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A neo-colonial intervention under French leadership in Mali

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On 11 January 2013, French president François Hollande announced the intervention of his country's army in the war in Mali, which had until then opposed the Malian army to the Tuareg independence movement, the Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad (MNLA - National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad), and the various jihadist groups apparently committed to the establishment of a West African caliphate: the Malian Tuaregs of Ansar Dine, the internationals of the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest (MUJAO - Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa) and the "narco-Salafists" of Al-Qaeda au Maghreb islamique (AQMI - Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb). France's entry into a war in one of its former colonies was presented as a response to an appeal for help from the head of the interim government in Mali, President Dioncounda Traoré. The latter owes his position to an agreement between the army, led by Captain Sanogo, which overthrew the legal government of Amadou Toumani Touré in March 2012 (a month before the presidential elections which the latter was not going to contest), and a part of the Malian "political class" under the patronage of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Dioncounda Traoré felt threatened by the movement of the jihadists towards the Malian capital, Bamako.

The intervention took place while the "international community" — in the event the UN Security Council which adopted resolution 2085 on December 20, 2012, and the ECOWAS — were again discussing the terms of the deployment of a sub-regional armed force, the Mission internationale de soutien au Mali (MISMA - International Support Mission in Mali), under African leadership, but with the agreement of some Western states, to expel the "Islamic terrorists" from Malian territory. According to the representative in the Sahel of the Secretary General of the United Nations, former Italian council president Romano Prodi, the said force would only be ready from September 2013. Meanwhile Algeria and Burkina Faso, for certain geopolitical and historical reasons, negotiated, in the name of the said African "international community", a political solution with the Malian Tuareg organisations — the MNLA and Ansar Dine — and the Malian interim government. The Algerian and Burkinabe mediations were, it seemed, going well. A cessation of hostilities was obtained between Ansar Din and the MNLA (December 2012) and the Malian authorities. Then, the victorious jihadist attack in early January 2013 on the town of Konna, considered by the mediators as a betrayal of the

word that had been given to them, was supposed to lead to the taking of the town of Sévaré (the operational headquarters of the Malian army, with an airport and a separate French military aid), which would have opened the road to the conquest of the capital Bamako, given the state of the Malian army. Mali would thus have been the first stage of the supposed establishment of a West African caliphate.

With the exceedingly bad reputation of the jihadists, founded on the horrors committed in the name of Sharia against the people — not always showing resignation in the face of their conquerors — accompanied by a great media coverage and the rapid defeat of the Malian army by the jihadist militias, the French military intervention had a sufficient base to appear legitimate, both for the Malian people — who acclaimed it — and for a part of African and international opinion.

In a metropolitan France characterised in recent years by an undeniable ambient Islamophobia, combined with the traditional support, through indifference, of public opinion for neo-colonial enterprises by the Republic, there was quasi unanimous approval of this military intervention. Some departed from the said consensus in raising the “debatable” character of the president having decided without prior consultation of the government or parliament when “the fundamental interests of France are not at stake, according to the head of state himself” (thus Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of the Parti de Gauche on January 11, 2013). But it is precisely in terms of the interests of France in Africa in the current phase of capitalist globalisation that the military intervention must be understood.

Rebellion of the Tuaregs

A new post colonial armed rebellion against the Bamako government by the Tuaregs, a Berber people also present in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali and Niger, began in northern Mali on January 17, 2012. It followed those of 1962-1964, 1990-1995 and 2006-2009. These rebellions result, in different countries, from frontiers inherited from French colonisation, whose respect has been a supposedly untouchable principle of the defunct Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and of the current African Union (AU). They are the product of the inegalitarian policies of national development which postcolonial African states have continued, a factor in ethnic/national identity-based tensions in less favoured areas, in addition to the non respect by governments of undertakings made in peace agreements, a factor of crystallisation of frustrations.

These ethnic frustrations are socially determined. Their crystallisation is explained both by the collapse of alternative political projects to neo-colonialism as well as by the social violence of neoliberal structural adjustment policies. Mali was bled white during the 1990s and 2000s by the repayment of a debt inherited from the autocratic regime. Such policies have increased the abandonment of the traditionally deprived areas and favoured individual strategies of survival and all forms of corruption. The elites being moreover devoted to the neoliberal principle of material self enrichment, by all means. Such is the general situation in north Mali, zones inhabited by Tuaregs in particular, although Arabs, Peuls, Songhaï and others are present.

The latest revolt by the MNLA is distinguished from its predecessors by:

- the importance of ex-soldiers and ex-mercenaries from the overthrown Libyan regime;
- the involvement of jihadists (AQMI and MUJAO) — some of whom fought in the anti Gaddafi rebellion — which came to militarily dominate the MNLA, not only because of their ability to religiously convince the local youth, already Muslim, of a different Islam, but because of their financial capacities.

The taking of Western residents as hostages, the traffic in the Sahara of cocaine (unloaded along the coastline stretching from Ghana to Senegal, originating from the South American cartels, already direct actors in economic growth and indirect actors in political change in this part of the continent, with the recent military coups in Guinea-Bissau, for example) and other traffics are significant sources of income. They allow the leaders of these Islamist militias to recruit youth. More than a year before the outbreak of the current rebellion MNLA spokesperson Hama Ag Sid'Ahmed had said: "the youth abandoned by their state and also often by their Tuareg political and military leaders do not know where to turn. Some are tempted by the facilities offered by the AQMI, the only northern enterprise which works and wins all the markets without making any investment".

Controlling northern Mali is then a very profitable business for these jihadists. Also, the smooth running of their business requires complicity in certain state apparatuses which they border or where they have created lawless border zones. This explains not only the connivance of certain notables in northern Mali with the narco-Salafists but also the ineffectiveness of the Malian army, numerous members of whose hierarchy are presumed linked to the coastal networks in Guinea of the South American narco-traffic and the narco-Salafists. Which also goes for the political and military leaders of the neighbouring state of Burkina Faso.

France's "cooperation" with Mali

One thing is certain: for France, this intervention will change the givens of military "cooperation" with Mali. Unlike most former French colonies it decided, in January 1961, under the presidency of the non-aligned and leftish Modibo Kéita, on the closure of the French military bases of Kati, Gao, Tessalit — the latter very important for France's war against the FLN in Algeria. This decision stemmed from the abrogation of military accords including a defence agreement signed in June 1960, one of the consequences of the dissolution in August 1960 of the Federation of Mali, involving Senegal and the former French Sudan. In the name of national sovereignty, the new Republic of Mali considered the maintenance of French bases on its territory as incongruous, especially since France had supported Senegal in its secession.

The presidency of Moussa Traoré, a French trained officer, who had overthrown the first president, certainly re-established military "cooperation", but without however signing a defence agreement (a tool which allows France to intervene legally "in case of external aggression" against its African vassals). It was limited to a technical military cooperation agreement. Mali, even led by the autocratic general Traoré, was not comparable to the Ivory Coast, Djibouti, or Senegal (until 2010), or to Chad, where French soldiers form part of the national landscape.

The regimes installed by democratic elections since 1992, those of Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992-2002) and Amadou Toumani Touré (1991-1992 and then 2002-2012) conserved this situation, with however one change: the development of military cooperation with the USA. Since the end of the Cold War, under the presidency of George Bush senior, the US had decided on a greater presence in Africa. Thus military "cooperation" with Mali and other states begin with the Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) set up in 1993. By its geographic position, it became in the context of the "struggle against Islamist terrorism" one of the laboratories of US military policy in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the Sahel-Sahara zone where various military exercises related to the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) which subsequently became the African Contingency Operations Training Assistance (ACOTA) take place.

The Malian army has accordingly benefited from a specific attention from the US government departments involved in counter-terrorism. The said terrorism being incarnated by Algeria's Groupe

salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC - Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), which recently became AQMI, moving in virtually complete freedom and sovereignty in the border lands of Algeria, Mali and Niger — states in the forefront of the US campaign. It is this context that the CIA opened its most important office in the area here some years ago. There has been the intensification of the training of Malian soldiers by the US army, and the regular supply of military equipment. Thus, on October 20, 2009, Mali received from the Obama administration more than 4 million dollars of military equipment, including thirty seven pick-up Land Cruisers, communication equipment and spare parts and under the CTTE (Counter Terrorism Train and Equip) programme. Following a US programme of military training of troops from three Malian bases, including the 33rd regiment of parachutists, by US special advisers.

With all the training and exercises organised since the 1990s as well as the equipment received and assistance in intelligence, it is surprising that the Malian army did not show the least resistance in early 2012 faced with the pro-independence MNLA — supposedly enjoying underhand support from France, indeed from Switzerland — and the different jihadist groups, which did not prove so combative with regard to the weak resistance met by the French army, supported by the Malian army. The latter had been trained throughout recent years to face this possibility: the coming together of the Tuareg armed movements and the jihadist militias. Confronted with it, it retreated. Which attests to the defeat of the US anti-terrorist campaign in this zone. Worse for the US image, heavily armed convoys left Libya for northern Mali, passing through south east Algeria and north west Nigeria, without being intercepted, in a zone monitored with the aid of the most modern technology, while there was a desertion to the MNLA, of the higher Tuareg Malian officers trained by the US army. Meanwhile, the putschists — who, by their paralysis of the army, after the overthrow of Amadou Toumani Touré, indirectly contributed to the partition of Mali by the MNLA and jihadists — had at their head captain Amadou Sanogo, trained by the US army as a parachutist, intelligent officer and teacher of English to the military. The current head of AFRICOM, General Carter Ham said: “I was sorely disappointed that a military with whom we had a training relationship participated in the military overthrow of an elected government,” [1].

However the same article cites a Malian officer who speaks of the defection, with arms and troops, of the heads of three of the four units of the Malian army then fighting in the north of the country: “The aid of the Americans turned out not to be useful,” said another ranking Malian officer, now engaged in combat. “They made the wrong choice,” he said of relying on commanders from a group that had been conducting a 50-year rebellion against the Malian state”. [2]

A French general noted: “The Americans have been involved in Africa for five years with AFRICOM. They trained the Malian army for 600 million dollars. All this to end up in a putsch carried out by a captain... Everybody is then happy to turn towards France which has its savoir-faire, regional and cultural knowledge, and links. We are there a little by delegation of the western world for fifty years.” [3]

While the US ambassador to the UN, Susan Rice, opposed French activism for a rapid intervention and General Ham declared the impossibility of an intervention in Mali, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, pressed the Algerian president to involve himself in the preparation of the intervention rather than to negotiate with the MNLA and Ansar Dine. The current US declarations of approval of the French intervention and offer of logistical support brings to mind the supposed new option, applied in Libya, according to which the United States will not take the leadership of military operations that they deem relevant to European interests before their own, while the Europeans will remain dependent on the US to supplement their efforts where necessary. But unlike the intervention in Libya, the disagreements between France and the US have been publicly exposed as an inter-imperialist duel from which France has emerged victorious, affirming thus its imperialist leadership in the sub-region, at least in its former colonial area. It is not obvious that Mali can

remain a very good customer of US counter-terrorist military exercises.

France: return on military investment

As the real fighting was initially carried out exclusively by the French, it was the French army (personnel and equipment) which will emerge prestigious — including for the soldiers of other countries in MISMA, whose Nigerian commander in chief is a Francophone — in the event of the final victory of the neo-colonial coalition. The non opposition of Captain Sanogo to the French intervention should be noted. Yet his conflict with ECOWAS (hostile to his coup, which could inspire soldiers in neighbouring states) had centred on the demand for a Malian command for the African sub regional force. The appeal of Dioncounda Traoré to the French army cannot have been taken without the approval of the junta, Sanogo presenting himself as the military advisor of the interim president.

France will find the opportunity to take root militarily in Mali after fifty years of comparatively timid military relations. France is already responsible for the training of the Malian army and that of neighbouring Niger, also at risk from jihadism, and whose president supported the French position on the Security Council, will not remain apart from the process. It cannot be ruled out that the French army wants to re-establish itself, with some supplementary forces from ECOWAS, in Tessalit, under the pretext of securing the frontier with Algeria.

The principle of foreign operations, which are expensive, is the economic return on military investment. Above all in this period of economic crisis. During the debate on the Mali intervention in the French parliament on January 16, 2013, some right wing opposition deputies, including UMP leader Jean-François Copé, insisted on the need to increase the defence budget for 2013, despite austerity. Good news for the French military industrial complex whose surveillance equipment (Atlantique-2, Pléiades and so on), was already active in the Malian skies before January 11. The operation promotes the Tiger combat helicopter as well as Mirages. Foreign operations are more convincing commercially than the Salon du Bourget. This aspect has often been avoided, including by critics of the French intervention.

French leadership of a European army?

Also the French intervention involves the redefinition of the Politique de sécurité et de défense commune européenne (PSDC - European Common Defence and Security Policy), a subject where the presidency of François Hollande contrasts with the enthusiastic Atlanticism of his predecessor. As a return to the Gaullist heritage of French leadership of a European army, the Serval operation can then be considered as an anticipation of the European Operation Sahel 2013 which envisaged training and aiding African forces to regain the north of Mali. This European operation could be led with other African states directly threatened and with regional organisations. It is undoubtedly in relation to this operation that the French defence minister said that “these soldiers [French, European] will not participate in combat operations. But the EU considers that it is necessary to help Mali eradicate the jihadist menace. The European initiative is independent of the resolution adopted by the UN Security Council to allow ECOWAS to intervene militarily alongside the Malian army” [4].

It seems inevitable that part of the EU's aid to Mali will concern the “modernisation” of the security forces, which will include the provision of appropriate equipment, i.e. that which proved its worth in the war against the jihadists. Each European army participating in this expedition will wish to have its economic return on military investment. There is perhaps more chance for the Europeans here

than in Iraq or Afghanistan — where attacks undermined participation in the coalition of international forces supporting the US army. The US and the UK will also play their part along with France. The principle of a return on military investment has been applied in Libya and the same can be expected in Mali.

French interests

While Mali is known for being among the lowest ranking nations globally as far as HDI is concerned, it is much less known as one of the main producers of African cotton, or the third biggest gold producer of the continent, with the perspective in recent years of supplanting Ghana or South Africa, the two biggest. This gold is exploited by, among others, AngloGold-Ashanti, Gencor, Société financière internationale, Bouygues, and SOMADDEX (Société malienne d'exploitation) a subcontractor of AngloGold. These transnationals have been confronted by the struggle of miners and neighbouring communities, victims of the collateral social and ecological effects of mining. This does not particularly concern the Malian leaders who share out the dividends — the state being the main minority shareholder in the mining enterprises — and the profits, part of which are diverted not only for consumerism but also for the primitive accumulation of capital in a society with very old traditions of corruption. The poverty of most Malians is not the consequence of an unfavourable natural environment, despite the aridity of a part of the territory which does not however prevent the domination of farming activity. Malian poverty is a consequence of economic choices inherited from French colonisation, reproduced by the neo-colonial elites with the complicity of the old colonial metropolis for nearly five decades (exception made of the Modibo Kéita years of an attempted emergence from neo-colonial dependency) and the organisers of the neoliberal world order.

While 51% of Mali's population lives on less than 800 FCFA per day, its economic potential is of interest to French and international capital. Which gives the lie to François Hollande's claim, made in Abu Dhabi: "There is no French interest, apart from our nationals in Mali..... We defend only one cause: the integrity of Mali..." [5] There certainly are French interests in Mali, represented for example by the Club des investisseurs français au Mali (CIFAM), made up of around sixty enterprises, including Air France, Air Liquide, AGS, Gras Savoye, BNP Paribas, CANALSAT horizons, Sanofi Aventis, SDV, Allianz, Total, CFAO, Castel, Bouygues. Some, like Bouygues or Orange, have benefited from the privatisation of Malian public companies and liberalisation.

Chinese competition

However, companies confronted with Chinese competition fear having to quit Mali. "In the area of investment, China intervenes in various areas in Mali... in particular in textiles, agro-industry, the pharmaceutical industry, public works" [6]. Direct Chinese investment in Mali was 30.95 million US dollars in 2009 against 23.4 million in 2007. The last figures available for 2011 indicate an increase to 160.06 million dollars. Also, "China is forcefully inserted in nearly all sectors of the Malian market. Malian imports from China concern even the most ordinary equipment and consumer goods" [7]. Which has an impact on France's trade balance with Mali, currently positive for France at nearly 270 million euros.

Meanwhile the US ambassador in Mali has expressed concern about the Chinese monopoly in Mali, while the deputy secretary of state for African affairs, Johnnie Carson, has said that the whole Sahel region was vital to US interests. For French finance minister Pierre Moscovici: "It is obvious that China is increasingly present in Africa. French enterprises which have the resources should go on

the offensive.” [8]. Mali is presented as one of the areas where the Chinese are most active. And the French minister’s call is not motivated by empathy with Africa but because “the new phenomenon that is African growth has the potential to stimulate growth in France.”

Certainly there are other French interests in West Africa, like the exploitation of uranium in neighbouring Niger, whose protection could justify an intervention from imperialist point of view, given its vital importance for France. The establishment of an Islamic state in Mali, considered as the embryo of a future caliphate embracing the whole of West Africa would certainly have modified the situation. For example the neo-colonial contract of exploitation linking Areva and the Niger state. The jihadists in power could have revised the contracts, demanded higher returns, or availed in certain economic sectors of capital from Qatar or other Gulf oil states at the expense of French or Western competitors. But they would not have done so as the Gulf monarchies can make their Wahabbism coexist with very fruitful economic partnerships with the main Western transnationals as well as significant military assistance from the imperialist powers. In the light also of the coming to power of Ennahda in Tunisia and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, we can say that there is no anti-capitalist perspective in the current Islamist dynamic.

But France is not blind to the potential of Mali in terms of the exploitation of other minerals, including uranium. There is also the exploitation of fuels: — gas, a deposit of which, containing produce of a very rare quality, has been discovered not far from the garrison town of Kati and elsewhere; — oil, whose importance for France was underlined by, for example the events in Mauritania from 2005-2009.

In a speech to the Senegalese parliament in Dakar on October 12, 2012, Hollande stated: “today on trade, the climate, on economic questions, you are our main partner and France will be your first ally. The task of a country like mine is to accompany you in the domains of the future, not simply natural resources but also agro-alimentary, telecommunications, services”. He also warned Africa against possible “predators” among the new big investors in Africa.

A future oil and gas state

Like many other African countries in recent years, Mali has entered the club of oil and gas states. Thanks to the exploration carried out first by the Chinese enterprise SINOPEC, before the Algerian SONATRACH, in northern Mali, although this is endlessly being postponed. The last postponement was caused by the war of independence launched by the MNLA in January 2012. Foreign enterprises like SONATRACH, the Italian ENI, Australia’s BARAKA and China’s National Petroleum Corporation), as well as TOTAL ARE involved. But the latter does not enjoy the traditional French oil leadership in Francophone Africa. To such a point that the sympathy of Sarkozy’s France with respect to the MNLA has been interpreted as motivated by the potential oil wealth of north Mali, destined to be separated under the name of Azawad. Links have been established between the rebellion of the MNLA and the last Tuareg rebellion in Niger, led by the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice (MNJ) in 2007, at the time when China became involved in the exploitation of Niger’s uranium (jealously protected by AREVA) and, since 2011, oil exploration, at the expense of EXXON. Elsewhere in Francophone Africa, in Congo-Brazzaville, in relation to oil, and the Central African Republic in relation to uranium, coups, indeed wars have taken place following attempts to question the French monopoly in the name of liberalisation.

In Mali, the exploitation of a part of what was presented as the most important African on-shore deposit began with TOTAL being in a marginal situation. This led to the movement for secession or a broad autonomy for north Mali enjoying help from Sarkozy (sympathy for the Tuareg cause should

not make us blind to the fact that northern Mali is an area shared with other peoples. An independence in the limits of Azawad traced by the MNLA would have to be ratified by a popular referendum to be legitimate or democratic). A French military intervention under François Hollande can correct this. The economic return on military investment can only improve.

China is increasingly present as much in the old oil bastions of the Western majors as in the new ones. The production of certain majors including Total is falling. Thus the, battle for control of what remains has already begun. The “fight against terrorism”, although the jihadists and their horrors are no fiction, is a good alibi to justify imperialist appetites.

Recomposition of the imperialist order

What is happening in Mali, like what has happened in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or Sudan, relates to the recomposition of the imperialist order imposed by neoliberalism. France, which initially supported the MNLA diplomatically, seems inspired by the Sudanese situation (a partition blessed by the United States, thirsty for oil, on the basis of legitimate popular demands), is now transformed (turning a deaf ear to the public offer of the MNLA to support the struggle against the jihadists) as restorer of Mali’s territorial integrity, dragging behind it the so called “international community” in general and in particular the African satraps. The monsters produced in Afghanistan during the Cold War by their system — which includes the Gulf oil monarchs, financiers of these “jihadists” — serve in recent years as permanent alibi to legitimate their own imperialist horrors. Emergent capitalist powers like China and India, who have their own “Islamist” problems at home, have for the moment in Africa other assets which are also one of the factors in the aggression of the traditional imperialisms.

The action of the “international community” under French imperialist leadership can only consolidate the links of dependency in their neoliberal version. It will reinforce the ideological domination of imperialism considered as a saviour and bearer of democracy rather than a predator. The Malian left in particular, and the African and global anti-capitalist left must grasp the current complexity of the dynamic of capitalist domination. Support must be given to the Malian people and particularly those in the north, who are the victims of a war between forces which are fundamentally hostile to their emancipation with respect to neo-colonialism. Support must also be given to all those struggling everywhere in Africa — particularly those in Egypt and Tunisia — and the rest of the world against capitalism, which everywhere no longer offers an alternative.

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* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Adam Nossiter, Eric Schmitt and Mark Mazzetti, “French Strikes in Mali Supplant Caution of U.S.” “The New York Times”, January 13, 2013

[2] Idem.

[3] "Mali: "On ne peut pas échapper à nos responsabilités en Afrique", "Défense globale", January 17, 2013.

[4] Jean-Yves Le Drian: "L'intégralité du Mali est essentielle pour la sécurité de l'Europe" ", "La Croix", December 23, 2012.

[5] "Mali — Emirats Arabes Unis — Conférence de presse du président de la République, M. François Hollande", Déclarations officielles de politique étrangère, Bulletin d'actualités, January 17, 2013.

[6] Professor Abdrahamane Sanogo, "Les relations économiques de la Chine et du Mali", Consortium pour la recherche économique en Afrique, (CREA), January 2008, p. 13.

[7] idem.

[8] "La France doit concurrencer la Chine en Afrique, dit Moscovici", Reuters, December 1, 2012