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## A quiet election day in Mali is no guarantee of peace

By Julia Leininger,  
*German Development Institute /  
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

# The Current Column

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## A quiet election day in Mali is no guarantee of peace

*Bonn, 29 July 2013.* Before the presidential election in Mali on 28 July 2013 it was widely feared that there would be unrest and attacks. But the expected outbreaks of violence did not occur. Most Malians were able to cast their votes in peace – even in the centres of the thinly populated north. There the fighting has admittedly abated since the French military intervention in January 2013, but about a million people in Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu are still exposed to persistent violence. Some Malians and members of the political opposition expressed the view that the elections were premature and likely to give rise to more violence and suffering.

Alarming and sceptical assessments are often to be heard in advance of democratic elections in sub-Saharan Africa. Although peaceful elections have become the rule rather than the exception in Africa. In neighbouring Senegal, for example, it was feared before the elections in 2012 that supporters of President Wade would take action against the opposition. In East Africa the Kenyan authorities were intent on preventing a recurrence at this year's elections of the ethnically charged outbreaks of violence of 2008. In both cases, the situation remained stable. People were able to cast their votes in an atmosphere of calm and tranquillity. And Mali, too, has joined this African trend of peaceful elections.

### **Peace today...**

The Malian media refer to enthusiastic citizens wanting to exercise their right to vote. A glance at the past twelve months shows why this enthusiasm did not change to violence on election day. Shortly before the elections planned for April 2012 a military coup toppled the government of President Amadou Toumani Touré. The military thus opposed corruption in the ruling political class and complained about the desolate state of the army, and for this they received strong support from the people. Yet rather than leading to greater security in the disputed northern regions, the coup encouraged organised crime and violence. War broke out between militant Tuaregs, Islamists of Algerian descent, and the state of Mali. At least 450,000 people fled into the interior and to neighbouring countries. Only a few have

since returned to their home villages. Meanwhile, life has continued as normal for the 13.5 million Malians living south of Timbuktu.

Recent history has already seen a war between Tuaregs and the state of Mali, which lasted from 1990 until 1996. Memories of that dreadful period are still very much alive in Mali. The people are now hoping that the solution found then will work again today. The first democratic government, which took power under President Konaré in 1992, brought about peace. Opinion polls in Bamako and Mopti – the regions with most voters – have shown that people today want a strong leader at the head of the state. The democratically elected executive is expected to solve the huge problems facing the country, just as Konaré once did. Consequently, the people wanted the elections, although some time later 80 percent called for the date to be deferred until the conflict in the north had been resolved. But given the complex situation and the very substantial economic interest the political elites have in the smuggling that goes on in the Sahara, this would have delayed the advent of democracy.

Last Sunday, 27 candidates, including one woman, competed for the presidency and so for undertaking the enormous political and social tasks with which Mali is confronted with. According to the preliminary results, Ibrahim Boubakar Keïta, known to the people as "IBK", is said to have already won an absolute majority of the votes cast in the first round. Even though the final result has still to be announced, it is certain that a representative of the old political class is ahead by a nose. Both IBK and his main rival, Soumaila Cissé, have occupied high government offices as prime minister or minister, and both stood in the presidential elections that were ultimately cancelled in 2012.

Another sign of continuity is the lack of preparation for the election, which has been criticised by international observers. The electoral register is still incomplete, and the security situation may have stopped citizens voting. Yet this was hardly different from the preparations for the 2012 elections. Aside from a few improvements in the course of the previous twelve months, the electoral register was almost the same. And how the

nomadic people of the north can be reached, by mobile polling stations, for example, has been under discussion since the introduction of democratic elections in 1991. Nonetheless, the reservations concerning the lack of preparations for the elections were greater than in 2012 – and were also shared by international donors who had supported the elections. Yet without the technical preparations made in 2012 this year's elections would not have been possible so soon.

### **...does not necessarily mean peace tomorrow**

The tasks that await Mali's future president are enormous. There is no doubt about that. Whether the peace will continue beyond election day is uncertain, and this is true not only of the three northern regions. Besides the security problems there, the president is now more than ever responsible for *social* peace throughout the country. The people expect not only greater security but also greater food security and better health systems and educational opportunities. Above all else, the political elite is expected to change its ways and put an end to the disastrous combination of state, smuggling and particularist economic interests. Whether this will be achieved by a president who is likely to have benefited from corrupt networks in government and so indirectly from the smuggling in the north is questionable.

Whether the results are welcomed as much as election day itself remains to be seen. The count-

ing of the votes has yet to be completed. The reports from Mali speak highly of the large turnout – 55 percent nationwide. If this proves to be true, it could indeed be said that a minor sensation has occurred, since turnouts in the past have never exceeded 38 percent. But this supposed high level of participation neither guarantees balanced representation of the people, nor is it bound to enhance the government's legitimacy. The percentage of the electorate that went to the polls cannot be inferred from the flawed and incomplete electoral registers. According to local reports, many people were unable to cast their votes because they could not find their names on the lists displayed. Furthermore, refugees from the north were excluded from the elections. Efforts to enable votes to be cast in refugee camps were no more than a limited success.

The new president thus not only faces a Herculean political task: he must also maintain his position. To preserve social peace and to cope with the security problems, he must see himself as the president of all Malians – in the north as well as the south. He will achieve credibility only if he takes state reform seriously and builds on new reform forces in his government. Long-term changes, however, will require a change of generation in the political class. The new president would therefore be well advised to invest in a new generation of politicians.



Dr. Julia Leininger  
*Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*