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CONSULTATIONS IN MALI

DRAWING ON DEMOCRATIC HERITAGE TO DEEPEN DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

JAIMIE BLECK AND MOUMOUNI SOUMANO

AUTHORS

Jaimie Bleck is a Professor of political science at Lehigh University.

Moumouni Soumano is a Maître de Conferences, faculty of administrative and political sciences at the University Kurukan Fuga, Bamako

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The Brookings Africa Growth Initiative (AGI) works to inform new policies and models for better development outcomes in Africa through rigorous research and analyses, convenings featuring African voices, and direct engagement with African partners.

In a previous analysis (Bleck and Soumano 2025), we observed a paradox when it comes to Malian democracy—most Malians still prefer democracy but are currently and historically dissatisfied with democracy in practice. As a result of this, many Malians have been willing to tolerate junta rule with the goal of reforming institutions of the state—in hopes that this would make them more accountable to the Malian population. We identified a) Mali's weak formal institutions and b) a tendency of the population and the government to address pressing public policy problems through extra-institutional channels, such as protests or lobbying, as two factors that have historically constrained the Mali's ability to consolidate democracy.

For Mali to embark on a more sustainable democratic path, it will need to strengthen and consolidate the formal institutions, including political parties and the National Assembly, that can help to balance and check the overwhelming power of the president.[1] If Malians regularly use these institutions as forums to address their aspirations and grievances, there is a higher likelihood that the institutions will become more responsive rather than being able to "slack" in a context of little citizen pressure (Hirschman 1972). To encourage citizen participation, these institutions will need to build legitimacy.

Mali is known for longstanding cultural traditions of consultation, deliberation, and tolerance. Malian political culture and preference for "consensus governance" can sometimes create distaste for "one man, one vote" systems that settle issues with a majority vote based on individual perspectives. In this logic, "procedural" or "thin democracy" generates policy solutions without hearing others' perspectives or forcing broader reflections on what is best for society as a whole.[2] By contrast, Malians extol the merit of dialogue as an end of its own. Mehler et al offer the Bambara saying as an example "'sigi ka fo ye damu ye' (dialogue is a virtue)." (2021, 19)

This essay explores the way that the Malian government could leverage the widespread support for processes of political consultation and deliberation—potentially integrating open and direct participation in formal institutions—to help solve the "crisis of representation." National conferences and consultations have historically happened at the margins of formal institutions or taken place in punctuated moments of crisis. They have also been mixed in terms of their successes and failures and their perceived legitimacy. However, in part due to the legacy of the 1991 founding conference, there is broad support for this type of political process to directly consult the population.

We present arguments about ways to improve forums for direct participation and a strategy to raise legitimacy and engagement with government institutions, drawing on examples such as the citizens' assemblies in Australia, Ireland, Belgium, and Switzerland (We the Citizens 2011; Suiter 2018, Fournier et al 2011, Farrell et al 2019; Gerber and Meuller 2018; Macq and Jacquet, 2023). Critical to our discussion is a strategy for a comprehensive integration of these practices into institutions of the state. If deliberative forums remain separated from political discussion in formal institutions, we lose the important link between these institutions and the population. Therefore, this report also focuses on strategies to make parties and representatives more accountable to citizen concerns and preferences.

We examine some of the strengths and weaknesses of Mali's deliberative and consultative traditions to see ways in which these practices might be better incorporated into formal institutions to strengthen and legitimize democratic institutions. To do so, we start by reviewing historical moments where the government has engaged the population in various types of consultation and deliberation. We evaluate these approaches using criteria established by theorists of deliberative democracy: quality of deliberation that informs citizens, the inclusiveness and legitimacy of who serves as their "representatives" (Mansbridge 1980), and the ability of consultative forums to achieve policy aims. We conclude by drawing on some examples from other contexts to offer some suggestions for ways that these practices could be incorporated into political

1 An independent judiciary is also very important for balance of powers in Mali but is beyond the scope of our discussion in this paper, which focuses on direct citizen participation.

2 See critiques of procedural democracy consistent with this position in the work of theorists such as Jane Mansbridge (1980) and Benjamin Barber (1984).

institutions.

At the time of writing, the Malian junta has banned political parties and the military leader Assimi Goïta has been inaugurated as president of the transition for a five-year term through a process that relied on consultation with traditional leaders. In addition, Mali continues to face polycrisis in terms of climate instability, including drought and flooding, food and water insecurity, and various forms of violence and other insecurity (Bleck et al 2025). This essay is not focused on the specific challenges of this period, but the longstanding need to reform and adapt Malian institutions to provide them with legitimacy. We write these policy recommendations with a long view of the urgent need to reform Mali's political institutions based on our previous analysis (Bleck and Soumano 2025). In this sense, our recommendations are universal; any political leader who is interested in improving institutional quality will need to tackle the challenges of improving the legitimacy and functioning of formal institutions and encouraging Malians to engage with these institutions.[3]

Background: Evaluating deliberation and consultation as components of policymaking

3 We acknowledge that are other pressing challenges related to security and sovereignty that also obstruct the ability of institutions to reflect the will of the people. For citizens to be able to fully participate in democratic governance, they need to enjoy basic freedoms including access to water, food, and security (Sen 1999). This paper does not address these challenges in a comprehensive way. Instead, we focus on a narrow set of reforms that can inform current policy debates—specifically, how the state might leverage historical traditions of deliberation and consultation to legitimize and strengthen formal institutions. We will reference these other challenges in this essay, but stick to the primary challenge of improving Mali's representative institutions.

There is a rich literature in political science that views public debate around political or policy ideas as important because it can promote legitimacy in collective decisions, generate a sense of public spiritedness, and allow for the ability to correct mistakes of the past (Macedo 1999 pages 9-10, summarizing Gutman and Thompson 2000). Since 1970, there has been a growing call for greater citizen engagement with democracy. Beyond just the ballot box, there has been an expansion of government forums for citizen deliberation, policy proposals, and decisionmaking (Youngs 2019; Open Government Partnership 2019).

Mansbridge (1980) reminds us of important differences between "adversary democracy"—or the system of equal weighting of preferences at the ballot box—and "unitary democracy"—or a system based on dialogue to reach a common consensus among the group, focusing on areas of agreement rather than differences. Unitary democracy functions best when members of a group share similar preferences and/or can conceptualize themselves within the goals of a shared community. As Mansbridge writes about how the underlying concepts of shared friendship of members changes their calculations for understanding and articulating their preferences, "[f]or each individual, the pleasure of the collective experience outweighs his or her individual preferences. Equally important, the friends make each other's pleasure their own. Because the group's unity has a value greater than the value of most differences in individual preferences, a group of friends will rarely, if ever, settle its decisions with a vote" (1980, page 9). Following from this, Barber's concept of "strong democracy" allows for greater diversity of opinions among participants, but similarly stresses the ability to exchange ideas to moderate or change preferences in ways that might ultimately benefit the political community (1984). Both theorists criticize adversary democracy for its limits in political imagination—by merely aggregating individual interests, electoral politics foreclose an opportunity for a community to deliberate, and in doings so, change preferences for the sake of the public good or community interest (Mansbridge 1980, Barber 1984).

The Malian case introduces further complications to adversary or thin democracy in that political parties

have not historically taken up platforms that incorporate citizen concerns or proven to be very accountable to the populations that have elected them (Bleck and Soumano 2025). However, Mali holds other kinds of democratic assets in its political heritage, including political forums for discussion aimed at finding a common solution to a community problem. While the Malian model is probably more consistent with unitary democracy or a focus on consensus,[4] it offers an interesting basis to explore ways that direct political engagement in discussion can improve institutional legitimacy and functioning. Barber extols direct citizen engagement in political discussions or "strong democracy" that "rests on the idea of a self-governance community of citizens who are united less by homogenous interests than by civic education and who are made capable of a common purpose and mutual action by virtue of their civic attitudes and participatory institutions rather than their altruism or good nature." (1984: 117) Rather than replace elections or representation, it can "complement and be compatible with the primary representative institutions of large-scale modern societies." (1984: 263)

When we evaluate projects to incorporate deliberation and consultation, we can use three rubrics: a) quality of deliberation, b) the quality of participants and c) the degree to which deliberations are then integrated into the debates of formal institutions. The quality of deliberation includes the degree to which all participants can voice their perspectives and are given time (to reflect and discern across various perspectives) and space (for participants to exchange with each other across beliefs). The quality of participants might include analyzing whether they are representative of the broader population as well as their ability and willingness to engage in political debate. The degree of integration is whether the issues raised in citizen forums are taken up by political officials.

Based on analyses of existing projects in Europe and the Global North, experts have identified key conditions that improve the quality of these forums, including random selection of participants, involving experts, avoiding polarization in debate, focusing the types of problems and solutions proposed, and getting buy-in from government authorities and a commitment to address the results (Gastil and Richards 2013). Research has also revealed the importance of addressing theoretical issues of a political project and an emphasis that goes beyond individual-level needs (Young 2019, p 4). These experiments have tended to yield more concrete results at the local than national level.

Though much of the work on deliberative theory focuses on the Global North, the African continent has robust histories of deliberation, debate, and community consultation in many political communities. In many instances in Africa, we see longstanding mechanisms of community deliberation and debate—ranging from the West African palaver system to kgotlas in Botswana—which heightens the urgency to examine how community-level discussion can inform democracy in the African context(Friesen 2025; Schaffer 1998, Bujo 2005). There is also a widespread practice of holding informal political discussion groups in urban areas (Banégas et al 2012). These systems vary in the degree to which they are incorporated into the formal political system as well as the possibilities for dissenting belief and expression within the forum. Some countries, including Mali and Benin, drew on these rich histories of deliberation and consultation in the founding national conferences (les asssises nationales) that paved the way to multi-party elections (Wing 2008).

Drawing on these findings, this report interrogates the best ways to adapt direct participation to the Malian context, which has longstanding social traditions of deliberation, and—crucially—how these practices might be used to strengthen formal institutions.

4 In drawing a distinction between different types of consensus, Barber explains that "The ideal grounds of unitary democracy is substantive consensus – common beliefs, values, and ends that precede government and predefine the community and through which individuals can realize themselves (these selves being defined by community)" (1984: 224)

The practice of consultations: An accessible and shared sociological resource in Mali

In the political trajectory of post-colonial Mali, deliberations have long remained elitist, mirroring colonial governance. Only a small number of participants discussed questions of organization and management of the administration. This established a precedent of verticality in political governance, with populations who were not truly citizens but administered "subjects" of the state. The survival of this mode of governance, following independence, was supported using French as the official language of the country, complicating political debate and the participation of populations on national issues for the uninitiated. The regime crises that followed, in particular the Tuareg rebellion in 1962, the arrest of political opposition leaders (such as Fily Dabo Ahmadoun Dicko in 1962) following their opposition to the creation of the Malian franc (Commission Internationale de Juristes 1963, pp.31-32), and the 1968 coup against President Modibo Keïta, among others, contributed to strengthening the power of authoritarian rulers and the single-track thinking in this period. Political contradictions were seen as factors that weakened the political system in facing the challenges of political and economic independence to the detriment of national cohesion, hence the importance of stifling dissention. Under the Modibo Keïta regime, opponents were considered enemies from within compared to those outside, who were colonizers (Commission Internationale de Juristes 1963, Keita 1963).[5] This came at the detriment of openness and participatory governance, without institutions that were representative of the different national sensitivities.

An added wrinkle to implementing party politics and elections (adversary democracy) in Mali is that the socio-political conception of leadership or power in Mali traditionally has a divine dimension (from a social conception of God as the one who allows to someone to become president). Adversary democracy is also different in its acceptance that the majority vote can trump the needs of voters in the minority,[6] rather than pursuing a collective vision of community through consensual deliberation. Leadership by ballot contrasts mass consultations like those used in Mandé historically (present-day Mali and Guinea) where, according to oral historians, leaders used consensual measures of discussion to strengthen peace and cohesion such that they could establish and consolidate the management of land and relations between people such as in the case of the Kurukan Fuga—the 1236 founding charter of the Empire du Mali. The consultations were grounded in cultural values that are also embodied in the governance of community affairs, symbolized by the palaver tree, the Toguna (short shed to facilitate dispassionate exchanges), or the Soud Baba whose literal translation means "Paternal House," all of which represented spaces for dialogue, exchanges and decision-making for village or community affairs (Coulibaly 2019; Sy et al, 2019).

Malian culture is robust with examples of deliberation and exchange for both problem-solving and more theoretical exercises of political imagination. In rural areas, chiefs regularly hold consultative meetings with members of the village where they hear villagers' needs, wants, and conflicts. In urban areas, informal discussion groups called "grinw" offer young Malians, though predominantly men, an opportunity to debate political ideas; importantly, grinw invite dissent and debate and are a place for citizens to gain new perspectives and access new information (Bleck et al 2024). At the national institutional and political level, different presidents have experimented with consultations as attempts to find solutions to issues of national importance. What characterizes these spaces is a consultative model where different members of the community give their opinions or points of view

5 For a broader discussion of this period, see Mann 2015

6 Consistent with Mansbridge's (1980) discussion of thin democracy or Barber's conception of weak democracy (1984) as opposed to deliberative, consensual, or strong democracy.

on issues based on their convictions or interests. The solution that emerges is then approved by the leader, who acts more as a facilitator than as someone holding specific privileges in regard to decisionmaking. Through this mechanism, disputes and shortcomings are managed in a space that inspires confidence in citizens, because everyone feels they have the opportunity to be heard. They have not only the conviction of having participated in the decisionmaking, but also the satisfaction of obtaining something (a preferred policy outcome). At the national level, this mechanism has inspired the consultation processes between several presidents of the Republic of Mali and the presidents of various national institutions, either to find ways and means of exiting a crisis or to appoint executives to high state functions without this being formally enshrined in the Constitution or other texts governing the state. The aim of these approaches is to strengthen cohesion or consensus-based solutions to a national problem.

Another important consideration is the objective of the debates and discussions and the degree to which citizens need to come to a consensus or whether the deliberation can end with pockets of dissent. In national consultations, an important question is how to reach agreement on the motivations for and goals of the consultation. The answer to this question is a common thread that guides the discussions and reinforces the feelings that motivate the participants to reach an agreement. Among the Dogon people of Mali, for example, it is established that "the common interest necessitates peace and that the rain clouds are blown away from the places where disorder holds sway" and that mutual forgiveness and peace are prioritized in the event of conflict (Sy et al, 2019, page 8). Far from idealizing the achievement of this objective, it may happen that divergences or dissent during consultations cannot be resolved by consensus despite the goodwill of the participants. In such situations, referring the issue to other forums may be recommended or the search for a majority trend will be taken into account. In such circumstances, the search for a consensus or a solution can be carried out by referring the discussion to a more technical framework at the administrative level (e.g. inter-ministerial committees) or by setting up specific commissions to formulate initiatives or solutions that reduce the divergences in order to facilitate a majority vote in democratic institutions (the National Assembly, for example).

Embedded within popular Malian political culture is an ability for citizens to talk to each other. There are historical conflict mitigation mechanisms—such as "sanankuya," a system of cross-cutting cleavages—that are part of the social fabric of Malian society (Dunning and Harrison 2020). This ethos of keeping the peace and tolerating other views is visible in the ways that groups typically have mechanisms to calm discussion down if it becomes too heated. For instance, in the context of the national consultations in 2020, when political discussions that become too polarized, participants resolved to send the most contentious issues up to the National Assembly and ministerial departments so they could discuss it there.[7]

Lessons learned from the consultations in Mali

The cultural foundations of dialogue and consultation have been invoked to deal with new political situations from the transition to democracy in 1991 (Sy et al 2016; Wing 2008; Wing 2015) to more recent political and military conflicts (Sy et al 2016). Past governments have recognized that such consultations are a way to build popular legitimacy, as they know that the Malian population values political leaders consulting the population directly (Wing 2015; Mehler et al 2021, p. 18; Sy et al 2016). In addition, by allowing citizens to participate directly, the government can avoid the magnification of protests.

Thus, we see them repeatedly used by different Malian leaders including in the National Conference of 1991, political forum of 1999, national consultations in 2020 to set the terms of the transition, the National Refoundation Conference of September 2021, the Inclusive

7 Author observation as NGO representative (CMID) at the 2020 national consultations, August 2025.

National Dialogue or Inter-Malian Dialogue in May 2024, and the national consultations for peace and national reconciliation in February 2025 for the review of the party charter in April 2025.[8]

Analysis of Mali's political trajectory in recent decades consistently demonstrates the use of extra-institutional spaces for dialogue to address difficult issues or to establish the overall political or specific framework. These spaces have become genuine political alternatives in times of peace as well as in times of political unrest. This symbolizes, first and foremost, the deficiency or weakness of constitutional institutions, whose existence is based on the ability to facilitate political compromises on divisive issues, but also reflects the path for these alternatives to gain legitimacy complementary to that of the ballot box. Having become a logical consequence of Mali's political evolution, extra-institutional spaces for dialogue have become a major feature in resolving Mali's institutional, political, and security crises.

SUCCESSES

The previous sections have established popular appreciation for direct consultation. We can look to analysis of past experiences in Mali to explore what previous consultations have been able to achieve and where they fell short. We select the two conferences that are viewed as the most successful among the various conference and consultations over the years: the founding National Conference of 1991 and the 1999 political forum. We take a deeper look at both in order to draw lessons from each.

1991 National Conference

The first major national consultation in 1991 took place following the fall of the 23-year single-party regime (1968-1991), which had been criticized for its vertical governance with a single-party system developed within a single constitutional political party. The vertical continuum that had existed within the post-colonial state until then was shattered by political openness and the establishment of a multi-party system and the rule of law. Sanctioned by a national conference (held from July 29 to August 12, 1991), the change of regime was a decisive milestone in the Malian democratic process because it was instituted under the impetus of popular will. The result was not due to an elite struggle, but the sum of a popular will to change governance and break decades of decadent elitism such that governance and political power are accessible to all. This intellectual foundation is critical for analyzing the political trajectory of democratic construction in Mali and explains, to a large extent, that beyond rules and principles, the population demonstrates a conviction in their relationship to power that an elitist governance or even its perception is unacceptable and non-negotiable. Malians claim that they will no longer accept elite power without popular consultation; one popular way of expressing this is to invoke the name of an ancient precolonial ruler in saying they refuse the power of Kaya Makan (Keita 2017).[9]

In the case of the 1991 National Conference, the objective, according to its initiators, was the re-establishment of the state by drafting a new constitution and new texts, hence the importance of making the conference sovereign by making these decisions related to the electoral code, charter of political parties, and making the constitution enforceable. In accordance with its objectives, the National Conference was able to bring Malians together to analyze the fundamental issues that could enable a break with the previous mode of governance and lay a consensual basis for initiating the democratic process. This is a daunting challenge that would have been difficult to address without broad consultation due to divisions and the search for legitimacy. More than 2,000 participants "negotiated the institutions that would form the core" of Mali's democracy (Mehler et al 2021, p. 17).

An assessment of Mali's political trajectory allows us to measure the true value of the feat achieved during the National Conference. This founding event serves

8 See the appendix for a full list of various consultative processes in Malian history.

9 Kaya Makan was the name of the king of the empire of Wagadu or Empire of Ghana (XI et XIIes), which preceded the Malian empire. He is traditionally considered as someone with formidable power, including the right to kill. (See Keita 2017)

as the most important example of dialogue and exchange aimed at creating a new political framework. It succeeded in bringing Malians together to draw up a new social contract—a new constitution. This task has never been able to be repeated within the institutional framework, even after more than three attempts at constitutional revision, all of which have failed.[10] The 1991 National Conference was the founding space for Malian democracy after the fall of the single-party regime that lasted 23 years. It set the tone for consultation as a building block to democratic representation. Held for the first time as a type of institutional innovation, it was an exceptional framework and space for sociological, ethnic, and political diversity that made it possible to unite the multitude of populations in Mali to initiate and agree on a new social and political contract in order to establish a multiparty system and the rule of law (Wing 2008). This was a feat given the scale of the task and the ideological differences between the participating actors. The discussions within the forum allowed for difficult compromises around heated issues including the age of the president, voting methods, assembly-government ratio, and questions of justice. The political proposals were largely based on ideological objectives, but also and above all on the existence of a common political will to emerge from an autocratic regime and move towards a liberal and democratic political system. It is largely regarded as the most successful consultation in Mali's history and set a popular expectation for direct popular participation in the context of a multi-party regime (Sy et al 2019, Wing 2008).

This objective was shared by both the participants and the transitional authorities (composed of civilian and military actors) of the time. The absence of a formal partisan framework, no majority or opposition representation, and the apparent neutrality of the military, particularly its leader (Amadou Toumani Touré) with regard to the conference agenda and the terms of reference, allowed the emergence of a framework for open discussion between the participants who reached, sometimes with difficulty, useful consensus to define the political regime, the rights of citizens, the role of the military and their relationship with political powers, particularly the conditions of access to political power.

True political openness in regard to participation at the top of the state (government) and at the level of the citizen (participants within the CTSP (Transitional Committee for the Salvation of the People)) continued in the inclusion of diverse participants in the National Conference; the conference invited participation by different socio-professional categories. Participants were selected by the organizations that they were members of. In terms of form, the processes for organizing consultations are carried out in accordance with a methodology of exchanges at scale that goes from the bottom up. Thus, discussions on the themes proposed by the government are held in the communes and circles, the conclusions of which are then brought up to the regional level, followed by further discussions in the regions, the summaries of which are sent back to the exchanges at the national phase for final recommendations. The participants in the discussions are determined on a case-by-case basis, first by socio-professional categories (civil servants, unions, private sectors, representatives of parties, CSOs, NGOs, farmers, breeders, and artisans) and traditional cultural legitimacy (village chiefs, religious leaders, customary chiefs, traditional communicators, etc.). The participants were a-partisan and without access to resources of the state- which ensured some level of political neutrality. One notable lacuna was the small number of women participating. Sy et al (2016) report that there were 1,034 men compared to 52 women on the list of registered participants (page 15).

The table below, taken from the cited study, describes the participants in the conference.

10 First in 2000 by President Konaré, whose revision project was interrupted by the Constitutional Court (Decision No. 1-128 of December 12, 2001) following a referral from the opposition at the time. Then, the attempt initiated by President Amadou Toumani Toure in 2012 passed the National Assembly and the control of the Constitutional Court, only to be suspended by the coup d' état of March 2012. Finally, the third attempt was initiated by President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) which, like the second attempt, passed the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court but was suspended by its initiator after significant popular demonstrations by Malian citizens. The failed attempts were all characterized by high levels of mistrust between political actors, a lack of political will to see the efforts through, a lack of political neutrality, and lack of inclusivity in terms of who was invited to participate.

TABLE 1

Participants in the 1991 National Conference

Profile of participants	Number
CTSP and cabinet	28
Members of the government	21
Ambassadors, governors	8
Army and security actors	15
Members of the diaspora	20
Professionals	42
Experts from the preparatory commission	63
Malians from abroad	77
Delegates from the regional coordination committees	118
Delegates from the cercles	135
Delegates from the communes	19
Delegates from cooperatives	11
Delegates from political parties	125
Delegates from associations	467
Interpreters	10
Press	126
Organizing committee	132
Total	1,518

SOURCE: Sy et al 2016, p. 14

Two strengths of the National Conference were this level of political inclusion as well as a freedom of expression; the procedural rules of the conference explained that participants couldn't be harassed or subject to legal proceedings (Sy et al 2016, p. 16). Relatedly, since the conference was broadcasted on local radio, members of various associations could monitor to ensure that they were being represented accurately (Sy et al 2016, page 16). In addition to ensuring popular legitimacy, the conference was also successful in generating concrete resolutions which were implemented to strengthen the Malian democratic process. The National Conference gave enduring legitimacy to the Constitution that was generated in its wake (Wing 2015).

In spite of the successes, there were still some weaknesses, including the short timeframe of the conference and the superficial treatment of certain issues (Sy et al 2016). Additionally, the aftermath of the conference lacked adequate monitoring; there was not an evaluation committee in place to see that the recommendations put forth were translated into policy (Sy et al 2016).

1999 political forum

Mali's second experience with multi-party elections (1997) took place in a fractured political environment, including a boycott of the presidential elections by opposition actors (Sotinel, 1997). This aggravated the political cleavage between the majority and the opposition coalition. The 1999 political forum (January 21-29) aimed to resolve political polarization whose points of contention centered around the presidential election, the narrowness of political participation, and demonstrations for more political openness. In the years between 1996-1999, it had been difficult to resolve this political polarization due to a crisis of confidence between political actors. The National Assembly operated under the leadership of an ultra-dominant party (ADEMA) which led to unbalanced debates within the assembly with no true opposition voice. The credible alternative available to the president was to initiate extra-institutional discussions in order to smooth out the divisions and reduce the high level of imbalance between political forces by initiating a framework in which Malian actors find themselves on an equal footing to seek solutions that could allow political appeasement: Hence the 1999 political forum.

The forum was held to address these lingering tensions and was successful in initiating important reforms: laws on political finance, creating a government of national unity, reviewing electoral law and the status of the opposition, which dampened political polarization.[11] Initiated in difficult circumstances, the forum, through its approach which attempted to circumvent the hierarchies of political power, initially made it possible to reduce mistrust between political actors and create an environment conducive to dialogue with the guarantee, symbolized by the political commitment of the head of state, that consensual resolutions can be found and subsequently applied. The approach and methodology of the forum was distinguished by the fact that the major actors represented by the political parties and their offshoots (mayors, deputies, district councilors) accepted that in addition to the administration (government, governors and prefects) the search for solutions to strictly political issues should be extended to other actors such as civil society organizations—who again designated members as participants (NGOs, traditional leaders, youth and women's associations)—with the dual perspective of giving a national dimension to the resolutions and having witnesses to strengthen and support the implementation of said resolutions.

The week-long discussions resulted in important resolutions, including the granting of funding to political parties, the institutionalization of a status for the opposition, and the decision to entrust the management of elections to the Ministry of Territorial Administration. These measures helped to calm the climate, and their implementation helped strengthen the peaceful dynamics of consolidating the democratic process. The major lesson learned from the political forum is that it opened the political space by allowing for diverse and pluralistic expression; the actors felt they had been listened to and had the opportunity for national construction. Majority management, which is a democratic principle, was balanced by preventing the feeling of exclusion, which is a significant frustration for political actors who believe that it is unacceptable to exclude part of the population under the guise of elections.

The national consultation broadened the scope of political analysis by integrating diverse opinions and complementing the inadequacies of political programs as proposed by members of government. Consultations help to fill the gaps in political representation by allowing people to participate in defining political projects and agendas while strengthening the sense of participation in the country. This gave legitimacy to these types of processes, which were viewed favorably by the Malian population.

11 Based on an author interview with former Ministerial Advisor who attended 1999 Political Forum, August 2025

WEAKNESSES

We can also take stock of the failures of the consultations within Mali. While each of Mali's consultative processes has had similar objectives, they have not been successful in each case or across all issue areas. One common failure of the consultations is that they have been less successful in ensuring the implementation and monitoring of recommendations after the conclusion of the consultations. Often ideas arriving from the consultative forum dissipate after the convening and are not integrated into the debates in the National Assembly. Even for the recommendations turned into law, there is not always an assurance that the government will ensure that they follow through on the full implementation of these ideas and removal of barriers to their success. It is important to remember that the implementation of the decisions resulting from the consultations is not binding and is left to the goodwill of the public authorities. Political will is the key to the efficient implementation of the outcome of the consultations. Literature on participatory democracy stresses the crucial second step of citizen deliberation, which is the degree to which issues raised in these forums are taken up by elected officials/bureaucrats. This element is key to linking Mali's weak formal institutions to its strong culture of deliberation. In addition, past deliberations at the local level have generated a huge number of recommendations such that it is difficult to filter and distill them into specific governmental policies. For instance, the 2019 consultations organized at the commune level by President IBK resulted in 32,451 recommendations with an additional 5,000 recommendations coming from a website set up to field diaspora contributions (Mehler et al, 2021, page 14; Diallo 2019).

A second problem is that some forums have been less politically neutral in character. Leaders have instrumentalized consultations and their agendas (terms of reference) to achieve their own goals. Some analysts see consultations, particularly local-level ones, as mechanisms of cooptation (Mehler et al, 2021, p. 6). Dialogues cannot merely be top-down but "as forms of "communicative action" that serve a better understanding (and therefore peace) [they] are at work when a) the arguments exchanged build upon each other, b) the outcome of the dialogue processes is not fixed in advance (Mehler et al 2021, p. 9)." Without the political will and openness to ideas that arrive throughout the political deliberation, a consultation will be far less politically relevant or viewed as legitimate by the population. Elites invited to a dialogue during the 1991 National Conference and 1999 forum were unique in their commitment to a diversity of participants. In other consultative forums, the political authorities have been able to handpick participants in order to achieve their political agenda. This threatens the diversity of ideas, the opportunities for debate and discernment, as well as the legitimacy of these events.

Third, there are some difficulties in translating local discussion into national policymaking. At the local level, the designations of participants are made by consensus: Generally, opinion leaders and representatives of youth, women, and traditional and customary chiefdoms are the designated categories. If the debates are held in the national language, the technical nature of certain issues (political regime, electoral structure, participation modalities, etc.) sometimes constitutes an obstacle to optimal participation and proposals that can truly reflect certain populations' deep aspirations (For instance, the majority system or the system of seat repartitions after a communal vote). It is very important that technical information is translated, and time is spent sensitizing citizens to major governance issues such as the mandate of MPs, the electoral system and electoral boundaries, the national budget, the responsibilities of mayors, and other important regulations. In addition, the terms of reference of the consultations sometimes limit the possibility for the debates at the grassroots level to reach the major concerns of these populations, not to mention the influence of opinion leaders who act according to their political visions or corporate interests. The dimension of participation is reinforced by the fact that representatives (called vital forces) at the grassroots level are designated to participate in the national phase, which is generally held in Bamako (Ousmane Sy, Ambroise Dakouo et Kadari Traore, 2016).

Fourth, sometimes contentious issues are difficult to discuss in this type of forum that values consensus. While it is likely that some policy issues could be fully

debated, and citizen preferences revealed, it is also true that some political issues were too sensitive to discuss in these open forums and that participants engaged in self-censorship. While deference to ruling presidents has always been an element of Malian political culture, the current political environment as well as more than a decade of insecurity makes these concerns even more salient. In evaluating the quality of discussion, it is important to note the degree to which divergent or unpopular beliefs are allowed to be heard and considered. Otherwise, discussion focused on consensus can mask coercion or be exercises in group think. In addition, previous consultations have tabled some key issues or asked for endorsements of policy as a starting point (eg. secularism, Algiers Accords) (Mehler et al 2021, page 15), rather than encouraging free discussion.

Fifth, there are also questions about the neutrality and representativeness of participants selected for national forums. When political elites select participants—whether the military government or the previous multi-party regimes—some spectators question the representativeness of these participants. Mehler et al (2021) argue that true inclusion should be measured by the participation of "avowed regime opponents:" "a fixed, top-down agenda…only serves the regime, while a participatory process potentially opens avenues toward regime softening or even political reform (p. 9)." They give the example of consultations held by President IBK in 2019, which, although open, the vast majority of civil society actors were boycotted by some of the main opposition parties and leaders, as well as by two former Prime Ministers—Cheick Modibo Diarra and Soumano Sacko (2021, p. 14).

Finally, Mali's consultative model leverages traditional leaders as representatives of their constituents. Afrobarometer data reveals that Malians have historically been eager for these leaders to have a greater role in governance (Logan 2013; Coulibaly and Diarra 2004). However, it is undeniable that gender and caste inequality continue to plague many communities in Mali, so it is also important to evaluate whose voices are included in these discussions. These concerns are particularly salient given patterns of social inequality in Malian society. Mali continues to have one of the highest gender gaps in political participation and political knowledge on the African continent and women's participation in the public sphere can often be frowned upon (Bleck and Michelitch 2018; Gottlieb 2016). In addition, caste divisions—including histories of slavery—continue to plague some ethnic communities in Mali (Rodet 2016). Representatives claiming to speak on behalf of traditional communities may be most interested in preserving status quo power relations (Benhabib 2002). We also must be cautious of the ways that power shapes participation in consultations. When lower-status villagers do participate, they might use this type of forum to demonstrate allegiance to the chief, rather than to voice their own opinions about village affairs (Shapland et al 2023, pp. 1473-1474). It is important to interrogate whether these leaders can properly represent diverse views from those constituencies. That said, economic inequality between traditional leaders and their communities is relatively low in Mali (Shapland et al 2023, p. 1467), and thus traditional leaders may be more representative in this sense than elected officials. Finally, given the ethicized nature of Mali's historic insurgencies, intercommunal violence, and continued marginalization of certain nomadic communities, it is important to note which groups are involved in national processes of consultation.

The merits of direct participation to build institutional legitimacy

Below, we offer some recommendations for ways to incorporate models of participatory governance to strengthen formal institutions. We focus on two institutions that have been historically weak in Mali: political parties and the National Assembly. We see these two venues as key for building citizens engagement and for acting as checks on the dominant presidential power.

POLITICAL PARTIES

Malian parties are seen as being largely distant from the population and lacking programmatic platforms (Bleck and Soumano 2025). Parties continue to be vehicles for personalist ambition and frequently are shaped by the contours of available resources. We see popular skepticism about parties in low voter turnout; Mali has never reached 60% turnout in any election.

To better anchor political parties in the deliberative and consultative tradition, Mali could focus on improving the quality of party primaries such that party members feel invested in the selected candidate. Political parties must focus on civic education of the population instead of continuing to practice conscience-buying to obtain votes. The election management body should embark on a widespread information campaign to explain what candidates in various offices can and cannot do including their mandates, their budgetary resources, and competencies. They should work to sponsor local radio programs to have hosts run call in shows in local language where citizens can discuss expectations for politicians as well as relevant scope of work for different elected offices. These shows could also highlight "success stories" in terms of specific communes, national-level actors, or parties abroad that were able to successfully respond to needs and interests of constituencies. The electoral process is flawed in the sense that candidates presented by political parties feel less accountable to meeting the needs of the population because they win elections by buying votes and not in winning voter confidence. Thus, a second crucial element is the development of candidate and party platforms and a frank discussion about how these could be put into action. Ideally, these platforms would be informed by the interests and preferences of constituents. Candidates must widely advertise what they plan to achieve once in office with commune meetings and townhalls in local languages.

In Mali, there are very few political debates between candidates. When candidates do visit localities on their tour, they give speeches and meet with notables but rarely engage in direct conversations with constituents. The government could consider organizing deliberative forums with representatives from various civil society organizations, including traditional and religious leaders. The forums should be held in various communes across Mali and used to develop a list of key issue areas that could be submitted to all political parties. Parties could use these lists to develop or incorporate into their platform. These discussions could potentially be integrated into each commune's PDSEC (Social, Economic, and Cultural Development Plan), which is reviewed and adopted every year. Then, the second step would be to organize dialogue with political parties to have them debate specific issues from their platform. These debates could be moderated by local journalists or could take the shape of town halls with direct questions from constituents to strengthen connections between elected officials and the local population. In addition, at the national level, state broadcasters, and the Office of Radio and Television of Mali could sponsor candidate debates that are broadcast on Facebook live and/or on local radio. These debates could potentially include call-ins from citizens to ask candidates questions in a virtual town hall model. Historically, Malian candidates have not engaged in these types of debates or formal, moderated town halls. This kind of engagement could build from deliberative traditions in Mali by allowing candidates to come face to face with constituents.

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Previous analysis revealed the members of the Malian National Assembly to have minimal engagement with constituents and that citizens felt that politicians did not represent their interests. The relationship between parliamentarians and the public can be strengthened through greater consultation between the former and their constituencies by strengthening the capacities of parliamentarians (via financial support and capacity building for parliamentary assistants) and by requiring parliamentarians to initiate discussions with their constituencies before each session (in Mali, there are two annual sessions of 75 days and 90 days).

We propose two types of institutions that could be considered to strengthen the linkages between populations and the National Assembly. The National Assembly could benefit from citizen assemblies, drawing on

models from Switzerland, Ireland, Canada, Belgium, Estonia, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Romania, where randomly selected citizens deliberate on issues and then send recommendations to the government (Fournier et al 2011, Farrell et al 2019; Gerber and Meuller 2018; Macq and Jacquet, 2023). These could take the shape of public hearings.[12] At the national level, civil society could begin by organizing dialogue among diverse representatives nominated by their own group. They could use their own platforms (les faîtières thématiques) with the intention of informing government of their own resolutions/findings to influence the formulation of policy or introduction of new law. By using a non-governmental space for discussion, the dialogue would be less laden with pressures or power dynamics than if it was organized by those in power. Concerns from these public hearings could be taken up by various governmental bodies—depending on the thematic area—or by individual MPs. It is critical that these forums are chaired by a neutral actor capable of imparting political will in favor of granting spaces to institutions to function not according to political considerations but in line with the needs and recommendations of the populations.

Another constitutionally permissible option would be a parliamentary restitution, which provides MPs with direct interaction with various populations around a topic. This is rarely done in Mali, so this tool could be reinforced and improved so that it is more regularly incorporated into policymaking in Mali. It would be important to provide information and training about existing and proposed legislation in local languages so that the population would be in a good position to formulate their concerns and offer suggestions.

Key to the success of these bodies would be ensuring that different regions and groups are represented, and no key groups are excluded. While many citizen assemblies use random selection, given the disparity in the distribution of the population across territory, it would be important to include regional quotas. Associations could vote to elect their own representatives or deliberate to nominate their own representatives; Tounkara (2021) recommends organizing elections so that each large labor union could elect their own representatives so that future dialogues are more inclusive and effective. Given Malian cultural organization around traditional leaders, one consideration might be using a random selection of traditional leaders (accompanied by their chosen interpreters) as well as randomly selected civil society and religious leaders to act in this capacity. The 1991 Conference and 1999 forum should be studied to better understand how to arrive at a set of more politically neutral participants who are committed to the goals of the reforms as well as how to select members that are viewed as legitimate. The National Assembly would then be required to deliberate on these issues and recommendations, which could include new laws, proposed budget lines, or even constitutional amendments.

The forums should be preceded by widespread public discussion on local radio of key issues and policies that need to be addressed (as discussed in Sy et al's prescriptions one and two below) as well as specific resources, key issues, and policy parameters distributed to participants in advance of the assembly in order to prepare. Indeed, public information campaigns, periods of home study, or trainings take place for citizen assembly participants in British Columbia, the Netherlands, and Ontario in order for them to familiarize themselves with issues related to electoral reform (Fournier et al 2011, pages 7-9).

Sy and coauthors (2021) offer seven prescriptions to improve the quality and effectiveness of these forums: 1) start with small teams of experts proposing topics for discussion and to plan and organize the dialogues; 2) develop a communication strategy so that the general public can understand the approach and follow the discussion; 3) offer training at the national and regional levels in facilitation, documentation, and synthesis of discussions; 4) conduct citizen dialogues at the cercle level; 5) conduct a regional synthesis of the cercle-level dialogues; 6) conduct a national discussion of regional-level dialogue; 7) systematize the outlines of the reforms to be undertaken (page 31).

12 The internal rules of Mali's National Assembly (Secretariat législatif) already make provisions for these types of public hearings.

Relatedly, deliberative councils[13] are citizen-run bodies that oversee citizen assemblies and follow up to monitor the National Assembly and ensure that the ideas from these citizen assemblies are addressed. These councils would be comprised of knowledgeable actors with the time and resources to monitor and evaluate the degree to which issued raised in citizen forums are addressed by elected leaders. This might include some quota of randomly selected villages leaders as well as representatives of associations and NGOs, academics, and journalists. One could imagine a task force that uses social media technology to update other citizens on the status of these proposals from committees and to engender wider comment. As argued above, to date in Mali, a major challenge has been that there are no mechanisms to ensure that citizens' discussions or priorities are debated and considered for integration into formal institutional spaces. As we have seen from the case studies above, sometimes there are hundreds of recommendations that need to be consolidated and prioritized. It is critical that there is somebody charged with ensuring that broad consultations are considered within the halls of government. We can imagine a deliberative council publicizing key issues that come out of consultations and then monitoring and broadcasting updates on the integration of key debates into the National Assembly or other formal bodies via social media so that citizens can see the degree to which their discussions are incorporated into policy. The political support of the president for the strengthening of institutions is key for considering the interests of the populations. In this role, the president must seek balance between the stability of their mandate and the fair functioning of democratic institutions.

Conclusion

This article discusses ways that Mali might draw on its democratic heritage of deliberative forums to improve formal institutions: political parties and the National Assembly. It has surveyed the strengths of community exchange as a way to highlight citizen priorities, but also as a mechanism to emphasize the public good in policymaking and to build the legitimacy of formal institutions. It stresses the transformative power of deliberation in uniting citizens around common goals and also in generating citizen efficacy.

To this end, we make recommendations regarding the need for community debates about key issues, party platforms that incorporate these discussions, and candidate debates so that citizens better understand where politicians stand on key issues and can hold them accountable. This effort would need to be undergirded by a mass information campaign in local languages so that citizens understand the technical parameters of key issues including institutional responsibilities of various levels of government. In addition, we propose two mechanisms to strengthen debate within the National Assembly. First, a platform for citizens to raise and debate solutions to major issues that would then be sent for discussion in the National Assembly—embodying the spirit of the first National Conference. This could take place through two constitutionally sanctioned processes—public hearings that are run by civil society (without major political actors as facilitators) or parliamentary restitutions—in conjunction with MPs. In either case, we also recommend a deliberative council of experts to monitor the degree to which salient issues raised by citizens are discussed and addressed in the National Assembly.

13 For the example of such citizen councils in the context of Belgium, see Chwalisz 2019

APPENDIX: AN OVERVIEW OF CONSULTATIVE PROCESSES IN MALI

TABLE 2

National consultations since 1991[14]

Dialogue	Date	Stakeholders	Purpose	Source
CONFERENCE NATIONALE (NATIONAL CONFERENCE)	29 July to 12 August, 1992	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Human rights association •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative •Diaspora representatives	New constitution	Sy et al, 2016
ASSISE NATIONALE SUR LE NORD (NATIONAL FORUM ON THE NORTH)	1 to 3 November, 2013	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Armed movements •Government representative	Build peace, cohesion and development	Sy et al, 2016
FORUM POLITIQUE NATIONAL (NATIONAL POLITICAL FORUM)	1999	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative	Political stability (reduce tension and polarization)	Rapport Général du Forum Politique National du 21 au 29 janvier 1999

14 This list only includes conferences and consultations with national-level participation

Dialogue	Date	Stakeholders	Purpose	Source
CONFERENCE D'ENTENTE NATIONALE (NATIONAL UNITY CONFERENCE)	2017	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Human rights association •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative •Diaspora representatives	For peace and social cohesion	Sy et al, 2018
DIALOGUE NATIONAL INCLUSIF (INCLUSIVE NATIONAL DIALOGUE)	2019	•Political movements •Government representative	Political stability, national cohesion	Mehler et al 2021
CONCERTATIONS NATIONALE (NATIONAL CONSULTATIONS)	2020	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Human rights association •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative •Diaspora representatives	To fix the terms of political transition	Lorgerie 2020
ASSISES NATIONALES DE LA REFONDATION (NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RECONSTRUCTION)	2021	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Human rights association •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative •Diaspora representatives	Redefine the political transition's goals	Republique du Mali et Assises Nationales De La Refondation (ANR). 2021.

Dialogue	Date	Stakeholders	Purpose	Source
DIALOGUE INTER MALIENS (INTER-MALIAN DIALOGUE)	2024	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Human rights association •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative •Diaspora representatives	New peace arrangement after the denunciation of Algiers Accord (2015)	Association Internationale des Jeunes Chercheurs en Droits Afric-ains (AIJCDA), 2024.
CONCERTATIONS NATIONALES (NATIONAL CONSULTATIONS)	2025	•Political movements •Civil society organizations •Trade unions •Human rights association •Socio-professional category representatives •Government representative •Diaspora representatives	To review political parties	Mahamane 2025

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