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Crisis in Mali:
Lessons from an ongoing democratic transition

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Introduction

The West African Republic of Mali began its transition towards a democratic, multiparty regime on March 26, 1991. After months of mass uprisings and street demonstrations led by labour unions, students, and unemployed university graduates, a military coup staged by the commander of the presidential guard and the top presidential military *aide-de-camp* overthrew the 23-year-old military dictatorship of President Moussa Traoré and his one-party government.

The demonstrators had been inspired by the Traoré regime's unwillingness to open up the political space and accept multiparty democracy; its inability to address pressing socio-economic demands stemming from mass poverty and growing unemployment among secondary school and university graduates; its inability to clear the arrears in civil service pay and meet pay demands from the labour unions; and its failure to stamp out corruption.

Why did this rare democratic success story in Africa falter?

On April 5, 1991, a transition government began to lay the institutional foundations for a Third Republic, and to pave the way for a democratically elected government. President Alpha Oumar Konaré was inaugurated as president in June 1992, and was followed by President Amadou Toumani Touré in a peaceful and smooth handover of power in June 2002. At this point it was generally accepted, especially among the international community, that democracy was taking root in Mali and that the country was well on its way to a mature, self-sustaining and stable Western-style democracy. Unfortunately, the military coup of March 22, 2012, less than six weeks before the scheduled presidential election, came as a brutal awakening. Why did this rare democratic success story in Africa falter?

This paper suggests that, from the very outset, Mali's democratic transition found it difficult to carry out effective political and economic reforms while simultaneously addressing rising expectations, weakening state capacities, intermittent waves of Tuareg separatist insurgency, and attempts to influence the situation from the outside.

I Background on Mali's democratic transition

Prior to the current crisis, Mali had made significant progress towards a mature, self-sustaining democracy, with several successes in political and economic reform.

1. POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

The first and most obvious achievement of Mali's democratic transition was the successful dismantling of a ruthless and corrupt military dictatorship.

In addition to ushering in an unfettered multiparty system, the 1992 constitution stipulated that Mali be governed by the rule of law. The source of all powers rests with the people. Human rights, political freedoms and due process are enshrined in the constitution and are to be protected and upheld by an independent judiciary.

While private newspapers had been authorised under the Moussa Traoré regime—they actually helped mobilise public opinion against him—it was only with the transition government of 1991–92 that freedom of the press and the accompanying freedom of expression became a fact of daily life, with more than 50 dailies and weeklies hitting the newsstands in Bamako and other major urban centres. The transition government also liberalised the airwaves, including television, thus facilitating the launch of over 160 private and community-based FM radio stations. State media entities were given more leeway to challenge official government editorial lines.

The new openness also made it possible for civil society to grow. Groups of citizens were able to mobilise in order to influence the policy process and to provide voice to various segments of the citizenry, such as expatriate Malians, farmers and the local business community.

Mali's democratic transition established new political mechanisms and institutional forums for a peaceful resolution of conflicts and national dialogue. For example, the government was able, through negotiations that led to the signing of the National Pact on April 11, 1992, to bring a political settlement—albeit not a permanent one—to the 1990–92 Tuareg rebellion. The National Pact provided for a decentralised system of government—a 'special status' for the northern regions—allowing for local management of regional affairs and mandating withdrawal of army barracks from urban and pasturage areas, the integration of former rebels into the army as well as civilian sectors of public administration, fiscal incentives to attract investment into the northern regions, as well as other measures to address socio-economic development issues.

All of this was made possible thanks to the National Conference, held from July 29 through August 12, 1991, which gave the people of Mali a unique opportunity to construct a shared vision for a new, democratic Mali. Following intensive debate, the National Conference set out the main democratic building blocks of the Third Republic. These included a new constitution guaranteeing human rights and civil liberties, providing for a multiparty semi-presidential system, with the separation of powers as well as checks-and-balance mechanisms; a charter of political parties, which explicitly prohibits use of the name or insignia of UDPM, the former single party of the Moussa Traoré regime; and a new electoral code, which makes room for independent candidates with no party affiliation to run for election and provides for local councillors to be elected on the basis of a proportional voting system.

On the basis of these new constitutional, legal, and institutional rules of the political game, the transition government went on successfully to hold a referendum on the new constitution on January 12, 1992, followed by local and parliamentary elections in February and March 1992 respectively, with presidential polls one month later. The referendum on the new constitution was approved by 98% and attracted a relatively high voter turnout of nearly 49%. However, the other polls attracted ominously low voter participation, with only 18% of registered voters turning out for the presidential election. This signalled a worrying degree of voter apathy. Most observers believed that voters stayed away from the polls because of their distrust in political parties and politicians, and because they were unable to make a connection between the act of voting and the chance to improve daily life and the future.

Nonetheless, the mere fact of being able to hold these various polls in a largely peaceful atmosphere, free of any violent disputes, was quite an achievement, considering that the last open and competitive multiparty elections in the country took place in 1959, a year before Mali's independence.

The transition government also strove to professionalise the civil service with a view to making it immune from political interference. For example, it sought to ensure that appointments, promotions, or demotions were based on merit as opposed to party affiliation. Efforts were also made towards more transparency in the policymaking process. Access to public information was deemed a key right. For example, participation in interagency meetings on major public policy issues was open to civil society and political party representatives instead of being the preserve of bureaucrats.

While Mali, like most former French colonies, had a long tradition of centralised, top-down public administration, the transition government opted for a decentralised system of territorial administration. The constitution provides for self-government of local territorial collectivities. The transition government had envisioned an administrative system that would be somewhere between the French model of decentralisation and the German federal system.

Civil-military relations were a central issue, especially considering the legacy of the 23-year-long, corrupt and inept military rule of General Moussa Traoré. Rebuilding trust between the army and the civilian population and finding an antidote to the military's propensity to take over political and administrative power was a key challenge. During the National Conference, the army made public apologies for its role in the repression of pro-democracy demonstrations and other wrongdoings during the military dictatorship. In October 1991, the transition government organised a seminar on the role of the armed and security forces in a bid to transform them into a professional, republican force. It also put laws in place to ensure proper oversight of the defence budget by the finance ministry and designed rules and procedures for members of the armed forces who wish to run for political office.

With respect to social reforms, in addition to creating the first cabinet-level department in Mali's history in charge of promoting equal opportunities for women, the transition government appointed a female governor of the politically sensitive district of Bamako. During the previous regime, women were generally confined to the ministry of health and social affairs, but under the new regime they were promoted to key positions across ministerial portfolios. The transition government also revised the tax code to redress existing tax discriminations against women.

Overall, the transition government laid down the basic institutional framework and rules of the political game for a democratic system.

2. MAJOR ECONOMIC AND STRUCTURAL REFORMS

One of the dilemmas faced by the transition government was whether to pursue economic reforms and a policy of fiscal austerity or put them on hold in the face of social demands by influential interest groups such as the labour unions, the student movement, and the association of unemployed school and university graduates, all of whom had played a pivotal role in bringing down the previous regime. The transition government had inherited a three-month public salary arrears, a huge backlog of unemployed graduates, a big budget deficit and an economy that was in disrepair. At the same time, the IMF had suspended negotiations for an Enhanced Structural Adjustment Facility, which complicated mechanisms for receiving outside assistance.

Obviously, the transition government was in a difficult position. Meeting even half the demands of special interest groups would have sent the already huge fiscal deficit skyrocketing and undermined business and donor community confidence at a time when successful democratic transition was largely dependent on the state of the economy. But opposing or ignoring them might have created social and political instability and derailed the democratic process. Through a combination of strategies (dialogue, isolating extremist elements, taking a tough stand on fiscal policy, reducing government waste, etc.), the government was eventually able to implement a package of measures, such as modest salary increases, the launching of a public works programme targeting small enterprises set up by unemployed school and university graduates, and economic liberalisation towards more market competition, which helped ease demands for economic improvement.

The transition government also enacted a new mining code, which was instrumental in attracting a huge inflow of foreign direct investment. It introduced a new code of commerce to make competition and market-led price mechanisms the rule for all goods and services, while asserting the government responsibility to step in and set prices for key mass consumption commodities whenever required. In addition, the transition government enacted a new public procurement code, allowing for greater competition, transparency and efficiency in government purchase of goods and services while a revamped inventory management system was put in place to ensure traceability and safekeeping of government physical assets.

When the transition government handed power over to President Alpha Oumar Konaré on June 8, 1992, the winner in the second round of presidential elections, the stage seemed to be set for the Third Republic to achieve success in consolidating and deepening its transition to democracy.

II The Third Republic and the challenge of consolidating Mali's democratic institutions

From the very outset, the Third Republic was faced with several challenges:

» How to consolidate the new democratic institutions, especially given low voter turnout.

» How to make multiparty democracy relevant and effective in addressing the people's economic and social aspirations.

» How to implement the National Compact signed on April 11, 1992, and bring the Tuareg rebellion to permanent end.

» How to preserve the secular nature of the state in the face of the growing influence of radical Islamism.

1. CONSOLIDATING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

While presidential, parliamentary, and local elections took place on constitutionally scheduled dates, the new administration needed to broaden its popular base in the face of low voter turnout. In particular, the new regime had to heal the political divisions that threatened the fragile government. The next few years were tenuous—with student riots, currency devaluation, inflation, and continued Tuareg unrest—which led to various leadership changes. At one point, the government closed schools, considered to be hotbeds of political agitation, in a bid to restore peace as well as law and order.

By mid-1995, the government was able to reopen schools and establish stability. These developments won Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta a reputation for toughness in some segments of the population, especially among the most militant supporters of Adema, the ruling party. Among opposition parties however, he acquired a reputation for ruthlessness. But while Prime Minister Keïta was busy consolidating his grip on power, he apparently had forgotten to undertake preparations for the 1997 general elections, so much so that no electoral voting lists were available when parliamentary polls opened on April 13, 1997.

Following the elections, violent disputes and street demonstrations prompted the constitutional court to annul the April 1997 vote. The opposition parties then staged a boycott of all polls scheduled for—or rescheduled in—1997, including the presidential and parliamentary elections, until such time as reliable and comprehensive voter registration lists would be drafted. Opposition parties vowed not to recognise Mr. Konaré as the legitimate president of Mali and launched a civil disobedience campaign. The latter lasted over a year, even though it left the average citizen largely unmoved.

At the same time, the government had failed to notice that, in the guise of humanitarian assistance or religious proselytism, several groups from the Middle East and Persian Gulf countries were making inroads into the slums of Bamako and providing the poor not only with some of the basic social services they were not getting from government, but also with a social and moral critique of the democratic establishment. Instead, they argued in favour of an Islamic, religious alternative. It is against this background of political tensions and socio-economic hardships that General Amadou Toumani Touré, with the support of a significant majority of parties and civil society groups, decided to run for president, ostensibly to “reunite the Malian people”. In truth, the presidential polls of May 2002 failed to impress the electorate as 25 candidates, including General Touré, only managed to attract around 24% of registered voters, more evidence that there remained a wide gap between the general population and the political elite.

To make matters worse, the winner-takes-all voting system meant that the political alliance that supported General Touré as an independent candidate enjoyed such an overwhelming majority in parliament that he could pass any laws he wished, and even secure the two-thirds parliamentary majority required to propose a constitutional amendment to a referendum.

Despite the formal trappings of democracy, Mali’s political regime was turning into a one-person rule, with the president of the republic reducing the prime minister—the constitutional head of government—to no more than an assistant who could serve as a scapegoat for presidential failures. The national assembly was reduced to a rubber stamp organization and the state-owned media became mere outlets of official propaganda, just as they had been under the one-party regime of General Moussa Traoré.

By the middle of 2011, Mali’s multiparty democracy, which looked good on paper and had been branded as a success story on the African continent, was entering a turbulent zone. President Touré succumbed to the temptation to amend the constitution, a move that was widely rumoured to signal that he was intent on running for a third term. To be sure, President Touré repeatedly denied in public ever being interested in seeking a third term. However, each public denial only contributed to convincing a large segment of public opinion that he was intent on clinging to power, or at the very least ensuring that his hand-picked candidate would win the presidential election, then scheduled for April 2012. The national assembly eventually passed the constitutional reform in August 2011 against the advice of the majority of civic groups and while the general population was growing more and more alienated, disenfranchised and frustrated, the ruling elite entrenched itself further, decreasing space for dissenting voices. It was clear that the ruling party and its overwhelming parliamentary majority had little respect for democracy, separation of powers and checks-and-balance as they voted, in the summer of 2011, for a new constitution that further concentrated powers in the hands of the president of the republic.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS RELEVANT TO THE PEOPLE’S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ASPIRATIONS

In rising against the dictatorial regime of General Moussa Traoré, the Malian people clearly demonstrated that, to them, democracy and its accompanying rights have an intrinsic value. However, they also understood democracy to have instrumental value, and they expected that a democratic government would help them lead a better life and improve the economic prospects for them and their children. They expected that they and their families would gain easy access to better education and improved healthcare, and that an accountable government would tackle corruption and social injustice.

In truth, both the Konaré and Touré regimes invested in infrastructure development in areas such as roads, bridges, schools, and low-cost housing. Over the years, the country’s GDP growth rate was generally above the West African Monetary Union average, mostly driven by the gold mining and cotton branches as well as sizable inflows of donor money. But in practice, the gold mining activities added little to no local value, and contributed to the destruction of the natural environment. Much of the same criticism can be levelled at the textile sector. There is very little local processing of cotton and so local people benefitted very little from the investment.

More importantly, adjusting for inflation and taking into account a rather high population growth rate, GDP growth was too slow to have any significant impact on real per-capita income and the daily lives of the average citizen. Poverty worsened between 2006 and 2010 in Bamako and other urban areas. In 2006, 64%[1] of the population was living below the poverty line. Unemployment in the capital city hovered around 25% in 2010. Every year, close to 300,000 unskilled youths, including school dropouts, enter the labour force with scant prospects of finding a job. About three Malians out of five are below the age of 25 and the resulting high dependency ratio translates into a heavy burden on family welfare and the government budget. The informal sector represents about 80% of the economy. The structure of GDP is characterised by a prevalence of low productivity, subsistence agriculture and a tertiary sector driven by general commercial activities with low job-creation potential.

As the private sector was not creating enough jobs and public enterprises were being privatised or were closing down, civil service jobs and recruitment into the army and security forces quickly became highly coveted sources of income. They were also home to active corruption, with political parties behaving like employment agencies and unqualified persons bribing their way into government employment in both the civilian and military branches. This had a devastating impact on the efficiency and effectiveness of public service delivery. To ensure that the ruling Adema party kept a tight control over key public sector positions, the Konaré government lost little time repealing the competitive recruitment process that the 1991–92 transition government had put in place. Professionalisation of the civil service lost out to political cronyism.

Unsurprisingly, these gloomy economic characteristics are mirrored by equally lacklustre social indicators. For example, it is estimated that close to 21% of school-age children never went to school, while the dropout rate is very high in the primary cycle. About one-third of school children live more than 30 kilometres from the nearest primary school. As a result, formal education is no longer an effective avenue for upward social mobility, especially for children from the rural and the poorest urban families, with serious implications for people's future outlook. Also, geographic and economic access to primary healthcare leaves much to be desired. The overall literacy rate stands at 26%, well below the sub-Saharan Africa average of 62%.[2]

Not more than 27% of Mali's population has access to electricity, while 83% of all households still resort to firewood with devastating impact on the natural environment and on agricultural lands and yields. With a human development index of 0.344, Mali ranks 182nd in the world and has no prospect of achieving the Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015.[3]

Overall, Mali's economic structure and performance is characterised by the coexistence of a modern, export-oriented sector (mines, cotton, etc.) and a largely traditional, subsistence agricultural sector. Small, under-equipped and low-productivity family holdings in rural areas are mirrored by small shop owners in urban and semi-urban areas, with little manufacturing or industrial activities in the middle. Unfortunately, despite the government's commendable achievements in physical infrastructure development, Mali's economic performance could not match the growing needs and expectations of its people.

Rampant corruption also eroded the legitimacy of democratic institutions in the eyes of most citizens. With no specific laws punishing conflicts of interest, the public procurement process deteriorated. Outright embezzlement and diversion of public funds became common, all the more so since President Amadou Toumani Touré said publicly that he had no "intention to humiliate a head of family"! The office of the comptroller general reckons that more than half a billion US dollars were embezzled by bureaucrats and a number of key officials over a five-year period. The IMF has estimated that tax and customs fraud amounted to nearly one billion US dollars a year in 2010 and 2011,[4] i.e. half the government's initial budget for FY 2013.[5]

While it cannot be denied that internal factors played a determining role in the collapse of Mali's democratic state, external powers also contributed, particularly when it came to foreign aid. Restrictions and conditions attached to foreign funds did not always match the immediate internal need (ie retraining of civil servants, building up the security sector). Additionally, many donors were too eager to label Mali as a 'success story', thus turning a blind eye to corruption and the failings of governance.

It was against this backdrop of increasing mass impoverishment, corruption, rampant adult illiteracy, an enduring education and health sector crisis, and rapid rural to urban migration that radical Islamism started to take root and seek to offer itself as a credible alternative to a corrupt and increasingly inept state bureaucracy and Western-style democracy.

3. SAFEGUARDING THE SECULAR NATURE OF THE STATE

Mali's democratic constitution explicitly prohibits the creation of political parties based on religion and repeatedly asserts the secular nature of the state. Radical Islamists, fuelled by a growing number of unemployed madrasa graduates as well as Malian students returning from Islamic studies in Arab countries and funded by 'humanitarian' and other groups from the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Pakistan, sought to feed off urban poverty and feelings of alienation and hopelessness, especially among the urban poor in Bamako and in the arid zones of northern Mali.

Having failed to convince the National Conference of 1991 to legalise religious political parties, and having failed to persuade the president of the republic to take his oath of office by swearing on the Quran, Islamist leaders—some of whom had also taken part in the pro-democracy street demonstrations of 1990–91—sought at first to ally themselves with some nominally secular political leaders from both the ruling Adema and some opposition parties. Their explicit and publicly heralded endorsement of former Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's presidential bid appeared to be an opportunistic move.

Towards the end of his tenure, President Konaré publicly admitted that, if democracy were to fail, the people would turn to radical Islamists as an alternative to the secular political establishment. Unfortunately, President Konaré did not take any meaningful measures to stem the growing influence of political Islam. Instead, in 2001, President Konaré felt compelled to withdraw his draft new constitution—though it had already passed parliament—because he feared it might be defeated in the referendum by an 'unholy' alliance between the Islamist leaders and his former-prime-minister-turned-opponent.

Having failed to secure the presidency for former Prime Minister Keïta in the May 2002 polls, radical Islamists had to retreat and rethink their strategies. They began publicly to ask why Mali should remain a secular state when 95% of Malians are Muslims. Still, with the election of General Amadou Toumani Touré in 2002 and his so-called 'consensus government', which included most political parties, it appeared that Mali was set to enjoy a period of political stability, democratic consolidation and broad-based socio-economic progress with strong support by a donor community that was impressed by the peaceful and orderly transition of power.

Unfortunately, the 'consensus' model of governance did not herald Mali's return to the core values and aspirations that had fuelled the March 1991 revolution. Instead, as noted, corruption and financial delinquency continued unabated under the tenure of President Touré.

Indeed, President Touré's perceived tolerance for corruption provided ammunition for radical Islamist groups. These anti-democratic forces were looking for an opportunity to launch a direct, frontal challenge to the democratic, secular state. This opportunity presented itself on March 27, 2005, the day following the anniversary celebrations of the March 26, 1991 revolution, when Mali's national soccer team lost a home African Cup of Nations qualifying game against Togo. Riots erupted in the stadium and quickly spilled out into the streets of Bamako, inflicting extensive damage to the city. The specific destruction of bars and brothels seemed to point to the presence of Islamist groups among the vandals. In any case, the police and paramilitary security forces' failure to control the crowds left the helpless President Touré dangerously exposed and isolated in the presidential palace.

A little over a year later, a new episode of the Tuareg rebellion erupted in the northern town of Kidal. The provisions included in the Algiers Accords of July 4, 2006 showed that some elements of the Tuareg movement had not been satisfied with the decentralisation option that was offered by the National Pact of April 11, 1992, and wanted something more—more development, but also perhaps independence of the so-called Azawad region. The rebellion also proved that the central government was so weak as to be even prepared to relinquish control of the Kidal region.

In August 2009, the situation worsened. Under heavy political pressure from Islamist groups, the government withdrew a new family code, which had already been approved by the cabinet and by a near-unanimous majority vote in the national assembly. Islamists staged huge street demonstrations in Bamako and other regional centres, culminating in an impressive mass rally at the football stadium. The Islamists had campaigned against the new family code and especially against its preservation of women's rights in marriage and inheritance matters, which they declared to be a violation of the Quran.

From then on, the High Islamic Council grew bolder, and began to try to take control of key institutions of the state. With President Touré's blessings, the High Islamic Council assumed the chair of the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI), the 'independent' public body in charge of organising all elections in Mali. The High Islamic Council was making it clear that they were the new 'referee' of the political game in Mali, few voices to the contrary being heard from the political and civil society establishment.

These developments did not escape the attention of the international network of armed radical Islamist militants. Some years earlier, Algerian armed Islamist groups had set up bases in northern Mali, and had begun to conduct a lucrative trade in drugs and hostages. Highly placed members of Mali's political and military establishment—including some from within the president's close entourage—were alleged to be involved in these criminal activities and to be making huge sums of money from them.

At this point, Al-Qaida-in-the-Islamic-Maghreb (AQIM) and its local and regional affiliates (Mujao, Ansar Dine, Boko Haram.) saw the opportunity to take over Mali and its now weakened democratic government. They were nearly successful thanks to a combination of a weak leadership; a corrupt and discredited political establishment and public bureaucracy; a South under strong influence of Islamic fundamentalists; a weak security apparatus; an education and health sector in crisis; growing income disparities; rising mass impoverishment; and an uncertain short-term political outlook aggravated by President Touré's decision to amend the constitution.

Conclusions: Lessons from the crisis of democracy in Mali

French military intervention on January 11, 2013, helped prevent Al-Qaida-backed groups from taking over Bamako. Thanks to pressure from ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and Western donors, the military had agreed on April 6, 2012, to return Mali to a semblance of 'democratic constitutional order'. Although the situation remains unstable, it is now possible to draw some tentative lessons from Mali's experience.

In Mali, as elsewhere, it was not easy to establish democratic institutions in the wake of a long dictatorship. But it proved even more complicated to build or rebuild democracy without the human and institutional capacities needed for strategic thinking and planning, as well as programme design and delivery at both central and local government levels. Clearly, as it sought to build and consolidate democratic institutions, Mali had forgotten that it needed to rebuild and strengthen a well-functioning state.

- In multiple ways, the ineffectiveness of state institutions created problems for the new democratic regime. For example, partly because of failures in the planning process, the government's decision-makers failed to anticipate the increase in population growth rate (and the increase in poverty) from 2006. Along with a high dropout rate among primary and secondary school children, this would provide ammunition for anti-democracy—and mostly Islamist—propaganda. Nor did the government fully appreciate how events of the late 1980s in Algeria were radicalising young Tuaregs in the Kidal region and luring them towards Islamist militancy. External and domestic intelligence gathering and processing—not to be confused with spying on internal political foes—is a key capacity that a democratic government requires in order to be able to anticipate, and effectively address, internal and external threats and opportunities. Mali's government did not have any quick response prepared, and did not then have the capacity to regain control of the situation.
- Secondly, Mali's new democratic leaders made a strategic miscalculation. They assumed that because multiparty democracy was rolling back dictatorial regimes across Africa, the main threats to the country would be internal (i.e. law and order), as opposed to external ones. Therefore, they strengthened internal security forces such as the police, gendarmerie, and National Guard instead of the army. It is now clear that threats to internal security and law and order can be compounded by external threats, such as those Mali faced from AQIM. This explosive conjunction of forces can only be countered when the country has a strong, well-trained, well-equipped army with a competent officer corps.
- Third, while nurturing the formal policymaking organs of government, it is important to make sure that other channels are made available to the average citizens. A vibrant civil society containing at least some organizations with the national interest at heart and no partisan bias is a key component of a stable, effective and efficient democratic governance system.
- Fourth, an educated, literate and well informed public opinion is a strong bulwark for democracy. With high, mass literacy, citizens are able to exact transparency and accountability from public office holders and bureaucrats. They are less likely to fall prey to demagoguery. This does not preclude the use of national languages in official communications between

policymakers and the citizens, including in urban areas. But it does mean that the government needs to make an effort to explain itself, and to embark on a campaign of civic education.

» Fifth, preventing or fighting corruption—both petty and grand corruption—must be the top priority of any government if democracy is to survive. In addition to its economic cost, widespread corruption can easily undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions, particularly in a context of mass poverty. The disclosure of assets by government officials is not itself sufficient. These disclosures must be accompanied by effective measures to verify the accuracy and reliability of the disclosure, the origins of the assets as well as with strong provisions to uncover and fight conflict of interest and insider information situations. These measures should be extended to members of parliament, local mayors and councillors, all managing directors of public enterprises and directors of public service directorates, and all members of the customs and tax departments. Also, all senior public bureaucrats should be barred from the governing bodies of political parties.

» Sixth, a proliferation of media outlets and private newspapers per se is not enough to ensure transparency and accountability in the management of public affairs and resources. It is important that they are truly independent of state funding and business or political elites. It is equally vital that media personnel are true professionals and that determined efforts are made to improve mass literacy and enhance civic education.

» Seventh, the secular democratic elite must be able to explain to the population that a secular state is no threat to religious beliefs, values and practices. On the contrary, it is the only safeguard for the freedom of religion, for the protection of all religions and for the prevention of religious war. When religion seeks to enter the political institutional arena, it can be manipulated by politicians disguised as defenders of religion and lead to dictatorship and tyranny. Secular politicians must also be courageous enough to stand up and oppose the intrusion of religious leaders into the political arena.

» Eighth, for democratic institutions to take root and withstand internal and external shocks, it is vital that citizens see a 'democracy dividend' trickle down to them by way of economic opportunities and social amenities, including in rural and semi-urban areas. The education sector should be restored to its role as an engine of upward social mobility especially for children of lower social origins.

» Ninth, formal democratic institutions by themselves are not enough to ensure that democracy survives. A shared democratic culture as well as strong, democratic leaders are needed. Also, while democracy and decentralisation are conducive to local people feeling that they are active participants in their own destiny, special attention should be given to ensuring that ethnic or regional disparities do not become issues for political discourse or competition.

» Lastly, the donor community should revise its aid policy to facilitate social and economic development in Mali. Donors should refrain from practices that can undermine the institutional capacities of the Malian state and undercut its legitimacy in the eyes of the local population.

In conclusion, Mali's democratic transition is at a critical juncture. It is to be hoped that the presidential and parliamentary elections that took place in the second semester of 2013 represent a new beginning for Mali's transition towards a stable, mature and effective democracy that can also deliver sustainable, broad-based economic and social development.

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A national of the Republic of Mali, Dr Soumana Sako served in various positions both in his home country and in international organizations.

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Dr Sako was subsequently appointed as Director of Cabinet in the Ministry of State for Public and Mixed Economy Enterprises. In February 1987, he joined the Cabinet as Minister of Finance and Commerce but resigned six months later due to major policy differences with General Moussa Traoré's regime. In April 1991, he was appointed Prime Minister, Head of the Transition Government that ushered in the IIIrd Republic of Mali and organized the country's first multiparty democratic elections as well as the successful signing of the National Pact of 11 April 1992 with the Touareg rebellion.

Dr Sako served as the UNDP Senior Economist in the Central African Republic, Madagascar and the Comoros. From 2000 to 2008, he served as Executive Secretary of the Zimbabwe-based African Capacity Building Foundation, the first and only Executive Secretary to have served out two full consecutive terms as Head of ACBF.

Dr Sako holds an MPA and a Ph.D. in Public and International Affairs (public policy research and analysis/economic and social development) in 1978 and 1991, respectively, from the University of Pittsburgh. He holds certificates from various entities such as the Economic Development Institute of the World Bank, the German Foundation for International Development and the Gosplan. He also served as international consultant for such organizations as the World Bank, the UN Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank, the West African Development Bank, the United States Agency for International Development, Triodos-Facett of the Netherlands, and the African Union. A former graduate student Assistant for Statistics and Probability at the University of Pittsburgh, Dr Sako also held part-time teaching positions as Professor of Finance and Development Economics at Bamako University.

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