

“Marcher, pas casser” : Contentious Forms of the Street in Bamako, Mali (1994-2010)

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In 1997, Mali knew a period of agitation around the presidential and legislative elections. Marches were organized, some of them forbidden, riots occurred (including attacks against the houses of people known as close to the president candidate Alpha Oumar Konaré), as were also observed violences attributed to the power (arsons, arrests). In the newspaper *les Échos*, one could see a caricature of a young man throwing a stone, and behind him another man trying to prevent him, saying: “not, let’s march, but let’s not break (things)” (“Oh, non, marchons mais ne cassons pas!”). Other episodes of street violence occurred in Mali since the democratic transition of 1991.

This caricature is not only a proof of the stigmatisation, by a contested presidency, or marches denounced as potentially violent. This rioting potentiality of the street, even in quite organized social movements, is still an important aspect of the ordinary perception of « marches » (a term preferred in Mali to demonstration – “manifestation”). This continuum, always possible, between riot and demonstration means that repertoires of social movements are dependent on what is considered as socially acceptable and routinized. In a society often presented as based on a consensual culture, and more prosaically on a hierarchical and clientelist structuration, which makes intermediation and patronage more likely than protest, in a state often presented as a democratic model, what does ‘using the street’ mean ?

Using direct observations, archives, interviews (with social movement activists and ex rioters) and a quantitative exploration of marches declared in the Commune III (where more than 95% of marches occur in Bamako), I show the extraordinary residual and controlled aspect of marches. The fear of a potential violence leads to a considerable work of violence denegation to earn the right to march in a space under huge institutional control. Riots do occur however, be it in political circumstances or through other opportunities (such as a football match lost by the national team). Marches and riots have therefore to be mirrored to seize what tastes and distastes (both political and social) are expressed in the latter, to understand the various political dimension of the street in Bamako. The reference to 1991 is still a permanent scheme of interpreting and (de)legitimizing those who take the streets.