

Mali's Religious Leaders and the 2018 Presidential Elections

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Summary

Mali is by constitution a secular state, but here as elsewhere in the Sahel the role of religious leaders is increasing both in the social and the political sphere. This HYRES research brief explains how, why, and in what ways religious leaders tried to gain influence in the 2018 presidential campaign. While the research brief shows that there has been a fusion of politics and religion that can increase the political influence of Malian religious leaders, such engagement can also be a double-edged sword as Malians tend to see ‘politics as dirty’ and not a field that pious men of faith should get too deeply involved in.

HYRES – Hybrid Pathways to Resistance in the Islamic World

HYRES studies the interaction between Islamist movements and the state in the cases of Iraq, Lebanon, Libya and Mali, and is designed to answer the following question: Why do some Islamist groups pursue their political and religious project within the state to which they belong – while other Islamist groups refuse to accept these borders, seeking instead to establish new polities, such as restoring the Islamic Caliphate?

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Introduction

Mali is by constitution a secular state, but here as elsewhere in the Sahel the role of religious leaders is increasing both in the social and the political sphere. This HYRES research brief explains how, why, and in what ways religious leaders tried to gain influence in the 2018 presidential campaign. While few religious leaders of national importance formally campaigned for any candidate, many actively used more subtle ways of letting their supporters know who their preferred candidate was.

The 2018 Malian elections came at a time when the crisis in the country had reached its most critical level yet. The instability that erupted in Mali in 2012 led to military interventions by France (first Operation Serval and later Barkhane) and the United Nations (MINUSMA). The crisis also prompted the deployment of a European Union (EU) police, rule of law mission (EUCAP-Sahel Mali), and an EU military training mission in Mali (EUTM). Despite all these efforts and the signing of a Peace Agreement for Mali in Algiers in 2015, the situation on the ground has gone from bad to worse as the conflict has spilled over from the North to the centre region of Mali.

During the presidential elections in 2013, there was a clear consensus among the religious leaders that Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) was the man that could steer Mali out of crisis. Most of them therefore openly supported IBK's candidacy. In 2013 he had promised not only to restore Mali's territorial integrity, but to eradicate both corruption and mismanagement in the political system. However, the crisis deepened during his first period in power. By 2018, the conflict not only seemed to be almost chronic, but the insurgents' area of operation had also come much closer to the capital of Bamako. In addition, the 'good governance' approach that IBK had promised to restore had failed. Both citizens and international observers viewed the Malian state as just as corrupt in 2018 as it had been when he assumed office in 2013. In short, none of IBK's promises had been fulfilled.

Thus, one would think that it would be difficult to gain enough confidence among the Malian electorate for a second term in office. His track-record was undoubtedly somewhat of an embarrassment, even for some of IBK's most faithful supporters. The religious leaders were also clearly more careful in how they talked about IBK during the 2018

elections than what had been the case in 2013. Despite this, IBK was re-elected after a run-off against opposition rival Soumaila Cissé.

The 2018 presidential elections

The first round of the presidential election took place on 29th July 2018, when 24 candidates competed for the favour of the electorate. However, only IBK (Rally for Mali), Soumaila Cissé (Union for the Republic and Democracy), Aliou Diallo (Democratic Alliance for Peace) and Cheick Modibo Diarra (The Movement for Development in Mali) were considered as serious contenders. As no candidate received more than 50 per cent of the votes, a run-off had to be held on 12th August between the two top candidates, IBK and Cissé. In the end IBK was re-elected with 67 per cent of the votes, but this was the first time in Malian history that an incumbent was forced into a run-off.

This outcome can not necessarily be explained by the actions of religious leaders, but it is of considerable interest to understand how they can have an impact on electoral processes, how they attempt to manage this, and why this is so important to them. Formally, religious actors are not supposed to be political figures in Mali, which is by constitution a secular unitary state where political parties based on religion are not legally allowed to exist. This did not prevent the candidates that stood for election to eagerly seek the support and blessing from religious leaders or the religious leaders themselves to actively and even cunningly negotiate the game of electoral politics in Mali.

On the contrary to the 2013 campaign, the religious leaders were far from united in their indirect support for the candidates that stood for election. In fact, until the very last day of voting in the second round, they remained far more divided than civil society actors or political parties with candidates that had already lost in the first round. Despite these divisions, most religious leaders had taken a clear stand on who they wanted their congregation to vote for. The only significant exception was Chérif Ousmane Madani Haidara (Mali's most influential cleric in the Maliki branch of Sunni Islam) who kept his opinion well hidden from the public eye. The question is therefore why their support felt so important for the candidates, and subsequently, what was in it for the religious leaders themselves?

‘Appetite comes with eating’

In Mali, it’s a common saying that ‘appetite comes with eating’, and 2018 was not the first time that religious leaders entered an electoral campaign. This also happened to a considerable degree during the 2013 presidential elections. Their involvement must have born some fruits as all of them (except for Haidara) were ready to do this again, even though some of those that stood by IBK in 2013 had lost credibility. The political candidates were not unaware of this, but they also knew that they still needed the religious leaders’ support to strengthen their failing image as pious legitimate leaders seeking the best for their country, and not only themselves. It was obvious when the campaign started that many Malians were deeply dissatisfied with the political class and politics in general. This was also evident in the low voter turn-out in both the first and second round of presidential elections (respectively 43 and 35 per cent). It is therefore fair to say that these two groups of elites needed each other. The political candidates needed their blessing to protect their crumbling popular legitimacy, whereas the religious leaders needed to show their influence and thereby also express to politicians that they could not be ignored. Basically, their appetite for eating from the political tray had grown.

Thus, what is taking place in Mali is a slow, but steady fusion of politics and religion. This is also quite clearly expressed in the political discourse, where one increasingly finds references to religious subjects such as sharia. This fusion has opened the political space in Mali for religious actors and leaders to seek influence, but it is important to note that there are important exceptions to this trend, with Haidara being the most important, but not the only one.

Religious leaders on the campaign trail

Chérif Bouyé of the town of Niéro chose Aliou Diallo of the Democratic Alliance for Peace (DAP) as his preferred candidate of choice in 2018. This was a clear U-turn in his political allegiance as he had supported IBK in 2013. His choice was also significant as Niéro is an important place in the history of Islam in Mali, although located in the very periphery along the border to Mauritania. Being one of the country's most respected Sufi leaders, Chérif Bouyé is the son of Cheikh Hamallah (the most important Malian Sufi mystic, e.g. the Tidjaniyya Sufi branch) and he therefore also represents important symbolic capital and charisma. Bouyé was the first important religious leader to openly express support for a presidential candidate. As he had been somewhat of a kingmaker due to his open and vocal support for IBK in 2013, his switch of allegiance to Diallo in 2018 was therefore of significant importance.

Why did Bouyé abandon IBK? Was he as many other Malians disappointed with IBK's balance sheet and wanted to show his disapproval by once more to trying play the role of a kingmaker? Or had this little to do with IBK's track record but with the fact that the DAP candidate Diallo was a rich businessman? Or perhaps it was the fact that Diallo promised more, in combination two coming from the same area in Mali? Either way, Bouyé stated his support by publicly calling on his voters to go cast their ballot for Diallo. Obviously, Bouyé failed as a kingmaker in 2018. However, although his preferred candidate did not make it to the second round, it would be fair to say that this had little negative impact on his legitimacy as a religious leader in Mali. After all, he had chosen to support a 'fresh' candidate that had not been 'polluted' by a general Malian sentiment that 'politics are dirty'. As such, one could say that what may have looked like a very bold move by Bouyé did not come with a high risk, at least not for his personal legitimacy.

Whereas Bouyé wasn't damaged much by his involvement in the electoral campaign, Imam Mohamoud Dicko, the leader of the High Islamic Council in Mali (HICM) and a well-known scholar of the Wahhabi-brand of Sunni Islam, ended up in quite an embarrassment. After first publicly pledging that he would follow Bouyé, Dicko suddenly became hesitant and declared that he would not give any instructions to his followers concerning who to vote for. This did not stop Dicko,

however, from publicly declaring that some good programmes had been started during IBK first term in office. Thus, to some degree, he made it seem as he regretted his previous statement to his followers that they should support the candidate chosen by Bouyé. In the end, Dicko tried to get out of this fray by declaring a more neutral position, more in line with Haidara's, by stating in a meeting of opposition leaders that 'we pray God for Mali to be led by the one who will bring peace and tranquillity to the country'.

‘Managing appetite’

What this shows is a fusion of politics and religion that can increase the political influence of Malian religious leaders. However, it also shows that even if ‘appetite comes with eating’, those who successfully navigate this game are also those that are able to manage their appetite in future Malian elections. What is meant by this is that religious leaders can play the political game, but this is also a double-edged sword for them. They must protect their image as frugal men of faith. Thus, they can at certain times declare openly their support for one candidate as the case of Chérif Bouyé shows, but it can come with a cost. The more all-embracing the religious actors are, as with the case of Imam Mohamoud Dicko, the more cautious they must be. If not, one may end up in a situation of embarrassment where one has to back-track on previous commitments made.

How this will be acted out in coming Malian elections remains to be seen, but with all likelihood, Malian politicians will continue to seek the support of strong religious leaders. They will not necessarily refuse the political game. However, they have learned from the 2018 elections that even if there is some fusion of politics and religion in Mali, their ability to play the kingmaker is still limited as politics is also viewed as ‘dirty’ and profane. Thus, an issue-area that religious leaders cannot dig too deeply into yet. However, this may change if a new generation of Malian politicians are to emerge that with much more credibility than the present one can portray themselves as pious religious men of the common people.



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