

STATE LEGITIMACY IN MALI: CRISIS, CONTEST, (RE) CONSTRUCTION

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Emerging scholarship on the sources of political legitimacy raises questions about the character and purpose of the Malian state, challenging capacity-based approaches with relational and contextual ones. Taking key concepts from this scholarship, this article sets out the case of Mali as illustrative of the pertinence of relational approaches to understanding political legitimacy. The context of chronic crisis since 2012 is set against the backdrop of democratization's disappointments since the 1990s and the longer arc of problematic nationalist approaches to building the political legitimacy of the state. From a richer contextual understanding of the drivers and barriers of political legitimacy, there emerges a renewed call for the bottom-up re-construction of the social contract between Malians and their governing actors and institutions.

INTRODUCTION

With reference to the Republic of Mali, the pervasive view among Malian and international actors and analysts is that political legitimacy is an “aggregate quality of the state in relation to an abstract citizenry writ large.”¹ When close attention is paid to diverse contextual factors that Malians name from their lived experience of the state, the foundational assumptions about what the state is and ought to be are called into question. Norms and expectations