

Mali 2013: A Year of Elections and Further Challenges

Written by Morten Boas

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MORTEN BOAS, DEC 22 2013

Emerging from a severe political crisis that had a severe impact upon the country for almost a year and a half, Mali staged a remarkable comeback during the summer of 2013 when the country held successful presidential elections. The winner was Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, and the large majority he collected gave his mandate legitimacy. The challenges are, however, still huge; the upsurge in violence that accompanied the parliamentary elections testifies to this, but the Islamic insurgents are not the only bump in the road to the Malian recovery. Political and administrative institutions must be rebuilt, the army must be brought under constitutional control, and President 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 manoeuvring is constrained by his own supporters who will not accept a deal that gives autonomy to the areas to which the Tuareg lay claim.

The Malian Crisis

The Malian crisis 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 mass exodus of people from the north to the southern parts of the country and saw huge waves of refugees flee 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 (see Bøås and Torheim 2013).

The Presidential Elections

The first and second rounds of the presidential elections on 28 July 2013 and 11 August 2013 respectively, were therefore conducted in a very particular context. However, the outcome of the elections provided 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 of democracy, based on bribes, corruption and lies (Ba and Bøås 2013).

In the first round, the voters had 28 candidates to choose from, but the forerunners were Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and Soumaila Cisse, who respectively won 39.23 per cent and 19.44 per cent of the votes. However, as no candidate gained more than 50 per cent of the vote, on 11 August 2013, Keita and Cisse contested the second round of presidential elections as the two forerunners from the first round. Keita's overwhelming victory in the second round, where he collected 77.7 per cent of the vote against Cisse's 23.6 per cent, proves that there was a real national basis for his candidacy. However, it was also clearly to Keita's benefit that 22 of the unsuccessful candidates from the first round allied 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.

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There was clearly a spirit of patriotism and national revival at play during the elections, and the losing candidate, Cisse, also contributed in this regard. His admission of defeat and personal congratulations to Keita well in advance of the official announcement of the official results contributed to this. This is to Cisse's credit. He is the first candidate in a Malian election to have done this, and it is 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, irrespective of the quality of the election and the margin of their loss, claim electoral fraud.

The voter turnout was 48.9 per cent, and this is a high figure in this context considering voter turnout between 1992 and 2007 never exceeded 30 per cent. This is just another example of how the so-called success story of Mali in the 1990s did not have much real substance (see Bøås and Torheim 2013a and 2013b). In the summer of 2013, people really wanted to vote, because the elections were regarded as representing a possible rebirth of the country.

The Elections to the National Assembly

The elections to the National Assembly are, however, another story as they were conducted in a very different climate. In November and December 2013, the main storyline was not revival and reconstruction, but fear, as they were conducted on the backbone of a small, but still significant upsurge in violence. This explains why some people did not cast their votes; they were simply afraid that the insurgents (particularly the Islamic ones) would target the polling stations. However, we must also take into consideration that for most ordinary voters in Mali, the election that is seen as important is the presidential one; elections to the National Assembly have never been conducted with the same enthusiasm. However, in terms of Malian recovery, this was still an important election. 147 seats in the National Assembly were to be elected by absolute majority in single-member constituencies to serve for five years. In the constituencies where no candidate gained an absolute majority, a run-off election was organised between the two candidates receiving the most votes in the first round. These two rounds took place respectively on 24 November 2013, with a voter turn-out of 38.6 per cent, and 15 December 2013, with a voter turn-out of 37.4 per cent. As this last election constituted the fourth nationwide ballot in less than five years, a certain level of election fatigue also played a role in explaining the gradual downsizing of the number of people who cast their votes.

The provisional results released on 16 December 2013 showed that Keita's party, Rally for Mali, had won the election, gaining 60 seats and that it, together with its junior partners, controlled 115 seat. The main opposition will be constituted by Cisse's party – the Union for the Republic and Democracy (URD), who gained about 19 seats. Keita therefore enjoys a comfortable majority in the National Assembly. At this crucial moment in time, Mali needs a strong government, but it would be incorrect to presume that with the completion of the last round of elections Mali is well on its way to recovery and stability.

Islamist Insurgency

As the recent upsurge in attacks by Islamist insurgents shows, they are not yet a spent force in Mali and the war is therefore not over. These forces are not as alien to northern Mali as some international observers suggest. They have been present in the area for a long time, and their strategies of integration were quite successful. In the absence of a functioning state, they presented themselves as honest traders offering a good price for local products, and they also distributed much-needed money, medicine and other goods to local communities (Bøås and Torheim 2013a). A military response to the challenge that these groups represent is needed, but neither the international community nor the Malian army is likely to win a decisive military victory in the desert of northern Mali. In the long run, the only viable answer to the challenge that these groups represent is the return of legitimate state structures. Keita's government and the newly elected National Assembly therefore must find a credible and legitimate solution to the crisis in the north that can accommodate the more secularly-oriented Tuareg rebels.

Next Steps

One solution could be deepening the process of decentralisation nationwide and not only in the north. However, if this is to work, it must be conducted 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

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decision-making process and in the implementation of development programmes locally. The idea of autonomy for Azawad, the areas of northern Mali that the Tuareg rebels lay claim to is, however, politically impossible. Not only is it highly uncertain how much support there is for this idea in the north itself, but the majority population in Mali is against it and such an arrangement would also have little if any economic and institutional sustainability. Tinkering with the territorial integrity of Mali is therefore 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. Even under normal circumstances this would have been a huge task, but coming on the backbone of the Malian crisis and in a context of an Islamic insurgency that is far from broken, the challenge is even more difficult. The Malian elections of 2013 are a step in the right direction, but only a small step. It is now that the hard work really starts and the international community needs to recognise that elections are not a quick-fix to the fundamental problems in Mali.

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Morten Bøås (PhD) is Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). He is the author of numerous articles and reports about African politics and conflict, and he has conducted substantial fieldwork in a number of African countries, including Mali. His latest published book is *Politics of Origin in Africa; Autochthony, Citizenship and Conflict* (co-authored with Kevin Dunn), Zed Books 2013.

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