



Building peace in Mali: The elections and beyond

by Cristina Barrios and Tobias Koepf

On 28 July, the Malian population will go to the polls to elect a new president. This event will mark a return to the constitutional order, which ceased following a military coup on 22 March 2012. Getting Mali back on track after years of decline and months of turmoil is no easy task. This holds true for the elections per se but also, and most importantly, for the period after them as the newly elected head of state will have to lead the recovery of the country and build long-term peace.

The electoral process is currently facing serious logistical difficulties that Malian officials and their international partners are trying to overcome. But the most important challenge will be to remodel the way power is exerted by the Malian authorities and to build trust between the population and a political elite accused of corruption and nepotism. Mali also has to engage in a long-term process of asserting both civilian and military control over the entirety of its territory while maintaining social peace. This is especially so in northern Mali, where Tuareg rebel groups - currently in control of the city of Kidal - have long claimed independence. Recent negotiations between the interim Malian government and two Tuareg groups in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, led to an agreement signed on 18 June that will allow

for elections to be held in Kidal. But a long-term solution for the problem still has to be found once a new president has been elected.

As the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) begins its operations, the EU will continue its work as one of Mali's key international partners. The Union has actively mobilised support for the electoral process and is now ready to put on the table a new state-building contract with Mali that can help tackle the immense challenges that the country faces. The EU has been working with Mali and the Sahel as a region for many years, focusing on both development and security. In 2011, it released its Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel, and in recent months, it has encouraged, among others, initiatives supporting and promoting the role of women in peacebuilding and reconstruction. In May 2013, it also gathered around one hundred donors for a fund-raising conference, who collectively pledged €3.25 billion.

Biometrics is not enough

The organisation of the Malian elections has caught the country between the determination to move



on to the next stage with an elected authority - a position also encouraged by the international community - and inertia caused by severe logistical challenges. Voter registration is hampered by the post-conflict situation as well as technical problems, which have led to an inevitable delay in the distribution of materials and training of officials. About 200,000 people are still displaced within Mali and some 175,000 have fled to neighbouring Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger. In cooperation with the UNHCR, polling stations will be set up near the camps for internally displaced persons and refugees. Although drafting reliable voter lists under the current circumstances is extremely difficult, the interim government is not starting from scratch as it has recovered and resumed the work undertaken by Malian authorities since 2009 (with international support under the RAVEC census programme) to create new ID cards with a National Identification Number (NINA).

As the NINA is a very sophisticated biometric document, the problem boils down to the fact that there is neither the time nor the resources to create a voters' register based on the NINA lists. Malians have their NINA allocated through local administrations, but many may have moved or data may have changed. Also, all those who are currently 18-19 years old are not even on the lists because they were too young at the time of the RAVEC census. For the many Malians in the European diaspora (up to 300,000 live in France alone), consulates have pledged to do their best, but for certain places where NINA lists are not reliable - such as for Malians living in Portugal - participation has been ruled out for now.

In addition, voter turnout in Malian presidential elections has never been high. During previous presidential polls in 2002 and 2007 - judged free and fair, on the whole, but marred by massive cancellations of 'void' ballots - a mere 30-37 per cent of the voting population participated. The low turnout expected in this vote has led some to question whether the future head of state will possess sufficient legitimacy. However, the new president's legitimacy will not only stem from voters' participation but also from his capacity to deliver. Different from other transitions and countries in the region Malians proudly ended dictatorship in the 1990s, with a strong civil society movement that even brought women and children onto the streets. This time

‘...the new president’s legitimacy will not only stem from voters’ participation but also from his capacity to deliver.’

around, those that will not be able to vote may therefore protest, and it cannot be ruled out that one or more of the losing candidates will contest the vote. Though the main candidates have signed a charter committing to respect the results and not to resort to violence, vigilant monitoring by the international community will prove indispensable. These logistical challenges were the main reason why different observers - along with Malian politicians and members of the electoral commission - called for postponing the vote by several months. However, such calls have been repeatedly rejected by both the interim government and the international community, who see the elections as a necessary step in order to turn the page on the crisis and engage in further co-operation with Bamako.

Same crocodiles, same swamps?

There are 28 official candidates running in this election; an incredibly high number compared to any established democracy. With many of them heavily connected to previous administrations, they are, as the saying goes in Mali, ‘the same crocodiles in the same swamps’. In fact, three of the most promising candidates - Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK), Soumaila Cissé, and Modibo Sidibé - all held posts under former President Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) or, in the case of Sidibé, even under his predecessor Alpha Oumar Konaré. The others running will simply try to gain influence with stronger candidates in the event of a run-off, where they will pledge to ‘forward’ the votes of their followers. There are at least 40 political parties in Mali (for a population of 14 million), but there cannot possibly be 40 different projects for the country. Most parties lack specific programmes, and political life is more about networking and outreach through family and business ties than any concrete vision for the state or the pursuit of socio-economic goals.

Weakness and nepotism discredited ATT's rule and have continued to plague the current transitional government. Bamako is widely perceived to have given in to pressure from the Tuareg groups in the recent Ouagadougou negotiations as many Malians wanted the national forces to have the monopoly of security in the north during the elections. Observers also emphasise that political elites are all concentrated in Bamako:

this is true even for those officials who represent minorities from other regions or ethnic groups. Within this political elite, some have resisted decentralisation and vow to create a strong Mali, hindering or exploiting ethnic representation and development aid. The new president, the new government he will appoint, and the new parliament (parliamentary elections are scheduled for later this year, but a date is yet to be set) will inherit both the state's fragility and its entrenched undemocratic power dynamics. The renewal of political elites in Mali will take a long time, but the elections will offer an opportunity for changing both elected politicians and the revamped administration.

Rebuilding the state

Presidential candidates are pledging to (re)unify Mali with heartfelt appeals to 'national honour' - but will the state actually be able to 'reconquer' Mali? Could such plans take a sour turn?

In the short term, the main challenge for the government in Bamako is to establish control over northern Mali, which has traditionally been beyond its reach. ATT's forces had not been able to effectively confront armed groups (both Tuareg and Islamist) in this area. Regarding development as well as administrative and civilian support, ATT also tried to invest in the north (with the help of the EU). But the state lacked the capacity to set up and run programmes, so the non-state groups kept their weapons and consolidated their position in the negotiations, seizing chunks of the budget and safely remaining outside the rule of law. As a result, in recent years, the territory became a 'grey zone' with de facto alternative rulers and protectors. At the moment the MINUSMA, supported by France's Operation Serval, is doing a decent job of keeping violent Islamist groups beyond Mali's borders. But the Malian army will eventually have to secure the region itself; a difficult task given that the armed forces have been in a state of complete disarray since the 2012 coup.

Shifting and complex allegiances - due to historic, geographic, ethnic, family, economic and military factors - still prevail on the ground. Many Malians, however, continue to voice hope, as they boast a proven history (and even a national

identity) of being a people who live together and are not ethnically opposed, and whose leaders prioritise consensus. Nevertheless, such consensus has often seen leaders collude for their own benefit, while disregarding the needs of the Malian population, and notably, of its minorities.

'In the short term, the main challenge for the government in Bamako is to establish control over northern Mali, which has traditionally been beyond its reach.'

Initiatives for a 'national political dialogue' must go hand in hand with the (re)deployment of Malian state institutions, so that territorial integrity and unity are achieved by securing opportunities for the

population in the north and countering potential spoilers that will be loath to abandon their privileges. The Ouagadougou agreement between Bamako and the Tuareg groups has cleared the path ahead, but further dialogue and inclusive policies will be needed to sustain the process and consolidate a new era where state institutions and authorities will be literally 'learning by doing'.

Rebuilding the army

The long-term challenge is to train and equip Mali's armed forces to counter non-state armed groups in the Sahara-Sahel while at the same time creating a structure that guarantees full civilian control and lessens the likelihood of military coups. The EU training mission (EUTM) Mali and several bilateral support measures are addressing these issues, but it will take much more to prevent desertions and mutinies in the future. Current training periods in Mali are only ten weeks long; equipment has to be secured through parallel channels; and the freshly-trained battalions are expected to fight against terrorist units in the north right away. In addition, massive work is still needed to stabilise chains of command, payments and material provisions. As a European top officer acknowledges, even Western armies usually need 4-5 years of targeted training, reliable equipment, and then cumulative battle experience to effectively combat terrorism - but for now Malians will have to make do with their own precarious situation.

Furthermore, non-state groups that control parts of Mali still have greater legitimacy vis-à-vis some local populations, whose perceptions of the Malian army are tainted by recent incidences of abuse, betrayal or weakness. The new Malian

authorities will have to demonstrate the ability to secure international accompaniment and support by ECOWAS, the African Union and, more broadly, the international community. In this regard, the role of neighbouring countries and their leaders will be crucial. If successful, Mali will increasingly find its way back onto the regional stage, which is still dominated by personal links between heads of state and friendships/enmities on specific trans-national files that are affecting population mobility, regime security and economic opportunities.

The EU in Mali - and beyond

The European Union is currently consolidating its 2011 Sahel Strategy as the framework for its policies in Mali and the wider region. The EU Special Representative for the Sahel, Michel Reveyrand de Menthon, is now coordinating the EU's overall approach. This regional perspective is much welcomed by Mali's authorities and civil society and, quite importantly, by EU member states who also need to reconcile their positions and agree on a course of action.

The EU and Malian authorities have also agreed to a state-building contract that would go beyond funding specific projects - a form of budget support that would nevertheless depend on the country's political evolution and stability. The EU has already committed €520 million to Mali for the 2013-2014 period and finances the EUTM (with contributions from 22 member states) as well as a string of ambitious development projects, such as the building of a paved road between Timbuktu and Bamako. Humanitarian aid is still necessary - the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) has already assisted internally displaced persons and refugees with some €42 million - and the Commission will continue its support for the inter-DG Alliance Globale pour l'Initiative Resilience (AGIR) to boost food security in the Sahel. There is no quick-fix equivalent to the 'Marshall Plan' for Mali, since no amount of money will make any difference if infrastructure and the political capacity to efficiently absorb aid do not improve.

The EU (notably the Security Policy and Conflict Prevention Division of the EEAS) also supports the Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission (DRC), an initiative that predates Operation Serval and is tasked with identifying and engaging all relevant political and social actors needed to work towards reconciliation. A presidential decree from March 2013 formally instituted

the DRC, and 33 men and women have to date been appointed to organise the commission and its activities. But dialogue will not (have to) be limited to the DRC: while it can facilitate compromise and generate certain results if it maintains its momentum, Mali's civil society also have to accept it as a useful channel. The DRC will run in parallel to the national political dialogue that is set to build on and implement the recent Ouagadougou agreement between the Malian government and Tuareg groups from the north.

Building peace after conflict inevitably involves such a daunting array of challenges and right now, instability continues to dominate the situation in Mali. The country and the international community, including the EU, must learn to live with this, adapt to evolving circumstances and frame security approaches within a broader, regional approach. Ultimately, the upcoming elections will not significantly alter the fact that Mali is not out of the conflict stage. Not just yet at least.

***Cristina Barrios is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.
Tobias Koepf is a TAPIR Fellow at the EUISS.***

