



Eyes on Mali's Upcoming Presidential Election

The upcoming Malian election offer few paths to improve the current situation, however there are many ways in which it could make matters worse. Due to a volatile political and security situation, next month's elections could easily spark the major conflict Mali has desperately spent years trying to avoid.

By Brandon Locke
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Last month, Mali's government officially confirmed that its long-awaited presidential election would begin on 7 July and end on 27 July. The elections have been repeatedly postponed since 2013 due to persistent security challenges in the northern and central regions throughout the country. Regional elections, which were scheduled for April 2018, were postponed until the end of the year.¹

Given Mali's delicate political environment and fractured national identity, there is no doubt that these elections could play a pivotal role in determining the country's prospects for peace and stability in the near future. While any major restructuring of the existing government is highly unlikely, the degree to which the elections are viewed as free and fair will have ramifications on future perceptions of state legitimacy.

¹ Security Council Report. Mali Monthly Forecast. 2018. http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-04/mali_28.php

Challenge I: Test of Legitimacy

The significance of Mali's elections is best understood within the historic context of its persistent instability. In 2012, Mali fell to al-Qaeda linked jihadist groups, which exploited decades of tension between the country's southern capital and the neglected northern regions. While these groups were largely defeated in early 2013 by France's military operation, the official government has since struggled to regain full authority over the entire country.

Despite a 2015 peace agreement, the government's weak implementation (and failure to include a broader base of political actors), has perpetuated support for extremist groups throughout the central and northern regions of the country.² The UN has sought to build peace in Mali since 2013, and its MINUSMA mission remains the UN's costliest missions to date, in terms of lives and budget. It retains roughly 12,500 military and police officers, but has lost more than 160 peacekeepers in 104 attacks since 2013.³ This is more than half of total UN peacekeepers killed globally during this period.

Mali's government has struggled to establish its legitimacy in rural areas of the country for years, both in terms of the state's physical presence and its usefulness to citizens. Regardless of its outcome, the upcoming election will be a public test of the government's capacity to fulfill its basic responsibilities, and contain the numerous security threats that will undoubtedly plague polls.

As of March, electoral officers still had not been guaranteed in a third of the country,⁴ and despite government's 2017 plan to secure key central regions ahead of the election,⁵ over 100 terrorist attacks have occurred since the beginning of 2018. Holding an election without guaranteed oversight is a dangerous gambit for the government, as an obviously flawed process will unquestionably delegitimize the next administration in areas where it needs to build support.

Challenge Two: Allowing genuine competition

Second is question of genuine competition and viable alternatives to incumbent President Kieta. Currently, roughly 12 candidates intend to challenge Kieta's administration, which currently is viewed unfavorably by the majority of the public. According to a recent poll, 50% of respondents were not satisfied with President Kieta's performance, with just 38% satisfied.⁶ Throughout the country, there is growing sentiment that Kieta has not done enough to combat persistent challenges such as youth unemployment and insecurity.

² Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Central Mali: violence, local perspectives and diverging narratives. 2017. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2018-02/sipriinsight_1713_mali_3_eng.pdf

³ United Nations. UN strongly condemns latest deadly attack on peacekeepers in northern Mali. 2018. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/04/1006792>

⁴ Institute for Security Studies. Mali's problems are much bigger than July's presidential election. 2017. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/malis-problems-are-much-bigger-than-julys-presidential-election?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email

⁵ Plan de Sécurisation Intégrée des Régions du Centre, or PSIRC. See footnote 2.

⁶ Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Mali-Mètre : Enquête d'opinion. 2017. <http://www.fes-mali.org/images/MM9.pdf>

Nevertheless, the government already has taken an antagonistic stance against any opposition. On 2 June, Malian riot police used tear gas to disperse a coalition of opposition supporters who intended to march through Bamako to call for transparency in next month's presidential election.⁷ The government had banned the march, and hundreds of police officers reportedly surrounded and beat the protestors. Candidate Soumaila Cissé, a former Finance Minister who is widely considered to be the strongest challenger, released a statement alleging that the ADP Headquarters was attacked by special forces, who also threw grenades.

Should President Kieta pursue repressive and violent strategies against his contenders to guarantee his reelection, any prospects for peace and reconciliation in the near future evaporate. He will both escalate tensions between moderates in the capital and play directly into the hands of extremists and separatists looking for political ammunition in the north, potentially sparking a major conflict.

Challenge Three: Preventing Post-Election Violence

With tensions high in the central and northern regions of the country, the threat of post-election violence looms in the event of almost certain irregularities. History shows that, contested election results can spark major conflict, such as following Côte D'Ivoire's 2010 election intended to end the country's crisis.

Despite widespread violence and massive suspicious of fraud, the UN Secretary General Special Representative in Côte D'Ivoire certified the results proclaimed by the Independent Electoral Commission, which declared the opposition candidate, Alassane Ouattara, the winner. However, the Constitutional Court declared Laurent Gbagbo the winner, and a post-election crisis resulting in 3,000 deaths ensued.

Seemingly aware of the potential risks at play, UN Secretary General Guterres flatly declined candidate Soumaila Cissé's request to certify the upcoming election, taking a different approach than his predecessor Ban-Ki Moon. Despite guaranteeing UN support from MINUSMA to secure regional capitals,⁸ he stated that "the United Nations is not an arbiter. In principle, the United Nations, except in exceptional circumstances, does not certify elections."⁹

The upcoming Malian election offer many paths to improve the current situation, however there are many ways in which it could make matters much worse. Regardless of the victor, the election will publicly test the government's administrative capacity, its democratic tolerance to opposition, and its ability to secure volatile regions in the north and center. Failing any one of these tests could spark the major conflict Mali has desperately been trying to avoid.

⁷ New York Times. "Police Respond to Mali Protesters with Tear Gas Ahead of Election." 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/02/world/africa/mali-protesters-tear-gas-election.html>

⁸ MINUSMA will only work to ensure civilian security throughout the election, however it will only secure candidates in regional capitals. Secretary General Guterres noted that this may pose a problem as there are cities in the country more heavily populated than regional capitals.

⁹ BBC. L'ONU appuiera le Mali à organiser les élections en juillet. 2018. <http://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-44312093>

Recommendations:

In order to avoid maintain peace and support progress towards national reconciliation, the Malian government should:

- Strengthen coordination with MINUSMA and the G5 Joint Force (FS-G5S) in the coming weeks to reinforce civilian security capacity in the central region of the country.
- Security forces, both police and military, should receive special additional training, if possible, to ensure knowledge and compliance with International Electoral Standards for free and fair elections.¹⁰
- The government should allow special exceptions to the 2015 State of Emergency to allow peaceful political demonstrations.
- President Kieta and the Malian government should completely abstain from any repression or intimidation of political candidates.
- Mali's government should ensure that security forces, especially special security forces, are given clear directives not to use violence against opposition protests or political candidates.

¹⁰ EEAS. Compendium of International Standards for Elections. 2016.
<https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/compendium-en-n-pdf.pdf>