Protecting Mali's Peace: The Role of Civil Society

International Peace Institute

Mlians voted last week to appoint 12,000 local officials. This seems to indicate progress in the conflict-afflicted country, considering that the polls have been postponed four times since 2014. Yet the effective establishment of interim authorities designated by government and the groups who signed Mali's 2015 peace agreement continues to be delayed in northern regions. In light of this and renewed insecurity, some question the validity of going ahead with the elections, which might not deliver the necessary popular legitimacy and level of representation.

An election day ambush against a Malian army convoy transporting ballot boxes in the center of the country left five soldiers dead. Ballot boxes were also set alight in Timbuktu and Gaol, and polling failed to take place in several northern areas. The violence highlights the failure to install the interim authorities in Kidal, Timbuktu, Gao, Ménaka, and Taoudéni, which was expected to help re-establish state authority in the whole of the country. In addition to a national reconciliation conference planned for December (now also delayed), the authorities would promote dialogue and enhance nationwide ownership of a peace process that has been viewed as lacking inclusion.

Bringing more parties on board has been a challenge during both the negotiation and implementation of the peace agreement. Ensuring effective participation of the wide variety of local stakeholders—including women and civil society—is an overarching concern among the diverse international presence in the country, including the United Nations mission (MINUSMA) supporting the government in many aspects of its state responsibilities. Although international support is broadly deemed to be vital for protecting certain populations, as well as safeguarding the state itself, local ownership is critical for ensuring the longer-term sustainability of the peace agreement.

This local focus must also be reflected in policymaking, which is why we recently met with representatives of Malian civil society organizations. These groups are working with local networks and engaging communities in multi-

stakeholder processes to manage the challenges and opportunities related to the peace agreement and reconciliation process.

While there is a broad expectation that the upcoming reconciliation conference will foster a greater sense of inclusion, those we met with were concerned it might be no more than a talk fest, with no tangible outcome. In order to yield the right results, the conference must instead be part of a long-term process that builds on the many engagement initiatives and networks already established in different parts of Mali.

Civil society organizations have the knowledge to contribute to this end, but they need to work in a more consistent, coordinated, and transparent fashion. Our panel suggested some positive experiences of coordination between the government, local actors, and the international community that could be built on. This includes development of Mali's National Action Plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security, which saw strong input from civil society organizations. These organizations have pushed for 50-50 gender representation in implementation of the peace accords and have worked on curbing gender-based violence in the country.

One of the individuals we spoke with, Boubacar Thera, from the West African Network for Peacebuilding, said civil society can ensure the bottom-up approach needed to ensure the sustainability of the efforts the government and the international community have already invested in development and peace in Mali. The peace agreement does assign an important role to civil society in the consultative security committees that are to be established at local levels. It will be important to ensure that these committees include representatives from all relevant sectors.

Néné Konaté from the Malian Institute of Research and Action for Peace, meanwhile, said civil society groups had already held various meetings across Mali to discuss what to expect from implementation of the peace agreement. One of the conclusions was that continued dialogue is key to realizing sustainable peace in Mali. To make the national conference fulfill expectations in this regard, it will be crucial that the government foster inclusion in both planning and execution. Despite its lack of a date, a lead coordinator has been appointed by the government to advance planning of the event.

Although the Malian government and its international partners have worked to disseminate the peace agreement throughout the country, it is clear that a large part of the population still does not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the content to support it. This, in addition to the delays in implementation provisions, has led many to feel disengaged and disillusioned with the process. "We need local civilians to be involved in implementation, but if they don't understand the agreement, they can't play their part," Ms. Konaté said. An inclusive national dialogue would obviously contribute to increasing the population's ownership of the agreement. It would help to address an increasing lack of trust between Malian state and society members.

In response to concerns about the slow implementation of the peace accord, the Malian ambassador to the UN, Issa Konfourou, has said that the government promotes inclusiveness wherever possible, but also pointed to the challenges posed by extremist groups that benefit from perpetuating a climate of instability in Mali. "Violent extremism, terrorism, and organized crime pose the biggest obstacles to the implementation and is the main reason why the agreement is taking a while to show results" he said. While the civil society representatives we met with generally agreed that insecurity does pose a severe challenge to implementing the agreement—and also makes it hard for civil society to actively support the process in northern areas outside government control—they maintained that the risks of not fostering inclusiveness outweighed the threats.

Maître Saran Keïta, from the Women's Peace and Security Network in the ECOWAS Region, argued that women and youth especially have not been sufficiently engaged and have had to "push the doors open" in order to be allowed to participate. She pointed to examples of new legislation that designates quotas for women in government bodies, but which still remains to be implemented. "The peace agreement is a document of the elites in Mali; an international document with no real local ownership," Ms. Keïta said. She underlined that the largest obstacle for comprehensive inclusion remains political will rather than security challenges.

While inclusion comes with a set of inherent challenges, it is nevertheless critical to achieving the goals outlined in Mali's peace agreement and to promote national reconciliation. Civil society can play a major role in this by bringing members of their networks to the table. The national reconciliation

conference should proceed soon, and with this focus in mind. It must also be followed by concrete action from all parties, including international partners.

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