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*Editor's Choice*

# From Fragility to Total Collapse: A Process Tracing Analysis of the Disintegration of the Malian State (2012-2024)

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## I. Introduction

In the global political architecture of the 21st century, the *"failed state"* phenomenon has ceased to be viewed as an isolated incident of no systemic relevance, becoming instead a central challenge to international security, regional stability, and the norms of international law. The decline of central authority in a series of states, particularly in the Sahel region, has highlighted the limits of traditional Weberian definitions of statehood, which posit that the state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within a delimited territory. In this context, the case of Mali represents a paradigm of political involution. Although previously considered a *"model of democracy"* in Africa, the state is currently in an advanced process of structural weakening. This degradation is reflected in the 2024 Fragile States Index, where Mali recorded a high score of 97.3 points (TheGlobalEconomy, 2024).

The aim of this analysis is to problematize the concept of the *"failed state"*, exploring its theoretical limits and the ways it has been used to justify external interventions or mask resource extraction by local elites. The paper begins with an analytical theorization based on contributions from authors such as Robert Rotberg, Charles Call, and Joanne Rose to formulate a conceptual framework that distinguishes clearly between institutional fragility and total collapse. Subsequently, this framework is applied using *process tracing* to the evolution of the Malian state from 2012 to 2024, investigating the mechanisms that led to the loss of the monopoly on violence, recurrent political instability, and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis.

This analysis goes beyond a descriptive level of fragility indicators to identify the structural causes of state decline. In this regard, the role of extractive institutions and the implications of security strategies based on outsourcing force to non-state actors, such as the Wagner Group, are examined.

## II. Theoretical Framework

The concept of the *"failed state"* emerged in the post-Cold War era as a response to the collapse of authoritarian regimes that had maintained a semblance of stability through the support of one of the two superpowers. However, the theorisation of this phenomenon has been marked by a tendency toward universalisation that raises methodological and analytical difficulties. This involves applying a standardised model of the liberal-democratic state as the sole benchmark for evaluation, often ignoring historical particularities.

Charles Call (2010, p. 303) argues that labelling a state as *"failed"* is often a practice centred on Western values and that it is counterproductive to cluster diverse states like Somalia, Colombia, or Tajikistan under the same umbrella. Call contends that the term has been used strategically by Western powers, especially by the United States after the September 11 attacks (Call, 2010, p. 305), to justify the erosion of sovereignty in the name of the *"War on Terror"* or the fight against drug trafficking.

Robert Rotberg (2004, p. 2) provides a fundamental perspective on state success or failure through the lens of delivering *"political goods"*. In his view, states exist to deliver a set of intangible goods to citizens: security, education, healthcare, and legal order (Rotberg, 2004, p. 3). A failed state is one that honours these obligations only *"in the breach"*, losing its capacity as the guarantor of the social contract (Rotberg, 2004, p. 4). In this hierarchy, human security is critical: the provision of all other goods becomes impossible if the state cannot ensure its citizens' freedom from fear and violence (Rotberg, 2004, p. 3).

A central element in theorising disintegration is the distinction between fragility and collapse. Fragility is a systemic vulnerability where the state retains its formal structures, but these are inefficient and lack legitimacy (Call, 2010, p. 306). State collapse, by contrast, is defined by Johais, Bayer and Lambach (2020, p. 180) as a condition in which "structure, authority, law and political order have disintegrated". The authors propose a model in which collapse is a "stalemated power struggle" between rival actors, leading to the absence of state capacities across three fundamental dimensions: control of violence, rule-making and tax collection, for a period of at least six months (Johais et al., 2020, p. 181).

This nuance is essential for Mali. Although considered stable until 2012, retrospective analysis shows it was a *"Potemkin state"*, a façade of formal democratic procedures masking a profound incapacity for real governance (African Security, 2017).

Joanne Rose et al. (2013, p. 75) extend the analysis to the humanitarian dimension, defining a "complex emergency" as a crisis involving a significant collapse of authority due to conflict, requiring a massive international response. The challenge in such states is that humanitarian assistance must become a long-term substitute for services the state can no longer provide, even though Western intervention mechanisms often ignore local values and resilience (Rose et al., 2013, p. 75).

## III. Methodology

To analyse Mali's trajectory, this report uses the *process tracing* method, which is useful for identifying causal mechanisms linking structural factors to the outcome of collapse (Johais et al., 2020, p. 184). This methodology moves beyond simple correlations, aiming to elucidate causal mechanisms by examining temporal sequences and interactions between actors. The analysis tracks three main mechanisms:

1. **Mobilisation of armed opposition:** the process by which Tuareg and jihadist groups militarily challenged Bamako's authority starting in 2012 (Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2019).
2. **Elite rivalry and political transitions:** how instability within the military apparatus (coups in 2012, 2020, 2021) paralysed the state's response capacity (Crisis Group, 2021).
3. **External intervention as a balancing factor:** an analysis of how the presence of international forces (MINUSMA)[1] and, later, Russian mercenaries prolonged the military stalemate (SIPRI, 2024; RAND, 2025).

## IV. Case Study Analysis: Mali

Until 2012, Mali was frequently cited as a democratic success story in West Africa. However, structural indicators reveal major disparities: beyond formal electoral procedures, the system faced the marginalisation of rural areas, systemic corruption, and a heightened fragility of the military apparatus (African Affairs, 2015, p. 457).

**Table 1: Fragility Indicators in Mali (FSI 2024)**

| Indicator | Score (0-10) | Description and Implications |
|---|---|---|
| Security Apparatus | 9.8 | Loss of territorial control in the centre and north |
| Factionalised Elites | 9.5 | Power struggle within the military junta |
| State Legitimacy | 8.7 | Contestation of central |

[1] "The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was established by Security Council resolution 2100 of 25 April, 2013, to support political processes in that country and carry out a number of security-related tasks. The Mission was asked to support the transitional authorities of Mali in the stabilization of the country and implementation of the transitional roadmap." (United Nations Peacekeeping, n.d.).

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | authority by various groups |
| Public Services | 8.9 | Collapse of education and health systems outside the capital |
| Demographic Pressures | 9.1 | Resource scarcity (water, food) exacerbated by climate |
| External Intervention | 9.3 | Russian influence (Wagner) and impact of UN forces' departure |

### Monopoly on Violence

**In Mali, the monopoly on violence was lost gradually starting in 2012. The Tuareg insurgency was rapidly absorbed by radical Islamist groups, such as JNIM[2], which have currently succeeded in blocking strategic trade routes to Bamako (The Soufan Center, 2025). The withdrawal of MINUSMA in 2023, at the junta's request, exposed the fragility of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa), leaving a security vacuum (SIPRI, 2024).**

**This loss of control is exacerbated by the subcontracting of security to the Wagner Group (rebranded as Africa Corps). The presence of Russian mercenaries has not brought the promised stability, but has instead intensified violence against civilians, with reports indicating the killing of over 1,000 people in recent operations (Human Rights Watch, 2024). From**

[2] "Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) was created on 2 March 2017. JNIM has described itself as the official branch of Al-Qaida (QDe.004) in Mali and is an alliance of elements of the Organization of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) (QDe.014) in the Sahel, Ansar Eddine (QDe.135), Al-Mourabitoun (QDe.141) and others. It is structured in several operational zones located in Northern Mali." (United Nations Security Council, 2018).

the perspective of Johais et al. (2020), this external intervention prolongs the impasse: Russian forces give the junta the capacity to survive politically but lack the resources to restore complete territorial control, leading to a "feudalisation" of the country, where control is fragmented between the military, jihadists, and local militias (FPRI, 2025).

### Political Instability and Erosion of Legitimacy

The case of Mali demonstrates how legitimacy gaps identified by Call (2010, p. 308) can trigger a regime's collapse. Three *coups d'état* in the last decade (2012, 2020, 2021) signal an erosion of the legitimacy exercised by the political elite in relation to population expectations. The May 2021 coup, led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, resulted in international isolation and a redefinition of sovereignty that excludes democratic norms (Crisis Group, 2021).

Without an effective conflict mediation mechanism, citizens began seeking solutions through extra-institutional channels, tolerating military intervention as a last resort against corruption and insecurity (Brookings, 2025). However, under the junta's leadership, the suspension of political pluralism deepens the legitimacy gap, making the state extremely vulnerable to a total functional collapse in the face of insurgents who offer alternative forms of "justice" and order (Atlantic Council, 2025).

### Humanitarian Impact and Collapse of Public Services

State collapse carries a devastating human cost. Rose et al. (2013, p. 76) show that population vulnerability increases exponentially in such "complex emergencies". In Mali, approximately 8.8 million people needed humanitarian assistance in 2024 (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Data from IOM and UNHCR highlight the scale of forced displacement:

- Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): by late 2024, over 402,167 people were displaced by violence and military operations (IOM, 2024).
- Refugees: over 199,500 people sought asylum in neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2024).

- **Access to Services: only 15% of refugees have access to health services, and 28% of IDPs do not possess identity documents (UNHCR, 2024; IOM, 2024).**

**This crisis is aggravated by the 2024 floods, which affected 733,000 people and destroyed agricultural resources (UNHCR, 2024). The withdrawal of MINUSMA left a void in human rights monitoring, making aid delivery extremely dangerous (Human Rights Watch, 2024).**

**Table 2: Synthesis of Failure Mechanisms in Mali**

| Mechanism (Johais et al.) | Application to the Mali Case | Result |
|---|---|---|
| Opposition Mobilisation | JNIM and ISGS control routes and vast territories | Loss of the monopoly on violence |
| Political Transition | Two successive coups (2020, 2021) | Institutional paralysis and legal uncertainty |
| Repression | Moura massacre; Wagner executions | Radicalisation of rural populations; loss of legitimacy |
| External Intervention | Partnership with Russia at the expense of France/UN | Diplomatic isolation and escalation of conflict |

**Table 2 synthesises the causal mechanisms identified through *process tracing*, highlighting how the interaction between armed opposition, political instability, repression, and external intervention led to the progressive loss of fundamental state capacities. This synthesis shows that the failure of the Malian state cannot be attributed to a single factor but results from an accumulation of self-reinforcing processes.**

## Discussion: Mali Between the "Potemkin State" and the "Feudalisation" of the Sahel

A higher-level analysis of the Mali case indicates a profound transformation in the nature of the conflict. What began as a Tuareg ethnic insurgency has gradually transformed into a *"marketplace of discontent",* where joining jihadist groups represents one of the few viable economic and social survival options for many young people in the absence of state alternatives (The Soufan Center, 2025). In a context characterised by the absence of basic public services, such as education or health, armed groups have begun to perform para-statal functions, imposing taxes, controlling trade routes, and providing a coercive form of "justice" that replaces formal state authority.

This process is described in recent literature as a "feudalisation" of Mali, a phenomenon that can be interpreted as the final stage of state failure (FPRI, 2025). In this scenario, the Malian state continues to exist formally and is recognised internationally, but on the ground, sovereignty is fragmented between local "lords of violence", ethnic militias, and jihadist groups. The "sovereigntism" promoted by the Bamako junta thus appears as a form of "pocket sovereignty", exercised almost exclusively in a few urban centres secured by mercenaries, while the vast rural space of the country slides into a state of fragmented anarchy and violent competition for resources and territorial control (FPRI, 2025; The Soufan Center, 2025).

## V. Conclusions

Mali today represents the most eloquent case study for the complexity of state failure. The analysis confirms that this is not a static state but a dynamic process of disintegration fuelled by the decisions of local elites and inappropriate external interventions.

The monopoly on violence cannot be subcontracted without major systemic costs, and the Malian junta's strategy of replacing international forces with mercenaries has accelerated the collapse of internal order, generating a humanitarian disaster and an even more pronounced loss of

territorial control. In this context, security, defined as the primary political good of the state (Rotberg, 2004, p. 3), has been subordinated to the imperative of regime survival, undermining long-term state capacity.

The lack of legitimacy exacerbates this dynamic, as in the absence of a minimum consensus on the rules for exercising power (Call, 2010, p. 308), the Malian state remains captive to recurrent cycles of *coups d'état* and violent reconfigurations of authority. This fragility, however, is not the exclusive result of military collapse, but rather precedes it: the systematic marginalisation of rural populations eroded the social contract long before the outbreak of armed conflict in the north of the country (African Affairs, 2015, p. 457).

Consequently, any stabilisation strategy that ignores the dimension of local resilience is destined to fail, as external interventions cannot produce lasting effects if they do not address the economic and climate-related causes of conflict through genuine partnerships with local communities (Rose et al., 2013, p. 75).

If the process of "feudalisation" continues, Mali could transition permanently from chronic fragility to total state collapse, with incalculable implications for the entire West African region (The Soufan Center, 2025).

Beyond the specifics of the Malian case, this analysis suggests that state failure in the Sahel cannot be understood exclusively through the lens of security or military intervention, but rather as the result of a profound rupture between state and society. Without rebuilding local legitimacy and basic institutional capacity, strategies centred on formal sovereignty and coercive force risk reproducing the same patterns of collapse in other fragile states across the region.

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