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The Mali presidential elections: outcomes and challenges

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Executive summary

Emerging from a severe political crisis that had encapsulated the country for almost a year and a half, Mali staged a remarkably comeback when the country held successful presidential elections. Behind the (for Mali) exceptionally high turnout of 48.9%, there was a strong sentiment of national revival. The winner was Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, and the 77.7% of the vote he collected proved that he has gained a legitimate mandate that should allow him the political space necessary to implement the difficult reforms needed to overcome the crisis. The challenges are, however, still huge. Political and administrative institutions must be rebuilt. The army must be brought under constitutional control and Keita must find a constructive way of dealing with the Tuareg rebels in the north. His main challenge in this regard is that his room for manoeuvre and negotiation is quite limited, because many of his own supporters will not accept a deal that gives autonomy to the Tuareg areas, while the Tuareg rebels have high expectations of what they want to achieve from the peace process. It is therefore essential that Keita also brings the political opposition into this process in order to avoid the negotiations becoming politicised.

Introduction

In 2012 Mali experienced its most severe crisis as an independent nation. This was a crisis of multiple dimensions, with each feeding the others. It started in the north with a rebellion originally based on Tuareg grievances, but as the Malian army fled south, Islamist-inspired insurgents took control of large parts of northern Mali. This resulted in the breakdown of the constitutional order in March 2012, followed by a humanitarian emergency that created a massive exodus of people from the north to southern parts of the country and huge waves of refugees fleeing to neighbouring countries. The breakdown of the constitutional order led to the suspension of official development assistance by almost all external donors. This not only had a huge impact on the Malian economy and the country's inhabitants, but also helped to create the urgency with which the presidential elections were organised during the summer of 2013. It is in light of this that we must see the establishment of the National Commission for Dialogue and Reconciliation in February 2013; the ratification by the transitional government in May 2013 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance; and the signing of the Ouagadougou Agreement on the elections and subsequent inclusive peace talks in June 2013. However, none of these institutional arrangements could guarantee successful elections. The main credit for this should go to the Malian people, who defied many obstacles and bad predictions and organised what became the best elections in the country's history.

This report will analyse the outcomes and challenges that the elections produced, and how these interact with the question of national reconciliation. The main objective is to review the challenges involved in bringing about profound changes in the way Mali is administered and governed. This is of the utmost importance, because the underlying features of the Malian crisis were all related to governance deficiencies.

The presidential elections

The first and second rounds of the presidential elections on July 28th and August 11th 2013, respectively, were conducted in a very particular context, following as they did on the heels of the most severe crisis that Mali has ever experienced. However, the outcome of the elections is a

clear sign that the Malian people wanted to use the ballot box to bring about a change in the way in which their country was governed. The vote was first and foremost a protest vote against the patronage, corruption and mismanagement of the past. The Malian electorate signalled clearly that it desired to see a renewal of the political class and the emergence of a real democracy, and not a "banana-republic-type" democracy based on bribes, corruption and lies. Thus, faced with significant internal pressure as well as from external donors eager to see the emergence of a legitimate power that could contribute to the stabilisation of Mali, the transitional government of Mali (TGM) was forced to hold presidential elections on July 28th against the advice of the Independent Electoral Commission, which was in favour of a much later date.

In the first round the voters had 28 candidates to choose from. However, only four of these were considered real political heavyweights: Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, Soumaila Cisse, Dramane Dembele and Modibé Sidibé. Keita won the first round with 39.23% of the vote; Cisse came second with 19.44%, while Sidibé and Dembele only collected, respectively, 9.59% and 4.87%, finishing third and fourth. The first round of the presidential elections was generally considered free, transparent and fair by all observers. However, certain problems should not be denied. There was widespread confusion concerning the identification of polling stations and around the announcement of the provisional results of the elections.

Because no candidate gained more than 50% of the vote in the first round, on August 11th Keita and Cisse contested the second round of presidential elections as the two frontrunners from the first round. However, one important feature to take note of from the first round is that the four main contenders alone collected almost 72% of the vote, while the other 24 candidates shared about 29%, suggesting that Mali may be about to enter a political area where smaller parties will either have little if any influence or will disappear into the larger parties. This could signal the beginning of a more mature political system, but it could also potentially mean that new and critical voices will find it more difficult to be heard as politics becomes a game of intra-party clientelism. It remains to be seen if the same pattern will manifest itself in the legislative elections scheduled for the last quarter of 2013.

However, if the best practices of the presidential elections are transferred to future elections, it will mean that Malian civil society will have sound mechanisms in place for holding and monitoring elections. Through the ECOP platform, civil society had unprecedented access to real-time data on key aspects of the voting operation, including not only the opening and closing time of polling stations, the voting, the participation rate, and the counting, but also to reports about election-related violence and intimidation, and the overall opinions of observers at polling stations.

When the results from the first round were announced there were some fears that they suggested a potential polarisation of the country, because the two top candidates were seen as having opposing views on the 2012 coup and coup makers. This could eventually have led to a deep divide across the country if the political climate had turned hostile in the second round. However, Keita's overwhelming victory in the second round, where he collected 77.7% of the vote against Cisse's 22.3%, proved that there was a real national basis for his candidacy, programme and political views. In this regard, it was also clearly to Keita's benefit that 22 of the unsuccessful candidates from the first round rallied around him and called for their supporters to vote for him. Some of these candidates chose to support Keita because they saw him as the most likely winner and hoped to gain something from supporting him, but several also saw his candidacy and a huge victory for him as the best chance for Mali. Cisse also played an important role in calming such fears: his admission of defeat and personal congratulations to Keita well in advance of the official announcement of the results contributed to the creation of an atmosphere of peace and reconciliation. This is clearly to Cisse's credit. He is the first candidate in a Malian election to have done this, and it is to be hoped that he has set a standard of political courtesy that will be replicated in future elections in Mali, as well as elsewhere on the African continent, where all too often losing candidates, irrespectively of the quality of the election and the margin of their loss, claim electoral fraud.

The high turnout and lessons learnt

Coming out of a severe political crisis that had encapsulated the country for almost a year and a half, Mali staged a remarkably comeback when it successfully completed presidential elections that were hailed by the entire international community, including observers from the Integrated UN Mission for the Stabilisation of Mali and representatives of the African Union and European Union (EU). However, behind the (in the Malian context) exceptionally high turnout of 48.9%, there was a strong sentiment of national revival and reconstruction. Even if there was a high number of spoiled ballots in the first round (over 400,000, equal to almost 10% of the votes cast), the number that participated is very high for Mali, because voter turnout between 1992 and 2007 never exceeded 30%. This is just another example of how the so-called success story of Mali in the 1990s did not have much real substance.

In 2013, however, people really wanted to vote, because the elections were regarded as representing a possible rebirth for the country. Most likely, the turnout would have been even higher if it had not been for the many internally displaced people and refugees that could not vote, and the fact that the elections took place during the rainy season, which is not only a busy farming season, but also tends to make travel difficult in many parts of the country.

In general, the elections proceeded smoothly, with only small errors and irregularities that did not significantly affect the outcome. Some of these, such as disturbances at some polling stations, voters who struggled to find their names on the electoral roll, etc., where more prevalent in the first than in the second round of voting. However, the elections also brought to the fore some more substantial issues that concerned parties need to be aware of:

- Firstly, it must be noted that for the first time in Mali the religious establishment and the military apparatus became actors in the political debate, with both structures openly calling on the population to vote for one specific candidate, in this case Keita.
- The TGM's minister of territorial administration, Colonel Moussa Sinko Coulibaly (from the former military junta), stated on the evening of the announcement of the provisional results of the first round that "based on the counting, a second round was unlikely between IBK [i.e. Keita] and Soumaila Cisse", because the former looked to be winning decisively. This was a monumental blunder that not only attracted the ire of groups supporting Cisse, but also potentially could have had a destabilising effect.
- One important lesson from the presidential elections is that they were conducted on the basis of a biometric file that made electoral fraud less possible and thereby also increased the confidence of the Malian electorate in the elections and their results. This was clearly of the utmost importance in a country where the level of trust in both the country's institutions and the political class had been drastically reduced.
- For the first time in Mali voters were asked to choose their favourite from among candidates with real political programmes (although these were slightly similar and overlapping). Keita, Cisse, Modibo Sidibé, Oumar Mariko and others had prepared elaborate political programmes that they presented and discussed extensively during the election campaign. This may suggest a new maturity in the political landscape of Mali that is most welcome. However, it should also be noted that Keita's victory owes more to his careful branding of himself than the actual strength of his party, the Rally for Mali. It was his skill in presenting himself as a reformer and strong manager who could take the country beyond the failures of the past that sealed his victory. Change was his argument, the electorate wanted change and they saw him as the best way of achieving the break with the past that they wanted.

The Malian vote: sanctioning candidates for the crisis

The strong passion for the elections suggests that President Keita has gained a legitimate mandate from the Malian electorate that should allow him the political space necessary to implement the difficult reforms needed to overcome the crisis. Because the leaders of yesterday not only failed, but are also generally perceived to have betrayed the trust of their people by plundering the wealth of the country, many Malians also saw the elections as a protest vote. Several opinion leaders called on people not to vote for specific candidates from the previous regime. Their chosen candidate was therefore Keita, because he was not only seen as the most charismatic one, but also because he was perceived as a clean candidate with enough firmness and managerial skills (he was prime minister from 1994 to 2000) to make a clear break with the past. Similarly, by opting for Keita, the electorate also punished the parts of the old political class seen as most responsible for the crisis. It will be very interesting to see if a similar sanctioning vote will manifest itself in the forthcoming legislative elections.

Challenging reforms lie ahead

The first issues that the new administration must concentrate on are to restore administrative governance and the country's democratic institutions, and to negotiate a sustainable peace agreement with the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). The severity and shock of the crisis have contributed to an awakening of the majority of the population to the mistakes and mismanagement of the past. Most people therefore realise that in-depth reconciliation is necessary. The question, however, is on what terms. Several platforms for social dialogue are emerging. However, so far there is no neutral or inclusive civic space of a national scope that could complement the various processes initiated from Bamako, be it by the state or external actors. What are much needed are initiatives that are locally grounded and bottom-up oriented, driven by consultations with actors involved in mediation and negotiation on the ground in local communities.

One solution to the crisis in the north could be deepening the process of decentralisation, but this time in combination with real local capacity-building in a transparent manner. This could allow for improved political representation locally of various political, ethnic, religious and cultural groups in the decision-making process, and the implementation of development programmes locally. The idea of autonomy for the Kidal region, on the other hand, is politically impossible. Not only is it uncertain how much support there is for this idea, even in the Kidal region itself, but such an arrangement would also have little if any economic and institutional sustainability. Most Malian actors are unanimous on this issue and not many international actors support the idea either. Tinkering with the territorial integrity of Mali is really not an option, but what needs to be discussed is how to create terms favourable for reorganising the Malian state and reconnecting it to the northern periphery. Both local state structures and local populations must be brought into this process, and here there is also undoubtedly a role for traditional leaders to be ex-officio members of various legislative bodies in an advisory capacity.

The second set of reforms that President Keita must concentrate on is security sector reform. This sector must be substantially revised in order to adapt to security challenges in both Mali itself and the wider Sahel region. The sovereignty of the Malian state can simply not be exercised without such reform. One major challenge in this regard it to establish a chain of command from the new president to the security apparatus that wrests de facto control of the army away from the former junta leader, Captain Amadou Sanogo. The appointment of Sanogo as chairman of the Committee for National Reconciliation has raised some questions in this regard, and Cisse supporters have protested against this, with some even stating that they plan to take this to court in order to get Sanogo's appointment cancelled. Keita, on the other hand, has defended this appointment by arguing that it was done for the sake of the reconciliation of the country. Some people agree with this, but many also wonder about what role the army and Sanogo will play in Keita's Mali. Will the army once more leave the front line to stage a coup if its interests are perceived to be threatened? And several Malians, although not all of them, also have their doubts about Sanogo. When the transition process started he had promised to stay out of sight and not play an active political role. However, his shadow hovered over the election campaign and few doubt that of the two candidates remaining after the first round, Keita was his favourite. To be able to govern freely without undue influence by the army and Sanogo, Keita must find a way of gaining real authority over the military apparatus. Important choices and decisions are therefore urgently needed to restore an army that is in the service of the country and democracy. The army must therefore become subject to a professional ethic and political power in accordance with the Malian constitution of 1992, which stipulates that any coup is a crime against the people of Mali.

The third set of necessary reforms that the new president will have to deal with soon is related to the independence of the judiciary. Instead of the rule of law, social justice and defending their own citizens before the law, previous governments based their rule on the practice of exclusion, impunity and ineffective administration. This denied Mali's citizens access to justice. The judiciary must therefore be reorganised and made more accessible to citizens. Reconciliation and social cohesion must also be built on a platform of transitional justice based on the principles of justice, reparation and guarantees of non-repetition.

The fourth necessary reform is to step up the fight against corruption. The corruption of its political institutions that Mali experienced contributed to the creation of extremely negative representations of the state in the public imaginary. Thus, the mindset that developed among ordinary citizens was one where access to power meant having access to state resources. This is one important reason why the fight against corruption is such a challenge, because it is not only about catching and sentencing a few important figures, but changing attitudes prevalent in the state and state institutions that had developed over years, if not decades.

Niger: lessons for Mali?

The countries of the Sahel all face similar challenges related to the rise of terrorism and cross-border transnational crime. Their responses have, however, been quite different. Some countries have taken a more proactive approach (e.g. Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso), while others, such as Mali, have failed to confront these issues. The question is therefore not only how Mali can improve its approach, but also if it can learn from neighbouring countries with a more proactive approach.

Neighbouring Niger is most likely the case where certain lessons could be learnt, because previous rebellions not only led to a military response from the state, but also an attempt to solve these conflicts through the implementation of social policies. Important in this regard is the establishment of the High Authority for the Consolidation of Peace. This institution is not only the national structure for conflict resolution and community integration through disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes, but it is also supposed to identify actions to correct social inequalities, disparities, and exclusions created by development programmes and government policies.

Another aspect from which the new government could draw lessons is the two social visions that the government of Mahamadou Issoufi articulated when it came to power in 2011. Firstly, it articulated a clear vision for how to guarantee food self-sufficiency in Niger and, secondly, it established the Programme for Development and Security in the Nigerien Sahel to enhance stronger social, economic and cultural security in the Sahelian zones of the country. Similarly, inclusive development and social security should constitute the core approach of the Keita regime to the challenges it faces, and not solely military measures. It is undoubtedly important to reconstitute the army and return it to constitutional control, but this should be seen as part of a broader social agenda and not as an objective in itself.

In this regard, the incoming administration in Mali should also take great care to note that over time, and particularly since 2012, it seems that the government of Niger is increasingly relying on a strategy of security and military co-operation with external partners, leading it to neglect its original vision that the only way that Niger can secure itself is through inclusive development projects that enhance social security. Unfortunately, influential external partners such as the EU and U.S. seem currently to be preoccupied with strengthening the military capacity of the Nigerien administration, and are thereby also contributing to pushing the Issoufi government away from its original developmental vision.

Conclusion

The quality of the 2013 elections and the victory of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita could signal a break with the political culture of patronage and corruption that had come to dominate in Mali. The challenges that the country faces are, however, still huge. Political and administrative institutions must be rebuilt, while the army must be brought under constitutional control, and Keita must find a constructive way of dealing with the Tuareg rebels in the north.

The announcement in late September that the MNLA is pulling out of the Ouagadougou Accord is just as worrying as the gun battles that erupted in Kidal immediately thereafter. Keita's main challenge in this regard is that his room for manoeuvre and negotiation is quite limited, because many of his own supporters will not accept a deal that gives autonomy and transfers wealth to the Tuareg areas of the north. The MNLA, on the other hand, has high expectations of what it wants to achieve from the peace process. Ideally, President Keita would be given the time to organise his administration, reorganise the army and bring it firmly back under constitutional control, and hammer out a transparent agenda for the negotiations that he could communicate to the electorate, but time is not on his side. He will have to rush into the negotiation process, because trying to postpone it could lead to an escalation of violence, particularly in the Kidal region. It is therefore of immense importance that the president also brings the political opposition into this process in order to prevent the issue of the negotiations from becoming politicised. In this regard, it will be important for the Keita government to signal that the issue of the north is not only a Tuareg question. Thus, it should attempt to strike a balance between the northern and southern parts of the country by instead making the northern issue a question about Mali. Any development initiative in the northern regions should therefore include all marginalised groups that inhabit this area and not only the Tuaregs. This is the only way that the new president can manage to quickly build a national coalition of credibility around the peace process.

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