

Mali Tuareg Rebels Call off Alliance With Islamists

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Tuareg rebels in Mali have called off an agreement with an Islamist group to create an independent, Islamic state in the north of the country.

In an e-mailed statement Friday, a senior member of the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad said the rebels are pulling out of the agreement to maintain their “staunchly secular” character.

The deal, signed on May 26 in the northern town of Gao, called for Tuareg rebels and the al-Qaida-linked extremist group Ansar Dine to join forces for an independent state of Azawad.

As part of the agreement, the state was to be operated under strict Islamic law, or Sharia. Reports this week said the deal was under strain.

The Tuareg rebels and Islamist fighters joined forces in a fast-moving offensive to seize northern Mali following a March 22 military coup in Bamako. Mali's transitional government has rejected the rebels' declaration of independence in the north.

The Tuareg rebels and Islamist group have separate goals. The Tuaregs are seeking to create an independent secular state of Azawad, while Ansar Dine wants to impose Sharia across the entire country.

Sect members have started introducing hardline Islamic law in key regional areas including Gao and Timbuktu. However, residents in the region who are accustomed to a moderate form of Islam have resisted the new measures.