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By Dorina Bekoe

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People originally from northern Mali carry signs reading, "We support army action to liberate the North," as thousands of Malians, including elected officials, front, marched in support of foreign aid and military intervention to retake Mali's north from Islamist groups in Bamako, Mali, Thursday, Oct. 11, 2012. France has circulated a draft resolution that would give U.N. backing to an international military force to assist the Malian army in ousting Islamic militants who seized the northern half of the country and are turning it into a terrorist hub. (AP Photo/Harouna Traore)

Dr. Dorina Bekoe, a Research Staff Member at the Institute for Defense Analyses, is a specialist in African politics.

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Madagascar is tentatively scheduled to hold presidential and parliamentary elections on July 24, 2013, in an effort to resolve a four-year-long constitutional crisis that began with a military-backed coup in 2009. The Special Electoral Court, created in May 2012, approved 41 candidates, including former president Didier Ratsiraka, former first lady Lalao Ravalomanana, and current leader Andry Rajoelina. The participation of these three candidates is a troubling development for a country that has been on the brink of collapse for the past several years. The possibility that the campaign could trigger a prolonged conflict looms large, in part because each candidate is allied with a different faction of the military. [more...](#)



The Malagasy military during the electoral crisis in 2002. Source: AP/Karel Prinsloo.

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The Institute for Defense Analyses, a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

IDA's three federally-funded research and development centers provide objective analyses of national security issues and related national challenges, particularly those requiring scientific and technical expertise.

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Thursday, Jan. 24, 2013, Chadian soldiers for the African-led international support mission to Mali wait to board an aircraft in N'Djamena, Chad, bound for Bamako, the capital of Mali. (AP Photo/ECPAD, Nicolas Vissac)

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Elections in Perspective

Many hold that elections can bring an end to conflict. Some, like Terrence Lyons in a [1998 publication](#), argue that such elections, as in Liberia 1997, can be votes for peace, where citizens essentially co-opt a warlord by providing him with the objective of the war—political power. Elections also capped the end of the peace process in Mozambique; they were widely considered an example of elections representing a new, positive beginning.

But, adhering to an election date without regard to the political and security conditions can spell disaster. As I noted in a [2008](#) book, Angola's September 1992 elections went ahead despite a failure of disarmament and signs that neither the government nor the UNITA rebels were committed to peace. Months after the elections, UNITA's Jonas Savimbi refused to participate in a run-off, asserting that he had been cheated out of a first-round victory, and the country plunged back into civil war. More recently, the 2010 Ivorian elections, which took [place](#) after several failed disarmament efforts and with an unclear protocol for certifying the elections, resulted in a four-month violent stand-off in which nearly [3,000](#) were killed.

These examples show that elections under conditions of political uncertainty and insecurity are ill-advised. In Mali's case, elections will be taking place not only in the context of a divided nation, but under circumstances that have exacerbated the very grievances that led to the conflict. The Mouvement National de Liberation de l'Azawad (MNLA), which sparked the rebellion in January 2012, cited the general disenfranchisement of the Tuareg as its rationale for fighting, echoing the grievances of past Tuareg rebel movements, as Andy Morgan [wrote](#) for *Think Africa Press*. Now, this very population is displaced internally and in neighboring states—the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) estimates that as many as 457,000 people have fled. Holding elections with great uncertainty about the participation of the current refugees or internally displaced populations will only deepen grievances, planting future seeds of conflict.

Additional impediments to holding credible elections are present as well. As Bruce Whitehouse notes, Mali's government has not begun the necessary administrative tasks -- such as producing new voter IDs - and is not in control of its territory. Moreover, July is the rainy season, which will hinder people's participation. Last, MNLA leaders have [threatened](#) to resume fighting, if elections occur before peace negotiations take place.

Elections entail a significant undertaking by institutions and political stakeholders. In the best of times, they speak to a nation's ability for peaceful political transition. But, in less certain political times and amid insecurity, they can assume a

greater importance—hope for a new beginning or an end to conflict. At present, Mali does not have the time or capacity between now and July for elections to serve as an indicator of peaceful political transition. Elections in July, under the current conditions, may increase the chances of conflict in the future.

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The Malagasy military during the electoral crisis in 2002. Source: AP/Karel Prinsloo.

At first, none of the three candidates were to participate in the polls. Mediation efforts by the Southern African Development Commission (SADC) had succeeded in committing Rajoelina not to run in the election. Lalao Ravalomanana, wife of deposed president Marc Ravalomanana, did not technically dismiss running for office, but her husband did. Didier Ratsiraka has been living in exile in France since 2002 and was not expected to return. Ratsiraka, Ravalomanana, and Rajoelina have all used the military to assist them in their political objectives, and they retain close ties to various factions in the armed services. This is an important point, because access to armed groups increases the chances that disputed elections will end violently.

Didier Ratsiraka ruled Madagascar from 1975 to 1993 and from 1997 to 2002. After massive protests in 1991 led to the [deaths of at least 12](#), he conceded to the opposition and oversaw Madagascar's transition to multiparty elections in 1993. After losing the 1993 election, he fled to France. He returned to participate in the 1997 election and won the presidency again. Ratsiraka ran against Marc Ravalomanana in the 2001 presidential election. The official vote tally provided by the Ministry of the Interior gave Ravalomanana a plurality of the vote, but not the majority needed to avoid a second round run-off. Independent electoral observers, however, claimed that Ravalomanana had won the election with [50.5% of the vote](#). For the next two tense months, Ravalomanana supporters staged [massive daily demonstrations](#) against Ratsiraka. After failing to come to an agreement by the end of February, Ravalomanana declared himself president. The protests and demonstrations turned deadly as both candidates enlisted different factions of the military for support. Two rounds of failed negotiations took place in Dakar while the military conflict continued. In June 2002, after Ravalomanana's forces secured all of Madagascar's key ports, Ratsiraka fled to France.

In March 2009, Andry Rajoelina ousted Ravalomanana in a coup backed by a sizable segment of the military and the [reported support](#) of the exiled Ratsiraka. Despite calls from the international community for a return to constitutional order in Madagascar, Rajoelina insisted that his installation as president was the will of the Malagasy and said that after a transition period, elections would again be held sometime in 2011. Rajoelina, a former DJ by trade and the then-mayor of Antananarivo, dissolved the existing political institutions and established the High Transitional Authority with himself as president. Ravalomanana fled to Swaziland and then settled into exile in South Africa. He was tried in absentia for crimes against the state, including corruption and the use of security forces to kill protesters during the coup.

Since 2009, several rounds of negotiations between all interested parties have been facilitated by SADC leadership. These negotiations have been punctuated by three failed coups by various factions of the military. Elections have been promised, scheduled, and then rescheduled several times. In December, Ravalomanana announced that he would not run for president in 2013. In January, with the announcement that Rajoelina would also [not participate](#) in the 2013 presidential

election, it appeared that SADC had made a significant breakthrough. In April, however, Lalao Ravalomanana announced her intention to run. Many have interpreted her candidacy as a proxy for her husband. Didier Ratsiraka quickly followed suit. Their names were submitted to the Special Electoral Court, along with more than 40 other possible candidates. On May 5, the Special Electoral Court announced the official list of 41 presidential candidates, which now included Andry Rajoelina. These three candidates are the likely frontrunners in July's tentatively scheduled election.

None of these candidates meets the [legal requirements for candidacy](#). Ravalomanana and Ratsiraka have been living in exile for the past several years and thus do not meet the residency requirements. Rajoelina was added to the ballot came after the end of the official registration period and in contravention to the gentleman's agreement that SADC had negotiated in January. All three have demonstrated that they will go to any lengths to stay in, or regain, power. None have voluntarily or peacefully left office. All three have relied on the state's security forces to deal with protesters.

The pressing need to hold elections and restore constitutionality to Madagascar is driving SADC and others to move forward, but there are virtually no safeguards to prevent violent conflict from breaking out. Premature elections could cause more harm than good, as the main political players do not seem to know how to accept defeat graciously, political institutions are weak (or nonexistent) and easily manipulated, and the military is polarized behind the various candidates. More than 70 independent radio and television stations that closed after the 2009 coup have yet to be reopened. [The Union of Malagasy Journalists](#) has implored the international community to pressure the Rajoelina government to allow these media outlets to resume operations ahead of the elections. On May 5, the [Ecumenical Council of Christian Churches](#) issued its opinion that elections should be postponed again and another interim government installed while the country organizes a referendum to approve a new constitution.

A rigged election—or even the perception of electoral impropriety—could be the catalyst that drives any of the main actors in this saga to violent recourse. The recent rulings of the Special Electoral Court—in particular its selective enforcement of electoral rules—do not inspire confidence that the body will be able to effectively or fairly manage this election. In a worst case scenario, the current situation in Madagascar could become reminiscent of Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, where disputed elections led to a four-month-long conflict, 3,000 fatalities, and the extradition of former president Laurent Gbagbo to the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity. If current conditions prevail, Madagascar could follow a similar path.

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After months of discussion and preparations, on December 20, 2012, the United Nations Security Council, working in close partnership with AU and the Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), authorized the deployment of an [African Union force](#) in support of the government of Mali. With deployment of that force projected to take several months, the Islamist forces in Mali seized the initiative, advancing on key towns in the nation's south. This offensive provoked [French military intervention in January 2013](#) (“Operation Serval”). The French turned the tide, restored much of the northern portion of Mali to government control, and facilitated the deployment of AU forces.

At a meeting of the Chiefs of African Defense Staffs in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on April 29, 2013, Ramtane Lamamra, the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, [took account of the Mali experience](#), saying “we should acknowledge that the pace of progress has not been commensurate with the challenges at hand, as clearly demonstrated by the slowness of the deployment of the African troops in Mali and the recourse to external forces to deal with the sudden escalation of the crisis. . . .” The AU report prepared for the meeting relegated the ambitious regional rapid deployment capability project to an unspecified longer term and announced its replacement, the AICRC. The latter will be built around the capability to deploy a tactical battle group (reinforced battalion) of 1,500 personnel with 30 days sustainment within 15 days of agreement on a concept of operations.

While more realistic than the African Standby Force concept, which made very limited progress toward fruition in eight years of effort, the AICRC will still be a stretch for African land forces. It is of interest that quite separate from the AU's announcement of the AICRC, the United Nations has decided to form an “Intervention Brigade” within its force in the DRC (MONUSCO). This force, numbering around 3,000 personnel, will be built around [infantry battalions](#) from South Africa, Malawi, and Tanzania. According to press reports, the [South African air force](#) will deploy attack helicopters and fighter aircraft in support of the effort. Targeted against the M23 and other militias operating in the DRC, the Intervention Brigade will require extensive logistical, airlift, and combined-arms support. Its success would be an early indicator of whether African land forces are capable of conducting the sorts of demanding operations inherent in the AICRC concept. If the DRC effort fails to gain traction, it will be a setback for the concept of “African solutions to African problems.”

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