

OUSMANE SIDIBE

One of the most striking, yet under-remarked, consequences of the NATO intervention in Libya has been the turbulence it precipitated on the other side of the Sahara. In the wake of Gaddafi's fall, heavily armed Tuareg émigrés returned from Libya to the north of Mali, sparking an insurgency in early 2012. A succession of crises ensued: the toppling of the government in Bamako by a military coup in April was followed by the seizure of the country's vast northern half by a combination of Tuareg nationalist and Islamist forces. In January 2013, François Hollande launched Operation Serval, supposedly targeting 'terrorists' in the north of the former French colony. In July a UN 'stabilization mission', drawn largely from other West African countries, also deployed to Mali to provide security for hastily organized presidential elections—held in July and August, while some 500,000 Malians remained displaced, more than a third of whom had fled the country's borders. Although triggered by the overturn in Libya, this dramatic sequence of events—traumatic, for a proudly sovereign country once in the vanguard of pan-Africanism—testifies to a deeper fragility of the post-colonial state in Mali. Here, legal scholar Ousmane Sidibe discusses his country's trajectory since independence in 1960, characterizing the legacies of its rulers, the outcomes of structural adjustment in the 1980s and of democratization since the 1990s. In Sidibe's diagnosis, a number of damaging dynamics—spreading corruption, moral and material corrosion of the armed forces, malfunctioning of public institutions—led to a profound internal decay of the Malian state, leaving it vulnerable to external shocks. With the installation of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in the Koulouba presidential palace in September 2013, and the election of a new parliament in November–December, the 'post-conflict transition' envisaged by Paris and the Malian elite seemed to be proceeding as planned—even as France launched a second military intervention in its ex-colonial bailiwick, in the Central African Republic. Yet fighting between French and Salafist forces continues in the northeast of Mali, and serious inter-ethnic tensions persist, under the guns of MINUSMA and Tuareg nationalists alike. If the crisis that exploded so visibly in Mali in 2012 had a long fuse, its after-effects are likely to be no less durable.

OUSMANE SIDIBE

Interview

THE MALIAN CRISIS

Can you tell us something about your background and formation?

I WAS BORN IN 1954 in the town of Kirchamba in the north of Mali, around sixty kilometres from Timbuktu. My family were pastoralists by tradition, from the Fulani ethnic group. I completed my schooling in Timbuktu, and then went to the Ecole Nationale d'Administration in the capital, Bamako, specializing in law. After graduating in the late 1970s I went to Bordeaux for my doctorate, before returning to Mali, where I initially spent two years working on a rural development project near the border with Mauritania, and ultimately went back to the ENA to teach. I was director of studies there for six years, in 1985–91, and then after the democratization of Mali in the early 1990s, I twice served as Minister of Labour under President Konaré: the first time in 1994—I resigned after a massive devaluation of the currency brought a political crisis—and again in 1997–2000. Since then I've served as Commissioner for Institutional Development, working to coordinate reforms to public policy and institutions across a variety of spheres.

How does the ethnic make-up of your home region compare to that of Mali as a whole?

In the north, in Timbuktu and Gao, the majority is Songhai, with a large Fulani minority, and smaller numbers of Tuaregs and Arabs. The further south you go, towards Mopti, the larger the proportion of Fulani. In the country as a whole, though, the largest ethnic group is the Bambara, who make up perhaps 35 per cent of the total, which is around 14 million. Together with the Soninke and Malinke, also part of the Mande

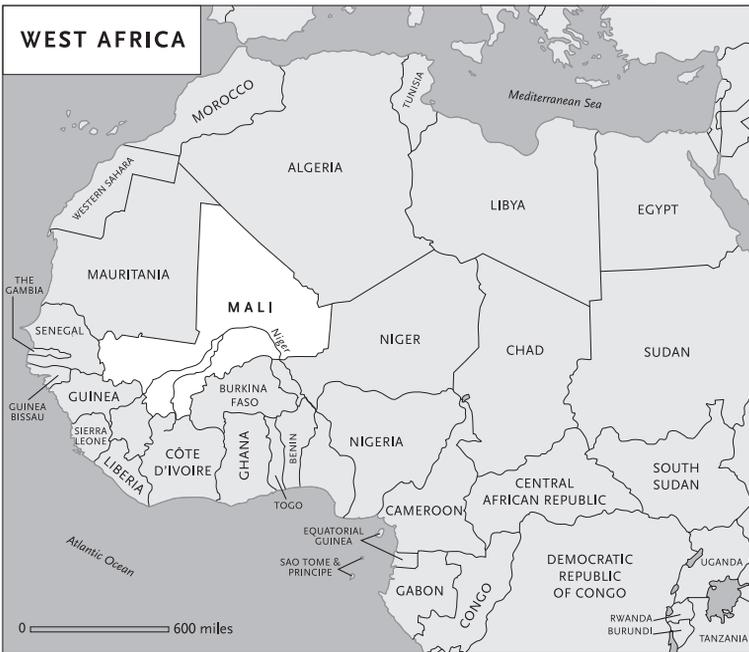
language family, they account for more than half the population. The Fulani are around 15 per cent, then there are the Senufo, the Dogon and the Songhai, each between 7 and 9 per cent, and a number of smaller ethnic groups. The Tuaregs and Moors each contribute between 1 and 2 per cent.

Since independence in 1960, Mali has had just five presidents. How would you assess the legacy of the first, Modibo Keita?'

Keita was a former school teacher, trained at the Ecole Normale Supérieure William Ponty in Dakar, which was an elite institution—the future presidents of Côte d'Ivoire and Togo also went there, for example. He was from the Malinke ethnic group, which straddles the border between Guinea and Mali—Sékou Touré was also Malinke. Sundiata Keita, the founder of the Mali Empire in the thirteenth century, was Malinke, a historic lineage they proudly assert to this day; Modibo Keita even claimed to be descended from the first Mali emperor, though this was totally untrue. He had only eight years in power before being toppled by a military coup. One of the most striking aspects of his rule was his political independence from the former colonial power. He sought to take a distance from France; instead, as a socialist, he moved closer to the USSR, China and the Eastern Bloc. He was a real pan-Africanist, with great influence on the continental scene—for example, in 1963 he mediated in the conflict between Morocco and Algeria, hosting talks in Bamako. He became close to Kwame Nkrumah, with whom he shared the pan-Africanist vision. Relations between Ghana and Mali were very good at the time—if we had shared a border, the two countries might have merged—and many of the trade links forged then remain.

During his eight years in power, Keita also laid the foundations of the national economy, based on public enterprises—for example, the national airline, Air Mali, was a source of great pride. He adopted a policy of import substitution in agriculture, food processing and to some extent in textiles. He accomplished a great deal by the standards of the time. His administration was characterized by a notable honesty: there

¹ Modibo Keita (1915–1977): prominent figure in the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain in the late 40s, then mayor of Bamako in the 1950s, before serving in the French national assembly. In 1959 he became president of the Mali Federation—comprising Senegal and French Sudan—and, on the Federation's collapse the following year, president of the independent state of Mali. [Notes by NLR.]



was very little corruption. But towards the end of his period in office, he began to rely increasingly on a popular militia, somewhat on the Chinese model, which created a lot of problems. Keita was very suspicious of the army, seeing it as a colonial legacy, but the militia began to infringe people's human rights, and also to obstruct the movement of goods. This created a lot of privation in the country: in a state-run economy, people weren't free to sell their goods, which served to block production. The national currency he introduced in 1962 also ran into difficulties, as rising inflation pushed down living standards. By the end, his regime had become unpopular.

In 1968, Keita was toppled by a military coup and replaced by Lieutenant Moussa Traoré, who ruled the country for the next 23 years. How would you describe the man and his regime?

Traoré is a Bambara from the Kayes region, near the border with Senegal. He was trained at Fréjus, a colonial garrison in southern France, rather than in one of the major military academies, and went on to become an instructor in the Malian army officers' school. He was an honest, disciplined officer. He was one of fourteen officers who carried out the coup, and was soon placed at the head of the junta, which called itself the Military Committee for National Liberation. Within the junta, to begin with there were officers who had more influence than him, so for a certain period of time Traoré did not have a free hand. Each member of the junta had their own ministry or institution that they ran as their personal fiefdom. Gradually, Traoré managed to purge the ranks of the junta and consolidate his power. In 1974 he created the Union Démocratique du Peuple Malien (UDPM), the country's sole legal party. From then on, one could say that he really had Mali in his grip.

Could his regime be described as a classical military dictatorship? How does Traoré compare with other strongmen of the same time in Africa—Eyadéma in Togo, Bokassa in the Central African Republic, and so on?

When the coup took place in 1968, the junta arrested a lot of leftists and trade unionists who opposed it. Many were imprisoned and sent to the north; some of them died there. So in that sense, yes, it was a military dictatorship. But it was not as bloody as others. Within the junta there were people who committed abuses—for example Tiécoro Bagayoko, the head of the security services; people were very pleased when Traoré got

rid of him.² Traoré himself was not really that kind of person: there are no indications that he committed any abuses himself or stashed away funds. There was another difference in the Malian case: although it was a military dictatorship, Malians never lost freedom of speech under Traoré. In other countries, one had to hide if one wanted to talk about the regime. In Mali, the press was not free, but one could speak freely—even in Traoré's presence. He would hold general assemblies in various towns, where the public would come and criticize his government's policies right in front of him. This is perhaps a peculiarity of Mali: whoever the president may be, he remains in some ways close to the population. Whether it's Traoré or someone else, when the president makes a public appearance, even a peasant out in the sticks can speak to him and say what he thinks.

Modibo Keita was jailed after the 1968 coup, and died in prison nine years later. Is there any truth to claims that Traoré had him poisoned?

There has been no official enquiry, but everyone agrees that Keita was poisoned. Who did it? There are many versions circulating, and there was even a case against a doctor. It's a murky affair. But Keita's fate was fairly typical for prisoners at the time.

What would you say were Traoré's main legacies?

On the ideological front, the military regime dispensed with Keita's socialism and replaced it with a kind of economic liberalism. People had the freedom to produce, sell, circulate, which had the effect of reducing poverty for a time. In terms of how they ran the country, it was under Traoré that corruption began seriously to affect public administration. As soon as the junta took power they started to enrich themselves. Traoré himself was not corrupt, but his family and his entourage came to have a lot of influence. Another important legacy was the development of the military apparatus: Traoré created and equipped a real national army, widely respected in West Africa—unlike at present. Mali fought two border wars with Burkina Faso in the mid-70s and mid-80s in which the disproportion of forces was glaring, due to Traoré's investment in the army.³

² Bagayoko and Defence Minister Kissima Doukara were arrested in 1978.

³ The two wars over the Agacher Strip took place in 1974 and 1985; in 1986 an ICJ ruling split the territory between the two states more or less evenly.

It was also under Traoré that the great Sahel drought of the early 1970s struck the country. How did this affect Mali's economic fortunes?

There had been some economic improvement after the junta took power, but the state itself remained poor. There were insufficient revenues contributing to the state budget, leaving the government with very little room for manoeuvre—somewhat like in Greece at the moment. The drought brought severe famine in 1973, and Mali rapidly entered into economic crisis. We were among the first countries to undergo a structural adjustment programme, imposed by the IMF starting in 1980. The government was forced to close the public enterprises established under Modibo Keita, one after another, and many state employees were laid off. Traoré was increasingly unpopular. There was a widespread social malaise, which prepared the way for the revolution of 1991. Around this time there was a wave of national uprisings in Africa—Benin, Zaire, Congo, among others. In Mali, the population went into the streets in March 1991 to demand a multiparty democracy, not just in Bamako but across the whole country. As many as 300 people were killed by the police. In the end the army pushed Traoré out of power and were forced, by sheer popular pressure, into promising new elections.

These were held in April 1992, and won by Alpha Oumar Konaré, candidate of the Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali (ADEMA), which emerged from the struggle against military rule. He was re-elected for a second term in 1997, virtually unopposed. How would you characterize Konaré and his presidency?

Of course, I served in his government twice, but I will try to be as objective as possible. Konaré is a historian, a very cultured man, who did a doctorate in archaeology in Warsaw. His wife, Adame Ba Konaré, is also a historian, who has written on the Songhai empire. He is a Bambara on his father's side, but his mother is Fulani. Although he is an intellectual, he was involved in the political struggle against Traoré for a long time—he's a real politician, and ruled like one. On the whole, Konaré's style of government was not the familial type one often sees in Africa. None of his family members, his in-laws or his friends were close to power; there was no nepotism of that kind. I think Konaré learnt lessons from what had happened in Mali before democratization. On the social front, he achieved a great deal: the country's indicators in the realms of education, health and infrastructure all improved. Economically,

we made a lot of progress under Konaré, with growth rates averaging around 5 per cent.

What was the basis for this?

Mali's principal exports are cotton and above all gold. Many of the geological surveys had been done before Konaré came to power, but it was only with democratization that mining companies came to exploit the gold deposits. These are in the south, in the Sikasso and Kayes regions, near the borders with Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. The mines are all privately owned, almost entirely operated by Anglo-Saxon companies. It's true that the overall economic impact of the mining sector is limited, since it employs only a small workforce, but the revenues have a powerful effect on growth figures. Aside from gold and cotton, Mali exports a lot of livestock to Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal and Ghana. And we have a large agricultural sector, producing for internal consumption: we grow rice, millet and so on, and are almost self-sufficient in food.

Is there also a small manufacturing sector?

Initially, Mali's industries were state-owned. They were then privatized during the 1980s, but the private sector ran into serious difficulties. Contrary to what many people think, we too suffer from Chinese competition. For example in textiles: it's impossible to make that work, since our production costs are higher than those in the PRC, so most of the textile factories have shut down. Recently a Chinese concern took over the COMATEX plant in Ségou, which is now operating again. The private sector has managed to develop small units such as cooking-oil mills or food-processing plants. But there has been a real deindustrialization relative to the days of Modibo Keita.

Did Konaré more or less follow the directives of the World Bank and IMF?

Yes, he was a star pupil. He also received a lot of international aid, because Mali was considered a democratic country. Konaré sold that image to the rest of the world—over-sold it, even. Perhaps it was not as solid as it had seemed, which is what we're seeing now. For example, education: Konaré put a lot into schools, but it was also one of his weak points, since the quality of our education system really declined over his ten years in power. There were two reasons for this. The first goes back to

the structural adjustment programmes carried out under Traoré, which brought the closure of teacher-training colleges; institutions ended up having to hire people who weren't qualified, so the quality of the staff was already bad. When Konaré established a lot of new schools in order to raise enrolment rates, there were not enough good teachers to staff them. Both the government and international aid agencies put a lot of emphasis on primary- and secondary-school enrolment rates, which did go up a tremendous amount, from 23 per cent when Konaré took office to perhaps 110 per cent when he left.⁴ But they were unwilling to invest in higher education, so that when students arrived at university, there weren't enough places or teachers. The University of Bamako now has 100,000 students, and not enough lecture halls or libraries.

Another reason for the government's problems in education is connected to the democratic movement itself. Students played an important role in helping to topple Moussa Traoré, which meant that they acquired real political weight after democratization. They went on strike all the time, but Konaré was not able to face up to them, since they were key allies of his regime. This was another weak point. By contrast, Konaré didn't give as much priority to the army as his predecessors, for ideological reasons—he was not a militarist, and couldn't see Mali going to war with another country. This did mean that questions of security were somewhat neglected during his mandate, something that has perhaps caught up with us now.

After Konaré came Amadou Toumani Touré, who won the presidential election of 2002 in the second round, and was re-elected to a second term in 2007. He was a soldier—but also a democrat?

Yes, he was always linked with democratic circles, even under Moussa Traoré. He was a paratroop colonel, and was also head of the Presidential Guard for a time. But it was clear that he never approved of the military's exactions; he never wanted to take part in any repression. When the uprising against Traoré took place in 1991, it was Touré—known as ATT—who arrested the president and, for the next year, oversaw the transition to elections and a new civilian government. Under Konaré, he

⁴ Enrolment rates measure pupils as a percentage of school-age children; they can therefore rise above 100 per cent if adults enrol.

was no longer on active service, and didn't occupy any official positions, but he had the public status of a former head of state.

What was his record as president?

He was someone who wanted his name to go down in history, but who was also very sensitive to the situation of the poor and deprived. Perhaps the thing that marked his administration most was a very large programme of social-housing construction—individual houses which, in the context of Mali, weren't bad at all. He also continued the construction of schools, dispensaries, infrastructure; he did a great deal—as much as Konaré, or perhaps more. But there was much more corruption under ATT than under his predecessor. There's no suggestion that he was personally implicated, but he let his entourage do more or less what they wanted. He was also guilty of a certain amount of demagoguery: he wanted to be too popular, wanted to please everyone, which is always bad.

But the economy continued to grow?

Yes, growth rates stayed at around 5 per cent on average, right up until ATT was removed from office in early 2012. Anyone who knew Mali under Moussa Traoré and came back under Konaré or ATT would think it was not the same country. It really has changed. Under Traoré the economy had ground to a halt. On the level of infrastructure, things have greatly improved since then.

Yet at the same time, the Malian state appears to have become increasingly fragile, as the crises of 2012 revealed. What were the causes of this vulnerability, and how far back in time should they be traced?

There are a number of different factors. To some extent the weaknesses of the Malian state go back to the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s, which drastically reduced the state's margin of manoeuvre, and undermined the functioning of public institutions in the long term. The impact was especially severe in the realms of education, health and public services. Voluntary retirement schemes meant that a lot of administrators quit, at the same time as there was a ten-year freeze on public-sector hiring; and we've already discussed the effect the SAPs had on education. But the erosion of the Malian state also owes much to our

practice of democracy after 1991. I've written elsewhere about the way in which our political system evolved from one of 'concerted power' under Konaré to one of 'consensual power' under ATT.⁵ In the first, the government involved other parties in the exercise of power, but still within the framework of a republican democracy, with a majority government and an opposition. Under ATT, by contrast, there was no clear majority, and in the end all political parties were absorbed into the government; there was thus a total lack of opposition, an absence of debate or contradiction. This brought not only a sterile competition for places within the ruling system among the political elite, but also demobilization among the population at large. The gulf between the administrative-political elite and the population began to widen.

The spread of corruption was another key factor contributing to the delegitimation of the state in the eyes of its citizens. Of course, this is hardly a new phenomenon in Mali—it was one of the catalysts for the democratic revolt of 1991—but it has grown steadily and reached very serious proportions in recent years. The 'Air Cocaine' case of 2010, when a Colombian plane full of drugs landed in the Malian desert, seemingly with the complicity of the authorities, illustrated the extent to which the Malian state had been corroded. Corruption also had a terrible effect on the armed forces, which are riddled with clientelism. This is especially visible with promotions: according to a report in *Le Monde* last spring, Mali has more than 100 generals for an army which on paper has 20,000 troops, whereas the French army has 150 generals and is six times the size. Since democratization, the Malian army has also been starved of resources and badly run. Then there are the successive peace accords signed with Tuareg rebels in 1991 and 2006, which led to the national army's withdrawal from parts of the territory, at the same time as they called for the integration of ex-combatants into the armed forces. The conditions on which this was done didn't contribute to cohesion, to say the least—there was a lot of mutual distrust and resentment, as well as desertions. In part because of the dysfunctions in the armed forces, the Malian authorities began to create separate Arab and Tuareg militias in the north, which further complicated the picture.

The rebellion that broke out in northern Mali in early 2012 seems to have been directly connected to the fall of Gaddafi a few months earlier. Can you

⁵ Sidibe, 'La déliquescence de l'Etat: un accélérateur de la crise malienne?', in Doulaye Konaté, ed., *Le Mali entre doutes et espoirs*, Algiers 2013, pp. 171–91.

tell us about the origins of the conflict in the north? Why did the NATO intervention in Libya have such a severe impact on Mali compared to the rest of the Sahel?

There are two aspects to the situation in the north. There is a history of Tuareg rebellion in Mali, going back to French colonialism. After independence, there was another Tuareg revolt which Keita suppressed militarily, with the aid of Algeria. Keita had helped the Algerians in their struggle against France—Bouteflika had actually been based in Gao when he was running the FLN's southern front—so in 1963, the Algerians returned the favour by closing the border. The repression wasn't much spoken about at the time, since there wasn't the same access to the media. But in many cases the children of the Tuareg rebels crushed in 1963 went to Algeria, and then the drought of the 1970s also made many people leave the north of Mali for Libya. This is the main difference between Mali and other countries in the region: the Libyan Army, and in particular the troops most loyal to Colonel Gaddafi, included a good number of Malian Tuaregs. During the NATO intervention some began to return, but the majority of them came back after Gaddafi's death in October 2011, bringing with them huge amounts of weaponry they'd taken from Libyan army depots. Their presence is what reignited the old conflict with the Malian state.

In itself, the Tuareg rebellion was not dangerous—they cannot destabilize Mali on their own, they are too few in number. But then there is the second aspect, the Islamist dimension. This is an entirely imported phenomenon. There didn't use to be any Islamist bases in Mali—perhaps a few adherents of Saudi-style Wahhabism in the north, in the Gao region and elsewhere. But when the Algerian government cracked down on the Islamists there, they crossed over into the north of Mali. In Algeria they were called the GSPC, the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, but around 2007 they changed their name to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). They established themselves in the deserts of northern Mali, which became a kind of sanctuary for them, along with drug traffickers, smugglers and all sorts of organized crime. The jihadists made money by taking hostages for ransom. This enabled them to recruit from among the disenfranchised and the poor, from among the Tuaregs and others, in the north of Mali and in neighbouring countries. Touré did nothing to counter them—something for which he's been much criticized.

You've spoken of Mali's economic growth, and of the country's transformation over the past two decades. Would it be fair to say this affected the south much more than the north—and that this imbalance was a strong motivation for rebellion?

No, the whole country benefited. True, the south is more developed than the north, by Malian standards: it has a much more favourable climate, and the population is overwhelmingly concentrated there—90 per cent of the total live in the six southern regions and the capital, compared to less than 10 per cent in Tombouctou region, Kidal and Gao. But many of the Tuareg rebels don't know Bamako—some of them have come from Libya, and compare Mali to that, thinking the south is as developed as Tripoli, which just isn't the case. It is also true that the north had been neglected for a long time, but the government had been working to redress this historic lag, from the time Konaré took power till recently. The road to Timbuktu was being tarmacked, for example, a dam was due to be built in Gao, and a manganese processing plant. All of that has stopped now.

Fresh presidential elections were due to be held in April 2012, but a military coup took place in March, deposing Touré right at the end of his term. Was there any connection between the coup and the electoral cycle?

No, I think it was a coincidence. It wasn't a pre-planned coup; it was a mutiny linked to the problem of the north, where rebellion had broken out again in January 2012. The soldiers were angry at the government's handling of the Tuareg rebellion, and felt that Touré was not putting sufficient means at their disposal to fight the armed groups. In January there had been a massacre at Aguelhoc, in the north near the Algerian border, where a combination of Tuareg rebels and Islamist groups had encircled a military base. The Malian army ran out of ammunition, and no reinforcements came—it was too far away. There were reports that the Islamists came in and killed dozens of unarmed soldiers like so many chickens.⁶ The army blamed President Touré for the lack of

⁶ The details of this episode remain unclear. According to the Malian army, somewhere between 85 and 200 soldiers and civilians were killed, apparently in summary executions, by Tuareg nationalists allied with the Islamist group Ansar Dine. On the symbolic importance of the Aguelhoc events, and the condition of the Malian army, see Eros Sana, 'L'armée malienne, entre instabilité, inégalités sociales et lutte de places', in Michel Galy, ed., *La guerre au Mali*, Paris 2013, pp. 106–20.

weapons and supplies. Soon afterwards, another contingent was due to go to the front, but when they tested their ammunition they found it was out of date. Soldiers from Kati military base, near Bamako, announced a protest planned for 22 March, and on the 21st Touré sent his defence minister to defuse the situation. It went very badly—he insulted them, they threw stones at him, and everything got out of control. Later that day, soldiers seized control of the presidential palace in Bamako, and the next day the National Committee for the Recovery of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (CNRDRE) announced the suspension of the constitution. There were mutinies in other units across the country, as the junta ordered the immediate arrest of all commanding officers at the front, who were said to be corrupt. This meant that the whole chain of command instantly broke down. In the confusion that followed, Islamist and Tuareg forces seized control of the whole of the north. It was a truly dramatic turn of events.

What was the impact of the northern rebellion on the population there?

By the end of 2012, perhaps as many as 150,000 Arab and Tuareg refugees had left the north, most of them crossing into Mauritania, Algeria and Burkina Faso instead of going to the south of Mali, for fear of reprisals against them. Many left even before the rebellion began—they were told to go by Tuareg leaders, who feared exactions by the Malian army. Around 100,000 black refugees from the north also fled the Salafists and AQIM and came to Bamako or Mopti. But the rest of the black population remained. In the countryside, life changed very little: the villagers could carry on working their fields, and never saw any Salafists—there were too few of them to fully control that whole area. It's really the bigger towns that were their base—Timbuktu and Gao, which have populations of 60,000 and maybe 100,000. In the villages, there was no longer any administrative authority, but the people stayed there, and they could travel to Bamako and back. There were even refugees who came to Bamako and, when the army began to commit abuses there, decided to return to the north on the grounds that it would be safer.

When the Tuareg rebels seized the north, they unilaterally proclaimed the independence of a new state, Azawad. What was the significance of this name?

I'm from the north, but the first time I heard mention of the name was at the end of the 1980s, when the Mouvement Populaire pour la

Libération de l'Azawad was formed.⁷ We all said, 'Azawad, what's that?' What happened was that the different Tuareg groups had got together to find a name they could all agree on, and they settled for Azawad, which means 'basin' or 'bowl'. It refers to an area of the Sahara spanning from northeastern Mali into western Niger and southern Algeria, the basin of a dried-up river which used to drain into the Niger. The Tuaregs began to use this term to designate the entire north of Mali, something the rest of us in the region didn't accept, since it meant nothing to us.

Have the Tuaregs always demanded independence, or was that a new development?

This was the first time it had come to the fore. It had never been on the agenda until now—the Tuaregs would previously say they wanted to improve conditions in the north, something the other peoples of the north would agree with. I don't know why the idea of independence arose precisely in 2012, unless it was because of the oil that is rumoured to be in the north. Or are there other agendas? It's very surprising, because the north isn't really viable as a state, unless it does have oil. The three regions of northern Mali taken together have only 1.2 million inhabitants, spread across a territory bigger than France. And that's including everyone—the Songhai, Fulani and Tuaregs. The Tuaregs themselves are a minority of the population in the north, contrary to what people often think. So it's a little surprising that the MNLA would insist on independence.⁸ Apart from anything else, it would be impossible for the Tuaregs to create a state in the north if most of the population there was hostile to the idea. Another element is that, in areas they took control of, the Tuaregs pillaged a great deal—taking equipment from schools, furniture, fridges, everything. When the Islamists took over Timbuktu, chasing out the MNLA, they invited some journalists to the airport to see the damage the Tuaregs had done. AQIM were more disciplined about that, they never took people's goods—though they committed plenty of abuses.

Would you say that neither of the two rebel forces—Salafists or Tuareg rebels—are deeply rooted social phenomena?

⁷ Founded in 1988, the Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération de l'Azawad (MPLA) split into three groups in 1991; one signed a National Accord with Bamako the following year, the rest were included in an official armistice of 1996.

⁸ MNLA: Mouvement Nationale pour la Libération de l'Azawad, Tuareg group formed in 2011 from several contingents of fighters, including returnees from Libya.

No, I would say they aren't. Kidal region, for example, is a Tuareg bastion, but the total population there is only 100,000. Ansar Dine, the group led by the veteran Tuareg rebel Iyad Ag Ghaly, came out of Kidal.⁹ But most Tuaregs practise a very relaxed version of Islam, and I would say that Islamism is not an integral element of the society. It's an artificial phenomenon. No doubt there are some Malians who could be described as Wahhabis, but from there to being the basis for a fundamentalist Islamic state . . . I don't think so.

One gets the impression that Tuareg society is divided in a variety of senses—socially stratified, regionally differentiated, politically fragmented.

Yes, there are a number of different divisions—as in other societies that are split along ethnic or tribal lines. For example Tuareg society is traversed by distinctions of caste: there are nobles, artisans, freemen and slaves, and so on. There are differences in religion between the more secularly inclined and a more Islamist minority, some of whom had joined Salafist groups before the conflict broke out. Recently there have been other divergences, as with the many Tuaregs who returned from Libya and, knowing little about the local Tuareg society, weren't inclined to respect the old, established hierarchies. Then there is the impact of globalization. One could say it's a society in the midst of a revolution.

In January 2013, Laurent Fabius declared that the French intervention in Mali would last only 'a few weeks'. One year on, how many French soldiers remain on Malian soil?

I don't know exactly how many, it's somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000. The idea is that by 2014 only 1,000 men will remain. But I'm sure that this thousand-strong contingent won't be leaving any time soon—I'd be astonished if they did. One factor here is that in the northeast, the French have occupied the military base at Tessalit, near the Algerian border. This is an old NATO base, which Mali demanded back on independence, and which is very strategically located; from there France can operate across the whole of the Sahara.

⁹ Iyad Ag Ghaly: founder, in 1988, of Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération de l'Azawad; leading figure in Tuareg rebellion of 1990–91. Appointed Malian Consul General to Saudi Arabia by Amadou Toumani Touré in 2006; expelled by Riyadh in 2010, returned to Mali and, after failing to secure a leadership role in the MNLA, established Ansar Dine in late 2011.

What role do the UN troops of MINUSMA play in Mali at the moment?

Not a great deal, as far as I can see. They're not a combat force, but rather seem to act as a kind of buffer between the Malian army and the Tuaregs in Kidal.

Presidential elections were held in July and August, won in the second round by Ibrahim Boubaacar Keita, a former prime minister in the 1990s. What were the main issues of contention in the campaign, and how would you describe Keita's political programme?

The crisis in the north was really the central issue, and Keita clearly struck Malians as someone capable of resolving it. His campaign revolved around a basic patriotic slogan—'Mali First'—and the idea of putting the Malian state back on its feet, of restoring the population's pride. But there wasn't a detailed agenda for government—his campaign was more about the person than the programme.

What is the situation in the north at present?

There are a lot of tensions between the Malian government on the one hand, and MINUSMA and the French forces on the other. There is this feeling that the Operation Serval troops and UN mission are there to keep the Malian army from re-entering Kidal, acting as a kind of protection for the Tuareg rebels—some of whom, such as the MNLA, quickly aligned themselves with the French against the Islamists. President Keita has accused the 'international community' of forcing his country to 'negotiate on its own soil with people who have taken up arms against the state', and called the situation in Kidal 'unacceptable'. Meanwhile many of the Salafists who fled to other countries are now going back and forth, crossing into Mali to mount attacks and disappearing again. Unlike in Afghanistan, say, they aren't really sheltered by the local population.

The post-conflict 'road map' adopted by the National Assembly in Bamako in March 2013 envisaged the creation of a Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission. What has its work to date consisted of, and what are the obstacles facing it?

Normally the idea of such commissions is to investigate crimes that have been committed, to try to reconstruct events and establish the

truth. But I don't think this commission has really found its voice as yet. It's not currently playing much of a role in the political arena. Part of the problem is that it was set up by the transitional government, and I think the new administration wants to reorganize it and change the parameters of its mission. One of the obstacles is that Malian society isn't interested in neutrality. Another point of contention is the international arrest warrants that have been issued for several Tuareg leaders, from the MNLA, Ansar Dine, AQIM and other militias, several of which have been lifted as part of the negotiation process. It's going to be complicated.