From Environmental Scarcity to 'Rage of the Rich' – Causes of Conflict in Mali

The conflict in Mali, particularly known as the Northern Mali Conflict, refers to the armed conflict that began in 2012 between the northern and southern parts of Mali (Ghauzal & Van Damme, 2015). Nevertheless, the sources of conflict stem further back than 2012, as this paper will go on to explore. In January 2012, several groups within Mali began an armed campaign against the Malian Government in aspiration for the independence of northern Mali, the area referred to as Azawad by many. Although Mali has taken the steps of formal peace agreements in attempts and with aspirations of settling peace and creating stability and security, the true validity of the peace processes lies in understanding, and subsequently solving the root causes of the violent conflict (McCoy, 2008). The very multidimensional threats to Malian security can be observed as a result of cumulative continuous micro-conflicts since the 1960s after Malian independence (Farah, Gandhi & Robidoux, 2019). Thus, this paper will take a wider scope in examining the underlying causes, the horizontal inequalities, the individual motivations for violent conflict, the concerns for environmental scarcity, failure of the social contract, and lastly the proximate causes, as the possible triggers or reasonings for the violent Malian intra-state conflict.

Underlying Causes

The underlying causes, or permissive conditions, of the Malian intra-state conflict are extensive, yet they tie together under the general realms of structural factors, political factors, economic factors, and cultural factors (Brown, 1997). These factors are so interknitted that it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to differentiate. The political factors – the evident discriminatory political Malian institutions, the exclusionary national ideologies, the inter-group politics, and the elite politics – have manifested themselves extensively as underlying causes of the conflict. Historically, it is clear that a lack of cohesive understanding mixed with mutual distrust between Central Mali and Northern Mali has fed into the increasing Malian instability.

These causes are interrelated to the structural factors, particularly the ethnic geography of Mali, and the intra-state security concerns that arise consequently. The aspirations of the North to develop culturally, socially, and economically, in terms of infrastructure, yet also in terms of political representation, have been ignored by the Malian authorities (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). After Mali achieved independence from the French, spontaneous revolts began in 1963 in the center of the country, and the response by the national army was cruel and discriminatory particularly towards the Tuareg, as a variety of restrictions were placed on them exclusively (Lode, 1997). With the government's distrust in the Tuaregs, the national military academy has historically been off-limits to Tuaregs, very few civil servants and diplomatic corps are Tuareg, and a limited number of ministers in government have been Arabs/Tuaregs (Ibid). The nomads became a projecting marginalized group and felt "they were considered as second-class citizens" according to findings by Lode (Ibid). The marginalization was protruding across the Malian state, mainly due to a lack of proper representation (Hjorth Gernigon, 2019).

With the increasing discriminatory policies that followed during and after President Traouré, the increasing gap in terms of development between North and South Mali, went hand in hand with the existing literature for other African conflicts; that the continuous widening gaps between intra-state regions and ethnic groups, would be a major underlying cause for violent conflict (Ibid). Particularly in the year 1990, the accumulation of all the above reasons,

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and more, resulted in the perception of the North of Mali as "the useless Mali" compared to the south of Mali as "the useful Mali" (Ibid). Deprived of basic public services and aid, poverty struck the nomads so drastically that the lack of hope for a future for nomads in Mali resulted in the nomads being willing, and arguably even eager, to "take up arms against the government" (Ibid). This will be further understood later in this paper, in the section on individual motivations, and in particular the grievances hypothesis. This paper will illustrate how the above factors, which led to the manifestation of armed conflict, are deeply rooted in the concerns of the North, and how the unconcern for the South further catalyzes the former. It is this which has paved the way for violent contestation, separatist actions, and the secessionist movements in Mali as a weak state.

Horizontal Inequalities

The basic building block for analysis, policy, and examination of the development of conflict places individuals "firmly at the center of concern" (Stewart, 2005). Horizontal inequalities (HIs) are inequalities amongst culturally defined groups that share a common identity (Stewart, 2010). It is these multidimensional inequalities – economic, social, political, and cultural – with their respective elements, that may be pulling societies into violent conflict. According to Stewart, this includes the inequalities in income and employment opportunities, which are largely dependent on the general conditions of the economy (Ibid). This is clearly evident in Mali, where inequalities between North Malians and Central and South Malians result in the economic marginalization and negligence of the North. Between the 'black population of the south' and the 'paler northern population' ethnic fighting coupled with the economic grievances create further inequalities (Economist, 1990). Consequently, the nomads are arguably pushed into finding alternative economic opportunities due to HIs. The social HIs include public services and access to such, including education, healthcare, and housing.

It is these social HIs in particular I argue that result in the failure of the social contract in Mali. The inequalities between the North and the South go beyond the social, and they spill over into the political HIs of Mali. These inequalities include the distribution of political opportunities and power amongst the various groups of a country, and are critical for political participation and interest articulation. Lastly, the status of cultural HIs refers to the recognition of one group to another group. This may be the recognition of the group, as a group, or even the recognition of the groups' language, customs, practices (Ibid), or grievances. The theory of horizontal inequalities finds its fundamentals in the notion that 'when cultural differences coincide with economic and political differences between groups, this can cause deep resentment that may lead to violent struggles' (Stewart & Brown, 2007).

Studies on horizontal inequalities, particularly within Mali, place a high emphasis on the objective inequalities between groups (Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2017), however, I argue here that the *subjective* horizontal inequalities may play a more critical role in understanding the cause of violent intrastate conflict. Subjective inequalities also referred to as perceived inequalities often increase the risk of conflict. The line of argument here is that it is not necessarily the objective HIs which cause conflict, rather it is the perception of those HIs and how groups perceive their environments in direct comparison to other groups (Ibid).

The foundation of this newer line of thinking is found in the relative deprivation theory. As a psychological theory, it is argued that the perceptions and expectations of individuals in regard to their conditions will ultimately and inevitably shape their behavior (Buhaug, Cederman & Gleditsch, 2014). Contextualizing this with the Malian conflict, the living conditions of the Tuareg in the North, for example, will inevitably shape Tuareg behavior and their propensity to employ violent conflict (Ibid). In Mali, the very high levels of perceived discrepancies by the North between themselves and Central and South Mali reflect that north Malians (Tuaregs mainly) see it so that they are rightfully entitled to independence and equality from the Malian state. Group-leveled reactions may start as the expression of frustration and discontent; however, this discrepancy is likely to generate violent conflict eventually (Gurr, 2007).

Environmental Scarcity

With severe climate change and food insecurity (Davies, 2016), Sahelian Mali is known for its demographic and environmental stress. The most prominent argument is that the 'combination of population pressures, poor land-use practices, and a fragile ecology has made soil erosion, desertification, and freshwater scarcity serious problems'

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(Kahl, 2006). Now the interpretation of what "serious problems" are, and whether they could be serious and problematic enough to trigger violent conflicts, is where the debate really is. It is here that Benjaminsen examines whether a supply-induced scarcity could be a driving factor for the Malian conflict and the Tuareg Rebellion (2008). Generally, there is an understanding that environmental degradation (supply-induced scarcity) is often the main cause of conflict, particularly violent conflict. In line with this thinking, the body of literature also alleges that the Sahel region and the African drylands are "areas most seriously affected by this development" (Benjaminsen, 2008), and the region is in fact an area where the dryland degradation has caused the use of force (Bächler & Spillmann, 1996).

Northern Mali is most often hit by desertification and also hit the worst. Benjaminsen argues that although it is undoubtedly that the droughts witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s in Northern Mali contributed to supply-induced scarcity, this is not an accurate understanding or interpretation of the environmental events and their consequences (2008). The droughts increased marginalization and furthered horizontal and vertical inequalities (Ibid). Yet the conflict itself was the work and aspiration of a group of "ishmur", who were individuals from Northern Mali that had migrated into other Sahelian neighbors due to the significant droughts of the '70s and '80s (Ibid). Abroad they had been taught revolutionary ideologies and discourses, especially in Libya, which will be discussed later. The argumentation here is, therefore, that even though the droughts most certainly had a significant impact, their role in rebellions was not through the creation of supply-induced scarcity (Ibid).

Individual Motivations

The 'rage of the rich' is hypothesized to explain the emergence of secessionist conflicts, to a certain extent (Tadjoeddin, 2014). In ethnically polarized regions, the hypothesis explains that the rage of the rich could trigger ethnic strife and violent conflict. The theory of relative deprivation once again comes into play here, as the groups perceive their grievances as being severe and unbearable enough that conflict is the only way forward. However, in cases where perhaps these grievances would not organically accumulate into mass grievance capable of triggering violence, the greed hypothesis may offer insight into what may become the tipping point. Power, social violence, and mobilization are largely concerned with organization and opportunity (King, 2017). Commonly referred to as the "forgotten frontier" in the fight against terrorism and extremism (Clarke, 2013), the international neglection of the Sahel region is often argued to be responsible for organizational opportunities for terrorist groups (Francis, 2013). Finding economic opportunism in the area due to the weak to non-existing governance of the region, the multiple groups exploit grievances and play into the greed hypothesis. Moreover, the greed hypothesis is also clearly manifesting in Mali.

 Various terrorist groups and militants had utilized the Sahel region in Mali as a "breeding group and safe haven", long before the violent conflicts began (Francis, 2013). Since then, the groups fundamentally exploited the grievances of Northern Malians, as weak governance and territorial control by the Malian state was optimal for the various criminal enterprises including drug trafficking, human trafficking, arms smuggling, and kidnapping of foreigners for ransom (Ibid). As conflict broke out, the instability of the region became an asset for these groups as they looked at the economic advantages of war and conflict. The main concern here, and this is where the grievance theory once again comes into play, is when these enterprises began to not only become an asset to the groups, but became profitable for all stakeholders – Northern Malians, corrupt government officials, local leaders, and so on. The rage of the rich began a fearing loop of economic opportunism which has, and continues to, motivate growing numbers of terrorist groups (Marchal, 2012). The Collier-Hoeffler Model for greed-grievances hypotheses argues in favor of greed as a cause and reason of conflict as individual motivation through the understanding that the natural resources, for example, of a certain region will make it desirable (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000). The more a state or group is dependent on primary commodities, the more desirable a region will become, and thus it will be "worth a fight". In fact, the model would argue that the region is not only desirable but also pivotally necessary whatever the cost may be, thus these regions have a greater risk of conflict.

Extending this idea of the necessity of power, political economist David Keen elaborates on the concept of the former model by arguing that the economic incentives for violence have consequences contrasting to the Collier and Hoeffler hypothesis (2000). Keen's theory explains how certain Malian parties and terrorist organizations, as well as state officials and administrators, may want to prolong conflict and violence as it allows them control of economic

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resources, criminal enterprises, and power positions (Ibid). The harnessing of economic opportunities within Northern Mali has given organizations reasons to sustain the weak rule of law as violence becomes privatized. On the other hand, the grievances hypothesis is still a persistent argument for the causes of the violent conflict in Mali, as the grievances truly are so severe due to the ethnic and religious discrimination as well as continuous deprivation from political rights, and other various HIs that the people truly are motivated to rebel (Qadir & Khan, 2015). For many nomads, such feelings were so strong that they were motivated to take up arms against the government and almost felt as though they had to in order to ensure dignity but also general wellbeing (Lode, 1997).

Failure of the Social Contract

The legitimacy, authority, and capacity of public institutions, and the relationship with economic and political forces significantly determine the impact of the social contract (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, 2016). In the presence of structural underlying causes – weak state structure, intra-state security concerns, and particular ethnic geography – the social contract may suffer. As the Malian state continues to fail to provide basic services in any capacity, not to mention in an equal manner across groups and territories, the state continues to suffer from a capacity trap (Farah, Gandhi & Robidoux, 2019). Consequently, the continuous weakening of the social contract and the undermining legitimacy and authority of the state are symptoms of the capacity trap. Lacking a significant monopoly over the use of force and of authority, the Malian state is unable to deliver its responsibilities of the social contract (Ibid).

The authority and legitimacy concerns of the Malian state are linked to this capacity trap, and it continues to be unable to provide security by itself. For the purpose of finding means to survival the nomads, along with many other Malians, have had to turn to illicit trade, organized crime, and terrorism (Molenaar & von Damme, 2017). These means feed back into the trap, making it even more difficult for the state to break the cycle and re-establish a social contract, creating a vicious feedback loop. The lack of state authority to enforce the legal measures and frameworks to manage illicit means, crime, and terrorism further decreases its state legitimacy and authority (Bruni, Kohn, Siegel & Strain, 2017). What worsens the extents of the capacity trap is the scenario where a state is not only no longer able to maintain the social contract, but when the services are being handled by the parties who are beneficiaries of the conflict (Farah, Gandhi & Robidoux, 2019).

In Northern Mali, where the social contract has failed the most significantly, the northern groups have taken it upon themselves to maintain this unreliability upon the state by providing the services (CBC, 2018). In fact, a large number of Tuareg groups are heavily dependent on the militias for services and basic income (Morgan, 2012). The efforts go unregulated and unpredictable, as there is no theoretical equivalence to the social contract. The less structure, stability, predictability, and state control there is in Northern Mali, the more consolidated it becomes as a weak and fragile region. Once the social contract fails, it is evident that exploitation of the resultant grievances is of great economic, amongst other, opportunities. The development and possible peace and stability of Mali would threaten the opportunities for the various organizations. Furthermore, the increased levels of inequality between individuals and households, such as income inequality, can be observed as vertical inequalities (Østby, 2008) as the conflict moves towards Central and South Mali. It is no longer the North against the South, the Tuaregs against the Malian state, rather, due to the state's inability to protect marginalized groups, the violence has begun to manifest itself between in-groups and between individuals (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2018). These vertical inequalities are seen particularly between herders and farmers, for example (Ibid).

Proximate Causes

The proximate causes of the current conflict are very diverse. Although Brown argues that internal conflicts can be depicted using his two-by-two matrix (internally or externally-driven; elite or mass-triggered) and the causes which triggered violence can be any of the 4 sets (bad leaders, bad domestic problems, bad neighbors or bad neighborhoods) (1997), in this paper I contest that argument partially. I argue that the proximate causes of the violent conflict in Mali are actually a mix of both elite-level and mass-level factors, as well as internal and external developments. However, I argue that the elite-level external factor of Brown's matrix does not correlate with the causes of the Malian conflict. This set includes the deliberate decisions by neighboring governments to trigger

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conflicts for their own political, ideological, or economic benefits, which after assessing the research, I would argue is not a major contributing proximate cause for the intrastate conflict at hand. Nevertheless, the other 3 sets are applicable, and it is arguably because of this phenomenon that the Malian conflict, with its historical roots and contemporary exponentially rising concerns, is at the extent to which it is, and the reason the path to peace and reconciliation is particularly difficult.

According to Brown's matrix, the internal mass level factors revolve around the 'bad domestic' factors. These factors include the underlying causes, the horizontal inequalities, the grievances hypothesis, and to some extent the environmental scarcity, which have already been examined in-depth earlier in this paper and apply synonymously here. Mali has confronted, and persists to confront "bad domestic problems" due to the long-standing patterns of political, economic, and cultural discrimination and marginalization, as well as the problematic ethnic geography. In terms of the internal elite level factors, the clear power struggles between civilians and groups with the Malian state authority, yet also MINUSMA Peacekeeping authority and the French authority. The power struggles of the various leaders and authoritative organizations, whether legitimate or illegitimate, are concerned with the governing and functioning of Mali in terms of political, economic, and religious affairs organization. The two main stakeholders would be the rebels and the Malian State as "bad leaders". After the Malian military was driven out of Northern Mali, in early April 2003, Ansar Dine, a terrorist group in the North, began a process of imposing strict Sharia Law (BBC, 2013). The imposing of religious fundamentalism can be increasingly stabilizing to a region. In regard to the state as a "bad leader", the emergence of exclusionary national ideologies has proved critically destabilizing in Mali. It is often examined in the body of literature on the matter the extent to which Amadou Toumani Touré was a scapegoat for the 2012 crisis (Chauzal & van Damme, 2015). His 10-year-long regime did unmistakably foster the deep gap between the public image of Mali and the existent political reality (Ibid). More than that, the decade-long regime favored the community divisions, and rather than taking on processes of reconciliation and conflict resolution, favored the divisions and inequalities to strengthen its power (Ibid). Although it is undoubted that he contributed significantly to the political weaknesses and worsened the already prominent security threats, Touré's actions as a "bad leader" alone cannot be considered the proximate cause of the 2012 conflict.

It is in fact the above-mentioned various proximate causes, amongst many more, which together create conditions for triggering violent conflict. Lastly, the external mass level factors for Mali are characterized largely by the situation of refugees in Mali as part of the Central Sahel region's refugee crisis, along with the spillover effects of the conflicts in Libya. Due to the circumstances of the Sahel region, understanding the illicit activities, tracking of humans, drugs, and weapons, along with many other circumstances, many internally displaced people of the Central Sahel Region (CSR) sought refuge in Mali. As of December 2019, of the approximate 1,007,258 refugees in the CSR, 24,797 are in Mali. Relatively free movement, especially of well-connected armed militias, is a symptom of the Sahel region contributed to these movements (Larémont, 2011). With the Libyan Civil War and the 2012 conflict in Mali being so close in time to one another, there is a commonly assumed notion of a Libyan spillover in Mali (Shaw, 2013). With security crumbling and disintegrating in Libya throughout the war, weapons in large amounts were being trafficked and distributed between the various Sahelian militant groups (Larémont, 2011). Consequently, attacks in Northern Mali against the Malian state authorities and security forces, as well as MINUSMA Peacekeepers, began to exponentially increase. It is not so much the actual war of Libya which impacted Mali the most critically, rather it was the involvement of Malians in the Libyan civil war. Libya at the time was recruiting Malians as part of their offensive, and many young Tuareg men joined the efforts by joining organized military training programs, and thus developing both "competence in and commitment to the use of force" (Humpreys & Mohammed, 2005), as outlined earlier in the section on environmental security. The state had not foreshadowed that these recruiters would return to Mali one day and turn their attention to their own grievances and see violence as a tool for change.

Conclusion

As McCoy notes, it is the "ability of a nation to resolve inequalities between groups [that] is of the utmost importance in any peace process" (2008). Having dealt with challenge after challenge to its territorial integrity since the 1960s and the Malian indolence (Shaw, 2013) it can be argued that the fundamental problem is a policy one. Since Keita, the former President of Mail during the 1960s, policies of toward the Northern nomads were seen as pivotal in the process of modernization and development of a new nation post-independence (Benjaminsen, 2008). Although the

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point by Keita and later Traouré, and other Presidents, was to 'convert' the nomads into 'productive citizens' by having them marginalized with no option but taking up farming (Ibid), this is evidently seen to have been counterproductive. It was during this time that Northern Mali was seen as the "useless Mali", often referred to in French as "*le Mali inutile*" as Central and Southern Malians spoke French. The Tuareg saw this as a new shape of colonization so soon after the former colonization, yet this time by fellow Malians.

As a result, many of these marginalized nomads grew up in a new Mali, yet never developed a feeling of being Malian (Poulton & Youssef, 1998). The existing underlying causes discussed above, with the increasing horizontal inequalities, the historical effects of environmental scarcity, the known motivations for groups and individuals, the ultimate failure of the social contract, and finally the proximate causes all explain how the conflict of Mali came about, and more significantly, what is keeping it alive. The causes are increasing in their respective intensities, and, as history is being written, more causes are in the mix of being created, and it is therefore that the UN independent expert on the human rights situation in Mali notes that the "continuing deterioration of the overall security situation" has currently reached "a critical threshold" (OHCHR, December 2019).

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