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Socio-political Turmoil in Mali: The Public Debate Following the *Coup d'État* on 22 March 2012

Sten Hagberg and Gabriella Körling

Abstract: During the night between 21 and 22 March 2012, a group of young military officers overthrew Mali's president, Amadou Toumani Touré. The group justified the coup by citing the inability of the regime to both deal with the crisis in the North and provide the army with the appropriate material and manpower to defend the national territory. The coup plunged Mali into violence, and caused a de facto partition of the country. The socio-political turmoil pitting different political and armed factions against each other has continued unabated and has been accompanied by intense mass media debates. In this report we focus on the Malian public debate. By looking at the political class, the international community, and the partition of the country, we analyse representations and stereotypes prevailing in this debate.

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Keywords: Mali, political systems, domestic political conflicts, Tuareg

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On the night of 21 March 2012, a group of young, low-ranking military officers from the military camp in Kati, a garrison town located 15 kilometres from Bamako, overthrew Mali's democratically elected president, Amadou Toumani Touré (nicknamed "ATT"). The mutiny was sparked by a meeting the officers had held with the minister of defence in the Kati military camp on the subject of the rebellion in northern Mali. During this gathering, the soldiers demanded more resources to fight in the North, but the meeting ended abruptly when the frustration and anger of the soldiers boiled over; the minister and his collaborators were subsequently escorted out of the camp (*Jeune Afrique* 2012). Later the same day, soldiers from Kati made their way to Bamako. They succeeded in overtaking the headquarters of Malian national television and later the presidential palace. The president, however, managed to escape unharmed. In the early hours of 22 March, the *coup d'état* was announced on Malian national television. The group, led by the hitherto relatively unknown Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, proclaimed the creation of the National Committee for the Re-establishment of Democracy and the Restoration of the State (Comité national pour le redressement de la démocratie et la restauration de l'État, CNRDRE). Sanogo justified the coup by referencing the inability of the regime to deal with the crisis in the North and to provide the army with the manpower and equipment necessary to defend the national territory. The CNRDRE also pointed to the climate of uncertainty surrounding the upcoming presidential elections (in April 2012) and the incapacity of the government to fight terrorism. The army had undertaken its responsibility, the CNRDRE held, to put an end to the incompetent and repudiated regime of Amadou Toumani Touré. The coup plunged Mali into a downward spiral of violence, and led to a *de facto* partition of the country. In the following months, the socio-political turmoil pitting different political and armed factions against each other has continued unabated and has been accompanied by intense mass media debates.

This report scrutinizes the crisis, paying particular attention to the public debate played out in media reporting and public declarations.¹ The material derives mainly from newspaper articles – the majority of which we have found online – as opposed to other media outlets such as radio or television. By looking at how the Malian "political class", the international community, and the *de facto* partition of the country are discussed in the public debate,

1 We are deeply grateful to Katja Werthmann and Hugh Beach for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of the report as well as to the participants of the NAI-KAIPTC workshop "Exploring the Post-Gaddafi Repercussions in the Sahel" in Accra, 28–29 June 2012. The research on which the report is based was generously funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). All translations from French to English are ours.

we elicit the prevailing representations and stereotypes in this political turmoil. However, we also need to put the current political crisis into a historical context, as this will help us to articulate both longstanding conflicts that are being aggravated by the outright takeover of the North by Tuareg and Islamist movements and the heated party politics in Bamako. The report is divided into two parts: First, we contextualize the crisis in light of recent political history, notably ATT's politics of consensus, and the complex relations between Tuaregs and the central state. Second, we highlight the key issues in the national mass media, notably the polarized political life in Bamako, the discourses on the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS; in French: CEDEAO) and the international community, and the representations of the Mouvement National de Libération de l'Azawad (MNLA).

Contexts of the Crisis

Over the last twenty years, Mali has been depicted as a democratic success story in Africa, and to many, the rapid unravelling of stability following the *coup d'état* on 22 March 2012 came as a surprise. In this section, we seek to contextualize the crisis in light of both Bamako politics and the Tuareg question.

Democratization and the Politics of Consensus

For twenty years – through the terms of Alpha Oumar Konaré (1992–2002) and “the democratic hero”, Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012) – Mali has experienced a multiparty democracy that has been regarded as a positive African example. Following popular protests, a group of army officers led by Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) overthrew President Moussa Traoré's military regime on 26 March 1991. ATT then led a one-year peaceful transition to multiparty elections. The fact that ATT followed his initial commitment to hand over transitional power to the elected president Konaré in 1992 was admired at the time and earned him the appellation “soldier of democracy”. President Konaré was elected once in 1992 and then again in 1997, and in 2002 he resigned, in accordance with the two-term limit specified in the constitution. During the Konaré governments, important steps were taken to root democracy in local constituencies through decentralization (Fay, Koné and Quiminal 2006; Hagberg 2010; Kassibo 1997).

ATT declared his return to politics by launching his campaign for the presidency in 2002. He won the elections, defeating Soumaila Cissé of the

Alliance pour la Démocratie au Mali (ADEMA, the party of former president Konaré) in the second round. ATT had not aligned himself with a specific political party or coalition of parties, instead presenting himself as an “independent candidate” with the support of a large number of associations and civil society organizations united under the Mouvement Citoyen.² Following ATT, many others presented themselves as “independent candidates” and stood in legislative and municipal elections, and they contributed to the grounding of democracy in persons rather than in parties. Yet these candidates did not fare very well in these elections, and the largest political parties maintained their influence (Baudais and Chauzal 2006: 68).³ ATT’s rule from 2002 on was marked by “an exceptional consensual political environment” in which all political parties were asked to take part in “the management of state affairs” (Camara 2011: 79). Members of different political groupings were appointed ministers alongside senior officials not affiliated with political parties. Baudais and Chauzal (2006: 72) note that the politics of consensus was made possible by ATT’s personality and reputation, and was legitimized with reference to Malian history, notably the legendary thirteenth-century emperor, Sunjata Keita. It was also a strategy for exercising power that served both ATT and the political elite who had been sidelined during previous regimes (Baudais and Chauzal 2006: 76-77). ATT’s running as an independent, advocating national consensus and criticizing partisanship also represented ways of managing the opposition (Bleck and van de Walle 2011: 1130). The politics of consensus resulted in a “total absence of opposition on the national political scene” (Camara 2011: 79).

By the time the 2007 elections came round, cracks had begun to show in the consensus government (Camara 2011: 80) as two loosely constituted alliances⁴ stood against one another (Baudais and Sborgi 2008: 771). ATT defeated Speaker of the National Assembly Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and his Rassemblement pour le Mali (RPM). While deemed free and fair by international observers, the election was contested by Keita and some other candi-

2 ATT’s Mouvement Citoyen was an umbrella organization; in 2010, it was transformed into the Parti pour le Développement Économique et la Solidarité (PDES).

3 In the 2002 elections, only 6 of 147 MPs were independent candidates (Baudais and Chauzal 2006: 68).

4 The Alliance pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (ADP) is made up of 43 political parties (including ADEMA) and civil society associations that supported ATT. The Front Pour la Démocratie et la République is made up of 16 parties, some of which were represented in the consensus government, including by four presidential candidates (Baudais and Sborgi 2008: 771).

dates. The voter turnout was remarkably low, with only some 36 per cent of registered voters actually voting.⁵

Hence, while being presented and recognized as a successful democratic example, political debate in Mali has been constrained by the lack of both political alternatives and opposition politics. The politics of consensus is one context in which the current crisis must be understood. Van de Walle suggests that the government lacked accountability due to “abuses of power” that undermined support for the democratic order and led to widespread dissatisfaction: “Public opinion thus seemed favourable to democracy but not to its performance in Mali in the last decade” (van de Walle 2012: 11). The 2012 elections nevertheless looked to be particularly open with some twenty candidates and no given favourite, but with four clear leaders: Soumaïla Cissé, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, Modibo Sidibé and Dioncounda Traoré (*Think Africa Press* 2012).

The Tuareg Question

Another context of the current crisis revolves around the relations between Tuaregs – populations of Berber origin regrouped under the ethnic label Tuareg or Kel Tamacheq – and the central state. Tuaregs have felt marginalized and mistreated by the Malian state, and this has led to several rebellions. The French colonial administration sought to maintain military order and to tax the peoples living in the Sahara, and few investments were made in education and economic development (Bourgeot 1995: 339; Poulton and Youssouf 1998: 12). The marginalization of the North was reinforced after independence. In 1963, a small-scale rebellion broke out in response to the government’s modernization policies, which were basically to sedentarize and educate the nomads (Lecocq 2004: 89). The rebellion was brutally suppressed.

The Tuaregs and other northern peoples were severely hit by long periods of drought in the 1970s and 1980s, leading to an increased number of people leaving the region. In the mid-1980s many young men migrated to the Maghreb or to other West African countries in search of employment (Lecocq 2004: 95). In Libya, a significant number also received military training. Yet with the economic hardships of the late 1980s, many were forced to return home. Some of those who returned to Mali initiated the Tuareg rebellions of 1990 (Poulton and Youssouf 1998). These rebellions kicked off with a series of attacks led by the *Mouvement Populaire pour la Libération de l’Azaouad* (MPLA); these attacks killed many people, including

5 According to African Elections Database, online: http://africanelections.tripod.com/ml.html#2007_Presidential_Election (25 June 2012).

staff of the Malian army, in an attempt to liberate Tuareg prisoners. President Moussa Traoré declared a state of emergency in the North, and the army retaliated with indiscriminate killings of local people and rebels alike, leading to further violence and civil unrest for many years until a formal peace agreement was signed in 1996.

The decentralization reform, which transferred more decision-making to local constituencies and was strongly endorsed by Konaré, was an attempt to placate Tuaregs with promises of greater autonomy and served to “co-opt” the “Tuareg threat” (Seely 2001: 505; see also Hetland 2007). A wide-reaching programme of integrating Tuaregs, including the integration of former rebels into the Malian army, was launched in the mid-1990s. However, a new rebellion broke out in 2007 (lasting until 2009) in response to the non-fulfilment of promises made in the peace agreement, further fuelled by the dissatisfaction of Tuareg soldiers integrated into the army (ICG 2012: 3). Development programmes in the North were initiated. Yet the few investments actually made were in the end mainly devoted to the co-optation of northern elites (van de Walle 2012: 15). The most recent Special Programme for Peace, Security and Development in Northern Mali (Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement du Nord Mali, PSPSDN) was met with suspicion following the failure of previous programmes (Lecocq and Belalimat 2012). The PSPSDN was widely criticized for its vertical approach and for its failure to involve communities in the North (ICG 2012: 7). Security was given a more preponderant role than development and in practice the former was reduced to an unwanted and unpopular increased military presence in the North (ICG 2012: 7).

An attack on military installations in the town of Menaka on 17 January 2012 led by the MNLA marked the start of the most recent Tuareg uprising. The MNLA denounced the situation in the North, particularly what it saw as the breaking of peace accords, and expressed demands for self-determination. Many observers link the recent Tuareg uprisings to the uprising in Libya, which precipitated the NATO-led invasion of that country and the fall and subsequent killing of its leader, General Qaddafi, in October 2011. This led to the return of mercenaries and members of Qaddafi’s regular army, and to the unhindered circulation of arms strengthening the ranks and firepower of Tuareg fighters (*Africa Report* 2012). The intensification of the war on terror in the Sahel (Gutelius 2007) and the presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in northern Mali (Krech 2011) also seem to have favoured unrest. AQIM’s main tasks are, apparently, smuggling and kidnapping (Krech 2011), and prior to 2012 Tuareg leaders criticized the Malian government for not dealing with the problem posed by the presence of AQIM. Today, however, AQIM is one of the key players in the current

conflict. A third movement in the conflict, Ansar Dine, is closely related to the Tuareg political movement but seeks to establish northern Mali as an Islamic state (Peterson 2012). Ansar Dine is led by the former Tuareg rebel leader Iyad ag Ghaly, who purportedly was sidestepped in the formation of the MNLA. Ansar Dine is a Tuareg-led, but Islamist, movement, in contrast to the MNLA, which is more ethno-political and ideologically motivated.⁶

In February 2012 the MNLA won a series of victories against the Malian army. And in the power vacuum created by the *coup d'état*, the MNLA, joined by Ansar Dine and AQIM, quickly advanced and took control of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu. On 6 April 2012 the MNLA declared the independence of the Republic of Azawad, making up approximately two-thirds of Malian territory. This represented an unprecedented victory, and although the proclamation was not recognized by the international community it did establish a *de facto* partition of the country.

Public Debate in the Wake of the *Coup d'État*

Let us now turn to key issues in the national mass media, paying particular attention to Bamako's political life; discourses on ECOWAS and the international community; and media representations of the MNLA.

Polarized Positions and Popular Protests

The coup was unanimously condemned by the international community; the African Union and ECOWAS called for an immediate return to constitutional rule. Multilateral and bilateral donors rapidly decided to suspend all development cooperation with Mali. Many Malian political parties were quick to condemn the coup. Yet one could soon distinguish two radically different readings of the situation of Bamako's political class – a term used in Mali to depict political actors in leadership roles. The first reading was the one made by political parties,⁷ trade unions and associations opposing the coup, which came together in the Front Uni pour la Sauvegarde de la Démocratie et de la République (FDR). The FDR called for Captain Sanogo to hand back power as the first step to defending the 1992 constitution, ensuring the re-establishment of peace and security in northern Mali, and organizing free and transparent elections. The second reading was advocated by other organizations and political parties (most notably the leftist party of Oumar Mariko, Solidarité Africaine pour le Développement et l'Indépend-

6 See MNLA's website: <www.mnlamov.net/>.

7 It should be noted that most of the biggest political parties condemned the coup.

ance – SADI), which together formed the “Popular Movement of 22 March 2012” (MP-22) to support the coup “politically accompanying” the CNRDRE junta in their efforts to “re-establish democracy”. The MP-22 declared the coup a “welcome start to ridding Mali and its democracy from the gangrene of capitulating generals and a corrupt political elite that has led the country into bankruptcy and towards partition” (MP-22 2012). Other movements, such as the Coordination des Organisations Patriotiques du Mali (COPAM), also supported the coup. When the curfew imposed after 22 March was lifted, demonstrations were held both in support of and in protest against the coup, at one point leading to clashes between the two sides (*L’Indicateur du Renouveau* 2012).

The division between the FDR and the MP-22 (and COPAM) was reflected in the national press. In reproachful editorials, the coup was seen as a serious setback for democracy. *Le Républicain* remarked that the coup showed that a twenty-year-long project of democracy can crumble in only two hours (*Le Républicain* 2012a). *L’Indépendant* regrets the circumstances of the end of ATT’s regime, stating that instead of presidential elections and the transfer of power to a democratically elected successor, Mali’s economy, the democratic acquisitions it has made over the past twenty years, and its reputation are all threatened (*L’Indépendant* 2012a).

However, as noted by van de Walle (2012: 12), the junta played on a longstanding “popular discontent regarding the political class”. Captain Sanogo justified the coup by referencing not only the poor conditions of the army and military forces but also putschists’ anger over the high living costs citizens were faced with, along with the problems with schooling, health care, corruption and illegality that had been allowed to take root. This seemed to strike a chord with sections of the public. *Info Matin* notes that the coup revealed the true sentiments of the Malian people, as there was a wave of popular relief after ATT’s regime fell (*Info Matin* 2012a). ATT’s regime was criticized not only for its poor management of the conflict in the North and for allowing armed men to enter Malian territory, but also for sanctioning laxity, impunity, corruption and favouritism in the state administration. In addition, *Info Matin* continues, the political class and civil society, which are busy positioning themselves for or against the coup have become as discredited as ATT. The political class has also come under fire in the press outlets that positioned themselves against the *coup d’état*. *Le Républicain* underlines that the political transition underway should be taken as an opportunity to take stock of the strengths and weaknesses of democracy and to “rehabilitate” politics. Political forces have to regain lost ground by uniting and by weeding out the corrupt and mediocre among them, because

the events of 22 March 2012 showed that no democracy can survive mediocrity and distraction (*Le Républicain* 2012b).

ECOWAS and the International Community

ECOWAS has been a main actor in spearheading the mediation of the political crisis in Bamako, but its involvement has been marked by ups and downs. Following the (first) ultimatum – which was issued on 27 March 2012 and which obliged Captain Sanogo and the CNRDRE to retreat and to hand over power to a civilian-led government along with threatening political and economic sanctions – ECOWAS has maintained the pressure on Captain Sanogo to step aside. The junta's national convention on 5 April was boycotted by the FDR camp, but on 6 April 2012, Captain Sanogo and the CNRDRE and ECOWAS signed a framework agreement for the return to civilian rule under the mediation of the president of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré. Diounounda Traoré, speaker of the National Assembly (and a presidential candidate), was installed as interim president, and Cheikh Modibo Diarra (another presidential candidate) was appointed prime minister to lead the formation of an interim government.

The political transition has been marked by tension and by the frequent resurfacing of conflicts and disagreements. The new government was announced on 25 April 2012, but the FDR claimed that their movement had not been consulted and that they were poorly represented. MP-22 claimed that the members of the government were too closely connected to international leaders and organizations and had spent too much time abroad, making them ill-informed about realities in Mali (*Le Républicain* 2012f). These positions weakened the interim president and the interim prime minister. And although a transitional government was in place, Sanogo seemed to remain the “real” head of state.

With the reluctance of Captain Sanogo to relinquish power, the position of ECOWAS hardened. At a meeting of ECOWAS on 26 April 2012 in Abidjan, the CNRDRE, seen as actively hindering an effective transition, was denounced. It was decided that the transitional government would remain in power for 12 months in order for elections to be held. In response, Captain Sanogo accused ECOWAS of breaking the framework agreement of 6 April by taking decisions unilaterally, the CNRDRE wanting to maintain the 40-day period as defined by the constitution. However, in the end Captain Sanogo accepted Diounounda Traoré's remaining president of the transitional government until elections could be organized. This announcement followed the outbreak of violence between factions of the army that

led to several deaths and arrests.⁸ At this point, the National Assembly had promulgated a law guaranteeing amnesty to the junta, and Captain Sanogo was also promised the status of ex-head of state, allowing him the benefits associated with this status (RFI 19 May 2012). However, this promise was later withdrawn. In July ECOWAS, dissatisfied with the political developments in Bamako, called for the creation of a government of national unity (ICG 2012).

In Mali, the involvement of ECOWAS has met with criticism. Protests have been staged in Bamako, including the media-reported protests at the airport that prevented the ECOWAS mediators from landing there a couple of days after the coup. The most worrying incident took place the day after the announcement that Diounounda Traoré would remain interim president. A protest march towards the presidential palace got out of hand and Traoré was beaten up by protesters. Traoré was later evacuated to Paris. The attack caused a national and international outcry.

Critics of ECOWAS in Malian media put forth an argument about national sovereignty, emphasizing that leaders should not be imposed on Mali from the outside and that the country should not be reprimanded by a club of “badly elected presidents” (*L’Inter de Bamako* 2012). For many in the left-ist and anti-globalization movements, ECOWAS is simply running errands for the international community. Leading Malian public figures signed a statement (*Le Mali: Chronique d’une récolonisation programmée*) declaring that the country is on the road to “recolonization”, fuelled by energy, security, migration and ideological concerns in what they called a “global war” (*Afrik.com* 2012). The statement deplores the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS and dismisses the idea that Mali has been an exemplary democracy. Others support ECOWAS for its contribution to the re-establishment of democracy by putting pressure on the CNRDRE and for its willingness to send military support (*L’Indépendant* 2012b).

8 This was a factional fight within the Malian army. “Red berets” (presidential guards loyal to ATT) attempted to take control of the national television station. After deadly clashes, however, the “green berets” (on the side of the CNRDRE) managed to suppress the red berets. *Le Combat* indicates that the rivalry between green berets and red berets is nothing new. When in 1991 ATT overthrew Moussa Traoré, he was leading a commando of parachutists (red berets) that later became the presidential security forces. On 22 March 2012 these red berets saved President Touré when the green berets of Sanogo attacked the presidential palace (*Le Combat* 2012).

Media Representations of the MNLA

In Malian media, the conflict in the North is mostly represented as being caused by “armed bandits”. A large part of the national media coverage is devoted to reports on demonstrations and press conferences in Bamako that decry the situation in the North and call for its liberation from Tuareg and Islamist movements (for example, *Le Collectif des Ressortissants du Nord Mali*, COREN). Malian media outlets make little room for MNLA arguments about the marginalization of the Tuaregs and the North. The press has published few accounts of the demands made by the MNLA, with the exception of a couple of interviews with MNLA officials (*Le Républicain* 2012e); the idea of an independent Republic of Azawad is unanimously denounced. *L'Indépendant* points to the international condemnation of the creation of Azawad, arguing that there is no basis for a Tuareg claim to Azawad and that the MNLA lacks widespread support in the occupied regions (*L'Indépendant* 2012d). It is further argued that Mali has never discriminated against or oppressed the Tuareg minority and that great efforts and investments have been made (in education, health, and drinking water) in the North. *Info Matin* criticizes the silence of the state, especially in the face of the MNLA's more effective communication strategy, which includes appearances by MNLA leaders in international media (*Info Matin* 2012b). The MNLA is further accused of spreading lies and misinformation about the situation of the Tuaregs. In the “media war” between the MNLA and much of the Malian print media, the political wing of the MNLA emphasizes the inclusionary nature of their struggle as encompassing all communities in the North/the Azawad. In newspapers, the support of the MNLA is said to be limited not only among the communities in the North in general but also among Tuaregs. *Le Républicain* contests MNLA's territorial claim, as no region in Mali belongs to only one ethnic group or community (*Le Républicain* 2012d). The majority of Malian people and the “friends of Mali” would, it is held, all agree on the necessity of maintaining the integrity of the national territory (*Le Républicain* 2012c). In other words, since the beginning of the uprisings in January 2012, the ethnic dimension of the conflict has come to the fore in the public debate. Protests against events in the North have at times led to attacks on Tuareg residents and Tuareg businesses in Bamako.

Conclusion

In this report we have scrutinized the positions in the public debate in Mali to demonstrate how the current crisis has reinforced longstanding conflicts. By focusing on media reporting and public declarations, we have highlighted

the lines of cleavage and conflict in order to assess how political actors have positioned themselves. The political contexts of the crisis include intertwined national and international processes, such as the blocking of the political system, the persistent issue of Tuareg autonomy, and the fall of Libya's Qaddafi. We have elucidated the representations and stereotypes in national mass media in the period following the *coup d'état*, notably the polarized political life in Bamako, the discourses on ECOWAS, and representations of the Tuaregs. The socio-political turmoil in Mali – a country regarded as a success story among African democracies – has deteriorated into what some observers have called a nightmare. But beyond the specifics of the current crisis, the rapid breakdown of Malian democratic institutions and processes invites a more general reflection on the making of success and failure in African politics.

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Sozio-politische Turbulenzen in Mali: Die öffentliche Debatte nach dem Staatsstreich vom 22. März 2012

Zusammenfassung: In der Nacht vom 21. zum 22. März 2012 wurde der Präsident Malis, Amadou Toumani Touré, durch eine Gruppe junger Offiziere gestürzt. Die Gruppe rechtfertigte den Putsch, indem sie auf die Unfähigkeit des Regimes verwies, die Krise im Norden zu bewältigen und die Armee personell und materiell angemessen auszustatten, um die Grenzen des Landes verteidigen zu können. Der Staatsstreich stürzte Mali in eine gewaltsame Auseinandersetzung und führte zu einer faktischen Teilung des Landes. Die sozio-politischen Turbulenzen, in denen verschiedene politische und bewaffnete Gruppierungen gegeneinander antraten, haben seither unvermindert angehalten und wurden von intensiven Debatten in den Massenmedien begleitet. Der vorliegende Bericht konzentriert sich auf die öffentliche Debatte in Mali. Vor dem Hintergrund der politischen Entwicklung des Landes, der Positionen der internationalen Gemeinschaft und der Ursachen für die Teilung des Landes stellen die Autoren die Darstellungsweisen und Stereotypen dar, die in dieser Debatte Verwendung finden.

Schlagwörter: Mali, Politisches System, Innenpolitischer Konflikt, Tuareg