



Re-election of Ibrahim Baubakar Keita and future prospects

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On 12 August 2018, the runoff presidential election was held in Mali in which President Ibrahim Baubakar Keita emerged victorious with 67.2 percent of vote by defeating immediate contender Soumalia Cisse, former finance minister who received 32.8 percent vote. The first round of election was held on 29 July where both candidates failed to achieve the fifty percent threshold. In the runoff election, voter turnout was affected owing to violence and security threats, only 35 percent out of Mali's eight million eligible voters casted their vote. There have been allegations of corruption and lack of transparency in the election process by the opposition candidate Soumalia Cisse who led a protest on the streets of Mali immediately after the result was announced. However, the European Union (EU) observed that the voting took place in acceptable conditions, refuting any voting irregularities.

It is noteworthy to mention that these elections were conducted in the backdrop of complex multi-dimensional security challenges posed by various terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar Dine, Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) along with insurgent activities of Tuareg rebels, a grave security concern not only for Malians but for international community as a whole. It is hoped that the new government would be able to overcome the ongoing security challenges and instability with reconciliation efforts. In this context, this paper would examine complex security challenges facing the government.

Ongoing security challenges

- ***Rise of Islamic terrorism***

Mali has for long been engulfed with constant rise of jihadist militants. In Northern Mali, AQIM and affiliated Islamist organisations gained a foothold in the so called stateless areas where meager economic prospects, ineffective security services, complexity in ethnic identities and poor governance created a secure harbour for them. Although the French military intervention in Mali

has pushed back the Islamist rebels and secured control of the northern cities of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu, a number of challenges remain.

Soon after the election date was announced, many observers demonstrated cynicism over the successful holding of election. Jihadist coalition in northern Mali aroused fear among citizenry to cast their votes on the day of election. Moreover, a number of attacks disrupted voting process and seriously weakened enthusiasm of common Malians who have already lost their hopes on Malian national army on account of Malian government's ineffectiveness to reform the national army. Earlier in June 2018, Islamist militants attacked the headquarters of G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), situated in Mopti, central Mali¹, resuming the resurgence of Islamist militants killing six security personnel. On the day of voting on 29 July, Jama's Nusrat ul-Islam Wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), an Al-Qaeda affiliated group carried out multiple mortar attacks in the Aguelhok Village, situated in the northern region of Kidal². Thus, these constant threats by the rebels and failure of government to provide a competent security apparatus resulted in low participation of voters from north Mali. The estimated turn out of the first round was 43 percent while in the second round only 35 percent of voters were present.

- ***Ethnic uprising***

In conjunction with Islamic terrorism, incidence of inter-communal violence between nomadic Fulani herders and Bambara and Dogan farmers are on rise in central Mali. The region is embroiled with increasing confrontation and ferocity between these communities over the use of scarce grazing land. On 25 July this year, clashes between nomadic Fulani and farmers from Bambara and Dogan communities killed 17 people in Somena village.³ On 7 August in the central region of Mopti, Dogan Militia again kidnapped eleven Fulani civilians and later killed them.⁴ State security services failed to guarantee reasonable degree of security followed by less number of people voting in these regions.

- ***North south divide and complete distrust of people towards governance***

Apart from these diverse dynamics of security challenges, there is an apparent division of north and south in the country. Tuareg rebels and Islamic groups control most areas of northern Mali and have always been involved in conflict with the Malian armed forces. In 2011, Tuareg rebels formed the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and joined hands with Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb and group of new militant Islamists known as Ansar Dine, together they occupied key regions in northern Mali by defeating Malian army⁵. Tuareg rebels aspired to create a homeland state known as Azawad in this territory. However, this ambition of Tuareg rebels is not supported by other ethnic communities of north such as Songhai and Arab communities, settled in Gao and Timbuktu respectively. These communities bear the brunt of violent activities of the coalition of Tuareg rebels and all jihadist groups such as AQIM, MUJAO and Ansar Dine. Population in north often complained of lack of government and international attention towards their challenges. The number of security personal under the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in north Mali are considered to be insufficient and jihadist groups remained ensconced in northern Mali.⁶

Assistance from International community

USA, France, international organisations like United Nations and European Union have provided troops and well-trained peace keepers to deal with these non-state activities in Mali. Jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb and its offshoots like al-Mourabitoun have remained active in northern Mali in the absence of efficient state security apparatus. These groups mostly attack foreigners or peace keepers of international community. For example, in the year 2015, Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its offshoot al-Mourabitoun attacked Radisson Blu Hotel, situated in Bamako and killed 19 people consisted of foreigners as well as Malian security personals⁷. The attack on foreign nationals' severely disturbed international community and as a result, numerous military missions stationed in Mali to tackle violent activities of armed rebels. The government of France began Operation Barkhane, a counter terrorism effort providing 4500 troops, in addition to the presence of 13,289 troops and 1,920 police personnel under the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA)⁸ European Union Training Mission (EUTM) continued to focus on training of Malian army which trained nearly 10,000 Malian soldiers on 20 April 2017⁹.

The assistance of UN Stabilisation Mission MINUSMA during the election is indispensable for Mali's peaceful transition towards democracy. Apart from providing transportation to candidates, MINSUMA trained electoral officials as well as it distributed electoral materials in rural areas.¹⁰ France, Mali's long-standing donor showed unabated support during Presidential election. All these international community closely monitored Mali's election and viewed that presidential election was conducted in a peaceful and smooth manner despite there were allegations of fraud towards current President and refusal of 18 of the 24 Presidential candidates to accept the result of first round. However, all these allegations came to an end with the verdict of the constitutional court that confirmed the win of President Ibrahim Boubakar Keita.

Mali's significance in the international system especially amongst western powers has been rising on account of intensification of Islamic terrorism since 2012. The international community as well as India welcomed the re-election of Ibrahim Boubakar Keita with the hope that he would initiate rapid implementation of peace and reconciliation process in the country. However, there have been popular discontents against Keita especially among youths for his failure to address local grievances of north and central Mali. People in north Mali often criticised lack of government attention towards their challenges and its failure to address the law and order situation. Mali has massive security and governance challenges in spite of substantial international assistance and the major task before this new government still remains the security, providing security solution for long term stability in Mali.

As far as India is concerned, the country could hope to deepen bilateral ties with Mali with the re-election of Ibrahim Baubakar Keita as the President. There is a traditional friendly engagement between both countries as Mali has received nearly US\$ 303.62 from India as Lines of Credit (LoC) to develop infrastructure especially construction of rural electricity, building of parts of tractor, agricultural and food business. It was during Keita's government, India-Mali

engagement achieved a greater impetus with the high level visits between both countries. First, India's former Vice President Hamid Ansari visited Mali on 29-30 September 2016 and secondly, India's Minister of State for External affairs M.J. Akbar visited Mali on 2-3 March 2017. Both these visits marked the beginning of India's willingness to associate with Mali at a greater level especially to cooperate in tackling terrorism and create opportunities and prospects for Indian investment.

Given the number of terrorist groups promoting jihadist militia not only in Mali but its neighbours such as Burkina Faso, Niger, Mauritania, Chad often transmitting to entire western African regions, security and stability remains the top most agenda of the newly elected government under Ibrahim Baobakar Keita. There should be a unified approach and greater cooperation amongst Malian government, MINUSMA, G-5 Sahel and French troops in the field of counter insurgency operation to restore peace and strengthening stability in Mali.

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 Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ "Islamist militants attack African military base in Mali, at least six dead", *Reuters*, 29 June 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-violence/islamist-militants-attack-african-military-base-in-mali-at-least-six-dead-idUSKBN1JP23F>

² "Al-Qaeda Unit Claims mortar attack that disrupted north Mali poll", *Reuters*, 30 July 2018, <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFKBN1KK14Y-OZATP>

³ "17 Malian civilians killed in clashes before Presidential Vote", *Al-Jazeera*, 28 July 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/17-malian-civilians-killed-clashes-presidential-vote-180728080457117.html>

⁴ "Eleven killed in Mali ethnic attack", <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/11-killed-in-mali-ethnic-attack-20180809>, 9 August 2018.

⁵ Walle, N. (2013), "Foreign Aid in dangerous Places", in Resnick, D. and Nicholas Van de Walle (eds.) *Democratic Transition in Africa*, Oxford University Press: UK, Page 88

⁶ Boas, M., "Guns, money and prayers: aqim's blueprint for securing control of northern Mali", *CTC Sentinel*, Volume 7, Issue 4, April 2014, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/guns-money-and-prayers-aqims-blueprint-for-securing-control-of-northern-mali>.

⁷ Lebovich, A. , "The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region", *CTC Sentinel*, no 1, 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-hotel-attacks-and-militant-realignment-in-the-sahara-sahel-region>

⁸ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/mandate-0>.

⁹ “10,000 Malian soldiers trained”, *European Union Training Mission Mali*, <http://eutmmali.eu/en/10-000th-malian-soldier-trained/>

¹⁰ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/mandate-0>.