

## Mali Overview

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

## Environment

The Republic of Mali is a landlocked state in West Africa that extends into the Sahara Desert in the north, where its north-eastern border with [Algeria](#) begins. A long border with [Mauritania](#) extends from the north, then juts west to [Senegal](#). In the west, Mali borders Senegal and [Guinea](#); to the south, [Côte d'Ivoire](#); to the south-east [Burkina Faso](#), and in the east, [Niger](#). The country straddles the Sahara and Sahel, home primarily to nomadic herders, and the less-arid south, predominately populated by farming peoples. The Niger River arches through southern and central Mali, where it feeds sizeable lakes. The Senegal river is an important resource in the west. Mali has mineral resources, notably gold and phosphorous.

## Peoples

Main languages: French (official), Bambara, Fulfulde (Peulh), Songhai, Tamasheq.

Main religions: Islam (90%), traditional religions (6%), Christian (4%).

Main minority groups: Peulh (also called Fula or Fulani) 1.4 million (11%), Senoufo and Minianka 1.2 million (9.6%), Soninké (Saracolé) 875,000 (7%), Songhai 875,000 (7%), [Tuareg](#) and Maure 625,000 (5%), Dogon 550,000 (4.4%) Bozo 350,000 (2.8%), Diawara 125,000 (1%), Xaasongaxango (Khassonke) 120,000 (1%).

[Note: The percentages for Peulh, Soninke, Manding (mentioned below), Songhai, and Tuareg and Maure, as well as those for religion in Mali, come from the U.S. State Department background note on Mali, 2007; Data for Senoufo and Minianka groups comes from Ethnologue - some from 2000 and some from 1991; for Dogon from Ethnologue, 1998; for Diawara and Xaasongaxango from Ethnologue 1991; Percentages are converted to numbers and vice-versa using the State Department's 2007 estimated total population of 12.5 million.]

Around half of Mali's population consists of Manding (or Mandé) peoples, including the Bambara (Bamana) and the Malinké. The largest and dominant ethnic group, the Bambara, live in central and southern Mali along the middle Niger Valley, and around 80 per cent of all Malians speak Bambara as a *lingua franca*, especially in the centre, west and south. The Malinké also speak a Mande language and live in the southwest and west. Bambara, and to a lesser extent Malinké, have dominated the political life of Mali through their geographical proximity to the seat of national government - Bamako - and

their Western education in the colonial period.

The Peulh (Fula, Fulani) are spread across western Africa. In Mali, they live predominantly in the great inland delta of the Niger, where their Fulfulde language is the *lingua franca*, and in the country's east. Some are cattle herders, while others are sedentary farmers.

The Senoufo, who call themselves Siena, are an important ethnic group in south-east Mali, where they abut a larger Senoufo population in Côte d'Ivoire. Most are sedentary farmers. Many Senoufo also have migrated to urban areas in Mali, as well as to France and Côte d'Ivoire. They are divided into five sub-groups, of which Minianka is one. Senoufo resisted Islam more than did other peoples, and many continue to adhere to traditional beliefs.

The Soninké, or Saracolé, live in north-west Mali, in the Sahelian zone along the Senegal River. They are descendants of the Ghana Empire that reigned from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and have lived in the region for thousands of years. Traditional Soninké society is characterized by a rigid caste system. Many are merchants and travel throughout West Africa and beyond.

The Songhai are mostly settled subsistence farmers in south-eastern Mali, in the Niger valley from Djenné to Ansongo, although some nomadic groups are dispersed across Mali, Niger, and into Algeria. They are descendants of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Songhai empire of Gao, which was destroyed by the Moroccans in 1591. The Songhai were converted to Islam in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The Tuareg (see separate section) and Maure (Moors) live in northern Mali. Maure are a group of Berber nomads who migrate between Mali and Mauritania. They are traditionally herders of goats and sheep, as well as providers of transport by camel and donkey. Maure society is divided into castes, with Beydan (White Moors) dominant over their former slaves and their descendants, the Haritins (Black Moors). Both share the same Arab-Berber culture, speak Hassaniya dialects of Arabic, and practice Islam. Members of the sub-groups can appear racially indistinct.

The Dogon live in the Mopti plateau region around Bandiagara, where they live in cliff villages and the sand dunes of Seno. Some Dogon have also migrated to Bamako and Cote d'Ivoire in search of employment. Dogon traditional life and art forms have survived, and their settlements now draw many tourists. Many Dogon still practice their vibrant traditional religion, although around one third have converted to Islam. They speak a distinct language, of which there are several dialects. Most are agriculturalists, but there is also a small caste of craftsmen.

Bobo, Diawara and Bozo fishers live by the Niger. Bobo (Bwa) live in the San and Tominian regions of Mali but are more numerous in Burkina Faso. Bobo farmers have retained traditional beliefs and customs although many have become Christians. They are descendants of the Soninke diaspora after the fall of the Ghana Empire. The Diawara are an ethnic group living in the Niora and Nara regions. They speak the Soninké (Saracolé) language of the more numerous groups who surround them but they are not a subgroup of the Saracolé. The Bozo are fishers of the middle Niger, believed to be descendants of Soninké (Saracolé) who left the Ghana empire after its fall and migrated south-east to Niger. Divided into clans, Bozo fishers now organize co-operatives to market their fish catch.

The homeland of the Xaasongaxango (Khassonke), known as the Khasso, is in western Mali. It formerly consisted of several small chiefdoms and kingdoms. Their language is very similar to Bambara, and to Malinké in Senegal.

Ethnic rivalries have not been a major feature of the Malian political scene to date and the various

groups often compliment each other. Such diverse farming groups as Bambara, Malinké, Songhai and Dogon do not compete for the same lands and do not produce sufficient surplus to become marketplace rivals. However, the pastoralists of the hinterland have suffered from neglect and the ravages of drought. Around 90% of Malians practice Islam, while six per cent practice traditional beliefs and four per cent practice either Catholic or Protestant Christianity.

[^top](#)

## History

The first great empire in Mali was the Ghana Empire, formed by Soninké people at the beginning of the 8th century CE. It thrived on the trade of copper, salt and other goods from the north in exchange for gold from the south. In the early 11<sup>th</sup> century, Almoravids arrived from the north, defeated the Ghana Empire, and began converting the Soninké to Islam. The Ghana Empire recovered briefly in a weakened state, but was soon defeated by the Kingdom of Mali. At roughly this time, members of the Keita people who resisted Islam split off and took refuge in the Bandiagara cliffs, becoming the Dogon people. Soninké who left the remnants of the Ghana Empire to settle on the banks of the Niger river, where they founded the towns of Mopti and Djenné, became the Bozo people.

The Mali Empire grew out of a small Manding state that formed a southern province of the Ghana Empire. It defeated the hobbled Ghana Empire in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and took control of the lucrative north-south trade, as well as gold mining in the south. In 1325, the empire conquered Timbuktu and Gao. But beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Songhai settlements at the bend of the Niger River broke away from the Mali Empire and began using their military prowess to gain control over surrounding territory. The empire was weakened by disputes over succession, and was effectively conquered by the Songhai in 1375, although its vestiges continued into the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The Songhai Empire spread across the region, into today's Nigeria, and thrived on trade in salt and gold until its defeat by the Moroccan army in 1591. It was during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries that the Senoufo migrated from the north to today's Cote d'Ivoire and south-eastern Mali. Also in the 16th century, the Peulh spread from Senegal across the Sahel to Sudan. Their prowess as fighters did not allow their southward expansion because the tropical climate and disease there prevented use of the horses on which they relied.

The Moroccans tenuously held parts of the area of today's Mali from 1591 until 1737. In this period of transition after the great empires, smaller kingdoms vied for control. These included the Senoufo kingdom of Kéné Dougou, centred on the border area of today's Mali and Burkina Faso and the Bambara Empire, centred on the town of Ségou and extending its reach over portions of central and southern Mali. Under the Bambara empire, peoples such as the Bobo (Bwa) were forced to pay tribute. In 1861, a Toucouleur (Peulh) warrior and his Islamic army, using guns acquired through trade with Europeans, toppled the Bambara Empire and briefly established a theocracy the region. The Toucouleur leaders took Bobo as slaves and conscripted them into their army. In 1880, during the European 'scramble for Africa', the French military arrived to assert Paris's claim to the territory that it initially called 'Upper Senegal'.

In 1892, the French established the capital of the territory it now called 'Soudan' at Kayes, in the west, and began construction of a railway from Dakar to Niger. There were numerous rebellions against French rule, including by the Tuareg in the north and the Bobo in the San region. The Tuareg fought against French efforts to sedentarize and tax them, but succumbed in 1898. That same year, the French succeeded in quelling a seven-year Malinké rebellion. In part, the French used Toucouleur as mercenaries to consolidate their control over the interior. In 1915 and 1916, French forces themselves

destroyed Bobo villages and killed Bobo leaders following revolts over forced labour and conscription.

During French colonial rule, parts of West Africa including Mali and its neighbours, in various configurations, were called Soudan, Senegambia and Niger, Upper Senegal and Niger, and the Federation of French West Africa. French administrators picked favourites among their colonial subjects to rule on their behalf: collecting taxes, implementing forced labour programmes, and conscripting locals into the armed forces. Local administrators were provided with an education and opportunities for advancement. The French forced many subsistence farmers in the inland Niger delta from their land in an effort to implement larger-scale agricultural schemes. However, the attempt at production of cotton and rice for export failed. French colonialism faced resistance from urban trade unions and even organized civil servants. Between 1922 and 1946, Islamic leaders spurred several revolts that were put down.

After World War II the French allowed formation of political parties, and in 1956 the territory gained the right to self-representation. With passage of a new French constitution in 1958, the République Soudannaise was granted complete internal autonomy. In 1959 the territory joined Senegal to form the Mali Federation, and it is this entity that became independent from France on 20 June 1960. But Senegal seceded two months later, and in September 1960, Soudan withdrew from the French Community and Franc Zone, declaring itself the Republic of Mali.

President Modibo Keita, a Marxist, had dominated pre-independence politics in Mali, and after independence quickly declared a one-party state. Policies of nationalization and industrialization proved disastrous to the Malian economy, and in 1967 the country re-joined the Franc zone. In the face of rising discontent with economic hardship, Keita formed a radicalized militia to intimidate opponents. In November 1968, military officers staged a bloodless coup and Lieutenant Moussa Traoré became president at the head of the Comité Militaire pour la Liberation Nationale (CMLN). Traoré banned political activity, and although he scaled back some of Keita's economic policies, he still pursued socialistic economic approaches. Major drought hit the region in 1972 and 1973 and had a severe impact on Tuareg and other herders in the north. In the south, too, the drought had devastating consequences for sedentary farmers. Traoré's government squandered much of the foreign aid sent to relieve the humanitarian crisis.

In response to criticism, Traoré introduced a new constitution in 1974 to pave the way for a return to civilian rule. The new document established a one-party state, and in 1979 elections Traoré rewarded himself with 99% of the vote. 1980 student-led demonstrations were violently repressed, as were three alleged coup attempts. Severe drought in 1984-1985 led to famine among the Tuareg, who had long been in low-level conflict with colonial and post-colonial administrators. The Malian government did little to ease their plight. Traoré amended the constitution in 1985 to remove the limit on his term of office. He introduced market reforms during the 1980s and entered into an austerity agreement with the International Monetary Fund. In 1990, Tuareg separatists struck at government facilities in the city of Gao, and reprisal attacks by the Malian military fanned the flames of the rebellion.

The economic squeeze and inspiration from widespread political change elsewhere at the end of the Cold War led students to launch protests against Traoré in 1991, some of which turned to rioting. He eased some restrictions, including on the media, but it was not enough to satisfy proponents of democracy. A January 1991 cease-fire with Tuareg rebel factions, brokered by Algeria, soon fell apart. Government workers joined the students in the streets, and after soldiers opened fire on the protesters - killing more than 100 of them - a group of 17 military officers arrested Traoré and suspended the constitution.

After this military coup, however, the soldiers rapidly joined with civil society leaders to form a broad-

based Transitional Committee for the Salvation of the People, which in turn appointed members of a transitional government. A national conference held in August 1991 drafted a new constitution that was approved by referendum in January 1992. In early 1992, Malians elected a president, members of the National Assembly, and municipal leaders.

Alpha Oumar Konaré, leader of the Alliance for Democracy in Mali (ADEMA), became the country's new president in June 1992. Amid a partial opposition boycott in 1997, Konaré was re-elected to a second term in a process deemed free and fair by international observers. ADEMA also took around 80 per cent of the seats in the National Assembly. He focused on decentralization of the government, economic reform and coming to terms with Tuareg rebels in the north. Konaré made numerous concessions to the Tuareg, including 1992 reparations and enhanced regional self-governance. In 1994, Libya, which was also sponsoring rebellions in Sierra Leone and Liberia, backed a faction of Tuareg rebels who again attacked Gao. The Malian army responded, and was aided by a Songhai para-military organization. A new peace agreement was reached in 1995, and disarmament begun in 1996. When his term expired in 2002, Konaré resisted the pleadings of some of his supporters to abolish term limits and relinquished the presidency. Before stepping down, he commuted the death sentences of former president Traoré and his wife - who had been convicted of embezzlement - to life imprisonment.

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## **Governance**

Elections in 2002 brought Amadou Toumani Touré to power. As the former general who had led the 1991 coup against Moussa Traoré before quickly handing power to a transitional government, his supporters dubbed him the 'soldier of democracy'. International observers judged the elections to be essentially free and fair, despite some irregularities. In April 2007, Touré was elected to a second five-year term. His tenure in office has been marked by a focus on tackling corruption, for example through creation of an Office of the General Auditor. However, corruption remains a large problem and an impediment to economic growth. Mali remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Most Malians are subsistence farmers who are susceptible to drought, and threatened by climate change.

Under the 1992 constitution, the president is head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The president appoints the prime minister to head the government, and is limited to two five-year terms. In the 147-seat unicameral National Assembly, 14 seats are reserved for northern pastoralist and nomadic ethnic minorities, as are two cabinet positions. The judiciary is not fully independent of the executive and still follows colonial French laws to the extent that these have not been repealed or amended. Mali is a federal state, divided into eight regions plus the capital district of Bamako, each headed by an appointed governor. The regions are further divided into between five and nine districts, which are, in turn, divided into communes. Communes comprise multiple villages and quarters. The constitution provides for multi-party democracy, but disallows parties formed on the basis of ethnicity, gender, religion or region. Mali's media are among the least constricted in Africa.

## **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

With the exception of the Tuareg rebellion in the north, inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance has prevailed in Mali's sometimes-turbulent post-independence history. Since the 1996 peace agreement between the government of Mali and Tuareg rebels, tensions have continued and sporadically erupted into violence. Isolated Tuareg rebel attacks in 2006 and 2007 followed complaints about marginalization of the north, but may also have been linked with smuggling disputes. Increasingly, the United States has grown concerned about the possibility for Islamic extremism in northern Mali, and

after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, its forces have undertaken training operations with Mali's military.

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