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Beyond institutional blueprints: hybrid security provision and democratic practice in Mali

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SUMMARY

This Malian case study joins an expanding body of literature in the academic fields of political science, sociology, history, regional studies and anthropology that challenges prevailing state-centred and institutional approaches to both political authority and legitimacy.

The first part of this thesis deconstructs Malian *state authority*. Classical views in the literature portray the state as the hierarchically supreme institutional locus of political authority in society. The state is on top of society and so it should be. The state monopoly on the legitimate use of violence constitutes a critical cornerstone of this classical definition. This thesis, however, illustrates the gradual emergence of a “heterarchical political order” in Mali. Instead of a hierarchically superior institution, the state increasingly operated as a “horizontal contemporary” of non-state actors in society. In this context, the state was but one of the institutions amongst many non-state equals involved in the exercise of public authority. The state shared key statehood functions with non-state actors. Hence, the analytical perspective shifts from *state authority* towards more hybrid forms of *public authority*.

The thesis offers an historical assessment of hybrid security provision since Malian independence up until 2018. The analysis reveals that the Malian state increasingly relied on non-state armed groups to counter recurrent security threats in the northern regions. Transnational smuggling, kidnapping and terror networks played a prominent role in reshaping the power balance to the benefit of non-state actors. Based on these shaky foundations, state authority withered in the blink of an eye when a Tuareg rebellion revived and an opaque alliance of drug smugglers, radical Islamists and armed groups took control of almost two thirds of the national territory in Mali’s *annus horribilis* 2012 (Chapter 2). In the five-year period that followed the crisis, the heterarchical order only further anchored despite considerable international support geared towards rebuilding the Malian state. By 2018, Malian state authority was largely confined to the main urban centres and state expenditure reached a mere 20 per cent of the national territory. A myriad of non-state actors, including traditional and religious leaders, armed groups, militias and self-defence groups instituted their authority across the rural areas (Chapter 6).

The core part of the thesis deconstructs democracy's contribution to Malian *state legitimacy*. After an exemplary transition in the early 1990s, Mali emerged as a poster child for democracy on the African continent.

In 2012, the country came within a hair's breadth of reaching the status of a fully consolidated democracy according to Samuel Huntington's institutional definition of two peaceful transfers of power through elections. In practice, disgruntled soldiers staged a chaotic military coup just before the elections that very same year. Democracy collapsed and Malian citizens actually welcomed the ousting of a highly discredited regime. In contrast with the country's international reputation, popular satisfaction with the way democracy worked and how the political elites performed had both dwindled.

The assessment provided in this thesis is centred on three conceptual pillars upon which democracy's contribution to state legitimacy (so-called input democracy) stands according to the literature: (1) political participation; (2) representation; and (3) accountability. In theory, democracy provides the institutions that connect people and their interests to the decision making process as well as the mechanism that ensure effective checks and balances. The analysis is limited to the functioning of Malian political parties and the party system (Chapter 3); the legislature (Chapter 4); and local democratic institutions established following the ambitious decentralisation reforms in the 1990s (Chapter 5).

The thesis reveals that these prominent democratic institutions have not enhanced Malian state legitimacy as expected from their official mandates and in ways predicted by theory. Quite to the contrary, the democratic structure seems to have actually weakened the position of the state vis-à-vis other power poles in Mali's heterarchical context.

Successive elections mobilised only small parts of the population and popular contact with elected officials remained highly restricted. Very basic but influential factors as language, education and religion consolidated the wide divide between the democratic system and the Malian *demos*. Political participation and representation centred on exclusive networks between national political elites, local power brokers and a small minority of citizens. These exclusive patterns of representation connected a few privileged to the state but alienated most citizens from the political centre. Popular frustration with the country's political elites gradually increased. Yet, Malian democratic institutions largely failed to hold an increasingly discredited executive accountable and to channel rising levels of popular discontent. Scratching below the surface of Mali's exemplary transition, the thesis illustrates remarkable institutional and political characteristics of the previous authoritarian era that prevailed under the democratic regime. Power continued to be concentrated in the Malian presidency and a considerable

institutional imbalance between the different branches of government prevailed. One-party or one-coalition dominance in the party system and the near absence of a viable political opposition constituted another clear pattern of continuity that further exacerbated executive dominance. In a context of inaccessible and ineffective official democratic accountability mechanisms, citizens relied on non-state actors beyond – and often in opposition to – the state. The functioning of democratic institutions thus weakened the state and boosted non-state actors. Clearly, democracy did not emerge as the only game in Mali's heterarchical town. In practice, most citizens continued to rely on non-state power poles who legitimised their authority in reference to other sources of legitimacy than the ballot. In addition to influential indigenous, patrimonial and religious sources, this thesis reveals that the ability to protect citizens became another critical source of legitimacy in the context of a deteriorating security situation. Citizens thus rely on multiple actors, both state and non-state, who legitimise their authority in a multidimensional way. In Mali's heterarchical context, political legitimacy is established through the interplay between these different sources of legitimacy. Hence, the analytical perspective shifts from *state legitimacy* to *public legitimacy*.

This thesis thereby contributes to a growing body of literature that demonstrates the need to move beyond state centred institutional blueprints when analysing processes of *public authority* and *public legitimacy* in the context of a heterarchical order.