



BULLETIN

No. 72 (525), 3 July 2013 © PISM

Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) ● Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)
Jarosław Cwiek-Karpowicz ● Artur Gradziuk ● Piotr Kościński
Roderick Parkes ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Beata Wojna

Presidential Election in Mali: Conclusions for the EU

Kacper Rękawek

In July and August 2013, Mali will hold presidential and parliamentary elections, and despite numerous administrative, logistical and political issues, the Malian authorities are determined that these will be organised in line with the pre-arranged schedule. The European Union, without pushing for the elections to be organised in the summer, should insist that Tuareg armed groups disarm and intensify its assistance activities in Mali. Poland could play a role in this process, especially in relation to the activities of the Malian Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission.

From the beginning of 2012, the West African nation of Mali finds itself in a grave political crisis caused in part by a separatist rebellion started by the Tuareg, who inhabit the northern part of the country, and a military coup d'état. High political instability (Mali has had only a provisional government for the last 14 months) and the energised activity of Islamist terrorist organisations in the country (a cause for the French intervention from January 2013) are symptoms of the crisis. During the last six months, Malian territorial integrity has almost completely been restored—a prerequisite for holding the elections. The last part of the Malian territory outside the government's reach is the northeastern city of Kidal, which is in the hands of the Tuareg rebels.

The Ouagadougou Agreement. On 18 June 2013, the Malian government, acting under international pressure, and the two organisations representing the Tuareg rebels, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (HCUA), concluded a preliminary agreement on the organisation of presidential and parliamentary elections and future peace negotiations in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso. The agreement outlines the framework for the return of the Malian administration and military to the areas currently under MNLA and HCUA control. In turn, this will allow for the first round of the presidential election to be held on 28 July. Fundamental issues such as the disarmament of the Tuareg rebels and a Malian–Tuareg political agreement would be concluded two months after the elections by a Malian government with democratic legitimacy. The agreement was met with enthusiastic reactions from the international community and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton, who called it historic and a crucial step towards peace in Mali.

According to the Malians, the international pressure and outside satisfaction derived from the Ouagadougou Agreement, concluded by an unpopular provisional government and representatives of two organisations regarded as criminal and terrorists in Mali, is yet another argument that the EU, and especially France, show a preference for the Tuareg. Those holding such an interpretation of events perceive the Malian–Tuareg compromise as the price to be paid for receiving development aid from Brussels and others.

Arguments for Holding the Presidential Election Now. Important internal and external arguments point to the necessity to hold soon the presidential and parliamentary elections in Mali, a country in the midst of a grave economic and humanitarian crisis (475,000 Malians are either internal or external refugees) and civil war. The government was able to win international financial assistance, including at the “Together for a New Mali” conference, during which the international community pledged to assist Mali with €3.25 billion in the next two years. Receiving this money is, however, conditioned on the implementation of a broad programme of structural reforms that are outside the mandate of the provisional government, thus a return to the constitutional order symbolised by the new presidential election is needed.

Mali's external partners, i.e., France, which is withdrawing its troops from Mali, wishes to announce the success of its armed intervention, and the U.S., which is not able to resume development activities without a democratically elected government in Bamako, are also pushing for the organisation of the new elections. The EU and the UN, which established The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to help stabilise the situation in Mali (operational as of 1 July 2013), also need a democratic government as a partner in order to continue their civil and military presence in the country.

Arguments against Holding the Elections. Up until recently, a key argument against holding the elections was the issue of the Malian state and army's absence in areas under Tuareg control. An attempt to hold elections while Kidal was still outside Malian control would amount to an unprecedented situation, and in the eyes of Malians, could be interpreted as the first step on the road to the north seceding from the country. The Ouagadougou Agreement reduces such fears but does not remove doubts about the seriousness of the Tuareg rebels as potential political interlocutors. They are accused of committing war crimes during the civil war and far-reaching criminal activities in the Sahara as well as holding an anti-Malian alliance with Islamic fundamentalists affiliated with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Because of these accusations, both MNLA and HCUA fear the Malian army will take revenge if it returns to Kidal and thus claim they will not be disarming. Such ambiguities and claims limit the potential for success of the Ouagadougou Agreement.

The next argument for the postponement of elections is the lack of preparation of the state machinery for such an undertaking. The Malians are still without new ID cards, and refugees may not be able to get them at all given the Malian weather conditions between July and September and that torrential rains have rendered many roads unusable.

The elections in Mali will not lead to speedy democratisation of the country. The Malians are thoroughly disaffected and disappointed with the functioning of the ineffective, nepotistic, corrupt parliamentary democracy in their country. Given such conditions, one should expect a high turnout at the polls and that the elections could lead to a situation in which the likes of former Malian prime ministers Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, Soumana Sacko or Modibo Sidibé, politically active from at least the early 1990s onwards, could regain power. It will be extremely difficult to force these beneficiaries of the political reality at the time that led to the Tuareg rebellion and the military coup d'état to implement energetic structural reforms, including those currently planned and outlined by the interim government under international pressure.

Conclusions for the EU. The commencement of necessary reforms, a political solution to the Tuareg issue and the ability to receive international development aid necessitate holding parliamentary and presidential elections in Mali in 2013. It is debatable whether these should be held in the summer of 2013 as the Ouagadougou Agreement is only a temporary solution that does not end the war in Mali and threatens the international community-backed peace process with an escalation of a seemingly dormant conflict. In that case, the Malian EUTM Mali-trained troops would concentrate on fighting the Tuareg MNLA and HCUA, whereas the Islamist terrorist groups of the Sahel will remain a point of interest for the French interventionists, the EU and the U.S. Should such a scenario come to pass, then international efforts to transform Mali would be rendered meaningless as the decision-makers should be focused on reforming the country and not on combating the relatively unpopular Tuareg groups.

The EU should attempt to persuade Malian politicians and society that there are little pro-Tuareg tendencies in the international community. In order to achieve this, European diplomacy should insist on the disarmament of the MNLA and HCUA. At the same time, individual Member States should intensify their development activities in the whole of Mali. A significant role in this process could be played by the new Member States, including Poland, which, although relatively unknown in this part of Africa, could act as an objective and independent observer. These states could share their experiences with the liberalisation of their political and economic spheres (especially related to the reform of the civil service and efforts to combat corruption) and management of transitional processes, especially while assisting the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission, which should evolve into a Malian version of roundtable talks. Such activities could also indirectly support the Polish government's efforts to promote Poland as an attractive and reliable partner in Africa.