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They want to lead us into war – interview with historic African leader from Mali

By Raphaël Schmeller

This interview with Aminata Dramane Traoré was first published Nov. 30 in the German newspaper junge Welt (jW). Traoré is an author, human rights activist and former Minister of Culture in Mali. She discusses the chaos caused by Western states in the Sahel and the interests of the international oligarchy. She will be a guest speaker at an “International Rosa Luxemburg Conference” in Berlin in mid-January 2023. Translated by John Catalinotto.



Aminata Traoré, a political and cultural leader of Mali's independence movement

junge Welt: The media are focusing on the war in Ukraine on a daily basis. The African continent's point of view hardly plays a role. How do you view this conflict?

Aminata Dramane Traoré: The war is exacerbating our problems considerably. You could say it is one evil too many for Africa. The bitter thing is that solutions could have been found at the beginning to prevent an escalation. But I don't think anyone was interested in that. And even now I have the impression that no one intends to get to the bottom of the deeper causes of the war.

jW: What do you think are the war's deeper causes?

ADT: What's involved are the economic and geostrategic interests of the various actors. It is these issues that, in my view, underlie the upheavals that are underway in Ukraine. So from an African perspective, the war is also related to the economic policies that are being imposed on our countries.

jW: Can you elaborate?

ADT: In the 1960s, we wanted to break out of [foreign] domination and a model based on exporting only a few raw materials, without ever using them locally — so as to create jobs and transform our agriculture and our own production of food needs. To this day our economy consists of producing for international demand and the needs of others. Mass unemployment, mass poverty, emigration and what is called jihadism are directly related to these economic issues.

jW: In the West, Russia in particular is blamed for problems like hunger crises. Do you share this view?

ADT: No. After all, it is not Moscow but the West with its policies and military interventions in recent years that have failed and made everything worse — for example, in Iraq or Afghanistan. And when the British-French partnership and NATO decided to attack Moammar Gadhafi and destroy Libya, Russia played no role there either. The West should stop misleading the public.

jW: Can you explain what consequences the Western sanctions against Russia have for your continent?

ADT: Russia and Ukraine have a significant role in the supply of wheat, which, along with other things, is now lacking because of the sanctions. This leads to hunger, and this brings us back to my previous answer: If we could structure our economies to produce to meet our own needs, we would not be in this situation today. So Ukraine is another problem for us but not the fundamental one.

jW: Russia and Mali signed an agreement last week to fight terrorism. What is this about?

ADT: This is not a question at the moment of systematically challenging the West. It's about wanting to have the right to diversify our military partnership. Because when it comes to fighting terrorism, the West is ineffective.

The French military operation "Barkhane" failed to contain and effectively combat jihadism over a period of a good 10 years. On the contrary, the number of jihadists was around 400 in Mali in 2013, and they now number thousands in several countries in the Sahel.

This situation occurred because the jihadists can recruit locally. Hundreds of thousands of young men and women enter the labor market in these countries every year, yet there are no jobs. The prevailing economic model has no answer to poverty.

jW: Now the French troops have been withdrawn from Mali. You had already called for this 10 years ago. Why?

ADT: The real reason for the military intervention was never to combat terrorism. It is, conversely, a consequence of the expansionist policies of the capitalist system. [The governments in] countries like Mali do not make the decisions when it comes to their economic policy; the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have long since taken over.

So the core of the debate is that nothing has been done to meet the basic needs of Africans, while [at the same time] respecting their human rights and an intact environment, including the climate. Again, France and its allies, including Germany, are not even capable of successfully fighting jihadism. These countries are here because they want to take us to war, so they can defend their [economic and strategic] interests.

jW: Will this situation change, now that France is turning its back on Mali?

ADT: In reality, France does not want to leave the country, it is just pretending to leave. And this is not only true for France. The German foreign minister, for example, says that it is out of the question for Russia to be left in charge of the country now.

I find this Russia argument — which is being served up all the time right now for everything in all kinds of variations — incredible. The West was there before Russia — it was the West that failed to solve the problem. And yet now it's supposed to be all about Russia?

The vast majority of Malians have long wanted negotiations with the Malian jihadists. But France and Germany say that dialogue between Malians, that is, between the jihadists, the authorities and civil society, is out of the question. They have repeatedly prevented such negotiations in recent years.

jW: Why have they refused to let these negotiations take place?

ADT: Because the West does not want to go. Because if the Africans can solve the problem themselves, they will be forced to leave. The military operations, the CFA franc [currency of the former French colonies] tied to the euro, the trade agreements between the West and Africa — are all only there to defend the interests of the international oligarchy.

jW: In addition to the existing problems in Africa, there is now increasingly another one: the climate crisis.

ADT: Yes, this is a big problem. Africa, which produces just 4% of global greenhouse gases, is the region of the world that already feels the consequences of the climate crisis the most. When we see how little progress has been made since the 2015 Paris climate conference, how small payments of reparations are being bickered over and how billions are now being spent on war, we in the Global South really feel mocked.

The funds are there that could be used to ensure that neither Africa nor other parts of the world have to suffer so much from the consequences of the climate crisis. But little is being done in the fight against it, because that is not in the interest of capitalism either.

jW: Is the climate issue increasing resistance to Western domination?

ADT: I believe so. There is a new generation of Africans today who understand these connections. In this context, [French President Emmanuel] Macron talks about anti-French sentiment, which he says is on the rise, but that is not the point. People have simply become aware of cultural and racial contempt and want to emancipate themselves. It is this resistance that is at the heart of the conflict in Mali — not Russia or jihadism.

jW: What is your view of the future?

ADT: Times are tough, and everyone knows what's at stake. So it's up to us to change the circumstances. But we should not forget that all African leaders who have tried to represent the interests of their peoples in the past have been killed, their governments destabilized or marginalized in one way or another.

o there will be no democracy in Africa as long as democracy is in crisis in the ostensibly developed countries, which today face the same difficulties as the so-called Third World. In fact, great democratic regressions can currently be observed in the West. One could say that these countries are now themselves on the road toward the "Third World." Maybe then we can talk to each other as equals.

Translator's note: In January 2006 Ms. Traoré hosted the Bamako section of the World Social Forum and facilitated the special meetings of anti-imperialists organized by the late Samir Amin, which I had the honor of attending.

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