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MALI SECURED?

THE ELECTIONS WERE SUCCESSFUL, BUT THE PROBLEMS PERSIST

Bakary Sambe

The attack on the army base in Menaka by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) on 17 January 2012 marked the beginning of the military crisis in Mali and simultaneously acted as the trigger for a conflict, during the course of which the separatist Tuareg took control in the north of the country. The crisis assumed a new dimension when armed Islamist groups under the banner of Ansar Dine, reinforced by fighters from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI), sought to enforce the implementation of sharia and introduce an Islamic form of government in the north of the country, above all in Gao, Timbuktu and Kidal. This complex crisis lasted for several months until the French army intervened in the so-called Operation Serval with support from African military forces. During this period, the weak rulers in the capital of Bamako made efforts to re-establish administrative institutions which had been severely disrupted by repeated political crises and whose army had suffered humiliation over having been unable to control larger parts of the territory of Mali.

Against this backdrop, the African-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) was deployed with the task of strengthening government structures in the course of political development, the ultimate aim of which was organising democratic elections. The objective was to provide the country with legitimate political bodies and enable them to perform tasks such as conducting the inevitable negotiations with the Tuareg groups in the north in order to facilitate the long-term stabilisation of the country. In spite of innumerable logistical and political difficulties, elections were then organised throughout the territory of

Mali (including Kidal).¹ This took place on the basis of an agreement that the transitional government and the MNLA had signed in Ouagadougou in June 2013. Although somewhat weak and imprecise, this agreement facilitated the elections, which won the country unanimous congratulations from the international community.

But do the relatively successful elections mean that Mali has returned to constitutional normality and enduring stability? Prerequisite to this question will be an examination of the initial socio-political situation in Mali. This, in turn, will require investigation into the complex nature of the Ouagadougou Agreement, the focus of which will be specifically on the unresolved political and military status of Kidal.

The new President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, is striving for an effective stabilisation of the country and for national reconciliation in spite of simmering power struggles and opposing interests within Mali and the international community. One cannot appreciate the challenges facing the President today without knowing the circumstances in which the elections took place. A review of the overthrow of President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) will allow a more in-depth analysis of the obstacles and risks involved in organising such elections.

OVERTHROW OF ATT: IGNORED WARNINGS

The second term of President Amadou Toumani Touré, who was elected on 12 May 2002 and re-elected on 29 April 2007, would have come to an end in 2012 in line with the provisions of the constitution. At a memorable press conference on 12 June 2011, ATT confirmed that he would not stand a third time in conformance with the constitution, which restricts the number of terms to two. Everything therefore appeared to proceed very favourably; Mali was considered a model democracy and its president was frequently held up as one of Africa's few democrats in

1 | While the capital of the northern region was officially cleared of Islamists, in reality it continues to be occupied by Tuareg movements. Although fighters withdrew while the elections were being held, they are still present in the town. The Tuareg groups insist on having a special status, which is to be established by means of new decentralisation legislation.

diplomatic circles and in the international press. Mali rose ever higher in the global ranking of countries honouring human rights, particularly in comparison with other African countries. However, numerous indications within the country should have sent warning signals to the government regarding the severity of the impending storm. But although it lacked a proper political apparatus and in an effort to gain a broad consensus, ATT governed for a long time, taking half-hearted measures and rarely making decisions on crucial political and security issues.

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While everything around him began to disintegrate reforms and erupt in fighting, the President seemed to be most concerned with not offending the sensibilities of the Tuareg. Genuine peace with the Tuareg sections of the population was never achieved. However, in an effort to further national unity and territorial integrity, they were never openly fought. In fact, these objectives remained without true substance and were never effectively realised.

There has been a cycle of repeated crises involving the central Mali state and the Tuareg as opposing parties. During the crisis from 1990 to 1995 and during the subsequent one that began in 2006 that abated and then reignited in 2008, third-party countries such as Algeria and Libya attempted to calm the fighting with varying degrees of success. Even then it already became obvious that Mali did not have a clear advantage that would enable it to play an effective role in a crisis situation by which it was most strongly affected and which was being played out on its national territory. In response to these crises, incomplete solutions were produced that left kernels of dissent out of which future conflicts would burgeon.

On 17 January 2012, the Tuareg rebels from the MNLA attacked the Malian army in Menaka. This event marked the beginning of a new rebellion. Furnished with arms and strengthened logistically, the MNLA now demanded the independence of Mali's three northern regions: first Kidal, then Gao and finally Timbuktu. Due to a lack of equipment,

the Malian army suffered repeated setbacks at the hands of the MNLA. Mali's collective memory will have the terrible events of Aguelhok seared into it forever, when several dozen young Malian soldiers low on ammunition and equipment were cruelly massacred by the northern rebels. This was a clear sign of the advanced state of disintegration of the Malian armed forces and of an extremely serious security situation.

It was on 24 January that the MNLA attacked the town of Aguelhok on the orders of Colonel Ag Najem, supported by Tuareg soldiers from Libya. Within two months, over 200,000 Malians fled from the fighting, with the majority seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. At the end of January and beginning of February, soldiers' wives demonstrated against the authorities' crisis management in Mamako, Kati and Segou. During the night from 10 to 11 March, the MNLA captured the military base of Tessalit, which was of strategic importance because of its landing strip. Following this example, other armed groups, who described themselves as Warriors of Islam, took up the fight on the side of the MNLA: Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MOJWA). They stated they were in control of the towns of Aguelhok and Tessalit and declared their intention of enforcing sharia law in Mali.

On 21 March 2012, soldiers mutinied in Bamako and Gao. They protested against the way the government was conducting the armed conflict and against the lack of equipment. The same day, the mutineers occupied the presidential palace and the offices of the radio and television station ORTM. President ATT was overthrown. The constitution was suspended and a National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and State (CNRDRE) was set up, headed by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo. Under pressure from the Economic Community of West African States and from the international community, the leader of the coup agreed to the implementation of a transition period.

THE TRANSITION PERIOD IN MALI

In response to pressure from the national and international communities and with ECOWAS acting as intermediary, the CNRDRE undertook to restore constitutional order in a solemn declaration made on 1 April. The framework agreement of 6 April 2012 covers the establishment of transitional bodies, amongst other things. The Interim President of the Republic and the Government of National Unity in particular were assigned specific tasks to be fulfilled during the transition period.

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The tasks allotted to the government are derived from the framework agreement of 6 April 2012: first, the restoration of territorial integrity by regaining the north; secondly, the organisation of general, transparent and credible elections. They further include efficient functioning of the institutions throughout the territory; creation of a climate of peace and security in the zone controlled by the government and safeguarding of the transitional institutions; restoration of the fight against extortion and unlawful arrests as an instrument of the rule of law, as well as meticulous and speedy prosecution of all infringements of law by the judicial authorities; fight against corruption, nepotism, exclusion and immunity from prosecution; preparations for the post-war era and the return of the displaced and refugees, and finally the restoration of social cohesion and peaceful coexistence of communities.

In a statement posted on its website on 6 April, the MNLA "irrevocably" declared the independence of Azawad from that day forward. Subsequently, differences of opinion developed between the MNLA and Ansar Dinem, which was allied with AQMI and MOJWA. The jihadists gained the upper hand and henceforth controlled northern Mali. When they attempted to advance into the south of the country in January 2013 by capturing the town of Konna, France intervened militarily at the request of Interim President Dioncounda Traoré. With support from several African countries, predominantly Chad, the French and Malian armies succeeded in stopping the jihadists' advance and regaining northern Mali, with the exception of the town of Kidal, which continued to be controlled by the MNLA.

On 12 April, Dioncounda Traoré, President of the National Assembly, became Interim President. The transition period was envisaged to last one year. Traoré appointed Cheick Modibo Diarra Prime Minister and instructed him to form a Government of National Unity. However, the crisis had not come to an end and coup leaders continued to interfere in political life. After two Governments of National Unity had been formed, the coup leaders forced Cheick Modibo Diarra to resign on 11 December 2012 and Diango Cissoko was appointed Prime Minister.



President Hollande during a visit to the troops in Bamako in February 2013: After the intervention, France demanded that elections soon be held. | Source: © Emilie Regnier, picture alliance / dpa.

After the French initiative, the international community committed itself to make a considerable financial contribution to the reconstruction of Mali, its army and its administration as well as the basic public services that had been destroyed in the north. In return, the Malian interim government was called upon to organise presidential elections by July 2013 to bring the period of political transition to an end. Despite various difficulties and pressure from France and the international community, the government accepted this demand.

THE ELECTIONS: A LENGTHY OBSTACLE COURSE

France insisted on elections being held by July 2013, as it wanted a military withdrawal to avoid the spectre of a drawn-out war and its impact on public opinion in France. But what Mali's interim government, ECOWAS and the international community wanted above all was to organise elections quickly. It was important for the country to have a lawfully elected government that could act as a negotiating partner in talks with the international community and the Tuareg movements.

Kidal as the Pivotal Issue of the Peace Process in Mali

The main point of contention, however, remained the "issue of Kidal", whose status is still not finally determined, even under the Ouagadougou Agreement, the aim of which was to force the parties to sign the deal in order to allow preparations for the presidential elections in July 2013 to proceed. Negotiations between the Malian authorities and the MNLA thus resumed, with the President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, acting as intermediary, so that the election schedule could be adhered to. The aspiration was that the rebel groups should return to base and subsequently be disarmed, that the Malian soldiers should return, the Malian administration should be re-established and elections should be held in the entire Malian state territory, including Kidal.

The negotiations began with a three day delay, and the security issues soon gave rise to friction. The most impor-

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tant envoy from the Mali leadership, former minister Tiébilé Dramé, addressed the press on 13 June 2013 with the remark: "We are for peace, but for a peace that defends Mali's interests." The government advocated the disarmament of the MNLA immediately upon

the arrival of its troops in Kidal. The Tuareg rebels, for their part, demanded that legal proceedings against some of its members be suspended. Lengthy negotiations demonstrated to Mali's President that the disarming process would require a great deal of patience and persistence. After much oscillation and numerous misunderstandings, it was an intervention by the President of Ivory Coast,

Alassane Ouattara, and French President François Hollande that finally persuaded Bamako to accept the Ouagadougou Agreement.

However, the Bamako government was fortunately successful in having some principles included that were crucial for the survival of the Malian state, namely the democratic principle (in renunciation of any religious form of government) as well as, most importantly, the principle of the inviolability of the borders, which are defined in Chapter I of the agreement. The Ouagadougou Agreement envisaged implementation in several phases: an initial phase was to facilitate the organisation of the elections, particularly in Kidal; a second phase envisaged a cease-fire followed by the return of the rebel fighters from the north to their bases with the simultaneous deployment of Malian security forces and administrative officials capable of organising the presidential election. Throughout the negotiations, Traoré had sought to highlight the key issues of security and the sovereign rights of the state of Mali. The Malian President wanted Bamako to have an exclusive monopoly on the army, security and sovereignty. However, the circumstances militated against the fulfilment of this demand, especially as France was not at all in agreement. This demand kept delaying negotiations with the Tuareg groups, which were occupying Kidal; it was not until the Ouagadougou Agreement was signed that a temporary solution was achieved.

Some observers think that France did not act decisively enough vis-à-vis the Tuareg in its efforts to support the Malian government in its desire to effectively secure the integrity of the state. As a result, Bamako had to forego particularly two of its demands: first the immediate disarming of the Tuareg fighters in Kidal and secondly the deletion of the term "Azawad" from the Ouagadougou Agreement. The government had conducted a long and ultimately unsuccessful campaign against this term, which the Tuareg use as the name for the northern region of Mali. In view of these concessions, it is clear that only part of the journey has been completed and that the most important issues have yet to be resolved.

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The Course of the Elections: From Uncertainty to a Surprising Outcome

Resolution 2085 of the UN Security Council marked a decisive turning point for the restoration of Mali's institutions. The Security Council called upon Mali's leadership to establish a schedule for the democratic transition and the holding of free and transparent elections so that the country would regain an institutional order. In fact, the elections were postponed several times as the recapture of the northern region of Mali had initially been at the top of the agenda.

Once territorial integrity had been restored through the Franco-African military intervention, elections were once again delayed by the MNLA's refusal to allow them to be held in Kidal Region as well. In addition, the status of the former rebels had to be defined to calm the political climate. A compromise was finally reached in June 2013 with the Ouagadougou Agreement.

The election law was approved on 27 May 2013, which envisaged presidential elections to be held in Mali and in its diplomatic and consular missions in a first round on 28 July 2013 and in a potential second round on 11 August 2013. Events followed one another at an increasingly more rapid pace until 29 June 2013, when the Constitutional Council published the validated list of candidates for the presidential office. Eight out of 36 candidacies had been rejected.

In this difficult political situation, campaigning began on 7 June 2013, which allowed the candidates to introduce themselves to the population. The first round of this election took place in a transparent manner and without any significant incidents. However, organisational deficiencies and logistical problems in some polling stations came close to compromising the voting in the regions and in the Malian diaspora, particularly in France.

The two favourites, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK) and Soumaïla Cissé, were co-founders of Mali's largest political party, ADEMA (Alliance for Democracy in Mali). IBK was way ahead in early exit polls. But Cissé denounced the results, citing numerous organisational deficiencies and election fraud. Keïta appealed for calm among his party

supporters and prohibited them from demonstrating in any way until the definitive results were made public. These were announced on 7 August 2013, giving IBK 39.79 per cent of the votes, followed by Soumaïla Cissé with 19.70 per cent, with a turnout of 49.98 per cent, which was higher than any achieved in Mali previously during presidential elections. A second round was thus unavoidable, even though the Minister of Territorial Administration maintained the opposite in a statement that threatened to divide the political class. Campaigning for the second round was to be limited to 48 hours; mobilisation was further curtailed due to the Eid al-Fitr celebrations (end of Ramadan). Consequently, turnout on 11 August was reduced as well, namely to 45.78 per cent.

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The majority of the defeated candidates joined the camp of IBK, who went into the second round as the overwhelming favourite. When the initial exit polls confirmed IBK as the victor, the defeated Soumaïla Cissé paid his rival a visit at his home and congratulated him on his victory, much to the Malians' surprise. The official announcement of the results on 15 August 2013 confirmed the forecasts with a clear victory for IBK (77.6 per cent of the votes against 22.4 for Cissé).

CHALLENGES FACING THE NEW PRESIDENT

With these elections, the country has taken a significant step forward. But the challenges facing the new president are enormous. His main concern, the issue of security, demands first and foremost a reform of the Malian army and regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism and the drugs trade. In the view of many actors of political life in Mali, the reform of Malian institutions, which had not been capable of guaranteeing the survival of the greatly flawed democratic system, is an absolute necessity. To them, the fight against corruption and nepotism in the administrative apparatus is a prerequisite to reconciliation among the Malian people by means of a "culture of dialogue" pursuant to Article 3 of the Ouagadougou Agreement. One of the greatest challenges facing the newly elected President Keïta will no doubt remain the unsolved status of Kidal.



Facing great challenges: President Keita receives congratulations during his inauguration. | Source: Mali Buzz, flickr ©©©.

Besides purely security-related and political issues, Mali's economy also needs to be revitalised with the aid of international cooperation. Since the beginning of the security crisis in the north, the economy has largely been dysfunctional and the country depends to a large extent on international aid. According to the Senegalese Birama Fall,² IBK will not only have to deal with the devastating impact of the coup of March 2012 and the subsequent occupation of the north by terrorist groups, but also with the legacy of the transitional government, which was anything but a model of good governance against all appearances. Added to this are the effects of the preceding decade of ill-fated measures and failures to take action by the government of President ATT, which seriously weakened the authority and credibility of the state. The extent of the challenges facing IBK is great.

The newly elected president must begin by fulfilling the obligations set forth in the Ouagadougou Agreement; at the same time, he must address highly urgent tasks including the essential reconstruction, or even re-creation of the Malian state. First of all, discipline must be restored within the armed forces and the security forces. The Malian population has been suffering for years from the consequences of poor discipline and insubordination, as well as from serious violence perpetrated against the civilian

2 | Birama Fall, "IBK, Président: Les défis et attentes", *Le Prétoire*, 29 Sep 2013, <http://maliweb.net/news/politique/2013/08/29/article,166615.html> (accessed 31 Oct 2013).

population by members of the army and security forces. Incidentally, the army did not unanimously welcome the promotion of coup leader Captain Sanogo to the rank of general. Overall, bad practices had proliferated in the army and in the administration, and these even deteriorated after the coup. In various battalions, poor discipline and contempt for hierarchy are pervasive. The extreme politicisation of the troops, particularly of the garrison of Kati³ and numerous members of highly active police trade unions, have produced a situation where hundreds of uniformed men have declined into anarchy and lawlessness. To be able to reform the army, the gendarmerie and the police efficiently, so they can fulfil their tasks properly, the defence and security forces require adequate resources and personnel.

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Secondly, social cohesion and the national unity of the country must be re-established. After the presidential elections, the country remains deeply divided between proponents and opponents of the coup; secular and religious decision-makers; and antagonistic communities. The army itself suffers from a lack of cohesion and is split between those loyal to the rule of law and rebels. The political class is seriously weakened and has lost ground considerably in the estimation of the people due to its vacillating stance and lack of leadership – there is thus no end to the problems in sight. For this reason, it is absolutely crucial for IBK to pursue policies that resonate at a grassroots level and inspire even those at the very top of the state apparatus to generate a dynamic within the Malian population: the desire to live together relying on the sociocultural values that underpin the Malian nation and to develop an outlook for the future.

In addition, it is vital for the Republic of Mali to re-establish state authority and administration in the north. Particularly in the marginalised areas of the north, development programmes produced hardly any results. The relative success of radical Islamists of the north was partly due to the fact that they offered religion as an alternative to a

3 | Kati, 15 kilometres from Bamako, is a garrison town and the headquarters of the hero of the coup of 22 March, Amadou Haya Sanogo.

dysfunctional and corrupt state. Islam was portrayed as a source of morality and justice, which the state had not been able to provide for the people in the north for years. Some observers berated "excessively frequent" references to religious topics and content during the election campaign and even in IBK's inauguration speech. Noteworthy is that his candidacy and campaign were supported and financed in part by over a hundred Islamic associations, which were organised in the "Sebati" movement. This organisation is close to Imam Diko, the Wahhabi doctrinaire of the High Islamic Council of Mali.

All symbolism and declarations of intent to one side, it is important to take into account the needs of sectors of the population in the north without jeopardising national unity. Decentralisation must be effective, and resources must be deployed in a sensible manner. In the same context, the state must respect the leading figures from the madrasas and offer graduates from Islamic universities career opportunities in order to avoid waves of dissatisfaction and frustration, which Salafist or radical movements may take advantage of. It is a fact that the elites educated in Arab countries represent a potential recruitment pool for jihadists.

It is now incumbent upon the elected President to perform the difficult task of bringing things into balance by stressing the universal applicability of certain principles for citizens and for the behaviour of state representatives at all levels. In the context of Western Africa: Most of the current challenges concern the Malian state as the main party affected and as the central actor, but the ECOWAS must also accept some responsibility and take action, particularly with respect to the porous borders and therefore virtually uncontrollable transnational movements. The war against terrorism and general security issues must be dealt with at a regional level because no state, however powerful, can win the fight for security on its own.

FINAL REMARKS

The preparations for the presidential elections in Mali were crucial as a political prerequisite to the resolution of a crisis that began as more of a security issue. The fact that it

involved a dimension of domestic politics correlated with security aspects has made the crisis resolution very difficult – and it is still not completed. In spite of the elections being conducted successfully, they represented only one moment in a process of transition.

Although the international community applauded the unexpected smooth running of the elections, the thorny issue of the Tuareg remains. President IBK, whose task is to reconstruct a destitute country and bring it back from the brink of bankruptcy, is faced with enormous challenges, the most important of which is the restoration of state rule over the entire territory. This challenge became all the clearer when recent clashes between members of the MNLA and the Malian army on Wednesday 11 September 2013 provided a reminder of the fact that religious radicalism could erupt once again if economic development cannot successfully combat youth unemployment and social misery in the foreseeable future, because those provide fertile ground for political violence and terrorism.

This article has been translated from the French.