

The rise and fall of the Mali Federation

Agnieszka Homańska 

University of Warsaw (Poland)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2273-7903>

ABSTRACT: The Mali Federation may be perceived as one of the first African attempts at regional integration. After the Loi-cadre was enacted in 1959, the French colonies started their path toward independence, and they sought for cooperation. However, both views on the future relationship with the Fifth Republic and internal disputes over power distribution came as their most significant threats. The author analyses the idea and the creation of the Mali Federation, taking into consideration the political and historical factors. The aim of this paper is to present a general overview of one of the first and most important independence movements in West Africa. The federation was to consist initially of 4 states, but eventually, only 2 of them, i.e., French Sudan and Senegal, decided to adopt its constitution. Those two countries shared many similarities with each other; however, the lack of agreement between the parties prevented the effective functioning of the federation as a sovereign state. Although it existed only for two months, the Mali Federation marked the possibilities and the difficulties for the African cooperation and integration processes for the next decades.

KEYWORDS: Africa, Mali, federation, colonialism, France, independence, constitution

Introduction

■ African political history is inseparably linked with the continent's colonial past. The path toward independence was for the countries of the region different from in any other continent, and for some units, it is still a struggle. This situation derives not only from the artificial creation of borders, which in many cases was not done in line with the distribution of populations and ethnic groups. The region, especially West Africa, was and is profoundly destabilized. Moreover, the way of creating an international and unified integration system faces different challenges and

threats than in, *exempli gratia*, Europe. One example of the earliest post-colonial attempt at integration was the short-lived Mali Federation. It had a tremendous impact on how uncertain the future of the independent African states was. This paper examines the creation and ideas on the Mali Federation, with a particular focus on political issues and its historical background. In addition, the reason for its failure and the condition of the African-French relations are examined and featured.

Corresponding author:

Agnieszka Homańska, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw, Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warsaw, Poland. E-mail: agnieszkahomanska@gmail.com

Genesis and historical background

Before giving an in-depth examination of the existence of the Mali Federation, it is essential to outline the environment in which it was born. The French colonization period marked the future of the subordinate territories. However, for the purpose of this paper, the focus should be put on the African continent. The era of French colonialism in West Africa is to be analysed from 1895 when the formation of French West Africa (fr. *Afrique-Occidentale française*, AOF) started. The administrative basis of the entity became a series of decrees, the most important of which, following Joseph-Roger Benoit, is the Charter of French West Africa, adopted on 18 October 1904. This document defined *de facto* and *de jure* the borders of the AOF until the end of World War II. The person responsible for implementing the charter was Ernest Roume. The territory of this unit encompassed around 4,634,000 km². Gunther (1958) presented the following colourful description:

It is one of the biggest geographical “units” in the world (...). It is (...) eight times the size of France, half the size of Europe itself, and occupies an area that is equivalent to $\frac{3}{5}$ the area of the United States; its surface area is $\frac{1}{6}$ that of all of Africa. It has a population of about 17 million, 63,000 of whom are, as the French say, non-indigenous or non-Africans (...). AOF has two enormous rivers, Senegal and the Niger, although the greater part of its area is a bare desert¹.

The AOF consisted of eight colonies: Mauritania, French Guinea (now Guinea), Senegal, Dakar District, French Sudan (now Mali), Ivory Coast, Dahomey (now Benin), Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), and Niger. In each colony, administrative action was exercised by a governor and a secretary-general (Mauritania was an exception), and it had a council of government and an administrative council (from 1925 onwards, African representatives were also present). Dakar served as the capital of AOF, which later afforded Senegal significant economic advantages and endowed the colony with the same awareness of its potential major role in a larger West African region.

French colonial system

The AOF territories were French subjects for the metropolis, while the population was not entitled to French citizenship. For the French, unlike the British colonizers, what mattered was not the legitimacy of power but its efficiency. To maximize it, African chiefs in French colonies were often relocated, which aimed at limiting hypothetical rapprochement with the inhabitants of the building of traditions. For the French, the highest importance was the ideology of assimilation. The colonizers highlighted that the inhabitants of the African colonies would seemingly be granted the full rights enjoyed by French citizens and be legally considered ‘French’ if they adopted French culture.

The 1940s and 1950s were a period of political and social change in the AOF. The emerging African elites, educated in African schools and French universities, began to radicalize. It should be noted that according to official figures, school enrollment increased by 50% between 1946 and 1950 and 10% in 1952 alone (Gunther, 1958). Moreover, French requirements for a possible chance to become a local ruler focused on, in addition to background, education, and devotion to France. This attitude led to the formation of the ruling elites. African leaders received rewards such as privileges, houses, land, or grants for obedience and doing their assigned tasks well. For disobedience, they, in turn, were reprimanded. This political construction of the elite led to the low popularity of local rulers, and they, despite their particular position in society, had no authority in the native system, in which they were regarded as mere elements.

The second component of the French presence in the region was a federation located between the Congo River and the Sahara, i.e., the French Equatorial Republic (fr. *Afrique équatoriale française*, AEF), created in 1910. Its fate was similar to that of the AOF presented above. For the purpose of this paper, the issue of this territory only completes the question of the French colonies in Africa. The AEF territory consisted of four areas, namely French Congo (now the Republic of Congo and a part of Gabon), Gabon, Ubanga-Shari (now Central African Republic), and Chad, which had been a separate colonial unit since 1920. From 1946 to 1958, the AEF had representation in the French parliament. In addition, each territory making up the federation had representatives representing the governor-general, whose seat was located in Brazzaville.

¹ [Author’s translation].

Beginning of the process of decolonization

Such a number of close relations stemming from the colonial period made France, as a former metropolis, remain with its former colonies in special relations. In 1960, 17 new states were created on the African continent, representing an intensification of the independence processes. Therefore, this year is referred to as the *Year of Africa*. The formation of sovereign states was a historical phenomenon, as never before (nor since) has the number of independent states in a given area increased at such a rate. Those changes had a tremendous impact on international relations in Africa, completely changing the balance of power and influence in the region. Consequently, one can point to three types of relations that dominated the continent in the second half of the twentieth century: between independent states, colonies with already independent African states, and relations between colonies.

The critical moment in the path of the AOF and AEF states toward independence was the adoption by the Minister for the Overseas Departments Gaston Defferre on 23.07.1956 of the framework law (fr. *Loi-cadre*) number 56-619. Increasing separatist movements, driven by changes in the structures of the Commonwealth, made it necessary for Paris to reform its actions in its colonies. The authorities saw it: "Indigenous people are restless. The question is not whether we should emulate the British. But there is no doubt that the political-administrative transformations made in the British territories have contributed to the growing impatience among the peoples of the AOF and AEF", said Defferre, speaking in Paris at the National Assembly (Meredith, 2020). The newly appointed law created territorial councils of government (fr. *Conseils de gouvernement*) elected by universal suffrage. It granted greater autonomy to the local executive from the metropolis. Until 1956, residents were divided into two colleges depending on their status. The framework law established a single electoral college (fr. *Le collège électoral unique*). It is noteworthy, however, that the voting system remained unfavorable to the local population. Although the document significantly affected France's relationship with its colonies, it has also pointed out that it preserved the nature of the French approach to their territories (Deltombe, Domergue, and Tatsita, 2019). However, such an opinion did not change the fact that the framework law was the first step toward the creation of the French

Community (fr. *Communauté française*), a remnant of the colonial empire.

Two years later, in 1958, General Charles de Gaulle, to finalize the process of founding the Fifth Republic, called for a constitutional referendum during which the African territories had two options to choose from. 'Yes' opted for permanent membership in the French Community, and 'No' meant absolute independence with no ties with Paris. The second possibility was chosen only by Guinea. In this way, de Gaulle left African leaders no choice, as immediate secession would incline no future for the territories and complete chaos (Meredith, 2020). Under the provisions of the Constitution of the Fifth Republic, the French Community included all the departments and overseas territories of France, as well as the nationally administered UN trust territories of Togo and Cameroon and the colonial states, including the territory of the former AOF and AEF. The loudest critic of French actions was Léopold Senghor, the Senegalese leader who was, in fact, a very pro-French politician. He distinguished himself in the French National Assembly by attacking the *Loi-Cadre* as a worthless collection of 'playthings and lollypops' (Mortimer, 1972, p. 284). Moreover, Senghor accused the government in Paris of *balkanizing* Africa in order to subjugate the small African states that were feuding and thus dependent on France, thus maintaining control over them despite their promised independence (Ndoye, 1995, p. 151).

The local reaction to de Gaulle's policy played a crucial role in shaping the future of the young states. Before the referendum, two big political parties existed in West Africa, i.e., African Democratic Rally (RDA) and the African Regroupment Party (PRA). Both sides represented different views. The first one, led by the Ivorian leader Félix Houphouët-Boigny advocated for creating a Franco-African federation composed of the metropolis and various territories, thus for close cooperation with Paris. He presented no ideas of highlighting any importance of independence, as well as he were firmly against the creation of federal governments in Africa.

On the contrary, PRA leader Leopold Senghor was a close friend to George Pompidou and envisaged the possible *intrafrican* cooperation as a federation of various western and eastern African units with a confederation of France and the latter (Gandolfi, 1960, p. 881). Relations with Paris nevertheless remained for him just as important as inter-African relations, for he saw the former metropole has the best and most possible source of

the financial assistance which he deemed necessary to the future survival of a new independent state.

In July 1985, Mamadou Dia, a close colleague of Leopold Senghor, postulated that the best idea would be to create a federal organization of every African state within which every unit would be equal and sovereign. Modibo Keita from Sudan, another prominent African leader, shared this view (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 60). Consequently, the idea of an African federation soon found support among several of its recent opponents. However, what at the beginning seemed to be a common belief, appeared to be the bone of contention.

The new situation in which the former colonies were put made the African leaders look for the optimal road to independence. It can be seen that creating an integrated body was easier for them, probably also due to the way France shaped their political territory. The newly created units that were about to become sovereign states did not remember the times of not creating a part of any kind of union. The creation of the community was a way for Paris to maintain its economic and political control over its former colonies.

Negotiations on the future shape of the federation

It is noteworthy that the political parties played a significant role when it came to whether the country wanted to become a part of the federation or not. Such a case derives from the fact that the strong position of a leader is characteristic of most political movements in less-developed African countries. It has its roots in history, as the most important roles were always played by the tribal chief, who was often from the oldest or/and wealthiest family. Consequently, what the leader advocated for became the most vital issue for the party, thus, for the population. If one were against any kind of action, all its supporters would go in the same direction. However, the ideas of RDA started to differ on an even grander scale. What will the future of the former colonies look like? Who will be the leader? What will be the role of France? Those questions remained unanswered for some time and were causing trouble to the leaders and decision-makers. Even if discontent with the scenario presented by de Gaulle was a common point for them, the conference in Cotonou showed that any kind of consensus is not to be reached quickly. On the other hand, de Gaulle himself highlighted that the form of cooperation is less important

than the topic of independence (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 62). With regard to his words, both PRA and RDA voted for creating a constitution. They understood that the only way to gain sovereignty is through cooperation, even if it would require mutual resignation from certain proposals and creating a body of a transitional character. Therefore, the same year de Gaulle announced the referendum results, West African leaders gathered in Bamako to discuss their future. They understood that independence became a struggle. With such extensive territories and small populations, the leaders needed to find a way in which they would matter in the international society.

Gabriel D'Arboussier, one of the founders of the RDA and, at the time, President of the Grand Council of the AOF, planned the Bamako congress. A vast and important delegation was present, and it numbered 150 delegates from Senegal, Sudan, Upper Volta, and Dahomey; members of the parties and their leaders, i.e., G. D'Arboussier and Doudou Guèye from Senegal, Modibo Keita, and Mahamane Haidara from Sudan, and Oumar Ba from Upper Volta. The leaders of the Ivory Coast and Niger were officially absent. Interestingly enough, at the congress present was also the Union of Popular Forces for Democracy and Progress (Sawaba) party of Djibo Bakary, who had lost power in Niamey after voting for cutting the ties with France in the referendum. Mauritania had sent observers to the meeting (Ndoye, 1995, p. 152).

The negotiations ended up in the decision to create the Mali Federation. Its name was not chosen haphazardly, as it referred to the Mali Empire, which existed in the XVI century. Until the end of March 1959, elections to the legislative assemblies of each republic were to be held. On this ground, each unit will be able to send its representative to the federal assembly. The decision of whether a state wanted to be a part of the federation was taken by the people in a popular referendum. Such a process was the perfect example of how freedom was defined. Freedom that was so fragile in Africa. Mali Federation is a result of an African initiative born during intense *anticolonialism* times.

The Ivory Coast and France were firmly against what happened in Bamako. The newly structured federation was created before the community started working. It was a vote of no confidence in Paris (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 63).

Political construction of an independent African state

On January 17, 1959, when the Mali Federation was officially proclaimed, African leaders met in Dakar to discuss the constitutional details. The body responsible for this was the Federal Constitutional Assembly, composed of representatives of 4 countries, i.e., Senegal, Sudan, Dahomey, and the Upper Volta. The discussions were led by M. Keita and observed by a two-person delegation from Mauritania. Significantly enough, the pro-French states, Niger and the Ivory Coast, did not send their observers, which may be seen as a demonstration of disapproval. On the contrary, the federal constitution was finished and approved without discussion in three days (Kurtz, 1970), which showed the states' eagerness for integration and independence that did not include France.

The assembly managed to define the main objectives of the meeting, i.e., the delegation of power to the Constituent Assembly of Federal Institutions; the establishment of the limits of their competencies, and the definition of the general principles of the states in terms of the harmonization within the framework of unity (Ndoye, 1995, p. 153). The Constituent Assembly was unanimously adopted, and this event marked the birth of the Federation.

After the meeting in Dakar, the process of forming a new unit required further actions. Apart from the state constitution, each country that wanted to become a member of the federation needed to ratify the notation of membership. However, it was not as easy as it may have seemed after the optimistic meetings in Bamako and Dakar. In Dahomey, strong anti-independentist movements advocated dismissing politicians representing the country in Dakar (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 65). Consequently, in February 1959, Dahomey stepped down from the federation. There was no popular referendum, and the elections to the legislative assembly were held on April 2, 1959, with no candidates from the federalists' side.

Moreover, the announcement of the results was postponed due to big demonstrations. As Dahomey did not have a border with the territories of the Mali Federation, the Upper Volta, which merged those two units, had to be in favour of stretching the federation also on the Dahomeyan territory. Such an option was of no interest to the Voltian authorities. In addition, the fate of the federation was in Senegal's and Sudan's hands, and those countries saw no close connections,

neither political nor social or economic, between them and Dahomey. This led to the decision of Dahomey not to become a part of the federation. Later on, due to the political unrest and economic problems, the citizens of Dahomey rejected in a popular referendum the possibility of joining the federation.

About a million voters opted for a 'no' to the Federation. In favour of the idea were approx. 245 thousand.

The reason for that issue was that it was widely believed that issues and conflicts in the region would be solved quicker and easier with cooperation with France than without it (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 67). Therefore, both the Upper Volta and Dahomey ratified their constitutions with no intention of entering into the federation. The actions turned out differently in Senegal and Sudan. The first country almost unanimously adopted a Constitution of its Territorial Assembly that was directly correlated with the federal project. With his UPS-PRA, L. Senghor won the elections, and he, as a firm supporter of African integration, pushed the legislation process into becoming a part of the federation. He was elected the President, and his good friend, who also opted for the same future, M. Dia, a Prime Minister. Therefore, by law, Senegal was to be an autonomous state within the Community and a federated state within the Mali Federation (Gonidec, 1968; in: Ndoye, 1995, p. 154).

In Sudan, in 1959, RDA led by M. Keita, won the elections. Therefore, it was clear that the pro-federalist mood prevailed in this country. The same year, on April 17, M. Keita was elected Prime Minister of Sudan. He was consequently hosting this post with the position of the Bamako's mayor and the Mali Federation's prime minister (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 60).

Fragile existence

As a result of these events, the Mali Federation consisted of two units – Sudan and Senegal. Such structure showed the extent to which the independent decision-making process and any idea of integration were highly limited in Africa, mainly due to the amount of power and interests of the parties, thus elites. The newly-born actor in international relations had to face external and internal difficulties. It is essential to highlight that those two countries had a lot in common, which helped them organize the federation and was an essential asset to the whole cooperation process. Both countries were predominantly Muslim, possessed an ethnically

and linguistically diverse population, and differentiation was deeply rooted in both classes. However, the economic factors fostered the integration the most (Kurtz, 1970, p. 416). The Mali Federation was seen as a possibility and a tool for the countries to specialize in the agricultural sector. The most exported product was peanuts. Thanks to concentrating on its production, Senegal could provide itself with the most important goods, essentially crops from Senegal, and Sudan would focus on cattle farming. With such a cooperative mechanism, the federation could make significant profits from peanut exports while saving on grain imports. It would thus become more profitable and self-sufficient (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 83).

Before the Mali Federation gained complete independence, several agreements with the Republic of France needed to be signed. Therefore, just two months before the official declaration of the existence of the federation, various documents enabling the devolution of powers from the Community to the Mali Federation went into force. They were as follows: the special agreement transferring the competencies of the Community, two agreements on transitional provisions, and an agreement on the participation of the Mali Federation in the Community. Moreover, it also signed a series of cooperation agreements on foreign policy, defence, the economy, higher education, raw materials, and strategic products. On the basis of these documents, the federation's independence will only be effective after the ratification of the agreements by the assemblies of it, as well as France. In addition, those agreements were officially addressed to Mr. the President of the Council of the Republic of Senegal, Vice-President of the Mali Federation, and Mr. President of the Government of the Mali Federation, Republic of Sudan. Having said that, it can be assumed that France has *de facto* recognized the federation with their officials – M. Dia became its vice-president and M. Keita – Prime Minister (Gandolfi, 1960, p. 881). L. Senghor was elected president of the Mali Federation in the first session of the Federal Assembly.

In June 1960, the Mali Federation became a legally existing independent entity, endorsed by the Fifth Republic. The most important legal act binding on both parties was the aforementioned constitution. The act itself consisted of 62 articles and highlighted the awareness of the importance of the process of building unity among Western African countries. The federation was

set to be a democratic republic open to every autonomous West African state. The official language was French, the flag – red, green, and gold, and the motto: “One Nation, One Goal, One Faith” (fr. *Un Peuple, Un But, Une Foi*)². The seat of government became Dakar, but under federal law, the location could be changed to any location. The Prime Minister was to be appointed by the Federal Assembly Bureau and confirmed by the majority of the Assembly. Moreover, it was him who was empowered to appoint ministers. What seems important to mention is that the authorities of the federation possessed vast power concerning the legislation as a whole and, *inter alia*, economic or financial policy (Constitution de la Fédération du Mali, 1960).

Building the first independent integrated African state, however, appeared to be a bigger challenge than it was thought. Even if only two countries decided to build it, the opinions of their political leaders varied greatly. What for L. Senghor seemed like a good idea, was not favoured by M. Keita (Jakubiak, 2014, p. 19). These differences in opinions occurred at the beginning of the federation's existence, marking its short life, and led to its collapse. The most significant internal problem proved to be the distribution of power in the federal government and, consequently, the filling of positions and the carrying out of the process of *Africanization* of the civil administration. A struggle for influence began in the camp of the ruling elite. The policy of the federation was greatly shaped by the authorities. The most discussed post was the presidential one. The surmounting political discrepancies in power led to the army's involvement in the internal conflict. Hence, a coup d'état – from both sides – became a real possibility or even a threat. On August 20, 1960, two months after gaining independence, M. Keita was removed from the position of minister and arrested. The day before, an extraordinary federal government meeting decided to deprive M. Dia of power over the armed forces and declared a national state of emergency.

Almost immediately after those events, Senegal declared itself an independent state, which was recognized by the government in Paris a month later. Thus, the Mali Federation broke up into two independent and autonomous states – Senegal and Western Sudan, which took the name we know today – Mali. The arrested Sudanese politician was sent to Bamako on a special train. After arriving in the current capital of Mali, M. Keita claimed during a press conference that L. Senghor and

² Interestingly enough, later it became a motto on the coat of arms of Senegal.

M. Dia wanted to create a federation that would be absolutely dependent on France and that France itself wanted to destroy it as it perceived the new sovereign, and united African unit as a threat for French influence in the region. Moreover, M. Keita declared that he asked the United Nations for help maintaining the federation's unity (Prokopczuk, 1964, p. 145). Therefore, the first attempt at political and economic postcolonial integration in West Africa failed.

Failure of the Mali Federation

Given all facts presented above, it should be stated that several factors contributed to the accelerated collapse of the newly formed state. In addition to the already mentioned political issues and personal aspirations, socialist thought was of great importance. Some leaders were more radical, others less, which led to disputes and prevented the effective operation of the government. Moreover, there were apparent differences in the size and quantity of the population of both federation units, which created an asymmetry in the relations of the two components of the Mali Federation. Those ideas discrepancies were seen on the economic level and the organizational and political levels. The Senegalese side opted for a confederation in which only the authorities were to cooperate closely, which would give more autonomy to the populations and existing organizations. Sudan, on the other hand, perceived independence as a non-negotiable partner of unity. M. Keita highlighted the importance of a unitary state, where the president would serve as head of state and the government and minister of foreign affairs. L. Senghor refused to accept these conditions and pressed for a division of responsibility between the president and a prime minister; ideally, one of these jobs would be held by Senegal, the other by Sudan (Kurtz, 1970, p. 417). Apart from the form in which the African countries could shape their future, the relations with France and the understanding of socialism were understood differently. For Senegal, a close relationship with Paris was crucial; for Sudan – absolutely not. The first country wanted to build, alongside most of the countries of black Africa, the socialistic regime, while the second advocated for a so-called 'African socialism'. Moreover, the issues of ethnic and religious diversity did not facilitate integration processes. Even if the societies of the former AOF were characterized by homogeneity to the extent that the number of people presents constituted a geopolitical barrier, some kind of conflicts in this

background were visible, as can be seen in the subsequent history of Mali (conflict between Tuaregs and Moors). Consequently, independence from the French Republic was to a large extent a "poisoned gift, containing opposing parties, dictatorships, possible military regimes, and consequently neo-colonialism" (Ndoye, 1995, p. 152).

Conclusions

The Mali Federation marks the beginning of the idea of Pan-Africanism. Even if it was too weak to survive, it became an example of an attempt to build regional communities. What has to be stressed is that the disappearance of the colonial order left the African continent in a complex geopolitical situation. The attempt to create a federation independent from the previous metropolis revealed how difficult the African struggle for sovereignty would be. The Mali Federation proved but a short interlude between the two countries' status as a colony and as a unitary state.

The survival of the Mali Federation, as it was presented in the paper, was threatened by several factors. It is noteworthy that the main problem would be the lack of agreement over how African countries should express their autonomy. Such an issue was inextricably linked to the internal political unrest.

By September 1960 the dissolution of the Mali Federation completed the process of *balkanization* of French West Africa.

The federation's history exemplifies as well today's problems of the region. Besides different needs from respective sides, French neocolonialism still echoes from the background. What can be highlighted is that France wanted and needed to stay present in Western Africa and used the internal conflicts for its own interest. Even though the Fifth Republic agreed to the formation of the federation, the shape in which it would be organized was necessary, as the more ties with Paris, the better. That is why France was happy to see the ideas of L. Senghor and M. Dia, as though it seemed to be French enough. In addition, the former metropolis sought to impose on the federation its solutions in the conduct of policy, especially its economic aspects, which was an interference in building an independent state.

Significantly enough, the French presence is still visible in the region and also today is sometimes regarded as a part of its neocolonial policy. Therefore, in West Africa, the past directly influences the present time. Any integrative movement,

not only in the region but in the whole continent, still requires a lot of work and coordination, as there are various and sometimes tremendous differences between the countries. The recent events and the relation between Mali and France clearly show that the world has witnessed the collapse of the bilateral relations. The most significant example is the end of the Barkhane mission and outlawing the military presence of French troops on the territory of Mali (Olech & Homańska, 2022, p. 149).

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