

Land Grabs, Radicalization, and Political Violence: Lessons from Mali and Beyond

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“Mali: Islamist Rebels Smash Historic Sufi Tombs”
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IT IS SOMETIMES SAID THAT UNITED STATES MILITARY PERSONNEL AND policymakers are more interested in making history than reading it. Due to this lack of local knowledge and cultural awareness, many of the United States’ modern wars—primarily those unconventional or irregular in nature—have turned out rather poorly. Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq illustrate this point. Of course, the United States’ adversaries in these wars also have their blind spots, one of the most egregious of which is demonstrated by contemporary militant Islamists, who too often are more interested in destroying history—even that of their own culture—than in cherishing it. The Taliban’s demolition of 1,500-year-old Buddhist statues in Afghanistan in 2001 and, more recently, the obliteration of ancient Sufi shrines in Mali by the al Qaeda-linked Ansar Dine in 2012, serve as reminders that America’s tendency to underestimate history pales in comparison to the banal intolerance many militant Islamist groups express for ideas not their own.

Economic decisions made by Mali’s government have further destabilized an already struggling country.

What are the origins of militant Islam in Mali? Was it imported via the World Wide Web after 9/11? Was it brought across the border as chaos spread through neighboring Libya? Or have the seeds always been present in Mali, but lain dormant? Like most countries, Mali’s situation is complicated and can be looked at through a variety of lenses. As outsiders peering in from afar, we find it useful to consider the recent upswing in political unrest in Mali through the lens of economic globalization. Recent research identifies three main reasons for the emergence of the militant group Ansar Dine in Mali: 1) the diffusion of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from Algeria throughout much of North Africa; 2) the recent civil war in Libya; and 3) Tuareg tribal politics.¹ While we agree with these findings, we suggest that the role played by economic policies both inside and outside Mali should not be overlooked. In this essay, we will consider how economic decisions made by Mali’s government have further destabilized an already struggling country, and enhanced the conditions in which a militant group like Ansar Dine can survive and thrive. Our basic premise is simple: Mali today illustrates how “old” issues of land tenure and food production, the very issues that have generated wars throughout the ages, remain important factors to investigate in many countries that now face or are likely to face civil unrest or insurgency.

Political Instability in Mali

The news out of Mali in 2012 has been nothing but bad, and the roots of its present discord go back decades. Roughly speaking, the country of Mali (1.24 million square miles, or roughly twice the size of Alaska) can be broken into two regions: the larger sparsely populated and underdeveloped north,

which is the home of Saharan Tuaregs and Arabs, and the more developed south, populated by sub-Saharan Arab and non-Arab ethnic groups. The Tuaregs have been in intermittent rebellion against the southern political establishment that has controlled Mali since France granted independence in 1960. The political center in the capital, Bamako, has never fully brought the north, referred to as Azawad by Tuaregs, under the authority of the state.

Recently emboldened by weapons and supplies obtained during the Libyan civil war, a new Tuareg paramilitary organization emerged in 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). While claiming secular status, the MNLA quickly aligned itself with the Islamist elements of AQIM and Ansar Dine in an effort to expel the government's military forces from the north. Building on a few initial successes, the northern rebellion took off when the democratically elected Malian president, Amadou Toumani Toure, was overthrown in a surprise military coup in late March 2012. Led by disgruntled soldiers upset about a lack of support from the government, the coup in the south had an immediate impact in the north.

The Malian soldiers, mostly southerners, evacuated the three northern regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu (essentially two-thirds of the country), thus giving the Saharan rebels an easy victory. Even as they filled the power vacuum, however, the rebels soon turned on each other, with the Islamist Ansar Dine expelling the secular MNLA. This marked the beginning of the "Talibanization" of northern Mali (including the destruction of the ancient Sufi tombs noted above). By mid-July 2012, the MNLA withdrew its demands for an independent state and sought international assistance to deal with Ansar Dine and AQIM.²

While this current Islamist power-grab in Mali can be seen as the result of a confluence of both long-standing grievances and shifts in the military balance of power, the inability of the central government to regain control is perhaps surprising. The truth, according to U.S. military advisors, is that the Tuaregs and the Islamists in the north are exceedingly weak militarily, and they could only have gained control as a result of internal discord among the traditional ruling southern elite.³ Why, after years of democratic and economic stability in southern Mali, did the government and military become so ineffective? As political outsiders, we must not overstate our claims to understand; nevertheless, based on our broad



knowledge of the socio-economic origins of conflict in other societies, we encourage the reader to consider the following analysis.

The Roots of Discontent

Sub-Saharan Mali is a predominantly rural society, where exported cotton, accounting for more than 80 percent of the country's export revenues, is the backbone of the economy. In 2003 President Amadou Toumani Touré illustrated the crop's importance when he co-authored a *New York Times* op-ed with Burkina Faso's President Blaise Compaoré, entitled "Your Farm Subsidies Are Strangling Us."⁴ They described how American farm subsidies, in effect, lowered cotton prices on the international market, resulting in a grossly unequal status quo in which Malian farmers were paid less than true market value for their goods:

In the period from 2001 to 2002, America's 25,000 cotton farmers received more in subsidies—some \$3 billion—than the entire economic output of Burkina Faso, where two million people depend on cotton. Further, United States subsidies are concentrated on just 10 percent of its cotton farmers. Thus, the payments to about 2,500 relatively well-off farmers has the unintended but nevertheless real effect of impoverishing some 10 million rural poor people in West and Central Africa.⁵

Their complaints seem plausible, and they echo a common criticism of U.S. farm subsidies by the country's competitors in the global market. To make matters worse, long before the military coup in Mali, farmers were complaining that government mismanagement was delaying payments for their cotton crops until months after the harvest, exposing them to very real subsistence pressures.

Mali's cotton follies were further heightened in August 2008, when the democratically elected legislature voted to completely privatize the cotton industry. The government divided the state-owned Malian Company for the Development of Textiles (CMDT) into four subsidiaries and offered them up for sale, breaking its own trade monopoly and fully exposing the country's farmers to international pressures. Reports suggest that by December 2010, the government in Bamako had negotiated the lease of 544,500 hectares of Malian land to just 22 foreign investment firms, with 40 percent of the land targeted for the production of biofuel. In 2011, a Chinese company, the Yuemei Group, which owns cotton fields and garment plants elsewhere in Africa, agreed to buy two of the CMDT subsidiaries in southern and western Mali. In response, southern peasants mobilized against these changes.

In November 2011, Malian peasants converged on the southern village of Nyéléni to protest land sales to foreign interests. Other participants came from 30 different countries, speaking to the international nature of the threat of land grabs. At the conference, Ibrahim Coulibaly of the National Confederation of Peasant Organizations emphasized the human costs: "We have seen an increase in land grabbing. Just in Mali alone the government has

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committed to give 800,000 hectares to business investors. But these lands are not empty! People may not have legal titles, but they have been there for generations, even centuries.”⁶

A new NGO, the Syndicate of Peasants of Mali, held its first meeting in February 2012, when more than 600 peasants gathered in the city of Koutiala to express their concerns about privatization and related agricultural policies. According to Brian Peterson and Brandon County, “Beyond land and farming, runaway privatization has made inroads into other sectors of the economy: the railroad, the telecommunications company, utilities, gold mines, and vegetable oil factories are controlled by private stakeholders with a penchant for cost-cutting, producing stagnant wages, discontent, layoffs, and protests. But the government has ignored workers’ voices, and labor leaders have been dismissed and even imprisoned.”⁷ In short, self-generated unrest eroded the foundations of popular sovereignty.

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A Stable Democracy Fails

In March 2012, when soldiers of the Malian armed forces mutinied, the people of Mali largely supported the military’s action, despite the country’s long history as a democracy. It would be inaccurate to suggest that a rising tide of mass discontent alone sparked the coup; it would not be inaccurate, however, to infer that the southern population had lost faith in the government and was willing to give the soldiers a chance to correct the government’s perceived mistakes in the economic arena. The Syndicate of Peasants in Mali supported the military junta and asked it to pursue four goals: restore the ideals of 1991’s pro-democracy movement; manage the crisis in the country’s north; fight corruption; and work to restore expropriated lands.⁸ As of this writing, the military regime has yet to make any meaningful progress in governance, and as a result, it appears unlikely that the change in leadership in the south will significantly hinder Ansar Dine in its quest to further reshape northern Mali into a Salafi bastion in the heart of West Africa. As incidents of sickening juridical brutality, reminiscent of the worst years of Taliban rule continue to mount, however, the Islamists of Mali may be sowing the seeds of rebellion. But even if their own government is too inept to act, many sectors of the civilian population may welcome the international intervention that is now being considered by the UN Security Council.⁹



Beyond Mali: A Wider Problem

The Malian government’s land reform policy played what seems to be an important role in instigating the political divisions in the south that both contributed to the military coup and perpetuated an environment in which the Ansar Dine can thrive. These so-called “land grabs” reflect a broader trend, whereby states (and states in Africa in particular) seize arable land from local farmers—in some cases, hundreds of thousands of hectares at a time—and either lease or sell this acreage to foreign investors. In turn, the significant populations displaced by these land grabs can become politically volatile.

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For instance, in Uganda, over 20,000 villagers claim to have been evicted from their land.¹⁰ This population is ripe for rebellion. In addition, Human Rights Watch reported in January 2012 that it has evidence that approximately 70,000 indigenous people in the western Gambella region of Ethiopia were forcibly relocated when the land they lived on was leased to foreign investors.¹¹ These people are likely to turn against the government. The Oakland Institute, a U.S.-based policy think tank, estimates that these land deals have displaced perhaps millions of small farmers from their ancestral lands across the entire continent of Africa.¹² Not only does this displacement undermine the livelihoods of millions of Africans, but researchers point out that, in Africa, “the close association of land and identity has received much attention.

Land and natural resources are not merely assets, sources of income, and commodities but represent repositories of ancestral spirits, sites for sacred rituals, and historical landmarks that tie the individual to particular locations and landscapes.”¹³



Taking into account

both the economic and cultural value of these holdings, governments that choose to displace their citizens from their lands by the tens of thousands run the risk of creating aggrieved—and potentially volatile—populations that will further undermine governmental legitimacy.

With no written documentation to prove they own the land their families may have occupied for generations, Neil MacFarquhar describes scenarios in which “stunned villagers are discovering that African governments typically own their land and have been leasing it, often at bargain prices, to private investors and foreign governments for decades to come.”¹⁴ Although the oil-rich Gulf States, intent on securing affordable food for their own populations, initially led the land-buying charge, investors from Asia, Europe, and North America have increasingly followed suit in anticipation of sizeable returns as global food prices continue to soar. Despite local opposition in many states, a 2011 World Bank report reveals that these African land grabs represent a growing trend since the 2008 global food crisis:

Compared to an average annual expansion of global agricultural land of less than 4 million hectares before 2008, approximately 56 million hectares worth of large-scale farmland deals were announced even before the end of 2009. More than 70 percent of such demand has been in Africa; countries such as Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Sudan have transferred millions of hectares to investors in recent years.¹⁵

In fact, these foreign land deals currently account for 14.6 percent of the total agricultural area in Uganda, 21.1 percent in Mozambique, and a staggering 48.8 percent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁶

Advocates of these land deals insist that they represent a potential windfall for African countries that have historically failed to fully capitalize on their own agricultural potential. As South African entrepreneur Nissi Ekpott suggests, “If land deals are implemented properly, they can bring many benefits to Africa—including increased food production, access to improved agro-skills, and development in rural communities, which, in turn, will stem the tide of urban migration, one of Africa’s most pressing issues.”¹⁷ Critics, however, note



that these development opportunities are not without their costs, costs that historically echo those documented during the 19th century “scramble for Africa,” which occurred at the zenith of European colonialism.¹⁸ For instance, when land previously used for subsistence farming is leased to foreign investors intent on

exporting agricultural products to wealthier nations, land grabs constitute a potential threat to local food supplies. “The food security of the country concerned must be first and foremost in everybody’s mind,” insists former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. “Otherwise it is straightforward exploitation and it won’t work.”¹⁹

A Harbinger for Africa’s Future?

Mali offers a potentially instructive example of how land grabs in Africa can displace large populations, threaten food security as crops are diverted to global markets, and increase the likelihood of scarcity-induced resource competition. Each of these outcomes, independently or in combination, potentially pits societal groups against one another in a struggle for ever-dwindling resources. They also can undermine the legitimacy of those governments responsible for signing the land deals, thus increasing the potential for civil unrest. In the most grievous cases, these lands deals can spark intrastate violence, sow the seeds of revolution, and contribute to the further radicalization of groups like the Ansar Dine. As this trend becomes increasingly common throughout Africa, we suggest that the potential for intrastate and interstate violence across the continent significantly increases.

One does not need a doctorate in economics, history, anthropology, or political science to understand the possible implications of these types of government policies. Both the proponents and critics noted above might in fact be correct. If land and agricultural reforms are “done right,” meaning

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significant numbers of the population benefit, then the use of the phrase “land grab” is probably specious. If, however, land and agricultural reforms are “done wrong,” meaning a large segment of the population perceive of themselves as losers and have no options other than to fight, then the term “land grab” has validity. The simple truth is this: all revolutions great and small start with aggravated individuals who eventually become aggrieved populations. As Ted Gurr argued in his seminal work, *Why Men Rebel*, the development of a perceived gap between people’s expectations and their ability to satisfy those expectations—what Gurr termed relative deprivation—can result in mass frustration, popular uprisings, and ultimately political violence.²⁰ When pushed to the edge of survival, humans have a tendency to fight back. In the case of Africa writ large, the structural variables driving global capitalism, combined with the comparative weakness, corruption, and inability of existing nation-states to “get it right,” may make it inevitable that routine outbreaks of localized warfare will increasingly resemble what is taking place in Mali. ❖

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NOTES

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- 7 *Ibid.*
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