

Another straw on the camel's back: COVID-19 in Mali amid old and new tensions

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Abstract

The spread of COVID-19 in Mali represents a new challenge after years of instability, security threats and endemic corruption. The fragility of the health system and the limited measures taken to contain the disease might lead to severe consequences, while fearing further economic distress. At the same time, social and political tensions are rising and the legitimacy of President Keita is put into question by a group of political opponents, the *Mouvement du 5 Juin*, led by a prominent religious leader.

Keywords: Mali – Coronavirus – Health System – Education – Islam.

OVERVIEW: 1. Introduction. 2. Malian health system. 3. Containment measures. 4. Increasing social and political tensions. 5. The islamisation of the contestation. 6. Searching for a solution.

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1. Introduction

On the 25th of March 2020, the Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta officially announced the first two cases of COVID-19 in the country. However, despite the outbreak of the pandemic, the President confirmed the date of the legislative election, scheduled for March 29. The scrutiny, initially planned in 2018, had already been delayed due to security threats. In a certain sense, this suggests Coronavirus is just another straw on the camel's back, a back which seemed already about to collapse (or probably had already done it) since 2012, the year of the Touareg rebellion in the northern part of the country.

Mali currently counts 1,809 Coronavirus cases and 104 deaths¹. These figures, while apparently limited if compared to many other countries, need to be analysed in the light of Malian instability, tensions and poverty – this latter due, among other causes, to the continuous terrorist attacks, in particular on behalf of jihadi groups – and of its endemic corruption, which has severely affected all public services and in particular the health system.

2. Malian health system

Malian health system was not prepared to face COVID-19. It is considered one of the weakest health systems in Africa, due to its high levels of corruption². According to Boubacar Haidara, 700 billion Franc CFA (which correspond to 1,13 billion euros) were misappropriated between 2005 and 2017³. Furthermore, the health system and public services in general did not experience any relevant improvement in recent years, as the leading classes – instead of getting medical care in Mali – prefer to travel to Maghrebi or European hospitals. This practice, known as “medical tourism”, affects negatively the whole system, as the *élites* in command are not interested in its improvement. The experience of Coronavirus and the prohibition to travel abroad to get medical care, which is valid also for the richest part of the population, may make them understand the importance to reform it⁴: the process already started a few months after the beginning of the pandemic.

¹ This article was written on 15th June 2020. World Health Organization, <https://covid19.who.int/region/afro/country/ml>.

² Africa Center for Strategic Studies, *Mapping Risk Factors for the Spread of COVID-19 in Africa*, 3 April 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-risk-factors-spread-covid-19-africa/>.

³ B. Haidara, *L'expérience malienne dans la gestion de la pandémie du Covid-19*, in *The Conversation*, 18 May 2020, <https://theconversation.com/l'experience-malienne-dans-la-gestion-de-la-pandemie-du-covid-19-138158>.

⁴ B. Haidara, *L'expérience malienne dans la gestion de la pandémie du Covid-19*, cit.

According to the Ministry of Health, at the beginning of the crisis the Country counted only 40 intensive care beds and 56 ventilators⁵. Furthermore, there were only 2,500 tests available and four testing centres, all of them located in the capital, Bamako⁶. It was only on 31st May, more than two months after the first two cases were acknowledged, that the Minister of Health Michel Sidibé announced on Twitter a mobile laboratory had been taken to Timbuktu in order to make tests accessible to a greater part of the population and control the contagion⁷. In such a contingency, Malian relations with China were crucial: the Country sent facemasks and medicines. Moreover, 60 ventilators were ordered to the Chinese supplier Mindray and 400 beds were offered by a Chinese enterprise to allow the arrangement of a camp hospital⁸.

3. Containment measures

Due to the fragility of the health system, Mali had to adopt a series of measures in order to avoid the spread of the virus. The first one was implemented a few days before the first two people tested positive: on 18th March, the Superior Council of National Defence suspended all flights coming from countries affected by COVID-19, with the only exception of cargo flights⁹. In addition, during the 25th March speech, the President announced the enforcement of several containment measures, among which a curfew between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. and the prohibition of gatherings of more than 50 people¹⁰. However, mosques remained opened and no social distancing measure were required¹¹, in order to avoid tensions with the Islamist actors during the election period. Restaurants, pubs and dance clubs had to stop their activity but they did not receive any economic aid on behalf of the State¹². The situation was even worse for those who worked in the

⁵ O. Marbot, *Nombre de lits de réanimation et de respirateurs: où en est l'Afrique?*, in *Jeune Afrique*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/924087/societe/nombre-de-lits-de-reanimation-et-de-respirateurs-ou-en-est-lafrique/>.

⁶ *Communiqué de démenti du gouvernement à Agence France Presse (AFP) relatif au nombre de respirateurs disponibles au Mali*, in *Africa Newsroom*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.africa-newsroom.com/press/communique-de-dementi-du-gouvernement-a-agence-france-presse-lafp-relatif-au-nombre-de-respirateurs-disponibles-au-mali?lang=fr>.

⁷ Tweet by Michel Sidibé, Minister of Health and Social Affairs of Mali, 31 May 2020, <https://twitter.com/MichelSidibe/status/1266884013190455296>.

⁸ O. Marbot, *Nombre de lits de réanimation et de respirateurs: où en est l'Afrique?*, cit.; Tweet by Michel Sidibé, Minister of Health and Social Affairs of Mali, 12 May 2020; <https://twitter.com/MichelSidibe/status/1260213865746440192>.

⁹ C. Blackman, *Mali suspends flights from COVID-19-Hitler countries*, in *Anadolu Agency*, 18 March 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/mali-suspends-flights-from-covid-19-hit-countries-/1769908>.

¹⁰ B. Haidara, *L'expérience malienne dans la gestion de la pandémie du Covid-19*, cit.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

informal economy (the 73% of the population, according to the International Labour Organization¹³) with an almost inexistent system of social protection.

Moreover, the government adopted policies that appealed to the civic sense of the population, emphasising the relevance of single citizens' correct behaviour to minimize the pandemic. In particular, the Minister of Health announced on 3rd June a campaign – held in cooperation with UNICEF – to raise awareness on protective measures. 36 tricycles will ride around the capital Bamako and explain residents how to protect themselves from the spread of the Coronavirus¹⁴. This will take place in a context of similar operations, such as the *un malien, un masque* project (one Malian, one face mask) where free face masks were distributed to the population¹⁵.

However, there are limits to the containment measures that can be implemented in a country whose economic situation is far from stable. A balance has to be found between the need to protect the population and the one to safeguard the economy; especially when the possibility to grant governmental economic aid is quite limited. To give an example: free electricity and water were provided for some consumers, as was announced on 10th April¹⁶. Unfortunately, many other citizens did not have access to this benefit, as it was effective only for tariffs between 0 and 50 kWh and maximum 10 m³ of water, without taking into consideration the number of members of the household¹⁷.

The pandemic might severely affect the Country. Incomes are expected to decrease, in particular in the agricultural sector, which covers 1/3 of the GDP¹⁸. Due to measures that limit the circulation of goods, prices will rise and – as COVID-19 related economic difficulties spread all over the world – transfers of money from the diaspora, which form between 7% and 12% of the GDP, will be reduced¹⁹. The combination of these factors will increase the need of food aid. While, before the pandemic, it was estimated that 4 million Malians (1/5 of the total population) would need food aid in 2020, this number might more than double with the crisis²⁰, and would further worsen if grasshopper invasion – which has been devastating Eastern Africa's crops in the last months –, reaches Western Africa in the next weeks²¹.

¹³ International Labour Organization, *Activities of the employment intensive investment programme in Mali*, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/employment-intensive-investment/countries/WCMS_327090/lang-en/index.htm.

¹⁴ Tweet by Michel Sidibé, Minister of Health and Social Affairs of Mali, 3 June 2020, <https://twitter.com/MichelSidibe/status/1268098629505626113>.

¹⁵ *COVID-19 | Un malien, un masque!*, in Primature, 5 June 2020, <http://primature.ml/covid-19-un-malien-un-masque/>.

¹⁶ B. Haidara, *L'expérience malienne dans la gestion de la pandémie du Covid-19*, cit.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ F. Backman, *COVID-19 en Afrique: le Mali malade*, Fondation Jean Jaurès, 6 March 2020, <https://jean-jaures.org/nos-productions/covid-19-en-afrique-le-mali-malade>.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ S. Pintus, *Covid aumenta e cavallette continuano a divorare il Corno, a rischio anche Africa occidentale*, in *Africa Press*, 6 June 2020, <https://www.africa-express.info/2020/06/05/covid->

President Keïta had to rely on international solidarity: in mid-April the International Monetary Fund reduced Mali's debt along with the one of other 24 countries. The President is also asking a moratorium on the debt and a plan of coordinated multilateral response, together with other African Presidents and other leading political figures like Emmanuel Macron, Angela Merkel and Ursula Von Der Leyen²².

4. Increasing social and political tensions

While at an international level Mali is benefiting from good multinational cooperation, at a domestic one its government is still facing multiple challenges. Firstly, the security issues that continue to threaten Malian population, in particular in the centre and north of the country. Secondly, but not less importantly, there are two other problems: the teachers' strike and the political opposition.

For what concerns education, tensions are not the result of the pandemic, but of an older process that dates back to the adoption of article 39 of the 16th of January 2018 Act, which states that any increase in the remuneration of public officials would be applied also to the teaching personnel²³. Since its approval, in order to obtain the rigid application of the law, a series of long-lasting strikes were held, the last one starting on the 21st of January 2020. In that occasion, participation to the strike was so high that the government had to start recruiting 15,300 voluntary teachers²⁴. Then came the pandemic, schools were closed in order to reduce the spread of the virus and strikes had to stop. On the 2nd of June, examination classes went back to school, and teachers' union started to boycott the classes²⁵. Meanwhile, Mali is also facing a political crisis. As aforementioned, on the 25th of March, while announcing the first two cases of COVID-19, the President confirmed that the parliamentary election was still going to happen, with the adoption of protective measures. This decision was probably made, among other reasons, in order to follow the recommendation of the national inclusive dialogue and to apply the Algiers Peace Agreement, signed with the Touareg movements in 2015²⁶. However, on the same day, the opposition party *Union pour la République*

umenta-e-cavallette-continuano-a-divorare-il-corno-a-rischio-anche-africa-occidentale/?fbclid=IwAR2kEVwj_WCjP9mOHWkqX1wWibz1plFun8u8MCsfF4mPZWxsogc1JHZV28

²² F. Backman, *COVID-19 en Afrique: le Mali malade*, cit.

²³ N. Chahed, *Mali: La marche des enseignants dispersée par la police à Bamako (médias)*, in *Anadolu Agency*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/mali-la-marche-des-enseignants-dispers%C3%A9e-par-la-police-%C3%A0-bamako-m%C3%A9dias/1762547>.

²⁴ *Mali, Recrutement de 15300 enseignants volontaires ressortissants de l'IFM*, in *Maliactu*, 27 January 2020, <https://maliactu.net/mali-recrutement-15300-enseignants-volontaires-ressortissants-de-lifm/>.

²⁵ *Ecole: difficile reprise des cours dans les établissements publics*, in *Studio Tamani*, 2 June 2020, <https://www.studiotamani.org/index.php/themes/societe/23697-ecole-difficile-reprise-des-cours-dans-les-etablissements-publics>.

²⁶ F. Backman, *COVID-19 en Afrique: le Mali malade*, cit.

et la Démocracie (URD) announced that its leader Soumaila Cissé had gone missing after campaigning near the town of Niafunke, in central Mali²⁷. One of his bodyguards had been killed, two others wounded and there were no news on Cissé himself²⁸. Despite this event, the ballot still took place, and more than two months after his kidnapping, there was still no information on Cissé's whereabouts. Additionally, in central Mali, al-Qaeda's affiliates intimidated people not to vote, the president of a voting station was removed, while the representatives of the electoral commission were chased away, as reported by Al Jazeera²⁹. In northern Mali, voting was cancelled after some terrorists' threats, and after voting equipment was destroyed by unknown assailants³⁰. As a result, participation rate was low: the turnout after the second round was of 35.2% in the country and of 13.17% in the capital, Bamako. The President's party – *Rassemblement pour le Mali* (RPM) – ended up winning the elections, while simultaneously 15 seats in the National Assembly³¹. Besides, the outcome of the election was disputed and, despite Keïta's hope to avoid an institutional crisis, he seems to have lost his legitimacy.

5. The islamisation of the contestation

In this situation, the opposition started to play an important role. In fact, in order to understand Malian politics, it is necessary to consider that religious leaders have a central role, as in the State 90% of the population is Muslim³². Political forces need the help of religious leaders, as they manage to obtain the support of the population much more effectively than the traditional parties do³³. Three main leaders are worth considering: Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara, Chèrif Bouyé Haidara and, as a crucial figure for the latest events, imam Mahmoud Dicko.

Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara, currently president of the *Haut Conseil Islamique Malien*, founded more than 25 years ago the *Ançar Dine* movement (which is not the terrorist group present in northern Mali), representing an alternative to the Salafi hegemony³⁴. He supported Keïta during the 2013 election

²⁷ J. Bambi, *Mali's opposition leader kidnapped, bodyguards killed*, in *Africa News*, 27 March 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/03/27/mali-s-opposition-leader-kidnapped-bodyguard-killed-morning-call/>

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Polls close in Mali election held despite threats of violence*, in Al Jazeera, 20 April 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/polls-open-mali-runoff-elections-coronavirus-threats-200419055608539.html>.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ F. Backman, *COVID-19 en Afrique: le Mali malade*, cit.

³² World Population Review, *Mali Population 2020*, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/mali-population/>.

³³ F. Backman, *COVID-19 en Afrique: le Mali malade*, cit.

³⁴ G. Holder, *Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara and the Islamic Movement Ansar Dine*, in *Cahiers d'études africaines*, V. 206-207, N. 2, 2012, https://www.cairn-int.info/abstract-E_CEA_206_0389--cherif-ousmane-madani-haidara-and-the.htm?contenu=article.

but has now become one of his main detractors³⁵. A similar pattern of initial support and later opposition is the one of Chérif Bouyé Haidara, who tries to restore order when tension rises, as happened when imam Dicko wanted to organise a march in support of Malian teachers on strike three months ago³⁶. Last but not least, imam Dicko, former president of *Haut Conseil Islamique Malien*, is the main religious opposition leader, who continuously criticises the government and Malian endemic corruption. He represents a group of quietist Salafi Islamists but he concurrently promotes the development of a dialogue with jihadi terrorists groups³⁷. He has had a strong political influence for years. In 2010 he managed to stop a reform of the family code³⁸. Nowadays – with his political movement, *Coordination des mouvements, associations et sympathisants de l'imam Mahmoud Dicko* – he is leading the *Mouvement du 5 Juin – Rassemblement des forces patriotiques du Mali*. This is a group of opponents to the incumbent Malian president, which also includes the coalition of opposition parties *Front de la Sauvegarde de la Démocratie* and *Espoir Mali Koura*, a civil society movement³⁹. They organised a manifestation in Bamako on the 5th June 2020, which saw a very high number of supporters, to ask the President's resignation. Most people were there to support imam Dicko, to the point that Bakary Sambé, the director of Timbuktu Institute in Dakar, commented: «He managed to do something enormous: the islamisation of the contestation. He is an Islamic-nationalist, demagogic but structured rallying point»⁴⁰.

The success of the manifestation was irrefutable: on the 7th of June, Dicko and his partners had already opened the discussions with the representatives of MINUSMA, CEDEAO and African Union. Furthermore, they were already organising another protest for the 19th of June.

6. Increasing social and political tensions

In such a tense situation, President Keïta had to react. He did it on the 14th of June, by making an address to the nation in which he proposed some measures to face current Malian problems. He decided to change the direction of the

³⁵ F. Backman, *COVID-19 en Afrique: le Mali malade*, cit.

³⁶ G. Aimé Ebloté, *Au Mali, l'imam Bouyé Haidara convainc son homologue Dicko d'annuler sa marche de soutien aux enseignants*, in *La Croix Africa*, 10 March 2020, <https://africa.la-croix.com/au-mali-limam-bouye-haidara-convainc-son-homologue-dicko-dannuler-sa-marche-de-soutien-aux-enseignants/>.

³⁷ C. Macé, *Mali : Mahmoud Dicko, l'imam qui défie le président IBK*, in *Libération*, 4 June 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/06/04/mali-mahmoud-dicko-l-imam-qui-defie-le-president-ibk_1790277.

³⁸ *Mahmoud Dicko, l'imam qui casse le code de la famille*, in *Jeune Afrique*, 14 October 2010, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/194548/politique/mahmoud-dicko-l-imam-qui-casse-le-code-de-la-famille/>.

³⁹ C. Macé, *Mali : Mahmoud Dicko, l'imam qui défie le président IBK*, cit.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

government, still led by Boubou Cissé, and make it a «government of change»⁴¹. The President's idea is to make limited reforms that might improve the conditions of the health system, put an end to the teachers' strike and avoid his resignation. Firstly, he stressed that the health system will be the priority of this new government and called for the elaboration of a plan to modernise Bamako's hospitals⁴². Secondly, he asked the government to find an agreement with the teachers' union to put an end to the crisis, though he did not provide any guideline on how to do it. Lastly, he stated to be ready to start a dialogue with the *Mouvement du 5 Juin* and promised further announcements would have followed regarding the core issues of the 5th of June protests.

In conclusion, unfortunately the Coronavirus has not been the one and only problem that Mali has been facing in the last months. It has for sure worsened the conditions of the country and clearly shown which were the most important issues to address, from the weakness of the health system to the limited political legitimacy of the government and the President. On the bright side, this difficult contingency has given ground to some changes, which are already taking place.

⁴¹ *Adresse à la Nation : IBK promet : « la résolution de la crise scolaire » et se dit « ouvert au dialogue » avec le mouvement du 5 juin*, in *Studio Tamani*, 14 June 2020, <https://www.studiotamani.org/index.php/themes/politique/23800-adresse-a-la-nation-ibk-promet-la-resolution-de-la-crise-scolaire-et-se-dit-ouvert-au-dialogue-avec-le-mouvement-du-5-juin>.

⁴² *Ibidem*.