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To cite this article: Morten Bøås & Abdoul Wakhab Cissé (2022): The sheikh versus the president: the making of Imam Dicko as a political Big Man in Mali, Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal, DOI: [10.1080/23802014.2022.2108893](https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2022.2108893)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23802014.2022.2108893>



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Published online: 19 Aug 2022.



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# The sheikh versus the president: the making of Imam Dicko as a political Big Man in Mali

Morten Bøås<sup>a</sup> and Abdoul Wakhab Cissé<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, Norway; <sup>b</sup>Alliance pour Refonder la Gouvernance en Afrique, Dakar, Senegal

## ABSTRACT

In the lead up to the military coup in Mali in August 2020, Imam Mahmoud Dicko solidified his status as one of the country's most important power brokers. How did a religious leader achieve this in a country where politics is considered 'dirty', the social capital of religious leaders rests on being seen as honest and pious, and politics and religion are considered constitutionally separate? Drawing on recent work in African Studies that utilises the classical 'Big Man' concept of Marshall Sahlins, this article tracks the political engagement of religious leaders with a particular focus on the political career of Imam Dicko. We document both his failures and how he learned to play politics without tarnishing his image as a pious man of God. We argue that Dicko's hybrid mix of theology and politics led his followers into new terrain that even the secular opposition could buy in to. In turn, this opens up space for Salafi actors to navigate the straits between resistance and collaboration with the state.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 10 June 2021  
Accepted 3 July 2022

## KEYWORDS

Mali; islam; religious leaders; big men; resistance

## Introduction

Mali is, by an overwhelmingly majority, a Muslim country. Nonetheless, it is also by constitution a secular state that explicitly forbids religious political parties. Religious actors have therefore rarely been openly involved in party politics and electoral campaigns. Until the current conflict started in 2012, Mali was also considered a typical West African country wherein more liberal versions of Sunni Islam through important Sufi brotherhoods were expected to dominate the religious sphere (Coulon 1983).<sup>1</sup> There is, however, another history of Islam in Mali that dates back to the jihads of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In this tradition, leaders from both the Qadiriyya and Tijāniyya Sufi brotherhoods expressed ideas of reform and renewal of Islam and Islamic practices that should take place under the guidance of a state that governed in accordance with sharia (see Lebovich 2019). Today, while the majority of the population still practice a form of Islam in accordance with Sunni persuasions, Salafism and various other Wahhabi-inspired congregations have remained present in the country since the 1930s (Cruise O'Brien 2009).

At times throughout the 20th century, there has been fierce competition between these interpretations of Islam, but this rarely mattered much in the political contestations of electoral campaigns and public protests. This changed when the country descended

into violent conflict and near collapse in 2012 after a secular Tuareg rebellion in the north was followed by a coup d'état and the subsequent infiltration of large parts of the country by jihadi insurgents (see Bøås 2015). Based on a call for support from the transitional Malian government, France intervened militarily through Operation Serval in early 2013. The French intervention halted the advance of the jihadi insurgents and facilitated the deployment of the UN peacekeeping mission, the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), later the same year. In 2015, a peace accord was also signed between a coalition of separatist Tuareg rebels, pro-government militias, and the Malian state (Bøås 2019).

Despite these efforts, as well as those of several other large international missions deployed to stabilise the country, no real improvements have materialised on the ground. The security situation has rather deteriorated, especially in the central regions of the country where jihadist insurgents have been able to re-group while international attention was focused on implementing the fragile peace deal and stabilising the north. Since 2015, a more locally based jihadist group, the Katiba Macina, led by the Fulani preacher Hamadou Koufa, has gained a substantial foothold in the important Mopti region of central Mali. Koufa and his group are also formally partnered with the al-Qaeda affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) led by the Tuareg leader Iyad Ag Ghaly. The Katiba Macina and JNIM's combined campaign of violence against the state and international forces, and coercion and killing of non-collaborators in this part of Mali, has accelerated the retreat of the state and facilitated the insurgents' expansion and reach (Bøås 2019). As a consequence, many Malians have lost the little faith they had left in the modern state, as it does not present credible answers to their livelihood challenges (Ba and Bøås 2017; see also Schulz 2021).<sup>2</sup>

Several actors, including religious leaders, have attempted to take advantage of the anxiety and social confusion created by this turmoil. Although assisting their country and its population in times of precarity is certainly a function of religious leaders, they also strategically manoeuvred to gain more followers. Religious leaders in Mali have largely been considered as pious, honest, and non-corrupt. This is in stark contrast to how most Malians view politics, which is considered a 'dirty' practice of shady deals and of patron-client relations where 'Big Men' seek the favour of the electorate in order to 'eat' the spoils.<sup>3</sup> The interjection of religious leaders into the ongoing struggle therefore afforded them the opportunity to gain material support from the political class, which suddenly more than ever needed the support of one of the few sources of authority left largely untainted by the crisis.

Religious leaders have since had to grapple with preserving their symbolic capital while participating more openly in the formal matters of politics, such as in electoral campaigns.<sup>4</sup> To achieve this, they have to demonstrate their ability to 'manage their appetite' for the various forms of spoils that Malian politics is known to produce.<sup>5</sup> However, as it is commonly said in Mali, 'appetite comes with eating'. This paper will therefore explore how, after the 2012 crisis, religious actors were drawn into the political game, what effect this had during the 2013 and 2018 elections, and how they have since tried to convince their congregations that they still can 'manage their appetite' through focusing on socially conservative issues, such as the family law code and the question of homosexuality. The latter is a question that had never before been debated in Mali, but which enabled religious leaders to bring down the prime minister

in 2019. This event, and what followed, led almost directly to the August 2020 military coup that brought down the elected government of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (commonly known as IBK).

Although we discuss the role and involvement of several religious leaders, the main character in our study is Imam Mahmoud Dicko. Born in the mid-1950s in the Timbuktu region of Mali, Dicko's social and political influence has steadily grown since he first gained national attention as the head of the Haut Conseil Islamique Malien (HCIM) in 2009. From this position, he led a popular campaign of mass protests in 2009 that forced then President Amadou Toumani Touré to significantly weaken proposed reforms of the family law code that would have increased the rights of women in Mali. Dicko is therefore clearly a social conservative, but his outspokenness against inequality, corruption and state mismanagement has also made him a champion of the masses on a number of secular political issues. But how did a religious leader that at times self-identifies as a 'Wahhabi' manage to get so deeply involved in politics in a country that considers 'politics as dirty'.<sup>6</sup>

### A note on theory and methodology

This article is based on our continued collaborative engagement on events in Mali since 2013. Having worked together on different research projects dealing with various aspects of the crisis, we observed both how religious leaders increasingly became involved in the electoral campaigns in 2013 and 2018 and the role that Dicko began to play when dissatisfaction with President Keïta increased not long after his re-election in 2018. To document this process, we collected information and observations from a number of people while undertaking broader research on various aspects of the Malian crisis. This data was then collated in fieldnotes and forms the basis of the empirical material in this article. This material is supplemented by research notes, blog posts and newspaper articles produced between 2013 and 2020. During this period, we worked together mainly, but not exclusively, in Bamako, twice or more every year. While we recognise that there are other ways in which this particular history can be represented, we believe that we have pieced it together as balanced and objectively as possible. Our intention is certainly not to signal any alarm about an increased involvement and influence of religious leaders in Malian politics, but rather to show that this represents a new chapter in the history of religion in Mali. This development could signal a new pathway of political involvement for Salafi actors that navigate and negotiate the straits between resistance and collaboration with the state.

While our theoretical ambitions are relatively modest in this article, we want to present how useful recent interpretations of the classical 'Big Man' literature of Marshall Sahlins (1963) within African conflict studies (see Utas 2012; Bøås 2012, 2015) can be for our attempt to understand events and actors in an unsettled and sparsely institutionalised state, such as Mali.<sup>7</sup> The conceptual terms that framed our initial conversations on unfolding events in Mali were centred on the concept of the Big Man and to what degree a religious actor such as Imam Dicko could be understood as one in the making.

We agree with Driscoll (2020) that the concept has moved away from its original meaning in Sahlins' original study. The Big Man of Marshall-Sahlins (1963) was powerful, but as power was predicated on recognition, the Big Man was also indebted to those who

gave him such recognition. It was a relationship based on reciprocity, and while what Driscoll (2020) calls 'Big Man Governance' is informal, it also must have a degree of predictability and is thus to some extent rule bound. The Big Man is therefore not the despotic, unpredictable ruler associated with Jackson and Rosberg's (1982) personal rule. As Utas (2012, 8) reminds us, 'Big Men do not generally control followers. Quite the opposite: it is in the interest of followers to maintain ties with a Big Man'.

In his 1963 study, Marshall-Sahlins used the terms 'developed' to conceptualise Polynesian political systems and 'underdeveloped' to describe its Melanesian counterparts. These are not terms we would use today, but they nonetheless highlight something important – how the polity is organised. In Polynesia, the political geometry was pyramidal – smaller units integrated into larger through a system of intergroup ranking, and the network of representative chiefs of the subdivisions amounted to a coordinated political structure. In Melanesia, however, what Marshall-Sahlins found was autonomous kinship-residential groups (small village or a local cluster of hamlets), each a copy of others, but each economically self-governing and the equal of others in political status. Within these large differences in political scale, structure and performance lies a more personal contrast in leadership – the Big Man appears in the 'underdeveloped' settings of Melanesia, whereas the 'chief' is associated with the Polynesian systems.

Our argument is that whereas the pyramidal political geometry of Polynesia shares similarities with the regulatory neopatrimonial system that existed in Mali when the country supposedly was a showcase for neoliberal reforms, what the Malian state now has become is more similar to the Melanesian model, where the space for aspiring Big Men is much larger. This is simply due to the ongoing crisis since 2012 and the ways it has opened up new social, political and economic spaces for entrepreneurial activity and risk-taking.

Big Man authority is therefore very much based on self-made personal power. Big Men can come to office, and they can succeed or be installed in existing positions within political groups or institutions, but this is not necessarily the essence of their authority (Englebert and Dunn 2013). If the Big Man comes to office, it is by his or her decision only. The attainment of Big Man status is thus the outcome of a series of individual entrepreneurial acts – acts that imbue a sense of wit and risk-taking that elevates their status and attracts an entourage of loyal lesser individuals (see Marshall-Sahlins 1963). The authority of such an individual is therefore not based on political title as such, but the person's acknowledged standing – this is a manufactured quality that followers see an inherent value in and hence attach themselves to. If the value of attachment disappears, so does the status as Big Man. It is this tacit recognition as Big Man, as opposed to any designated formal title, that Dicko gained during the events leading up to the August 2020 coup and which enabled him to take on and contribute to the downfall of the president.

Although Dicko with hindsight made some mistakes in 2013 and 2018, in the lead-up to the August 2020 coup, he became a social hero capable of capturing the imagination of large audiences. His public performances played to a popular imagining of the hero as a 'destabilising force in society, someone who strikes against and sometimes overturns the prevailing regime' (Whitehouse 2012, 97). Seen in this light, what Dicko became was an agent of disequilibrium. This may sound dangerous, but often what is needed in a state of exception is a man of exception who can lead his followers into new social terrain (see also Hellweg 2011).

Although the majority of cases of Big Men analysed in the new conflict literature based on anthropology and African Studies (see Utas 2012) have been secular actors, we argue that what characterises Big Man status is not a secular inclination or any other social, economic or political position. Rather, what this status is based on is entrepreneurship and the ability to craft, manage, and utilise political authority based on accumulated capital. This capital can come in many forms but is ultimately based on mutually acknowledged recognition and respect. We argue that in a context of crisis and social confusion, as is the case in Mali, an image of piousness combined with strong religious credentials is a form of symbolic capital that can be co-opted and utilised as almost perfect Big Man capital.

The remainder of this article outlines the ‘political career’ of Imam Dicko and other religious leaders up to the August 2020 military coup. We document both failures and setbacks as well as how Dicko and some other religious leaders learned to play politics without tarnishing their image as pious men of God. In particular, we argue that Dicko’s hybrid mix of theology and politics is key to his popularity – it illustrates his ability to keep his finger on the pulse of the politics of the ‘street’, leading his followers into a new landscape of politics, religion, and resistance that both his religious supporters and parts of the secular opposition can abide by. What this suggests is that a new pathway of resistance and collaboration for Salafi actors may be about to emerge underneath the international headlines of Mali being caught between traditional Sufi Islam and violent Salafi insurgencies.

### **Politics as dirty – Dicko’s reinterpretation of the traditional political Big Man**

Consistently near the bottom of the United Nations Development Programme Human Development Index, Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world. Outside of the bigger cities, most people make a living from farming or herding – traditional livelihoods that are threatened both by violent conflict and by demographic trends.<sup>8</sup> State institutions are weak, administrative capacity is low, and the country is caught in a vicious cycle of violence and fragmentation which international community partners have done little to improve (Bøås 2019).

The fragile condition of contemporary Mali stands in stark contrast to its heritage of ancient civilisations with vast empires (as the Mande and the Songhay) and kingdoms (like the Fulani of Macina). Islam arrived in Mali around the ninth century, and the cities of ancient Mali – like Timbuktu, Gao, and Djenne – became known in the Islamic world for their wealth and scholarship. However, these empires eventually fractured into smaller entities. Little was left of the ancient glory when the French colonial powers arrived in the late 19th century (Ba and Bøås 2017).

In the 1990s, Mali was often presented as an example of successful liberal economic and democratic reform in West Africa.<sup>9</sup> However, behind what was presented as a showcase of democracy, good governance, peace, and reconciliation lay institutional weakness, mismanagement, and collusion involving regional and national elite interests that paid scant attention to human security and development (Bøås and Torheim 2013). Thus, when the current crisis broke in 2012, Mali was a weak and fragile state with hardly any formal institutions or networks capable of working out sustainable compromises at the local level. It was a multiparty democracy, but as every political party was sustained by

a vertical hierarchy of patronage networks, the resilience of the political system was very low, as shown by the March 2012 coup (Bøås 2019). Most ordinary Malians are therefore deeply disenfranchised by the political class and tend to believe that politicians are only there to make money. As one key informant put it: 'if they are not corrupt on entering office, they quickly learn how to use their new position to fill their pockets.'<sup>10</sup> Politics is seen as dirty, but political Big Men are also feared and respected because they are needed.

As the crisis of 2012 has unfolded for almost a decade with no endgame insight, the political system has deteriorated even further. What used to be neopatrimonial state of regulatory hierarchical type of pyramidal patron–client relations (Murray 2016; Mkandawire 2015) has been clearly weakened in the capital of Bamako and almost vanished in some peripheral areas (Bøås 2015). What has replaced this is a looser Big Man type of politics, not unlike what Sahlins (1963) identified on the Melanesian Islands (Bøås 2012).

### The 2013 and 2018 elections

In the beginning, Operation Serval seemed successful as it managed to stop the advances of the jihadi insurgents south of the River Niger. The international community therefore expressed a strong desire to return the country to ordinary parliamentary and presidential rule as quickly as possible. National elections were hastily organised in the autumn of 2013, followed by an election in 2018 in accordance with the schedule designed by the Malian constitution.

While religious leaders of national importance did not openly campaign for any candidate in the 2013 and 2018 elections, their preferred candidate was well known to their followers. IBK won the presidency by a huge majority in August 2013 on a campaign platform to restore Mali's territorial integrity and to tackle the massive corruption and economic mismanagement of the country (Ba and Bøås 2013). During the presidential elections in 2013, there was a clear consensus among religious leaders that IBK was the man that could steer Mali out of crisis. Most of them, Dicko included, therefore openly, although informally, supported IBK's candidacy. While the involvement and support of religious leaders in electoral politics was somewhat novel, IBK's broad popularity among the Malian population meant this transition was not considered particularly controversial.

Despite IBK's 2013 electoral campaign promises, however, the crisis deepened during his first period in power. By 2018, the conflict seemed to have become almost chronic, and the insurgents' area of operation had also come much closer to the capital of Bamako. In addition, the 'good governance' approach that IBK had promised to base his rule on had not only failed, but in effect never even materialised at all. Both citizens and international observers viewed the Malian state as just as corrupt in 2018 as it had been when he assumed office in 2013. In short, none of IBK's campaign promises had been fulfilled (Bøås 2019).

One would think that it would be difficult for IBK to gain enough confidence among the Malian electorate to ensure a second term in office. His track record was undoubtedly an embarrassment, even for some of IBK's most faithful supporters. Religious leaders were also clearly more careful in how they talked about IBK during the 2018 elections than had been the case in 2013. Despite this, IBK was re-elected after a run-off against main opposition rival Soumaila Cissé.

## *The 2018 presidential elections*<sup>11</sup>

The first round of the presidential election took place on 29 July 2018, when 24 candidates competed for the favour of the electorate. However, only IBK (Rally for Mali), Soumaila Cissé (Union for the Republic and Democracy), Aliou Diallo (Democratic Alliance for Peace) and Cheick Modibo Diarra (The Movement for Development in Mali) were considered as serious contenders. As no candidate received more than 50% of the votes, a run-off had to be held on 12<sup>th</sup> August between the two top candidates, IBK and Cissé. This was precisely the same situation as in 2013, and in the end, IBK was re-elected with 67% of the votes. The result in 2018 was therefore much the same as in 2013, but for the first time in Malian history, an incumbent had been forced into a run-off.

It would be wrong to explain the outcome as solely due to the involvement of religious leaders, but it is of considerable interest to understand how they had an impact on the election result, how they managed this, and why this was important to them. As previously noted, religious leaders are not supposed to be openly political figures in Mali, but this did not prevent the electoral candidates from eagerly seeking the support and blessing from religious leaders, nor did it prevent the religious leaders themselves to actively and even cunningly negotiate the game of electoral politics in Mali.

On the contrary to the 2013 campaign, in 2018, the religious leaders were far from united in their informal support for candidates. In fact, until the very last day of voting in the second round, they remained far more divided than civil society actors or political parties with candidates that had lost in the first round of voting. The only significant exception was Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara (one of Mali's most influential imams in the Maliki branch of Sunni Islam and the current chairman of the HCIM) who kept his opinion well hidden from the public eye.<sup>12</sup> The question is therefore why support from religious leaders was so important for the candidates, and what was in it for the religious leaders themselves?

The involvement of religious leaders in the 2013 elections must have born some fruits as all of them (except for Haidara) were ready to do the same in 2018, even though some of those that stood by IBK in 2013 had lost credibility. The political candidates were not unaware of this, but they also knew that they still needed the religious leaders' support to strengthen their failing image as pious legitimate leaders seeking the best for their country, and not only for themselves. It was obvious when the 2018 campaign started that many Malians were deeply dissatisfied with the political class and politics in general. This was also evident in the low voter turn-out in both the first and second round of presidential elections (respectively 43 and 35%). It is therefore fair to say that these two groups of elites needed each other. The political candidates needed the blessing of religious leaders to protect their crumbling popular legitimacy, whereas the religious leaders needed to show their influence and thereby also show the politicians that they could not be ignored. In short, their appetite for eating had grown.

What has taken place in Mali since 2013 can thus be considered a slow but steady fusion of politics and religion (see also Schulz 2021). This is also quite clearly expressed in the political discourse, where one increasingly finds references to religious subjects such as sharia. This fusion has opened the political space in Mali for religious actors and leaders to seek influence, but it is important to note that there are significant exceptions to this trend, with Haidara being the most important – but not the only – one.



One of Mali's most respected and venerable religious leaders is Muhammadu, the Chérif Bouyé of the town of Nioro. Muhammadu belongs to a lineage that traces decent to the prophet Muhammed. As the only surviving son of Cheik Hamallah (1883–1943) who founded the Hamawiyya Sufi brotherhood, a branch of Tijāniyya, Chérif Bouyé sits at the top of the Sufi hierarchy in Mali (see Soares 1996). In 2018, he chose Aliou Diallo of the Democratic Alliance for Peace (DAP) as his preferred candidate. This came as a surprise both because Diallo was seen as a minor candidate with little national name recognition and because Chérif Bouyé had formerly supported IBK in 2013. Nonetheless, this was a significant decision because Chérif Bouyé carries great symbolic weight due to the role his father and his hometown of Nioro had played in the history of Islam in Mali, even if the town today is located at the very periphery of the Malian state along the border to Mauritania. It was in Nioro that Cheik Hamallah – perhaps the most important Sufi mystic in Mali – established his Sufi order before French colonial powers deported him, apparently for his opposition to their rule, to France where he died in 1943. It was therefore a decision of national significance when Chérif Bouyé as the first important religious leader openly expressed support for a presidential candidate in 2018. Moreover, as Chérif Bouyé had been considered something of a kingmaker due to his open and vocal support for IBK in 2013, his switch of allegiance to Diallo in 2018 was clear evidence of the weakening of support for IBK among the religious leaders; with hindsight this was also a sign of what would come in 2020.

Why did Chérif Bouyé abandon IBK? Was he, like many other Malians, just disappointed with IBK's balance sheet and wanted to show his disapproval by once more trying to play the role of kingmaker? Or had this less to do with IBK's track record and more with the fact that the DAP candidate was a rich businessman? Or was it perhaps that Diallo promised more, in combination with his origins in the same area of Mali as Chérif Bouyé? Either way, Bouyé stated his support by publicly calling on his voters to cast their ballot for Diallo. Obviously, Bouyé failed as a kingmaker in 2018. His preferred candidate received few votes and did not make it to the second round. However, this had little negative impact on his legitimacy as a traditional religious leader. After all, he had chosen to support a 'fresh' candidate not yet 'polluted' by the general Malian sentiment that 'politics are dirty'. As such, one could say that what may have looked like a very bold move by Bouyé did not come with a high risk.

Whereas Bouyé escaped without any harm to his legitimacy, Imam Dicko's involvement in the 2018 campaign ended in personal embarrassment and an association with 'dirty politics'. Dicko had first announced in public that he would follow Chérif Bouyé's advice for which candidate to support; however, he subsequently hesitated and declared that he would not instruct which candidate his followers should vote for. This alone would have posed little problem, but Dicko also made the mistake of indicating support for IBK by stating that some good programmes had been started during his first term in office. In the end, Dicko tried to get out of the fray by declaring a more neutral position, more in line with Haidara's, and stated in a meeting of opposition leaders that 'we pray God for Mali to be led by the one who will bring peace and tranquillity to the country' (Bøås, Cissé, and Diallo 2019, 4).

Why Dicko stuck with IBK as long as he did, we can only speculate. However, 2013 was not the first time Dicko and IBK had exchanged favours – they had known each other since the early 2000s and IBK may have helped Dicko become the chair of the HCIM. While the

nature of the alliance between IBK and Dicko may be uncertain, what the discussion above illuminates is the increasing political influence of Malian religious leaders. However, it also shows that even if ‘appetite comes with eating’, those who successfully navigate this game are those also able to manage their appetite for politics. What we mean by this is that religious leaders can play the political game, but that doing so is potentially a double-edged sword as they must protect their image as frugal men of faith. They can at certain times declare openly their support for one candidate, as the case of Chérif Bouyé shows, but it can come with a cost. If not, one may end up in a situation of embarrassment where one has to back-track on previous commitments made.

However, as events in the aftermath of the 2018 election showed, there are a number of tricks that religious actors can play in a context of insecurity. One of them is to re-establish a support base by finding a popular social conservative rallying cry. Dicko did so by returning to a tried and tested topic – the family law code (see Koné 2018); but this time he astutely added the issue of homosexuality.

### The aftermath of the 2018 elections and the path to August 2020

Like many of Mali’s important religious leaders, Dicko comes from a family of well-known Muslim leaders. However, contrary to his forefathers, Dicko attended a Wahhabi mosque in Bamako before he travelled abroad to continue his religious studies. His first port of call was Mauritania, where he enrolled in two different renowned madrasas. From Mauritania, he continued his education in Saudi Arabia, where he enrolled at the University of Medina – the centre of Wahhabi learning par excellence where students from all over the world are educated in the Wahhabi doctrine.

Through his studies, Dicko has become an accomplished religious specialist well versed in the Wahhabi doctrine, but he is more than just another Medina candidate well trained in a strict doctrinal reading of the sacred text. Dicko has become a quietist who refuses the violent aspects of jihad and sharia; more importantly, while most Wahhabi fundamentalists reject everything that is non-Islamic, Dicko argues that what should hold society together in Mali is Islam *and* the ancient pre-Islamic traditions – that it is social values and traditions that guarantees social order (see Macé 2020). Being charismatic and an elegant speaker both in local languages and in French just adds to his influence.

Returning to Mali from his studies abroad in the early 1980s, Dicko gained prominence in the Association pour l’Unité et le Progrès de l’Islam (AMUPI)<sup>13</sup> before he utilised the fall of the authoritarian Traoré regime in 1991 to claim a new position as a public figure. He began to use his AMUPI position to comment not only about religious issues but also blended his sermons with comments on national and at times also international political questions. Levelling above other younger religious figures at that time to become a figure of national standing, when the HICM was established in 2002, it was clear that Dicko would serve on its council. Just 6 years later, he became its leader (see Lebovich 2019). His leadership of the HICM also meant that he increasingly became familiar with and an acquittance of Chérif Bouyé; in 2009, the two joined together in an alliance that crossed the Sufi–Wahhabi divide when they together opposed reforms to the Malian family law code. This was the first, but it would not be the last, time these two religious leaders joined forces to drum up a political storm. It was at this time that Dicko emerged as an influential power broker and key player in Malian politics.

The original family law code – the Code of Marriage and Guardianship – dates back to 1962, and by the 1990s, it was seen as out-dated and discriminatory to women by both important donors (the United States and several European donors) and by women’s associations in Mali, such as the Coordination des Associations et ONG Féminines du Mali (CAFO). The process of attempting to reform the Code of 1962 started in 1995, but nationwide consultations were not held before 2000 and a new draft was not written up until 2002. This draft remained in the drawers for years and was only submitted to the National Assembly in 2009, which approved it after an extraordinary session. The new bill was not a gigantic leap forward, but it had the support of organisations like CAFO and most international donors; it was seen as ‘progressive’ as it favoured gender equality and respect for the rights of women and children (see Koné 2018; Schulz 2010).

However, almost immediately after it had been adopted by the National Assembly, it was rejected by Mali’s main Islamic organisations on the grounds that the new law was alien to Malian traditions and to the common Islamic social values in the country. The leading opposing organisation was the HCIM with Dicko at its helm, but AMUPI and others also contributed, as did Chérif Bouyé. It was becoming clear that on issue of social conservatism, more Wahhabi-leaning imams such as Dicko and important Sufi leaders such as Chérif Bouyé were finding common ground. This common ground would be powerful enough to force through a revision of the new legal code in line with the comments made by the religious leaders.

When the question of reforms to the family law code reappeared on the political scene after the 2018 election, Dicko took the opportunity to re-establish an alliance with Chérif Bouyé. The two of course share similar concerns on this question, but an alliance was also fortuitous as there were also rumours in circulation in Bamako that IBK was planning to take revenge on Chérif Bouyé for opposing him during the elections (see Lebovich 2019). In the end, IBK did not exact revenge, and Dicko and Chérif Bouyé, through organised massive demonstrations, were once again victorious in forcing the government to back down on reforms to the family law code, and the Dutch-funded sexual education programme in particular. The latter was in fact a small donor-funded workshop and had nothing to do with the family law code, but Dicko nonetheless used it to his advantage. This was not only a huge personal victory for Dicko, but also a way for him to effectively re-establish himself as a pure and pious defender of the faith and not a religious leader who dabbled in dirty politics. However, what happened next took most observers of Malian affairs by quite some surprise.

On the evening of 19 January 2019, an Imam, Abdoul Aziz Yattabaré, was stabbed to death in Bamako while leaving his mosque. Yattabaré was a well-known and influential religious leader, a member of the HICM and the Director of the Islamic Institute of Missira, thus his murder was both a huge shock and a cause of widespread grief. At first nobody was arrested or claimed responsibility for his death, precipitating much public speculation. Finally, the government arrested someone they claimed to be a misguided criminal individual. However, a spokesperson for Dicko cast doubt on this account and indicated that Yattabaré had been killed because he condemned homosexuality. This was followed by a mass rally of over 100,000 people in Bamako on 10 February 2019 led by Dicko and Chérif Bouyé (the latter represented by one of his closest assistants). Three key demands were put forward in this rally: 1) a new law criminalising homosexuality; 2) better

governance and security; and 3) IBK to sack his prime minister, Soumeylou Boubéye Maïga, whom many protesters accused of leading a secretive homosexual lobby that was about to gain control of Malian politics.

In the end, Maïga and the government that he led was forced to resign in April 2019. The combination of a strong standing on social conservative issues together with the circulation of conspiracy theories with anti-Western sentiments allowed Dicko to effectively expunge the association with 'dirty politics' he garnered during the 2018 elections. Dicko subsequently re-emerged as the pure pious defender of what is 'authentic' Malian and Muslim, and as a defender of the public will and good.

Following up on his success as a real power broker in Malian politics, Dicko continued to present himself to the public as both a charismatic pious religious leader and also an ordinary concerned citizen – he claimed it was as the latter that he gave interviews and commented on political affairs. His argument was that as a leader of his people, he was obliged to be concerned about the situation in Mali, but when frequently asked about political ambitions, he claimed he had none.

These claims did not end the speculations that he had ambitions for the 2023 presidential elections, and the formation of his own organisation – la Coordination des Mouvements, Associations, et Sympathisants (CMAS) – in October 2019 after his time as leader of the HICM concluded only gave more credibility to this rumour. Dicko's close advisors and assistants (but not the man himself) claimed that the CMAS would not be a political movement, but rather a socio-religious organisation focusing on the 'moralisation of public life', without giving any further indication of what that exactly meant. Dicko himself when speaking in public about CMAS continued to cry out against impunity, endemic corruption and the fatal mismanagement of the state, while always adding that he was not the kingmaker or a president in the making.

### *The summer of 2020 – the imam versus the president*<sup>14</sup>

Even if we are to believe that Dicko was not a president in the making, he proved to be the king slayer during the summer of 2020. Amidst the backdrop of a governing system based on corruption and cronyism, weak public services, accusations of electoral fraud and mismanagement, and IBK's continued failure of bringing an end to inter-communal violence and the jihadi rebellions, public rage on the streets of Bamako hit unprecedented levels when pictures circulated of the president's son (Karim) on a luxury yacht in the Mediterranean in the company of beautiful young women wearing just tiny bikinis. While the main opposition parties of the 2018 elections tried to ride this wave of popular discontent by jointly organising demonstrations on the streets of Bamako, the voice that brought people out in masses and sustained the street protests over time was that of Dicko. Capitalising on the Friday prayers, Dicko's speeches, which combined an easy-to-understand theological argument with his worldly and catchy critique against public corruption and the regime's general mismanagement of the country, brought increasingly higher numbers out into the streets. The protests soon spread to other large cities, including Sikasso in the south, Kayes in the west, Ségou in the south-central and even to Timbuktu on the fringes of the Sahara.

Dicko's power was also revealed when the Malian opposition organised in the so-called M5 alliance sat down for talks with IBK. Two days prior to this meeting, they had consulted Dicko as they were aware that they could not strike any ordinary political compromise without his blessing. The talks between the opposition and IBK did not amount to much, but the process further emphasised the importance of Dicko. Indeed, the new opposition alliance that materialised – the June 5 Movement – Rally of the Patriotic Forces (M5-RPF) – was in many ways structured around him. The M5-RPF was a heterogenous grouping, and what glued the movement together was their common disapproval and conviction that IBK had to step down; it is difficult to see anything else that would have united people as disparate as Choguel Kokalla Maïga, Oumar Mariko and Mountaga Tall, and organisations such as Dicko's CMAS, Clement Dembélé's Platform against Corruption and Unemployment and Cheick Oumar Sissoko's Mali Koura Hope.<sup>15</sup> However, they felt they could not achieve this without the informal but conspicuous leadership of Imam Dicko.

As Dicko was addressing ever larger and more agitated crowds of protesters in Bamako, it became obvious that a serious confrontation was imminent. This was not just another crisis that IBK could navigate out of by reshuffling the old political elite. Something was about to crack as Dicko seemed uninterested in the ordinary Malian political compromise of positions and payment in one form or another (see also Thurston 2020). The final episode of the IBK era came on 10 July 2020, when forceful repressions of street protests in Bamako sanctioned by IBK led to the death of 14 protesters with more than 300 wounded. This came as a shock not only to ordinary citizens, but also to several of the younger military leaders in the army. IBK and his closest advisors and allies became increasingly isolated in and around the presidential palace, and when military units started marching from the garrison town of Kati (15 kilometres from Bamako) on 18 August 2020, no gunshots were fired, and nobody tried to stop them as they arrested IBK and what was left of his government. Soon after, in a speech on national television, a broken but unharmed IBK announced his immediate resignation from office.

The Imam had brought down the president, clarifying his position as one of the most powerful men in the country. Our assertion is not that Dicko played any direct role in the military coup, but that he set the stage for an unconstitutional end to IBK's reign.

## Conclusion

As the saga of the Malian crisis and events following the August 2020 coup are still unfolding, concrete conclusions are hard to draw. Nonetheless, what was surprising to many was that Imam Dicko did not seek a position in the transitional government established after the coup. Although he never withdrew from the public view, he instead chose a more backseat role for himself, concentrating on CMAS. Is this because he doesn't want to risk his proven Big Man status as the king slayer who brought down the president? Or is he simply biding his time until the next presidential election? Most of his communications on this issue are ambiguous, but one key text is his manifesto of 18 February 2021. In it, Dicko (2021) states that

Mali is heir to the great empires of Western Sudan, and no one is a prophet in his country. My deep faith in the values of an Islam of tolerance and patriotic love continues to nourish my reason for living and my public discourse. This faith obliges me to speak the truth. (. . .). Those

who govern must live with the obsession of the general interest of the fight against impunity and intolerance, in favour of equality before the law and in access to public services. No being is perfect either. I have often been mistaken in supporting men who, guided by selfish and materialistic interests, have failed to embody Mali's much-desired recovery. I believed, as I did in 2013, that strong participation in an electoral project could, on its own, bring hope for the resolution of our problems of political and social governance. I was mistaken. I sincerely regret it. I want to bring here the voice of a new emancipatory impulse, of an urgency to act, to think high and true, before history for new horizons, with the hope that the Malian genius will hear the echo of this voice and will raise our destiny at my side, as a pilgrim. It is an act of hope and peace. I have no hidden agenda, no personal ambitions or partisan interests, but I am concerned about the fire that is burning in our cities and in our countryside, and which could, in the long run, destroy 'Living together' in this common home that is Mali.

Here he not only accepts responsibility for his support of IBK in 2013 (not 2018), but also presents himself as the pilgrim of hope and peace, as a concerned but ordinary citizen fearing that his beloved country may be on the brink of collapse. However, towards the end of his manifesto, he concedes ambiguity about his (political) future in Mali by stating that

Since 18 August 2020, I have left my door wide open. I have listened and observed tirelessly, but the situation seems too serious for me to remain silent. If we do not react now, actively and collectively, the state that governs us is meaningless. The country must be saved. We must act relentlessly with the living forces of the Nation to restore the authority of the State. To do this, I commit myself, freely, to go wherever I can be useful, wherever our citizens feel abandoned. I commit myself to promote dialogue among all to reconcile us. I commit myself to build bridges of exchange between civil and armed actors, to put back at the heart of the concerns, to live together and trust between communities.

This is not the humble pilgrim that speaks, but Dicko the Big Man – a man of exception in a time of exception. The man that can heal and restore Mali. If Dicko can continue to effectively bridge the divide between politics and religion and between his secular and religious followers, he could be a serious contender in future presidential elections, either as the 'new' king himself or as the 'kingmaker' in a Mali of his design. This remains, as with so much else in Mali, to be seen, but through an assessment of Dicko, we have demonstrated the relevance of the Big Man paradigm for religious actors. This is what Big Man status is all about. It is not just about despotism or unaccountability; the Big Man is accountable to followers and the flock of followers must be maintained. Failure to do so risks losing Big Man status; hence, Dicko must constantly protect his main capital – his credibility as a pious man of faith. In the Malian context, this means he must always 'manage his appetite' for politics. He can play politics, but he must also always be above the political field. If he manages this, Dicko could come to represent a new fusion of politics and religion in a country caught between traditional Sufi Islam and violent Salafi insurgencies.

## Notes

1. The most important Sufi orders of West Africa – the Qadiriyya and the Tijāniyya – are also present in Mali, with the latter being the most important (see Clark 1999; Soares and Seesemann 2009).
2. The degree to which Malians have had much faith in the modern state is an open question, and Schulz (2021) is probably correct when arguing that in rural Mali state interventions have often been seen more as a project of predation than well-meaning and benign.

3. In the Afrobarometer study of 2020, trust in religious leaders was high (78%). The president's approval rating, on the other hand, stood at 38% (the lowest recorded by the Afrobarometer in Mali), while the National Assembly only had the trust of 29% of the respondents (see Afrobarometer 2020).
4. Our understanding of symbolic capital draws on Bourdieu (1989:17) – 'the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate'.
5. Mali's perceived public corruption score, as evaluated by Malian citizens, is 29 out of 100 with zero being the worst possible score. See Transparency International (2021).
6. Dicko has become immensely politically savvy and, as will become clear in this article, presents himself differently to different audiences. This means that at times he embraces the Wahhabi label, at other times he distances himself or even rejects the term.
7. On the Malian state as unsettled and sparsely institutionalised, see Bøås and Torheim (2013).
8. Mali's current population of approximately 19 million is projected to increase to over 45 million by 2050. This projection is based on the current annual population growth of over 3%, where each woman in Mali gives birth to an average of 6.2 children.
9. For a review of this debate see Sears (2007).
10. Interview with Malian academic, Bamako, November 2016. See Ba and Bøås (2017).
11. This section draws on Bøås, Cissé, and Diallo (2019).
12. Haidara leads the Sufi association he himself founded in 1983 called Ansar Dine. It has grown steadily since its inauguration and Haidara's views on Islam are seen by his many supporters as closely related to the local way of life and Bambara culture in particular (see Chappatte 2018). The Ansar Dine of Haidara must not be confused with the jihadi insurgency Ansar ed-Dine led by Iyad Ag Ghaly.
13. The AMUPI was established in 1981 by President and General Moussa Traoré to manage Islamic affairs and in particular the relationship between Sufis and those practicing more scriptural versions of Sunnism. The AMUPI still exist and held its 4th ordinary congress in Bamako in November 2019. The current president and vice-president are, respectively, Issiaka Traoré and Mahmoud Dicko.
14. This section is built on both our and our colleagues' observations in Bamako and analysis of a number of international and national media reports about the affairs of the summer of 2020. See for example Melly (2020) and Baudais and Chauzal (2020).
15. Maïga and Tall best can be characterised as career politicians that have been around for quite some time. Maïga has served in various governments since the late 1990s and Tall was removed from a ministerial post as late as 2017 by IBK. Oumar Mariko is a former student activist from the early 1990s: a medical doctor by training, a staunch socialist, and has always been a controversial opposition figure in Malian politics.

## Acknowledgements

Comments received from two anonymous reviewers are highly appreciated as they clearly helped us clarify weaknesses in the first version of this paper that we submitted to the journal.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The research and drafting of this paper were funded by a grant (No. 261844) from the Norwegian Research Council (Norges Forskningsrådet).

## Notes on contributors

**Morten Bøås** is Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). Bøås works on conflict and politics with a focus on West Africa and the Sahel. He is the author of a number of articles and his most recently published book is *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Interventions: a Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts* (2020, with Berit Bliesemann du Guevara).

**Abdoul Wakhab Cissé** is a senior researcher at the Alliance pour Refonder la Gouvernance en Afrique (ARGA) based in Dakar, Senegal, but with satellite offices in most Sahel countries. Dr. Cissé holds a PhD in Political Science and coordinates ARGA research on conflict, peace and security in the Sahel.

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