

Mali's March Revolution (1991)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

Opposition to the corrupt and dictatorial regime of General Mousa Traore grew during the 1980s. During this time, austerity programs imposed to satisfy demands of the International Monetary Fund brought increased hardship upon the country's population while elites close to the government lived in opulence. An opposition movement emerged, led by the Alliance for Democracy in Mali, which was brutally suppressed by the regime.

In 1991, students organized a series of demonstrations against the autocratic government to demand free multiparty elections. Following a massacre of over one hundred demonstrators, army units subsequently refused to continue suppressing widening protests in the days that followed. Reformist army officers then overthrew the regime and allowed the formation of the Transitional Committee for the Salvation of the People, consisting of pro-democracy civilian leaders. Opposition parties were legalized and a national congress of civil and political groups met to draft a new democratic constitution approved by a national referendum. Opposition leader Amadou Toure won the election the following year and the country remains one of the most democratic in the region.

Political History:

The Republic of Mali is an impoverished landlocked country in the Sahel region of northwestern Africa. After a military coup d'état by Moussa Traoré in 1968 overthrew the left-leaning nationalist government which had ruled since independence from France in 1960, several clandestine parties emerged. These parties were underground until 1990 when, in response to international criticism, the Traoré regime legalized an association consisting of the National Democratic Initiative Committee and others, which united to form the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA).

ADEMA's historical roots and their proven ability to stay strong and united against persecution lent them legitimacy in the eyes of many Malians. Many different clandestine organizations came together under the persecution of the military regime, but it was ADEMA's original organizational structure, characterized by its decentralization, that maintained the organization's

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strength. The organization itself functioned in a manner consistent with democratic principles. This gave the organization legitimacy as a leader of the resistance movement for subsequent transformation into a political party. In the years leading up to the overthrow of the dictatorial regime, ADEMA was able to organize unions and student groups to create a unified front. In March of 1991, ADEMA was one of the main proponents and planners of a series of demonstrations, protests and strikes throughout the country. Through the unification of many organizations (whose histories go back as far as 1968), ADEMA broadened its geographical influence. Also, because of ADEMA's aged teachers and health professionals, whose skills and experience in the public sphere helped to bring ADEMA's message to rural communities throughout the country, as well as recruit members and raise funds for the democratic movement. ADEMA's supporters also consisted of griots, hereditary musicians who spread the historical roots of democracy in Mali. democracy. It also served as a framework for its longevity, many of its members were well-educated, middle

Peaceful student protests in January 1991 were brutally suppressed, with mass arrests and torture of leaders and participants. Scattered acts of rioting and vandalism of public buildings followed, but most actions by the dissidents remained nonviolent. From March 22 through March 26, 1991, mass pro-democracy rallies and a nationwide strike was held in both urban and rural communities, which became known as les evenements ("the events") or the March Revolution. In the capital of Bamako, in response to mass demonstrations organized by university students and later joined by trade unionists and others, soldiers opened fire indiscriminately on the nonviolent demonstrators. Although the demonstrations were conceived of as nonviolent and nonviolent discipline had been maintained up to that point, riots broke out briefly following the shootings. Barricades and roadblocks were erected to protect protesters from soldiers. Traore declared a state of emergency and imposed a nightly curfew. Despite an estimated loss of 300 lives over the course of four days, nonviolent protesters continued to come back each day to demand the resignation of the dictatorial president and the implementation of democracy.

By March 26, the growing refusal of soldiers to fire into the largely nonviolent protesting crowds turned into a full scale mutiny, as thousands of soldiers put down their arms and joined the pro-democracy movement. That

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afternoon, Lieutenant Colonel Amadou Toumani Toure announced on the radio that he had arrested the dictatorial president, Moussa Traore.

Toure then suspended the existing institutions and took the lead in the transitional government, which was initially named the National Council of Reconciliation. He promised he would neither run for president nor take over power once a president was elected in free and fair elections. Renamed the Transitional Committee for the Salvation of People, Toure appointed a civilian prime minister. At a congress two months after the events, ADEMA became an official political party. Because of their long history of organizing, ADEMA was able to quickly evolve from a resistance movement into a representative political party.

The leader of ADEMA, Alpha Oumar Konare, was the party's candidate for president. Konare was the Minister of Culture under Traore's regime until 1980 when he resigned in protest. Konare coordinated the student and union resistance leading up to March 1991 and he was a co-founder of ADEMA. Konare traveled across the country in order to create a dialogue between communities and officials, emphasizing how "We must have confidence in the wisdom of the Malian people, in the justice of Mali." Elections on April 12 and 26 resulted in Konare's election as president and Amadou Toumani Toure stepped down from his position as head of the transitional government. ADEMA finished first in all five regional elections.

Strategic Actions:

Malians have maintained the knowledge of their history through hereditary musicians called griots, who have been passing down their knowledge of proverbs, stories, epic poetry and oral tradition for centuries. Since independence, griots have been essential in the process of nation building and politics by conveying political messages and social critiques and educating people, especially the largely illiterate rural population. In mobilizing the 70% illiterate population to resist Traore's dictatorship, griots emphasized the well-known story from the 1300s of how, after the chiefs presented the emperor Sundjata with their spears as a symbolic act of submission, Sundjata returned them to signify that the chiefs would rule autonomously. As a result of this story, Malians believe that democracy and an autonomous self-governance—*mara segi so* in the Bambara language,

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which translates as “bringing power home”—is a national tradition. By framing the transition to democracy as a return to tradition, Malians avoided stigmas associated with Western-style “democratization.” The movement was characterized by the term mbokk, which connotes a dedication to solidarity, the nation and a duty to the community to exercise the rights of citizenship in order to uphold democracy.

It was university students, however, who were the main organizers of the demonstrations that precipitated the regime’s downfall. They made special effort to encourage women to participate as a means of reducing the risk of violence against demonstrators. Demonstrators also marched toward government buildings until encountering troops, where they erected barricades. Despite mass shootings, waves of protests continued, with leaders challenging the minority of protesters who reacted violently to the massacres.

Ensuing Events:

Despite corruption, poverty, and a weak infrastructure, Mali has remained one of the most democratic countries in Africa. In order to educate and promote the rights and duties of its citizens, the government implemented a program called the “Decentralization Mission” in 1993 to encourage popular participation in local and regional elections. Currently, Mali is divided into eight administrative regions, which are subdivided into districts, which are further subdivided into communes, which contain villages. There are 702 local municipal councils headed by elected mayors. There are independent radio stations and newspapers and the country experiences lively and open political debate. There have been a series of peaceful transfers of power.

Soon after the March Revolution of 1991, the Malian government negotiated a peace agreement with armed Tuareg rebels in which they agreed to end their rebellion in return for a degree of autonomy. In March 1996, there was a massive ceremonial burning of the rebels’ surrendered weapons in Bamako.

The events of 1991 are regularly commemorated. The anniversary of the March 26 massacre is a national holiday and there is a series of monuments in the capital of Bamako commemorating the events.

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The use of nonviolent action in Mali continues. There were several periods of student-led protests in the 1990s against high unemployment and other negative effects of structural adjustment programs imposed by international financial institutions, contributing to the fall of one government through a no confidence vote in parliament. The tradition of nonviolent resistance against authoritarianism came to the fore in 2001 when a proposed constitutional referendum put forward by President Alpha Oumar Konare was called off after a series of protests by those fearing it would have threatened the country's independent judiciary and effectively make the president immune to prosecution. Additional protests against neo-liberal economic policies erupted in 2005. Hundreds peacefully demonstrated against the 2006 visit by then-French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy in protest of his tough policies against immigrants. That same year, Mali hosted the World Social Forum, a mass gathering of activists from hundreds of civil society organizations.

Mali provides an example of an underdeveloped country which—although lacking in many of the resources available in others societies that have experienced unarmed insurrections against authoritarian rule—nevertheless was able to launch a nonviolent democratic revolution. Moreover, Malian democratic institutions have survived despite the challenges of an armed insurgency in the north, draconian structural adjustment programs, endemic corruption and high rates of illiteracy. In taking advantage of the country's cultural traditions and spreading their message through griots and other traditional means, a sustainable democratic movement not only emerged victorious against brutal repression in the March 1991 uprising, but avoided the tragic violence and instability of many of its west African neighbors through its decentralizing governing institutions and ongoing tradition of nonviolent action in a democratic society.


Further Reading:

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