

# Fostering inclusive politics to avert a national crisis in Mali

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**T**he most stupid coup in world' is how many observers described the coup of March 2012 in Mali. The coup defeated the national army in the north of the country. It was described as stupid because it was not well prepared and it occurred somewhat spontaneously after a riot by the military. After defeating the army the putschists suspended the constitution and parliament. Consequently, neither the government, nor state institutions were operational. Mali, a fragile state because of its history of war, had a fractured and divided society that could easily be plunged into a civil war.

## Edging towards a civil war

After the coup, emotionally charged people filed into the already crowded 'Bourse du Travail', the headquarters of the biggest trade union movement. The teeming crowd, including me, waited in anticipation for the start of the meeting by the Front for the Defense of the Republic (FDR) to protest the coup. From their body language I could see that the leaders, like the audience, were tense and determined to mobilize their supporters. While waiting, I listened to a radio broadcast calling for the people to consider the coup as a window of opportunity for real reform.

At the meeting a group of enraged citizens, clearly opposed to the FDR, began cursing and insulting the leaders, vowing to kill them if they did not stop condemning the coup. For me, this confrontation brought home the potential for violence. At this point I decided that we had to devise a course of action to help calm the situation.

I was convinced that CMDID's (NIMD's implementing partner in Mali) dialogue platform, which had representatives from all major political parties, could reduce the tension and avert the impending confrontation that would flow on to the streets of Mali. Our investment in building trust through inclusive multiparty dialogue on national matters was the only platform that could provide a space for dialogue

between these highly charged and divided political groups.

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## Taking sides

The coup resulted in the spontaneous formation of different political alliances, some against the coup and others in support of it. The FDR was the largest. Their alliance demanded a return to constitutional order; the re-instatement of the deposed president; and a return of the military to barracks. At the same time they refused to negotiate with the putschists.

The second largest group, Movement for the People 22, led by an MP who was a well known representative of the far left, supported the coup. There were several other smaller groups and each group hoped to mobilize the population to support its political position.

To start the much-needed multiparty dialogue, I began planning the meeting with representatives from all the parties. I knew that it was going to be difficult to garner an agreement amongst these parties. Our strategy was to build trust between the different political groups by facilitating an agreement that was grounded in the fact that the country was already in a crisis and we had to avoid making the situation worse by mobilizing the people to take to the streets in mass protest. At the time several other groups attempted similar initiatives, but failed because of a lack of trust in them as facilitator.

## Uniting opposing forces

Fortunately most of CMDID's board members were also members of the different political groups formed

consequent to the coup. This placed us in a unique position to foster a dialogue between the different groups. In a speech addressing the board, the Chair of the board said, “I know that you all are members of different political groups, but please force yourself to stay a CMDID board member because we are talking about the survival of our country”. This request set the tone for a constructive and contributive atmosphere among the board members.

We had two important objectives for the interparty meeting we were planning. The first was to begin a dialogue between the different political groups that would facilitate the finding of common ground. Second, to agree on the fact that the country did not need mass street protests because the situation was so fragile.

Instead of sending letters to the leaders of each group we contacted them directly to invite them to participate in the meeting and to explain the goals of the meeting. I remember their responses: “Of course we will participate, the CMDID is our baby and all its initiatives are ours also,” said many of them. We also held meetings with all party leaders at their headquarters in order to set the agenda for the joint meeting. Furthermore, despite dissenting opinions, the media were also invited so that it could bear witness to the political positions of the different groups.

During this time, the ECOWAS leaders (the presidents of Ivory Coast, Benin and Senegal) attempted to come to Bamako to talk with the political actors and the putschists, but they failed because pro-coup political leaders mobilized their supporters to occupy the airport and prevented their plane from landing. They were forced to go back – and they took an important perspective with them.

### A historical meeting

Despite these international setbacks, we held the meeting at a neutral location. To signal the importance that they attached to this meeting and the trust that they had in CMDID, each group was represented by their top leaders. In addition to the loud greetings and exchanges in the room we could feel the anxiousness in the air. When I started speaking, everyone became very serious and the room fell silent. Representatives were seated like

athletes waiting for the ‘bang’ of the gun to rush to the finish line. At the start of the meeting, the Chair of CMDID, a respected political figure, made a call for the political representatives to keep in mind the danger the country faced and he encouraged them to be responsible and courageous while dealing with the situation.

The dialogue that followed was passionate and each group made its own demands. I listened to all their arguments and then drafted recommendations that I thought would be acceptable to all. To prevent accusations and counter accusations, I avoided difficult political questions and instead introduced general propositions that I thought would be easier to accept. I also included a crucial paragraph in which they committed to avoid public demonstrations and violence involving the public. After some discussion, this was validated without any major changes. This took the country a step back from the brink of civil war.

### Peace: a long-term commitment

The investment we made by building trust between political parties in times of relative peace, paid off when we were perched on the edge of a civil war. I remember with a sense of achievement, how at the end of this process, the representatives of the political parties congratulated our foundation for the initiative and encouraged us to keep going. We had used our dialogue and the trust it had built among the politicians, to prevent public demonstrations and violent confrontations. Even skeptical journalists applauded us on our achievement.

When observers of the Mali context ask: how did you bring all these disparate groups together in a just a few days to reach the agreement that averted the protests? My answer is always the same: “it is a result of our long term commitment to building trust in a way that contributes to the democratic process”.

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*In all its country programmes, NIMD invests heavily in building a sustainable relation of trust between the political parties, and NIMD as a neutral organization. This story shows that the long-term investment in a relationship based on trust paid off when political crisis struck. In fact, while all official democratic institutions stopped functioning, this was the only place that could facilitate interparty dialogue to avoid further escalation.*

# Dispelling the doubts surrounding international conflict and peace-building interventions in Mali

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After the occupation of the northern region of the country by the rebel groups and a subsequent coup d'état, the government and Tuareg rebel groups had agreed on a roadmap for a peace process that would be negotiated in Algeria, under the mediation of the international community represented by MINUSMA (United Nations Mission for Mali). As a result all political issues became very sensitive and the government was under pressure from MINUSMA and France (both of whom had already put troops on the ground), to resolve the situation quickly. Moreover, the involvement of these international organizations was not entirely welcomed by the Malian people and parties.

## The guardians of power

One day, in the midst of this negotiation, I came to work early and was just settling down, when to my surprise I received an unexpected call from the High Representative of the President of the Republic, a high-ranking government official. He was calling to voice his displeasure on a meeting CMDID (NIMD's implementing partner in Mali) was organizing to discuss the roadmap for a peace process. The meeting included all the political parties in the countries. "Why does everybody want to get involved in this issue? This is a state affair, not an issue we can discuss with everyone," he said a little impatiently. "With all due respect, it is the political parties who requested this exchange on the road map because they consider it to be of national interest" I responded. Clearly dissatisfied with my response he suggested a meeting.

Although I was aware that in fragile and conflict affected settings, political matters are very sensitive and the leaders of state tend to guard their power jealously, I was surprised with his reaction. They seemed to believe that the more in control they were, the better they were able to exercise their power and implement their policies. Yet according to me, national issues always have to be debated as part of the democratic construction.

At the meeting with the High Representative of the President, he tried to explain to us why, at that stage, it was necessary for the road map to remain a working document between the government and the armed groups. The dialogue we planned would work better after the agreement was reached between the government and the rebel groups.

I disagreed. It was a highly political document outlining the processes and mechanisms for the continuation of the negotiations and it was, therefore, essential that the perspectives of political parties be incorporated. And because the rebel groups were demanding political independence some important institutional changes would need to be made. In that sense, political parties would be key actors because those in Parliament would need to be part of any decision on such change.

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## Trusting outsiders

Despite the government's resistance, I continued to seek an alternative through MINUSMA. Through them CMDID could make a connection with the international community and create an opportunity for MINUSMA to collaborate with the political parties, enhance its understanding of local political actors, and guarantee the effective implementation and sustainable impact of the political agreement for peace.

MINUSMA's mandate was mainly political, but the international community under the umbrella of the United Nations also charged it with the protection of the civilian population and the facilitation of an intervention. The political class in Mali greeted the presence of MINUSMA with courtesy but also a

measure of scepticism. According to the Malian press a sense of national pride and different experiences with the UN in Africa were some of the reasons for this scepticism.

Furthermore, MINUSMA had not established a strategic connection with the political actors to widen its information sources, and to recognise their role as actors in the construction of peace. Instead its focus lay, perhaps because of the urgency, on state institutions and the rebel groups.

Despite these limitations, MINUSMA was also the main interlocutor for the government in the peace-building process and played a key role in legitimising political action in the country. This pivotal role justified my approach towards them as a strategy to enhance the involvement of political actors in the process. The suggestion to include the input of all political parties on the roadmap was well received by the political adviser of the Special Representative of the Secretary General of United Nations in Mali.

A few days later MINUSMA themselves, in partnership with the Ministry of National Reconciliation, decided to organize a workshop where different political parties could give their input to the peace process. CMDID were also invited.

### It starts with a meeting

The workshop on the contribution of political parties to the peace process and national reconciliation was held over two days. I was the facilitator of the group working on the institutional issue. During my facilitation, I was asked to help with drafting a workshop statement.

In drafting the statement, I focused my energy on formulating a proposition recommending the participation of political parties. I also explained to MINUSMA's director of political affairs the importance of political participation in the negotiations (even if only as observers) because they would be key players in the implementation of the outcome of the agreement. He agreed to back the recommendation.

A highlight of this workshop, for us, was when the session Chair asked how the participation of more than one hundred political parties would be possible and one of the political leaders said, "that

is easy for CMDID because all the major political parties are members and they are accustomed to inclusive dialogue". This demonstrated that CMDID was recognised for the impact of its long-term commitment to interparty dialogue for building trust and conflict prevention.

### A step in the right direction

Although the government chose not to accept the workshop's recommendation on the participation of political parties, through the two-day workshop the government was able to get feedback from the political parties on the negotiation process - it was one of CMDID's goals.

Furthermore, impressed by the outcome, the director of political affairs of MINUSMA said, "I appreciate the fact that CMDID is an incontestable interlocutor for dealing with political parties". According to him this experience with political parties in Mali, would help them in other countries. And because of MINUSMA's recognition and their confidence in CMDID they formalised a partnership with CMDID to contribute to the dissemination of the political agreement that was signed between the government and the rebel groups. This activity helped CMDID to establish representation in the northern regions of Gao and Timbuktu.

Initially, the intervention of the international organizations under MINUSMA did not sit well with the national pride of Malians. But because of the fragility of the state and the deep political polarisation, they soon realised that participation of the international community was necessary and they were guarantors of the peace settlement.

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*In fragile and conflict-affected settings, several different organizations often work towards the same goals, but from different points of departure. This story shows the sustained efforts of CMDID to cooperate with MINUSMA and emphasize the importance of the inclusion of political parties to the formation and implementation of the peace process.*