

The regional concertations process:

engaging the public

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Conflict continued after the signing of the *National Pact* in 1992. But after the relative calm of 1993, crisis escalated in 1994. Devaluation of the sub-regional currency by 50 per cent that January led to economic crisis with high inflation and increased unemployment. Student strikes, demonstrations and riots threatened the government. Violence escalated in the north to the degree that the government and the armed movements appeared to lose control. In May, the Songhoy sedentarists launched the Ganda Koy Self-Defence Movement that was supported by elements in the army aspiring for a northern ally. Many feared that Mali was on the brink of a full-scale civil war and the risk of a military coup was great.

In these conditions, it was difficult for the recently-elected civilian President Alpha Oumar Konaré to choose a course of action. He could not afford to provoke the army, the students, the trade unions or the northern movements. In a speech on 28 May 1994, he resisted pressure to arm self-defence groups but recognized that the situation had become intolerable and that the national army should be mobilized to put an end to the insurgency. He also reiterated that he would not accept an ethnically-based solution and that Mali's national unity would be preserved. But the political pressure in the capital from groups with close relations to Ganda Koy continued and created an extremely difficult situation for the government.

Facing an escalating political crisis, the president turned to the Malian public to find a path out of the crisis. In a speech on 8 June 1994, he said:

*"...Faced with the numerous disturbances and the violence, both physical and verbal, which have characterised the past two years, I could have chosen alternative policies to those of dialogue and consensus. ... As a modern State, Mali needs to add to its ancestral heritage of dialogue a modern institutional infrastructure which demonstrates that there is a real democratic process taking place. ... With this in mind, I shall ask my government to organise a series of regional 'concertations' in which every current of opinion will be able to express its views. Each participant will be invited to contribute to the debate, seeking to define solutions for tomorrow's problems. Our purpose will exclude systematic opposition to the ideas of others; nor will there be room for narrow sectoral demands. The government will bring to the discussion both its point of view, and its proposals for change: and together we shall seek the necessary consensus to achieve the transformations which we have started."*¹

To implement this plan, the government organized a series of public meetings that were held throughout the country during the last two weeks of August 1994. Seventeen meetings were held in all, with some regions hosting two or three meetings to accommodate larger

populations or because of greater geographical distances. The objective was to listen to the people in order to understand their frustrations and hopes and to bring the political dialogue out to the provinces, thus generating inputs from new social and political forces as a counter-balance to the political elite. The focus was to generate alternative issues for the political agenda, rather than to discuss the situation in the north – although this situation was also discussed.

Participation in the concertation process was open to whoever wanted to come and everyone could speak. All levels of the society were involved: traditional leaders, students, women, youth, the unemployed and professionals met with government ministers, local parliamentarians and leaders of the administration. It appears that women and the youth were very active in the meetings in most areas of the country. In the north, however, the sedentarists ruled the villages and cities. Due to increasing inter-ethnic tension caused by insecurity, very few nomads participated.

When creating the concertations the government did not set out any expectations about how it would use the ideas generated through the process. It was an open discussion and there was no agenda for any of the meetings; rather the format was adapted to local needs and customs. The concertations were not decision-making bodies but created the opportunity for a form of national 'brainstorming'. The participants formulated many recommendations that were given to the government to consider. The meetings lasted from two days to a week, depending on the length of time needed for all participants to speak but most occurred over three days. Each concertation was guided by a facilitator and the participants sought to reach consensus on the recommendations. The regional meetings were summed up in a national concertation in Bamako, where the doors were open for whoever wanted to come. All those able to attend from the regional meetings participated and they were joined by representatives of the government, the Parliament and civil society.

By bringing the political discussions out to the provinces, the government effectively ended a situation where well-organized northern sedentarists monopolized the political discussion. The regional concertations took place in the short period in 1994 when the ethnic conflict between Ganda Koy and the other armed movements was at its most violent. The *National Pact* was heavily criticized throughout the process. The peace agreement was seen by many Songhoy as giving undue advantages to the nomads. Given the context of limited resources, they feared they would lose out if it were implemented. Yet the government continued to insist that the agreement remained the basis for lasting peace.

Although many issues concerning the country as a whole and other more specialized concerns were discussed, an important outcome for the north was a general national consensus about the need for fair treatment of all the groups in the north. It opened the way for northern peacemakers to begin the process of consulting and then mobilizing civil society. It also strengthened President Konaré's position and added legitimacy to his government, which enabled it to act more decisively. The support that the government obtained for a peaceful solution probably strengthened its position *vis-à-vis* the army in a situation where a military *coup d'état* was a distinct possibility.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to assess the importance of this experience. Many in the north do not consider the regional concertations to have made a significant contribution to bringing peace to the region. Perhaps the broader significance was that the government built support throughout the country for resolving the northern conflict through a consensual process. It helped to strengthen the civilian government's position in relation to the army, which tended to favour a military 'solution' to the conflict. It was also significant that the process was based on mechanisms deeply rooted in Malian cultures, where serious problems are discussed in public by all who think that they are concerned or who think that they can make a contribution towards a consensual solution. It was innovative for the government to draw on this tradition at a time when it was in the midst of political crisis. It may have helped to shore up the democratic transition, in which public legitimacy and involvement can be an important force for sustaining a vulnerable system. It may also have helped to open the political space for public involvement in peacemaking that was soon mobilized in the inter-community meetings throughout the north.

¹ Quoted in Poulton and Ibrahim (1998: 106)