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Mali Rebels Say They Will Create Moderate Islamic State

By Anne Look

DAKAR - Two groups of rebels in control of northern Mali say they have united and will turn the territory into an Islamist state. The leaders of one rebel group say the state will be governed by a more moderate form of sharia law than is currently being imposed by the other group, made up of Islamist fighters.

A political spokesman for the Malian rebel group, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, or MNLA, says militants are still working on the terms of an official statement following an accord signed Saturday between the MNLA and al-Qaida-linked Islamist militant group, Ansar Dine.

In the chaotic days following a March 22nd coup in Bamako, the two groups seized control of northern Mali but they say they have very different goals.

Ansar Dine wanted to impose its brand of Islamic law in Mali. The MNLA wanted to create the independent secular state of Azawad. MNLA spokesman Moussa ag Assarid says the alliance marks a compromise.

He says they agreed to an Islamic state but one developed by their own imams and suited to local religious practices, not those from the outside. He says the Koran will be the source of the laws, as in Middle Eastern countries, however he says it will be a tolerant and moderate Islam. He says the state will be democratic and the people of Azawad will have a say.

Assarid said the MNLA is looking to Mauritania as a model.

There has been resistance from residents of the north to both the idea of independence and Ansar Dine's efforts to introduce strict Islamic law in occupied towns.

International human rights groups say Ansar Dine's methods have included extrajudicial killings and amputations of limbs.

There have been reports of dissension between the two groups since the accord was announced. However, MNLA's Assarid said the alliance holds.

He says in this day and age, it would be impossible to impose religious practices by force. He says the militants of Ansar Dine are not fanatics. He says they are reasonable, and discussions are underway between the two groups about the details, but the big picture goals remain the same.

Assarid says the two groups agree that they will merge their fighters into a national army. He says the two groups will cease to exist and the territory will be run a transitional council as an Islamic state. He says no armed groups outside of the national army will be tolerated.

The West African regional bloc ECOWAS strongly condemned the alliance as an "opportunistic move" and a "serious threat to regional and international peace and security" in a statement released Tuesday.

Both ECOWAS and the interim Malian government in Bamako say they will not recognize any declaration of independence.

ECOWAS has offered to deploy regional peacekeepers to Mali. The nation's military, already unable to halt the rebellion in the north earlier this year, is in shambles following the coup.

Many are hoping for a diplomatic solution. Assarid said rebels are open to negotiation and have received mediators from both ECOWAS and Burkina Faso.

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