

Maliens, though eager for change from failing state and economy, still demand democracy

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 386 | Massa Coulibaly, Carolyn Logan, and E. Gyimah-Boadi

Summary

After weeks of massive demonstrations demanding President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's resignation, thousands of jubilant Malians celebrated the military coup that removed him from office on 18 August (Al Jazeera, 2020). But some observers were left to wonder whether democracy in Mali is dead.

The coup has been widely condemned by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Western leaders, who insist that Keïta be reinstated (Ahmed & Petesch, 2020; France 24, 2020; BBC, 2020). The coup leaders have refused, while vowing to steer the country back toward elections and democracy.

The fact that many Malians seemed to welcome the coup should not come as a surprise. Findings from an Afrobarometer survey in March-April 2020 show deep dissatisfaction with the status quo, including widespread perceptions that the country was off track, that the economy was in a shambles, that corruption was growing rapidly, and that their elected officials were untrustworthy.

At the same time, the armed forces, along with traditional leaders, enjoy far higher levels of popular trust. Amid deepening dissatisfaction with the government and inept management by elected leaders, many Malians may have seen the coup as the country's best chance to escape a downward spiral.

But Afrobarometer also documents Malians' insistence on democracy as the country's path forward. Even if many citizens appear willing to accept military intervention in the short term, they reject military rule as a system of government. Findings suggest they will hold coup leaders to their promise to call elections and transition back to civilian government (Maclean, Diouara, & Peltier, 2020).

Afrobarometer surveys

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, nonpartisan survey research network that provides reliable data on African experiences and evaluations of democracy, governance, and quality of life. Seven rounds of surveys were completed in up to 38 countries between 1999 and 2018. Round 8 surveys (2019/2021) are planned in at least 35 countries. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mali, led by the Groupe de Recherche en Economie Appliqué et Théorique (GREAT), interviewed 1,200 adult Malians in March-April 2020. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 percentage points at a 95% confidence level. Previous surveys in Mali were conducted in 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2017.

Key findings

Maliens are deeply disaffected with the state of their country and their economy, and with the performance of their elected leaders:

- About four months before the August coup, almost nine out of 10 Malians (86%) said the country was going in “the wrong direction,” up from 52% in 2014. Even among supporters of the ruling coalition, 82% agreed.
- Three-fourths (74%) of citizens said corruption increased during the year preceding the survey, including 62% who said it increased “a lot.”
- Eight out of 10 Malians (81%) described the country's economic condition as bad, including 45% who said it was “very bad.”
- Approval of the president's job performance was at the lowest level that Afrobarometer has recorded since it started surveys in Mali in 2001. Six out of 10 citizens (61%) “disapproved” or “strongly disapproved” of the way the president was doing his job.

But they have high regard for the military:

- More than eight out of 10 citizens (82%) said they trust the military at least “somewhat,” including 62% who expressed “a lot” of trust in the armed forces. Fewer than half (47%) said they trust the president.
- In Afrobarometer's 2017 survey, large majorities said the Malian armed forces “often” or “always” protect the country from internal and external security threats (80%) and that they act professionally and respect all citizens' rights (69%).

While these findings may explain popular tolerance for, or even welcoming of, the military coup, the public's desire for democracy remains strong:

- Almost two-thirds (64%) of Malians said they prefer democracy over any other political regime, and even larger majorities reject military rule (69%), one-party rule (76%), and one-man rule (87%).
- Malians also expressed strong support for key democratic institutions and practices, including elections as the best way to choose leaders (75%), presidential accountability to the National Assembly (77%), and the president's duty to obey the country's laws and courts (80%). But only half (51%) would prioritize accountability over efficiency in government.

Popular dissatisfaction with the status quo

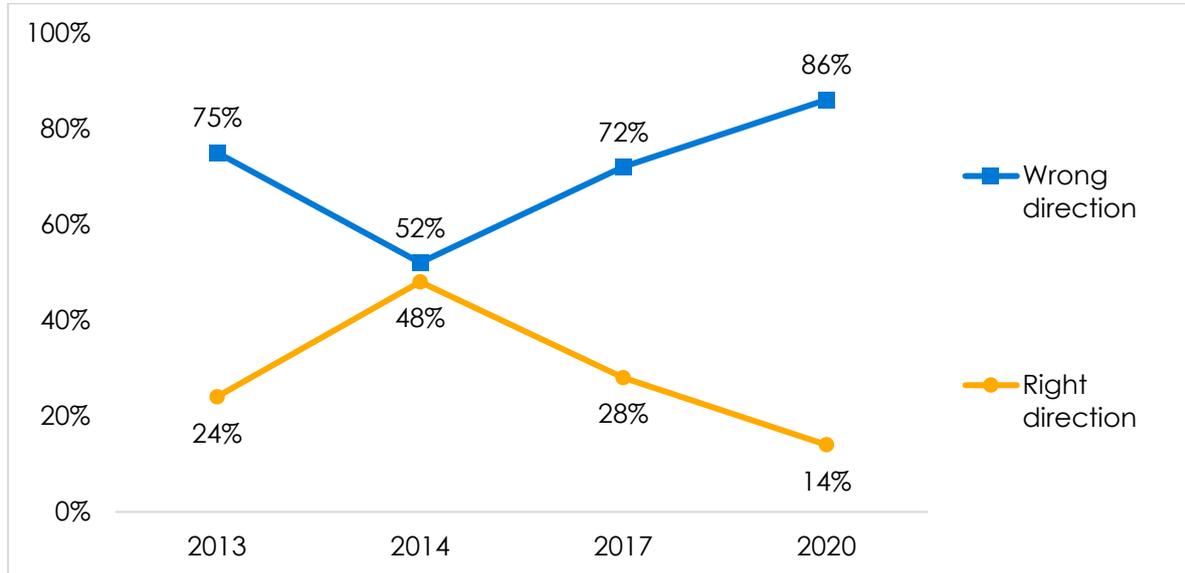
The 5 June rally that launched weeks of mass demonstrations under the banner of the Movement of 5 June - Rally of Patriotic Forces followed months of growing public frustration with the state of the country (Mbewa, 2020). In March-April 2020, almost nine out of 10 survey respondents (86%) said the country was going in “the wrong direction,” an increase of 34 percentage points from 2014 (52%) (Figure 1).

This assessment was consistent regardless of respondents' level of education, and even among supporters of the ruling coalition,¹ 82% felt that Mali was moving in the wrong

¹ Afrobarometer determines political affiliation based on responses to the questions, “Do you feel close to any particular political party?” and, if yes, “Which party is that?”

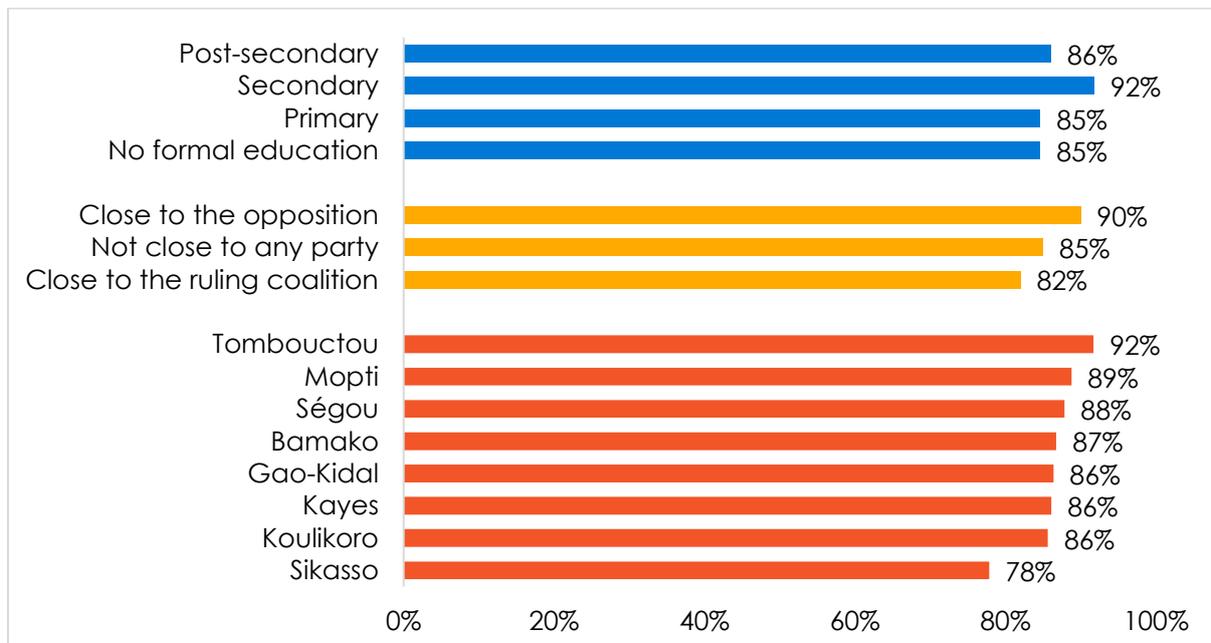
direction (Figure 2). Sikasso was the only region where this negative assessment dropped below eight out of 10 (78%).

Figure 1: Direction of the country | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked: Let's start with your general view about the current direction of our country. Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask you about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?

Figure 2: Country going in the wrong direction | by education level, political party affiliation, and region | Mali | 2020

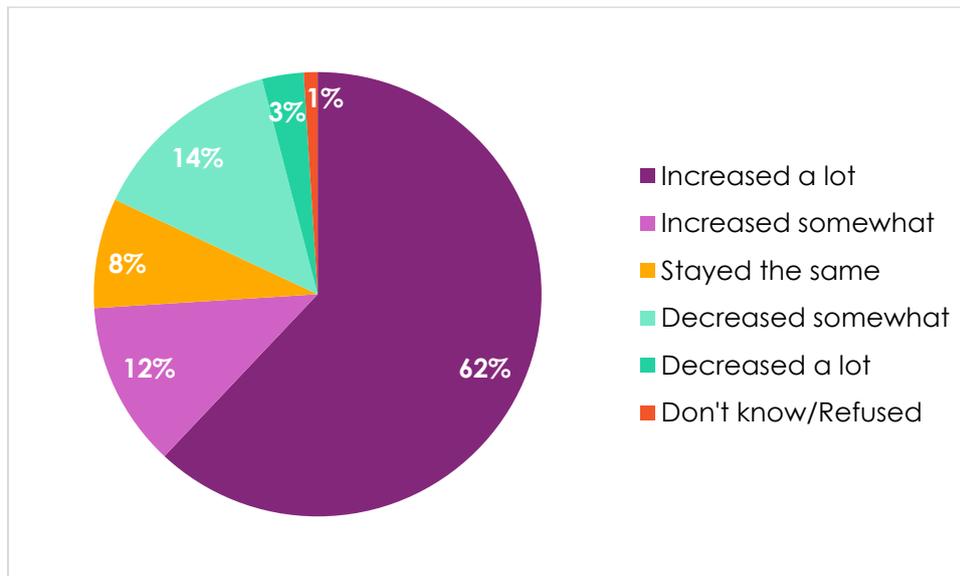


Respondents were asked: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who said "wrong direction")

Note: In accordance with their share of the total population of Mali, small sample sizes in sparsely populated regions (e.g. Kidal, Gao, and Tombouctou) produce results with very large margins of error. These results should be interpreted with caution.

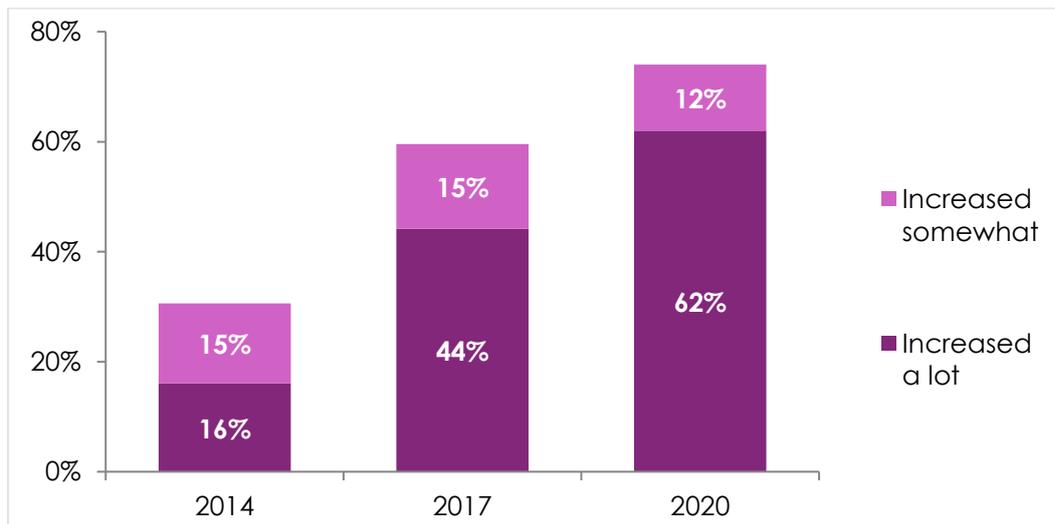
Respondents also reported rampant corruption, one of the main complaints of the protesters who dominated Bamako's public spaces in recent weeks (Obaji, 2020). In the survey, three-fourths (74%) of citizens said corruption increased during the year preceding the survey, including a remarkable 62% who said it increased "a lot" (Figure 3). This represents a sharp increase since 2014, when a far more modest 31% reported that corruption was rising (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Level of corruption in the country | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

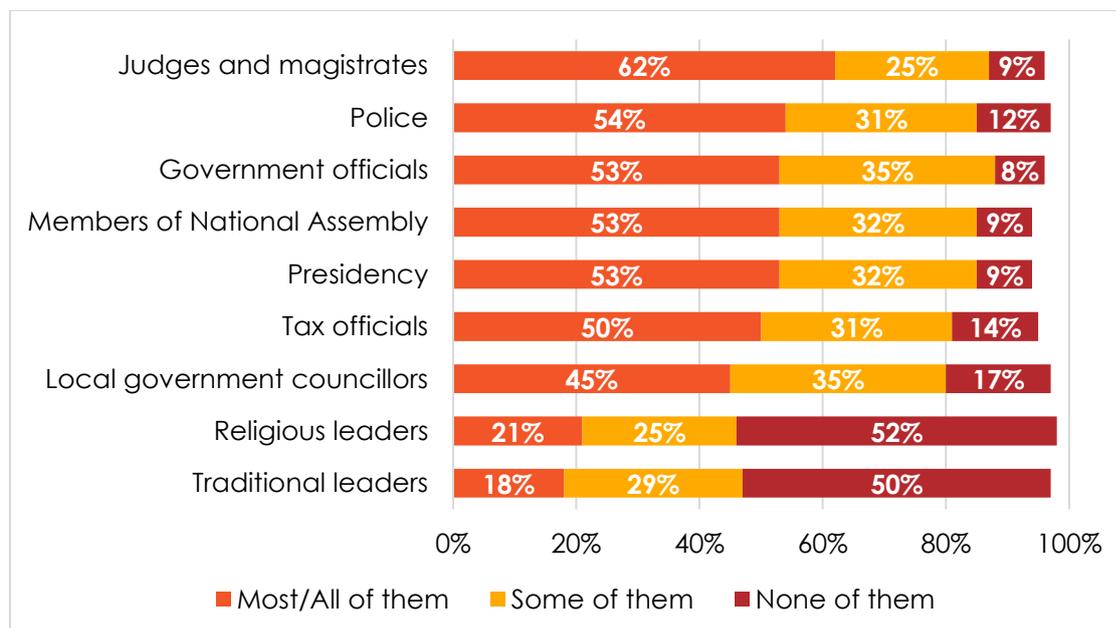
Figure 4 : Level of corruption, over time | Mali | 2014-2020



Respondents were asked: In your opinion, over the past year, has the level of corruption in this country increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Among key public leaders and officials, judges and magistrates were most widely seen as corrupt: 62% of Malians said "most" or "all" are involved in graft. More than half also saw widespread corruption in the president's office (53%) as well as among other government officials (53%), members of the National Assembly (53%), and the police (54%) (Figure 5).

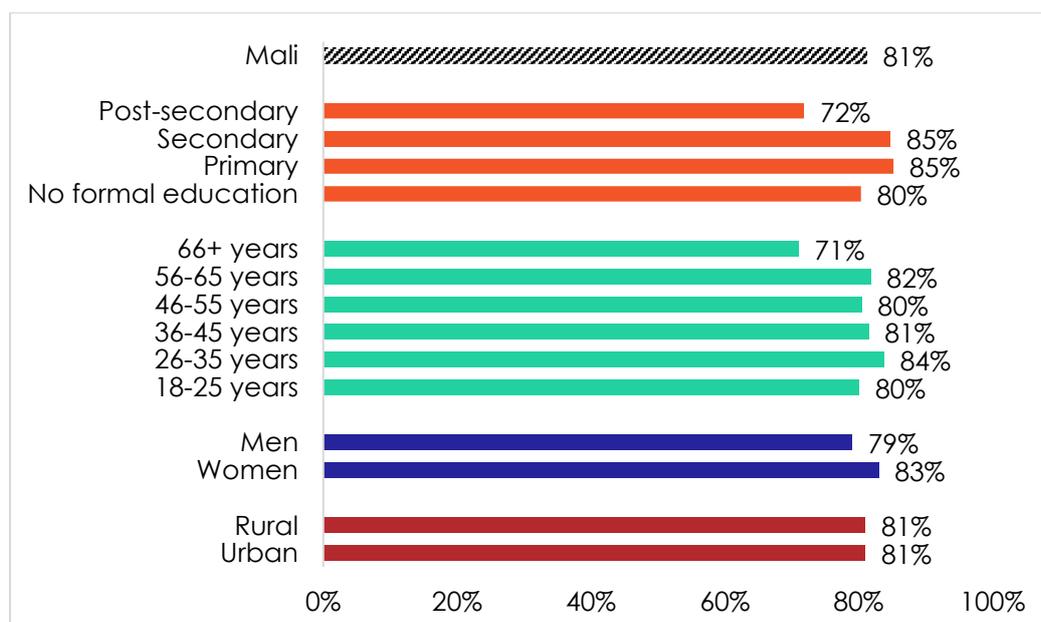
Figure 5: Who is corrupt | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked: How many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Widespread perceptions of official corruption were accompanied by gloomy economic assessments. Eight out of 10 Malians (81%) described the country's economic condition as bad, including 45% who said it was "very bad" (Figure 6). These assessments were fairly consistent across demographic groups, though citizens with post-secondary education (72%) and senior citizens (71%) were somewhat less critical.

Figure 6: Negative assessment of country's economic situation | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2020

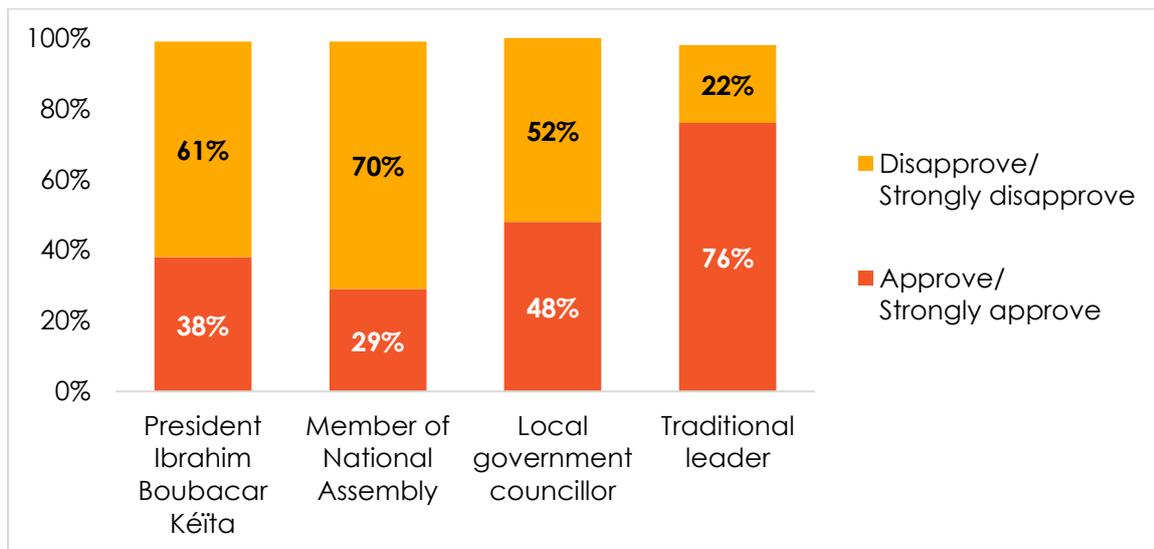


Respondents were asked: In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country? (% who said "fairly bad" or "very bad")

Citizens were also critical of the performance of their elected leaders. Six out of 10 (61%) “disapproved” or “strongly disapproved” of how the president was doing his job, though a substantial minority (38%) expressed satisfaction with his work. Even more (70%) gave their representatives in the National Assembly a poor job review (Figure 7). Local government councillors received more mixed reviews (52% disapproval), while traditional leaders shone with a 76% approval rating.

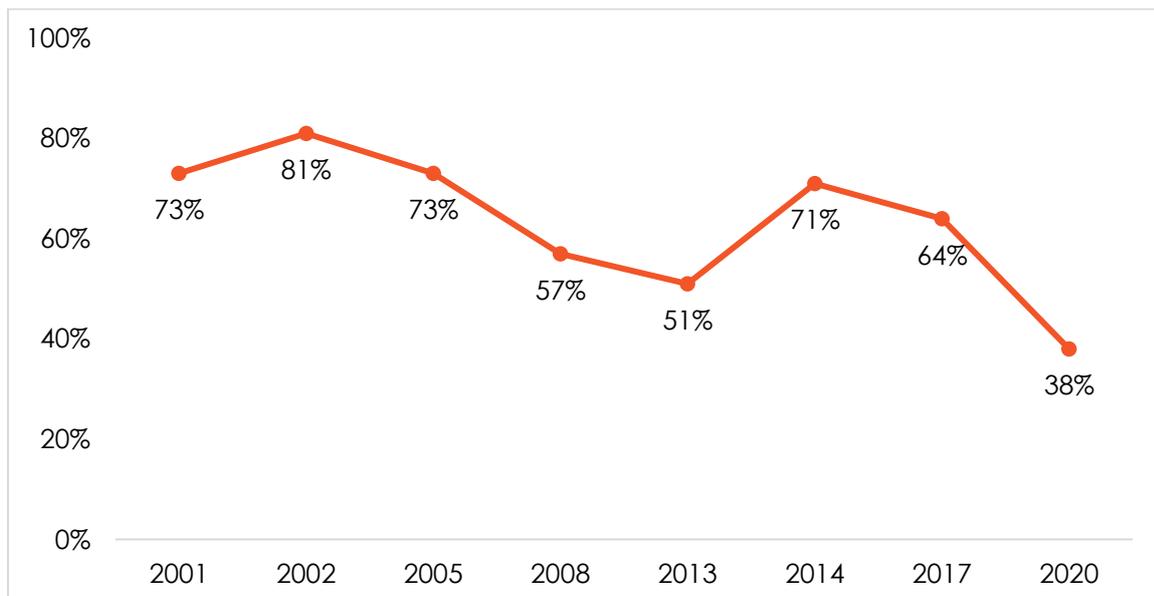
Popular approval of the president's performance declined by almost half since 2014 (from 71% to 38%), reaching its lowest level since Afrobarometer began surveys in Mali in 2001 (Figure 8).

Figure 7: Assessments of leader performance | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say?

Figure 8: Approval of president's performance | Mali | 2001-2020



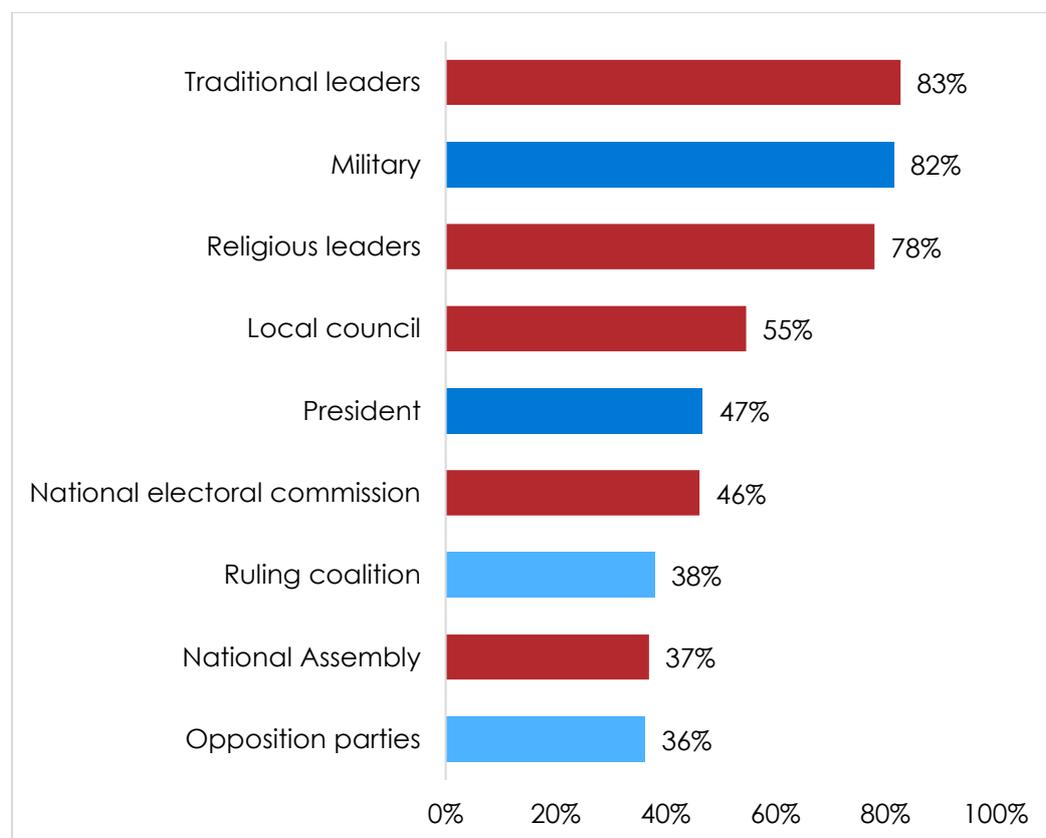
Respondents were asked: Do you approve or disapprove of the way that the following people have performed their jobs over the past 12 months, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The president? (% who “approved” or “strongly approved”)

Trust in the military and civilian leaders

The military is one of the most trusted public institutions in Mali, matched only by traditional leaders. More than eight out of 10 citizens (82%) said they trust the military at least “somewhat,” including 62% who expressed “a lot” of trust in the armed forces. In contrast, the president enjoyed the trust of fewer than half (47%) of Malians, while even fewer expressed confidence in the National Assembly (37%) (Figure 9).

The findings also suggest that a majority of Malians are not counting on political parties to lead the country in the right direction, as only minorities said they trust the ruling coalition (38%) and opposition parties (36%) even “somewhat.”

Figure 9: Popular trust in institutions and leaders | Mali | 2020

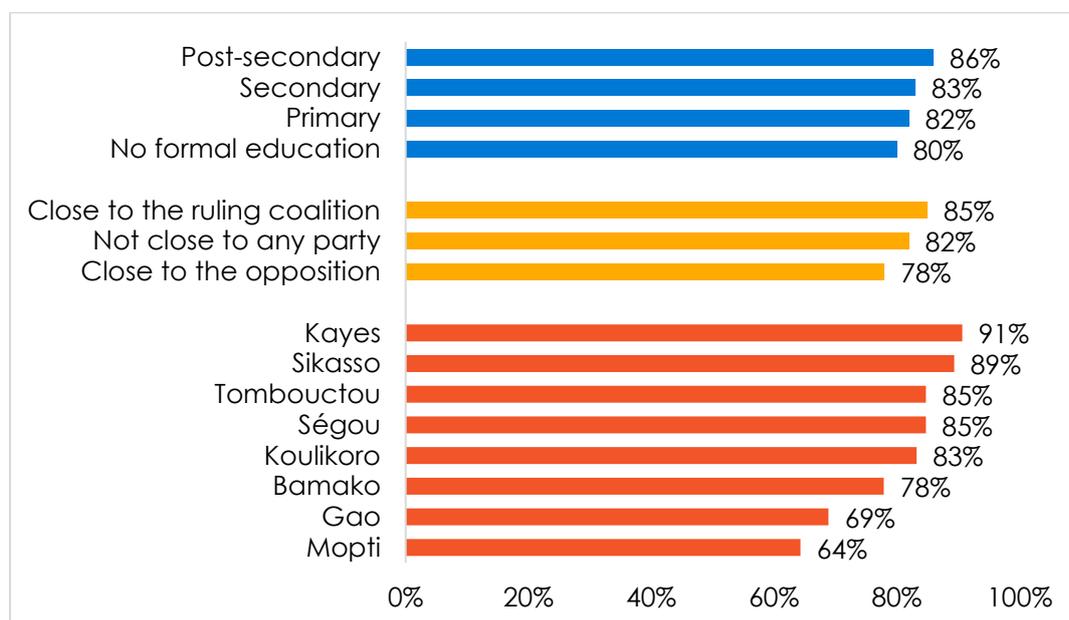


Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say? (% who said “somewhat” or “a lot”)

Trust in the military was high (at least 78%) regardless of respondents' level of education or political-party affiliation. And even in the regions of Mopti (64%) and Gao (69%), which have been battling a jihadist insurgency since 2012, around two-thirds expressed confidence in the armed forces (Figure 10).

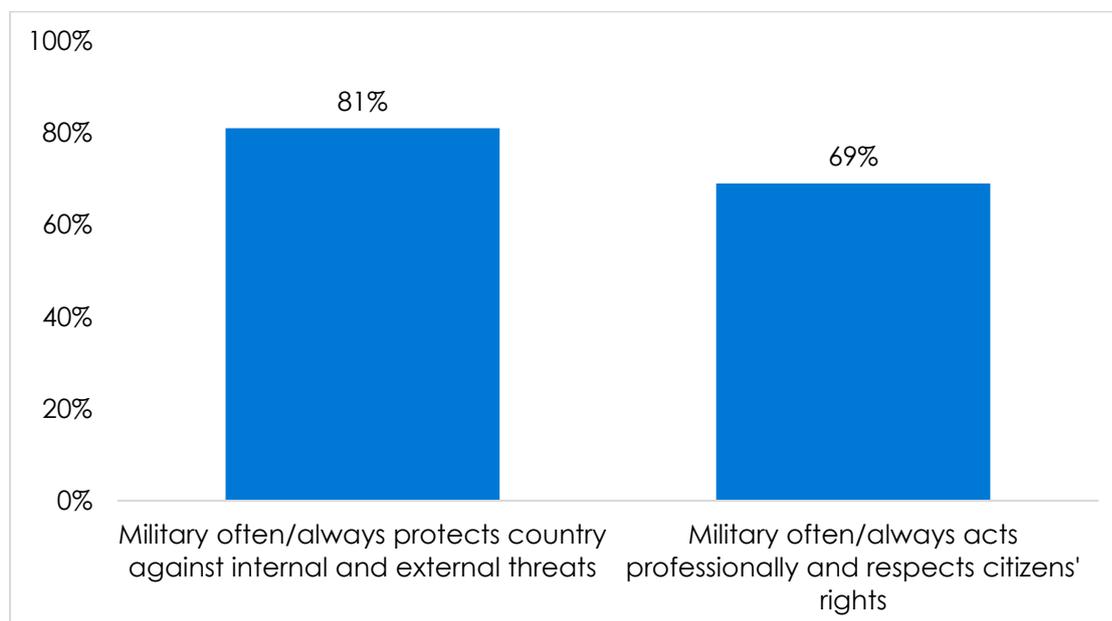
Moreover, the military won praise for its effectiveness and comportment. In Afrobarometer's 2017 survey, large majorities of respondents said that the Malian armed forces “often” or “always” protect the country from internal and external security threats (80%) and that they act professionally and respect all citizens' rights (69%) (Figure 11).

Figure 10: Popular trust in the military | by education level, political party affiliation, and region | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked: How much do you trust each of the following, or haven't you heard enough about them to say: The Armed Forces of Mali? (% who said "somewhat" or "a lot")

Figure 11: Perceptions of military's effectiveness and behavior | Mali | 2017



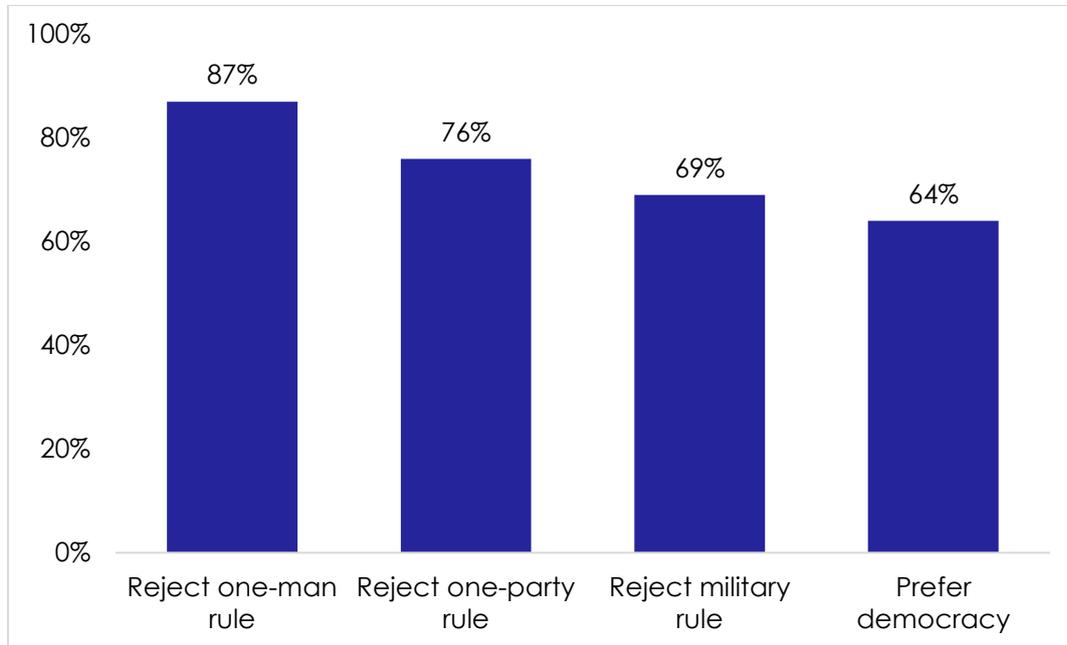
Respondents were asked: In your opinion, to what extent do the armed forces of our country:
 Keep our country safe from external and internal security threats?
 Operate in a professional manner and respect the rights of all citizens?

Commitment to democracy

Even if a combination of deep dissatisfaction with the status quo and strong popular trust in the military suggests why the coup appears to have been welcomed by many citizens, survey findings also document Malians' strong and continuing support for democracy. When

asked about their preferred system of government, almost two-thirds (64%) of respondents said they prefer democracy over any other political regime, and even larger majorities reject military rule (69%), one-party rule (76%), and presidential dictatorship (87%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Demand for democracy | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked:

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? (% who "disapproved" or "strongly disapproved" with each statement)

Only one political party is allowed to stand for election and hold office.

The army comes in to govern the country.

Elections and the National Assembly are abolished so that the president can decide everything.

Which of these three statements is closest to your own opinion?

Statement 1: Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government.

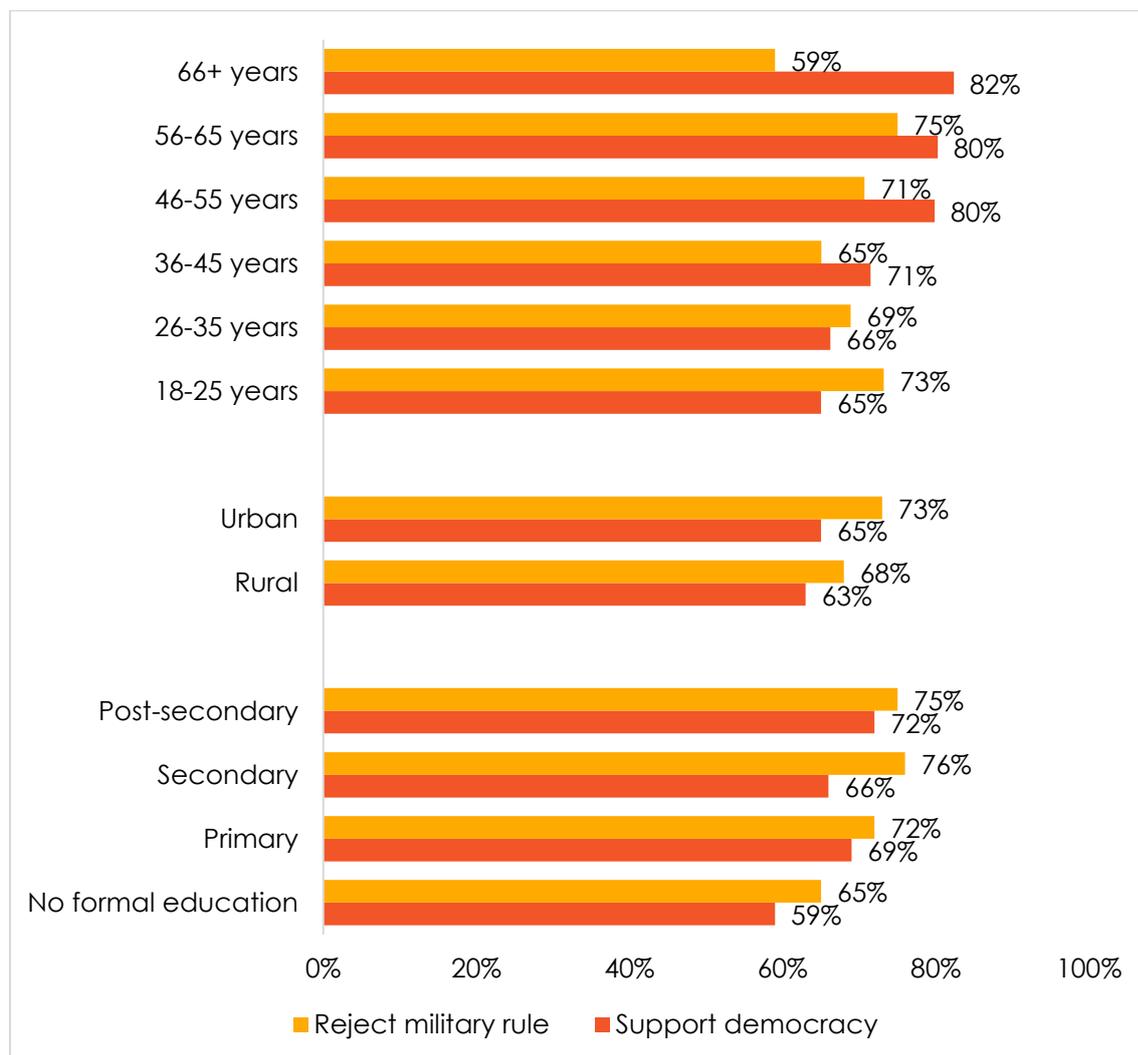
Statement 2: In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable.

Statement 3: For someone like me, it doesn't matter what kind of government we have.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with Statement 1)

Support for democracy increased with respondents' age, ranging from 65% among 18- to 25-year-olds to 82% among those over age 65 (Figure 13). Urban residents were more likely than their rural counterparts to oppose military rule (73% vs. 68%) but no more likely to prefer democracy. Citizens with no formal education were least likely to prefer democracy (59%) and to reject military rule (65%).

Figure 13: Support for democracy and rejection of military rule | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked:

There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives? (% who "disapproved" or "strongly disapproved" with each statement)

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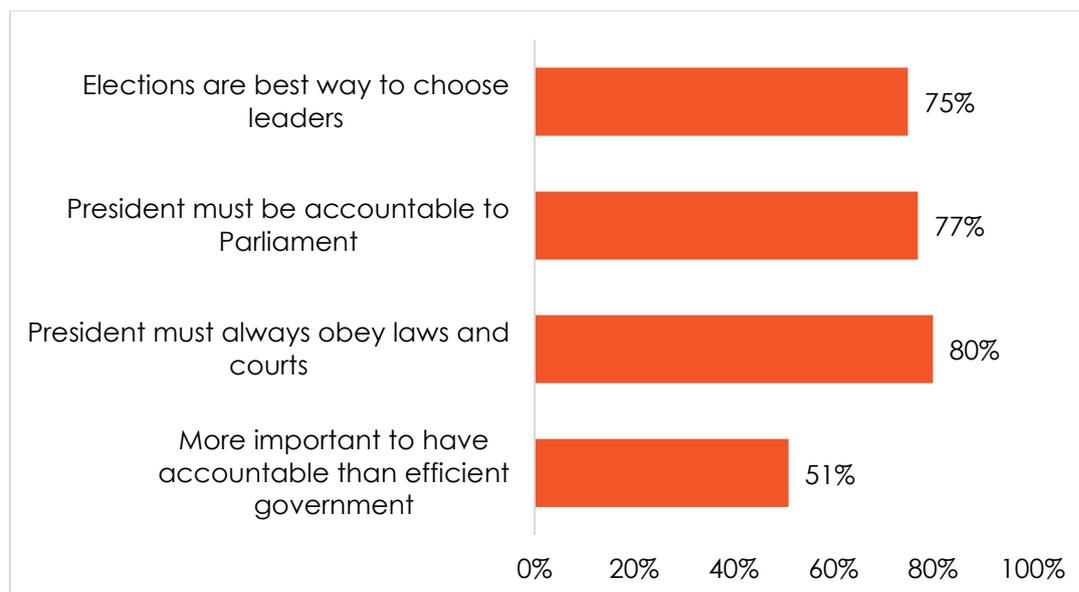
Importantly, Malians also expressed strong support for a number of key democratic institutions and practices (Figure 14). Most significantly, even after failed democratic leadership, they remain deeply committed to regular, free and fair elections as the best way to choose the country's leaders: Three-fourths (75%) affirmed their commitment to this cornerstone of democratic governance.

Support for democratic accountability was also strong. Large majorities agreed both that the president should have to explain to the National Assembly how his administration spends

taxpayers' money (77%) and that the president must always obey the country's laws and courts, even if he thinks they are wrong (80%).

When asked to express a preference between government accountability and efficiency, support for democratic institutions was somewhat weaker: Only half (51%) said it's more important to have a government that is accountable to its citizens, while almost as many (48%) preferred a government that "gets things done," clearly an indication of Malians' impatience with non-performing leadership.

Figure 14: Support for key democratic institutions and practices | Mali | 2020



Respondents were asked: Which of the following statements is closest to your view?

Statement 1: We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open, and honest elections.
 Statement 2: Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with Statement 1)

Statement 1: The National Assembly should ensure that the president explains to it on a regular basis how his government spends taxpayers' money.

Statement 2: The president should be able to devote his full attention to developing the country rather than wasting time justifying his actions.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with Statement 1)

Statement 1: Since the president was elected to lead the country, he should not be bound by laws or court decisions that he thinks are wrong.

Statement 2: The president must always obey the laws and the courts, even if he thinks they are wrong.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with Statement 2)

Statement 1: It is more important to have a government that can get things done, even if we have no influence over what it does.

Statement 2: It is more important for citizens to be able to hold government accountable, even if that means it makes decisions more slowly.

(% who "agreed" or "agreed very strongly" with Statement 2)

Conclusion

As recently as 2018, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta won re-election to a second term, securing 42% of the vote in the first round of elections and 67% in the second round. But the past two years have witnessed a stunning decline in his standing amid an explosion of dissatisfaction among ordinary Malians. No single obvious cause explains Keïta's downfall; several factors appear to

have coalesced, including popular perceptions that corruption was skyrocketing while the socioeconomic crisis deepened with incessant strikes in almost all sectors (education, health, justice, public administration, finance), the unresolved insurrections in the North, growing insecurity in the central part of the country, and perhaps even the social and economic disruptions caused by the coronavirus pandemic (Obaji, 2020).

Outside observers are right to be concerned that many Malians appear to prefer a coup to the prospect of waiting out the remaining three years of Keita's term. But in a country already facing deep political and economic challenges, and in the face of Keita's inept and ineffective response, it appears that Malians did not feel that they, or their country, could survive three more years of spiraling decline.

Yet the record is also clear that despite the profound failures of both the current and the previous democratic governments, Malians remain committed to democracy as a system of government and reject military rule as a long-term solution to the country's problems. While there may be substantial support or tolerance of the military takeover for the short term, the findings reported here suggest that Malians will hold the coup leaders to their promises to restore democracy.

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Afrobarometer, a nonprofit corporation with headquarters in Ghana, is a pan-African, non-partisan research network. Regional coordination of national partners in about 35 countries is provided by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

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