



OUR WORK IN MALI

MONEY AND POLITICS IN MALI **INVESTIGATING THE COST** **OF DEMOCRACY**

Honourable Issa Togo is a member of Parliament in Mali. He comes from the centre of Mali, an area in great turmoil. Jihadist attacks on the military and civilian population have become an almost everyday occurrence, and the absence of the state has made it impossible to curb violent clashes between communities. Corruption is also rife, and many politicians are accused of using cash, rather than policies, to win voters' support. We met Togo when he took part in NIMD's Cost of Politics study, which aimed to understand the role of money in Mali's democracy.

A reluctant MP comes forward

Togo's political career is a great illustration of how over the years, money has taken the upper hand in politics. "When I was a candidate for a parliamentary seat for the first time in 2002, I didn't spend a dime! I hadn't planned to get involved in politics, but I was quite popular in my district, Koro, so several political parties wanted me to run for them. I was personally more interested in my work as a researcher, but my family decided that it would be best for everyone if I ran. So I read the political programs, and chose to run for ADEMA."

Sitting in the NIMD office in Bamako today, Togo reflects on the 2002 campaign: "It really didn't take much for me to win those elections. I remember going into a village when I was campaigning. The population had come out with drums and costumes to support my candidacy. A village elder came out of his house, wondering what all the fuss was about. When the people told him that it was to mobilize votes for me, he said: 'but that is not necessary. Tell the sous-préfet [local government official] that we will not vote; Togo is our MP'."

Honourable Togo laughs when he talks about the old man's conception of democracy, but he adds: "But that was how it went. I won. Without effort."

Money enters the political space

The power of money became clear to Togo five years later, in 2007, when he ran for re-election. A rival party prioritized

winning Togo's seat, and presented a very wealthy candidate who went around distributing money left and right.

Togo remembers a phone call that he received from one of the villages that voted for him in 2002. The opposition candidate had visited and offered the women of the village a mill, so the men were worried that they might switch to the opposition. Togo told the men that they should take back the mill to the opposition candidate, and that he himself would make sure the women got a mill. In the end, his list lost the 2007 elections. However as a matter of principle, he still delivered the mill.

"You see, that is when it started..." muses Togo.

Paying the price to be a parliamentarian

During the five years following 2007, Togo rose to Head of Cabinet of the President of the Parliament. All the while he would regularly visit his district in preparation for his candidacy in the next elections. It was in those 2013 elections, after the coup d'état and a transition period, that the influence of money really exploded. He says: "Had I been alone on my list, I would have won without much cost, no doubt."

However, Togo was not alone. Mali's winner-takes-all majoritarian list system means voters were not only making a choice for Togo, but for all the names with him on his party list, some of whom depended more on their collective capacity to buy votes. As money was poured

into the district from certain sides, all other parties were pressured to follow suit in a self-perpetuating cycle of vote buying. Once vote-buying entered the system, parties were incentivized to choose candidates not only for their skills and political beliefs, but also for the funds they would bring to the campaign.

"Oftentimes, one or two candidates on a list of a maximum of seven seats may be serious, but the others are just there because they bring in money! And so I had no choice but to start spending too." He and his running mates spent tens of thousands of euros during those elections. "I'm sure we spent over 200,000 euros - but the other side spent even more!"

Togo's list won those 2013 elections and he went back to being an MP, but he was already looking ahead to the next elections. It was during this parliamentary cycle that Togo decided to collaborate with NIMD and investigate how and why the cost of elections had rocketed so high.





Challenging big money in politics

In 2019, NIMD Mali, with the help of local think-tank and action-oriented research group Odyssee, conducted an extensive survey among MPs, local elected officials and political parties. It showed that an electoral campaign for legislative elections costs on average the equivalent of 54,000 euros, while the average salary in Mali is under 100 euros per month. It also showed that as much as 28% of that amount is spent on the day of elections itself, indicating large-scale vote buying.

The study made evident that the negative impact of money in politics is on the rise, thanks to the exclusion of those who cannot afford to fund a campaign - especially historically economically disenfranchised groups such as women and young people. In candidate selection processes, the money needed to finance campaigns has started taking precedence over the ideological and political capacities of the candidates. As a consequence, the political class is losing credibility fast.

However, thanks to the publication of studies such as NIMD's Cost of Politics report, Mali's voters and MPs are increasingly aware of how money can undermine democracy, and how they can try to mitigate that risk.

Togo was one of the 44 out of 147 MPs who agreed to participate in the survey. At the presentation of the final report, he made a courageous witness account of his own experience with the crippling hold of money on Malian democracy. He also participated in a radio debate on the subject. This radio debate was part of a sensitization campaign launched by NIMD in the run up to the 2020 legislative elections. The campaign, which includes bloggers, rappers, spoken word artists and regular media in both French and local languages, aims at explaining how selling votes undermines democracy and inclusive politics.

Arguing for a new system

Togo went from the reluctant candidate of 2002 to one of the few Malian MPs willing to publicly acknowledge the cost of politics in Mali. Today he argues "a mentality change is needed, on the part of political parties, and on the part of the electorate. But the system needs to change as well.

With the majority vote system, the individual merit of the candidate doesn't count for much. I tell you, if that would change, we would be wasting a lot less money on elections."

Togo reflects on his participation in the study: "This is why the NIMD study was so important. It is clear from the findings that a lot of money goes into vote buying, but also into paying for your place on the list of your party. With the result that in the end, a lot of elected officials feel neither accountable to their electorate, nor to their political party! They are just there to use their position to make good on their investment during the campaign."

As someone on the inside of politics, Togo now sees that the harmful impact of money goes far beyond the election: "And let's not forget all the money that we spend while being in office. There is no way you can even think of being re-elected if you don't spend your money on keeping your voters happy by solving their day to day problems."

For Togo, the lessons from the NIMD study have compelled him to look at alternative electoral models – ones that he thinks can be more conducive to governance that is accountable, inclusive and representative. He fears democracy could become 'an affair of the rich', and that voters and the political class need to be sensitized to the dangers of that. NIMD's work in Mali aims to improve Mali's democracy, and that means making sure that public support, and not deep pockets, is what decides the government agenda.



OUR WORK IN MYANMAR

EMPOWERING FEMALE LEADERS AT THE MYANMAR SCHOOL OF POLITICS

Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun sits on the Shan State-level Central Executive Committee of the Kayan National Party. She became active in politics at a young age, joining the Catholic Youth Council in 2000 - until the military regime shut down her activities and attempted to arrest her.

Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun met NIMD as a participant of the Myanmar School of Politics (MySoP), which she joined in 2017 to build the knowledge and networks for supporting her own political career. Now she is seeking election as an MP during Myanmar's 2020 State level elections – only the third time such elections have been held since democratic reforms began in the 2010s.



A risky time to enter politics

Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun grew up in a rural area of Myanmar's Shan State and was decidedly public-minded, despite not being given the chance to finish her own education. That experience taught her that she could make the most difference by engaging with young people in her community.

"Although I could not finish my own high school education, I decided to become a volunteer teacher. As teacher, I engaged with Kayan youth about citizenship and how to be a responsible and active citizen, and I did my best to set an example to those young people. For instance I joined the Catholic Youth Council in 2000 and became its leader a couple of years later, so I could support local causes that mattered to me."

Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun's experience as a teacher influenced her approach to leading the Catholic Youth Council.

"As leader of the Council I organized citizenship education training for other members. However, it was during this time that I was faced with the reality of how restrictive Myanmar's political regime was. Soon after our activities started to grow, the military regime attempted to arrest me and prohibited us from organizing." Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun's political activities were thus brought swiftly to a halt and she left the Council in 2005.

It was only in 2014 that Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun could become politically active again. "I did not join a party, but I wanted to make a change. Therefore I helped the National League for Democracy to mobilize voters. After the elections, I decided to join the Kayan National Party, defending the interests of my ethnic group. It wasn't long before I got elected to the Central Executive Committee by my fellow members, which turned out to be the start of my life as a professional politician."

Learning to be a stronger leader

Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun had reached a position of importance in her party, and wanted to make sure she could deliver for the people who put her there. "I had the passion to work for my people, but in my opinion not yet the right experience. I attended various training sessions across Shan State, when I met two politicians who told me of an organization called MySoP. The MySoP alumni explained MySoP's multiparty approach and that its students were picked on merit, which convinced me that it was a very worthwhile initiative. As soon as the MySoP programme became active in my region, I applied together with a female party colleague."

It was a conscious choice of her party that Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun and her colleague – therefore two female party members - were put forward to join MySoP. "We agreed that as women's participation was still very low in our party, and as women's empowerment is one of the key objectives of our party, we decided to send two female participants. We feel very strong that we should work on that."

The training Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun received through MySoP's Democracy School was both theoretical and practical. "Besides my need to learn about theoretical context of politics, I was interested to learn practical skills. For instance, I drew a lot of important lessons from training on public speaking and creating key messages, which will help me communicate and connect with my constituents. The courses on debate techniques will enrich my contribution to Myanmar's political culture. Everything I learn from MySoP is useful to me, because I started as a politician with very little experience. Now, I can directly apply the skills I learn in real life.

"Yet most importantly, what I think MySoP really gave me and my fellow alumni was the opportunity to build relationships with politicians from different political parties. This multiparty setting enables us to strengthen our trust and cooperation across party lines, something not possible a generation ago in Myanmar."

In a country where the level of trust between political parties is still a great challenge, MySoP is one of the few organizations able to create and maintain a safe space for political dialogue. This is essential to support the country's democratic transition and strengthen inclusive democratic processes.

Building her own cross-party network

Next to the Democracy School, an important other pillar of MySoP's work is to maintain relationships with former participants through the alumni network. The largest meeting of alumni takes place at the annual MySoP Alumni Forum. Mu Nang Wai Wai Htun joined politicians across Myanmar for the three-day 2019 Forum held in Nay Pyi Taw, where they discussed the themes of electoral strategy and political campaigning.

"The topic of this year's Forum was especially relevant in regard to the upcoming 2020 elections. I am running as a candidate, so the workshops really inspired me. There are so many things I have learned these three days, but some points really stood out. For instance, the importance of analyzing the political landscape, learning how to manage and finance a campaign, and how to be a good candidate. I learned that in order to get elected I need to build trust, communicate my vision and establish a good relationship with the public.

"Before the courses I knew little about effective political campaigning. The only experience I had was from volunteering as an assistant to mobilize voters for to the National League for Democracy in 2015. I did not know the ins and outs of setting up your own campaign, nor did I not know how to manage and strategize for a campaign. Now that I do, I feel much more confident to run for the 2020 state-level election as a candidate myself."

During the 2019 edition, the MySoP Alumni Forum brought together over 200 participants from 39 different political parties. "I want to thank MySoP, NIMD and Demo Finland for creating these special environments. One of the best parts of Alumni Forum is the time we get to spend in a relaxed and safe atmosphere. We have time to (re)connect with colleagues in a trusted setting, to share the latest developments in our states, parties and families. The bonds we create and the knowledge we receive we take back home. It does not stop there, when I will spread the knowledge."

