

Mali's Public Mood Reflects Newfound Hope

Afrobarometer Policy Paper 9 | Michael Bratton and Peter Penar

Introduction

In an Afrobarometer survey in December 2012, three quarters of adult Malians were worried that the country was moving in “the wrong direction.” At that time, at the depths of a profound national crisis, most Malians thought the future looked bleak. A year later, however, a follow-up survey reveals newfound hope in the future. By December 2013, two thirds of all Malians now consider that that the country is headed in the “right direction.”ⁱ

What explains this remarkable turnaround in the public mood? The upswing in the country's collective frame of mind within the space of a single year is traced to several positive developments. These include an improved security situation, the restoration of a freely elected government, and rising confidence in economic recovery.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the residents of Mali's three northern regions as well as internally displaced persons (IDPs) – two groups that bore the brunt of the crisis – are especially sanguine about the direction of the country.ⁱⁱ But major challenges remain for these groups including an uncertain peace and persistent inequalities in regional development.

Key Findings

- In a complete reversal of opinion from one year earlier, two out of three Malians say that their country is moving in the “right direction” at the end of 2013.
- Some 60% of adult citizens also consider that their country is now safe and secure from armed conflict, up from 17% in 2012.
- But Malians still regard political instability as the country's most important problem, especially those who live in the northern regions or have been displaced from their homes.
- Malians feel very positive about the quality of national elections held in 2013, with 84% seeing the presidential contest as “completely free and fair.”
- Although still cautious about prevailing economic conditions, Malians perceive recent signs of recovery and hold high expectations for future economic wellbeing.
- In changing their minds about the direction of the country, Malians make reference mainly to economic and security considerations and, to a lesser extent, the quality of elections.

The Perceived Direction of the Country

To measure the general public mood in a country, the Afrobarometer survey asks: “What about the overall direction of the country? Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or the right direction?” This question was first asked in Mali in December 2012 following the largest series of calamities in the country’s post-colonial history. A March 2012 coup d’état against the elected national government was prompted by a Tuareg-led rebellion in the north in January 2012 and followed by the takeover of northern cities by Islamist jihadists. Tens of thousands of people fled their homes; travel and trade became dangerous in many localities. For all intents and purposes, the Malian state collapsed in the three northern regions and also in Douentza cercle (in Mopti region). There was also a marked deterioration in the rule of law in the south, exemplified by the abduction of journalists and the extra-judicial execution of coup opponents.

Faced with democratic breakdown, a failing state and a weakening economy, most Malian citizens expressed alarm. In December 2012, only 25% stated that Mali was headed in the “right direction”; fully 75% saw the country moving in the “wrong direction” (see Table 1). These figures represent popular opinion in the six southern regions because the 2012 survey could not be conducted in the north due to ongoing conflict. At that time too, internally displaced persons were still on the move and their numbers and locations remained fluid.

The crisis escalated in January 2013, when insurgents occupied territory close to Mopti and threatened to advance on Segou, then Bamako. In response to an urgent call for military intervention from Mali’s interim government, a French-led air and ground force, later backed by the United Nations Security Council, drove the rebels out of the northern cities. The quick success of this military offensive created political space for the government to approve a “roadmap” for political transition that promised elections, the reestablishment of order, and national reconciliation. In a landmark achievement, legitimate civilian authority was restored by means of open elections for president (July/August 2013) and parliament (November/December 2013).

By the end of the year, public opinion had turned around completely. In late December 2013, a clear majority of Malians (67%) now considered that their country was progressing in the “right direction.”ⁱⁱⁱ Only one third of all adults (33%) expressed concern that the country was on the “wrong” path. Interestingly, people residing in the three northern regions – who could now be interviewed due to an improved security situation – were more optimistic about the country’s trajectory than people living in the south (87 versus 65%). One possible reason is that northerners experienced the biggest change, namely from the strict rules of *sharia* law to a more relaxed, secular regime.^{iv} Furthermore, persons displaced by the conflict – who were identified during the survey in both north and south – also said that the country was back on the “right” track (75%).

Table 1: **Direction of the Country, Mali 2012-2013**
| Percentage of survey respondents expressing this perception |

	Maliens	Northerners	IDPs
2012			
Right Direction	25*	-	-
Wrong Direction	75*	-	-
2013			
Right Direction	67 (65*)	87	75
Wrong Direction	33 (35*)	12	25

*Southerners

Most Important Problems

But Mali's complex crisis is far from resolved. Major difficulties remain. To obtain people's views of the challenging terrain ahead, the Afrobarometer survey asked: "In your opinion, what are the most important problems facing this country that the government should address?" Although respondents were offered the opportunity to name up to three problems, the one mentioned first is taken to be the priority problem and thus is reported here (see Table 2).

Maliens regard political instability as the country's biggest challenge, which is not surprising in the aftermath of armed rebellion. More than one quarter (27%) of all adult citizens place the resolution of conflict and the return of peace at the top of the list of important problems. This sentiment is especially widespread among northerners (35%), who continue to experience political violence (though at greatly reduced levels), and among internally displaced persons, who were interviewed in both the north and the south (43%).

Food insecurity is the other prominent concern on the minds of Maliens.^v Southerners are especially likely to be preoccupied with hunger (24%, not shown in Table 2) as compared to both northerners and IDPs (21 and 17%). These regional and intergroup disparities are probably because the north is the focus of emergency food relief efforts, making food supplies more readily available there than in the south.

This wide array of basic developmental problems does not seem to dent popular expectations for social and economic progress. Remarkably, a strong majority of Maliens (62%) supposes that the government is potentially able to solve "all" these problems. And a further 31% estimates that the government can solve "most" of them (not shown). These high levels of public confidence, shared equally across north and south, seem inconsistent with the fact that armed conflict and military coup have undermined the capacity of the state. But rising expectations are consistent with the observation that, by the end of 2013 – and especially

compared to the dark days of 2012 – Malians think that their country is embarked on a brighter future.

Table 2: **Most Important Problems, Mali 2013**
| Percentage identifying this problem as first priority |

	Malians	Northerners	IDPs
Political Instability	27	35	43
Food Insecurity	24	21	17
Water Shortages	6	4	2
Unemployment	6	6	7
Poverty	5	4	6
Crime	5	6	5

What Explains the Public Mood?

Several factors may drive the observed U-turn in Malians’ popular outlook. Three will be considered here:

- An improved security situation;
- The restoration of elected government; and
- Perceived economic recovery.

Each of these factors will first be described. Then their individual connections to the public mood (“right direction” versus “wrong direction”) will be measured. Finally, the relative influence of these various factors will be weighed in an overall explanation of why most Malians think that their country is emerging from a crisis and beginning to move ahead. The goal is to estimate whether Malians regard security, electoral or economic considerations as paramount to the country’s recovery.

An Improved Security Situation

Compared to the end of 2012, the security situation in northern Mali was much improved by the end of 2013. A peace agreement was signed between the interim government and Tuareg fighters in Burkina Faso in June 2013, even though further talks were later repeatedly delayed by rebel discord and walkouts.^{vi} The regional capitals in the north returned to central government control, but sporadic terrorist attacks continued to unnerve the local populace. While the UN stabilization contingent (MINUSMA) patrolled Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu, the French military operation (Serval) pursued retreating rebels and jihadists into their desert hideouts.^{vii} For the most part, gains in security were all made without the participation of Malian soldiers.

When reflecting about security from the vantage point of 2013, Malians clearly look back at 2012 as a year of living dangerously. Fewer than one in five of the adult population (17%) considers the country as a whole to have been “mostly” or “totally” secure at that time (See Table 3). Northerners (3%) and IDPs (10%) offer even more negative assessments, with only 1% of IDPs regarding the country as a whole as being “totally” secure in 2012. Perceptions darken still further with reference to the North alone: just 7% of Malians, 1% of northerners, and 2% of IDPs saw any measure of security there.

The picture brightens somewhat when respondents are asked about conditions in 2013. At least six out of ten Malians (60%), as well as 67% of IDPs and 76% of northerners, see a restoration of basic security in the country as a whole by the end of the year. But only one quarter of Malians (28%) and half of northerners (49%) agree about present conditions in the northern region. They presumably regard an increase in banditry directed at Fulani herders, as well as armed skirmishes in the hinterlands and intermittent insurgent strikes into northern cities, as signs that the security situation has not yet stabilized. The slow return of police forces to the north also means that instability is due to crime as well as military action.

Certainly there is evidence that northerners feel more insecure than southerners as they go about their daily lives. The proportions who report that they “never” feel insecure when engaging in the following activities are systematically and significantly lower for northerners than for southerners: when mingling with other people in public places (5 versus 37%), walking about at night (5 versus 41%) or encountering strangers (9 versus 41%). Similarly, northerners are five times less likely as southerners (8 versus 41%) to “never” feel insecure when encountering armed groups.

Yet Malians are extremely optimistic about the future security situation. Realistically or not, all categories of citizen (including northerners and IDPs) project a situation of almost universal security by the year 2018 (see Table 3). They apply this hopeful scenario to both the country as a whole and to the northern regions.

Whether people are understandably engaging in wishful thinking is somewhat beside the point. For present purposes, perceptions of an improved security situation in 2013 are part of any explanation of a more buoyant public mood. Bivariate correlation analysis provides indicative evidence, namely that the perceived level of security in Mali in 2013 is positively and significantly related to an individual’s propensity to regard the country as moving in the “right direction” (Pearson’s $r = .218$, $p < .001$).

Table 3: **The Level of Security, Mali 2012-2013**
| Percentage saying “mostly” or “totally” secure |

The perceived level of security:	Maliens	Northerners	IDPs
in Mali in 2012	17	3	10
in the North in 2012	7	1	2
in Mali today (December 2013)	60	76	67
in the North today (December 2013)	28	49	39
in Mali within the next 5 years	94	93	94
in the North within the next 5 years	89	87	88

The Restoration of Elected Government

The elections of 2013 were an important milestone on the road back to constitutional democracy. In the presidential contest, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), a former prime minister with a reputation as a resolute decision-maker and a crusader against corruption, won 78% of the popular vote. His main rival, Soumaila Cissé, conceded graciously. Along with coalition allies, IBK’s party also secured a majority of seats in the national assembly in a second round of a peaceful legislative vote. The new prime minister, technocrat Oumar Tatam Ly, named a 34-member cabinet, including a novel department for National Reconciliation and Northern Development aimed at healing scars of conflict from independence to 2012. And IBK espoused negotiations and national reconciliation, while at the same time endorsing investigations of abuse of office by the last civilian head of state (Amadou Toumani Touré) and the March 2012 coup leader (Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo).

Like other Africans, Malians say they are strongly committed to the principle of elected government. Almost nine out of ten (89%) agree that “we should choose our leaders in this country through regular open and honest elections” (see Table 4). Even if elections “sometimes produce bad results,” an electoral process is preferable to “other methods for choosing leaders” (11%). But this result comes with a caveat that call into question Malian commitments to electoral processes. More than one third of citizens nationally (36%) are still willing to countenance the prospect that “the army comes in to govern the country” (not shown).

Perhaps because voting is a socially desirable behavior, many more survey respondents say they voted in the 2013 elections than were published in official figures. Whereas 70% claim to have voted in the presidential election, the government recorded turnout rates of 52% and 46% for the first and second rounds respectively. In the legislative elections, 63% say they voted, compared to the official figure of 39%.^{viii} Despite these discrepancies, the survey data and official figures reveal similar voting patterns: more people voted in rural than urban areas; and voter turnout was much higher in the northern regions of Gao and Timbuktu than in Bamako,

which recorded the lowest turnout rates nationwide. As expected, IDPs reported significantly lower turnout rates than other Malians in each election (57 and 55% respectively).^{ix}

The people of Mali regard the quality of the 2013 elections in an extremely positive light. More than eight out of ten (84%) pronounced the presidential contest “completely free and fair” and more than seven out of ten (74%) said the same about the legislative elections. The popular endorsement of Mali’s 2013 presidential vote was almost double the average judgment of “completely free” elections by citizens across 35 African countries in 2012 (43%). And it even exceeded the glowing approval by the citizens of Senegal of the high quality of their country’s 2012 presidential election, which resulted in an alternation of power (75%). In Mali, however, northerners were slightly less generous with their praise; nevertheless, 78% still saw the presidential and parliamentary elections as “completely free,” which is a strong endorsement by any standard.

Perhaps popular satisfaction with the openness of elections helps to explain the turnout in the public mood. If so, one would expect a positive statistical relationship between election quality and an optimistic mood. As predicted, citizens who see the 2013 elections as “completely free” are also more likely to deem the country is moving in the “right direction” (Pearson’s $r = .070$, $p < .001$ for the presidential election, Pearson’s $r = .113$, $p < .001$ for the parliamentary election). The relationships are only moderately strong,^x but are positive and statistically significant.

Table 4: **The Quality of Elections, Mali 2013**
| Percentage of survey respondents who: |

	Malians	Northerners	IDPs
See elections as best method of choosing leaders	89	90	90
Claim to have voted in presidential elections	70	85	57
Claim to have voted in parliamentary elections	63	84	55
See pres. elections as completely free and fair	84	78	82
See parl. elections as completely free and fair	74	78	71

Perceived Economic Recovery

According to the World Bank, the Malian economy was resilient in the face of crisis.^{xi} The services sector (particularly tourism) was hard hit in 2012, but the value of agricultural and gold production increased by 14% and 9% respectively. After contracting by 1.5% in 2012, the overall economy was forecast to grow by 5.1% in 2013 (it actually grew by 1.6%). With the restoration of political security and the reinstatement of an elected government, aid programs expanded. In 2013, Mali received a rapid credit facility of US\$18 million from the IMF, the restitution of suspended US assistance, and a pledge of over US\$8 billion from the World Bank and European Union. Importantly, however, aid agencies struggled to reach communities in the north that were under pressure from internal displacement and food shortages.

Popular assessments of current economic performance in Mali are cautious and sober. Only one third (34%) of adults interviewed in December 2013 consider the state of the economy, and their own living conditions, to be “fairly” or “very good” (see Table 5). Majorities (56 and 52% respectively) see the condition of the national economy and their personal livelihoods as “fairly” or “very bad.” In these respects, northerners and IDPs are prone to see their own living conditions as especially bad. And when asked to compare living standards to those of fellow nationals, only 18% of Malians, 10% of northerners, and 11% of IDPs reply that they are “better” or “much better” off than other people.

Even so, citizens concede a modest measure of recent economic recovery. In December 2013, almost as many Malians saw improvements in the national economy over the previous twelve months (41%) as saw setbacks (45%, not shown). And slightly more Malians (43%) thought their own living standards had gotten “better” or “much better” over this period, compared to those who declared they were “worse” or “much worse” (40%, not shown). Again, however, northerners and IDPs reported declines in personal welfare between 2012 and 2013.

Most Malians hold the government responsible for economic conditions. Clear majorities report that the government has performed “fairly” or “very badly” at handling the management of the macro-economy (53%), alleviating poverty (68%), creating employment (70%), stabilizing consumer prices (73%) and closing the gap between the rich and the poor (74%, not shown).

When it comes to forward-looking assessments of economic life, however, Malians tend to be wildly optimistic. Almost everyone – at least nine out of ten – expects improvements in national and personal economic conditions during 2014. In this regard, northerners and IDPs are the most optimistic of all, with 93 and 94% expecting economic expansion in the immediate future.

Setting aside these speculative hopes, however, it is possible to determine whether respondents’ views of current economic conditions – which, after all are grounded in concrete experience – help to shape their assessments of the country’s overall direction. Take the basic

issue of the perceived condition of the national economy in December 2013. There is a positive and significant relationship between an individual’s favorable opinion on this matter and whether he or she thinks the country is moving in the “right direction” (Pearson’s $r = .221$, $p < .001$). In other words, economic assessments appear to contribute strongly to the formation of the public mood in Mali.

Table 5: **Perceived Economic Conditions, Mali 2012-2013**

| **Percentage saying “fairly good” or “very good”

*Percentage saying “better” or “much better” |

	Maliens	Northerners	IDPs
**Present condition of the economy	34	40	34
**Your own present living conditions	34	27	28
*Your living conditions compared to other Maliens	18	10	11
*Economic conditions compared to 12 months ago	41	28	38
*Your living conditions compared to 12 months ago	43	28	36
*Economic conditions 12 months from now	88	93	92
*Your living conditions 12 months from now	90	91	93

Conclusion: What Drives the Public Mood?

This paper found evidence that Maliens believe that their country has a fresh chance to correct problems that led to an armed conflict and a military coup. In the interval of just one year, between December 2012 and December 2013, the public mood swung from deep pessimism (75% “wrong direction”) to solid optimism (67% “right direction”). The analysis in this paper has shown that the current bout of popular hope is linked to positive mass attitudes about security, democracy and the economy.

But which of these factors matters most? If policy makers are to make decisions that contribute to sustaining the country’s recent progress, where should they concentrate their efforts? To compare the relative effects of security, electoral and economic considerations, this paper concludes with a simple logistic regression analysis (see Table 6). It reveals that, even when controlled for each other, all three factors remain statistically significant, that is, influential in explaining the public mood. So each factor – state strengthening, democracy building, and equitable economic growth – deserves policy attention.

The analysis also implies a priority order. This order is based on the marginal effects of each factor on the likelihood that an individual will regard the country as moving in the “right direction” (Table 6, last column).^{xiii} By this standard, persons who see the present condition of the economy in a positive light are 28% more likely to do so. In other words, Malians have economic conditions – especially expectations of food security – at the forefront of their minds when they are asked to appraise the direction of the country.

But considerations of political disorder and instability are also salient in the popular mind, with those perceiving the present national security situation in a positive light being 25% more likely to say that Mali is on the “right” track. Recall, too, that when asked about the important problems facing the country, Malians (and especially northerners and IDPs) ranked political insecurity as the *most* important problem.

Finally, persons satisfied with the quality of the recent elections are 13% more likely to arrive at the conclusion that the country is headed the “right” way. It is perhaps surprising that the landmark elections of 2013 do not loom larger in the popular imagination about the country’s direction. But this outcome is understandable since so many people – including, inevitably, some who perceive things going in the “wrong direction” – thought that the elections were “completely free and fair.”^{xiii}

Table 6: **Explaining the Country’s “Right Direction”**

	Coefficient	Significance	Marginal Effect
Constant	-1.545		
Perceived economic recovery	.418	<.001	28%
An improved security situation	.380	<.001	25%
The restoration of elected government	.215	<.001	13%

In sum, the main driver of the public mood appears to be popular attitudes about the condition of the economy. The obvious implication – without neglecting the rebuilding of a flimsy state or the consolidation of a fragile democracy – is that the new government ought to direct priority attention to choosing effective policies for economic development. A good starting point would be those policy areas – especially food security, but also employment creation and poverty alleviation – that citizens have identified as the country’s most important economic problems. In so doing, the government would also be well advised to first target the special needs of internally displaced persons and the long-neglected issue of the economic development of Mali’s northern regions.

Endnotes

i The Afrobarometer is a survey research project managed by a network of African social scientists. It measures public opinion on key political, social and economic issues. Data are gathered by means of face-to-face interviews in local languages with national probability samples of African citizens (See <http://www.afrobarometer.org/survey-and-methods/sampling-principles>). In Round 5 of the Afrobarometer, which includes the 2012 Mali survey, more than 50,000 citizens were interviewed in 34 African countries. This Policy Paper is based on a customized Round 5.5 survey on “Democracy, Governance and Conflict Resolution in Mali” with fieldwork conducted from December 17, 2013 to January 5, 2014. Results are reliable within a margin of sampling error of +/- 2% at a level of 95% confidence.

The sample for the Mali study has unique characteristics. Totaling 2,486 cases, it has three components:

- A randomly selected national probability sample stratified to cover the urban and rural areas of all nine administrative units of the country in their correct proportions (N=2,067). Unlike the 2012 sample, the 2013 national sample includes not only the country’s six southern administrative units – the district of Bamako, and the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Mopti, Segou and Sikasso – but also the three regions of the north: Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu. In this report, members of the former group are referred to as southerners and the latter as northerners.
- An oversample in the north to compensate for the fact that the population of the northern regions constitutes only 10% of the national population. This oversample (N=200), which was also randomly selected, generates enough cases to increase the reliability of generalizations about the three regions of the north.
- An oversample of internally displaced persons (IDPs). IDPs are identified by the following survey question: “Are you, or have you been, displaced from your home as a result of the recent occupation and conflict in the north?” This procedure yielded 396 IDPs, of which 290 (73%) were located in the south and 106 (27%) in the north. Of these, 118 (30%) were identified by chance in the national random sample. The remaining IDPs were selected randomly in the northern over-sample (15%) or purposively in areas identified by relief agencies as places where IDPs had congregated (55%). Most had left homes in the northern regions, including Timbuktu (54%), Gao (32%), Kidal (8%), and Mopti (6%). A clear majority (60%) expressed an intention to return home, with 25% saying they had already done so and 15% indicating that they had no intention of returning.

ii The two random samples (national plus northern) provide improved national representation, divided between 1,891 southerners (83 percent) and 376 northerners (17 percent, weighted down to the correct proportion of 10 percent). Given a national random sample of 2,067 cases (excluding the random over-sample in the north), 118 IDPs constitute 5.7 percent of the population of Mali. The country had an estimated total population of 15.98 million in July 2013, of which 43 percent (or 6.88 million) were aged 18 or older. These figures yield an estimated IDP population of 392,000, which is a reasonable approximation of the 350,000 estimated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to have been internally displaced in June 2013.

iii Strictly speaking, the correct comparison should refer to residents of the six southern regions alone (since the north was not covered in the 2012 survey). If so, some 65% would perceive the country traveling in the “right direction” in 2013.

iv The authors are grateful to John Staatz for a close reading of an early draft of this paper and for bringing this insight, among others, to our attention. Thanks also to Steve Esquith for thoughtful comments.

v Indeed, if multiple responses are considered, Malians mention food security more frequently than political security (18 versus 14% of all responses; 51 versus 40% of all cases).

vi For their part, the rebels contend that the government has been dragging its feet on negotiations.

vii MINUSMA was authorized by the UN Security Council to help fight the jihadists but, in practice and to the government’s consternation, it has acted more like as peacekeeping force between the Movement for the National Liberation of Azawad (MNL) and the Malian army.

viii Compared to neighboring countries, turnout rates in Mali are always relatively low since Mali automatically registers 18 year-olds as eligible voters from a civil list rather than requiring eligible adults to make the effort to register as voters. But the turnout rates for 2013 exceeded the normal previous range of between 21 and 36% for elections in Mali.

ix Up to one quarter of IDPs said that they did not vote because they did not have their national identity cards, which were either never issued or perhaps lost as a consequence of displacement from their home areas.

x The low strength of the relationship is explicable in good part by the lack of variation in perceived election quality; an overwhelming majority of respondents see these events as “completely free and fair” (for implications, see endnote xiii).

xi *Mali: Rapport économique bi-annuel* (Washington D.C.: World Bank, Africa Region, AFTP4, January 2013)

xii These effects are computed as the differences in predicted probabilities from the lowest to highest response category on each independent variable. The point of reference is a person who considers Mali to be totally insecure, thinks that the last elections were entirely unfree and unfair, and who sees the national economy as performing very badly.

xiii In other words, there is very little variance on the explanatory variable (see endnote x). A more rigorous test among persons committed to democracy – for example, by discounting the 36% who would not object if “the army comes in to govern the country” – might produce a more compelling result.

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