AFRICA 20.07.2020 | Christian Klatt

Mali faces a political crisis

The confrontation between the government and a broad protest movement is escalating. And there's no solution in sight

Read this article in German.

In Mali's capital city, Bamako, recent large-scale unrest between Malian security forces and protesters resulted in eleven deaths, according to official statements. The eruption of violence was no surprise to long-term observers of the country.

In fact, Mali has been in a more or less constant state of crisis since 2012. Initially, the problem primarily concerned security policy. But in the few last years, social and economic rifts have emerged. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing problems through closed borders and periodic nightly curfews. On top of that, the political class appears to have lost contact with Mali's citizens. All the country's politicians — from the president to leaders of the opposition — fare badly in opinion polls.

The parliamentary elections in March and April 2020 were the last straw. According to Malian law, the constitutional court confirms final election results. Problematic interventions regarding the distribution of seats, often favouring the ruling parties, are nothing new. But this time the gap between the provisional and final results was so large that the people protested after the Rally for Mali (RPM) of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (aka 'IBK') gained many more seats than in the first count.

The 5 June movement

Three organisations initiated the protest movement and organised the first demonstration in early June: the Coordination of Associations and Sympathisers (CMAS) of Imam Mahmoud Dicko, the Movement of Hope for Mali Koura (EMK) and the Front for Safeguarding Democracy (FSD). In early June, a colourful mix of some 20,000 members of opposition parties, civil society organisations and lobbies protested

against the IBK government.

In reference to the date of the first demonstration, the protest movement has come to be known as 'M5-RFP': the 5 June Movement – Rally of Patriotic Forces. The movement's most prominent figure is the conservative, albeit not radical Islamist, Imam Mahmoud Dicko. The former president of the Islamic High Council of Mali is a prominent and respected figure. In recent years, he had been involved in politics time and again – mobilising against liberalisation of the Family Code and working to prevent its implementation. IBK had enjoyed Dicko's approval before and during his first term in office.

Malian security forces have arrested many CMAS leaders. But their attempt to arrest Imam Dicko in his mosque led to serious incidents with his supporters and reports of police using not just tear gas but also live ammunition.

The Dicko-Keita relationship, like that of many Malian politicians, began in the early 1990s, the period of democratic change. However, the relationship soured before Keita's re-election in 2018 because Dicko was not in favour of IBK having a second term. Although the two men still enact traditional Malian signs of respect when they meet, the imam has become one of IBK's strongest and most prominent critics. Religion obviously influences Dicko's behaviour – and he has not always distanced himself from more radical positions. Nonetheless, his engagement with M5 and the demonstrations seem to be much more motivated by civic engagement than religion. However, the imam's political ambitions should neither be overlooked.

The M5 demands were clear from the start. First, they want the resignation of President Keita, who is blamed for most of the country's problems. M5 also want the National Assembly to be dissolved, new elections held, the consititutional court replaced and greater efforts made to find the opposition leader, Soumaïla Cissé, who was supposedly kidnapped by Al-Qaeda.

Unrest on the streets

Last 10 July, M5 supporters rallied at the capital's Independence Square. The gathering ended with the organisers exhorting the participants to engage in civil disobedience. Protesters stormed into the statehouse, which they plundered and set ablaze. They also occupied the main building of the national news network ORTM and took it off air. Protesters clashed with security forces on the approaches to many

bridges. Throughout Bamako, columns of smoke rose from burning barricades.

Malian security forces have arrested many CMAS leaders. But their attempt to arrest Imam Dicko in his mosque led to serious incidents with his supporters and reports of police using not just tear gas but also live ammunition. Dicko urged his supporters to be prudent and calm but stressed that M5 still demands IBK's resignation. At a press conference, M5 deplored the violence and deaths but repeated earlier demands. The speeches ended by calling for the protesters to continue to block streets and passages in and leading to Bamako until President Keita steps down.

The international community is concerned with resolving the conflict.

So far, the large international engagement in Mali has not been a major issue in the demonstrations. Occasional criticism is made of French forces in the country. Especially on social media there are some far-out conspiracy theories regarding international influence. There were reports of confrontations with members of the international community at demonstrations, but they appear to be isolated cases. Demonstrations focus mostly on domestic concerns.

No solution in sight

M5 has explicitly called on protesters to leave Bamako's international community in peace. Thus far there has been no demand for the withdrawal of foreign military forces. Representatives of the EU, the UN and its MINUSMA peacekeeping mission have met with M5 and are seeking to mediate. At this point, the protests do not appear to be directly influencing the international engagement in Mali. Any further political destabilisation would clearly make everyone's work harder.

The violence and fatalities appear to have crossed many red lines. In addition to the announced replacement of the constitutional court, the president's son, Karim Keita, has resigned from the Parliament Defence Committee. The office of Prime Minister Boubou Cissé has also announced the start of an investigation into the deployment of the anti-terrorist unit, FORSAT. Mali's army, which played a key role in the subversions of 1991 and 2012, has not been involved. Were the army to distance itself from IBK it would be the end of his clinging to power.

The international community is concerned with resolving the conflict. Following the joint statement on 11 July by the EU, the UN, ECOWAS

and the African Union, former Nigerian president Goodluck Jonathan was named as mediator. But it remains to be seen if the situation can be calmed. The opportunity for President Keita to take meaningful action seems to be slipping away and M5 continues to insist on his removal. In the past, similar situations were often settled through consultations with the conflicting parties, including about government positions. This is an option this time, too. However, given the unprecedented violence, it's unclear whether protesters will be satisfied with elite solutions and if the spiral of violence can be stopped.



Christian Klatt
Bamako

Christian Klatt is the head of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Bamako, Mali.

-