

Book Review: *The Limits of Democracy and the Postcolonial Nation State: Mali's Democratic Experiment Falters, while Jihad and Terrorism Grow in the Sahara*

By Robin Edward Poulton and Raffaella Greco Tonegutti

Review by Ibrahim Bangura

For several decades, Mali has been trapped in a difficult past and a more contentious present, characterized by conflicts in the north of the country, military coups, corruption, and bad governance. While the tensions have not necessarily led to the complete collapse of the Malian state, they have undermined and fragmented it, consequently exposing it to negative internal and external influences including jihadists, terrorists, drug traffickers from South America, and corporations seeking oil and uranium beneath the Sahara Desert. Consequently, Mali has been a hub for terrorist and jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Coupled with this, the crisis in Mali's Northern region—labeled one of Africa's "forgotten conflicts"—had by 2012 transitioned into a protracted conflict with the potential to destabilize not just Mali, but the entire Sahel and Maghreb regions. The situation was apparently escalated by a military coup d'état in March 2012, carried out by junior officers of the Malian Army led by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo.

Shortly thereafter—during June and July 2012—Northern Mali had become an independent jihadist narco-state: the Malian Army abandoned its bases and Algerian-led al-Qaeda forces took over the main towns. As the situation deteriorated further, the al-Qaeda look-alikes threatened to take over the whole country, and Mali's former colonial master, France, felt compelled to intervene. On January 11, 2013, France deployed its revered Foreign Legion, almost five and a half decades after Mali's independence. Later that year, the United Nations deployed 12,000 troops, established the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and helped a force of French and African troops from Mali's neighbors to contain the tension and transition Mali again to democracy.

While there exists rich and extensive literature on Mali's ancient history, very limited writing exists on the country's recent history. This book by Robin Poulton and Raffaella Greco Tonegutti breaks that barrier, as it presents a comprehensive account of Mali's recent history and provides well-informed perspectives and arguments that significantly deepen the reader's understanding of the Malian context. Chapter 6, in particular, provides useful descriptions of the twenty-odd armed movements involved in this complex Saharan conflict (and even more breakaway groups have emerged in the past six months).

The book presents a critical reflection on the failures of both national and international actors in seeking a comprehensive solution to the Saharan crisis. Such a solution would address root causes, de-escalate the tensions in the north, and improve good governance in Mali. At the moment, foreign interventions appear to be focused on fighting radical groups, rather than addressing the conditions under which they thrive.

A vital argument of the book is that Mali's problems transcend internal politics, that "Mali is a victim of corporate desires for mineral extraction, but also of cocaine trafficking from South

America and a struggle for the leadership of Sunni Islam, all of which have helped undermine Mali's fragile, secular institutions" (2016:1). This assertion provides an interesting perspective on external actors and their influence on Mali. However, for external actors to thrive, the internal system has to be either dysfunctional or complicit with the external agents. Thus, the existential fragility compounded by corruption in the nation's capital represents as much of a threat as those posed by external actors.

The authors claim that under President Alpha Oumar Konaré, the country enjoyed ten years of relative peace and stability from 1992 to 2002. Efforts at rebuilding the Malian state produced positive results as governance was strengthened. Thus, the conversations on Mali were shaped by the need for a transformative shift to a more democratic outlook. However, this changed with the election of President Amadou Toumani Touré in 2002, whose rule engendered a democratic deficit and corruption, which created conditions for the coup d'état in 2012. The gains that had been made easily disappeared, and the country disintegrated into chaos.

The quick deterioration exposed Mali's fragility, and its lack of sustainable and resilient systems and structures. The struggle that ensued presented an entry point for terrorists and jihadists who had used the security gaps in the country to strategically position themselves for several years, and the instability provided the space for jihadist operations. The book indicates that, even though Mali now has a democratically elected government led by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, the situation remains fragile.

To enrich the arguments in this well-written book, the authors have used a unique approach of presenting conversations with key political figures, mediators, and commentators. The conversations provide deep reflections that intrinsically add to the reader's understanding of the complexities of the Malian crisis. Furthermore, the conversations present academic and practical perspectives that are not found in any other book on Mali in the twenty-first century. While some of the arguments may be controversial, it is important for the reader to be exposed to them. This is a major work of scholarship, providing unique insights into the security and socio-economic development of the strategic Sahel region.