



Commentary

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By International Crisis Group

## Mali's Elections Are an Opportunity to Reboot the Peace Process

*Inter-communal violence along the Niger-Mali border and a scattered jihadist presence have left large swathes of Mali insecure. In this excerpt from our Watch List 2018 annual early-warning update for European policy makers, Crisis Group urges Mali's next president to reinvigorate the Bamako peace agreement and embark on long-term structural reform.*

Only days before Mali's presidential election, large parts of the country remain wracked by violence. Jihadist insurgencies plague rural areas in the centre and north east. Predation by ethnic militias, often mobilised by local politicians and community leaders to fight jihadists and in some cases tacitly backed by the Malian authorities and the French military mission, Operation Barkhane, fuel animosity among communities. Clashes along the Niger-Mali border have claimed dozens of lives over the past few months.

Amid such volatility, the 29 July vote could reinvigorate efforts to quell violence in central and northern Mali, including by breathing new life in the June 2015 Bamako peace agreement that aimed to stabilise northern Mali after a 2012-2013 crisis that saw jihadists hold northern towns for almost a year. But if it provokes political turmoil in Bamako or aggravates insurgencies in rural areas in Mali's centre or north, the election could not only provoke intensified violence but also spell the end of that accord.

The European Union (EU) and its member states can take several steps to improve

prospects for peace. Ahead of the elections, they should encourage the main contenders to pledge to pursue disputes peacefully and through the courts. To reinvigorate implementation of the peace deal, notably its provisions related to decentralisation in the north, they will have to press the next Malian president and the armed groups that signed the deal to set clear timelines for elections to regional assemblies. In central Mali, they should press Malian authorities to halt security forces' abuses of the local population and hold accountable those responsible. They also should promote a shift from the Malian state's overwhelmingly military-focused approach in the centre to one that includes efforts to address the political disputes underpinning unrest and reinforces policing and the provision of other basic services.

### **Improving Prospects for a Peaceful Election**

For the most part, the government and main opposition parties have maintained a peaceful dialogue about preparations for the forthcoming presidential vote. But clashes between police and opposition protesters on 2 June in the capital Bamako show that tensions persist and could degenerate into violence.

Twenty-four candidates – including only one woman – will contest the presidency. In reality, however, the vote will pit President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta against opposition leader Soumaïla Cissé, in a repeat of the 2013 presidential election. Other candidates, including former prime ministers and ministers, have

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little chance of winning. But in the event of a run-off, their support to either of the two main contenders could prove decisive.

The immediate problem is the security of the vote itself. Several districts in Mali’s north and centre, where state authorities are unable to deploy, might be too unsafe for balloting. In the north, armed groups that signed the 2015 peace deal are still negotiating the conditions under which they will facilitate the vote in areas under their control. This is especially true of the Coordination des mouvements de l’Azawad (CMA) coalition, which controls the northernmost town of Kidal and surrounding areas. Central Mali suffers general insecurity, with control over terrain murkier. The authorities have announced that voting would proceed regardless. But the inability of people to vote due to insecurity could throw into question the election’s legitimacy and credibility, especially given that one of Cissé’s supposed strongholds is in central Mali.

In this light, the EU and its members should:

- Urge the main candidates to sign a pact committing to accept the outcome of a fair election or, if they wish to challenge results, to do so peacefully and through the court system; and
- Encourage whoever wins the presidency to focus on addressing grievances common to much of Malian society, especially the lack of job opportunities, the poor functioning of the state services and rising concerns about intercommunal violence in the countryside; without this, it is likely that an increasing number of Malians will start to believe that violent protests rather than elections can deliver change.

### **Reviving the Peace Process**

The Bamako peace agreement, and notably its main provisions on the devolution of power and economic development in the north, as well as the demobilisation of the armed groups that signed the deal, needs a reboot. Algeria, which negotiated the deal, appears to have lost appetite in pushing forward its implementation. None of the other guarantors, whether the African Union, UN or EU, has stepped up. The Malian signatory parties all dislike the deal and blame each other for its slow implementation.

As a result, the agreement’s impact on the ground remains limited. Joint patrols, comprising the different armed groups that signed the Bamako deal, have started in Kidal and other northern towns, Timbuktu and Gao, which were foreshadowed in the deal. Threats of UN Security Council sanctions appear to have helped push signatory parties to be more conciliatory, including accepting the deployment of joint patrols in Kidal. But the armed groups’ participation remains tenuous; the patrols have yielded little improvement in security; and in Gao tensions among the different groups’ contingents in those patrols resulted in skirmishes.

Overall, international mediators and the signatories have spent too much energy on temporary security arrangements, such as the joint patrols, rather than on structural reform such as devolving power to regional assemblies and the north’s economic development. The Sahel Alliance, a platform to coordinate donor support for the Sahel region launched by France, Germany, the EU and other partners in 2017, could address part of the problem, by advancing the development provided for in the peace agreement. But to do so, the projects envisaged in the Sahel Alliance should be kept separate from Malian or international military operations, to avoid stirring up resistance to them

among the north's inhabitants, exposing aid workers or communities to retribution by jihadists and thus rendering projects less effective.

To help revive the peace process, the EU and its member states should:

- Encourage the next Malian government, together with other signatories to the Bamako deal, to establish a precise calendar for implementation of its key steps, notably for elections to regional assemblies in the north and elsewhere; and
- Reassess, as part of the Sahel Alliance, the linking of development projects too closely to military operations. In particular, military forces should not be involved in development work.

### **Stabilising Central Mali**

Perhaps most troubling are insurgencies in central Mali's Mopti and Segou regions, which are more heavily populated and more integral to the country's economy than the north. Thus far the government's response – which it dubs a “special plan” – has been mostly military, attempting to rebuild barracks, redeploy troops and appoint military officials as local administrators. On his 11 February visit to Mopti, Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maïga stressed the need for political solutions and seemed to open the door to dialogue with all armed groups. But his speech has been followed by few concrete results. Repeated reports suggest extrajudicial killings by Malian security forces, fuelling anger at Bamako and the military.

Animosity among communities in central Mali is on the rise. Armed groups of the Dogon and Fulani (two ethnic groups in central Mali) have clashed repeatedly. Many Fulani suspect that Malian officials are backing the Dogon militias to counter jihadists, though such allegations are unproven. Similar dynamics are at play in Menaka region, where Tuaregs and

Dossaaks (two of the nomadic tribes living in the region) cooperate with Malian and French counter-terrorism operations, again fuelling both ethnic rivalries and Fulani alienation from the state, as Fulanis tend to bear the brunt of those operations (see Crisis Group's 12 July 2018 report, *The Niger-Mali Border: Subordinating Military Action to a Political Strategy*).

Priorities for the EU and its member states are to:

- Step up immediate diplomatic pressure to stop the abuses of civilians, including killings, by Malian security forces. The EU's capacity-building mission in Mali (EUCAP), which trains and advises the Malian police and gendarmerie, and the EU military training mission, which trains the Malian military, also should redouble efforts to ensure their counterparts in the Malian security forces end such abuses. Those missions also should support additional civilian oversight of, and accountability for, the security forces, including the establishment of a chain for reporting abuses; and
- Encourage Bamako to strengthen regional authorities in Mopti and Segou by sending trained specialists rather than political advisers; the Malian police and gendarmerie should focus on their traditional functions rather than be diverted to fighting jihadists. The EU also could consider expanding EUCAP's presence to central Mali to enhance the impact of the mission's advice and mentoring and help ensure that Malian national security policies and strategies developed in Bamako are implemented beyond the main urban centres in the south.