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Security populism and violence against UN forces in the French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. The cases of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Mali

Since 26 July 2022, UN peacekeeping missions in the French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa have been under increasing protest from the local populations they are supposed to protect. In the DRC and Mali in particular, the perpetrators of violent popular uprisings against the UN presence are demanding the "immediate withdrawal" of the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO) and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Though such challenges to the UN order in the French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa are based on motivations that are specific and inherent to each country, "they are indicative of the crisis

affecting UN peacekeeping operations in Africa and beyond"¹. This demand for UN "peacekeepers" to leave amid the insecurity in the DRC and Mali has led to the UN being accused of "indolence"² and "incompetence"³ in the face of the criminal enterprises operating there, while its irenic doctrine clearly illustrates the difficulty it has in grasping and mastering the configuration of the new so-called asymmetric threats. But there may be other reasons for the tense relations between the United Nations and its host countries. Apart from the fact that this

¹Meressa K. Dessu and Dawit Yohannes, ISS-Africa (Institute for Security Studies) Addis Ababa, "What do protests say about UN peacekeeping in Africa?", scientific article online, 28 October 2022, accessed 17 April 2023, <https://issafrica.org>.

² BBC Africa news edition, op.cit.

³*Ibid.*

tension is due to the limited operational performance of UN missions, particularly against non-traditional perils such as terrorism or armed rebellion, there are also two underlying factors, such as "the erosion of the fundamental principles of UN peacekeeping"⁴, namely "the consent of the country concerned" and "the need for the United Nations to play its part in the peace process" and the legitimacy of UN missions in the eyes of local populations. These arguments provide an insight into how opposition to UN peacekeeping has been manufactured and disseminated in some areas of these countries.

Security populism is understood here to mean the production of anger and erethism by members of civil society and political actors who accuse the UN of connivance and complicity in the insecure phenomena that plague the DRC and Mali. Its aim is to reinforce the hypothesis of a rejection of the United Nations on the grounds that its initial missions of peacekeeping in the two States have been discredited and falsified. Such an emotionally-charged and deliberate campaign holds the UN responsible for the rampant instability that its forces seem unable to halt and contain. By overlooking the shortcomings of the Congolese and Malian governments,

and wilfully ignoring the weaknesses of their armies, which are in the front line in the fight against insecurity, social groups will instead demand the dismantling of UN security assets (logistics, weapons, military human resources, administrative centres) in their countries.

This contribution, which falls somewhere between the sociology of African international relations and that of the State, focuses on a very specific question: how can we understand the language and corresponding attitudes underlying the large-scale protests by local populations against the UN? Who are the actors involved in building, amplifying and catalysing anti-UN sentiment? This paper examines how expressions of the anomic nature of UN peacekeepers are used to justify the UN's failure to end conflict in West Africa. It aims at offering a few keys to understanding revolts against the UN, and hypothesises on the motivations shaping the apostasy of UN missions in the DRC and Mali.

The critical verbatim report of the UN peace missions in the DRC and Mali: between inefficiency and partiality

Deployed in 1999 through the UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUC), following a popular uprising in

⁴Meressa K. Dessu and Dawit Yohannes, ISS-Africa (Institute for Security Studies) Addis Ababa, op.cit.

Congo Kinshasa⁵, the new format of the UN mission currently mobilises 13,500 soldiers, 16,000 police officers and 2,970 civilians⁶. With an annual budget of over one billion US dollars (\$1,123,346,000)⁷, MONUSCO continues to be one of the most expensive UN missions, and remains the largest UN force in the world⁸. Its current mandate focuses on two priorities: protecting civilians and helping to strengthen the DRC's state institutions. For its part, MINUSMA is one of the UN's main peacekeeping missions in the French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. With an annual budget of \$1.26 billion, this very expensive operation brings together 1,289 soldiers and 1,920 police officers from more than 50 contributing countries⁹. Since 2013, following the sudden eruption of nihilistic terrorism on Malian territory, its objectives have been: "to support the implementation of the peace and reconciliation agreement in Mali"; "to help stabilise the country"; "to protect civilians"

and "to provide humanitarian assistance"¹⁰. But MINUSMA is also the UN peacekeeping mission that has suffered the greatest loss of life, with between 174 and 181 peacekeepers killed in attacks¹¹. On balance, the role of MONUSCO and MINUSMA is to support the DRC and Mali in the process of establishing lasting peace through multi-faceted cooperation (security, human, structural, institutional).

However, the escalation of violence by armed rebel or terrorist groups has caused immense suffering for some of the citizens who are now protesting against these various missions. On the one hand, MONUSCO is criticised for its "inability"¹² to help re-establish peace and stability in the east of the DRC for more than 20 years now, since its "corps habillés" began their operations in this region torn apart by conflicts of a mutating nature¹³. According to a Congolese demonstrator venting his anger at the extension of UN forces, MONUSCO has "failed in its mission to restore peace in our country", and is regularly accused of "inaction"¹⁴ in the face of the insecurity that is insidiously sweeping the DRC through attacks by heavily armed bands of militants

⁵ MONUC became MONUSCO on 1 July, with a mandate focused primarily on the protection of civilians, pursuant to a Security Council resolution. Resolution 1925, adopted on 28 May, extended the mandate of MONUC, which has been present in the DRC since the end of 1999, until 30 June, and decided to change its name to MONUSCO with effect from 1 July, with a mandate extended until 30 June 2011.

⁶BBC Africa, "La MONUSCO est-elle la mission de maintien de la paix la plus coûteuse ? ", online press article, 4 August 2022, consulted on 31 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com>.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Jean-Hervé Jezequel, Francklin Nossiter and Ibrahim Maiga, "La MINUSMA à la croisée des chemins", Crisis Group, online scientific article, 1 December 2022, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹² BBC Africa news edition, op.cit.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*

who are destabilising the country, following the example of the M23, the predominantly Tutsi 23 March movement. On the other hand, MINUSMA is criticised for its "passivity"¹⁵ and, in the background, its partiality in the fight against terrorism that Mali is waging with the support of its international partners. It is reviled for its "ineffectiveness"¹⁶ in protecting the Malian population against murderous offensives orchestrated mainly by local and foreign armed groups affiliated to the Islamic State. On a certain level, while such criticisms are admissible, they are nonetheless subjected to calculations by internal and external political players.

Confusing local actors' opposition to UN peacekeeping missions in the DRC and Mali: between political propaganda and the construction of legitimacy

A sociological analysis of actors portraying the failure of the UN in the French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, most often in the traditional media and social networks, shows a clear political or ideological link with a section of the civil society close to the party in power.

¹⁵ David Rich, "Mali : MINUSMA, la mission des Nations unies au bord de la rupture", online press article, 22 July 2022, accessed 31 May 2023, <https://www.france24.com>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Firstly, civil society groups in the east of the DRC claimed that MONUSCO "has proven incapable of ensuring protection for the population and maintaining peace and security in the country"¹⁷. Victorine Muhima expressed her indignation at what she saw as the "complicity of MONUSCO and the international community"¹⁸ in allowing the conflict in the DRC to fester. At a sit-in organised in front of MONUSCO's offices, the vice-president of the Forum of Women Leaders of North Kivu explained that "we have been living with MONUSCO here for more than twenty years, but the blood continues to flow. People are being killed in Beni, Irumu and Ituri. We are calling for MONUSCO to leave without delay, as it has itself indicated its inability to fight alongside the FARDC"¹⁹. In this regard, "Zero MONUSCO" campaign²⁰ was launched to denounce the unwillingness of the UN to restore peace in the DRC. Fearing that anti-UN discontent could spread and exacerbate, José-Adolphe Voto declared to the BBC that "we are reaching a level never before reached in terms of demands against MONUSCO and the United Nations in general"²¹.

¹⁷ BBC Africa news edition, op.cit.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Interview with José-Adolphe Voto, professor at the Kinshasa School of Journalism.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

In the same vein, severe grumbling against MINUSMA was organised by Yèrèwolo Debout sur les Remparts (Standing on the Ramparts), an anti-Western movement in Mali with strong anti-French sentiment. On 28 April 2023, civil society organisations, including Yèrèwolo, called for a rally at the Palais de la Culture in Bamako to demand the definitive exclusion of MINUSMA from the country. Indeed, activists affiliated to Yèrèwolo are at the origin of insurrections against MINUSMA with considerable representational and cognitive impacts on the mental structure of citizens. Determined to obtain the dismissal of the international elements that make up the UN mission in Mali, this group believes that the UN is "a big disappointment"²² and is calling for the Blue Helmets "who have been present in Mali for almost ten years, but failed to protect the population against terrorists" to leave.²³ On the occasion of the Malian independence celebrations, Siriki Kouyaté, spokesperson for Yèrèwolo, moved by a strong wave of sovereignty inspired by the military junta in power in Bamako, believes that "the Malian people no longer want MINUSMA on their soil. All the people are mobilised, from Kayes to Kidal, to demand the departure of

MINUSMA. It is a presence that perpetuates war, which legalises war. And MINUSMA is no longer credible"²⁴.

Secondly, Al Jazeera reported in July 2022 that "demonstrations against the UN in the DRC were led by a faction of the youth wing of the UDPS (Union for Democracy and Social Progress), President Félix Tshisekedi's ruling party"²⁵. On his part, the Congolese political scientist Jean-Claude Mputu believes that "behind the demand for MONUSCO to leave lies a major political issue"²⁶. A close look at MONUSCO shows that 20 years after its involvement in Congo Kinshasa, it has become a power and election²⁷ issue for political entrepreneurs lacking notoriety and legitimacy, short of an alternative social project or lacking the prospect of thoughtful and credible programmatic action. This is part of a veritable drive to gain the support of the public and use the street to capitalise on the political market by a section of the political class that intends to put pressure on the UN. While on tour in Goma on 15 July 2022, Modeste Bahati Lkwebo took advantage of a

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵BBC Africa news edition, op.cit.

²⁶ Jeune Afrique, "RDC : critiquée, la MONUSCO interpelle discrètement les autorités", online press article, 20 July 2022, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com>.

²⁷Falila Gbadamassi, "RDC : derrière le départ demandé de la MONUSCO se cache un enjeu politique majeur", online press article, decoding with researcher and activist Jean-Claude Mputu, 9 August 2022, accessed on 31 May 2023, <https://www.francetvinfo.fr>.

²²Mahamadou Kane, "Mobilisation contre la MINUSMA à Bamako", online press article, 22 August 2022, accessed 29 April 2023, <https://www.dw.com>.

²³*Ibid.*

political campaign rally to make a remarkable speech in which the senior civil servant vitally called for an end to the presence of the UN mission in Congo Kinshasa. "MONUSCO must pack its bags"²⁸, the President of the Congolese Senate told activists from his party, the Alliance des Forces Démocratiques (AFDC), a member of President Félix Tshisekedi's UDPS coalition. These expressions are recurrent in the Congolese political arena and abound during election periods (former president Joseph Kabila was no stranger to them). Three days after this statement by the President of the Senate in the DRC, MONUSCO sent a letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Christophe Lutundula, in which the mission expressed its "concern" about the resurgence of "aggressive and inhospitable discourse emanating from State officials in the DRC"²⁹. It also warned of "the risk of hostile acts against MONUSCO personnel and installations"³⁰.

In Mali, Jeamille Bittar of the M5 RFP is among the Malian politicians who are making MINUSMA's distressing disaffection a priority. Close to the ruling military, he believes that the transitional authorities should not renew MINUSMA's mandate next

June³¹. The aim is to focus the public's attention on the flaws that may mar the participatory action and contribution to peace of Mali's external partners (Barkhane, Takuba, UN). But the repeated revolts against MINUSMA in fact conceal the weaknesses of the Bamako junta, which has been in power for two years, in effectively combating the violent extremism that is becoming "capillarised". On the other hand, it allows the military to demonstrate loudly that these actors, once associated and linked by the objectives of pacification of Mali, are now exogenous and crisisogenic, responsible for the persistent instability that is setting Mali ablaze. In any event, the civilian political authorities in the DRC and the transitional military government in Mali readily invoke these collective mobilisations, which they support directly or by proxy against the UN forces, as proof of their political legitimacy.

The murky game of external actors opposed to the UN peace missions in the DRC and Mali: between sub-regional and international rivalries

The two UN missions in the DRC and Mali have also had to contend with sub-regional struggles and difficult security environments.

²⁸BBC Africa news edition, op.cit.

²⁹Jeune Afrique, « RDC : critiquée, la MONUSCO interpelle discrètement les autorités », op.cit.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Mahamadou Kane, op.cit.

In the DRC, the Rwandan government is blamed for fanning the flames of the conflict through its multi-faceted support for the armed groups that have flourished in the DRC and operated there for nearly thirty years, notably the M23 rebels. On this issue, the demonstrators denounced the complicity of the international community and Western countries in refusing to condemn Rwanda for its obvious support for the M23. The historical context in the DRC reveals the choice of Rwanda as the enemy. Rwanda has most often been presented as "the first enemy", "the absolute enemy of Congo Kinshasa"³². According to Bob Kabamba, "even if there's a traffic accident in Kinshasa, you could say it's Rwanda's fault"³³. As far as North Kivu is concerned, there is no doubt that Rwanda is helping the M23, for the simple reason that there is first and foremost a national dynamic concerning the management of communities in this region, which has repercussions for Rwanda³⁴. Emmanuel Macron's recent African tour was a case in point, with a heated press conference between Congolese President Etienne Tshisékédi and his French counterpart that went beyond the

rules of diplomatic practice. The Congolese central government and activists demanded that France condemn the Rwandan aggression outright for its assistance to the M23, "support sanctions against the Rwandan leaders"³⁵ and "help Congo-Kinshasa organise a military response"³⁶. But Emmanuel Macron's political agenda seemed to contain other geopolitical concerns vis-à-vis Rwanda³⁷ than a formal condemnation of Kigali for its conflict-generating influence in the DRC. In response to France's hesitation or refusal to question Rwanda about its role in the insecure situation in the DRC, a French flag was burnt in Goma by groups of Congolese youths holding Russian flags and "smashed the wall of the French embassy in blood red"³⁸. At the same time in Kinshasa, other organised gangs of young people were chanting accusations against the President of the French Republic and the President of

³²Esdras Ndikumana, "RDC: La colère de l'opinion publique a évolué vers un sentiment anti-MONUSCO", online press article, Bob Kabamba, invité Afrique-RFI, 1 August 2022, accessed 26 April 2023, www.rfi.fr. Bob Kabamba is a political scientist and professor at the University of Liège, Belgium.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴ BBC Africa news edition, op.cit. Interview with José-Alphonse Voto.

³⁵Esdras Ndikumana, op.cit.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷ Paris now defines itself as an ally of Kigali. While Congo is the largest French-speaking country, Rwanda, which is more English-speaking than French-speaking, has, with France's help, appointed Louise Mushikdiwabo to the post of Secretary General of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) for two consecutive terms. In this case, France owes a great deal to Rwanda, which is defending its interests in Africa outside its traditional zone of influence. The Rwandan army is fighting in Mozambique against the jihadists who are threatening TotalEnergies' major liquefied natural gas (LNG) project. Rwandan soldiers are in the CAR, where there are violent clashes between armed groups. Benin, which faces jihadist attacks along its borders with Burkina Faso and Niger, is also calling for Rwandan involvement.

³⁸ BBC Africa news edition, op.cit.

Rwanda: "Macron...Kagame. Assassin...Criminal"³⁹.

In Mali, the fact that terrorism is regionally rooted in the Sahel has caused problems for MINUSMA, as a result of altercations between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Senegal and Ghana. The firm condemnations issued by ECOWAS and the aforementioned states against the perpetrators of the coup in Mali were not well received by the Bamako junta. At the heart of this tension was the arrest by the military authorities in Bamako of 49 Ivorian soldiers who were operating under a MINUSMA mandate on the official grounds that they were violating Mali's sovereignty. In response to Bamako, Côte d'Ivoire called on 12 July for the "immediate" release of its 49 soldiers who had been arrested "unjustly" and accused by the Malian authorities of being "mercenaries"⁴⁰ seeking to destabilise the country. According to Abidjan, the presence of its soldiers in logistical support operations for MINUSMA was "well known to the Malian authorities"⁴¹. This diplomatic row comes against a backdrop of already tense relations between Mali and its sub-regional partners, who have strongly criticised the brutal seizure of power in Mali and Guinea Conakry, fearing a contagion of illegal and

unconstitutional seizures of political power in the French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa. Following unfriendly rhetoric from the Malian government, which questioned the legitimacy of the Heads of State of Côte d'Ivoire and Niger during a speech at the UN General Assembly, Côte d'Ivoire informed the UN on 11 November 2022 of its intention to withdraw its 900 soldiers from MINUSCA⁴².

In other words, the various political classes in power in the DRC and Mali are fuelling public opinion with the idea that their countries are the victims of external aggression and a Western international plot to balkanise them in order to gain access to the immense wealth scattered across their territories. There is no doubt that MONUSCO and MINUSMA are facing global geopolitical tensions that have infiltrated the French-speaking sub-Saharan African youth movements and exacerbated local discontent with Westerners and the peace missions in the DRC and Mali. In the crisis between Russia and France in Mali (but also in CAR and Burkina Faso), for example, so-called "pan-African" civil societies (Yèrèwolo) are supporting the action of Vladimir Putin's

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Meressa K. Dessu and Dawit Yohannes, ISS-Africa (Institute for Security Studies) Addis Ababa, op.cit.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

⁴²In early 2022, Benin announced the repatriation of its 450 troops. Another factor that may explain the dwindling support for MINUSMA from several African countries (Senegal, Egypt) is that Bamako has hindered troop rotations, suspending them for a month between July and August, and has more generally restricted the movement of UN personnel, which has led to other tensions with troop-contributing countries (Egypt, Sweden, etc.).

diplomacy and Wagner's Russian paramilitaries who are "helping" the Malian junta engaged in eradicating Islamist terrorism. Against the backdrop of the Russian-Ukrainian war, they are spreading an anti-Western ideology and primordial anti-French sentiment, accusing France, the West and the UN of conspiracy against Mali. On 28 April 2023 at the Palais de la Culture in Bamako, imaginary hostilities were expressed on the banners unfurled for the occasion, including one particularly visible banner bearing the words "Down with France", "Down with MINUSMA" and "Down with ECOWAS", used to designate Mali's external enemies⁴³. These three players are regularly criticised for weakening the peace processes underway in Mali, supporting community tensions and institutionalising conflict in the Sahelian belt by funding terrorism. The aim of their collusive and cohesive transaction culture is to organise the long-term impoverishment of the country through the plundering and uncontrolled extraction of Mali's mineral resources. Through this protest ritual and its array of mobilised reasons, MINUSMA is weakened and scorned by the military in power, who see it as a foreign

force⁴⁴. This emotional partisanship, which seeks to rally to the sovereignist cause of the Bamako junta instigated by Russia, is having a resounding effect on the UN forces operating there, and does not always correspond to the reality observed on the ground. Outside Bamako, the negative, pejorative and heretical view of MINUSMA is more nuanced. In the north of the country, in Timbuktu and Gao for example, the inhabitants appreciate the various development projects set up by the United Nations mission, especially as it is creating jobs locally⁴⁵. Despite all this, the multidimensional mission has been weakened by the military in power in Bamako and by "pan-Africanist" associations who describe it as an international army in the pay of an exogenous power whose objective is to flout Mali's sovereignty for the purposes of subversive practices, disrupting the country's political and community balance, and plundering its precious gold ores.

Ultimately, the protection of civilians is primarily the responsibility of the police and army in the DRC and Mali. Some analysts believe that "it is unwise to blame the lack of

⁴³ France 24 with AFP, "Mali : des centaines de personnes manifestent leur soutien à l'armée et la junte", online press article, 13 May 2022, accessed 31 May 2023, <https://www.france24.com>.

⁴⁴ Franck Mathevon, "Au Mali, l'ONU s'interroge sur l'avenir de sa mission de maintien de la paix", online press article, 20 January 2023, accessed 1 May 2023, <https://www.francetvinfo.fr>.

⁴⁵ Mahamadou Kane, op.cit.

security on the peace missions"⁴⁶ in these countries. For this reason, the UN is doing its best to clear its name by pointing out that the fight against the armed groups in Goma or Bamako is a sovereign mission that falls primarily to the Congolese and Malian governments. In this case, the role of the UN peacekeeping forces is to "support" the armed forces of the DRC and Mali, which are "primarily responsible for the country's security"⁴⁷. The role of UN "peacekeepers" is not to be on the front line of combat, for three reasons. Firstly, the training structure of the UN contingents confines them to a support force (police and gendarmes) for the regular and conventional armies of countries plagued by increased crime. Secondly, the UN does not allow its troops to attack armed terrorist groups militarily. At the same time, however, it requires the Blue Helmets to "anticipate, deter and respond effectively to threats to the civilian population"⁴⁸. MINUSMA therefore finds itself in the paradoxical and delicate position of having to contain the jihadist threat without being able to actively eliminate it⁴⁹. From this standpoint, "several countries unfortunately refuse to allow their national troops serving with MONUSCO to take part

in the fighting"⁵⁰. The UN's "peacekeepers" are not sufficiently equipped with the logistical resources and sophisticated weaponry (munitions and offensive weapons) that regular armies have at their disposal to counter the firepower of private rebel companies. Finally, UN peacekeeping missions are costly and require considerable expenditure, which makes the international community reluctant to provide protection. Countries in a state of belligerence are in economic difficulty and are exposed to the vertical strategy of the major powers, which partly finance their stabilisation process and the operation of the international system. The aid policy of these hegemonies, which accompany states that are disintegrating, is dictated by their geopolitical and geostrategic interests. Yet peacekeeping operations are supposed to reflect the involvement of their member countries⁵¹ and are only effective if all their members participate to a high standard⁵². At a time when the UN is drawing up a "new agenda for peace", peace missions must give priority to political dialogue and a people-centred approach to protection⁵³.

⁴⁶ Meressa K. Dessu and Dawit Yohannes, ISS-Africa (Institute for Security Studies) Addis Ababa, op.cit.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jean-Hervé Jezequel, Francklin Nossiter and Ibrahim Maiga, op.cit.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Yves Durieux (2017), *Les opérations de maintien de la paix de l'ONU. L'exemple de la République démocratique du Congo*, Paris, Éditions du Cygne, Géo-sécurité, pp.2-4.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Meressa K. Dessu and Dawit Yohannes, ISS-Africa (Institute for Security Studies) Addis Ababa, op.cit.

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