

(MFI) Since the March, 1991, revolution, Mali constitutes an example of a successful African transition to democracy, although its economic situation remains precarious. The country that plays host to the 23rd Africa-France summit has won praise for its unusual political advance and its stability in a threatening regional context, but also baffles by its ability to control its own development.

Space and history have fashioned Mali and given this vast land-locked country of 1.24 million km² a strong identity. Largely made up of deserts, the country remains among the world's poorest with a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of 290 dollars in 2004. Over half its 11.7 million inhabitants live below the poverty line. But in the course of history, prestigious entities have emerged in this very same space: the empire of Ghana (4th to 8th century A.D.), the empire of Mali founded in the 13th century by Soundiata Keita, and, in the 14th century, the Songhai kingdom. Later, during the 16th to 19th centuries, the Bambara (Segou) or Peul kingdoms rule the country until the arrival of the Europeans. Their advances follow soon after the epic of El Hadj Omar who, in the name of Jihad, rebuilt an empire that failed to survive him. Samory Touré, 1880-1898, a great historic figure shared by Guinea and present-day Mali, embodied the resistance against the colonisers.

Established as the colony of Upper Senegal/Niger, and later Sudan, by the French, Mali won its independence in September 1960. Modibo Keita, promoter of the non-aligned movement, established a socialist regime but failed in his attempts to develop a state-controlled economy. A putsch was carried out in 1968 by a group of young officers. Lieutenant Moussa Traore emerged as the leader of an arbitrary regime that ruled the country for several decades, while seeking to establish its legitimacy with the creation in the early 1990s of the Malian people's democratic union, which remained the only legal party. The opposition was muzzled and sent underground.

Popular revolt and exemplary transition

Faced with rising discontent at the end of the 1980s, as the army is struggling with a Tuareg rebellion, Moussa Traore concedes a timid opening up, allowing the publication of the first independent newspapers. But he rejects multi-party rule demanded by pro-democracy associations in 1990-91. The violence of repression of opposition demonstrations in March 1991 leads to the downfall of Moussa Traore. He is overthrown by Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Toure. He offers civil society and the newly-founded political parties a power-sharing formula that gives the Malian "transition" its special flavour. Institutional reform is followed by a national conference, and a political compromise gradually brings an end to the Tuareg rebellion (National Pact, April 1992). Alpha Oumar Konare, one of the leaders of the democratic movement and publisher of the newspaper *Les Echos*, emerges as the winner of Mali's first multi-party elections later in 1992, along with his party, Adema.

Moussa Traore is sentenced to death in a series of trials of leaders of the former regime, but the sentence is not carried out and he is in the end released. Konaré is re-elected president in 1997, and leaves office in 2002. The Konare years are marked by fairly serious social instability, but democratic institutions are consolidated and Mali recovers its voice on the international scene. At the economic level, the main effort is geared to infrastructure – road construction and development of telecommunications – but successive governments find it difficult to achieve a real economic recovery, because of the inertia of major economic players and corruption.

Rule by consensus – a workable formula

The 2002 elections mark the return to power of Amadou Toumani Toure – nicknamed ATT – within a new political constellation. Adema, the main political group, has broken up and new

coalitions have been formed – Alliance for the Republic and Democracy, Hope 2002, Convergence for Alternance and Change... The new Chief of state offers them a new formula – rule by consensus. A national union government is established in November 2002 with all parliamentary groups. The leader of the Rally for Mali, Ibrahim B. Keita, becomes president of the National Assembly. The new formula, initially held to be barely viable, is holding up and a new government is formed in May 2004, led by Ousmane I. Maiga. ATT may claim that the consensus has entailed an appreciable degree of stability. But this has not been enough to revitalise a still shaky economy.

The Malian economy has indeed been much affected by the turbulence in world trade in cotton. Mali is among the leading producers in sub-Saharan Africa, with an output of 620,000 tons of cotton seed in 2004-05. The cotton industry employs 25 percent of the active population and cotton is the country's second ranking export item. The combined impact of falling prices, the Ivorian crisis, rising oil prices and natural calamities like locust invasions and poor rainfalls has been to curtail growth which was close to zero in 2001, but which has gradually recovered. While relations with donors have been difficult in 2005 (budget aid has been frozen because of delays in the privatisation of the cotton industry) the rains have been better and the government optimistically predicts 6 percent growth.

Gold mining has shown sharp expansion over the past decade with output rising from 6.291 tons in 1995 to an estimated 53 tons in 2005, and gold has become Mali's main export. The country needs to diversify its economy, still dominated by agriculture (80 percent of the active population), stockbreeding and trade, and to develop processing industries. With privatisations well under way, the investment climate is broadly favourable. But handicaps remain: low productivity, short supply of skilled labour, lack of transparency in management. A Comptroller General was appointed in May 2004 and given broad investigative powers, and attempts are being made to assess the Administration, reputedly lacking in efficiency. The health and education sectors remain the weak links in Mali's development effort, and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in its Human development indicator 2003 placed the country in 174th rank out of 177 countries listed.

Thierry Perret

Culture – Mali's "gold"

(MFI) Mali's cultural wealth could well one day develop into an economic resource. An ethnic mosaic where Bambara and Peul people mix with Senoufos, Soninkes and Dogons, and marked by the age of its artistic and literary heritage, Mali has preserved significant traces of ancient architecture (the Djénne and Mopti mosques). Literary production was not only oral (*the Epic of Soundiata, the Gesture of Segou*) and the study of ancient manuscripts discovered in the centres of Muslim culture has only just begun, with support notably from South Africa.

In the recent past there has been a significant production of literature (Hampaté Bâ, Massa Makan Diabaté, Moussa Konaté...) and of movies (Souleymane Cissé, Cheikh Oumar Cissokho). But it is above all through their music that Malian artists have won international renown (Salif Keita, Ali Farka Touré, Rokia Traoré, Amadou et Mariam...). Despite the scarcity of resources multiple actions have been undertaken, notably on the initiative of Alpha Oumar Konaré (Great meeting of West African hunters in 2000, rehabilitation of the Bamako museum) and of strong-minded Culture Ministers like Aminata Traore and Cheikh Oumar Cissokho. These activities combined with efforts by private actors, often with the support of external funding, are turning Mali into an important cultural centre (Bamako meetings on photography, literary festival of the Astonishing Travellers, etc.)

T.P.