



Under the shadow of Boko Haram: Niger on the eve of elections

Over the last year, Niger, one of the least developed countries in the world,¹ has been heavily targeted by Boko Haram. The violent Islamist movement, which initially focused its activities in the north-east of Nigeria, made a strategic shift at the end of 2014 and started to expand its influence into neighbouring countries. In Niger, the south-eastern region of Diffa (1,360 km from the capital Niamey) now serves as a rear-base for Boko Haram, from which it launches attacks in Nigeria and the area itself.

This new threat has led to a number of highly controversial measures being introduced by the government: the imposition of a state of emergency in Diffa, restrictions on civil and religious liberties, a ban on public demonstrations, and the arrest of activists who were criticizing the conditions in which the army operates. These measures have been strongly condemned by civil society and by members of the political opposition, who claim the regime is using them as a new means of curtailing their freedom of action ahead of the February elections.

The management of the Boko Haram threat by Mahamadou Issoufou's government is not the only divisive issue that has marked the President's term in office. It has in fact reinforced pre-existing tensions and revived old grudges between the different

components of the Nigerien political realm, adding a new layer of contention that endangers the already fragile balance of the country's political settlement.

On the eve of the elections, this short analysis aims to highlight the main factors that underlie the current instability and that have developed in Niger since the beginning of Issoufou's mandate, in an attempt to contextualize the implications of his government's latest policies designed to tackle the Boko Haram threat.

The aftermath of the 2010 transition – concentration of power around the President's inner circle

On 18 February 2010, a military coup overthrew president Mamadou Tandja and led the country into a political transition that was seen as a model by international observers. The Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy (CSR/D), a body set up by the military junta, rapidly formed a transitional government comprising a mix of civilian and military officials, created an adequate institutional environment for restoring democracy and the rule of law, and enabled the organization of credible

¹ Niger is ranked last (188) in the UNDP Human Development Index.

elections.² Mahamadou Issoufou, the winning presidential candidate, immediately formed a government that mostly benefited members of his political party – the Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (PNDS) – and those who had supported him during the elections³, but that completely left out the architects of the successful transition. Key portfolios were rapidly handed out to PNDS's strongmen, while less important ministries were distributed to allied political parties.

By completely disregarding key players of the transitional period, the newly elected President provoked disillusionment within a population that had hoped the transition would result in a positive break from the previous regime. Instead, what it witnessed was a continuation of the neo-patrimonial trends that characterized the Tandja presidency. The end result of this has been a loss of legitimacy with regard to Issoufou, and a further widening of the gap between the aging political elite (most members of the government emerged in the early 1990s) and the country's youth, who represent the vast majority of the population.

A fragile political equilibrium

After winning the 2011 elections, Issoufou knew that his party, occupying only one-third of the seats in the National Assembly, needed to form a political coalition in order to govern. He first attempted to do so through the creation of the Movement for the Renaissance of Niger, an alliance composed of a wide range of political parties, including that of his long-standing rival and leader of the MODEN, Hama Amadou.⁴

While this maneuver allowed him to secure a comfortable majority within parliament (74 seats out of 113) and to co-opt some of his most influential political adversaries, it forced him to make important concessions – for example, grant the presidency of the National Assembly to Amadou. It also proved to be unsuccessful, as defections and rumors of a potential parliamentary coup precluded any possibility of this alliance being sustained in the long term.

Following this failed attempt to strengthen his position, the President launched the idea of forming a government of national unity – bringing together all the political parties. He justified this plan by stressing the need for the nation to unite against the threat posed by Boko Haram. The plan backfired, as one of the main opposition parties, the Mouvement National pour la Société du Développement (MNSD) led by Seini Oumarou,⁵ refused to join the government of national unity, and Hama Amadou, frustrated by the composition of this new government, decided to withdraw from the coalition.

The end result was a government that, in the end, was still monopolized by the PNDS and now alienated most of the other Nigerien political parties. Issoufou's reaction to this was not to work towards rebuilding trust but, instead, to adopt a more radical attitude towards his opponents, allegedly 'buying off'⁶ members of the opposition and interfering in judicial cases so as to exclude his most influential competitors from the political

2 Chauzal, G. (2011) 'Les règles de l'exception: la régulation (du) politique au Mali et au Niger', PhD thesis, Université de Bordeaux.

3 Some of those former supporters are now openly opposed to Mahamadou Issoufou.

4 Hama Amadou has been a dominant figure in the Nigerien political landscape since the 1980s. He has been prime minister twice, under the presidency of Mahamane Ousmane (1995–96) and that of Tandja Mamadou (2000–07). After a period of exile in France, due to allegations of corruption, he returned to Niger in 2010.

5 The MNSD-Nassara was formerly the sole political party of Niger, led by Mamadou Tandja until 2001. It was then run by Hama Amadou until he was obliged to pass the leadership to Seini Oumarou following corruption charges.

6 Jeune Afrique (2015) 'Niger: unie dans une nouvelle coalition, l'opposition exige des élections transparentes', *Jeune Afrique*, 18 August 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/257790/politique/niger-lopposition-veut-imposer-elections-transparentes/>

scene in an attempt to clear the way for the 2016 elections.⁷

The opposition's distrust of the government has been growing steadily, as illustrated by the request for impeachment filed by 34 members of the National Assembly at the end of November, and the more recent decision by the opposition to suspend its participation in the audit of the electoral registry in the absence of external control. While this latest grievance has been addressed by the secondment of experts from the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), it nevertheless illustrates the climate of suspicion that prevails in the run up of the February elections.

Repression of the civil society

Issoufou's first year in office coincided with the end of a ten-year uranium exploitation agreement between Niger and the French company Areva, which forced stakeholders to renegotiate the terms of the arrangement. Popular pressure was mounting as Issoufou's constituents demanded a re-balancing of the agreement in favour of Niger, the previous one having required Areva to pay a royalty of only 5.5% of the value of extracted resources, which meant the country was denied what should have been an important contribution to its economy.⁸ The government adopted a repressive attitude during the negotiations, banning protests organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and imprisoning some of their leaders; its intention was to hide the existence of

dissenting voices that might have jeopardized the conclusion of a deal, but these actions predictably antagonized civil society.

The new agreement signed by Niger and Areva, presented as a success by Issoufou, has been called into question by civil society organizations such as the Réseau des Organisations pour la Transparence et l'Analyse Budgétaire (ROTAB), arguing that the tax agreements between the two stakeholders have not even been published yet.

The same tactic has been applied and intensified by the government within the framework of the fight against Boko Haram. The examples of Moussa Tchangari and Nouhou Azirka seem to illustrate the tendency of the regime to shut down every dissenting voice that might endanger what Issoufou tries to present as "unified popular support" behind the government and the army. Both activists were arrested in May 2015 for their "lack of cooperation with the authorities in the fight against Boko Haram" and for "criminal conspiracy linked to Boko Haram terrorist activities".⁹ It appears that the reason for their incarceration was that they had criticized the government for its inability to protect the population of Diffa, despite having imposed a state of emergency, and for its failure to provide the army with the necessary equipment and training to confront the Islamist movement.

Overall, it seems as though anyone who criticizes the government's handling of certain issues can be seen as a potential threat to the state and is thus vulnerable to politically motivated intimidation and arrest. This trend is not new in Niger but as the army began to suffer many losses in its struggle against Boko Haram, the government grew more nervous and stepped up its repressive measures.¹⁰

7 See, for instance, the arrest of Hama Amadou for his presumed involvement in a baby-trafficking case: RFI (2015) 'Affaire des bébés nigériens: le tribunal correctionnel jugé compétent', *Jeune Afrique*, 14 July 2015, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20150714-nigeria-affaire-bebes-traffic-tribunal-correctionnel-hama-amadou-hadiza>

8 According to ROTAB, a coalition of ten NGOs working on financial transparency, Nigerien uranium represents one-third of the uranium used in French nuclear power stations. For more on this, see interview with Ali Idrissa, ROTAB's coordinator: <http://multinationales.org/Ali-Idrissa-L-accord-annonce-entre-Areva-et-le-Niger-etait-du-bluff>

9 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AFR4317162015FRENCH.pdf>

10 Carayol, R. (2015) 'Niger: face à Boko Haram, les nerfs à vif', *Jeune Afrique*, 22 September 2015, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/234943/politique/niger-les-nerfs-a-vif/>

Tensions within the army

Along with a feeling of being undervalued, owing to the French and US military presence in the country as part of the continuous fight against terrorism, a certain sense of weariness and discontent has spread within the ranks of the Nigerien army. Despite the substantial investments made in the defence sector since 2012 to modernize and better equip the military, the Nigerien army has shown itself to be incapable of securing its own territory.¹¹ The Boko Haram attack on Karamga Island (Lake Chad) on 25 April 2015, which cost the lives of 48 soldiers, exposed the inadequacy of the Nigerian armed forces' equipment, training and preparedness. It also brought into question the wisdom of the government's decision to become so heavily involved in peacekeeping missions outside of the country's borders. At the end of 2015, Niger's contribution to UN peacekeeping missions, mainly in Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, stood at 1,866 troops, making it the ninth biggest contributor among African countries.¹²

It may have been the military's mounting discontent that led to the alleged coup attempt at the end of last year. On 19 December 2015, the Nigerien presidency announced the arrest of nine officers from three major military units (the Niamey air base, the Tillabery artillery battalion and the special forces attached to the President) for conspiring to overthrow the regime. Opposition parties have expressed reservations about the allegations and have asked the government to provide proof – so far, without success. While it is difficult to assess the motives behind, or even the veracity of, such an attempted coup, it is worth bearing in mind that the Nigerien army historically has had a tendency to intervene in times of institutional

deadlock (for example, in 1996 and 2010).¹³ The tense political and security climate that has developed over the last two years could – especially in the event of turbulent elections – present the army with a reason to step in.

Election time – a critical test for Niger?

Since the beginning of Issoufou's mandate in 2011, discord on several fronts has grown between the government and the rest of the country. On the eve of the February elections, the situation looks particularly unstable: an antagonized political opposition, an alienated civil society, the loss of the younger generation's support, a dissatisfied army and, finally, the looming threat of Boko Haram. The latter has spurred the Nigerien government into mobilizing a great deal of (sometimes misguided) energy and resources, at the expense of other issues that many people deem more pressing (poverty, soaring rates of population increase, food shortages, etc.).

The absence of any tangible success in the fight against Boko Haram, coupled with the repressive policies introduced by the government, provides grist to the mill of Issoufou's opponents who have been quick to draw parallels between the mismanagement of that particular issue and the general failures they believe to characterize the President's overall tenure in office. Issoufou, on the other hand, seems confident that he will win the presidential race, despite four members of the opposition, including Oumarou and Amadou (still in prison) having signed an agreement under which they will join forces to defeat him in the event of a second round of voting.

11 The south-eastern region of Diffa is not the only area of concern in Niger, given that the country is bordered by southern Libya and northern Mali.

12 'UN Mission's contribution by country', UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/contributors/2015/dec15_1.pdf

13 Baudais, V. and Chauzal, G. (2010) 'The 2010 coup d'état in Niger: a praetorian regulation of politics', *African Affairs*, 110/439, 295-304.

CRU Commentary

It is difficult to predict how the February elections will unfold, it seems realistic to assume that if they fail to meet certain standards of fairness and transparency they will inevitably give rise to unrest, given the current context. If that were to happen, and clashes between supporters of the different candidates followed, a careful eye would have to be kept on the Nigerien army.

About the Conflict Research Unit

The Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael' is a think tank and diplomatic academy on international affairs. The Conflict Research Unit (CRU) is a specialized team within the Institute, conducting applied, policy-oriented research and developing practical tools that assist national and multilateral governmental and non-governmental organizations in their engagement in fragile and conflict-affected situations.

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