Mali: Mass protests and coup

Robert Teller, GAM Infomail No 1115, August 27, 2020 Fri, 28/08/2020 - 12:17
Robert Teller, GAM Infomail No 1115, August 27, 2020

The coup in Bamako on 18 August drew attention to a mass movement that had previously received little attention. It also provoked reactions from the foreign interventionist powers involved in Mali who, until then, had not considered the concerns of this movement worthy of attention.

Mass Movement
The coup was preceded by a mass movement since the beginning of June, which brought tens of thousands of people in the capital Bamako onto the streets. It called for the resignation of "IBK", President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who had been in power since 2013, and the dissolution of parliament. One trigger for the protests was a controversial decision by the constitutional court, which had declared the parliamentary elections of March 2020 partially invalid, thus enabling IBK's party to expand its majority. But the protests are based on a much broader crisis. At the heart of it is a wave of reactionary ethnic violence by armed groups and the government's inability, or unwillingness, to assert its authority in the country. The neo-liberal decline of the country through a series of imposed reform programmes since the 1990s, which threatened or destroyed the livelihoods of a large part of the rural population and was accompanied by the displacement of traditional agriculture by modern agrobusiness, also played a major role.

Power in the country is now in the hands of a previously unknown circle of military personnel led by Colonel Assimi Goita. He has promised to respect international agreements, particularly with regard to foreign military intervention (of which there are three). Nevertheless, the fear amongst the imperialist powers is that the coup will set back their war aims and strategic interests.

2012: Tuareg uprising and Islamic Caliphate
Mali has a large number of different ethnic groups, most of which are also present in surrounding states. When the former colonial powers in West Africa drew the borders, the interests of the population groups were not taken into account. Thus, on the one hand, racist and national oppression is structural in these now semi-colonial countries and, on the other, it is bound to exert a destabilising influence that overshadows the usual social devastation that global capitalism brings to the African continent. The Tuareg uprising of 2012 confirmed this. It put the former "model democracy" Mali on the road to the maelstrom of "failed states". Burkina Faso and Niger are also affected by this development.

The Tuareg communities, spread across several countries in central Sahara, had been marginalised more than other peoples in the region in the course of decolonisation. The bloody suppression of the first Tuareg uprising in 1963 had driven many from their home regions. The destruction of their livelihoods through economic misery and the droughts of the 1970s and 1980s exacerbated this and created a disenfranchised, transnational youth (Ishumar; named after music popular among young people, the desert blues) who roamed as labour migrants. This was the main social base of the armed rebellions of 1990 - 1995 and 2007, which were fought by the Malian military with the support of ethnic auxiliary troops and
settled with promises of limited self-government and greater integration of the Tuareg into the security forces.

The Tuareg necessarily became the subject of regional conflicts. They were only ever of political interest to the extent that they could be useful for specific purposes, especially for the Libyan regime. In the "host country" Libya, for example, they were valued as workers and recruits in the repressive organs precisely because they lacked civil rights. In terms of foreign policy, they were able to underline Gaddafi's pan-African ambitions. By deliberately exploiting the potential for conflict that lies in the unresolved national question of the Tuareg, Gaddafi was able to channel their political ambitions. This became evident in the Tuareg uprising in Niger in 2009, where Gaddafi negotiated an agreement with part of the Tuareg forces that divided and ended the uprising. The benefit for Gaddafi was that he could offer himself as a mediator to foreign countries. Not surprisingly, his overthrow in 2011 had a lasting impact on the situation of the Tuareg.

Their uprising in 2012 resulted in the proclamation of the short-lived state of Azawad. Its rapid disintegration was the result of the Azawad National Liberation Movement, MNLA, leadership's unprincipled policy of alliance with Ansar Dine (Supporters of the Faith), the local branch of al-Qaïda of the Islamic Maghreb, AQIM, and its misguided orientation towards recognition and support by imperialism. The uprising failed mainly because its Tuareg-dominated leadership was barely able to gain support among the other ethnic groups in northern Mali. Ansar Dine attacked the MNLA for its Azawad nationalism and recruited even among the Tuareg. At the same time, the Salafis exploited existing racist resentment and gained the support of forces in the Songhai and Fula communities, which had previously stood alongside the government. This Salafist-led alliance broke with the MNLA and was able to establish sole control over northern Mali in the summer of 2012. The rapid loss of control by the government in Bamako also triggered a coup on 21 March, 2012.

The coup of 2012

The 2012 coup against President "ATT" (Amadou Toumani Touré) faced opposition. The "Refusal Front", composed of some 100 trade union and civil society organisations and 50 parties, insisted on a civil and democratically legitimate government and refused to recognise or cooperate with the junta. Significantly, the reformist Stalinist SADI party was the only parliamentary force willing to cooperate with the junta. Despite this widespread rejection of the coup, there was no mass mobilisation that could have countered the military's rule. The junta opponents formed an unprincipled bloc with nationalist, bourgeois forces that included supporters of the overthrown president. At the same time, another wing of the trade union movement supported the military junta.

Some left-wing intellectuals even took a thoroughly chauvinist position. An example of this is the "Forum for another Mali", FORAM, which has links to the Social Forum movement and is supported by the Malian left-wing Aminata Traoré, among others. They argued in 2012 that the Tuareg uprising was part of a planned redivision of West Africa by the imperialist powers. Therefore, military rule was the lesser of two evils compared to the threat of losing "territorial unity". Of course, it soon became clear that the military and the corrupt elites would willingly agree to imperialist interventions in the interest of retaining their own power.

The complete abandonment of a leftist programme has exacerbated the political disorientation of this Malian and West African left and has contributed to the fact that they often act as left cover for reactionary despotic regimes and their policies - not to mention the fact that with "territorial unity" they are defending precisely the post-colonial, that is, imperialist, order, that they say they oppose. In the West African mosaic of nationalities, the left cannot represent a progressive and anti-imperialist perspective without recognising
the right of self-determination of peoples. The national question must be linked to the struggle against the ruling elites who plunder the post-colonial states and whose power and international recognition presupposes the defence of the existing state order.

Conflict in Central Mali

In view of the establishment of the Salafi militant forces, the government and the military have in turn relied on ethnic militias. An example of this is the Dan Na Ambassagou (hunters who trust in God), whose members come from the Dogon communities. At the beginning of the conflict, the government regarded it as a useful counterweight, and it has since established itself as a power factor. It is known for reactionary crimes against the Fula, which take on the character of ethnic cleansing, such as the Ogossagou massacre of 23 March 2019, which claimed 160 lives. The racist sentiment that stigmatises Fula as alleged supporters of Ansar Dine is a side effect of the "war on terror".

Ethnic conflicts are both a precondition and a consequence of the imperialist intervention policy. These powers, above all France, but also its EU ally, Germany, are trying to build up the Malian military into a reliable force of order through military "assistance", training etc. Given that the military has always played the ultimately decisive role in the country since independence, this strategy is obvious. The mass movement of recent weeks has shown that this system can be overthrown, but a political strategy is needed to solve the crisis in a progressive way. However, the leadership of the 5 June Movement - assembly of patriotic forces, M5-RFP, has recognised the military junta. Assimi Goita announced that his junta would rule during a "transition period" of 3 years. A large part of the Malian left seems to repeat the mistakes of 2012 by advocating "national unity" as a goal superior to the immediate interests of the masses.

Of course, the military junta will not be able to solve any of the country's fundamental problems. Like any other bourgeois government, it will depend on the goodwill of French imperialism and the so-called "international community". The Salafi preacher Mahmoud Dicko, until recently the centre of the M5-RFP, pretends to be a "bridge builder" between nationalists and Islamists. In 2013, he was one of the supporters of the imperialist intervention and until 2017 he was part of the camp of IBC. Assimi Goita himself comes from the Malian special forces, which have been trained by imperialist powers for the anti-terror war since 2013. According to statements by the EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner, 90 percent of the Malian army has been trained by EU missions in the country, including, as Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, the German Defence Minister, had to admit, some of the leaders of the current coup. Meanwhile, the EU is putting the training plans for the military and police on hold, but the units stationed in the framework of EU and UN missions will remain in the country. Finally, imperialist interests continue to exist under a new regime. The military junta, for its part, does not represent a fundamentally different policy, but simply that part of the national elite that advocates a more inclusive approach to the Islamist insurgency.

Strategy and programme

The crisis in Mali is based on the legacy of colonialism and on unresolved social problems - certain overlapping national issues, the land question and the loss of livelihood of subsistence farmers and peasants due to neo-liberal reform policies and climate change and, more generally, the unresolved democratic question. In order to solve this crisis in the interests of the oppressed masses, a programme is needed that focuses centrally on the working class and links these issues with the mobilisation and arming of the masses.

The military junta must be opposed by a constitutional assembly organised by mass assemblies of workers, peasants and the poor, in which the class question can be addressed politically. This, of course, would directly challenge the power of the military junta and puts on the agenda the struggle within the
military for the right of political organisation and agitation for soldiers, for refusal to obey orders and, ultimately, the break of the lower ranks of soldiers with the junta.

The reactionary ethnic violence requires the arming of the masses across ethnic borders and the formation of self-defence units controlled by the workers and peasants and protecting them from attacks by Islamists, the military or other groups.

In view of the national question, it is imperative that the left stands for a programme that overcomes the political and social/economic differences between nationalities and fights all forms of discrimination. This does not have to include the separation of the North, but the unconditional right to it, if the majority of the population there so desires. The national question must also be linked to the struggle against all imperialist interventions and for the withdrawal of all foreign troops, the expropriation of imperialist capital and Malian big business, the cancellation of foreign debts and the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government.

Expansion

Only such a system would be capable of reorganising the country's economy on the basis of a democratic planned economy. Not least because of the arbitrary imperialist demarcation of borders and the centuries of plundering of the country, a genuine revolution in Mali may address the country's major problems, but it will not solve them completely. The struggle for democratic rights and socialism must therefore be linked to the revolution across the continent, the struggle for a Socialist Federation of Africa.