



Stuck in the desert: negotiations on northern Mali

by Tobias Koepf

On Sunday 15 December 2013, Malians will head to the polls for the second round of the parliamentary elections. These elections mark a further step in the return to democracy following the March 2012 military coup and, whatever their outcome, they will strengthen the Malian institutions, as well as the newly elected president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK).

However, in the short term at least, the elections will not have an impact on one of the biggest political challenges that has confronted the new Malian president since he assumed office in September 2013: reconciliation with the armed groups from the north of the country, which boycotted the elections.

An agreement signed on 18 June 2013 in Burkina Faso's capital Ouagadougou between the interim Malian government and two Tuareg groups – the *Mouvement national de libération de l'Azawad* (MNLA) and the *Haut Conseil pour l'unité de l'Azawad* (HCUA) – envisaged negotiations between Bamako, the Tuareg movements, and other northern groups to begin 60 days after the new Malian president took office. However, with the positions of the two sides seemingly irreconcilable, especially with regard to the future status of northern Mali, this target could not be met. Very recently, violence once again began to flare up, and while a return to civil war does not seem to be imminent, the last months have revealed just how much work remains in order to bring all parties back to the negotiating table.

Dispute about status

The Ouagadougou Agreement, which led to a ceasefire between the two sides, is centred around three main goals: to reach an accord over the administrative status of the regions in the north; to address the question of how to better develop the poor northern part of Mali in the long term; and to reorganise the country's security and defence forces (including the disarming of the northern groups). No details on how to achieve these goals were included in the document. But it was decided to find preliminary agreement on these issues in pre-negotiation talks under the supervision of a so-called *Comité de suivi de l'Accord préliminaire de Ouagadougou*, presided over by the UN Special Representative for Mali.

After the talks resumed in September this year, the new Malian president offered some conciliatory gestures to the groups from the north that had since been joined by a third group, the *Mouvement arabe de l'Azawad* (MAA). IBK has repeatedly emphasised his desire to deepen the dialogue and created a specialised ministry for reconciliation and development of the northern regions. In October 2013, the Malian government released several MNLA and HCUA members from prison and lifted arrest warrants against others, including four leaders of the groups. But both sides are still far from starting official negotiations, mainly because a consensus has yet to be reached on the future status of the northern regions.

IBK made clear that he favours improving the status of the north via a further decentralisation of competences (including the management of financial resources) from Bamako to the local authorities (regions, districts, and communes). The northerners, however, do not agree. While most have dropped their original demand for outright secession of the territory (which they refer to as 'Azawad'), they continue to push for full political and legal autonomy for the northern part of the country. They are also deeply suspicious of the very concept of decentralisation, promised by several Malian governments in the past, but never fully implemented.

A return to violence?

With no agreement on the status of northern Mali in sight, the rebel groups are unwilling to make concessions regarding another issue included in the Ouagadougou agreement: disarmament. In mid-November, the MNLA agreed to hand control of the governor's office as well as the radio station in Kidal over to the Malian security forces – a condition set by the Malian government to keep the Ouagadougou talks running. But in contrast to what was originally agreed upon, the MNLA still retains a military presence in the contested city.

Over the last weeks, violence between MNLA fighters or pro-MNLA protesters and Malian soldiers has flared up on several occasions. On 8 November, MNLA fighters openly clashed with the Malian army in the city of Ménaka near the border with Niger. On 28 November, Malian soldiers opened fire on several MNLA supporters (killing one of them) who had attempted to gain access to the Kidal airport in order to protest against a scheduled (but later cancelled) visit of Malian Prime Minister Oumar Tatam Ly to the city.

The events of 28 November led some members of the MNLA leadership to announce the suspension of the ceasefire with Bamako. Although this announcement has been toned down by other leading members of the group, which seem to be eager on solving the MNLA's differences with Bamako through political channels, it clearly shows that the situation remains extremely tense.

A political solution to tackle terrorism

Unfortunately, the prospect of the negotiations starting soon remains rather bleak. In the medium term, a compromise over the question of the status of northern Mali needs to be found between Bamako and the groups from the north. To achieve this, both sides must seek to dispel mutual distrust and demonstrate that a return to violence is not an option. This holds true for the groups from the north, which have to adopt a more moderate position in their dealings with Bamako, but also for the Malian government, whose security forces are still perceived as a destabilising factor rather than a provider of security by the population in the north.

Finding a sustainable solution to the political conflict in the north also is an essential precondition to root out terrorism. Taking advantage of the ongoing north-south dispute, terrorist groups – especially the *Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest* (MUJAO) – have been able to regain a foothold in some parts of northern Mali. The power vacuum in Kidal has allowed them to carry out several attacks in and around the city, including the kidnapping and killing of two RFI journalists on 2 November. And the fact that it is virtually impossible to improve the economic situation in the north under the current conditions makes it easier for extremists to find local recruits.

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By working towards negotiations to find a political solution for the conflict around northern Mali, Bamako and the armed groups from the north could thus kill two (or more) birds with one stone:

settle a bitter dispute, defuse the terrorist threat, and facilitate economic development. While doing all this will certainly pose a serious challenge, it is definitely one worth addressing for the sake of long-term stability in the country – and the wider region.

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