Mali’s Atrocities Began When It Lost Its Democracy

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IN 2005, after the world failed to prevent mass atrocities in Rwanda, the Balkans and Darfur, the United Nations declared that nations had a responsibility to protect populations everywhere from genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

It is a fine idea, but not easy to implement, especially in Africa. There, frail democracies too often fall victim to corruption, social division, greed and dictatorship. So there, especially, the world needs to add another “responsibility to protect” — a duty of democratic nations to safeguard popular rule in neighboring lands. Too often, a failure of democracy is what starts a country down the road to atrocities.

The failure this year to protect and restore democracy in Mali is a perfect case in point. Less than a year after a coup last March, Mali has slid into a devilish civil war and national breakup accompanied by reports of war crimes, atrocities and crimes against humanity. The coup did not cause the current rebellion in the north, but it allowed it to succeed, with hundreds of thousands of people forced to leave their homes. In addition, more than 4.6 million people are at risk of running out of food when the war and drought are both taken into account, the United Nations has said.

Last summer, Human Rights Watch was reporting “the use and recruitment of child soldiers, looting and the pillaging of hospitals, schools, aid agencies ... public floggings and amputation ... rape and abduction of girls and women.” Amnesty International was urging the International Criminal Court to investigate “killings, rapes and torture and other possible crimes.” But the world, and the region, kept dithering until the rebels who had seized the mostly Arab north seemed about to expand their reach into the sub-Saharan south.

That finally brought a direct response from France last week, and a sudden new interest by Western nations in implementing, at last, a regional West African military intervention against the rebels. In fact, the 15 countries in the Economic Community of West African States, along with the African Union, had been seeking permission to intervene since early last summer, but a major stumbling block was the coup leaders’ fear that the foreign military forces might undermine their own firm grip on the country; in the face of this, the decision-making process of the United Nations Security Council moved at a crawl. The picture might have been different had Mali’s neighbors intervened more decisively against the coup in the first place. At this time last winter, Mali was widely admired as a successful democracy. But then heavily armed fighters from North Africa’s nomadic Tuareg group, having failed to keep Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi in power in Libya, crossed into the Arab northern half of Mali and joined forces with Islamist rebels, some
of them from Algeria. It became clear within weeks that they were outperforming Mali’s army.

But rather than focus the army’s efforts more effectively against the rebels, and perhaps appeal for outside aid, Capt. Amadou Sanogo and other military officers turned their forces against Mali’s elected president, Amadou Toumani Touré, and seized power, blaming the civilian leaders for Mali’s weakness.

Mali’s neighbors condemned the coup and suspended aid. But after a month — which would have been a good moment to restore the constitutional order — they foolishly agreed to negotiate with Captain Sanogo, rather than insist that he quit power and leave the country until peace and democracy were restored. After that, the Security Council frittered away the summer, saying it needed more information before it would grant African nations a mandate to intervene militarily.

The hesitation only emboldened the rebels. While Captain Sanogo agreed under pressure to the appointment of an interim government and started a wave of repression against his political opponents, the rebels conquered the northern half of Mali and declared it independent. Reports of inhuman applications of Shariah law, like amputations as punishment for theft, followed, continuing into the fall and winter.

So now, from their failure to protect democracy in Mali, the West African nations, and with them the West, have reaped a heavier responsibility — the duty, laid out by the United Nations at a global summit meeting in 2005, to protect “populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.” The task is far more complicated than it would have been last spring. Under international pressure for change, Mali acquired new civilian leaders, but leaders of the coup were involved in the selection process, and the new government cannot be said to have been elected freely and democratically. And yet, the first task ahead of all of Mali now, and of those from outside who would help it, is not the restoration of democracy but primarily the restoration of Mali itself — its central state authority and territorial integrity. First the rebels must be driven from control in the north; only then can the country start a truly democratic process, in which all citizens of Mali can choose their next leaders in free, fair and internationally supervised elections.

In fact, Mali is not the first African country in which a failure to protect the constitutional order or quickly restore an overthrown democracy opened a path for grave atrocities. In Kenya, a disputed election in 2007 was followed by violence in which more than 1,000 people were reported to have died and 500,000 others were displaced. In Guinea, a coup in 2009 was followed by the killing of more than 150 opponents of the junta. In Ivory Coast, Laurent Gbagbo refused to relinquish the presidency in 2010 after losing an election; mass atrocities followed. It took a civil war to dislodge him the following spring. Finally, late in 2011, he was turned over to the International Criminal Court to be tried for crimes against humanity.

So, how can the concept of responsibility to protect democracy be further developed?
Where institutions and traditions prove no match for a crisis of democracy, the region or the continent should step in. The African Union’s charter already empowers that organization to intervene to prevent war crimes and genocide, and it condemns “unconstitutional changes of government.” Such ideals need to be invoked boldly and quickly; that may be the strongest argument for a new doctrine of a responsibility to protect democracy, with a protocol for military or other forms of firm coercion when diplomacy fails.

Member states will not always agree on when to intervene, of course. But having a clear responsibility to do so in extreme cases would make prompt action more likely, by adding a sense of urgency. And it would help the United Nations Security Council play its own important role — by bringing the five permanent members into unison to avoid blocking or delaying a lifesaving intervention.

In addition, the International Criminal Court should announce that it will seek to punish all those responsible for any coup d’état that results in war crimes or crimes against humanity. In Mali and across Africa, the evidence shows that a failure of democracy is all too likely to lead quickly to such crimes.

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