Topic Page: **Mali**

**Definition:** *Mali* from *Collins English Dictionary*


Summary Article: **Mali**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(mä’lē), officially Republic of Mali, independent republic (2015 est. pop. 17,468,000), 478,764 sq mi (1,240,000 sq km), the largest country in W Africa. Mali is bordered on the north by Algeria, on the east and southeast by Niger, on the south by Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, and on the west by Guinea, Senegal, and Mauritania. Bamako is the capital and by far the largest city.

**Land and People**

In the south, traversed by the Niger and Senegal rivers, are fertile areas where cotton, rice, and peanuts are grown. Elsewhere the country is arid desert or semidesert and barely supports grazing (mainly cattle, sheep, and goats). The Niger serves as an important transportation artery and a source of fish. The main ethnic groups are the Mande (Bambara, Malinke, and Soninke), who are chiefly farmers and fishermen, and the Fulani and Tuareg, who are pastoralists. About 90% of the population is Muslim; most of the remainder follow traditional religions. While French is the official language, Bambara is spoken by 80% of the population and there are many other African tongues.

**Economy**

The vast majority of Malians are employed in farming, herding, or fishing. Cotton and peanuts are the country’s only significant cash crops, with millet, rice, corn, sorghum, and vegetables being the major food crops. Agriculture and herding have been increasingly hurt by the encroaching desert. Mali’s industries are mainly limited to the processing of farm commodities, construction, and the manufacture of basic consumer goods. Gold, phosphate, kaolin, salt, limestone, and uranium are mined, and the country has extensive unexploited mineral resources, including bauxite, iron ore, manganese, tin, and copper. Remittances from Malians working abroad are also an important source of income. The Manantali Dam on the Bafing River (a Senegal tributary) produces hydroelectric power.

Gold and cotton account for the bulk of Mali’s export revenues; livestock and fish are also exported. The main imports are petroleum, machinery and equipment, construction materials, food, and textiles. Mali’s chief trading partners are China, France, Senegal, and Thailand.

**Government**

Mali is governed under the constitution of 1992. The executive branch is headed by a president, who is
the head of state and is popularly elected for a five-year term and is eligible for a second term. The prime minister, who is the head of government, is appointed by the president. The unicameral National Assembly has 147 members who are popularly elected for five-year terms. Administratively, the country is divided into eight regions.

History

Early History to the End of Colonialism

The Mali region has been the seat of extensive empires and kingdoms, notably those of Ghana (4th–11th cent.), Mali, and Gao. The medieval empire of Mali was a powerful state and one of the world's chief gold suppliers; it attained its peak in the early 14th cent. under Mansa (Emperor) Musa (reigned c.1312–1337), who made a famous pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324 laden with gold and slaves to proclaim Mali's prosperity and power. During his rule Muslim scholarship reached new heights in Mali, and such cities as Timbuktu and Djenné (Jenne) became important centers of trade, learning, and culture.

The Mali empire was followed by the Songhai empire of Gao, which rose to great power in the late 15th cent. In 1590 the empire, already weakened by internal divisions, was shattered by a Moroccan army. The Moroccans, however, could not effectively dominate the vast region, which broke up into petty states. By the late 18th cent., the area was in a semianarchic condition and was subject to incursions by the Tuareg and Fulani.

The 19th cent. witnessed a great resurgence of Islam. The Tukolor empire of al-Hajj Umar (1794–1864) and the empire of Samori Touré (1870–98) emerged as Muslim states opposing French invasion of the region. By 1898 the French conquest was virtually complete; Mali, called French Sudan, became part of the Federation of French West Africa. A nationalist movement, spearheaded by trade unions and student groups, blossomed during the period between the two world wars. The Sudanese Union, a militantly anticolonial party, became the leading political force. Its leader, Modibo Keita, was a descendant of the Mali emperors.

Independence and Beyond

In the French constitutional referendum of 1958, French Sudan voted to join the French Community as the autonomous Sudanese Republic. In 1959 the republic joined Senegal to form the Mali Federation, but political differences shattered the union in 1960. That same year, the Sudanese Republic, renamed the Republic of Mali, obtained full independence from France and severed ties with the French Community. Seeking to promote African unity, Mali joined in a largely symbolic union with Guinea and Ghana, and in 1963 it joined the newborn Organization of African Unity.

Under Keita's presidency Mali became a one-party state committed to socialist policies. In 1962 the country withdrew from the Franc Zone and adopted a nonconvertible national currency. The resulting economic and financial difficulties forced an accommodation with France in 1967; Mali devalued its currency, returned to the Franc Zone, and permitted French administrators to assume a supervisory role in the economy. Militant elements in the Sudanese Union opposed this rapprochement, however, and Keita formed a people's militia to destroy opposition. The arrest of several dissenting army officers by the militia in 1968 provoked a bloodless military coup that overthrew the Keita regime and installed Lt. Moussa Traoré as president. The country continued to pursue a course of nonalignment in international affairs.

In the early 1970s, a prolonged drought desiccated the Sahel region of Africa, further reducing Mali's
already meager water supplies. The drought shattered the country's agriculture economy by killing thousands of head of livestock and hindering crop production. The resulting famine, disease, and poverty contributed to the deaths of untold thousands and forced the southward migration of many peoples.

Keita died in prison in 1977, touching off a series of protests. A new constitution (1979) contained provisions for elections to be held, and democratic measures were implemented in spite of an unstable political climate. Traoré was reelected president in 1979; he effectively repressed coup attempts in the late 1970s and early 1980s and was again elected in 1985. Also in 1985, a border dispute with Burkina Faso erupted into armed conflict. Neighboring nations sent troops to end the fighting, but relations between the two countries remain strained.

In 1991, Traoré was overthrown in a coup and replaced with a transitional committee headed by Amadou Toumani Touré. Mali had been a one-party state controlled by the Democratic Union of the Malian People (UDMP) from 1974 until 1992. In that year a new constitution was approved providing for a multiparty democracy, and Alpha Oumar Konaré of the Alliance for Democracy (ADEMA) became Mali's first democratically elected president. In the early 1990s the Malian army was engaged in conflicts with the Tuareg ethnic group in the north, who rebelled against alleged government usurpation of its land and the suppression of its culture and language; following an upsurge in violence in 1994, a peace settlement was implemented in 1995 and thousands of refugees returned to Mali.

In 1997, Konaré was reelected virtually unopposed and ADEMA won decisively in the legislative elections, which were boycotted by much of the opposition. In 1999 the ousted dictator Traoré, his wife, and an associate were sentenced to death for embezzlement; their sentences were commuted to life in prison by President Konaré. Presidential elections in April and May, 2002, resulted in a victory for Amadou Touré, the former interim military ruler. Touré ran as an independent candidate, and after the subsequent National Assembly elections (July), he formed a broad-based government that included the two largest groupings in the National Assembly.

In May, 2006, there were attacks in N Mali by Tuaregs the government said were army deserters, but in July a peace agreement was signed with the rebels. Additional fighting, however, occurred in 2007. Touré, running as the candidate of the Alliance for Democracy and Progress (ADP) coalition (which included ADEMA), was reelected in Apr., 2007, and in July National Assembly elections the ADP won a sizable majority of the seats. A new truce was signed with the Tuareg rebels in Sept., 2007, but they attacked government forces in 2008 (despite signing a cease-fire in Apr., 2008). A new cease-fire agreed to in July did not hold, but government forces won significant victories against the rebels in early 2009. Militant Islamists based in N and W Mali and originally opposed to the Algeria government have also mounted attacks and abductions in Mali. In mid-2009 government forces conducted operations against the Islamist's bases; other operations against their Mali bases were later mounted by Mauritania, at times in conjunction with France or Mali.

The fall of Qaddafi in Libya (2011) reinvigorated the Tuareg rebellion when Tuaregs who had served in his army returned to Mali. In 2012 Tuareg and Islamist forces made significant advances in N Mali, and government losses sparked an army coup led by Capt. Amadou Sanogo in March. Territorial losses accelerated after the coup. By April the rebels controlled N Mali (roughly two thirds of the country but with a tenth of the population) and Tuareg forces declared the region independent. West African nations meanwhile pressured Sanogo to restore civilian government, and in April President Touré
officially resigned as part of a deal to establish an interim government and hold new elections. The speaker of the parliament, Dioncounda Traoré, became interim president.

There was an alleged, unsuccessful countercoup in May, and Sanogo supporters subsequently called for him to serve as president and attacked the interim president; the situation in S Mali continued to be politically muddled, with no clear central authority and a lack of civilian control of the security forces. In December the military arrested the prime minister and forced him to resign.

Meanwhile, Islamist forces gained ascendancy in the north by June, and destroyed the shrines of Sufi saints there and imposed harsh Islamic law; several hundred thousand people fled the region. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) sought an agreement on providing more than 3,000 troops in support of the government’s retaking the north. The details of plan to do so and agreement with the Malians and the African Union and United Nations on the force were finalized gradually, and the Dec., 2012, ouster of the prime minister endangered the plan. The UN Security Council approved the deployment of foreign troops in Mali later in December, and after Islamists began advancing further toward the capital in Jan., 2013, France launched air strikes against the rebels, and France, ECOWAS nations, and Chad moved quickly to send troops to Mali.

French-led forces rapidly ousted the Islamists from the main population centers, but Gao, in E Mali, suffered a series of Islamist attacks after it was retaken. The Islamists largely retreated to nearby mountains and deserts, and mounted sporadic attacks in the main urban centers of N Mali from there. Tuareg rebels remained in control of Kidal, in NE Mali, and in June Tuareg rebels and the government signed a cease-fire accord. In April the United Nations approved a 12,600-member peacekeeping force for Mali (Minusma) that would incorporate some of the West African troops already in the country. Subsequently, combined French, UN, and Malian forces mounted occasional offenses against the Islamists, who also continued to mount their own attacks in the months that followed. Slowly progressing negotiations with the Tuareg rebels led to clashes in late 2013; progress was hindered in part by divisions among the rebels.

In July–Aug., 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who had served as prime minister in the mid and late 1990s, was elected president with more than three quarters of the vote in the August runoff. Keïta subsequently moved to reduce the influence that the participants in the coup had over the army. In legislative elections held in November and December, Keïta’s Rally for Mali won a plurality of the seats, and with its allied parties it secured a majority. In May, 2014, there were clashes between government and Tuareg rebel forces, but a cease-fire was reestablished; there was also fighting between progovernment forces and rebels in Apr., 2015.

A peace accord proposed by Algeria was rejected by the main rebel alliance in Mar., 2015. Subsequently, some armed groups signed a peace agreement in May, and the main Tuareg rebel coalition signed in June, after additional government concessions. Progress toward the implementation of the agreements, however, was slow, due to disagreements between pro- and antigovernment Tuareg factions. In July, 2016, there was fighting between progovernment and antigovernment Tuareg groups in Kidal; fighting between them intensified in 2017, but subsequently they signed a cease-fire and peace agreement. Also in 2016 there was unrest and attacks by Islamists in central as well as northern Mali.

Bibliography

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