

# Mali's Unlikely Democracy

*Why is one of Africa's most successful democracies taking hold in an impoverished Muslim country half-covered in the sand of the Sahara desert? In Mali, the seeds of change are rooted in tradition.*

BY ROBERT PRINGLE

AS JOURNALIST ROBERT KAPLAN FLEW INTO BAMAKO, Mali, in 1993, he saw tin roofs appear through thick dust blowing off the presumably advancing desert. He used this image of a “dying region” to conclude his *Atlantic Monthly* article “The Coming Anarchy,” in which he drew a connection between environmental degradation and growing disorder in the Third World, a hypothesis that certainly seemed to fit not only Mali but most of West Africa. When the article was published in February 1994, it made a considerable splash in Washington policy circles.

But even as Kaplan predicted doom, the situation on the ground in Mali did not quite fit his thesis. Yes, life was hard in this impoverished West African nation of 12 million people, and remains so. The 2005 United Nations Human Development Index, based on a combination of economic, demographic, and educational data, lists Mali as fourth from the bottom among 177 countries. Only Burkina Faso, Niger, and Sierra Leone rank lower. But despite persistent poverty and ongoing turmoil in neighboring states, in a single decade Mali has launched one of the most successful democracies in Africa. Its political record includes three

ROBERT PRINGLE, a historian and retired foreign service officer, served as U.S. ambassador to Mali from 1987 to 1990. He is the author of three books on Southeast Asian history, most recently *A Short History of Bali—Indonesia's Hindu Realm* (2004). A longer version of this article is forthcoming from the United States Institute of Peace.

democratic elections and two peaceful transitions of power, a transformation that seems nothing short of amazing.

When I served in Mali as American ambassador, from 1987 to 1990, I had never spent time in a country with such an apparent absence of political life of any kind. The military ruler, Moussa Traoré, presided over a typical single-party African dictatorship. In the early years after he took over in 1968, he survived several coup attempts, but by the time I arrived everyone seemed to have given up and gone to sleep. The government controlled all print and radio news, and, at first, there was no sign of dissident activity.

Mali, along with the rest of the region, had been wracked by drought in the late 1970s and again in the mid-1980s, and the government was making a serious effort to improve an economy dominated by peasant agriculture. Although the United States' significant interests in this poor, landlocked country were solely humanitarian, American economic aid to Mali almost tripled during my tour as ambassador. But I never imagined that tradition-bound, predominately Muslim Mali might soon become something of a poster child for African democracy.

There was a clue to what was coming, if I'd recognized it.

On my daily commute to the embassy through the potholed streets of Bamako, Mali's capital, my driver would listen to the seemingly endless half-song, half-chant recitals that were standard fare on the only radio station. He told me that the singers were griots, the hereditary musician-historian-entertainers of West Africa, singing about Mali's ancient history. He was a griot himself, and could explain some of the songs, often about the epic of Sunjata, the outcast-turned-hero who became the first emperor of old Mali in the 13th century. I recall wondering how people facing such a daunting present could be so preoccupied by stories from a distant past. I certainly did not envision how they might put their history to creative political use.

By the time my ambassadorial tour ended in 1990, Mali was on the cusp of momentous change. People were weary of the old dictatorship, which like many in Africa was vaguely

real authority to previously voiceless local governments. From the beginning, Mali's founding fathers claimed that decentralization was a return to traditional practice. The term for it in Bambara, the principal local language, is *mara segi so*, which means "bringing power home."

Mali's electoral track record since 1991 has been just messy enough to suggest that the country's democracy is genuine, not the creation of one strong, quasi-permanent leader in the background, as is the case in a number of other African states. The new constitution established a five-year presidency with a limit of two terms. Alpha Konaré, a journalist who had led the pro-democracy movement, won the first election in 1992. It was generally free and fair. Konaré and his ADEMA party also won in 1997, but this second election was a procedural shambles because of an inadequate electoral commission, and the opposition boycotted it. The electoral commission was

expanded and repaired, and the third national election, in 2002, went much more smoothly.

After his second term, Konaré—who reputedly once said that what Africa needs is more living ex-presidents—gracefully accepted retirement. Malian law wisely pro-

**MALI'S ELECTORAL TRACK record since 1991 has been just messy enough to suggest that the country's democracy is genuine.**

vides a comfortable personal residence for term-limited ex-chiefs of state, on the theory that it will help to discourage post-retirement coup plotting. But Konaré didn't need it: He is now chairman of Africa's top regional organization, the African Union. With Konaré out of the picture, ATT, Mali's erstwhile Cincinnatus, retired from the army, ran for election in 2002, and won handily. Meanwhile, the former dictator, Traoré, had been tried and sentenced to death for political and economic crimes. But Konaré pardoned him, and he is now living comfortably in Bamako with his once-controversial wife, whose extended family had been the economic power behind his regime.

Marxist-Leninist in organization; further, the demise of communism in the Soviet Union had destroyed whatever legitimacy such regimes still had. In March 1991, Mali's military dictator made the fatal mistake of ordering his troops to fire on students protesting in the capital, and several hundred were killed. In the wave of shocked public reaction that followed, a key military commander, Colonel Amadou Toumani Touré, joined the pro-democracy forces, and the dictatorship collapsed. Touré, better known as "ATT," promised to hand over power to an elected government. Like Cincinnatus, the Roman farmer who took up arms and then returned to his fields, Touré kept his word, surprising many of his fellow Malians.

Mali's new leaders immediately convened a national assembly, a kind of constitutional convention with representatives from all social classes. The government that emerged was influenced by the example of France, Mali's former colonial master. It included a specifically secular constitution, a strong executive, and a weak legislature. But most remarkable, and radically different from the French model, was a wholly Malian emphasis on decentralized administration that gave

During its first decade, Mali's democratic government settled a serious rebellion in the Saharan north, halted endemic student unrest, and established comprehensive political and religious freedom. These accomplishments were all the more remarkable given the chain-reaction conflicts that had spread across the region to Mali's south, from Liberia to Sierra Leone and most recently to Ivory Coast, once a model of developmental progress.



Mayor Manguran Bagayoko greets a constituent in front of his office in Keleya, one of the 702 rural communes that form the backbone of Mali's fledgling democracy.

Was Mali's record simply the result of fortuitous good leadership, or was something more fundamental at work? To find out, I returned in 2004 and traveled throughout the country conducting interviews. When I asked Malians to explain their aptitude for democracy, their answers boiled down to "It's the history, stupid," of course expressed more politely.

**T**hat history is intimately intertwined with Mali's geography. The country lies at the center of the great bulge of West Africa. Its northern half is part of the Sahara desert and mostly uninhabitable. Moving south toward the Atlantic Ocean, rainfall increases steadily, and Mali's southern half is arable. Bamako, in the country's midsection, gets as much rain as Washington, D.C., although precipitation falls entirely during the summer months. The once-fabled city of Timbuktu, on the desert's edge, receives less than one-tenth that amount. Roughly dividing Mali's two halves is the 2,600-mile-long Niger River, which rises in the hills of Guinea, not far from the coast, makes a vast arc to the northeast

through near-desert, then plunges south through Niger and Nigeria to the sea. Halfway through Mali, this "strong brown god" meets progressively flatter territory, losing momentum and spreading into a vast, seasonally flooded wetland or "inner delta," home to manatees, hippos, migrating birds, a mosaic of farmers, herders, and fisher folk, and a huge, French-era irrigation project. Mali's population still consists primarily of peasant farmers and herders.

The Niger River was the launching point for trade routes across the Sahara until they were marginalized by colonial-era commerce through coastal ports. Trans-Saharan trade nurtured ancient cities, the most famous in Mali being Jenné and Timbuktu. There were three early states: Ghana (eighth to 11th centuries), Mali (13th to 15th centuries), and Songhai (14th to 16th centuries). Two of the three lay largely outside modern Mali: Old Ghana inspired the name of modern Ghana, but was located in today's Mali and Mauritania, while old Mali was mainly in modern Mali, with a portion in Guinea. There were other states, but it is these three that the Malians refer to when they talk about the "Great Empires."

It is because of the Great Empires that Malians—from vil-

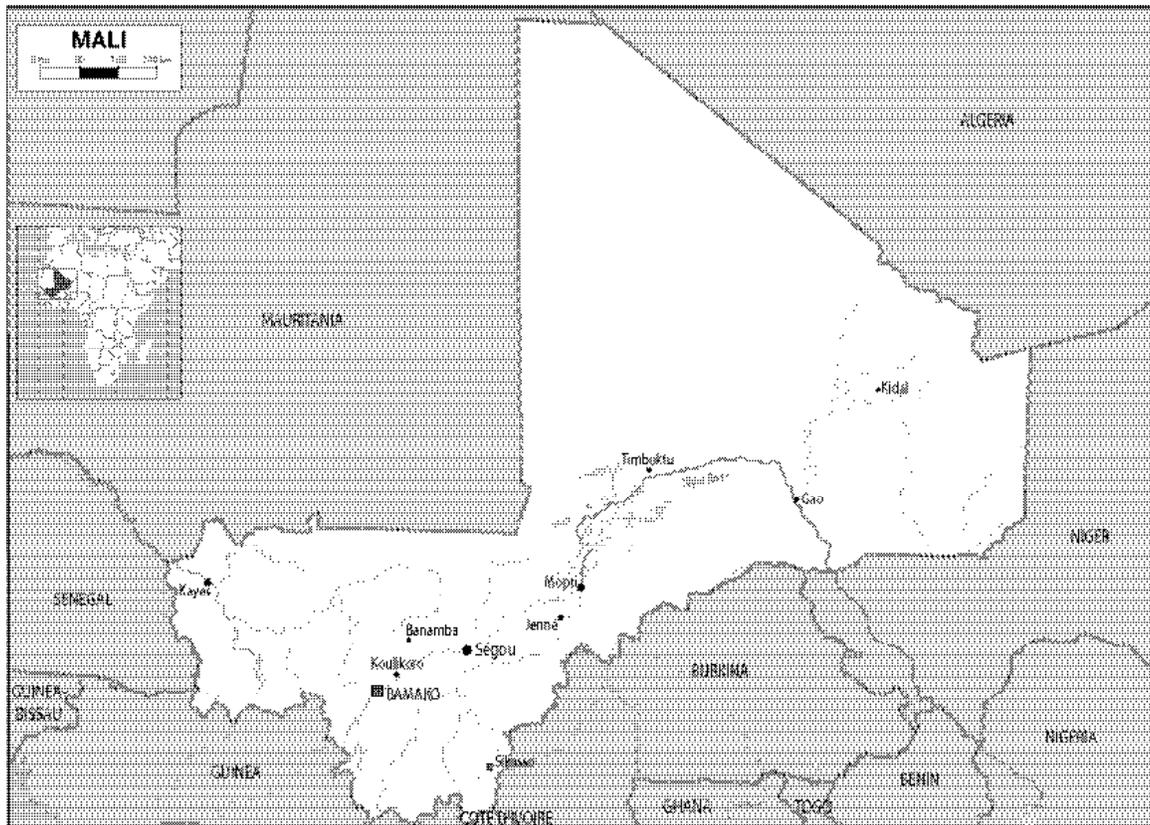
lagers to college professors—believe they have a gift for democracy and its twin, conflict resolution. The history they cite is not merely their extensive experience of precolonial, multiethnic government, unusual elsewhere on the continent, but also an associated system of beliefs and customs. The centerpiece of this tradition is the epic of Sunjata Keita, who overcame exile and physical handicap and founded the Mali Empire in the 13th century. Sunjata's story, primarily oral and circulated in numerous versions, has played a role in West Africa similar to that of the Homeric epics in Western civilization.

In Mali, it is fashionable to cite the “Constitution of Sunjata” as the inspiration for democratic decentralization. According to one of several versions of the epic, Sunjata gathered his chiefs on the slopes of a mountain not far from Bamako after his final unifying victory, and each chief presented Sunjata with his spear, in a symbolic act of submission. Sunjata then assumed the title of *mansa*, often translated “emperor,” and returned all the spears, signifying that the chiefs would rule autonomously. Today, some Malians see this oral constitution as equivalent to the Magna Carta.

Malians have redefined the term “consensus” to comport with the decentralization model. Whereas under the dictatorship “consensus” meant African-style democratic centralism, often smacking of communist practice, today it is understood to suggest reaching compromise on tough issues—more in the mode of Daniel Webster than Vladimir Lenin. No doubt this revisionism owes something to the fact that democracy is now the regime du jour, especially among big foreign-aid donors, while democratic centralism has been consigned to history's dustbin.

Malians believe that the Great Empires encouraged intermarriage and an almost-but-not-quite melting pot, which they refer to by the French term *brassage* (brew). Mali's ethnic diversity is about average for an African state. Malians speak a half-dozen major languages, none of which is used by a majority, although Bambara is widely used as a lingua franca. French is still the official language.

Malians say that their history and culture have nourished interethnic tolerance. They cite a whole tool kit of conflict resolution and avoidance mechanisms. There are, for example,



The distribution of Mali's 12 million people maps its water supply. The arid Sahara desert renders much of the country's northern half virtually uninhabitable; the 2,600-mile-long Niger River, known as the “strong brown god,” nourishes the south, which is home to the country's many peasant farmers, fishers, and herders.

“joking relationships” between clans and tribes. People involved in such relationships are licensed to greet each other with jocular insults. My Tuareg research assistant liked to remind my Dogon driver that the latter’s ancestors had once been slaves of his Tuareg ancestors. The driver would joke back in kind. While it always made me a bit nervous, this traditional practice seems to relieve tensions among Malians, perhaps because it is well understood as a substitute for tribal hostility. In a more subtle way, the joking relationships are an affirmation of a broader Malian identity.

Malian griots do double duty as conflict resolution specialists. So do Muslim imams. In the Ségou region, queens, descended from founding monarchs, traditionally acted as peacemakers. There is a tremendous corpus of customary law, varying from region to region, that still regulates issues of land, inheritance, and relations between communities and ethnic groups. Although most of the tool kit is oral, there is also a written element contained in ancient, often privately owned libraries in Timbuktu and elsewhere that were, until recently, maintained in secret. For years their contents were assumed to be overwhelmingly Arabic, hence not quite

African. It is now becoming more apparent that the old libraries, like the ancient trade routes, are highly diverse. They include material in black African languages transcribed in Arabic script, much as these languages are written with the Roman alphabet today. There is even material in Ladino, the language of Sephardic Jewry. The subject matter is fascinatingly various, ranging from science to interethnic governance, as well as Islam. A Malian commentator recently observed that the old books are “like a lamp at our feet.”

From these many materials, Malians are creating a national foundation mythology. Like Americans, they are selective. We stress the Bill of Rights, not the Pullman strike or what we did to Native Americans, and we like to believe the story about the young George Washington making a clean breast of it after he chopped down his father’s cherry tree, even when we know that this appealing story was invented by an early biographer. The Malians emphasize the three Great Empires and pass lightly over their ancestors’ later complicity in the Atlantic slave trade, though they do not deny it.

What is most important about Mali’s mythology is not

whether or to what extent history is being embellished, but rather the underlying assumption that reason and creativity can maintain harmonious relations among people of different cultural backgrounds. The Malians believe that equitable, responsive government has become a national tradition in part as a response to harsh conditions. Malian historian Doulaye Konaté, a leading scholar of the subject, notes, “It is precisely because violence was omnipresent that West African societies developed mechanisms and procedures aimed at preventing or, if that didn’t work, at managing conflict.” The value of such a mindset in a modern African setting, with warring, unsettled, or dictatorial neighbors still all too common, is hard to overestimate.

Mali’s new decentralization has created a three-tiered system: regions (think states), circles (think counties), and communes, which usually comprise several villages. Com-

**THE MALIANS BELIEVE that equitable, responsive government has become a national tradition.**

mune inhabitants elect local councils, which choose their own mayors and send representatives to the two higher tiers of the system. The 702 rural communes are widely regarded as the backbone of Malian democratization.

During my recent trip to Mali I visited Keleya, a commune an hour’s drive south of Bamako that includes 22 villages and a total population of 17,200. Mayor Manguran Bagayoko was greeting constituents in front of his office, a modest but attractive building in traditional adobe style. He has succeeded in getting more primary-level classrooms, he explained later. Now he needs secondary-level classrooms for their graduates. He also wants an improved marketplace, a local radio station, and some small irrigation works, all listed in his development plan (required by the central government). About 80 percent of Keleya’s citizens have paid their development tax, levied on all adult Malians, which is earmarked for commune expenditures—a very good record given that Malians do not like paying taxes any more than anyone else does. But Bagayoko is still perpetually short of funds.

As I proceeded down the road to visit other communes, I saw that Keleya was not typical—indeed, there was no such thing as typical. While some communes, like Keleya, seemed to be doing well, others were floundering amid apathy, corruption, or divided leadership. But for all its teething troubles, decentralized local government has already transformed rural Mali. Fifteen years ago the countryside was bowed under a resented, opaque central authority. Now political springtime is in the air.

The symbol of the new order is the ubiquitous speed bump, installed by communes on highways where the vehicles of the relatively rich and powerful used to roar through with scant regard for chickens or children. Whether villagers are doing well or poorly, they are certainly enjoying a new sense of hope and potential. In areas where daily life is not only hard but often boring, the jet contrails overhead have signaled, especially to village youth, an exciting realm of

rural communes of resources and then complaining that the resulting ineffectiveness shows the need to restore central control. In one sense this is a healthy democratic debate, but it's not clear who's winning.

Mali has as much political freedom as anyone could ask. There are about 15 daily newspapers, compared with the single government-run sheet prior to democratization. Most seem to exist on thin air, and reporters can be bought. Nevertheless, the better papers do not hesitate to criticize the government, and a leading editor insisted to me that if his paper uncovered a serious scandal involving the president, he would not hesitate to report it. But newspapers are a product available only to the elite. Most of them cost 50 cents a copy, the equivalent of at least \$10 for the average Malian. None has a distribution network outside Bamako.

It is FM radio, not print, that has truly democratized the media in Mali. One popular program features two elderly men sitting around the Malian equivalent of a cracker barrel, poking fun at the contents of the day's newspapers, in a manner reminiscent of Finley Peter Dunne's immortal character Mr. Dooley. Indeed, with some 140 radio stations in Mali, broadcasters have little choice but to rely heavily on the newspapers (and each

**MALI HAS ASSUMED new importance in America's eyes, not only because it is democratic but also because it is a 90 percent Muslim country in a rough neighborhood.**

wealth and modernity as inaccessible as the aircraft miles above them. Now, thanks in part to decentralization, they can begin to feel part of a nation and the greater world beyond.

In Bamako, there is less optimism. The educated middle classes complain about poor education, a dysfunctional justice system, and political parties whose leaders have no agendas beyond landing as many ministerial positions for their members as possible. They say that corruption has been democratized, that in the bad old days it was monopolized by the dictator and his family, but now everyone is on the take, from schoolteachers to hospital workers. Decentralization, which is praised by foreigners and emulated in some neighboring countries, is under fire in Mali itself, especially from the professional civil servants who ran the old centralized system. Proponents of decentralization believe that these mandarins are deliberately starving the

other) for content. The spread of rural radio got a big boost from a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) program that introduced suitcase-size FM transmitters developed for use in the Canadian north and Alaska. These little stations are a mainstay of decentralized local government. They also can be quite creative. A favorite entertainment is to tap a newly arrived American Peace Corps volunteer to play disc jockey and practice his or her Bambara language skills on the air, a performance that Malian audiences find most entertaining.

In general, Malians deeply appreciate their new liberty. In the countryside, the once-feared Department of Water and Forests, which controls a great deal of Mali's rural land beyond village boundaries, no longer uses its quasi-police powers to persecute the rural dwellers for sometimes-fictional infractions. In the cities, political intimidation is absent; instead, some complain that the police can't

or won't get tough about anything anymore. Most important, Malians seem well aware that their new freedom depends on the continued democratic alternation of political power, and as yet display no nostalgia for the old dictatorship.

After Mali's highly successful local elections of 2004, Yaroslav Trofimov of *The Wall Street Journal* wrote a front-page article headlined "Polling Timbuktu: Islamic Democracy? Mali Finds a Way to Make It Work." Malians were gratified by the big-time publicity but mildly annoyed by the assumption that Mali's democracy is "Islamic" and by the implication that any Muslim country with a democracy qualifies for freak-show status.

**M**ali has indeed assumed new importance in America's eyes, not only because it is democratic but also because it is a 90 percent Muslim country in the middle of a rough neighborhood. U.S. strategists, especially at the European Command, which is responsible for Europe and Africa, worry that the Malian

Sahara, with its huge expanses and uncontrolled borders, could become a haven for terrorism. Islamic extremism could then move from desert redoubts through the impoverished, conflict-plagued states of West Africa, eventually threatening U.S. oil interests in the Gulf of Guinea. It is assumed that such extremism would be doubly dangerous in a poor, weak region where Islam has long been gaining ground. It is also assumed that Malian Islam is increasingly polarized between a moderate but enfeebled traditional variety and a virulent fundamentalist strain with growing foreign support.

The truth is messier but less alarming. Mali has a centuries-long history of conflict stoked by fundamentalist, back-to-the-Qur'an reformers who sometimes waged jihad against their opponents. These included both non-Muslims and members of still-powerful Muslim brotherhoods that performed rituals often steeped in magic and mysticism. This historical tension is embodied in the famous 14th-century mosque of Jenné, the world's largest adobe building, which was destroyed by a jihadist reformer in the mid-19th century because he considered its man-made beauty hereti-



Villagers travel to market near Hombori in central Mali amid the spectacular scenery that could, with development, make the country a tourist destination.

cal. It was later rebuilt by less fundamentalist Muslims, with a little help from the French.

Today the degree of polarization among Mali's Muslims is routinely exaggerated by global strategists who know little of its long history. There are, to be sure, still Islamic extremists in Mali, some influenced by Wahhabi doctrine as well as by other fundamentalist traditions. But there are also moderate clerics willing, for example, to help USAID promote family planning, as long as this is done in the interest of maternal health, and condoms are not brandished in public. Christian missionaries, including evangelicals, are free to proselytize in Mali, although they don't make much headway. Most telling, there is as yet no significant movement to revise Mali's secular constitution and incorporate Islamic sharia law, a major issue in nearby Nigeria and elsewhere in the region.

U.S. policymakers routinely conflate two separate issues: the danger of Islamic extremism and unrest in the Saharan north bordering Mauritania and Algeria. Desert unrest is serious but has little, if anything, to do with Islam. For decades the Malian state has been struggling to integrate the north, which covers more than half of Mali's land area but is home to less than five percent of its population. The people of the north are a complex group including Tuareg nomads, the famed "Blue Men" of the desert, so named because the men's traditional head wrappings leave blue pigment on their faces. The Tuaregs were romanticized and given special privileges by the French, and were therefore regarded with suspicion by Mali's post-independence rulers. From 1990 to 1995, the north seethed in a bitter rebellion led by local Tuaregs trained in Libya. To achieve peace, the newly democratized Malian government withdrew its military forces from much of the north and offered local self-government, which has been highly successful.

While the rebellion is over, the desert has remained hospitable to bandits, smugglers, and traffickers in illegal immigrants heading for Europe. The trans-Saharan road through Mali, safe for tourists before the rebellion, is no longer. There has been at least one case of infiltration by Algerian Islamist rebels, who in 2003 fled into Mali with 15 captured European tourists, mostly Germans. The tourists were ransomed without loss of life, save one woman who died of heat stroke, and the Algerians retreated into Chad, where they were allegedly captured with the help of U.S. Special Forces.

In formulating its policy on Mali's northern unrest, the United States has displayed a certain degree of inconsistency. Washington welcomes and praises Malian democratization. But when it comes to the north, the U.S. government would like Mali to forget about due process and get tough with suspected terrorists, in the manner of neighboring Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania, none of which is exactly democratic. The Malians welcome U.S. military assistance but are deeply concerned that rough tactics could unravel the hard-won peace in the north. Those knowledgeable about northern Mali, including Malians and officials of foreign nongovernmental organizations, agree that economic aid crafted to the special needs of the desert region, not strong-arm tactics, is more likely to keep the peace.

**F**or all its political progress, Mali has yet to break the vicious cycle of poverty. Although there has been no catastrophic drought since 1983–84, per capita economic growth—the best measure of progress against poverty—averaged only 3.4 percent from 1993 to 2003. In part, that is because the population is growing rapidly: 2.4 percent in 2003. People still have many children because it is economically rational to do so in a labor-intensive agricultural economy where the infant mortality rate is high. Mali's official debt, owed mainly to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, is more than 100 percent of its gross domestic product. Aid donors are eager to reward Mali for its democratic record—it was by 2003 the leading per capita aid recipient in West Africa—but much of the new aid must be recycled to pay off old debt. Thus far it is clear that Mali's decade-old democracy is not producing sufficiently rapid economic growth to meet popular expectations. Malians are agreed that until it does, democracy will not be on firm ground.

Cotton and gold, the country's chief exports, are both unstable sources of revenue. Gold production depends on unpredictable future discoveries, while cotton is notoriously vulnerable to a world market depressed by developed countries' self-subsidization. The U.S. government's payments to its own cotton farmers probably cost Mali more, by depressing world cotton prices, than Mali gains financially from U.S. economic aid. The Malian economy remains reliant on traditional rain-fed agriculture, including cotton, grain, and cattle raising, all of which suffer in dry years.

Yet the country is not threatened by inexorable economic catastrophe, as the popular image of the advancing desert suggests. Scientific research shows with some precision that the Sahara has been both wetter and drier over the past 40,000 years than it is at present. Most of the land degradation now evident, and there is plenty of it, results from human activity—population increases combined with the use of primitive technology and overgrazing. There is nothing inexorable about it.

Moreover, Mali does not lack for economic resources. It has an abundance of irrigable land, especially along the Niger River and its tributaries, which could produce fruit and vegetables for winter export to Europe. It has spectacular tourist possibilities—ancient cities, elephants in scenery reminiscent of Arizona's Monument Valley, and an increasingly renowned array of art and music. But neither agriculture nor tourism has been significantly developed since I served in Mali 16 years ago, despite shelves of donor-financed studies. Malian conservatism, an almost instinctive tendency to move slowly and favor traditional values, has been a tremendous political asset, but at the same time it sometimes induces lethargy and resistance to needed change. Commercial agriculture, for example, requires skills and attitudes alien to a society in which subsistence is the primary objective and noneconomic values are sometimes entrenched. Malians still prefer to accumulate cattle as symbols of wealth until a bad rain year requires surplus animals to be sold at fire-sale prices. What venture capitalism exists remains in the hands of foreign ethnic minorities—Lebanese and, now, even Chinese, who have arrived in the wake of recent Chinese construction projects.

Malians have made the most of their dependence on foreign aid by managing and manipulating their aid donors, a complex and fluctuating congregation of foreigners with the World Bank in the lead. (The United States contributes only a small fraction of Mali's total aid.) In so doing, they employ all the diplomatic skills and persistence derived from centuries of multiethnic politics. They are developing a reputation for signing aid agreements and then avoiding implementation if it requires doing something distasteful. Thus, in 2004 Mali backed away from a key agreement with the World Bank to privatize the government-owned cotton-processing company. Malians are quite aware that the donors are not about to abandon democratic Mali, especially with conflict raging nearby in the once-prosperous Ivory Coast. As one leading Malian academic told me, "For

us, democracy is as good as money in the bank."

Foreign aid remains essential to Mali as a source of new ideas and needed policy changes as well as financial support. To cite only one example, foreign donors, led by the United States, prodded the Malians into reforms that have made the country self-sufficient in food production except in drought years. But Mali's democratization will not be complete until Malian leaders take charge of economic as well as political policy, and develop a vision for Mali's economic future and a strategy for reaching it. In general, they need to worry less about securing foreign aid and more about realizing Mali's own potential. And they should eschew their customary politesse with foreign friends who do unconscionable things. To the United States their message might well be, "If you want us to worry about your survival (and help thwart terrorism), you should worry about ours (and support our agriculture)."

**T**he most striking thing about Malian democracy is its success in drawing intellectual and spiritual sustenance from an epic past, and actively incorporating homegrown elements, such as decentralization. If there is occasional fiddling with historical truth, the past provides plenty of room for differing viewpoints and for shaping tradition to meet modern needs. It is this aspect of the Malian experience that is least appreciated, and it deserves more attention from policymakers, both African and foreign, who have a tendency to assume that "tradition" equates with "bad."

Not every African country has Mali's wealth of history and culture, but all of them, no matter how wracked by war or poverty, can draw on the positive aspects of their own experience for support. Aid donors can help by encouraging cultural preservation, exemplified by the U.S. embassy-sponsored small projects program, which in Mali is helping to preserve the old libraries in Timbuktu. Schools across the continent remain woefully deprived of textbooks that could, among other things, help preserve and stimulate pride in the positive aspects of local tradition. Where customary law is of critical importance, as it is in Mali, both government officials and their foreign advisers should be trained to make better use of it, rather than dismiss it out of hand as an awkward anachronism.

The underlying message from foreign friends to Malians and other Africans should be that they can proudly use the past to help make a better future. ■