

Spoiled for Choice, BBC Focus on Africa Magazine, July – September 2002, Vol 13(3), pp 26-29

By: Joan Baxter

Even if not many Malians were, at least the American State Department was happy with the presidential elections that had 'been a major step forward in the consolidation of Mali's democracy'. That declaration came after the Interior Ministry had released provisional results from the second round of polling, showing former head of state, the now-retired General Amadou Toumani Toure a clear winner with 64.35% of the vote.

The Constitutional Court had yet to deliver the results of its own count, or review the many official complaints of fraud submitted to it by lawyers for the ruling party, ADEMA, whose candidate Soumaila Cisse came second with 34.75% of the vote. Even the winners, General Toure's supporters that included 40 political parties, were alleging fraud, but saying they would not submit their complaints to the Court.

Nor had international election observers yet come up with their final verdict on the entire electoral process. David Pottie, head of the team of Carter Centre observers, had described the counting process for the first round as 'worrisome' for its lack of transparency. He noted that observers had for the first two days had no access to the facilities at the Interior Ministry where the counting was being done. When they complained to the Independent Electoral Commission, the Ministry had granted them access – but then only 'ad hoc and arbitrary'.

The quick, positive endorsement by the US State Department didn't surprise many Malians, who for years have listened to visiting foreign dignitaries, particularly American Secretaries of State, describe Mali's democracy as an 'African model'. They, like other western diplomats who heaped incessant praise on Konare, apparently chose to ignore the clouds over his second term in office after he was re-elected in 1997 in expensive and controversial elections, held without electoral lists, boycotted by the opposition, which even Konare later admitted were a 'nightmare'.

But most Malians seemed optimistic that with Konare at the end of his second mandate and out of the running, and 24 candidates in a wide open presidential race in their country – perhaps the West would back off a little, at least pretend to be a little more discerning in handing out praise - and the billions of dollars in aid and loans that go to countries led by presidents they consider good guys, loyal friends.

Malian political scientist, Cheibane Coulibaly, and former Culture Minister, Aminata Dramane Traore, have for years been begging western diplomats to cease calling Mali and its president, Alpha Konare, models for Africa, saying this is an insult to Malian people and a sure way to destroy the democratic process.

Their pleas appeared to fall on deaf ears. Exactly four years earlier, the day I met General Amadou Toumani Toure for the first time, during a visit of former US

president Jimmy Carter, with whom Toure was running health programmes in Mali, a US diplomat announced to me as we watched the General pass, 'There goes the next president of Mali.'

More recently, just weeks before the elections, a European diplomat told me the very same thing. This, at a time when Amadou Toumani Toure had yet to officially declare his candidacy or find any political parties to support his bid.

Was it lucky guessing, or were those diplomats privy to information Malians didn't have? Not a single Malian analyst or observer I asked on the first day of presidential polling in April was putting any money on the outcome, although nearly everyone thought former Prime Minister Ibrahim Boubacar Keita would make it through to the second round. And in the early results broadcast live on the night of April 28th, indeed Keita and Amadou Toure were running neck on neck.

Then the delays started, with a blackout on results that lasted two days and nights. At one point, Interior Ministry officials justified the delay with a mysterious car accident. They said the computer technician – the only man with the password to the computer network – was in 'a coma'. That same computer technician was already conscious and at home a few hours later, but by then the Interior Ministry had started handing out new results that showed Keita had fallen into third place, behind Soumaila Cisse.

Keita and his political coalition, Hope 2002, cried foul and pointed out that Cisse's campaign manager was the wife of the Interior Ministry, alleging the results had been rigged from 'on high' to eliminate Keita. But then the Constitutional Court did its own independent count. It was a totally opaque process, and the 9-member Court annulled 500,000 votes - 25% of all ballots cast – but still said Toure and Cisse had placed first and second, qualifying for the second round of voting. Keita and his alliance acquiesced to the judgement of the Court, despite the fury of their militants and their own claims of 'massive and grotesque fraud', and threw their key support – almost 30% of the votes in that first round - behind Amadou Toumani Toure.

With the advantage of hindsight, many Malians are now alleging it was all 'meticulously pre-planned, step by step'. After ten years of political leadership that Malians say was marked by intrigue, manipulation and divisiveness, it is a sorry comment on Mali's democracy that people on the street have lost faith in the democratic process and are so quick to claim everything that happens is a conspiracy coming from 'Koulouba' – the spectacular presidential office and palace perched on a cliff overlooking the capital, Bamako.

'At first I was really depressed by the trickery of the elections, we all know they tricked the results of the first round,' says one student, whom we'll call Mohamed. 'But then I realised that I should be thanking God that Alpha is leaving. I don't want Amadou Toumani Toure back in power, it's a step backwards to have a military man as head of state, nothing can be worse than Alpha.'

Asked for proof of their allegations of manipulation of the elections that knocked former prime minister, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, out of the presidential race after the first round, members of his political alliance, say there will never be any

because, despite donor talk to the contrary, 'there is and has never been anything transparent in the way Konare's regime governs.'

Choguel Maiga, long-time political opponent, describes Konare as the 'Merchant of Illusions'. Mountaga Tall, another presidential candidate who performed much more poorly than expected in the first round of voting, alleged that there had been a 'master plan' drawn up months or even years earlier – to humiliate in the first round of voting Keita and his political allies in Hope 2002, then Soumaila Cisse in the second round.

People recall the morning of 28 April, the first day of presidential polling, and the outgoing president was casting his ballot in a polling station in his official home. Asked how he felt to be leaving Koulouba when he still had so many unfinished projects, Konare declared 'I still have 40 days in power, and they will be 40 full days of power. That's a lot. You can do a lot in 40 days.'

Mali's political class viewed that as a thinly-veiled warning from Konare that he wasn't nearly a spent force yet. On the eve of the second round of voting, Soumaila Cisse, alluded to Konare's lack of support for him as ruling party candidate and said he had 'betrayed, insulted and attacked'.

Still, most Malians are looking ahead with cautious optimism to the return of President Amadou Toumani Toure, who has promised to reunite Malians, tackle poverty clean up corruption and end the decade-long education crisis in his country.

One elderly griot shrugs and tells me that she accepts the election results not because they were fair, but as 'God's will'. Many Malians say they had no choice, they just wanted change, reconciliation and an end to political intrigue. And they are hoping this is what Amadou Toumani Toure will do as president – this second tiem around.