

5. The implementation of the peace process in Mali: a complex case of peacebuilding

Overview

The peace process in Mali resulted in the signature of a peace agreement in mid 2015. The aim of the peace process is to resolve the conflict underlying the armed rebellion that started in northern Mali in January 2012 and raged throughout that year, causing large refugee flows that displaced roughly one-quarter of the population in the northern regions to other parts of Mali and to neighbouring countries.

Section I documents the key developments in the conflict between January 2012 and the signing of the declaration of a cessation of hostilities and the consensual roadmap in July 2014, which paved the way for peace talks in Algiers.

Although the finalization of the peace agreement was an important step in the efforts to build peace and achieve national unity in Mali, major challenges remain for its implementation. This was illustrated at the time of the signature, when two groups on the rebel side refused to sign until more of their demands had been addressed, resulting in two different dates of signature. While it is difficult to summarize the challenges ahead, section II seeks to identify and outline the four main ones: (a) the complexity of the conflict; (b) the fragmentation of the actors involved; (c) the increased presence of violent extremist groups in northern Mali over the past two to three decades; and (d) the growth in organized crime.

The primary conflict in Mali stems from the quest for self-determination by the Tuareg-led movement, which has manifested itself through regular uprisings or rebellions since Malian independence in 1960, but which has deeper roots in the history of Mali and the Sahel. Over time, and linked to the core conflict and the mismanagement of its resolution, a number of community conflicts have developed in northern Mali, both between and within communities, resulting in a complex dynamic of conflict. In parallel with the proliferation of conflict, there has also been a proliferation of armed groups to pursue the specific interests of various ethnic or social groups.

Furthermore, the peace process is faced with other sources of violence, especially religious extremism and organized crime, which have complex interlinkages with the armed conflict. These violent extremist groups participated in the fighting and eventually drove back the political Tuareg-led armed rebellion and transformed it into a religious insurgency. This had ominous consequences for

Malian citizens as the victorious groups imposed distorted and violent forms of sharia in the occupied areas of northern Mali.

External military interventions by French, African and United Nations forces pushed the extremist groups into hiding, but they have not been defeated and the population is regularly reminded of their existence. The fact that Libya has become another base for militant extremist groups, and in particular for the Islamic State following the intensified civil war in Syria, is another serious source of concern.

The signing of the 2015 peace agreement was the result of a year-long process of negotiation and consultations in Algiers, led by Algeria and with the participation of a number of international organizations and neighbouring countries. Section III provides an account of the main content, issues and parties to the peace agreement and the peace process. The overall goal is to address the root causes of the conflict as well as promote national reconciliation based on respect for the human diversity of the Malian nation.

The peace agreement itself has a strong emphasis on governance (including within the security sector) and socio-economic and cultural issues. However, overall peace process has a two-pronged approach, focusing on: (a) internal political and human security challenges; and (b) transnational violent extremism and organized crime.

The need for national dialogue and reconciliation has been an important issue in the peace process, and the peace agreement provides for the organization of a national conference ('assises nationales'), modelled after the 1991 national conference that led to the first democratic elections in Mali. The purpose is to facilitate a national political dialogue to renew the relations between state and society in Mali, and to facilitate a broad debate about the root causes of the conflict.

The objectives of the peace agreement are ambitious and their implementation will require consistent and committed participation and support from a broad number of actors. This is the fifth peace agreement between the Malian state and the Tuareg-led armed movement, and the recurring armed rebellions testify to the difficulty of resolving this persistent conflict—even aside from the additional challenges generated by violent extremism and organized crime.

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