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Niger

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Niger



In 2004 Niger maintained a fair degree of political stability. The multiparty democratic system was further consolidated by successful presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections. Cause for concern was a series of attacks by armed Tuaregs on civilians and army personnel in the north, and the activities of the 'Groupement Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat' (GSPC) in the country's frontier zones. The government maintained macroeconomic stability as a result of tight fiscal policies, a robust growth rate estimate and the financial assistance of the donor community. Agricultural output, however, declined as a result of poor harvests. Social stability remained precarious, while occasional government action against journalists underlined the limits of press freedom.

Domestic Politics

Niger's political landscape became more complicated when Cheiffou Amadou, a former prime minister, established a new political party, the '**Rassemblement Social Démocrate**' (RSD) in January. This was the culmination of a lingering two-year crisis in the second party of Niger's ruling coalition, the '**Convention Démocratique et Sociale**' (CDS). Cheiffou Amadou and the CDS leader, Mahamane Ousmane, president of Niger between 1993 and 1995, struggled with each other for supremacy in the party. Amadou broke with the CDS

in December 2003, and aligned his new party with the opposition. The main effect of this was that the principal party in the ruling coalition, the 'Mouvement National pour la Société du Développement' (MNSD) of President Mamadou Tandja, strengthened its position.

Municipal elections, first projected for 27 March and then postponed to 29 May and, again, to 24 July, were to be followed by presidential and parliamentary elections on 16 November and 4 December. The biggest challenge for Niger was to hold these plebiscites in the first place, neither marred by the chaos that marked the 1999 elections nor leading to a serious deterioration of relations within the political class. This, by and large, was achieved, with international observers concluding the polls were democratic, free and transparent. An important aspect of this success was the desire of political parties to maintain a degree of **consensus** and reduce confrontational politics.

Thus, on 15–20 January they met for discussions on the coming elections and the exercise of political power generally. They agreed on a number of general issues, such as deferral of the municipal elections for organisational reasons and the establishment of an all-party commission to discuss the prospective increase in the number of MPs, the redrawing of constituency boundaries and a change to the voting system. After the January forum, the government established a '**Conseil National de Dialogue Politique**' (CNDP) as a permanent body for the prevention and resolution of political conflicts and the promotion of consensus on national issues and democratic government.

On 26 March the national assembly adopted a number of amendments to the **electoral code** intended to simplify the registration of candidates for the municipal elections. The number of MPs was increased from the current 83 to 113 and agreement was reached on the redrawing of constituency boundaries. No agreement was reached on a change to Niger's system of proportional representation, in which seats are allocated on the basis of the 'highest averages' method that benefits the larger parties. The 'Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante' updated the electoral register.

Both the MNSD and the main opposition party – 'Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme' (PNDS) of Mahamadou Issoufou – were expected to do well in the local elections, since they had sufficient resources to put up candidates in all 265 communes (municipalities). However, the other two members of the coalition government helped the MNSD to retain control of local councils: the CDS, the or 'Alliance Nigérienne pour la Démocratie et le Progrès' (ANDP) of Adamou Moumouni Djermakoye, together with the MNSD managed to secure 62% of all council seats. Although Mahamane Ousmane registered as presidential candidate for the CDS, his party allied itself officially with the MNSD in the municipal polls. This built on an earlier understanding between President Tandja and Ousmane, chairman of the national assembly, that delivered Tandja the presidency in the second round during the elections of 1999 and left the main opposition candidate, Mahamadou Issoufou of the PNDS, out in the cold. This state of affairs, in combination with the voting system, proved detrimental to the country's numerous smaller parties and thus encouraged an **aggregation of political forces**.

It also set the stage for the presidential and parliamentary elections, with the CDS, as the country's third largest party and weakened by the defection of Chéïffou Amadou, throwing in its lot with the MNSD. In the election campaign, the opposition parties focused on alleged government mismanagement, its attacks on press freedom and the poor state of Niger's education and health facilities. Tandja's major opponent, the 'socialist' PNDS candidate Mahamadou Issoufou, appealed to the young and unemployed, a logical strategy in a country where 70% of the population is under 25, recruitment to the public service has remained frozen for seven years and many university graduates are unemployed. By contrast, President Tandja enjoyed **support among subsistence farmers** for his rural development policies that have aimed at delivering new classrooms and health centres. He, therefore, concentrated on questions of stability, promising to increase surveillance of the western border where herders sometimes clash with cattle rustlers.

In the first round of the presidential elections, held on 16 November, President Tandja secured 40.7% of the votes, followed by Issoufou with 24.6% and the CDS leader Mahamane Ousmane with 17.4%. Compared to the first round in 1999, Tandja improved his tally by eight points, as did Issoufou, who won three points more than in 1999. However, since Tandja did not get an absolute majority, a run-off between him and Issoufou was necessary, and was held concurrently with the parliamentary elections on 4 December. With four of his adversaries from the first round rallying to his cause, victory could not elude **Tandja, who won the presidency** with 65.5% of the votes. Yet, Issoufou, with his stronghold in the central town of Tahoua, still did better than expected, increasing his share by ten points and taking more than one-third of the tally (34.5%). In the parliamentary elections, however, the ruling MNSD and CDS retained their majority, even though it was slightly reduced (69 out of 113). As a reward for CDS support for Tandja, Mahamane Ousmane was re-elected as chairman of the national assembly. The **PNDS**, which boycotted the election procedure, remained the **strongest party in opposition**, while more than a dozen parties did not get more than one or two seats, if they won any seat at all.

Undoubtedly, the most crucial aspect of the polls was the **peaceful re-election** of President Tandja, who thus not only became the first president since 1974 to complete a full first democratic term without being deposed in a coup but, indeed, also headed the first government in Niger's history ever to be renewed by truly democratic means. Yet while this pointed to the consolidation of the multiparty system, the stability is not without its limits. There is a general mistrust of the political class, who are perceived as corrupt and keen on defending its self-interests. The turn-out rates, which have traditionally been low in Niger's largely rural society, did not reach the 50% mark (48.2% for round one and 45% for round two). Occasional strike action by some of the country's unions also pointed to dissatisfaction with the way politicians have handled socioeconomic issues.

One political development had the potential to upset Niger's newly found stability. On 13 February, President Tandja fired his minister for tourism, **Rhissa Ag Boula**, for alleged involvement in the murder of a 26-year-old MNSD militant. Ag Boula, a Tuareg from

Agadez, formerly led the 'Front de Libération de l'Air et de l'Azawagh' (FLAA) during the Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s. As minister, he was popular in his own community for his active promotion of tourism. At the time, the effect of his dismissal on the peace settlement with the Tuareg community was downplayed, since Ag Boula was only one faction leader among many and Tandja quickly appointed another Tuareg, Mohamed Anako, to his cabinet in order to maintain the government's ethnic balance.

Nevertheless, Niger saw a recurrence of various **violent incidents**, in some of which **Tuaregs** were implicated. Thus, in May there were rumours about a new Tuareg rebellion following the desertion of former FLAA rebels who had been integrated into the army. On 2 June, some ex-FLAA members claimed to have resurrected their movement and called on former members to join up, while accusing the government of having failed to decentralise authority and reintegrate former rebels into society, and having diverted donor funds that were intended for this purpose. On 5 June, vehicles were attacked on the road between Agadez and Arlit, the country's uranium mining centre, and between Agadez and the eastern city of Zinder, with two people being injured.

The government denied there were mass desertions from the army and claimed the incidents involved highway banditry rather than the start of a politically motivated rebellion. Most observers did not believe that the incidents foreshadowed a revolt, pointing to a meeting on 10 June of the 'Haut Commissariat à la Restauration de la Paix', during which commanders of the former Tuareg and Toubou rebel movements reaffirmed their commitment to peace. Yet on 10 August, armed men travelling in four-wheel-drive vehicles laid three **ambushes** on buses on the road between Agadez and Arlit. They killed three people and wounded several others, robbing the passengers and kidnapping two policemen. In a radio telephone interview, the brother of Rhissa Ag Boula, Mohamed, claimed responsibility for the attacks, as he did for an ambush on government troops on 1 October. In this engagement in the Air mountains, five people died, four soldiers were injured and two went missing. Mohamed Ag Boula claimed to lead a 200-strong rebel group that was defending the rights of the Tuareg, Toubou and other nomadic communities. He accused the government of reneging on the implementation of the 1995 peace accords and demanded the release of former rebels. The government, while continuing to talk about 'bandit' and denying "so-called political demands", admitted that the same people who were involved in the previous attacks were involved in the latest ones.

While these incidents probably did not portend the onset of a new Tuareg rebellion, they showed that security remained a problem, with the United Nations introducing tighter restrictions on staff movements in the north. Moreover, tourism, which benefited from a reopening of the airport of Agadez, could suffer from these developments, especially as groups of the GSPC attacked a convoy of French tourists in the course of infiltrating into Niger between 2 February and 5 March. Driven out by Algerian forces, the GSPC fighters also clashed with Niger government troops both in northwestern and eastern Niger, near the Chad border. In the latter case, the government claimed, in a joint operation with Chadian

forces, to have killed 43 GSPC fighters and to have captured five, including one Nigérien national. During November–December, government troops assisted by US special forces again clashed with GSPC fighters, killing several of them, in operations near the Algerian border. GSPC is a guerrilla group that seceded from the ‘Groupe Islam Armée’ (GIA) and aspires to an Islamic state in Algeria. It was involved in kidnappings of Western tourists in southern Algeria in 2003. According to Western sources, it claims allegiance to al-Qaida. Others dispute this, arguing West African governments exaggerate this issue in order to receive Western military aid.

These intermittent cases of violence show that security in Niger remained precarious, notably in the porous frontier zones, but also elsewhere. Simmering social tensions can easily lead to violence, as happened on 19 November when herders and farmers clashed near the city of Gaya in southwestern Niger, leaving at least 11 people dead, crops damaged, cattle killed and graneries destroyed. This was one of the worst incidents of its kind since 1991, when more than 200 people died in a grazing dispute in the east of Niger. Thus, despite the efforts of its elites to contain the unsettling effects of political competition, Niger’s political stability remained incomplete. This was underlined by certain government actions against the **private press**. Mamane Abou, director of ‘Le Républicain’, was arrested in 2003 for criminal defamation, but released on 6 January pending a second case against him. While this case led to a national and international outcry, on 12 August the director of an independent radio station was arrested over a radio telephone interview with Mohamed Ag Boula and held incommunicado, in violation of Nigérien law. He would be charged with complicity in connection with the ambushes north of Agadez on 10 August but was released after four days. Again, on 20 December, police seized the issue of ‘Le Témoin’, which contained photographs of four soldiers and gendarmes taken hostage by armed Tuaregs. As early as 2 October, President Tandja criticised the private media about their news coverage of the Tuareg issue.

Foreign Affairs

While the crucial dimension of Niger’s foreign affairs is its dependence on external donors, the country has a certain strategic significance that has drawn in Western powers. For instance, Niger’s uranium mines are the principal source for France’s nuclear ‘force de frappe’, while the growing activity of the GSPC has reinforced French interest in its former colony, as it has that of the **United States**. Consequently, the close relations with **France**, Niger’s principal bilateral donor, continued and benefited from the strengthening of relations in the wake of Chirac’s visit in 2003. The fifth Francophone Games to be held in Niger in 2005 will reinforce this situation. Security agreements were signed with the United States in mid-April 2004. The IMF and World Bank approved of the government’s reform record, while the European Union will provide € 350 m worth of grants from the European Development Fund in the period up to 2007.

The 'Autorité du Bassin du Niger' (ABN), a grouping of nine West and Central African states and chaired this year by Tandja, held a conference in Paris on 26–27 April and discussed cooperation in the sharing of river resources and the protection of eco-systems, an endeavour for which they received financial support from Western donors. Niger also tried to increase security cooperation with its neighbours, Mali and Chad, as a result of the problems in its poorly policed frontier zones. On 19 March, it agreed with other Sahelian and Saharan countries on a mechanism promoting 'conflict prevention' and cooperation along the lines of ECOWAS. Relations with Nigeria also continued to be strong, fed by ties between the Hausa-speaking communities north and south of the common border and Nigeria's status as Niger's principal trading partner, ahead of France. The Nigeria-Niger Joint Commission was transformed into an organ that could deal with issues other than border security. However, mutual security concerns between Niger and Nigeria retained importance, since some members of an Islamic sect, the Muharijun, fled to Niger after clashing with Nigerian government forces on 31 December 2003. Although there is not much support in Niger for Muslim fundamentalist ideas and its politics are marked by a secularist tradition, the activity of the Algerian GSPC did cause some concern. The French supported Niger's security forces by, among other things, monitoring cross-border traffic with satellites, especially in the border regions with Algeria and Mali.

During August and September, US marines provided training to around 130 Nigérien soldiers who are to form a rapid intervention force that can combat arms trafficking, smuggling, clandestine migration, banditry and 'terrorist' activities. Such aid is disbursed within the framework of the American **Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Initiative** (TSCTI), formerly known as Pan-Sahel Initiative, which was begun in November 2003. It takes the form of a \$ 6.25 m project focusing on the southern borders of Algeria, which is seen as a breeding ground for Islamic fundamentalist groups. The United States intends to spend millions of dollars over the next several years through the TSCTI, which involves eight Sahelian and Saharan countries. By November–December, US special forces were assisting Niger's government troops in an operation on the Algero-Nigérien border. Seven GSPC fighters were killed, as were two of the 150 Niger army soldiers involved.

While these initiatives make life more difficult for the GSPC – its infiltrations into Mali, Niger and Chad stemmed in large part from the Algerian government offensive against it – they carry the risk of **militarising issues** that at bottom have other, specifically social, economic or political roots. Moreover, the desire to rein in the GSPC leads to the reinforcement of Niger's military apparatus, which could also be used against other groups or other forms of dissidence, leading to a military approach to Niger's nomadic communities.

Socioeconomic Developments

With several macroeconomic performance indicators having been met, the final disbursement was authorised on 30 June of the three-year Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility

(PRGF) of the IMF. In order to facilitate donor aid, the government hoped to sign a new PRGF programme, which would also focus on macroeconomic stability and poverty reduction. Earlier in the year, in April, Niger reached the 'completion point' under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, so that it could receive aid with which to maintain a sustainable **debt-export ratio**, estimated at 150%. This would amount to a total of \$ 1.2 bn (nominal terms). While the Paris Club of bilateral creditors agreed to write off a substantial part of Niger's debt (\$ 230.9 m in 2002), the room for government manoeuvre remained limited in view of its dependence on agriculture and uranium exports. New loans would push up the debt-export ratio. The extension of value added tax to other consumer products was postponed until after the elections. The draft budget for 2005 amounted to CFAfr 401.9 bn in expenditure, which involved a drop of 1.14% as compared to the 2004 financial year.

Throughout the year, real GDP growth was estimated at between 4% and 5%, an estimate that will probably fall as a result of **disappointing harvests**. Though this is the lowest growth rate in West Africa, inflation also continued to be low, in part because of a slight fall in food prices caused by the bumper harvest of 2003, the third in a row, thanks to regular rainfall and government-distributed fertilisers. Yet, despite a cereal crop harvest of 3.6 m tonnes in 2003, the country still had to import cereals to cope with a structural deficit. Poor rains in 2004 and a severe **locust outbreak** worsened this situation. Consequently, for 2004 Niger registered a record grain deficit of 223,487 tonnes. The total crop harvest stalled at 2.6 m tonnes, forcing people in the Maradi region to abandon their villages.

The price of **uranium**, the export which accounted for 30% of total exports in 2003, remained stable. In addition, production began at the Samira Hill **gold mine** near the Burkina border, the first such mine in the country. The government has a 20% share in the production consortium, and estimated export earnings will CFAfr 15 bn. New prospecting agreements were signed in the autumn, while the Malaysian state oil company Petronas began drilling exploratory wells in the east of the country, where large oil reserves are believed to exist. Plans have also been made to boost the production of cotton, of which Niger is currently a small producer compared to neighbouring countries, from 8,000 to 100,000 tonnes in 2005.

The World Bank approved a credit of \$ 14.8 m for technical assistance to improve the efficiency of the country's **financial sector**, with regard to which the government has embarked on a four-year restructuring project. The rehabilitation of the road network has benefited from European Union funds while construction work undertaken for the 2005 Francophone Games is expected to boost economic growth.

Niger continues to be one of the poorest countries in the world, occupying the penultimate place on the UN Human Development Index (figures 2003). Industrialisation is minimal, with 86% of the active population employed in agriculture, which accounts for 43% of GDP. Sixty-three per cent of the population lives under the poverty datum line, while 41% has no access to clean drinking water, with some regions falling well below this mark.

Just over 40% of children are enrolled in primary school, which admittedly represents an increase of 7% over the last four years. These figures need to be set against the **high population growth**. A study by the government and World Bank showed that the population, now at approximately 11.5 m, rises 3.1% a year. On average, a Nigérien woman has eight children, more than anywhere else in the world. The study linked this growth to poverty and cultural and religious values. This demographic trend could lead to the collapse of the education and health system, already under threat in a society with one of the youngest age structures in the world (70% of the population being under 25).

Frequent student strikes calling for better conditions pointed to the continuing crisis in the education system, largely neglected during the 1990s. On 23 January gendarmes stormed the university campus in Niamey, dispersing students who called for an end to arrears in bursaries. This social crisis extends, however, beyond the education system, as shown by the **strikes** of public sector workers protesting pay arrears, retirement schemes and redundancies on 4–7 April and again at the end of May. Ministerial employees, workers for the privatised telecommunications company, as well as customs officials protesting stringent inspections participated in these protests. Although the 'Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Niger' (USTN) was weakened by a split in 2000, these strikes still represented a threat to the country's newly found stability.

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