

# MALIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS | SIMPLY AN OBLIGATORY STEP?



**The parliamentary elections in Mali, whose second round takes place Sunday, December 15, mark the restoration of constitutional order. They represent a step that will provide international legitimacy to the government. However, the first round recalled the scarce credibility of the Malian political class and the sheer scope of the pending project to restore meaning to the state and its representatives.**

On Sunday 15 December, 6.5 million Malians will go to the polls for the second round of the parliamentary elections to decide the National Assembly seats that remained vacant in the first round. That said, beyond the results, the low turnout observed in the first round is a measure of the work that remains to be done to reform the political sphere, and to allow Malians to believe in their leaders again and rebuild a country and a state. While the political class suffers from a profound lack of credibility and old habits are deeply ingrained, reforming them promises to be a task that will be both necessary and difficult for President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.

**Low turnout** | The historical participation in the presidential election last July-August was short-lived. Indeed, in the first round of parliamentary elections, the lists with country's major political parties led the polls in most of the fifty-five constituencies and, in Kidal, two former rebels who ran under the banner of the ruling party, Rally for Mali (Rassemblement pour le Mali - RPM) were elected. But, in a significant portion of the country, a second ballot needs to be held. Thus, in Bamako, the capital, no representative was elected on 24

November to sit in the National Assembly. Above all, the turnout did not exceed 38.49%, a figure far below the expectations of the Minister of Territorial Administration.

However, the low voter mobilisation shows several disparities: voters in Bamako and other large urban areas largely shunned the polls, while the participation rate sometimes reached nearly 50% in rural areas. Even in Kidal, where the call for a boycott led to fears of record abstention, people turned out to vote. On one hand, lack of security and the future of the region are central concerns. On the other hand, in a region where social relations are still overshadowed by the overall organization of the Tuareg society before colonisation, elections are a fighting ground between the old aristocracy and the formerly dependent social class, the first "seeking to maintain its hegemony, and the other struggling to break free for once and for all" (1).

The head of the observer mission of the European Union, Louis Michel, highlighted the difference in voting procedures between presidential and parliamentary elections to explain the discrepancy in terms of turnout. "Both elections are of a different nature, which can probably partly explain this. [...] This is not an election that ultimately pits two champions against each other! It's an election featuring numerous opposing parties. It's an election that is much less personalised, insofar as it involves a majority vote between two lists" (2). In fact, the general election does not confront candidates face-to-face, but instead, lists of candidates. For example, in a constituency where there are three parliamentary seats to be filled, each list must contain the names of the three candidates, who will win together or lose together (3).

**A political class lacking credibility** | Invoking the high number of lists and the strained logic of the alliances is not enough to explain the public's repudiation of the legislative elections. There is no doubt that electoral logic favours coalitions without real political meaning other than to obtain a seat in the National Assembly and the revenues - direct and indirect - associated with it. The polling system, with a two-round majority vote, in fact forces opposing parties to unite for the sole purpose of achieving a seat in the Chamber: "for example, observed a reporter on the first round, we have seen constituencies featuring RPM candidates and candidates from the Union for the Republic and Democracy in the same list. However, the first political party is in power while the second is destined to form the parliamentary opposition" (4).

But the evils are deep-rooted. First, the state of grace of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta seems to belong to the past, and not only because of the candidacy of his son, Karim Keïta in the Commune II district of Bamako. Many southerners expect order to be restored in the North and feel they have been deceived by MNLA's attitude, with a president incapable of establishing his authority over the whole Malian territory (5).

Second, the public's attitude towards politicians reflects the abuse of the electoral system in previous elections and the scarce credibility of Malian leaders. On one hand, in the presidential elections of 2002 and 2007, the president was elected in clearly fraudulent polls. In Bamako, a ballot was trading at between 2,000 and 3,000 CFA francs (between 3 and 4 euros), according to a practice described as "consciousness-buying"... Similarly, Mali has a majority of illiterate voters who "follow the instructions of tribal leaders and imams of mosques" when voting (6). On the other hand, the image of the political class is far from brilliant. "What our political leaders want, sums up a reporter in Bamako, is their share of the cake. [...] The goal of our elites is to have a wife who gives birth in France, whose children are educated in Canada and beautiful villas for themselves and their mistresses; all showboating and glitter" (7). Furthermore, many Malians despaired at the end of the first round of the presidential elections that there could be any real change of political power, complaining of ballot stuffing, "consciousness-buying" and the administration's lack of neutrality.

**The weight of corruption and impunity** | In an interview published by the newspaper *Le Monde*, on 4 December 2013, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta reaffirmed his willingness to break with past practices. "During the campaign, I said that some people could have opened a hardware store! I am surrounded by men and women whose integrity and I trust, and who know that no fault will be tolerated" (8). However, these well-established practices are far from being limited to just a few individuals. According to the CIA, in a list which the Malian press published in February 2010, 57 executives and senior managers in the private sector were involved in drug trafficking, while nine Malian generals were linked to cocaine trafficking in the Sahara (9).

If corruption and impunity reigned in the corridors of power under President Amadou Toumani Touré, it was not limited there, and permeates all areas of public service, even affecting those in charge of representing the State before the people. Teachers "sell" answers to students, either by telephone or by handing over corrected papers. The police "is too busy extorting motorists to protect the population", and judges sell verdicts to the highest bidder, resulting in an upsurge of "popular justice" and the untimely deaths of suspected criminals (10).

Has the political and security crisis in 2012 led to greater awareness? In January 2013, Malian justice issued arrest warrants for drug trafficking against six people in the northern regions, including Ould Awainatt, a protégé of the ex president who joined the Mujao insurgents, and the former mayor of Tarkint, Ould Coueck. The two men were quickly arrested and sent, on 4 February, to a prison in Gao, where they narrowly escaped lynching thanks to the intervention of the French army, before disappearing even before their transfer to Bamako the next day. However, according to several local reporters, they were released after the intervention of the mayor of Gao and senior officers of the Malian army. Similarly, twelve months after the launch of Serval operation, everyone continues to operate through bribery in Bamako.

The track-records of the candidates elected in Abeibara and Tin-Essako in north-eastern Mali, reinforce this image of leaders willing to do anything to stay in power and the stagnation of political life. Mohamed Ag Intallah, one of the sons of Aménokal Intallah, the powerful leader of the Ifoghas clans in Kidal, and one leader of the High Council for the Unity of Azawad (*Haut conseil pour l'Unité de l'Azawad* - HCUA), obtained his seat in parliament with 100% of the votes under the RPM banner. Similarly, in Abeibara, Ahmada Ag Bibi, a former spokesman of Ansar Dine and member of the Islamic Movement of Azawad (*Mouvement islamique de l'Azawad* - MIA) obtained 96.69% of the vote.

**A change that will take time** | Despite the arrest of General Sanogo after his refusal to testify before the court, changes will be long and difficult. Disruption of the drug trade in Mali reduces the potential windfalls at stake and could contribute to lessening internal tensions, by cutting-off a source of profit that was driving greed and destabilising society. But the absence of a true renewal of leaders is not an encouraging sign for the reform of current political practices and morals.

In this perspective, the international community and numerous donors must remain vigilant in the use of funds. However, above all, it is up to Malians themselves to become aware of the reasons that led the country into a crisis unprecedented since independence, and that is not solely limited to relations with "the Tuareg" or France's attitude towards the MNLA. The challenge is worthy of the issue at stake because, as Malian teacher Naffet Keïta lucidly recalled in July, the "removal of old references is not about to fade for Malians, despite the preaching, outreach, advocacy and awareness efforts. Malians are not yet able to admit that their country is gangrenous, like a human body, and it is rapidly turning into hell" (11).

## Notes

- (1) Mohamed Traore and Sékou Mamadou Chérif Diaby, *Les élections au Mali. Pourquoi le taux de participation est-il toujours si bas ?*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, October 2011, p. 21-22.
- (2) Quoted from "Législatives au Mali : faible taux de participation", *RFI*, 25 November 2013.
- (3) The Northern districts are represented in the National Assembly by nineteen members (eight for Gao, seven for Timbuktu and four for Kidal), out of 147 deputies who are elected every five years. Electoral law provides one MP for every 60,000 inhabitants (based on the 1996 census) and an additional parliamentary seat is assigned for any segment between 40,000 and 60,000 inhabitants. Constituencies under 40,000 inhabitants are entitled to a seat in Parliament, to better represent less populated regions such as Kidal, where each constituency sends one MP to the Assembly.
- (4) "Mali : les partis en lice pour le second tour des législatives", *RFI*, 28 November 2013.
- (5) Jean-Louis Le Touzet, "Les Touaregs ne veulent pas de nous, et moi je ne veux pas d'eux", *Libération*, 24 November 2013.
- (6) Nicolas Beau, *Papa Hollande au Mali. Chronique d'un fiasco annoncé*, Paris, Baland, 2013, p. 106.
- (7) *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.
- (8) Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (interview by Charlotte Bozonnet and Yves-Michel Riols), "La communauté internationale oblige le Mali à négocier avec un groupe armé" *Le Monde*, 4 December 2013.
- (9) Georges Berghezan, "La corruption, au cœur de l'effondrement de l'État malien", in Bérangère Rouppert (dir.), *Sahel. Éclairer le passé pour mieux dessiner l'avenir*, GRIP, 2013, pp. 41-60, p. 57.
- (10) *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- (11) Naffet Keïta, "Comment être Malien ?", *Les dossiers du CERI*, July 2013.



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