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# THE REPUBLIC OF MALI

## AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY: CONTEXT AND ISSUES

-AN AFRICA POLLING INSTITUTE PERSPECTIVE



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## GENERAL BACKGROUND

Relatively, the Republic of Mali has not been known for violent uprising and attacks. Beyond the intermittent invasion of Tuaregs, the country is considered to be a peaceful nation of largely Islamic populace located in the West African sub-region of the African Continent. In recent times, the country has been enmeshed in some sort of political instability occasioned by poor governance, unemployment, industrial actions by select unions like teachers, religious extremism amongst others. The most recent of Mali's turmoil began in 2012 when a group of soldiers carried out a coup d'etat in response to what they considered as government's weak response to a growing separatist insurgency by Tuareg rebels in the northern part of the country. The insurgents were armed with weapons from nearby Libya following the aftermaths of the Arab Spring<sup>1</sup>, and this led to some hostilities that resulted in the death and destruction of properties of some Malians. In a yet revealing report of the history of conflict in the country, Aljazeera submits that:

*Political tension has been simmering since Keita won re-election in August 2018 in a poll that opposition parties said was marred by irregularities. The government pushed ahead with a legislative election in March despite the coronavirus outbreak, and drew further ire after the Constitutional Court overturned 31 of the results. That decision handed Keita's party 10 more parliamentary seats, making it the largest bloc. Also, in March, unidentified gunmen abducted Mali's main opposition leader, Soumaila Cisse, as he campaigned in the country's volatile center. He has not been heard from since.<sup>2</sup>*

The security situation in Mali saw significant changes in 2019. The central and eastern areas of the country were subject to ethno-communal violence and reprisals, which were followed by an increase in attacks by radical armed groups on soldiers and camps of the Malian army.

Furthermore, the conflict is increasingly internationalizing with the added involvement of international coalitions and countries. Additionally, too:

*...there have been continuous allegations of corruption and power consolidation among the government elite, fueled by recently published images of the president's son partying on a yacht abroad. This comes as citizens continue to struggle under Mali's crumbling economy, which depends largely on gold and cotton and has been badly affected by the devolving security situation and the coronavirus pandemic. Striking teachers also joined protesters to press demands for promised salary increases. The country also faces chronic lack in road and electricity infrastructure, as well as access to healthcare, food and water. According to World Bank figures, more than 40 percent of Mali's 20 million people experience extreme poverty.<sup>3</sup>*

Given all of these happenstances which desire a strategic research attention and in line with the policy mandate of Africa Polling Institute (API), this working paper is an attempt at providing insights into the decade long political impasse in Mali from the perspective of Malian youth opinion leaders whose voices have long been neglected in framing the socio-political context of the Mali situation. It is a strategic incursion into the state of affairs of Mali as an African State. The work is also a deliberate intent geared towards disseminating credible Africa-led and Africa-owned evaluation studies; a mandate which is central to actualizing the goals of the institute.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-know-about-crisis-mali>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/18/explainer-what-has-caused-malis-political-unrest>

<sup>3</sup>ibid

Arising from the above, the study deployed a mixed method as relevant extant literature are triangulated with submissions from Key Informant Interviewees (KII) and Focus Group Discussants (FGD) who were purposively selected from the pool of youth influencers whose perception about the Mali predicament is thought to be first-hand in articulating API's position of the situation. Stakeholders engaged are youth influencers and young leaders who are experts and professionals engaging daily in providing economic, political,

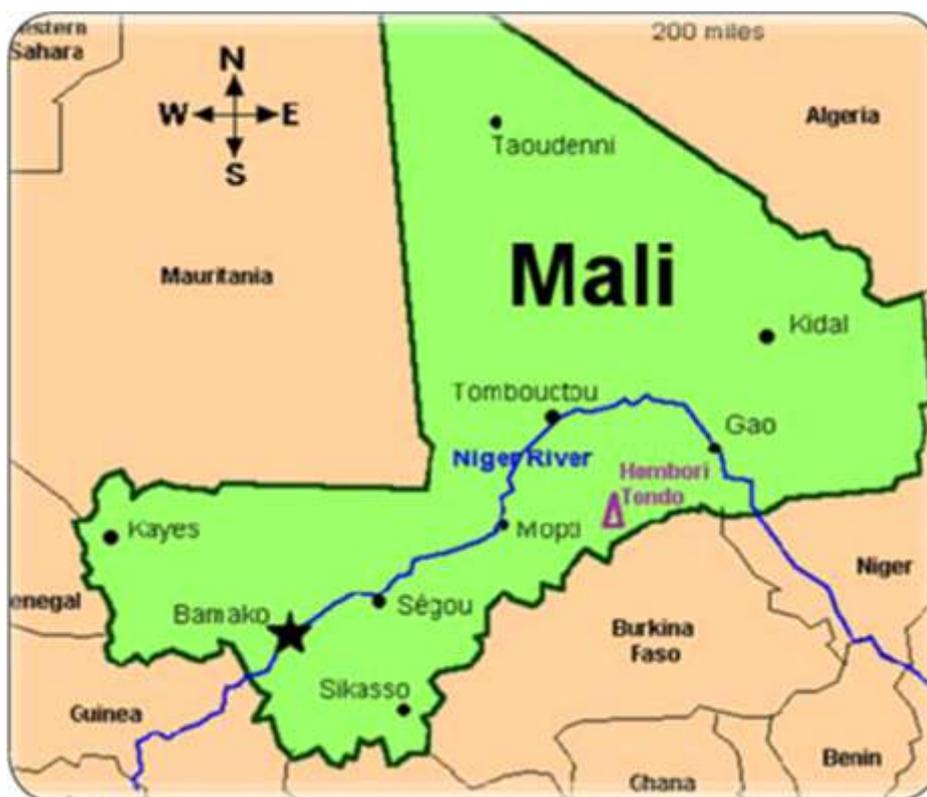
social, business and Information & Communication Technology-based services. The interface was made through the expertise of our Mali based non-resident research associates who administered the KIIs and FGDs in the month of October, 2020. While the scope of the study covers the outlook of the crises in recent times as indicated by extant literature, especially in 2020, historical insights into the root cause of the Malian conflicts were probed further.

## POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND CONTEXT – DEFINING THE PROBLEM

### *The Malian History*

Geographically, the Republic of Mali is the second largest country in West Africa, sharing common borders with seven other African states: Algeria to the north-northeast; Niger to the east; Burkina Faso south-southeast; the Ivory Coast to the south; Senegal and Mauritania to the west. With a population of 14.5 million people, the Malian Republic can be considered a heterogeneous country, as more than 24 distinct ethnic groups live on the Malian territory: Mande 50% (Bambara,

Malinke, Soninke), Peul 17%, Voltaic 12%, Songhai 6%, Tuareg and Moor 10%, other groups, 5%. In terms of religion, 90% of the population is composed by Muslims, 9% have indigenous beliefs and 1% belong to the Christian religion. Although the official language is French, Mali's true lingua franca remains Bambara. Administratively, the Republic of Mali is divided into eight regions, namely Gao, Kayes, Kidal, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou, Sikasso, Timbuktu, and the capital district-Bamako, each administered by a governor.<sup>4</sup>



Map indicating the border zones of the Republic of Mali<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Raul-Ionuț BADALE & Diana-Cristina ISVORANU (2013) "Mali Conflict Analysis" *Conflict Studies Quarterly Issue 3*

<sup>5</sup>ibid

From a political perspective, the Malian republic suffered violent regime changes which led to internal instability and failed attempts to implement effective reforms in key sectors: agriculture, health, and education. Major progress has been achieved in the area of democratization, as the former Malian Presidency, Ibrahim Boubakar Keita (IBK) struggled to unite all of Mali's political forces. Just like other Sahelian countries, Mali is among the poorest and least developed in the world, rated 178<sup>th</sup> of 187 countries on the UNDP human development index of 2011. With an annual gross domestic product of \$300 per capita, about half of Malian population live below the international poverty line of \$1.25 day. Following colonial rule and with limited finances, the government converged on developing the more populated parts of the country and, by 1990, the largely ignored desert areas from the northern part of the country. According to Badale & Isvoranu (2013), after the second nomadic rebellion, the government signed an agreement to direct some of its finances for the infrastructure in that region; however, due to the economic situation, the areas which are sparsely populated have had a poor development. Education in Mali is in a precarious state, as primary schools suffer from shortage of teachers and buildings. The ill-equipped universities and the unimproved curricula left Malian human resources undeveloped. Many Malian children are abandoning the school after 3 or 4 years, ending up in the street, where they end up recruited by different terrorist groups, which use them as child-soldiers. Women are subjected to intense discrimination in accessing professional or social employment. Confronted with these stringent issues, the government is unwilling to invest in ecological sustainability.<sup>6</sup>

Former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) was elected in 2013 with a mandate to pursue peace talks geared towards ending the insecurity that engulfed the country before then. A deal was signed in 2015 with some rebel groups, granting the sparsely populated northern part of the country of the country greater autonomy, but experts criticize the deal for failing to include other armed factions. These include Islamist extremist groups—some linked to al-Qaeda, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State—who seized on the chaos of the Tuareg insurgency to launch their own attacks, as well as

local militias that have formed to defend themselves in the worsening security vacuum.

IBK's 2018 reelection, in a vote marred by low turnout and allegations of fraud, exacerbated the growing frustration among the public, particularly the country's youth. This was even against the backdrop of the fact that nearly half of Malians live in extreme poverty and many are without access to education or employment. This was worsened by the realization that the economy, dependent on gold mining and agriculture, was already vulnerable to commodity price swings and increasing desertification. Also, armed groups have drawn upon deep resentment toward the state over rampant corruption and human rights abuses by security forces. Again, in 2019, with the deterioration of the humanitarian situation, there were three times more internally displaced persons than the previous year, and more than 300,000 people were in need of food assistance. In addition, the loss of government control of large parts of the country reduced the coverage of basic services and access for humanitarian organizations.<sup>7</sup>

In 2020, a nationwide protest had held across the country by both young and elderly Malians indicating their resolve for the resignation of the ousted president Ibrahim Boubakar Keita (IBK). According to a 2020 report by the USIP, the protesters were led by a group of organizations known as the June 5 Movement—Rally of Patriotic Force (M5-RFP), composed of Keita's political opposition, a network of civil society organizations, and followers of Imam Mahmoud Dicko, the former head of Mali's High Islamic Council. On the surface, the catalyst was the flawed legislative elections held in March. With historically low voter turnout of only 7.5 percent, Malians and international observers viewed the vote as deeply problematic due to COVID-19 and accompanying restrictions on large gatherings, as well as the ongoing violence that forced some polling stations to close. Adding to security concerns, the main political opposition leader, Soumailia Cisse, was kidnapped and has still not been released. The final straw for protesters was when Mali's Constitutional Court overturned election results for 31 legislative seats. IBK, initially deployed security forces to disperse protesters, leading to 11 deaths. But this did not deter the movement and IBK and his government made some

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<sup>6</sup>ibid

<sup>7</sup><https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/countries/africa/mali>

concessions after a July 11 demonstration. The ousted president pledged to appoint a new slate of judges to the Constitutional Court, paved the way for partial legislative elections in the constituencies the court overturned results, released members of the political opposition from custody, successfully pressured his son to resign from a powerful parliamentary committee, and said he would consider composing a power-sharing government. Yet the June 5 Movement held strong to its demand that IBK resign, despite these concessions<sup>8</sup>. This view considerable forms a precursor to the military coup that happened afterwards in August 2020.

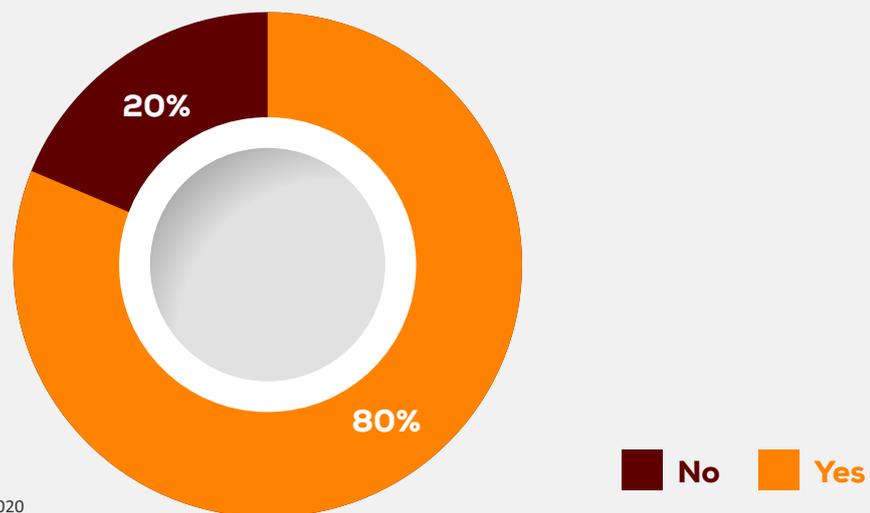
All of the above which had provided veritable justification for the reelection of the former president were dashed as IBK could not turn round the lots of development for good, an action which ultimately culminated into so many resentments against the regime and the eventual ouster of his administration via military coup d'etat in August 2020.

This military's ouster thus heightened political uncertainty amid severe security, governance, and humanitarian challenges. Under pressure from

economic sanctions imposed by West African leaders, the junta agreed to hand power to a nominally civilian-led transitional government, with retired military officer and former defense minister, Bah N'Daw serving as President and former foreign minister Moctar Ouane as Prime Minister. Junta leader Col. Assimi Goïta was named Vice President, a new position, and military officers are serving in four key cabinet posts. The transitional administration is expected to organize elections within 18 months.<sup>9</sup>

Be that as it may, divergent perceptions exist about the prospects of the military junta driving good governance given the fact that the crises in some quarters indicates a reflection of crises of legitimacy. About 80% of the respondents interviewed hold this view as shown in the chart below. One of the interviewees for instance submitted that: "Yes, the crises in Mali is a crisis of legitimacy somehow because there is a lack of trust between the authorities and the population as citizens no more trust the government and if there is no trust nothing can be done together making it difficult for the country to experience political stability"<sup>10</sup>

Do you think the current situation in Mali is a crises of legitimacy?



Source: API Field Survey Report, October 2020

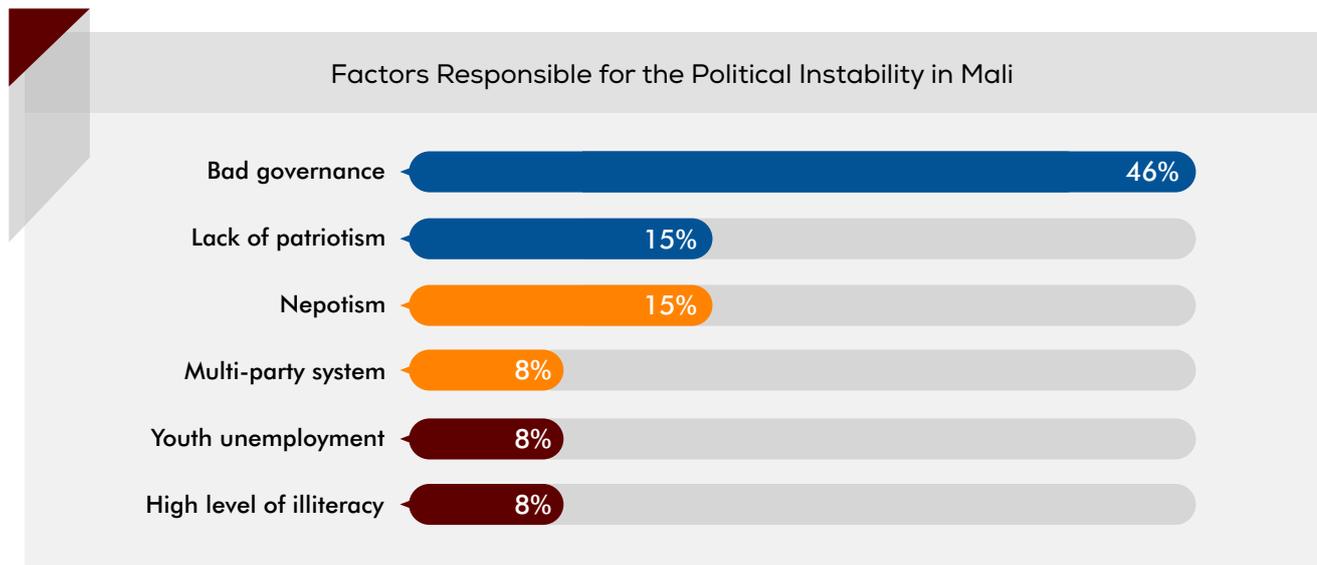
<sup>8</sup><https://www.usip.org/publications/2020/08/five-things-know-about-malis-coup>

<sup>9</sup><https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10116.pdf>

<sup>10</sup>KII excerpts

From the foregoing it is expedient to locate the factors responsible for the imbroglio in Mali around the deficit of governance. The above figure actually accentuates this need given that respondents consider the political impasse in Mali as the crisis of legitimacy. Not delivering on the core responsibilities of government is an apparent leeway to conflict. Several violent uprising in the country are therefore not only indications of government failures but obvious disaffection of the people with the perpetual inability of government to drive enduring peace and stability in the country.

Governance as a factor actually speaks to the core questions of respect for fundamental rights, constitutionalism and regard for rule of law. It is about delivering on the fundamental mandate and essence of the State which include the need to secure and ensure the provisioning of basic necessities. The outcry in Mali has shown a latent disaffection of the people, in the distant and recent past, with the posture of the ousted regime of IBK who had remained recalcitrant to the burning needs and yearnings for productive yet inclusive governance in the State. Some of the youth influencers engaged in a Focus Group Discussion succinctly articulated these issues in the figure below:



Source: API Field Survey Report, October 2020

An excerpt from the KII further buttresses the above findings as follows: “We have a political crisis that we have gone through which is triggered by bad governance and records of corruption fully in place in the ousted regime of IBK. Additionally, the difficulties in the education sector also pushed teachers to go on strike and students and youth have been demonstrating against unemployment and armed banditry. All of these have led to the current civil unrest in Mali.” The above draws from the back that the crisis is not only recent but has been an accumulation of the grievances held against the Malian State by both citizens and the international communities some of which are stakeholders in the resolution of the crises.

Furthermore, several mainstream research reports point to the fact the crescendo of the imbroglio started since 2012. According to United States Institute of Peace (USIP) “global attention had turned to Mali in March 2012 after a mutiny at a

military barracks in Kati, fifteen kilometers outside the capital of Bamako, spiraled into a coup d'état that led to the overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Touré, popularly referred to as ATT. When Touré was elected in 2002, he was a hero to most Malians. His fall from grace signaled the beginning of a rapid unraveling of the Malian state, revealing that, despite the country's democratic successes, real problems were eroding the foundation of its democracy.” Moreover, the mutiny had followed weeks of protests in Bamako and just over two months of renewed conflict in northern Mali. The coup had derailed elections and set the country on a precarious course that included losing control of a vast expanse of territory, first to Tuareg separatists in the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and then to militant Islamists such as Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO). By the end of June 2012, jihadist militias had claimed control of the major

towns in northern Mali. In January 2013, they restarted their offensive, capturing the government-held town of Konna and moving closer to Sévaré, a strategic town and military base located in central Mali. France intervened militarily on January 11, 2013, to prevent the militants' advance and help Mali reclaim its lost territory.<sup>11</sup>

Another assessment of the situation holds that:

*Mali was once considered a model democracy but in early 2012 it suddenly collapsed after a separatist rebellion by the Tuareg Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL). A civil war was unleashed, predominantly in the northern part of the country. Regionally-based extremist Islamist groups took advantage of the unrest in the north and a weakened Malian army overthrew the weakened, indecisive and corrupt Malian government. When the armed Islamic groups advanced on the capital of Bamako, a French military intervention returned a fragile control, allowing the establishment of an interim government and an international peacekeeping force.<sup>12</sup>*

Recent research findings by Ra'phael Davis also lends credence to aggregated positions of some of the youth leaders engaged by means of KII in the course of the field work for this study as reflected in the foregoing. According to him, the causes of the 2012 re-emergence of violence in Mali are manifold. The first cause of conflict is the continuous political corruption of Malian government officials. The second involves the growing influence of rebel groups which implies the lack of a stable central authority adequate to counteract insurgency in both the northern and southern regions of the nation. Finally, the third cause relates to the worsening economic conditions that are partially state-engineered but also connected with an

ongoing humanitarian crisis in the region.<sup>13</sup> This aptly resonates with the position of one of the Key Informants Interviewees engaged who submitted thus:

*First of all, poverty is one of the many causes of the security situation because if there is poverty, the young people are likely to do many bad things in order to survive and the second is terrorism which is everywhere in the world for example we are dealing with this situation in Mali.<sup>14</sup>*

The concerns raised by the above respondent are likely some of the reasons that made C-SPAN in a report to argue that "Government officials and policy researchers testified on political instability in Mali. They said Mali was battling three interrelated political, security, and humanitarian crises that needed the attention of the U.S and international community."<sup>15</sup>

It is noteworthy to emphasize that the increasing spate of humanitarian crises perfected in the heightened level of internally displaced persons (IDP) is unarguably assuming a disturbing abuse of human rights violations. In a report by the International Organization of Migration (IOM), the 2012 crisis in Mali led to massive displacement in Mali and across its borders, having major repercussions both within Mali and on its neighbours, particularly Burkina Faso, Niger and Mauritania. Since 2013, significant political advances have enabled many to return to their places of origin. However, a new cycle of protracted violence began in 2018, notably in the center and north of the country, exacerbating existing tensions and resulting in new waves of displacement. According to IOM's April 2020 Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) report, 250,998 persons continue to be displaced mainly due to intercommunal violence in the regions of Mopti, Gao and Menaka which has taken place since early 2018. While the regions of Mopti, Gao and

<sup>11</sup>[https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/164172/SR331\\_Malis\\_Precarious\\_Democracy\\_and\\_the\\_Causes\\_of\\_Conflict.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/164172/SR331_Malis_Precarious_Democracy_and_the_Causes_of_Conflict.pdf)

<sup>12</sup><https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/sahel-watch-a-living-analysis-of-the-conflict-in-mali/>

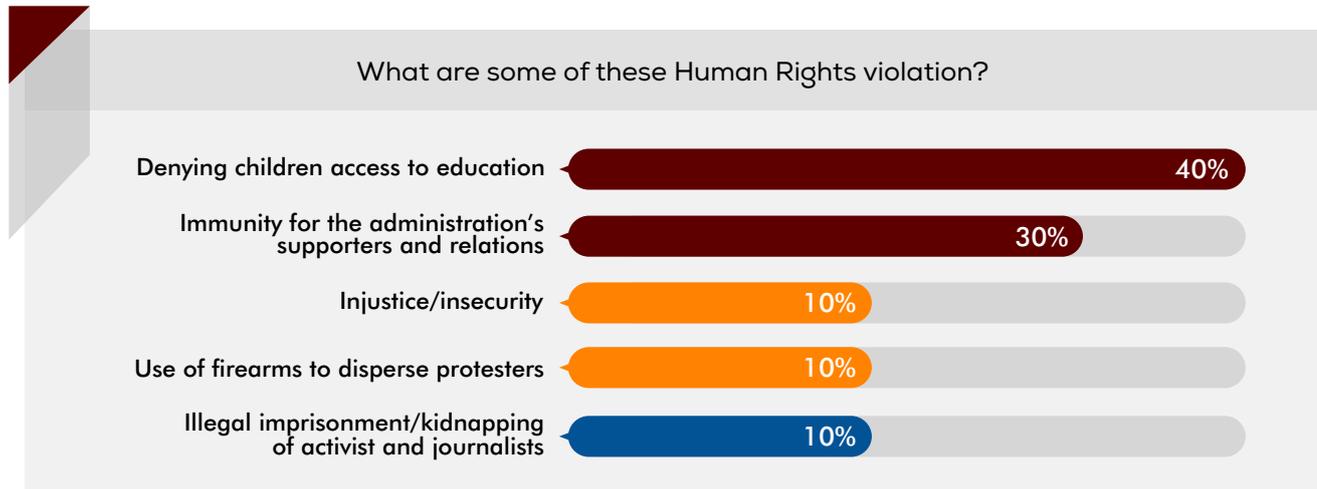
<sup>13</sup><http://www.sirjournal.org/research/2018/10/1/addressing-conflict-in-mali-political-humanitarian-and-security-problems>

<sup>14</sup>KII excerpt

<sup>15</sup><https://www.c-span.org/video/?309791-1/political-instability-mali>

Timbuktu currently host the highest concentration of IDPs (78 per cent), the overall population of IDPs has increased by 75 per cent between January 2019 and January 2020. According to DTM findings, the majority of children (66 per cent) in displacement do not attend school, and IDPs lack access to health services (68 per cent of sites assessed) and livelihoods opportunities, with food expressed as the greatest need<sup>16</sup>.

Additionally, some of the respondents hold the opinion that there have been litanies of human rights abuse which have degenerated into some sort of humanitarian crises. Some of these humanitarian crises respondents consider abuse of rights have been defined in the figure below:



Source: API Field Survey Report, October 2020

Lending light to the above table, respondents cited the non-payment of teachers as a major challenge that has kept children from schools. Teachers have been embarking on industrial actions without the government approving their demands despite signing several agreements in the past. For instance, a respondent submitted that:

*The civil instability in the country was caused by the fact that the citizens were noticing political compromise of the IBK regime as regards the protracted industrial action by teachers. Striking teachers have had agreement with the government which was about the improvement of their payments and living conditions. They had agreed to the increment of their salaries but since the signing of the agreement, government has failed to implement the outcome and this indicates insincerity and dishonesty on the part of the government.*

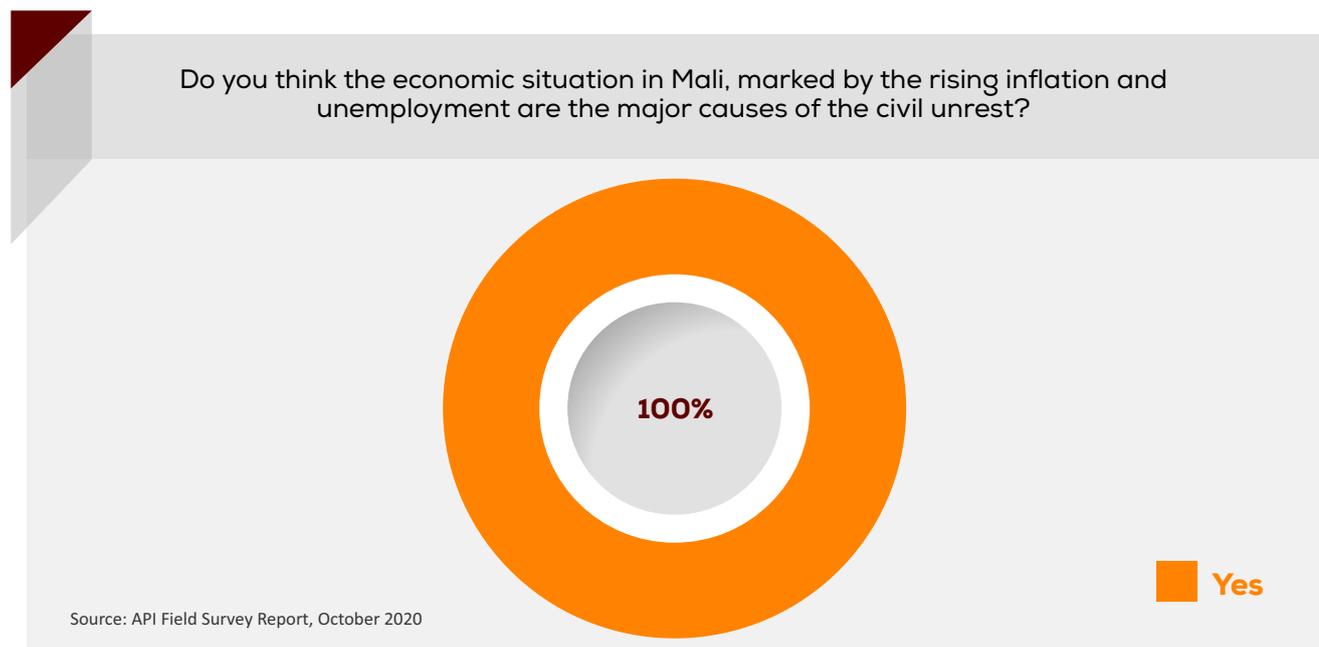
Expressions about rights abuse by the military, although not directly pronounced, were part of the root causes of the crises. One of the interviewees reported that:

*We can say there has been some actions of the military and police that constitute the violation of human rights. These include the jailing of journalists, use of tear gas on peaceful protesters, in addition to use of live bullet on the protesters which is a strong violation of human rights. There are recorded cases of unlawful imprisonment of citizens who aired their opinions about the state of things in the country. This is a clear violation of the freedom of speech and hence, a violation of human rights.*

<sup>16</sup><https://crisisresponse.iom.int/response/mali-crisis-response-plan-2020>

The above amongst many others provide analytical background for underscoring not only the situation of the crises but defining the pathways for enduring peace in Mali. In conformity to the above, Human Rights observers already reported numerous abuses committed by the Malian army in the central Malian town of Niono, although these were directed primarily against the rebels. It is estimated that almost one hundred civilians lost their lives since the beginning of the conflict, followed by a few hundred combatants, both rebels and governmental forces<sup>17</sup>.

Aside the above, it is rife to suggest that the conflicts in the region is largely resource-based and tilt towards the political economy of the scarce resources in Mali. When probed, respondents had suggested that the inability of the Malian government to ensure provisioning of basic necessities in view of rising socio-economic hardship is a major harbinger of crisis. All of the respondents interviewed suggest in the ensuing chart that the economic situation in Mali, marked by the rising inflation and unemployment are the major causes of the civil unrest. This view is aptly confirmed in the chart below.



Reflecting on the above, a respondent submitted that:

*it is true that unemployment, poverty inflation are the major causes of the civil unrest in Mali because most young people who finished their study in the universities can't get jobs whilst terrorist groups are around proposing and enticing them with lot of money as bait to get enlisted into their group. Hence, poverty and unemployment are part of the causes of the civil unrest in Mali.*

There is also an indication of infrastructural deficit which presence is an expected indication of economic progress. According to a report by the African Development Bank (AfDB), Mali faces critical infrastructure deficits: only 3% of the classified road network is blacktopped and in good order; the electricity gap is 140MW, and 53% of the population lacks access to electricity. In addition, only 75% of children are in primary education and 41% in secondary education while 75% of the population lacks access to health services<sup>18</sup>. Worsened by the political instability and insecurity in the country, all of these confirm the justification of the crises based on inability of the State to revitalize key infrastructures which are needed to productively set the pace for Small and Medium-sized enterprises' growth.

<sup>17</sup><file:///C:/Users/API%20Research/Downloads/CSQ-3.-Badale-Isvoranu.pdf>

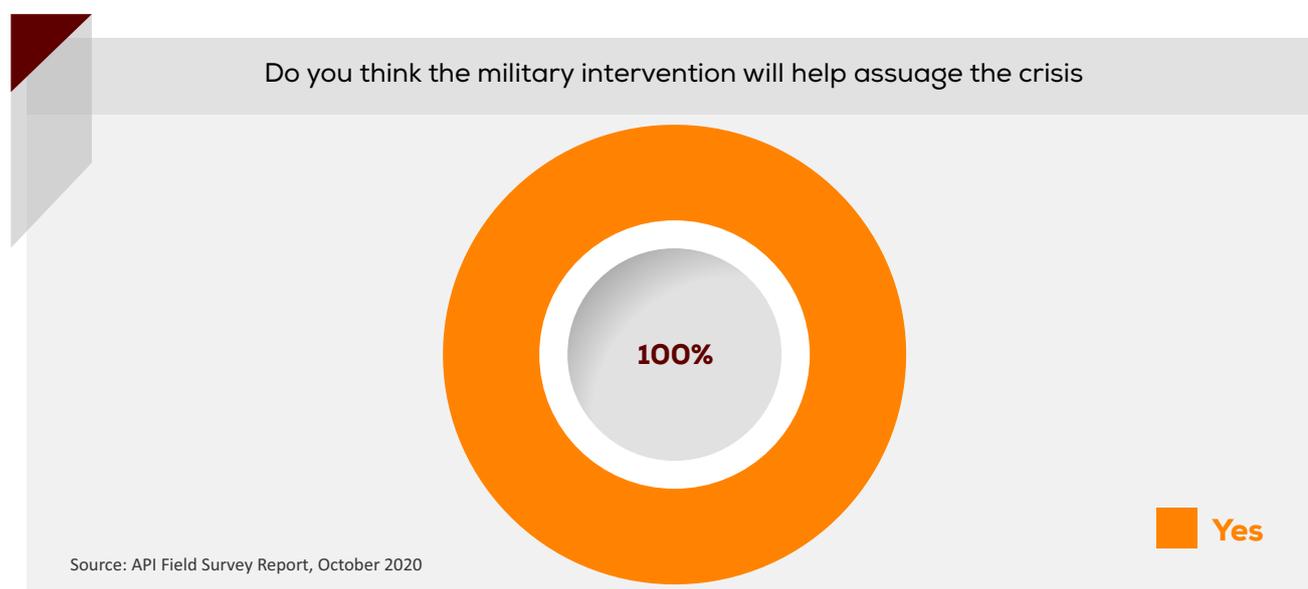
<sup>18</sup><https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/west-africa/mali/mali-economic-outlook>

It is important to recognize the fact that despite the security crisis, Mali's economy has remained resilient. In 2019, the country recorded 5% real GDP growth (driven by gold and cotton production), a budget deficit of 3.1% of GDP, and 0.4% inflation. Public debt was 35.5% of GDP at the end of 2018. However, the economy remains under

industrialized, and the manufacturing industry struggles to develop. This leads to an enormous need for imports and to a current account in deficit (5.4% of GDP in 2019). On the demand side, investment is particularly low, at 9.5% of GDP for the private sector and 8.7% for the public sector.<sup>19</sup>

## THE IMPERATIVE FOR LASTING REFORMS AND PEACE

The recent military in coup d'état seemingly appears not surprising in view of the currency of the situation in Mali. However, some commentators alike are of the suggestions that the interregnum will help occasion stability in the meantime and call the attention of the international community to the challenges bedeviling the country. There is an overwhelming consensus of the notion of the military incursion heralding momentary succor to the situation as all the respondents engaged approved of the move. For instance, the chart below significantly affirms this position as most youth leaders interviewed submitted that the military intervention will help assuage the already heightened conflict:



Again, while the security situation in Mali is deteriorating, in the opinion of Mr. António Guterres (the United Nations Secretary General)<sup>20</sup>, there is a need to implement a stalled peace agreement signed by the government and armed groups, in 2015. These include the integration of over 1,400 former combatants into the Malian army; the establishment of interim administrations in all five northern regions; and the effective participation of women in the peace process.

It is also important to highlight the strong suggestions made by development agencies like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD)<sup>21</sup> that had posited that unlike previous revolts in which the government temporarily placated Touareg's grievances with promises of greater development and autonomy, the Malian regime's response in the past and recent case has to be different. There should be some sort of broad-based inclusion strategy enforced by the interim regime to ensure that groups like the Touaregs are not alienated or neglected in the governance and peace-building templates. This should be intended towards shifting grounds to allow for some strategic compromises in view of the major cause of the impasse attributed to them.

<sup>19</sup>ibid

<sup>20</sup><https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/03/1035781>

<sup>21</sup>[https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/conflict-over-resources-and-terrorism/analysis-of-the-crisis-in-northern-mali\\_9789264190283-5-en#page8](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/development/conflict-over-resources-and-terrorism/analysis-of-the-crisis-in-northern-mali_9789264190283-5-en#page8)

International humanitarian interventions have already gone far in ensuring that peace deals, justice and stability happen in no distant time. While this is commendable, it is quite instructive to note that there have been accusations of partiality in terms of support of the conflict stakeholders. It is recommended here that vested interests of peace brokers should be shielded to allow for the ultimate actualization of the needs of the Malians. For instance, it has been suggested that creating conditions to allow Malians to look after their own situation should be the primary strategy. Without

creating such conditions, repressive anti-terrorism strategies can lead to further radicalization, especially among young people that are increasingly faced with rapid population growth and a lack of economic opportunities, particularly in the north. The challenge is to come up with solutions that go beyond the short-term political commitment and head towards sustainable change. This means providing Malians with a stable income, food, equal access to services like education, healthcare and a transparent, accountable system of political representation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup><https://www.thebrokeronline.eu/sahel-watch-a-living-analysis-of-the-conflict-in-mali/>

# MALI



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