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Niger: sustainable stability or precarious balance ?

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CHRISTIAN CONNAN - HUGO SADA

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INTRODUCTION

In the midst of a region that remains one of the poorest in the world, in which the states formed during independence on the model of the former colonizers are struggling to establish their legitimacy and, in addition, now see their stability threatened by terrorist movements, Niger is generally considered to be a well managed country, compared to most of its neighbors, and is presented sometimes as an example. Indeed, for at least a decade now, authorities have been able to put forward significant results.

However, upon examination of long-term trends (development rates, demography, changes in the relationship between religion and politics), they reveal disturbing fragilities. Political society, whose leeway is very limited (the country remains very dependent on donors), seems ill-equipped and unready to deal with future challenges.

In this context, the 2020 deadline (the year of the next presidential election) represents an important issue to deal with.

I – Progressive stabilization

1.1 – *A slow walk towards democracy*

In forty-eight years, since gaining independence on the 3rd of August 1960, Niger has gone through four coups¹ and the current regime is the seventh republic. The current Constitution is also the seventh.

Three of these coups have occurred since the 1991 National Conference (29 July-3 November) that had been set up after President Mitterrand's La Baule speech and had allowed the establishment of democracy and a multi-party system. The coup of 1999 was particularly spectacular, since the head of state, Colonel Baré, was assassinated.

¹ In 1974, 1996, 1999 and 2010.

However, since the National Conference, the secular tendency has been a slow progress towards institutional stability and democracy. The country experienced in 1995 a first political alternation². The military perpetrators of the last two coups have kept their promises to hold elections quickly in order to give back power to civilians³. The 2010 election resulted in a new democratic alternation.

In December 2015, some soldiers were tempted to prepare a new coup. Their attempt, however, was thwarted and it appeared that they formed a small group of few and hardly representative, whose action was doomed to failure.

1.2 – The Tuareg Issue: the appeasement

Niger has known, just as neighboring Mali, multiple Tuareg rebellions⁴:

Nevertheless, this issue is not as acute as it is in Mali, and seems largely defused today.

This may be due in part to the fact that Tuaregs are more numerous (about 10% of the population, compared to less than 2% in Mali) and more evenly distributed over almost the whole territory, which gives less weight to separatist claims⁵.

But the authorities' approach and the measures they have taken have effectively contributed to appeasement:

- ➔ In general, the Nigerien institutional system gives some place to the traditional notables which are considered to be essential social actors. The traditional chieftaincy system that exists collaborates in the recovery of taxes and helps settling many land disputes according to customary rule;

² Not without difficulty, but following an election: the Prime Minister having been overthrown by the majority in Parliament, the President of the Republic had dissolved the National Assembly and the new election had confirmed the victory of the opposition

³ After a nine months period of transition in 1999 and an eleven months transition in 2010. The coup of 2010 had the objective to prevent an autocratic drift: the issue was to avoid that President Tandja's intention to go for a third term (which the Constitution did not allow) leads to an institutional stalemate and chaos. In a very difficult social context (the country was going through famine), the President dissolved the National Assembly, a referendum on the amendment of the Constitution (which had endorsed the possibility of a third term, in accordance with his wishes) had been annulled by the Constitutional Court which had also been dissolved by the President. The military, led by Major Salou Djibo, overthrew President Tandja on February 18, 2010, and then organized a presidential election in January 2011, which led to the election of President Issoufou and the reinstatement of the constitutional order.

⁴ The first tuareg rebellion occurred during colonial rule (1916-1917). Independent Niger witnessed two periods of rebellion: 1990-1996, and 2007-2009 (tuareg rebellions in Mali were also taking place during those periods, from 1962 to 1964, in 2006 and after in 2012).

⁵ While in Mali their concentration in certain regions of the North legitimizes, in the eyes of some of their leaders, secessionist claims (the independence of Azawad is more a fantasist myth rather than historico-geographical concept).

- Great attention has been given to the nomination of a significant number of Tuaregs at important public positions⁶⁷.

1.3 – Political Consensus

Among the political forces that matter, there is consensus on democracy and the market economy.

No political force, no organization of civil society, no religious leader today questions the legitimacy of the state.

The nature of it is, at present, not disputed either. Basically, the Nigerien state has been a secular state since its founding at independence. At the 1991 National Conference, which inaugurated freedom of speech, the principle of secularism had been challenged, and in 1992, during the preparatory phase of the new constitution, a *Memorandum* addressed to the Head of State asked for the "pure and simple suppression of secularism of fundamental texts". Christians, who wanted to maintain the notion of secularism, protested against this eventuality. In the end, the term "secularism" of the state was replaced by the expression "non-confessionality". Since then, this principled fight against secularism has not resumed, even if religious interference in the political field is more and more evident (see below).

Article 8 of the applicable Constitution (adopted in 2010) affirms full respect for all beliefs and assures equality in the face of the law without distinction of religion. Article 9 states that "ethnic, regionalist or religious political parties are prohibited. No party will be created for the purpose of promoting an ethnic group, a region or a religion, under pain of sanctions provided for by law". We also note that religious groups must be registered to the authorities.

⁶ Even the Prime Minister, Brigi Rafini, in office since April 7, 2011.

⁷ In the recent period, a major decision is also worth noting: when in 2011, after the fall of Gaddafi, the Tuaregs conscripted into his army returned to their country, the Nigerien Tuareg were disarmed when they crossed the border, while the Malian Tuareg returned with their weapons and supplied them to the separatist MNLA which had formed in constituted units (as they existed within Gaddafi's army).

2 – President Issoufou’s honorable record

Elected on March 12, 2011, President Issoufou was re-elected on March 20, 2016. His record is, of course, to be nuanced. And, in Niger, there are many critics against him.

However, proactive action was conducted in an unfavorable regional context and resulted in a number of results.

2.1 – *An unfavorable regional environment*

2.1.1 – *A region particularly marked by poverty and instability*

Niger, whose territory (1 267 000 km²) is about two and a half times larger than that of France, has 5 697 km of borders with seven neighboring countries⁸, of which at least three (Nigeria, Libya and Mali) are currently sources of instability.

The weakness of these states and extreme poverty (the five G5 Sahel countries fall into the category of LDCs and figure amongst the poorest of these LDCs) constitute the perfect environment for destabilizing initiatives.

2.1.2 – *“Imported” terrorism*

The first suicide attacks that hit Niger in 2013 have been fomented from neighboring Mali⁹, and Niger has since been a regular target of attacks. In recent months, Boko Haram held operations in June in Diffa, a south-eastern city located very close to the Nigerian border¹⁰, and on November 21, in the same region, against an implantation that belongs to the French company Foralco¹¹.

If we are to except the events of January 2015¹², these attacks have been perpetrated by groups from neighboring countries.

⁸ 1 497 km with Nigeria, 1 175 km with Chad, 354 km with Libya, 956 km with Algeria, 821 km with Mali, 628 km with Burkina Faso, 266 km with Benin.

⁹ On May 23, 2013, Malian MUJAO fighters from Libya attacked a Nigerien army camp in Agadez (20 Nigerien soldiers were killed and 16 wounded in the fighting, which lasted more than 24 hours, led with the reinforcement of the French Special Forces) and an Areva mining center located in Arlit (that resulted in one dead and 50 wounded).

¹⁰ Three simultaneous kamikaze attacks killed 10 people and wounded several others.

¹¹ The death toll was 10 dead and 37 wounded (all were Nigerien employees).

¹² See below the analysis of the serious incidents that occurred after the participation of President Issoufou in the big demonstration organized in Paris after the attack against Charlie Hebdo.

2.1.3 – The refugee burden

Since 2011, Niger has hosted some 200 000 refugees who have fled Ivory Coast, torn apart by a civil war or Libya that is going through a serious crisis¹³.

2.2 – **The action of President Issoufou and his government**

2.2.1 – Efforts to enforce public policies

The government has adopted a *Strategy for Sustainable Development and Inclusive Growth by 2035*¹⁴, prepared in collaboration with the World Bank. There is also a 2017-2021 *Economic and Financial Program* underway. It is important, of course, not to attach undue importance to these documents, which remain too general to be operationally efficient. Nevertheless, at least they show a certain willingness to think prospectively and an intention to take things in hand that is not found in all countries in the region.

2.2.2 – Increased efficiency of security forces

Since 2015, the army has recruited a lot, 2 000 men per year, bringing its force up to 15 000, plus 5 000 gendarmes and about 7 000 members of the National Guard.

An effort has also been made to equip the army with more appropriate equipment. It even possesses a minimum of air assets – although they are obviously still very insufficient (a traditional weakness of the poor countries' armies).

Attention also focused on training¹⁵ and the organization of forces (mobile units), as well as the organization of the chain of command.

A major budgetary effort has been made to enable these capacity improvements. Nearly 15% of the national budget is devoted to the defense and security effort.

The professionalization of the Nigerien army is recognized by its peers in the region as well as by international observers, and the army enjoys good consideration and respect from Nigeriens (according to some polls, 92% trust the army, while 86% trust the police).

The results of this policy are not negligible, since, unlike many of its neighbors, Niger has managed to maintain its stability in the unfavorable environment previously described¹⁶.

¹³ Many of them, it is true, are Nigeriens who have found work in these two countries. Their presence is nevertheless a significant burden for a country of 22 million people who is one of the poorest in the world.

¹⁴ This succeeds to a Sahel-Saharan Development and Security Strategy that was developed in October 2012.

¹⁵ With the assistance of France, the United States, but also Algeria and Morocco.

¹⁶ While, in the months following President Issoufou's arrival in power, Libya was sinking into chaos and civil war, then Mali, the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso were also beset by major political turbulences.

The country, as has been said, is not in itself a terrorist homeland. Boko Haram's attempts to gain a foothold in the border areas of Nigeria, particularly in the Diffa region, have met with limited success.

Some people consider that the Nigerien government has made agreements with certain armed groups comparable to those that the Mauritanian authorities are suspected of having concluded. It is, in any case, likely that the proximity of certain power circles with the traffickers of all kinds (traffic of drugs, cigarettes, migrants, etc.) contributes to feed the intelligence services.

It would be unfair, however, to deny that efforts to strengthen the Nigerien army have produced tangible results, and that the Joint Force established with Nigeria and Cameroon is capable of effectively harming Boko Haram and threatening Niger.

The fight against terrorism, on the other hand, is not limited to security policy. Thus, at the end of 2016, the government set up de-radicalization internships, particularly in regions close to Nigeria, for "repentant" Boko Haram that had been amnestied¹⁷. Although this program obviously suffers from a lack of resources and involves only a small number of ex-combatants (150), it is nevertheless an interesting initiative that deserves to be encouraged. Above all, in the most vulnerable regions (those bordering Nigeria), the government has mobilized local authorities and civil society to counterbalance Boko Haram's attempts to recruit, who are less successful than we could have feared.

2.2.3 – *Economic and social policy*

The financial effort to improve security capabilities has not prevented the government from acting in at least two other important areas:

- ➔ Education. Educational expenditure accounts for 21% of public expenditure, well above the average for sub-Saharan Africa. This has enabled the construction of 15 000 classes;
- ➔ Infrastructures: tarring of 2 400 km of roads, modernization of the Niamey airport and other equipment in the capital, construction of new power plants, a hydroelectric dam, programmed electrification of 1 000 localities, etc.

Global indicators are satisfactory: average growth has been around 5% per year in recent years and public debt remains within reasonable limits (37%), although it has been rising for the past two years.

In recent years, the IMF has often praised the Nigerien authorities for their economic and financial policies.

¹⁷ Repentant rebels are accommodated in camps where they receive psychological assistance and training in order to facilitate their reintegration into the labor market.

2.3 – *A reliable partner of the international community*

Niger is strongly committed to regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism. It is present in the CEMOC¹⁸ of Tamanrasset since its creation in 2010, it participates in the fight against Boko Haram within the FMM¹⁹, puts 850 men at the disposal of the MINUSMA, participates in the process of Nouakchott and provides two battalions to the G5 Sahel Joint Force, and since January 2017 has been involved in the reactivation of the LGA (Liptako Gourma Authority). Niger has shown its willingness to participate in the ACIRC²⁰.

Niger also cooperates confidently with the European Union and the member countries in an attempt to reduce and manage the flow of migrants transiting the Sahara towards Europe.

3 – Disturbing long-term trends

3.1 – *Development challenges*

3.1.1 – *Developmental delay*

Even in comparison with their neighbors in the Sahel, and even more so in comparison to other countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Niger's economic indicators and development indices are very poor.

For the UNDP's Human Development Index (HDI), which ranks 200 countries, Niger ranks last. One in every two children under five suffers from chronic under-nutrition.

The economy still relies heavily on agriculture and livestock, which still supports 75% of the population today. But agriculture is limited to survival needs, with very low yields (only two-thirds of the regional average), and livestock farming remains a very traditional extensive breeding.

The informal sector provides the vast majority of jobs outside the civil service.

¹⁸ "Comité d'État-Major Opérationnel Conjoint", a structure created under the auspices of Algeria to combat terrorist groups in the region. In addition to Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger are associated with CEMOC.

¹⁹ Multilateral Mixed Force, created by the LCBC (Lake Chad Basin Community), in which Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Benin participate.

²⁰ African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises.

3.1.2 – Uncertainties and new challenges

The mining sector is very promising (receives almost all foreign investment). But apart from being a poor source of jobs, security concerns are deterrent for foreign investors, who alone are able to bring the necessary capital and skills.

At the moment, moreover, security situation discourages the search for new deposits. In addition, a serious question weighs on the future of the main mineral resource, namely uranium. Areva has given up on valuing the Imouraren site and, while it is still difficult to assess the consequences of the development of renewable energies for the construction of new nuclear power plants around the world, there is every reason to believe that uranium demand is not expected to grow as it was thought a few years ago.

It is also known that Sahel will be one of the regions that will suffer the most from climate change, because it will be particularly severe in this part of the world, and because the agro-pastoral sector in the Sahel is very sensitive to rainfall.

3.2 – ***The great weakness of "human capital"***

The primary school enrollment rate is only 33% (compared with 80% for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole). Only 19% of Nigeriens over the age of 15 can read and write (27% amongst those under 15), compared to 35% of Malians, 36% of Burkinabès, 40% of Chadians and 52% of Mauritians²¹.

There is also a huge gap between the literacy rates of men (27% for adults) and women (11%).

Besides, vocational education is seriously inadequate and many university courses are disconnected from the labor market.

3.3 – ***The demographic issue***

3.3.1 – A particularly dynamic demography

The Sahel is one of the last regions in the world, if not the last, that has not begun its demographic transition, and even within the Sahel region, Niger distinguishes itself with a particularly dynamic demography, with a birth rate of more than 7 children per woman, the highest rate in the world²². One in two Nigeriens is under the age of 15 and two in

²¹ 58% of Senegalese, for example (and 63% for all of sub-Saharan Africa).

²² In other countries of the Sahel or Nigeria, this rate is between 5 and 6. In France, it is less than 2.

three are under 25 years old. Each year, more than 250 000 young people enter the labor market, while the formal sector generates only a few tens of thousands of jobs.

In 1960, the country counted 3.3 million inhabitants. Today, there are 20 million, and if the current growth rate continues, the country will have 41 million inhabitants in 2035 (650 000 young people arriving each year on the labor market) and 90 million in 2050.

3.3.2 – *Denial*

Like most Africans, the majority of Nigeriens consider that the dynamism of demography is an asset for the development of the country and is offended when development partners express their concerns and advocate for a birth control policy.

It is clear that this attitude is pure denial. If, indeed, the growth and youth of a population can be factors of development, this implies that the concerned country is able to make sufficient investments to develop this potential (expenditure on education, vocational training, job-creating investment, etc.). It is clear that this cannot be the case in Niger in the next two or three decades, given the fiscal capacity of the state, the low appetite of foreign investors for the Nigerien economy and the immensity of the problems that are facing the authorities.

3.3.3 – *Security implications: a time bomb*

It is not unreasonable to affirm that this discrepancy between the needs generated by such dynamic demography and the investment capacity, over a period of one or two decades, is genuinely a bombshell that carries the germs for instability and heavy security implications. This is likely to create, within a youth without any perspective, a fertile ground for the emergence of terrorist movements.

3.4 – ***The growing involvement of religious affairs in political life***

Until now, religions in general and Islam more particularly, have never been a source of instability nor have they engendered a climate of violence that could be harmful to the country's development.

Islam is the hegemonic religion in Niger, since 98% of Nigeriens recognize themselves as Muslims. Yet many of them continue to practice traditional polytheistic cults as well. Cohabitation has always been peaceful. It has also been this way with Christianity since its introduction in the 1920-1930 decade.

The serious events of 16 and 17 January 2015²³ that had targeted Christians and French interests are indicators of the changes that have taken place in recent decades in Nigerien Islam:

- ➔ As in all the countries of the region, Wahhabism has steadily progressed to the detriment of traditional Islam. The numerous madrassas and Koranic schools financed by the Gulf countries can explain this phenomenon;
- ➔ At the meantime, religious interference in the political field has been more and more evident.

It is true that, despite the affirmation of state secularism as a principle, authorities' actions have been influenced for a long while by Muslim movements' requests; thus, the state by the means of sponsorship has participated in the widespread of Arabic language, contributed to the development of Islamic associations and financed the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. The state has even accepted the transformation of Muslim holidays into official holidays and the reading of the coranic verses at the beginning and the end of national radio broadcasts, as well as during certain official ceremonies.

But the recent period has also been marked by a clear shift in the attitude of religious leaders, who now openly express, through public sermons and media interventions, their views on directly political issues. They vigorously criticize authorities' decisions that they believe to be contrary to Islamic principles, and sometimes even resort to challenging them with violent demonstrations²⁴.

We may also note that beyond militant circles, many Muslims regret that the state does not act more firmly against what they consider to be a devaluation of mores or act more in favor of the defense of traditional values (which happen to be those of Islam), which they consider challenged by the messages conveyed by the major media, public and private, that they see as strongly marked by foreign values (especially Western).

We cannot help but be struck by the huge increase, especially in rural areas, in the number of women wearing headscarves.

²³ In protest against President Issoufou's participation in the big demonstration organized on January 11, 2015 in Paris after the attack on Charlie hebdo, the violence unleashed in Niamey and several other cities in the country had resulted in a heavy toll: 10 dead, 177 wounded, 55 ransacked churches, as well as 40 drinking establishments, private dwellings and hotels, and 22 burned vehicles. The French Cultural Center of Zinder was targeted as well as the premises of two French private companies: PMU Niger and Orange Niger.

²⁴ The most important ones remain to date the first two, which took place respectively:

- in 1999: demonstration in response to the attempt to promulgate a new Family Code and to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW);
- in November 2000: demonstration on the occasion of the holding of the Festival of African Fashion (FIMA) in Niamey.

In fact, the elites are considered by many Nigeriens to be both too westernized²⁵ and corrupt. Facing this widening gap between elites and the people, Islam is the path to what could be called "moral rearmament".

In the coming years, it is unlikely that these evolutions will result in the rise of religious parties on the political scene (on the model, for example, of the Muslim Brotherhood). Avoiding such a rise in the medium term however implies on the one hand, that the Nigerien state and its partners continue and amplify efforts to combat the sources of insecurity, and, on the other hand that the country makes significant progress in the path to development. As we already pointed out, the development delay previously analyzed constitutes a fertile ground for all destabilizing activities.

In any case, it is to be expected that religious circles will put forward heavy pressure in favor of certain social evolutions or in order to impose practices conformingly to their dogmas.

4 – The structural deficiencies of the Nigerien political society

We can see that the challenges Niger faces are enormous. The average growth of the Nigerien economy since 2005, which has been 5.5% per annum, a respectable performance²⁶, is nevertheless far below what would be necessary to solve the development problems previously mentioned and to meet up with demands of population growth²⁷. A "gear change" is needed.

However, the Nigerien political class is not up to these challenges, so it is also a paradigm shift that would have to be imposed.

4.1 – A clientelist political system

There are about a hundred parties, most of which are more clientelist networks than parties in the sense we commonly understand them. Only four or five have a significant existence, in terms of numbers and presence on the national territory and in terms of political orientation.

²⁵ This perception is accompanied by the rise of anti-French sentiments, which can also be observed in other sub-Saharan countries, but which are probably even more marked in Niger.

²⁶ From 1960 to 2004, average annual growth was only 1.2%.

²⁷ Especially since this performance was not only due to a better management, but also to two favorable factors: a good overall rainfall and a strong increase in the world demand for raw materials (and subsequently their price).

The NMDS²⁸, heir of the single party²⁹, is the best structured. It is represented in all regions. Its political culture, which is the fruit of its history as a state-party, is characterized by a certain attachment to a centralizing state culture (resulting, for a certain number of activists, by the conviction that a "strong man" would be something useful for the country), which is however gradually fading away over time. The NPDS³⁰ of President Issoufou, a participant of the Socialist International, intends to assert a marked ideological orientation which is reformist socialism. However, this displayed identity is largely dissolved in a cultural context very different from that which has witnessed the born of socialist ideology in Europe.

In any case, no single party can bring together a majority³¹ on its own. To form a government, alliances are therefore necessary.

But even among these parties with a certain existence, alliances are made and disbanded according to largely opportunistic considerations, access to honorary positions play an essential role³² in this respect.

Nigerien citizens do not believe in their political class, all tendencies combined. What they would expect from their leaders, perhaps even more than social progress (yet oh so essential in one of the poorest LDC in the world), is the sense of exemplarity in their behavior, a greater concern for social justice and the will to establish a judicial system worthy of the rule of law.

This does not prevent many poorly educated voters, especially in the countryside, from participating in the "system" by giving their vote on the basis of loyalty to an individual, stimulated by concrete benefits.

²⁸ National Movement for the Development Society.

²⁹ Pluralism was introduced following the National Conference of 1991, following the speech of La Baule by President Mitterrand.

³⁰ Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism.

³¹ The party best represented in the National Assembly, the PNDS of President Issoufou, occupies 75 seats (out of 171).

³² Thus, Hama Amadou, the main opponent of President Issoufou during the 2016 election campaign, had given him decisive support in his first election in 2011. Conversely, Seyni Oumarou, leader of the MNSD, the main opposition party during the previous legislature, joined the presidential majority after the 2016 election.

4.2 – **Persistent corruption, a major obstacle to development**

When he came to power, President Issoufou declared his intention to fight against corruption and put in place two bodies to that effect: the Information-Complaint Bureau, destined to fight against corruption in the judiciary apparatus, and the HAFCAO³³ a toll-free number to report cases of corruption in public services which citizens can seize by calling.

The results in this area, however, are modest to say the least. The measures taken, in any case, were not enough to change the situation, and the problem remains nagging for the Nigeriens³⁴.

It is true that, in this respect, Niger is rather less badly ranked than other countries in the region³⁵.

The extent of corruption however is such that it represents an almost diriment obstacle to development.

5 – **Strong constraints**

It must also be acknowledged that the Niger authorities, whatever they may be, see their options reduced both by the weakness of the "tools" they possess and their dependence on donors.

5.1 – **Weak means of action**

The Nigerien administrations are not a suitable tool for implementing the new policies that would be needed to answer the challenges that have been described.

They suffer from weak staffing, a clientelist management of appointments, an inadequate initial training and no training *a posteriori*. They are also largely absent from entire parts of the territory.

³³ High Authority for the Fight against Corruption and Assimilated Offenses.

³⁴ Favorable approval rates of former President Kountché is revealing in this respect. He came to power in 1974 by a military coup and did not leave it until he died in 1987. His regime was generally considered neither less nor more corrupt than those that preceded him but he had a reputation for being a man of great integrity.

³⁵ In Transparency International's 2017 rankings, Niger held the 112th place (out of 180 countries), after Burkina Faso (74th), but ahead of Mali (122nd), Nigeria (148th), Chad (165th) and Libya (171st).

5.2 – *Paralyzing dependence on development partners*

One figure alone is enough to point out this dependence: while the Nigerien GDP is about Euro 7.2 billion, and the state budget about Euro 3 billion³⁶, the development aid of which Niger benefits is about Euro 1 billion.

6 – 2020, an important deadline

In 2019 and 2020, the municipal and regional elections will take place, and finally the presidential election.

The Nigerien political class is already staring at the latter. In fact, it will be a particularly important election.

6.1 – *The challenge for Niger*

In Niger, as in many African countries, each electoral event remains a test. The 2020 election will, in addition, be of particular importance.

Admittedly, we must not harbor any illusions: whatever the result, this election will not lead to the paradigm shift that would be essential to engage the country on the path of development, and consequently of a sustainable stability and security. As the foregoing analyzes have shown, the policy which will be followed will not be much different from that which has been applied in recent years, namely because of the lack of real political differentiation between the political forces and an insufficient leeway regarding funders.

Nevertheless, it is essential that the next elections – and particularly the presidential election – be conducted in good conditions and that the result is widely accepted.

If this is so, it is to be hoped that the democratic option will definitely take root, and the country will continue to contribute actively to the re-establishment of regional security.

On the other hand, a contested election, leading to serious incidents, would mean backtracking with unpredictable consequences for the country³⁷. At the very least, precious years would be lost in the "battle for development".

³⁶ More than 300 billion for the French budget.

³⁷ The Malian example is a significant example of the speed with which the situation can deteriorate in weak states suffering from underdevelopment. At the end of the 1990s, this country was considered a model of stability regarding its democracy... rightly so at the time (no doubt, moreover, its institutions were then better established than are currently those of Niger).

6.2 – *President Issoufou's attitude*

President Issoufou's attitude will be essential. Many Nigeriens fear that he intends to hold a third term, which the Constitution does not allow. However, he stated that he did not have that sort of intention. It seems, moreover, that he has already decided to ask his party to support the candidature of Mohamed Bazoum, Minister of State³⁸, and one of his two main "lieutenants" (the other being the Minister of Finance, Hassoumi Massoudou, also Secretary-General of the PNDS presidential party). The candidacy of Mohamed Bazoum could be formalized at the beginning of the year 2019.

The man would be up to the job. Many Nigeriens, however, consider that he could not be elected because of his ethnic origin (he is usually referred to as "the Arab")³⁹. We can however think that, if President Issoufou picks Mohamed Bazoum, he would do so after having weighed all the arguments and, undoubtedly, by considering that, in Niger as in other countries of the region, an optimal use of means of power can compensate for certain disabilities ...

In any case, an early clarification on the figure that will embody the presidential party in 2020 would be welcome in order to avoid unnecessary controversy, as well as possible clan battles within the party.

The way in which President Issoufou and his government will organize the elections will also be decisive. The unfolding of the 2016 electoral campaign, the imprisonment on impotent grounds of the main opposition leader, Hama Amadou, obliged to campaign from his cell⁴⁰, the repression on opponents who refused to admit the result⁴¹ raised some questions: Do these incidents hide a certain authoritarian temptation of the Head of State as soon as his power seemed to be disputed? The demonstrations that the country has experienced in recent months are indicative of social unrest and suggest that in the event of serious incidents in 2020 the situation could quickly become explosive. However, the way some of the leaders have been treated is not a good signal⁴².

³⁸ His full title (Minister of State, Minister of the Interior, of Public Security, of Decentralization and of Customary and Religious Affairs) expresses well the extent of his prerogatives.

³⁹ Even though ethnic divisions are not very significant in Niger, it is generally accepted that, for the supreme magistracy, many voters would refuse to give their vote to an Arab or a Tuareg.

⁴⁰ The government claimed that he was involved in child trafficking (about thirty children bought and then sold to rich couples).

⁴¹ In 2016, the opposition considered that it won the elections and therefore refused to recognize the results announced. The opposition called for demonstrations, which resulted in contested arrests.

⁴² In October 2017, and again in January 2018, several waves of arrests successively targeted some thirty participants in banned gatherings who were protesting on the occasion of the "Civilian Action Days", against the 2018 Finance Act, which provided tax exemptions for multinationals and introduced new taxes on basic necessities. Most of the detainees have been released since then.

CONCLUSION

The 2020 presidential election in Niger will not only be important for Nigeriens. It will be equally so for their neighbors and for Niger's development partners.

If the presidential election goes wrong, there is every reason to fear, not only that the country is no longer able to contribute effectively to the fight against terrorism, but that it itself becomes a source of instability.

On the other hand, a proper course of action – which appears to be the most probable hypothesis at the moment – would ensure that Niger remains a reliable partner in the fight against terrorism and in deepening.