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The Malian presidential election: A new beginning or history repeating itself?

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Mali is holding its breath. A little more than six months after the beginning of military intervention to expel terrorist groups from the North, and less than 18 months after a coup that shook its socio-political structures to the core, the worst seems to be over. There is a general consensus that Mali's presidential election on Sunday was a democratic exercise – as much as the conditions allowed. Although accusations relating to the post-electoral process were made by several presidential candidates through the Unified Front for the Safeguard of Democracy in the Republic of Mali, international observers tend to agree that it was generally fair.

The election seems to have overcome all the major possible setbacks: threats from major terrorist groups; the rainy season (which made travelling to polling stations more difficult); the fasting period of Ramadan (which is not propitious to such a consultation); and above all, the many glitches in the distribution of ID cards (without which voting was impossible). International pressure may have helped. France, in particular, wanted to avoid becoming embroiled in a long and protracted conflict. Last Friday was even declared a bank holiday to allow the largest possible number of citizens to collect their electoral cards.

Yet, regardless of the identity of the final winner (a second round is scheduled for 11 August if necessary), the election has an air of *déjà-vu*: three of the presidential front-runners are traditional political heavyweights (the leading contender is a former prime minister). In the euphoria of the apparent return to democracy, they may be tempted to ignore the lessons of the recent near-dislocation of the country and the deep socio-economic, cultural and sectarian fracturing that ensued. The risk is high that they may use the same recipe that received international approval and surreptitiously led the country to disaster almost without noticing.

Whoever becomes the new democratically elected president of Mali will face a colossal task. He (the only female candidate is not in a position to run in the second round) will have to jump-start the economy in a country undermined by unemployment (especially among young people), the weight of the informal market and the dislocation of the central administration in many regions, where the basic needs of the population are no longer catered for. Enhancing trust in the state apparatus and in its ability to initiate economic recovery is all the more pressing in a country whose Human Development Index ranking is 182 out of 187.

The new president will have to use his legitimacy (and possibly his charisma) to give a sense of purpose to a country whose national army was last year defeated at the hands of a coalition of heterogeneous armed groups (mostly separatist movements and terrorist organisations linked to Al Qaida).

Yet there is an even more pressing issue facing the new president: the future of the northern regions, which have repeatedly demonstrated centrifugal aspirations since independence from France in 1960.

All the major presidential candidates have stressed the need for the country's unity on the basis of reconciliation and forgiveness. Though it is a convenient rallying cry, this promise eludes the main question: how can Mali create a status for these regions that will preserve its territorial integrity whilst answering the calls of the pro-independence movements, which have been fighting passionately for the independence of northern Mali (which they refer to as Azawad)?

The elected president will have to offer a new solution to an issue that has traditionally been resolved either by bloodletting and military feud, or indecisive policies, both of which have led to repeated outbreaks of rebellions, interethnic violence and state repression.

Moussa Ag Assarid, representative of the pro-Azawad independence movement MNLA (*Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad*) warns that 'stopgap measures and divide and rule policies will not be enough this time', adding that his movement intends to keep fighting if necessary 'for the independence or at least an extensive autonomy of the Azawad region'. The movement has accepted the principle of this election, and has not interfered with it, but the new president will have to consider how to deal with these demands whilst preventing the breakup of Mali. The risk is that history may repeat itself.

The electoral process carried the promise of more than three billion euros of international aid, but this colossal effort will be effective only if Mali's political elite delivers real change. The country needs a new start – and a clear vision of how its complicated ethnic makeup can be turned into an asset.

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