



Mali Imbroglio: A New Flashpoint of Islamic Radicalism & French Intervention

*Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui**

At a time when analysts and political commentators are still discussing the rise of Islamists to power in Egypt and Tunisia and contemplating about the political outcome in Libya and Syria, the sudden spurt of militant Islamist forces and the capture of northern Mali in West Africa took everyone by surprise. The subsequent intervention by the French government to evacuate the war-torn region from the control of radicals is now a source of anxiety.

The current rise of the Islamist in Mali can be traced back to the nationalist aspirations of the Tuareg Barbers, a tribal community of northern Mali who are spread across Niger, Libya, Algeria, and Burkina Faso. In the past too, the Tuareg tribe has revolted against the central authority in 1962, 1990 and 1996 demanding nationhood. The last revolt in 2006 had witnessed the participation of Al-Qaeda for the first time.

Later, a sharp division arose within Tuareg tribal groups and subsequently a faction of separatists partnered with the Islamist group, Ansare Dine of Islamic Maghreb (ADIM). The rest emerged as National Liberation Movement of Azwad (NLMA), in January, 2012 under Bilal Ag Cherif, a person with a vast experience of Jihad in the Lebanese War of 1982.

The alliance of local Islamists with the global affiliates of Al-Qaeda and another regional radical group, “Oneness and Jihad of West Africa” further radicalised the Islamists in Mali. These Islamists were bolstered when NLMA in Mali announced independence on April 6, 2012 abetting a wave of Jihadist into Mali from neighbouring region of Mauritania, Niger, Algeria and Libya. The emboldened Islamist of Mali imposed the strict version of Shariah, making more than 400,000 people flee towards the south. ADIM members conducted public whippings of alleged adulterers and destroyed UNESCO-listed shrines of local saints in the ancient town of Timbuktu, citing it as un-Islamic.

The history of Sub-Sahara region of Africa is laden with French intervention and Mali is just an addition to it. In an interview, French Interior Minister Manuel Valls has stated that, “If French force had not intervened at the right moment, Mali would have turned into a terrorist state at the gateway of western Arab”. He further observed that terrorism was a menace not only for France but for Europe and Africa as well.

There are reports of regular clashes between armed Islamic militants and French troops in cities of Gao and Konna and an incident of suicide attack in Gao has further rattled the region, echoing a warning that war of intervention might engulf other nations in the region, similar to Iraq and Afghanistan. The killing of 38 hostages with 29 Islamists in Algeria along the Libya-Algeria border in January 2013 cannot be seen in isolation from the current crisis. One of the members of the Algerian Islamist group, al-Mulathameen (Masked Brigade) declared it as a punitive act to avenge the Algerian government for providing its air space to the French Air Force. The leaders of Al-Qaeda in Maghreb (AQIM), a Mali based Islamist militant organisation, Belmokhtar and Zaid, better known as Marlboro and a ‘Taliban at day and smuggler at night’ still enjoy, a huge following in the region.

French intervention is not merely intended to eliminate the terrorist elements but also to protect its oil interest as also the uranium resource it procures from Nigeria. The ADIM has accused the western forces of eying the natural resources and it is believed that the intervention was devised to rescue French economic stakes.

The French intervention in Mali does not enjoy full support among the international community. Russia believes that all actions in Mali should be coordinated by the authorities of the troubled West African nations. China's reaction to French intervention was lukewarm emanating from its concern about a potential abuse of the UN mandate as was the case in Libya. Former U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton signalled caution, saying that immediate efforts should concentrate on putting a legitimate government back in power before the internal divisions are addressed.

German Defence Minister, Thomas de Maiziere Guido Westerwelle has stated that nothing could be said about the time period of the military operation in Mali. The recent US announcement to make one of the biggest unmanned air base in Niger to contain the rise of radicals force in West Africa is a signal in advance that it could be a long drawn war.

The spurt in the militant Islam in the Sahel region is not a good sign as the entire region might come under a string of violence. The Algerian president, Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika has already articulated his worry about the growing threat to Algerian internal security because of war in Mali. Al-Qaeda's access in Sahel is not a good omen for democratic forces in the continent. The rise of radical Islam will also weaken the emerging moderate voices within the Islamic world.

The conflict in Mali has evoked a much guarded reaction from India because India has legitimate interest in the region- both in term of economic investments and security. India has already pledged U.S. \$10 million aid to upgrade the Mali army to fight the Al-Qaida and for the reconstruction project. India has also announced its intention to be a part of EU-sponsored 'Mali Support and Follow-up Group' to help combat the Jihadis. If New Delhi truly wants to expand its footprint in North Africa, it needs to bolster its profile as a geopolitical player and therefore needs to augment its engagement in North Africa with the assistance of local and regional partners. French President Francois Hollande during his visit to India in February 2013 had expressed similar sentiments.

** Dr. Fazzur Rahman Siddiqui is Research Fellow at Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*