

“The Tuareg Revolt and the Mali Coup”

Statement of Dave Peterson

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, and members of the Subcommittee:

It is a great privilege to testify before you this morning regarding the recent crisis in Mali. In the five minutes I have been given this morning, I would like to make two essential points. The first emphasizes the political importance of Mali. The second describes the Endowment’s effort to contribute to the restoration of democracy.

I congratulate the committee for demonstrating its concern about Mali by holding this hearing. Although I am not able to speak to the strategic threat of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb and the Tuareg rebels to American interests, I would like to emphasize the grave setback the military coup and division of Mali has made to the democratic movement in West Africa, and indeed for the entire continent. Mali was among the very first African countries to lead the second wave of independence in 1991 when a popular uprising and the military’s refusal to fire on protesters led to the downfall of the longtime dictator, Moussa Traore, followed by a sovereign national conference and free and fair elections in 1992.

Although one of the poorest countries in the world, Mali remained at the forefront of democratic reforms in the region, pioneering a vibrant independent broadcast media and civil society, adopting democratic innovations such as the public “Democratic Questioning Space” for elected officials, implementing one of the first decentralization reforms in Africa, and leading ECOWAS and the AU in promoting democratic government throughout the continent. In 2007, aided by modest NED support, Mali hosted the world conference of the Community of Democracies. Mali seemed to disprove the contention that only rich countries can be free, and its relative stability for two decades served as a touchstone for the slow but steady democratic progress we have seen throughout West Africa.

This is not to say that Malian democracy was perfect. Participation in elections has rarely been above 30 percent. Corruption has grown steadily as a problem, undermining faith in democratic government. Terrorist activity and discontent among the Tuareg have repeatedly plagued Mali. Yet, those of us working to support democratic development in Africa were caught off-guard by the sudden reversal of democracy’s fortunes in Mali. The coup was a huge blow to democracy, although the resolute opposition of ECOWAS and the international community has been encouraging.

Unfortunately, the coup leaders seem to be controlling the agenda, and the capacity of ECOWAS to intervene in a forceful way seems limited. Even worse is the secession of the north. Not only has the sovereignty of Mali been abandoned, but the new rulers don't even pretend to respect democracy. According to Sanda Ould Boumama, Ansar Dine's spokesman in Timbuktu, "Sharia has to be applied whether the people like it or not, we will enforce it. We are not asking anybody's opinion. We are not democrats. We are servants of Allah, who demands Sharia."

In recent years NED has supported programs by the International Republican Institute to strengthen Mali's decentralization and by the National Democratic Institute to support the Malian legislature. USAID funding for NDI to assist the electoral process has been suspended.

From 2005-2010¹, NDI worked with Malian political parties and legislative caucuses to enhance the capacity of the legislature to reform policy targeting the needs of citizens and enabling it to perform its oversight role. NDI regarded Mali as an important test-case for West Africa to demonstrate that the democratic process could be used to ensure that a country's natural wealth delivers benefits for its citizens. NDI's current USAID-funded project to support transparent and credible elections in 2012 was placed on hold as the U.S. government revised its assistance programs in Mali². IRI focused its NED-funded activities in Mali from 2005 to 2009 on decentralization efforts by building local governance capacity and strengthening political parties in rural communes. NED also supported the Center for the Research and Study of Democracy and Economic and Social Development (CERDES) in 1992, and the *Comité d'Action pour les Droits de l'Enfant et de la Femme (CADEF)*, strengthening women's political participation, from 1993 to 2000. Finally, NED supported the Communities of Democracy meeting in Bamako in 2007.

Nevertheless, based on our assessment that Mali was a reasonably stable and functioning democracy, until recently the country has not been a high priority given the vast needs across the region. Obviously, this is no longer the case, and with the blessing of the NED's Board of Directors, it will be necessary to shift funding from programs budgeted for other parts of West Africa to address Mali's new situation. .

Mr. Chairman, the Endowment does not design projects here in Washington and attempt to implement them on the ground. Rather, we provide funding for proposals that are not formally solicited that we receive from indigenous NGOs. We are already receiving proposals, and I expect staff to travel to Mali in the coming months to assess the situation and meet with potential partners. Indeed, the outlines of our strategy for Mali are already beginning to take shape: first, we will support the restoration of democratic legitimacy in the south, and second, we will seek ways to help Malians engage with the north to promote reconciliation and ultimately reunification and democracy. At this stage it is difficult to estimate our budget for Mali, but I hope it would amount to at least several hundred thousand dollars by next year.

The transitional government in Mali has agreed to hold elections within a year, and my colleagues at NDI who had been working on the elections before the coup suggest that it would be better for these to

¹ NDI has had a field presence in Mali since 2002, and has provided technical assistance in Mali since 1996

² <http://www.ndi.org/mali>

happen within the next six months rather than at the end of that timeframe. Past elections have been troubled by boycotts, fraud, and poor management, and NED will seek to support domestic election observation efforts and other transparency initiatives. Disaffection with politicians and corruption has contributed to low voter turnout, and NED will also support projects that provide voter education, advocate accountability and promote popular participation. Malians were shocked and confused by the sudden disappearance of their democracy, and NED will seek to support efforts to rebuild their understanding and commitment to democratic values. Public opinion polling and focus groups that can probe what happened to Malian citizens' commitment to democracy could serve as a basis for designing such civic education programs. Mali has had a vibrant women's movement; NED will particularly target programs mobilizing women as voters and political leaders. Mali has had nearly 200 radio stations, 8 daily newspapers and 40 periodicals, but recent attacks against the press are troubling; NED will seek to address this problem. Human rights abuses have also reportedly escalated, and NED will consider support to Mali's well-established human rights movement for human rights monitoring, education and advocacy. Finally, given the apparent problems with the Malian military, notwithstanding the assistance it has received from the US military, NED will consider innovative proposals from civil society organizations assisting with security sector reform.

In the northern part of the country, as has been noted, the new rulers have little regard for democracy. Yet the Tuareg, who have led the rebellion, represent an ethnic minority in the north; and even among the Tuareg, the separatist agenda has a questionable level of support and the radical Islamic agenda of Ansar al Dine and AQIM even less. Few of the rebels seem to have any experience with governance and are more comfortable with their nomadic traditions than the settled culture of towns and villages. Although the presence of civil society and independent media is thinner in the north than the south, NED will seek to support those organizations and radio stations that do exist in the north on a range of initiatives. Our experience in Somalia, for example, has found considerable traction supporting radio broadcasts promoting democratic values. Projects strengthening the capacity of traditional leaders and other community authorities vis-a-vis extremists such as Al Shabab in Somalia have also had some success.

Hundreds of thousands of Malians are fleeing the north due to drought, locusts, and the repression and bizarre edicts of the rebels. Projects helping these internally displaced persons can protect their rights in the vulnerable conditions in which they now find themselves, enable them to participate in democratic processes such as elections, as well as lay the foundations for their eventual return home.

Mr. Chairman, the Malian crisis may be more effectively resolved through a battle for hearts and minds than through military confrontation. NED is not so presumptuous as to pretend that our modest resources alone can fix what ails the country. We trust that other international donors will also become more involved. The crisis in Mali is unlikely to be resolved easily; it may take many years. But as I hope I have convinced you this morning, much can be done to address the many challenges faced by its people. There is already much in recent Malian history and institutions that can provide the basis for democratic renewal.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to answer your questions.