaders Ultimatum to Relinquish power", BBC News 2012.

¹⁸ Albert, I. O. 2001. Introduction to Third-Party Intervention in Communities Conflicts. Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Ltd.

¹⁹ Amin, S. 2001. "Imperialism and Globalisation". *Monthly Review* Vol. 53, No. 2.

f) *Thinking Critically*

A critical account emphasizes the concerns and interest of the less-powerful, while not ignoring the constraints imposed by the more powerful exploring how the society of states might become more hospitable to the promotion of justice in world politics. In reality, critical theory's project which places the powerless, the developing and the dispossessed at the heart of theory is a pretext which masks the coercive nature of an order policed and dominated by the great powers. But critical theorists are sensitive to the dangers of a few Western States setting themselves up as guardians of the world common good.²⁰ The success or not of critical international theory will depend on its ability to develop analysis which advance the practical political task of reconstructing world politics. This article will facilitate keeping up of such momentum. Focusing on Mali, many of the ideas, concepts and issues it raises are relevant across continental boundaries – offers salutary lessons at a time when the international community is struggling to define global policies for conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution. In particular, it highlights the need for a more critical understanding of the nature and dynamics of intervention and their implications for compliance and the development of international humanitarian policy given the multifaceted nature of the problem. Finally, such a discourse is part of a process of creating improved mechanisms of accountability and effectiveness in a world order that has so far promised, but failed to deliver equity and peace and the good life, especially in the developing nations of the world.

II. CONCLUSION

The Malian crisis emerged as a result of economic decline, power struggle and unguarded external influence. Religious and ethnic sentiments helped to escalate the crisis leaving behind an atmosphere of uncertainty and unrest. This article probes French and Western activities in Mali and how these activities have contributed in undermining the country, leading to conflict. The article also attempts to unearth the unseen influence to conflict in Mali and how it can be checked. It then goes to conclude that development only strives in a peaceful environment and the lessons of past conflicts can be tapped for national development.

It suggests that a new framework for tackling conflicts to allow for the transformation of violent conflicts into peaceful disputes be put in place. There is the need for greater collaboration between state organs and the wealth of non-state organisations that have emerged. The E.U and AU should take urgent and

²⁰ Ankie, M. and Hoogvelt 2001. *Globalisation and Post-colonial World: The New Political Economy of Development*. London: John Hopkins University Press.

concrete steps towards redefining their mandates in relation to conflict prevention. However, there is a great deal of work to be done on their theoretical and practical implications. There is a need to establish mutual accountability, responsibility and an agreed code of conduct or guidelines for intervention and mediation into intra-state conflicts. Conflict intervention, in this case, should be handled by a neutral party within the framework of an African solution to African problem.

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