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EXPLAINING MALI'S DEMOCRATIC BREAKDOWN

WEAK INSTITUTIONS, EXTRA-INSTITUTIONAL CHANNELS, AND INSECURITY AS A TRIGGER

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ABSTRACT

In this article we theorize conditions leading to Mali's recent democratic retrenchment. After nearly 20 years of multi-party elections—including two executive alternations of power—Mali has experienced three coup d'etats since 2012. We argue that two underlying conditions—unresponsive and weak institutions in the context of multi-party elections and a reliance on extra-institutional mechanisms of problem-solving—contributed to Mali's vulnerability to democratic breakdown. Insecurity then served as the ultimate trigger for breakdown.

Introduction

In the past decade, the world has witnessed Mali's democratic breakdown. Mali and some of the other Sahelian countries, such as Burkina Faso, Niger, and Guinea, diverge from most contemporary cases of democratic retrenchment. We observe dramatic cases of "breakdowns" through the return of the military coup, which contrasts depictions of less visible forms of "backsliding" in other contexts (Bermeo, 2016; Waldner and Lust, 2017).¹ Mali has gone from holding regular multi-party elections that generated two turnovers of presidential power to three coups in a decade and a current military-run government. We draw on secondary literature and original focus group data from 66 "grinw"—informal, tea-drinking discussion groups conducted in Bamako and Mopti in the fall of 2015² to make our argument.³ This essay outlines major factors that contributed to Mali's contemporary political situation.

We argue that the Malian case highlights three important lessons for scholars of democratization. First, weak and non-responsive institutions made the regime vulnerable to instability. After nearly 20 years of multi-party elections, the state of Malian democracy—including the failure of elections to generate

responsive government, the social and economic distance between citizens and the ruling class, pervasive corruption, and the divergence of governmental and popular priorities—frustrated citizens. Our analysis aligns with Wing (2024), who argues that poor governance was a root cause of the contemporary crisis. In this case, regime underperformance set the stage for breakdown while insecurity served as the trigger.

Second, formal institutions' inability to resolve conflict made citizens look for solutions in extra-institutional channels to resolve disputes rather than through political parties, the courts, or the National Assembly. Malians tolerated the intervention of a relatively trusted institution, the military, to help address the governance crisis—as they had done during the original transition to multi-party elections.

Finally, the Malian case demonstrates the ways that conflict, insecurity, and threats to sovereignty can trigger democratic retrenchment. Ongoing insecurity can trigger democratic backsliding, as evidenced by tension between citizens and political elites in the lead up and aftermath of the 2012 rebellion. In the wake of this, citizens witnessed the regime's inability to mediate the conflict and the subsequent increases in insecurity throughout the country. This crisis of sovereignty served as a tipping point that precipitated the breakdown.

1 Waldner and Lust define backsliding by its subtlety: "Backsliding makes elections less competitive without entirely undermining the electoral mechanism; it restricts participation without explicitly abolishing norms of universal franchise seen as constitutive of contemporary democracy; and it loosens constraints of accountability by eroding norms of answerability and punishment, where answerability refers to the obligation of officials to publicize and justify their actions, and punishment refers to the capacity of either citizens or alternative governing agencies to impose negative consequences for undesirable actions or violations of sanctioned procedures (2017: 5.3)"

2 This original focus group data collection completed by author Jaimie Bleck was supported by USAID-DRG Grant (DFG-11-APS-ND), the American Council of Learned Scholars, and the Helen Kellogg Institute for International Studies at the University of Notre Dame.

3 Note: "Grin" is singular, "grinw" is plural.

Context: Mali's recent political history

The 2012 Malian presidential elections would have resulted in Mali's third electoral turnover of executive power since its transition to multi-party elections in 1992. But one month before the elections could take place, Mali experienced a military coup d'état, plunging the state into over a decade of instability (Wing, 2024). The 2012 coup occurred following a demonstration by wives and mothers of soldiers in response to a devastating attack in northern Mali. Malian soldiers were slaughtered by a newly formed rebellion made up of an alliance of secessionist and jihadist groups (Human Rights Watch, Nov. 2014). The women's protest focused on the lack of material support to those fighting in the north and the government's inability to protect their husbands and sons. At the same time, it was representative of broader popular frustration with the Malian government's management of the security situation that began with the fall of the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi in October 2011. Then-president Amadou Toumani Touré's (ATT) use of consensus governance had co-opted much of the opposition while failing to effectively use security funding (Wing, 2024).

Widespread dissatisfaction with ATT's regime set the stage for the early 2012 coup d'état. While the political takeover of the military was intended by its supporters to bring stability to the country, it facilitated a significant advance by the alliance of terrorist groups and rebel movements from the north to the center of the country. The coup also created strong divisions among the political class, as politicians disagreed about the extent to which the coup was justified. Meanwhile, Malian citizens were concerned about their security and future in the face of the advance of jihadist movements whose political agenda was to capture Bamako and establish Islamic sharia law (Soumano, 2023). Insurgent groups were able to take nearly two-thirds of the country's territory very quickly in March/April 2012. One of these, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), announced

the liberation of the proposed state of Azawad from these northern Malian territories before joining allies from the Islamist group Ansar Dine on May 26, 2012 (L'Armée française libère Timbouctou et Gao de l'occupation djihadiste, 2013). The disorganization and weakness of the existing military capacities and the inability of existing political actors to generate a coherent policy response to end the crisis made the state turn to international solutions. In 2013, the Malian government appealed for French troops to intervene. French soldiers were able to push rebel groups out of most of the north and center of the country. Later, a little over 15,000 U.N. military and police were installed to help stabilize these regions of the country with the support of French troops through Operation Barkhane 2014-2022 (Wing 2024: 40).

With stabilizing forces at work, the Malian government was eventually able to hold multi-party elections, which resulted in a new president—former Prime Minister and perennial political challenger Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (popularly referred to by his initials, IBK). However, his regime was soon plagued by popular dissatisfaction with corruption and the government's management of the crisis as insecurity grew despite the signing of the 2015 Algiers Accords (L'Armée française libère Tombuctou et Gao de l'occupation djihadiste, 2013).⁴ Despite this, he was reelected in 2018—though with lower voter turnout than his first election (43% and 35% in the first and second rounds respectively, as compared to 49% and 46% in 2013) (Mission d'Observation Electorale de l'Union Européene, 2018, p35).

Opposition to IBK's leadership came to a head when the constitutional court's decision to overturn opposition wins during the 2020 legislative elections generated mobilization into the streets asking for the

⁴ The Algiers Agreement, officially called the "Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali" is an agreement that was signed on May 15 and June 20, 2015 between the Malian government and rebel groups with the aim of ending the war. The agreement excluded jihadist groups, which were main actors in the conflict. The transitional authorities, under the military government, ended the agreement in January 2024 (Communiqué n° 065 du gouvernement de la transition, January 25, 2024).

president to step down (Mali's president dissolves constitutional court amid unrest, 2020). These protests were met with state violence. Eventually, a military junta—led by current President Assimi Goïta—stepped in to take power in August 2020 (International Crisis Group, 2020). The new regime initially installed a civilian government but later removed them in a 2021 coup. Later, they installed civilian leader Choguel Maïga as Prime Minister (June 2021–November 2024), until replacing him with current PM Major General Abdoulaye Maïga, who works alongside President Goïta (Mali junta appoints general to replace sacked civilian prime minister, 2024).

Since this, Mali has experienced significant democratic retrenchment. The current regime has delayed elections, which were slated to be held in February 2024. Since 2020, civil society and opposition actors have been jailed for their critiques of the government (Mali court jails professor for criticizing government, 2024; “Mali drops coup charges against ex-prime minister, radio host, 2021; Monteau, 2023;), some under the auspices of an existing cyber-criminality law (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2023).⁵ The National Commission for Human Rights has been critical of declining freedom of association and freedom of expression (Commission Nationale de Droits de l'Homme, 2024). Eleven political leaders from the “Déclaration Commune du 31 Mars” movement were arrested on June 20, 2024 for violating the suspension of political activities. They were released in December after five months of detention (Ahmed, 2024).

The current regime also revised the transition charter in to extend Goïta's mandate as president of the transition for another five years with the possibility of renewing indefinitely based off a series of consultations with civil society and traditional leaders organized by the

5 This includes suspension of certain channels including domestic stations, Radio France International and France 24 as well as the harassment of certain journalists (le journaliste Malien Abdoul Niang poursuivi pour propos mensongers, 2023; Opposition activists arrested in a crackdown in Mali were moved to prisons, 2024; Mali Ras Bath Imprisoned after his remarks on the death of Soumeylou Maiga).

regime.⁶ (Secretariat General du Gouvernement 2025b, “Mali coup leader wins backing to be president for next five years”, 2025; “Mali military chief granted renewable five-year presidential term”, 2025). This prolonged transition period delays elections for indeterminant amount of time. The same consultations resulted in a recommendation to review and repeal the political parties charter in order to reduce the number of political parties in Mali, create stricter criteria for the creation of parties—including higher fees required to run for office or to create a party—and to eliminate public party finance (Secretariat General du Gouvernement 2025a, Kane, 2025). They repealed the law governing political parties and later dissolved all “associations of a political character” in May 2025 (Mali's military government suspends political parties' activities, 2025; Tiassou, 2025; Abrogation de la charte des partis politiques: vers la création d'un nouveau cadre de gestion, 2025; Khalil, 2025).

Methodology

In the sections below we highlight three factors that led to these changes in political regime in the period between 2011 and 2020. This article focuses on the micro-foundations of citizenship and democratic retrenchment in Mali. We draw on 66 focus groups conducted with grinw—informal, tea-drinking, discussion groups—in Bamako and Mopti/Sevare in fall 2015 to illustrate citizens' perceptions of some foundational problems with governance in Mali. We complement the focus groups with secondary literature including newspaper articles as well as Afrobarometer data.

Nearly 60% of men aged 18-45 in these cities participate in grinw. The majority of these groups meet daily and provide members the opportunity to share information, ideas, and diverse perspectives (Bleck et al, 2024).⁷ We acknowledge that the use of grinw as focus groups does not give us a representative sample

6 The conference was boycotted by key opposition leaders.

7 This report draws on a different set of focus group modules from the same project (those on governance and political participation).

of Malian perspectives on governance—they are predominantly male and the entire sample is from urban areas—but believe that these groups can nevertheless provide some insight into lingering governance issues most visible if we look at “politics from below.” (Bayart, 2008; Banegas, 2014; Brisset-Foucault, 2019) Given the data from the focus groups is roughly a decade old, we compare our findings to data collected in recent rounds of an Afrobarometer survey to show that many of these attitudes are enduring in the context of the 2020 and 2021 coups.

The focus groups were conducted in 66 gruw with approximately 1,000 members, of which 330 participated as “active respondents” and spoke during the focus groups.⁸ This analysis focuses on a module about citizens’ attitudes and perceptions of political leadership as well as the challenges facing Mali. It explores members’ perceptions of Mali’s historical governance trajectory, ideas for leadership moving forward, and a module about political participation. The entire list of questions from this module is included in the appendix. Each statement is anonymized using the number of the respondent who spoke, the location, and the number of the gruw for that location. It is important to note once again that the vast majority of these groups were predominantly male or male-only, and thus, are not representative of women’s voices or those living outside of the two major cities where we were conducting research.

The analysis draws on statements from the focus groups and uses illustrative quotes to highlight key areas of concern through an inductive analysis of key issues that emerge from these open-ended questions. Nearly all focus groups were conducted in Bambara, then translated and transcribed into French by two different coders to ensure inter-coder reliability.⁹

Below, we structure our analysis around three themes we believe are key to explaining Mali’s current sit-

8 Focus group research was conducted with the University of Notre Dame’s IRB protocol 15-09-2676.

9 After ensuring both transcripts were roughly identical, we used the more detailed of the two transcripts for the analysis.

uation: unresponsive and weak institutions, the prevalence of extra-institutional channels as conflict arbiters, and insecurity as a resulting trigger for breakdown.

Unresponsive and weak institutions

Mali exhibited institutional weakness despite almost two decades of experience with multi-party elections after its democratic transition. We start by discussing the failures of elections to generate legitimacy. Next, we explore Mali’s weak parties and their lack of substantive policy discussion as well as high rates of volatility due to their personalist composition. Then, we discuss the way that citizens report feeling completely disconnected from elected officials, who lack accountability. Then, we discuss how many citizens associate the democratic era with pervasive corruption rather than bureaucratic responsiveness and efficiency. We conclude with a discussion about citizens’ visions for future leaders.

ELECTIONS: FAILING TO GENERATE LEGITIMACY

Afrobarometer data demonstrate the Malians continue to prefer leader selection by elections over any other form of government (Fadimata, 2018). However, there are significant gaps between what they believe democracy should do and how they perceive it as being practiced. The unsuccessful search for a mechanism and bodies capable of organizing transparent and credible elections was and remains a major challenge for the anchoring of the democratic process in Mali. Against the backdrop of a crisis of confidence between political actors, the organization of elections has become a means of acquiring power instead of serving as an instrument to decide between political programs through popular support.

Despite attempts to introduce different models of electoral management since 1992 as discussed in Table 1 (administration only, CENI only, CENI and administration at the same time), CENI was never

TABLE 1

Previous models of election management in Mali

Model one	Electoral process is managed by the territorial administration (1992-1995)
Model two	Electoral process is managed by the electoral commission (la Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante, or CENI) (1996-1997) composed of representatives of civil society and political parties
Model three	Electoral process is managed jointly by the territorial administration and by the electoral commission (CENI) (2002-present)

effective in generating the trust of the population or between politicians. We see evidence of this in weaker turnout rates relative to other countries on the continent—which is likely also a reflection of weak parties (Soumano, 2023).¹⁰

The lack of trust between the population and elected officials is due, in part, to electoral manipulation by candidates and parties, but also suspicion generated by lack of administrative capacity. In a critique of widespread fraud during the 2007 legislative elections, the president of the constitutional court, Salif Kanoute, provided evocative commentary during his declaration of the results: "...Through the reading of all the requests, you have seen the material and moral physiognomy of the election in our country. It reflects all forms of fraud, and above all, I do not understand that those who are responsible, at the polling stations, for working in the national interest, agree to falsify figures, to reverse figures." (Dembélé, 2007; Sow, 2007). The head of the constitutional court's willingness to discuss and denounce irregularities in the context of the election results suggests just how pervasive electoral fraud was. During the presidential elections in 2018, opposition leader Soumaila Cissé rejected the results during a press conference, saying, "I categorically and unequivocally reject the results proclaimed by the Ministry of Territorial Administration. I refuse and denounce these results. They are nothing but deception, masquerade, parody and lies. They are nothing but the

rotten fruit of a shameful fraud." (Présidentielle Mali Soumaila Cissé rejette résultats dit vainquer, 2018). In their analysis of the Malian electoral system, IFES identified the four electoral processes the most vulnerable to manipulation as the aggregation and certification of final results, the legal framework, financing, and dispute resolution (IFES 2021, page 15).

Additional problems stem from institutions' capacity. IFES' review also found that there is a tendency of opposition actors to interpret unintentional irregularities as intentional manipulation, which erodes confidence (IFES, 2021 page 1). While the EU electoral observation mission described both rounds of the 2018 presidential elections as peaceful except for security incidents at polling stations in the north and center of the country and that voting procedures were correctly followed in nearly all stations they visited, they noted irregularities during counting (Mission d'observation électorale de l'union Européenne Rapport Elections Presidentielles, 2018, page 6).

A final challenge is that the existing geographic administrative divisions do not map well onto specific constituencies or cultural areas. In some areas, constituents are unclear on who their representatives are. For instance, the electoral constituency of Kati is so large and covers such a vast geographic area that many voters are unsure who they are voting for.¹¹

10 Turnout in past presidential elections ranged from 21% to 33% in the elections prior to the 2012 coup (Soumano, 2023).

11 Author interview with constituents in Kati living in Mali, March 2017.

Financial mismanagement

During the multi-party years, the state constructed a multi-party system, but failed to invest in structures that would bring popular priorities into public policy. Scholars have criticized past regimes for excessive focus on extraversion—or courting money from donors—to the detriment of domestic concerns and coherent domestic policy (Bergamaschi, 2014). The systematic adoption of the budget settlement law each year without in-depth consultation of the population demonstrates the absence of a popular control and accountability mechanism or input from other branches of government. At the end of the budget year, members of the National Assembly approve the execution of the state budget without referring to reports of judicial institutions such as the accounts section of the Supreme Court, which is in charge of public finances. The same is true for the administration, with numerous irregularities noted in financial management each year since the institutionalization of the Auditor General. Many groups in civil society lack the skills or information to monitor the government. An additional obstacle is that some civil society actors are also political actors and/or members of government, which limits their ability to serve as watchdogs; these practices of integrating most civil society leaders have existed since the transition to multi-party elections in 1992 (Roy, 2005, p.573-585).

Constitutional blind spots

Cissé (2006, 24-25) illustrated how the Malian constitution as well as marriage and family law, were a “copy and paste” from the French constitution. Despite various efforts at judicial reform, there has been no serious effort to revisit the French origins of the document. Foreshadowing contemporary concerns with sovereignty, a respondent from Sevare lamented,

R4: The leaders of Mali are good, but the problem is we say that we are democratic and independent, but in reality—Mali is dependent. This is why our leaders cannot be good. Take the legislative texts in Mali. Everything is a cut and paste from France. Our leaders can only submit to France. (Sevare, grin 20)

This respondent raises concerns about Mali’s dependence on France. While this focus group took place in 2015 in a context of heavy international presence policing the conflict in the North that may have heightened concerns over dependence and sovereignty, the respondent’s reference to the state’s reliance on documents of French origin suggests that it affects perceptions of state legitimacy.

Excess of executive power

The original flaw of Mali’s democratic process is the dominant power of the executive over the other branches. Considered the keystone of the institutions of the French Fifth Republic, the president of the republic of Mali is, in the words of Maurice Duverger (1974), a republican monarch. Strongly inspired by the French constitution of 1958, the Malian constitution enshrines the semi-presidential regime. In Mali, the manifestations of this semi-presidential regime make the institution of the president the driving force behind reform initiatives and the center of impulse for all important political decisions. The consolidation of power in the president’s hands pre-dates the IBK regime. This omnipotence was analyzed during the two successive terms of President Alpha Konaré (1992-2002) and President Amadou Toumani Touré (2002-2012) as the power of one man (Sphinx 2006, p6). While interacting with parliamentarians at the National Assembly in Bamako from 2013-2015, one author of this paper was told that often, when a bill arrives at the Assembly, many parliamentarians are more interested in knowing the position of the “Fama” (the president of the republic) than its content. What is especially remarkable, and which constitutes the source of the abuses, is that these powers of the president are not subordinate to any rule or provision that could serve as a filter or framework. Thus, in Mali, all the powers of appointment of the president of the republic are discretionary and there is no validation by an institution such as the National Assembly or the Supreme Court, nor any obligation to consult any such institution. The corollary of this state of affairs is a subservience of other governmental institutions to the president and the ability for improper practices related to public procurement by the president and close associates to fester (Auditor General Report, 2014, page 16).

Impotence of the National Assembly

The National Assembly operates in a formal manner and cannot initiate laws or reforms related to the needs of the populations. Often, fundamental political issues like the Algiers Agreement (1995) are not discussed in the National Assembly, remaining the prerogative of the executive alone. Many votes in the Assembly are unanimous or nearly unanimous; for example, in April 2013, when the assembly voted on whether to extend France's intervention mandate in Mali. 342 MPs voted for, with zero votes against (Aulnette and Hadj-Ahmed, 2022, page 153). Sectors of economic activity capable of ensuring, for example, food self-sufficiency—such as agriculture and livestock—have always figured in political programs, but have never been the subject of a sustainable progressive vision with a significant human and financial investment. An IMF evaluation team (2018) characterized Mali's public investment as both inefficient and insufficient to provide infrastructure to its population.

The functional gap between the political elite and the populations continues in administration, which is a mechanism intended to meet the real needs of the populations. The Malian administrative bureaucracy, however, with little participation even from parliamentarians, holds little or no space to integrate the concerns or needs of the populations within the budgets or agreements binding the State. Indeed, from 1992 to 2018, nearly all of the laws voted on were bills discussed mainly in government agencies with little input or discussion from parliamentarians or the population. The vast majority of laws are initiated by the executive-run government and only in a handful of cases have laws been introduced by MPs.¹² Nearly all proposed laws pass. Bills are rarely rejected after constitutional review or presidential veto. One example is the "Code de la Famille" related to family and inheritance law, which passed through the National Assembly in 2009 but was not promulgated by the President until 2011 after significant amendments were included. In this instance, resistance to the law's passage was triggered not by political parties, but by

12 Based on one author's close observation of the National Assembly in Bamako from 1992-2018.

Islamic Associations (Koné and Calvès, 2021).

The closed nature of the Assembly generates frustrations and raises the question of the representativeness or legitimacy of elected officials who speak on behalf of the populations. The major drawback of the weakness of this system is the lack of debate, and therefore, the lack of possibility of broadening horizons for a greater inclusion of different perspectives and opinions—including constituents'.

In form, political opposition to the president's overwhelming executive power exists within the National Assembly, but it generally suffers from political and financial weakness, which makes its voice less audible. With few deputies from oppositional parties in the Assembly, their capacity for influence is diminished under pressure from the majority, which is able to co-opt opposition MPs (Baudais and Chauzal, 2006). In addition, opposition parties have limited access to state media, which the president uses for political campaigns. This makes it very hard for the opposition to develop positions counter to those of the president and his coalition.

WEAK PARTIES

One factor contributing to the lack of political accountability is that Mali has very weak political parties. There are hundreds of political parties,¹³ but few are grounded in any ideology. Instead, they rely on personal ties to their leaders (Diamoutene, 2024; Traore and Sogodogo, 2021). Instead of institutionalizing, parties frequently fragmented or leaders changed sides of the aisle (Cissé, 2006). Cissé writes that in 2006, no party had ever had a change in president—meaning that no party ever successfully changed leadership, with people instead opting to start their own new parties (pages 46-52). This manner of infighting around leadership transitions in parties leads to the fragmentation and proliferation of new parties. These practices have discredited political actors and dis-

13 The Ministry of territorial administration documented 296 political parties before 2020. Prime minister Abdoulaye Maiga cited that 66 political parties were created between 2020 to 2024.

tanced the population from politics due to the ubiquity of clientelist relations, the affirmation of personalities to the detriment of ideas—hence the reinforcement of “personal” fights instead of “fights of ideas”—and the aggravation of a crisis of confidence in party leadership.

This crisis of confidence hinges on the fact that parties which rely on one political figurehead often lack grassroots connections to society and they are typically deferent to executive power (Cissé, 2006; Soumano, 2023; Baudais and Chauzal, 2006; Bleck and van de Walle, 2011; Wing, 2012). During the 2002 presidential elections, nearly fifty political parties supported an independent candidate, demonstrating their institutional weakness, to the great displeasure of activists and populations (Soumano, 2023). Another obstacle to the development of strong partisan identities is a cultural ethos of communitarianism and consensus. Historically, Malian society stressed unified goals of communities, which can generate some skepticism about partisan competition. Cultural thinking about power emphasizes unity and people are sometimes confused when partisanship divisions are seen as running contrary to these values.

Some Malians posit that the loss of Malian values of deliberative consensus behind governance decisions results from the implementation of the individualist motto: “one man, one vote” within the context of multi-party elections. Some focus group respondents saw this as a departure from communitarian Malian values, with every man for himself rather than a consensual system where everyone debated ideas until there was agreement on a solution.

R2: But the very problem of the country was the democracy which completely destroyed this country. In this democracy all leaders are thieves.

R3: Modibo’s [Mali’s first president Modibo Keïta] power was socialism, which was much better than their [multi-party presidents’] democracy.

R2: Under the power of Modibo education was real in the country and at all levels. Even for ex-

ample in this grin if it was at the time of Modibo it is the youngest who would do everything for his superiors, but it is democracy that has completely destroyed this country.

R4: But democracy is the instrument of capitalism. (Bamako, grin 21)

The quotes above were prompted by a question about Mali’s best president.¹⁴ The respondents extol Mali’s first president—Modibo Keïta—and his socialist policies, which were implemented under one-party rule. They critique policy under multi-party democracy as a departure from the substantive programming offered by Keïta—suggesting that democracy is a policy instrument of capitalism. This is explained in part by a historical framing. During independence, Malian political leaders promoted socialism in contrast to the colonial paradigm, hence this rejection of a capitalist system. The tendency to show deference to leaders or seek consensus over interest aggregation from political groups and associations poses a challenge to multi-party competition in the Malian context.

Civic awareness training and participation in the national work have not been part of school curricula for a long time (Bleck 2015) and parties do limited outreach to inform voters of their platforms (Soumano 2023). This contributes to the widening confusion around the mission of political parties and rendering them futile vectors of interest aggregation.

LACK OF ACCOUNTABILITY FROM ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

In focus groups, many respondents expressed malaise about electoral participation due to the non-responsiveness of politicians, perceptions that elections were not free and fair, and vote buying. Politics and politicians—at the local and national levels—are frequently

14 In most of the 66 focus groups, the majority of respondents cited Modibo Keïta as their favorite president. It is important to note that the context of insecurity, insurgent threats, and heavy presence of foreign troops may have contributed to nostalgia for a post-independence era of sovereignty and self-determination.

characterized as being rooted in lies.¹⁵ In Mali, and throughout other Bambara-speaking countries in the region, “politiki manye”—meaning politics are bad—is a popular refrain. Much of the skepticism about politics is linked to the non-accountability and unreliability of elected officials. A respondent from Sevare explains,

Respondent 5 (R5): I do not know if you have measured the extent of this expression [politiki or politics]. For example, when we agree on something and it does not go as planned, if we meet again, we accuse ourselves of having played politics. This means that politics is characterized as a lie in society, but nowadays even children know that politicians are liars... (Sevare, grin 23)

We do observe a high turnover rate at the municipal level in many municipalities in Mali, suggesting competitiveness. So why aren’t competitive elections making mayors more responsive to the population over time? Some scholars have argued that it is due to elite collusion (Gottlieb, 2015) and the weakness of political parties (Gottlieb and Kosec, 2019; van Vilet, 2014). Others point to the lack of fiscal devolution (Wing and Kassibo, 2014) that leaves municipal governments disempowered and without sufficient autonomy for effective policymaking. Interestingly, voters tend to be more informed about mayors than other political leaders (Afrobarometer, 2015), so it is not as likely that these gaps are due to information asymmetries about performance. The question of enhancing political responsiveness at the municipal level is a fundamental one that needs to be better debated and addressed if Mali hopes to achieve some kind of representative governance. Afrobarometer data find that constituents evaluate mayors as slightly better listeners than members of parliament (48% felt like their mayor listened to them, while 29% of respondents felt listened to by MPs (Afrobarometer, 2024)), ultimately, elections alone are proving insufficient to generate accountability between local politicians and their constituents (Afrobarometer,

2024).

One central issue is that Malians perceive a lack of a fiscal contract between the state and taxpayers. A respondent from a grin in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Bamako defends his decision to abstain from participating in the municipal elections by critiquing the relationship between taxation and lack of development in the commune.

R1: I’m not going to participate

R3: Me either!

R1:because what the current mayor is doing to us, we know. We had thought that since he is from the neighborhood, he would do better, but we were wrong. Since he was elected, the only thing he has done has been to bring a truck full of water and since then nothing.

R3: Let’s take the Sabalibougou market, all the roads in what state they are, that he does nothing even in the market, but at least the access roads to the market, he could develop them a little, but nothing. There are families who—in plain sight—have connected their sewage pipes to the natural stream.

R1: And yet every day they collect the taxes at the market every day and these taxes are more than millions [of cfa] a day, since the collectors even come outside the market and collect taxes in the streets with the small vendors who are in front of the houses. And every time we complain, they bullshit us, saying that taxes go into the commune’s budget, and that we don’t know what they are intended for, otherwise we think that this money should be used to develop the municipality, but there is nothing here. Otherwise, the Sabalibougou market is one of the biggest markets in commune V and many people come to this market. But during the rainy season, no one can use this market.

R3: I can even say that among the markets of Bamako, there are only about two markets

15 Going forward, we will use “deputy” or “MP” (member of parliament) to denote members of the National Assembly. “Mayor” or “municipal elections” refers more localized competition at the municipal level.

that can beat Sabalibougou in terms of supply, at most three, otherwise our market is more stocked (with largest supplies) and more frequented than all the others, but our market is most run down of all. And what is surprising, the mayor himself, while going to the market on foot - grimaces while trying to dodge the sewage...even the only paved road that crosses Sabalibougou is in a very bad state because of potholes.

R1: The fact that most roads aren't even paved, all of that makes us angrier with our mayors.

R3: Precisely because of the poor state of road, some people even avoid Sabalibougou when they go shopping. All the neighborhoods of the commune are much better than Sabalibougou, we have absolutely no development here—here we don't have sewers for our waste water. Frankly, even if the populations are patient, the mayors must become conscious of their actions because enough is enough. We have a lot of problems here. Sabalibougou is like a village (Bamako, grin 23).

This scathing critique highlights the fact that Sabalibougou—a central neighborhood—in Bamako's Rive Droit region, still lacks paved roads and a sewer system. Yet even the smallest market vendor—selling fried dough in front of their home—pays a daily market tax. This tarnishes the population's belief that taxes are legitimate and that mayors respond to the population's needs and concerns. The absence of a fiscal contract between the state and its population weakens the foundation of representative government.

Respondents repeatedly referenced politicians who engaged them with substantive campaign platforms, but later abandoned these promises and the populations who supported them during the campaign. There was cynicism based on past deception by candidates they had supported. This is against a backdrop of citizens' fundamental desire and expectation for politicians to make sure that they have access to basic goods and services.

Malians frequently reference "la classe politique" with disdain; the "political class" is perceived to enjoy comfortable lives insulated from the hardships faced by the local population. They are seen as lacking empathy or the political will to understand or address the problems confronting their constituents (Bleck, 2015; Soumano, 2023; Cissé 2006). Respondents also brought up the seasonality of politics. Politicians only visit during elections or when they need something from voters; this cyclic and uneven engagement is seen as hypocrisy and antithetical to how real democracy should work. A respondent discusses this dynamic in Bamako in reference to members of parliament.

R2: Normally, deputies should be the mouths and the ears of people, but they [our MPs] don't do anything serious [honest] and they take the people's money, so we—the poor—don't care about them. Otherwise, under normal conditions, every MP should consult his constituency every time there is a law that is under consideration, but alas. It's here in Mali and the MPs are not considered, otherwise, in a lot of other countries deputies are listened to and respected—but not in Mali and that is their own fault. Otherwise, if you are a MP, you live in your constituency. But all of our deputies are in Bamako and certain ones—once they are elected—they don't ever return to their constituency during their entire term (Bamako, grin 24).

This respondent is saying not only that MPs don't visit them, but that their disdain for these elites make the population less willing to communicate their concerns. As parties and representatives are supposed to be vehicles to collect and express the collective will of the people, this was a tremendous defect in the functioning of Malian democracy in the multi-party era. This disconnect between politicians and their constituencies is even more pronounced when you consider those living in outlying regions. Respondents in Mopti/Sevare—a seven-hour drive North from Bamako—were critical of Bamako's neglect of the periphery. As one respondent from Sevare said, "Our leaders forget the regions. They focus only on the capital (Sevare, grin 19, respondent two)." This is a typical sentiment outside of Bamako.

Disparities in service provision reflect the uneven development between the capital and outlying regions. In the education sector, we can observe that Mopti and Timbuktu have out-of-school rates of over 50% (for 6-14-year-olds) while Bamako has only 9% of similar aged youth out of school (World Bank 2022: 97). Bamako also has above-average spending on each student in school, the lowest teacher-student ratios, and lower poverty rates compared to all other regions (World Bank 2022: 16). One source of these disparities was subsidies to private schools, which can be misused.

Over and over again, respondents stressed the gulf between politicians, who looked out for their own fortunes, and the population, which was often left to look for its own solutions to problems. Beyond the lack of accountability, respondents also pointed to a lack of respect from elected officials. A grin in Bamako that sits on the same street as a deputy's house lamented the arrogance of the political class.

R1: We will create our own politics ourselves because we don't wait for anything from Malian politicians. But if there is something that has recently happened that really bothers us—we are going to create our own revolution, I say this because the deputy passes here (the grin) every day, but he doesn't even greet us (Bamako, grin 17).

This respondent and others in his grin were incensed by the fact that the man living on their block never took the time to stop by and greet them. This is emblematic of the distance that young people, and the population more generally, feel from the political class.

PERVASIVE CORRUPTION

Malian citizens have long been concerned with corruption among the political class. In focus groups with grinw, respondents described politicians as eager to profit from the state. The emphasis on corruption at the time of the focus groups was heightened in part due to salient debates about then-president IBK's family—particularly his son Karim—profiting from lucrative U.N. contracts and aid deals (Wing, 2024, p84-85;

Korotayev and Alina Khokhlova 2022, p200-2001). The story of the purchase of a presidential plane and the overcharging of the purchase of military equipment made the issue of corruption in the Malian administrative system part of popular discourse (Bleck, Dembele, and Guindo, 2016). Irregularities were committed in the purchase of a presidential aircraft and military equipment. According to the Auditor General's findings, the amount of the aircraft and the military equipment was over-invoiced, and the purchaser of the contract did not meet the legal requirements (Report of the Auditor General, 2014).

A respondent (R2) from a grin in Bamako discusses the frustrations with nepotism, corruption, and politicians' disregard of regular people.

R2: Karim (IBK's son) is building everywhere in Bamako and is profiting from his business selling cars, while we struggle to find food. Karim's vehicles arrive and cross the country without control or customs, and he sells them at the price he wants and nothing helps, otherwise we sit in this misery. But for us it's even better (than those living in rural areas). You have to visit the villages and you will realize that the people are suffering deeply from the economic crisis, especially the women. The people in power have the means to build a water pump in each village, but it does not do it because they have mineral water to drink while our mothers in the villages go to drain the water from the well or the pond. A borehole costs only 3 million CFA francs, but the government cannot do that for its people, and let's not talk about a health structure. Otherwise with a 40 billion FCFA budget in Mali they can drill in each village, but the budget of Mali reaches 1000 Billion FCFA now, but nothing for the people (Bamako, grin 24).

This quote highlights high-level corruption scandals. One reason that citizens were skeptical of IBK's efforts to reform corruption¹⁶ is that it targeted non-elites with stricter rules, while leaders could do what they want-

16 Keita's government created a new Central Office for the Fight Against Corruption (Wing 2024:6).

ed, which was perceived as hypocrisy. Cissé (2006) argues that this mentality stems from the colonial period and continues into present day Mali. Citizens think that "stealing from the state is not actually theft" and that "to violate a law or prohibition is not a big deal because everything can be negotiated and fixed" (Cissé 2006, page 38).¹⁷ More generally, one common critique of past leaders was being surrounded by the wrong people or allowing those in their entourage to have too much influence. As respondent 4 from a group in Mopti said:

R4: In Mali, the problem is that everyone who has been close to power during the last 20 years are all responsible for Mali's problems and believe me – this will continue like this because there is no political will to actually change anything. (Mopti, grin 22)

Respondents report that for 20 years, political elites have made prevarication the most widespread mode of governance (Bigot, 2017), to the detriment of legitimacy and legality.

This testimony mirrors discourse that the ruling military government, which took power five years after this focus group, used to justify its power grab—linking existing corruption to insecurity.¹⁸ Many respondents

17 Author's translation from French, "Aujourd'hui encore, on continue de penser que voler l'État, ce n'est pas voler; ...violer une loi ou un interdit n'est pas bien grave; car tout peut se négocier et tout peut s'arranger" (2006: 38).

18 For instance, in speaking with the Malian press in September 2021, then-Prime Minister Choguel Maiga said "Corruption and impunity, which have become commonplace, have contributed to disarticulating the foundations of our security. The management of the country has passed into the hands of the technical partners, donors, and NGOs and the only indisputable result that democracy has left us is the flourishing of associations and political parties. The weakening of the central authority has resulted in the failure of the State with its corollaries: precariousness of the unity of the people and the integrity of the national territory, loss of sovereignty, decay of basic social services, insecurity; in a word, everything that the People are experiencing today as difficulties. Elections were organized against a backdrop

equated multi-party elections with the rise of corruption.

In the same vein, a 2017 report from a national conference describes the phenomenon of corruption as an "endemic embedding in the daily functioning of public administration..." (Actes de la Conférence d'entente nationale, April 2017, page 21). The issue is publicly denounced even by voices that are usually discreet. For instance, the German ambassador Mr. Dietrich Becker, annoyed by the level of corruption in Mali, stated, "I would not encourage a German to invest in Mali, given the state of corruption in the justice system" (Haïdara, 2019).

The Auditor General reports have made available information about the irregularities and embezzlement observed in the financial management of public services and public funds since 2004. As an illustration, for the year 2023, the Auditor General's report notes financial irregularities and mismanagement in the following allocations: 19,744 billions of FCFA (approximately \$32,742,952 USD)¹⁹ for the field of education, including state subsidies to private schools; 327 million FCFA (\$542,454 USD) for the allocation of agriculture tractors; and 19,396 billion FCFA (\$32,165,838 USD) for the health insurance service (Vérificateur Général, Annual Report, 2023, pages 42, 46, 76). While the Auditor General's reports outline pervasive corruption, it is relatively rare that anyone is found guilty and put in jail.

The gradual systematization of corruption throughout all stages of politics (candidacy for elections, organization of elections, management of election results, management of public affairs) removes accountability from the state to citizens and instead makes politicians focus on "godfathers" (powerful players who appoint them to positions of responsibility). For the latter, an MP told us "...the deputy who pays for his

of fraud and buying of consciences. The masters of the day ignored that the People have stopped letting themselves be manipulated." (Société attaque contre le mouvement démocratique: Choguel Victime d'un procès en sorcellerie?, 2021)

19 Calculated at \$1 = 603 cfa (average exchange rate for 2023)

seat is not accountable to anyone..."²⁰ The presidential regimes have often used strategies of cooptation through clientelism to silence demands by unions, protest movements or political opponents. Again, this distracts from accountability to voters.

Given extremely high levels of poverty in Mali, the squandering of resources is a terrible loss of income for many populations. In this context, corruption induces a deep distrust of institutions whose main depositaries suffer from a lack of legitimacy due to nepotistic appointments or those resulting from fraudulent elections. Sometimes, the population turns to other leaders such as religious leaders or traditional cultural leaders to represent their beliefs. These leaders enjoy more legitimacy and are seen being guided by morality and looking out of the population's best interest (Bleck and Thurston, 2022)—particularly as compared to politicians.

IMAGINING MORE RESPONSIVE POLITICIANS

Afrobarometer data reveal that Malians continue to support electoral democracy as their preferred form of government. In the most recent round of Afrobarometer surveys (2024), the majority of citizens (66%) still rejected dictatorship,²¹ but this was down from 80% who rejected dictatorship in 2013 (Afrobarometer, 2024).²² Seventy percent of respondents say that the media should be free from governmental control and 58% of respondents supported term limits for presidents, but only 34% supported multi-party competition (Afrobarometer, 2024). These numbers reveal some contradictions in Malians preferences—with most favoring freedom of expression and freedom of the

press and most rejecting dictatorship, but lingering skepticism about multiparty competition as it has been practiced in Mali.

However, they also perceive a large gap between how democracy should be practiced and governance in Mali. In 2024, only 30% of Malians rated their country as democratic (with minor problems) and 28% were satisfied with the functioning of democracy (Le democratie au Mali, 2024). In 2014 and 2017—when there were multiparty elections—assessments that Mali was democratic were 55% and 44% in each respective wave and citizens' assessments that they were satisfied with democracy were at 50% and 37%—indicating significant dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy in that period, too (Les Africains désirent plus de démocratie, mais leurs dirigeants leurs écoutent toujours pas, 2023, p13).²³

Below, a respondent imagines an ideal politician to contrast elected officials in Mali. He stresses that the ideal official takes time to go visit constituents in their locality and spends time talking to them—invoking some of the values of deliberative democracy that are found in indigenous practices of consultation in rural areas across Mali (Shapland et al, 2023).

R5: The good leader is the one who travels around his country to see with his eyes how his people live in their cercles and not the one who is constantly going abroad. He visits the villages, the neighborhoods to inquire about how his people live and how the public affairs of these communities are managed, to take their concerns and to consider possible solutions. He mobilizes the National Assembly to go and identify the problems of grassroots populations so

20 Interview with MP, September 2016, Bamako

21 Though only 21% of respondents rejected a military regime

22 While Mali is an extreme case, it is important to note that there has also been a continental decline in support for democracy: In the last 10 years, support for democracy has declined by an average of 7% in 30 African countries—with steepest declines in South Africa (29 points) and Mali (23 points) (African insights 2024: Democracy at risk – the people's perspective, 2024).

23 It is important to note the that gaps between citizens' preferred regime (democracy) and their assessment of the practice of democracy in their own country are found through many countries on the continent. The percentage of African citizens that were satisfied with the performance of democracy in their country dropped from 50% in 2011/2013 to 43% in 2019/2021 (Les Africains désirent plus de démocratie, mais leurs dirigeants leurs écoutent toujours pas 2023, 13).

that laws can be taken according to the realities of the populations. But we have always had the impression that our leaders are not interested in us.

R3: It's not that they don't care about us, they don't give a damn about us, it's only during elections that they remember us.

R5: Precisely, since during the elections they come with tea, sugar and other gifts so that people can vote for them and once elected, that's all, they forget us. And we just find that they are in power and that's it. In my opinion, to be a good leader, you must identify the problems of your people and seek to find a solution to their problems....You cannot be a good leader without leaving a trace of the development for the people. And yet during the campaigns the promises they make are so numerous that they are not possible [to achieve], but once elected, there is nothing apart from [what is in] their personal interest. (Bamako, grin 5).²⁴

This respondent describes an idealized form of democracy where representatives listen to constituent needs and then take their ideas and concerns back to the National Assembly, so that they are incorporated into lawmaking. He contrasts the way that democracy should work with the actual practice of politicians in Mali—who only visit during election time (when they need votes) and who forget all their constituents once elected. In sum, these discussions of an ideal leader further demonstrate the gap between democracy as it is practiced in Mali and democracy as imagined by respondents, mirroring the Afrobarometer data.

24 Similar sentiments were discussed by respondents in another grin in Bamako who talked about the need for politicians to visit their constituents instead of traveling abroad (grin 22).

Extra-institutional channels to address conflict and incentivize reform

Due to the failure of formal institutions as well as legacies of military intervention, the Malian public often turns to extra-institutional tactics to redress grievances or to solve societal conflict. This section discusses contentious politics—or the use of extra-institutional channels to achieve political ends—and military innovation as means that the Malian population has used to address conflict and demand reform.

CONTESTATION OUTSIDE OF FORMAL INSTITUTIONS

When the Malian population is frustrated with government mismanagement, they often take to the streets to protest. Since the early 1990s, each coup (1991, 2012, 2020)²⁵ was proceeded by mass protest in the streets; this is consistent with broader literature that explains that a context of ongoing protests increases the success of coups (Yukawa, 2022; Casper et al, 2014). Students and women protested for democracy before the coup of 1991, wives and mothers of soldiers protested after soldiers were slaughtered in Aguelhock in 2012, and Malians protested the constitutional court's ruling against opposition victories in the context of the 2020 legislative elections (Soumano 2023; Wing 2024).

Attempts at major policy reform—such as the Family Code reform in 2009—or even attempts to change bureaucratic practices are executed using extra-institutional avenues like protests rather than debate within the National Assembly. For instance, debate about the Family Code was triggered only after tens of thousands of Malians were mobilized into the street by

25 An exception is the 2021 coup, in which the ruling junta removed the civilian government that they had put in place.

religious leaders (Soares, 2009, Koné and Calvès).

While these protests often trigger broader consultations in government and with civil society actors that inform policy, the use of contentious politics raises questions about weakness within democratic institutions as well as the relevance of elected politicians. The decisions taken following these consultations are generally legitimate and serve as guidance tools for a national project, but reveal the population's distrust with political actors. Indeed, these frameworks for exchange and debate are most often piloted by civil society actors such as religious leaders, the umbrella organizations of civil society who, in reality, can turn into political actors with political agendas and whose roles (as unelected thought leaders) can sometimes be debated.

In the past, protests have played an important role in holding the government accountable. In April 2019, popular protests in response to escalating communal violence precipitated the ousting of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maiga (Le government demissionne apres une serie de violences et de manifestations, 2020). Malians protested for former president ATT, who was removed in the 2012 coup, to be allowed back into Mali; he was eventually allowed to return in December 2017 (Manifestations populaires pour le retour au pays de Amadou Toumani Toure, 2017). Additionally, civil servants often employ strikes to force the government to react to their grievances and were often able to extract concessions: Doctors were on strike in 2017 and judges were on strike July-August 2018 (Mali: fin de la grève des agents de santé 2017; Les magistrats maliens en grève illimitée, 2018).

Given the unresponsiveness of the political elites, many respondents in grinw described protests or contentious politics as the sole tactics they could use to get their point across. A respondent [R2] from a grin in Bamako explains,

R2: Did you know that all the deputies of Mali reside in Bamako? So, what can we expect from them? To be frank we have no channel through which we can express ourselves [to those in power] since the people are not even considered

by the leaders. But I think we can form a movement and whenever we are not satisfied, we [can] take to the streets and demand our expectations from the leader (Bamako, grin 24).²⁶

Another respondent notes,

R2: The only way [to communicate with politicians] is to protest because when we march, we make our grievances legible to the authorities, and it is the latter who is responsible for transmitting them to the highest authorities. It's the only way to be heard in this country (Mopti, grin 23).

Protests are seen as a response to politicians' apathy. Instead of trying to lobby a politician or visit their office, some respondents found that protests were the most effective tactics to be heard. It should be noted that some respondents did believe that you could still reach out and contact officials through less contentious means; for instance, members of Bamako grin 18 mentioned that you could go to the mayor or deputy's office with your concerns.

We note that respondents were divided about the effectiveness of protests. There were varying opinions about the association between protests and violence. Some felt that protests were effective in forcing politicians' attention and response, while others thought them to be useless as shown in the debate below.

R1: If we have things that we don't like, we will march or go on the radios to express ourselves, and after all that we can rebel.

R2: Hey! Marching doesn't solve anything in Mali. They'll even tell you that when you tire yourselves out, they will arrest you. So protesting doesn't solve anything (Mopti, grin 20).

Other respondents worried about violence during protests, particularly heavy-handed government responses to mobilization on the streets.

26 Similar sentiments from respondent one in Bamako, grin 30.

The constant turn to extra-institutional channels to express preferences, rather than political parties or consultations with elected leaders, leaves institutions to atrophy and also distorts notions of civic participation. While Mali is a highly pro-social country and many citizens engage in acts to support other citizens, this energy is not translated into formal political institutions or political participation—in part due to the institutional deficiencies described earlier.

COMPLEX NATURE OF CIVILIAN-MILITARY RELATIONS

Relations between the military and the civilian government had stagnated due to mistrust since the transition to multi-party elections in 1992, which prevented any constructive initiative to adapt the army to a democratic context, including enforcing subordination to political powers. The long period of military rule (1968-1991) has developed a certain culture within the army that has not evolved with the advent of democracy. A confusion of roles has been reinforced by default under the poor governance of political actors and the sympathy of the populations for the army—in particular during coups d'état. In Mali, Afrobarometer data reveals that the army was consistently ranked as the most trusted government institution over time and that the level of support for military rule is three times higher in Mali than elsewhere in Africa—though trust in the military actually dipped in response to the 2012 coup (Coulibaly and Bratton 2013, 4)—and this relative ranking has only increased in the recent period of crisis (Afrobarometer, Mali Round 9, 2022). Often, the military is seen as an actor of last resort, which can check the executive at times when the other branches of government fail to. In an environment of deep skepticism about the political class, citizens turn toward the military as a more neutral and less self-interested institution to address the crisis. This explains why many Malians were supportive of the junta's intervention, particularly in 2020.

Mali also has a longer historical-cultural memory of intervention by the military. During the 2012 coup, Bruce Whitehouse (2012) discusses how then-junta leader Sanogo also drew on a cultural-historical memory of a hero saving the population from an unjust regime—tapping

into centuries-old stories of past warrior leaders. He writes, "Yet the hero is highly respected because his actions, destabilizing as they may be, succeed in freeing people from inertia and complacency; his actions can also restore an equilibrium that had been lost. In times of crisis, when societal conventions prevent others from acting, the hero's unique role compels him to act." (97)

Both coups in Mali were framed by their leaders as coups to restore democracy. This framing is legitimized in popular memory, in part due to the historical moment of Mali's 1991 coup as ushering in the transition to multi-party rule. The military's use of the "restorative" coup is also consistent with other post-cold war coups, which in some instances were able to bring about elections within five years of the coup (Tansey, 2016). Some scholars are optimistic about the extent to which these types of interventions can usher in democracy (Powell, 2014; Trihart, 2013; Marinov and Goemanns, 2014), while others argue that most post-coup regimes tend towards authoritarianism unless there are significant constraints (Tansey, 2016; Elischer and Hoyle, 2024).²⁷

Since most recently taking power in Mali in 2020, the military has been working toward reform with an eye toward building capacity, including acquiring new equipment, instating new policies to support families of soldiers killed in battle, creating new military grades, and recruiting new soldiers. However, pledged transitions to multi-party elections have been stalled, and civilians remain at the margins of decisionmaking. Indeed, both in the National Transitional Council and in the government, there is little room for the influence of civilians. Civilians who do participate are appointed by the military and are not in a position—culturally or politically—to oppose those that put them in power. Instead, civilians in the current government play a support and assistance role, while reinforcing the political legitimacy of the military.

27 Many of those transitions were facilitated by the international environment favoring elections, but some argue that most of these regimes demonstrate a great degree of authoritarian resilience (Tansey 2016).

Insecurity as a trigger for democratic breakdown

In both the 2012 and 2020 coups, growing insecurity acted as a trigger for democratic breakdown. The mismanagement of the growing rebellion in the north of Mali in 2012 as well as rising opposition to IBK's tenure in 2020—coupled with the longstanding institutional issues described above—pushed the population to view the military as one of the only options to save the country. The fall of the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya served as a major trigger in 2012 (Larémont, 2013), but, in reality, threats to security and the presence of rebellion have become cyclical in Mali (with two researchers stating that “in Mali the state of low-intensity war is almost permanent,” (Guichaoua & Pellerin, 2017), hence the complexity of the analysis of this phenomenon.²⁸ Why have security issues persisted for more than ten years? These questions are as relevant as they are complex, and while it may seem difficult to provide an answer or give a panacea, we can safely note that the implications express a failure of the strategies used so far by the international community, and particularly France.

The analysis of “insecurity as a trigger,” reveals two aspects of insecurity: the immediate security threat on the one hand and, on the other, the inability, for more than a decade, of the national authorities to respond to the security crisis. Over the period of 2012-2020, insurgent groups were able to expand their territory with little effective pushback from the government. Note that one of the government’s main instruments to address the security crisis—the Algiers Accord—did not include jihadist groups, who were among the primary security threats, as signatories. There were also questions

28 Many of those transitions were facilitated by the international environment favoring elections, but some argue that most of these regimes demonstrate a great degree of authoritarian resilience (Tansey 2016).

surrounding the actual implementation of conditions of the Accord. The security issue had a strong impact on the Malian political process and, in particular, on the advent of coups d'état. Rising insecurity brought the country's fragility to an unprecedented level. In addition, it fueled nationalist sentiment in the face of an international community whose presence was perceived as useless and critiqued as pressuring the Malian government with policy constraints, making the country's political authorities “actors under orders” or “assisted governance.” (Soumano 2023) The complex environment in which Mali found itself between 2012 and 2020 was aggravated by the weakness of political initiative and increases in insecurity (Wing 2024, p65-66; Soumano 2023, pages 131-171). In vast swaths of the country where the state was not present, the population remained at the mercy of organized gangs, self-defense groups, and various traffickers.

Thus, elected authorities were sacrificed by interim authorities appointed according to criteria of belonging to armed movements. This was enabled with the complacency of a weak state, which gave a legal character to this state of affairs under duress by adopting a law to this effect (Ouattara, 2016). In addition, the Malian State had to comply with the provisions of the Peace Agreement signed in Algiers in 2015 by force (International Crisis Group, 2015) under international mediation. This agreement included provisions for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former insurgent and militia forces into the Malian military. Some of the Malian population was skeptical that the Accords had any disciplining effect on former rebels, and that instead, the Accords rewarded certain minority groups. There were also concerns about sovereignty, as the Malian government’s ability to react to insurgent groups was, in many instances, highly dependent on the position of international mediation—such as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali—and financial partners under the leadership of France (Soumano, 2023).

In some instances—like under the Algiers Agreement—under pressure from the international community, incarcerated criminals and jihadists were released in defiance of Malian laws, in order to facilitate rapprochements for political discussions (Soumano

2023). The feeling of infringements upon sovereignty and the various frustrations arising from the foreign management of security issues has been an important catalyst for the coups d'état and the support for the military junta from the population.

Conclusion

This article sheds light on the factors that precipitated the multiple coups and overall democratic retrenchment that has plagued Mali since 2012. It is important to underscore that concerns about substantive performance rest not only on service provision—or a regime's ability to "deliver the goods"—but also citizens' assessment of whether democratic institutions function as they should and are responsive to their priorities. Our findings suggest that the increasing gap between aspirations for democratic rule and assessments of democratic practice in African countries—as noted in recent Afrobarometer data (Afrobarometer, 2023)—are worrying, though we argue they are not likely to result in a major backsliding event in the absence of an insecurity trigger. We anticipate that the Malian public will continue to seek out accountable representatives and, in the longer run, demand a return to multi-party elections.

When considering how these results can inform other cases, we recognize that the recent "coup wave" in Africa is made up of diverse cases with different factors driving military takeovers. However, at least two other recent cases—Niger and Burkina Faso—have a history of policy and regime change through coups and contentious politics. Notably, they share with Mali two related drivers that likely shape these outcomes: citizen concerns with corruption and the practice of democracy as well as the poor management of the security situation and concern that France constrained national policymaking.

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APPENDIX I

FOCUS GROUP (GRINW) QUESTION PROMPTS

What are the characteristics of a good leader? How would you describe Mali's past leaders? Which leaders have led Mali best and why? What should an ideal president be like? What are the biggest problems of past Malian presidents? Through which medium are you informed of the actions of Malian leadership (e.g. newspaper, discussions in grinw, television)? How do citizens voice their concerns or ideas to the government or other leaders? What is the most effective form of political participation in Mali today? What, if anything, do elections contribute to Malian democracy (i.e. how valuable is your vote and the voting process)? Do you participate in politics or local governance? If so, how do you participate politically or encourage others to do so? How does your attendance of grinw groups affect your political participation and awareness? Could this document (the kouroukan fouga) be instructive of how Mali should govern today (or not)?

Quotes were pulled from across focus group responses to the questions above.

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