

# BEYOND THE MILITARIST APPROACH: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR MALI

Francesco Merlo

With the July presidential elections rapidly approaching, Mali still appears unable to guarantee complete control over its national territory and borders. Despite the peace agreement that was signed in 2015 and major military successes by the international forces (especially the French soldiers of the Barkhane Operation), important parts of the north-eastern regions still seem out of Bamako's control as jihadist infiltrations in central provinces have spread insecurity. Alarming, conflict narratives are increasingly mobilizing ethnic differences, deepening pre-existing social divisions and undermining long-term national stability.

The security crisis in Mali has deep roots. First, it is linked to its geographical challenges, because it is a land-locked state, subject to desertification of rural areas and exposed to wider regional instability. Second, with over 30 ethnic groups, Malian civil society is highly fragmented and these divisions are particularly strong between sub-Saharan identities (where the Bambara predominate) and Arab-Berber identities (whose main group are the Tuareg). Third, Mali has a long history of governance, especially in its north-eastern provinces, where poor administration has enforced social, economic and political inequalities between those living

in the south-west, mainly of sub-Saharan ethnicities, and those in the north-east, where the Tuareg are concentrated. The combination of these structural fragilities has led to the exacerbation of tensions between ethnic groups, where the growing use of identity politics has been instrumental in deepening the inter-ethnic cleavages and sharpening the conflict.

Although militarily defeated by the international coalition, jihadists and Tuareg autonomists still hold significant influence in Mali. Indeed, the restoration of the official government in rural areas has led to the resurgence of inefficiency, corruption and ineffective justice processes in provinces exhausted by years of war. This has caused frustration among locals and new infiltrations of non-state governance providers, mainly jihadist groups. Responses by the central government and its international allies have been primarily military; they have prevented new escalations but have remained oblivious to popular requests for renewed governance practices. Additionally, the presence of foreign soldiers has undermined the credibility of Bamako, who is accused by insurgent groups of being instrumental for a new colonization of Mali.

tnote

TORINO  
WORLD  
AFFAIRS  
INSTITUTE

Djinguereber Mosque, Timbuktu. In the current Malian crisis, Islam has had a prominent role in the shaping of national politics. (Source: Pixabay, Kibi86)



Current political tendencies keep privileging such a short-sighted military approach, and President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita himself has stated that only active military engagement by UN peacekeepers would resolve Mali's security deficit. On the other hand, where programmes for social and economic reforms have been implemented (notably through the G5 Sahel institutional framework), they have lacked the financial and political energy necessary to ensure lasting change. Hence, current responses focused on state-building and militarization have led to poor security outputs, neither addressing national tensions nor fighting ethnic narratives of conflict. Alternative peacebuilding approaches, focusing on social appeasement, thus appear necessary, and proposals can be made through analysis of successful models in comparable contexts.

In 1964, the newborn Tanzania presented surprising analogies with today's Mali. Very similarly, society was fragmented into multiple identities (over 120 different languages), with the population living off poor subsistence farming throughout an immense national territory (1.2 million km<sup>2</sup>, as compared with 950,000 km<sup>2</sup> for Mali) where urbanization was concentrated in the capital city, Dar es Salaam (until 1973); even population density appeared equally low (12/km<sup>2</sup>, as compared with 11/km<sup>2</sup> for Mali), while the enormous countryside had similarly poor infrastructure.

In addition, low levels of per capita income combined to a geographically and ethnically based concentration of welfare; the most valuable economic activities were located on the coast and in Dar es Salaam, and were conducted by Asians and Europeans. Thus, the geographically and ethnically shaped economic inequalities that have contributed to instability in contemporary Mali were also present in Tanzania in 1964, similarly combining to create a high degree of social fragmentation and the conditions for similar levels of conflict.

Despite its context of civil wars and apartheid regimes in neighbouring states, which contributed to mass immigration and rebel sanctuaries, Tanzania has witnessed half a century of sustained peace. Why?

Many and more pages have been written on the 'Tanzanian miracle'. Most analysts identify this unique peace as the positive outcome of national policies: through inclusive nation-building, Tanzania has avoided instrumental and conflictual uses of ethnically based narratives. The strong socialist and pacifist ideology of charismatic president Nyerere (1964–1984) was also decisive for the inclusiveness of the whole nation-building process: his efforts particularly focused on the overcoming of tribal and former colonial institutions and drew on a socialist plan for rural development (Ujamaa) and the creation of a public education system based on Swahili. Despite some blunders, Tanzania's 'social cement' has proved to be very resilient: national peace survived the aggression of Idi Amin's Uganda (1978–1979), long years of deep economic crisis (from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s) and the transition to political pluralism in 1995.

As peacebuilding is translated into militarization, Mali lacks efforts to appease internal divisions. In contrast, a Tanzanian-like inclusive approach to nation-building may provide more effective answers to Malian difficulties in defusing social conflict. Specifically, at least four aspects could be shaped by nation-building: education, political and also economic inclusion of the north-eastern provinces, and an aggregative use of the Islamic religion.

The creation of a public system for education is decisive in shaping the national identity. Since Modibo Keita's presidency (1960–1968), however, Malian education has insisted on sub-Saharan traditions and history, thus leading to an assimilative approach that has humiliated and frustrated the national minorities, who have in turn demanded equal respect and inclusivity.

Furthermore, structural cleavages in Malian society have been influenced by politics and economics. Solicited since the early 1960s, a more effective involvement of the state in north-eastern regions has so far been elusive. Approaches granting higher political representation to these populations, but also inclusive plans for economic and infrastructural development, would more effectively address their long-standing demands.

Finally, a greater use of Islam as social cement appears promising. The religion of 95% of the population, Sunni Islam seems to be the major touchstone between ethnicities; the peculiarities of Malian religious tradition, with its emphasis on Sufi principles, have shaped a pacifist religious doctrine, ideal for the appeasement exercise of nation-building. Moreover, Muslim religious precepts of fraternity and solidarity between believers would contribute extensively, in their moderate political perspective, to the creation of feelings of social union and community.

As the growing infiltration of jihadist narratives in Malian society requires higher involvement by the state in defence of traditional pacifist religious perspectives, such intervention would probably attract international benevolence; despite a partial abandonment of the French heritage of strict laicity, local jihadist infiltrations require responses that go beyond the current militarization strategy. Still, nation-building alone should not be considered the solution to all Mali's problems. Nation-building is a long-term process and because of the urgency of the situation in Mali, a more holistic approach, integrating state-building and nation-building, is required. It follows that whoever wins the presidential elections on July 29 – and in all probability that will be Ibrahim Boubacar Keita – will need to deal with the limits of comprehensive militarization and find effective responses for the mounting demands of Malian populations.

“  
**Current peacebuilding approaches focused on state-building and militarization have led to poor security outputs, neither addressing national tensions nor fighting ethnic narratives of conflict.**  
”



[Francesco Merlo](#) is Junior Research Fellow at [T.wai](#) and Chief Editor of [TOMorrowTurin](#).