Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Welcome to Into Africa. My name is Mvemba Phezo Dizolele. I’m a senior fellow and the director of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. This is a podcast where we talk everything Africa, politics, economics, security, and culture. Welcome.

Mali, the eighth-largest country in Africa has had eight attempted coups with five of them being a success. The first coup took place in November 1968, the second in March 1991, the third in March 2012, and the last two in August 2020, and then in May 2021. The last coup began when the Malian Army led by Vice President Colonel Assimi Goita arrested the interim President Bah Ndaw, his prime minister and several Malian officials. He then issued a statement saying that he was removing them because of their incompetence and forming a new government without his consultation.

On January 28th of this year, Mali under the leadership of Colonel Assimi Goita alongside other countries, namely Burkina Faso, Niger, announced the departure from the West African block known as ECOWAS. These countries stated that the reason for the exit was the perceived influence of foreign powers within the block as well as the failure to address insurgency and security in the region. I recently returned from Mali on a study visit there and realized that there was a major gap between what we read in the media, in the various reports and the reality on the ground. Today to discuss the various challenges that the country faces, I’m joined by Moussa Kondo, who is the executive director of the Sahel Institute or what they call in French, the “Institut Sahélian pour la Gouvernance”. Moussa, welcome to Into Africa. It’s a pleasure to have you.

Moussa Kondo: Thank you so much dear Mvemba for having me here. It is my pleasure to join you here.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you very much. So your country Mali has been important, particularly when it comes to the development that we’ve been facing in the Sahel. There’ve been insurgencies, there’ve been insurrections, there’ve been rebellions, terrorist, jihadism. You name it, Mali has been at the crux of it. Even trafficking, you know, drug trafficking, weapon trafficking. The entire spectrum that affect the region, Mali is very much at the center of it. On my visit to the country, I was actually starting that weekend of February the 2nd, that weekend where the plan, if the calendar had been kept by the transitional administration, Mali would’ve had its election. The election did not happen, but the reaction of the people also was pretty telling because a lot of people said it was okay that the election didn’t take place. They needed stability at this point and election can wait and take place another time. You are on the ground, what is your reading of developments there?
Moussa Kondo: Thank you so much Mr. Mvemba. And hi everyone. Before we arrive to the point you just described Mali is now, Mali used to be one of the best country in terms of democracy in the back of, a couple of years ago and one of the very hospitality place and, uh, historical and cultural space we've seen in Africa. So today when I hear you describing the same Mali I've been growing up, which is completely different, it make me really sad. Sad not because of what you say but sad of what we are living today. And this is the reality, this is fact. We can do nothing against that until to work towards for better days ahead. So my thinking about what's going on, you know, the new phase of insecurity and Jihadism and terrorism started in the 17th of January 2012 in Menaka when the first attack started.

And the second attack was the 18th, the same year in Aguelhok where like 150 said Malian soldier being killed by what back the time called them as a Rebels for independence groups and also Jihadis and, and terrorist groups. Many of these guys came from Libya after the conflict started there. So from the 2012 and the conflict start spreading all over, not just in the northern region, like less than 5% of the territory to the central regions Mopti and Gao and also the three borders of Mali, Niger and Burkina where we call Liptako Gourma. And this places has been really the hub of all sort of armed groups and terrorizing population, killing civilians, burning villages. So what you say is my taking, my vision on that since a very short period from 2012 to what we are living today, from the northern regions to central regions and now going down to south and west Senegal borders in Mali.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: That’s a lot of challenges for a country. What you’ve described sounds pretty bloody, brutal and so on. The military then have been at the forefront of this fight. If you talk about insurgency, rebellions, that means the military has to confront those groups and the military has done that since 2012 the way you just described. What were the challenges there? Because eventually the military got upset. We remember that Captain Sanogo when he marched on Bamako to stage his coup, it was within the context of this conflict.

Moussa Kondo: Yeah, sure. When you build disinformation and misinformation, malformation, you have to build it from somewhere because the past years when we had a very stable country as Mali during the Democratical era of Alpha Oumar Konare and Amadou Toumani Toure, it was much more focusing on where we put the money because when you are one of the poorest countries in the world and as a leader you have to think twice where you put your money. If you are putting your money on military equipment, military material would cost a lot of
money. And the same money should you put it on hospitals, very technical and sophisticated health centers, healthcare system or put it in the road infrastructures, development infrastructures or education? All these sectors require a lot of investment and a lot of money.

So this president on my point have decided that time as there was no direct threat, we were in peace and harmony with all our neighbors, why should we put all this money to buy weapons and to buy military defense, army materials, instead putting in the human development and country infrastructures. So the question was very simple. As civilian and also a pro democrat, I would 100% go for the choices of these guys. But when the crisis happened, many people served on this information say they demilitarized our army. And that's why as there were like civilians. So now we have to rearm our army, we have to buy military, we have to take control on things by ourself.

So people were applauding because losing Kidal was kind of a national shame to all the Malian. It was something unthoughtable when we talk about proud, when we talk about ego, when we talk about the way we perceive our ourself as a great nation and see we are losing our entire region because of an army group without no way who they were and who were supporting them. So that’s creates a lot of positive vibes around the coolness around the army against the politician and their choices. So I can, I can easily answer this question by that one.

If I hear you correctly, you’re saying when the civilians were in power they made a decision. That decision is the tough choice that every person who leads a country I think has to make particularly if the country doesn’t have a lot of resources, whether to invest in the public services such as public health education, economic development programs and so on, vis-a-vis investing in the military and use the term de- de-militarizing the military. So this was a question of lack of foresight maybe. I mean it makes sense you say as a pro-democracy person you agree with that.

But an important part of the role of the states under the social contract is to protect the population and you protect the population by having a strong security and defense apparatus. So when the government demilitarizes the military, then it opens the country up to the unforeseen. Right? At that point people don’t know exactly what may come. You know, they always say if you want peace you have to prepare for war. Do you think there was a miscalculation there? Is that what I hear, the government, the civil government democratically elected government did not anticipate this.
Moussa Kondo: So first of all, this question of de-militarizing the army didn't come from me actually. I said the way the propagandists used against Amadou Toumani Toure when the military were taking over the power, this is what they said. And when I told you as a pro democrat the choice between this point, I 100% agreed on what I said because for me there is no a bad peace, neither a good war. And you say to build peace we have to invest in, in defense. There was like a very old saying, but is it a current truth today? Because for me cultivating the peace however it might take is more than investing in army in a country where people don't have food to eat, in a country where people don't have clean water to drink, in places where kids are not going to school, in places where people cannot access to healthcare and a quality healthcare system.

So in this kind of system you cannot emphasize on investing tons of your money on building. It is not saying also you should forget 100% the army. No. But investing much more on peace and harmony inside the country and also with your neighbors will 100% and certainly prevent you together because the problems we are facing in Mali is not like international forces came out and invade the country. No. Because we had an army strong enough to deal with such kinda situation where we've seen in the '80s. But now the problem is among the Malians, the Rebels are Malians, there are Tuaregs and ethnic groups from Mali. And then what happens, it's all been built around the lack of social justice. So when I say the lack of social justice, it's also about the growing frustration. And when there is a growing frustration, you cannot put fingers on one person, this is your fault or this is not your fault. But how as a country, as a nation, we invest on a social justice and to make everyone feel Malian after all and make everyone part of the national conversation. Not you as a first class citizen and other one as a second class or economic class citizen. And we had to invest much more for me, very productive in the [inaudible 00:11:52] we are right now then investing billions or billions in military equipment in the country where people have, don’t have food to eat.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: This was a big challenge for the leaders at the time as you describe it. How do you allocate the resources of the country to meet the needs of the population? How do you address those needs to keep national cohesion, so nobody feels excluded? Typically, this is one of the reasons that we experience conflict in the world. People feeling that they've been excluded, they don't have access and basic needs not being met. In this case, particularly case that you're describing in Mali, what led to this proliferation of rebellion and insurgencies, all those issues that you've just described, what were the causes of it and how did they lead us to where we are today?
Moussa Kondo: So you know, Mali is one of the largest countries in Africa, as you said. So the government, the wealth and the justice were not fairly distributed, whether is in the southern regions or the northern regions. I'm lucky I've lived in the northern regions, I spent years in Menaka where even I got my secondary school diploma. So just to tell you, I know the realities and also been living in a south area here in Mali. So for me the choices have been very different from a government to another, from a president to another one. And we cannot judge say you did a bad or the wrong choice because he did it from, on for some reasons. But for me the escalation of the violence and everything is much more based on lack of social justice and economic and fairness more than any kind of other reason.

And secondly, the way we run for consensus, we forget to emphasize on who's right and who's wrong and sometimes we cannot oblige people to forgive. The pardon in the conflict process needs the people being victims of the conflict get out of their own emotional frustration and everything and then they willingly accept the pardon and move forward. But you cannot sit in somewhere and say for now it is a national reconciliation so everyone forgives and then we move forward. So it will always create people who always have questions. And then for me, this is the point we failed to take into consideration people's need in terms of justice, people's need in terms of, and security, people's need in terms of citizenship, being part of a nation, being part of the country.

And sometimes we feel as though in Bamako like whatever we say or agreed here in Bamako, that's okay for the rest of the country. And sometimes we moved forward with a lot of people frustrated but they're still Malians and even now we're going through a lot of trauma conflict, violence. It's not like at the end of the violence the city of Gao will move to Niger, Gao will remain in Gao, in Mali, part of Mali. And the population in Mopti will not move to Burkina Faso, they will still remain as population in Mopti. So how we can be sure these victims, the ones who are victims today are still part of the process of forgiveness moving forward, so they don't move with grieveness, with frustration forward.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The issues that you've described are very complex for a country as big and wide as Mali. You talked about public discontent, growing frustration, lack of consensus or consensus that doesn't take into consideration all the parameters of the conflict itself, that people cannot just forgive and move on. So that social justice has to be at the center of it. So the military, the transitional governments we should call it when they came to power is to reset, at least to their communication, is to reset all the cards for the country to start moving forward that
So you mentioned Kidal. That's when Kidal fell, this was a subject of shame or shook the national ego.

What was the importance of Kidal? And then why as we are today that the military have set themself as the transitional government, they even have a ministry of reconciliation, which is led by one of the five colonels who are running the country. What's your assessment of that? How is that working and how do we move towards the end of this transition? Because they do say Colonel Assimi Goita present himself as the president of the transition. That means there gotta be an end to a transition someday. Transitions are not permanent.

Moussa Kondo: That's a good question actually because the problem of Kidal has been one of the very important issues in the country and outside and not because Kidal is different than other part in terms of nation administrative principles, but Kidal as a particularity with Malian who are, I would not say different, but who are more close to Maghribian like Arabs or Tuaregs and different than the population down south. And for many reason if some consider themself as Malian, many of them consider themselves as part of an entire country or nation different than Mali, what they call Azawad. And even when you take for example the United States, you have a lot of places who they consider themselves as who they are, but part of the federation of the United States, they still have the flags, they still have their own, you know, national anthem, you know this part of your culture, this part of who you are.

So how the central government of Mali dealt with this has been a big question, right? And moving forward you say the minister of, uh, reconciliation. You know, in reconciliation, we, we can create a ministry and everything politically, political space. But if the contain doesn’t express exactly getting people together sensorily with honesty, it would still be meetings and conferences and gatherings. But there will never be a very specific content which can bring people together and move forward. And recently when the government for sure showed a lot of open hands to the armed groups of controlling Kidal, because when we say Mali is the world country, we cannot at the same moment find armed groups stronger and saying they control this region. It doesn’t make any sense. So now moving forward and also out of the Accord peace agreement signed in, in Algeria, what is the next of Kidal?

Now the Mali government is there, the army, the national army is there or controlled by the national army. But the army group also said they did not give up, they just moved out to avoid conflict happening in town, in the city of Kidal. So I mean the way we’re moving forward, how we’re gonna take in consideration or take, uh, advantage of this armed
group moved out the next generation in Kidal and make them feel as part of Mali and also leave Mali and be 100% part of the national conversation. So this will be a good way to move forward with this minister of reconciliation and especially what the president of the transition said, the inter-Malian dialogue including who and how this gonna happen. So this will play a key role for the issue of Kidal and the Northern armed group.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele:
Kidal in the north represent, if I understand you correctly, the very image of national unity for Mali. Kidal also represent the diversity that is very characteristic of Mali. Different type of people, different ethnic groups, different social contexts. In Mali, in Bamako when uh, I was there recently and we asked people if they were disappointed that the election did not happen on February the 4th, they said it was okay, it was okay for now because we need to consolidate the peace. They said, "We've had elections before, we've had civilians who have not particularly delivered for us. We are willing to give the military leaders a chance to give them time to complete this transition. We need electricity, we need roads that work. We want to see how far they can go."

A lot of people also said in many ways that, uh, military leaders were popular, popularity as this individual saw it. You talked about need for consensus to move forward. How do Malian partners help the colonels who in power move towards the end of the transition so that Malians can have those discussions? The inter-Malian dialogue is one step, it’s very much driven by Mali itself. But what other steps would you advise your partners or advise the colonels if you are talking with them they should take to get the country out of this situation today?

Moussa Kondo:
First of all, I would not say the militaries are doing well than civilians because there is no comparison for why and how. Back in the days in the '60s, the Malians that time and the Malians right now are different, have different perspective, different ambitions, different needs and part of a very globalized community with internet, with all these things coming around back and forth and all that. So this is one thing. And second thing it’s so easy to put fingers on civilians and politicians because we had more military in power actually in Mali than civilians. I would just say we’ve been in a independent in a 1960s with Modibo Keita was a civilian and there was a coup happened eight years later with Moussa Traore spent 23 years in power, then he was overturn by a military, Amadou Toumani Toure. And then democracy arrived Alpha Oumar Konare, and then replaced by a military who converted to civilian. And then we had a military coup, and then we had another military coup and in between we had IBK.
So that means we had more military. If we had to take the country now and say we felt because of the politician or the civilians, it is not true. We failed because we had so many military coup and nothing happened during these transitions. This is a fact. And if you combine the years the military ruled the country and you compare this the years the civilian elected government ruled the country, there is no comparison, so far away. So that means the military spend more time in power than civilians. So if somebody gotta be responsible for the failure of the country today, we cannot say military, but we can say this young officers in the army could be different than what we’ve seen in the past. But it doesn’t mean being different will also bring the change. No people can love you, people can appreciate you, people can admire you, it is one thing, but also deliver and bring solutions. Solve the people’s problem, anticipate future challenges. These are another lack of situation and things to do.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: People may love you, that doesn’t mean you necessarily deliver. So currently at best there’s a split. They're part of the population that love the colonels that were in power. My question still is the same to you. Given the reality you just described it, whether we split it between civilians and military leaders... From your math, there've been more military leaders than there've been civilians and the country is where it is today. So everybody has contributed to where we are today. Moving forward as an analyst, as somebody work with civil society, as somebody who’s even advise the government in the past, what advices will you give to, you know, France is no longer there, uh, in terms of relations with, with Mali, but you still have the Germans, you have the Americans, you have the EU, you have an entire world that you're dealing with. And most people, I think a lot of us in the world care about what’s happening in Sahel, particularly what’s happening in Mali. So what advice do you give to those would be or partners of Mali?

Moussa Kondo: Thank you so much for this question. For me, the questions of partners for me, we don’t need to focus on that because whatever partners we’ll work with will come for their interest. That’s one thing. If they don’t have any interest, they will not come. Their interest may diverse. But the first thing we as Malian should do and have to do is to fight for our own interests. But to fight for your own interests, whoever in front of you, it could be Chinese, uh, Americans or French or Russians. But we have to identify what is our priorities first. If we know our priorities, and then we can fight for our interest.

And then the second thing is to get out of this isolation. Because the way we are isolated, no one can develop in this globalized world today by yourself, even the most richest or powerful countries in the world, they still need others to keep moving forward. You cannot just be
yourself and say, "I don't need you or don't need that and continue to move." No you can't because we are all connected in one way or another way. So this is the two things I would say. The rest will come by themself. Malians are very courageous people and very resilient. And I know with these kind of things we're gonna find our ways for sure.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Malians are resilient people. The interest has to be front and center. Uh, we describe because it's only the local, the national themself who can, uh, develop their country. They every responsibility for it. So speaking to, as you say, partners will follow partners interests, which makes sense 'cause states follow their interests. What will you say to your fellow Malians then as you are traversing this period? Again, it's a transition. The military leader call it a transition, which means it'll end. In the meantime, the colonels need your help as citizens. What are the citizens interested in given where Mali has been? Mali's a young country as well, right? The median age is like 17 years old. They have aspirations, they have expectations. You have straddled both world. You are an analyst, you run a think tank, you do project, you have advised government. Inter-Malian dialogue is coming. What should be the centerpiece of that to help the country move forward?

Moussa Kondo: Um, I think the centerpiece of that is to be honest and understand what is not going well. Because living with the hope like tomorrow gonna be better, it depends on what you're doing today. If we are not putting the right pieces together today, for sure you will not have a complete piece tomorrow. So tomorrow will not be better for you. And keep praying God will provide inshallah is good, but God is here for everyone, not just for Malians or for Americans. Praying, spiritual always goes with hard work, and for me this is what is missing. Not expect a miracle to happen tomorrow, but concretely what's not working, why is not working and how we can make it work. So for me, this is the most important thing for this dialogue.

Because even when we are facing challenges in terms of peace, coming together, living as brothers and sister, that means we still don't get there. Someone is still cheating somewhere. Someone is not sincere and honest when we say we talk about peace and we talk about unity. Because you cannot say I want everyone to be together, unity and still putting fingers on people say, "You have stolen money, you are corrupt, you are this, you are that." So this work is for the justice because they will work accordingly with evidence and so, so. It is not a politician's mouth say we want unity, get everyone together and still chasing people who are not agreed on what to say. So this is my takeaway about this point.
Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: The hard work you’re describing means truth and reconciliation. Am I reading you right?

Moussa Kondo: Correct. But also the different things we don’t have. For example, we don’t have money and how we can get money as a country. We can go through easy solutions and, uh, short term solutions, but it is always solving the problem today. But what we can do to get more money for tomorrow to solve and anticipating features, challenges, we know we don’t have it. How to get it, where we go and get it and how we can do to get it. So these are our questions. We have to be honest with ourself to recognize this and then move forward with them. But we cannot do this if we are not honest with them. Because if we keep saying, you are gonna be fine, we are gonna find a way, we gotta work hard, you gotta wait, be patient, we gotta be resilient. But resilient about how and for how long?

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: This translates into what, uh, people say often that hope is not a strategy.

Moussa Kondo: Yes.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: In this case what I hear you say is that Malians have to look in the mirror, be honest with each other about the issues that are at hand, roll up the sleeves, fix the governance issues so that the states finally can get the means to move forward in a way that will serve all Malians.

Moussa Kondo: Correct, correct. As you said very well, hope is not a strategy and being young is not skill. So that means we have to go through processes. If we don’t know, we have to learn to know. Our education is completely, you know, so these are things we have to stay focused and work on them to move forward. Because as we said, Mali is a young country in terms of population but also in terms of independence. So that means we have a long days, you know, ahead. But we have to start thinking by ourself, not just with equal and say, "We, we don’t like this, we, we, we do this." No, but sincerely and honesty, what is not working? If I don’t have the solution, who has the solution? Because everyone is working and moving with and for their own interest. United States, the UK, Germans, Russians, even they do not have that interest, they will not spend time. Because this is a lot of energy, this is a lot of time, this is a lot of focus. For what? For nothing.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: I hear you say that truth, honesty, and hard work among Malians is the only key for Mali to get out of this. On that note, I would like to thank you Moussa Kondo for joining us today on Into Africa. We appreciate your perspective and insight for your country.
Moussa Kondo: Thank you so much Mvemba, and thanks for your hard work. Really appreciate it. Thank you.

Mvemba Phezo Dizolele: Thank you for listening. We want to have more conversations about Africa. Tell your friends, subscribe to our podcast at Apple podcast. You can also read our analysis and report at csis.org/africa. So long.

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