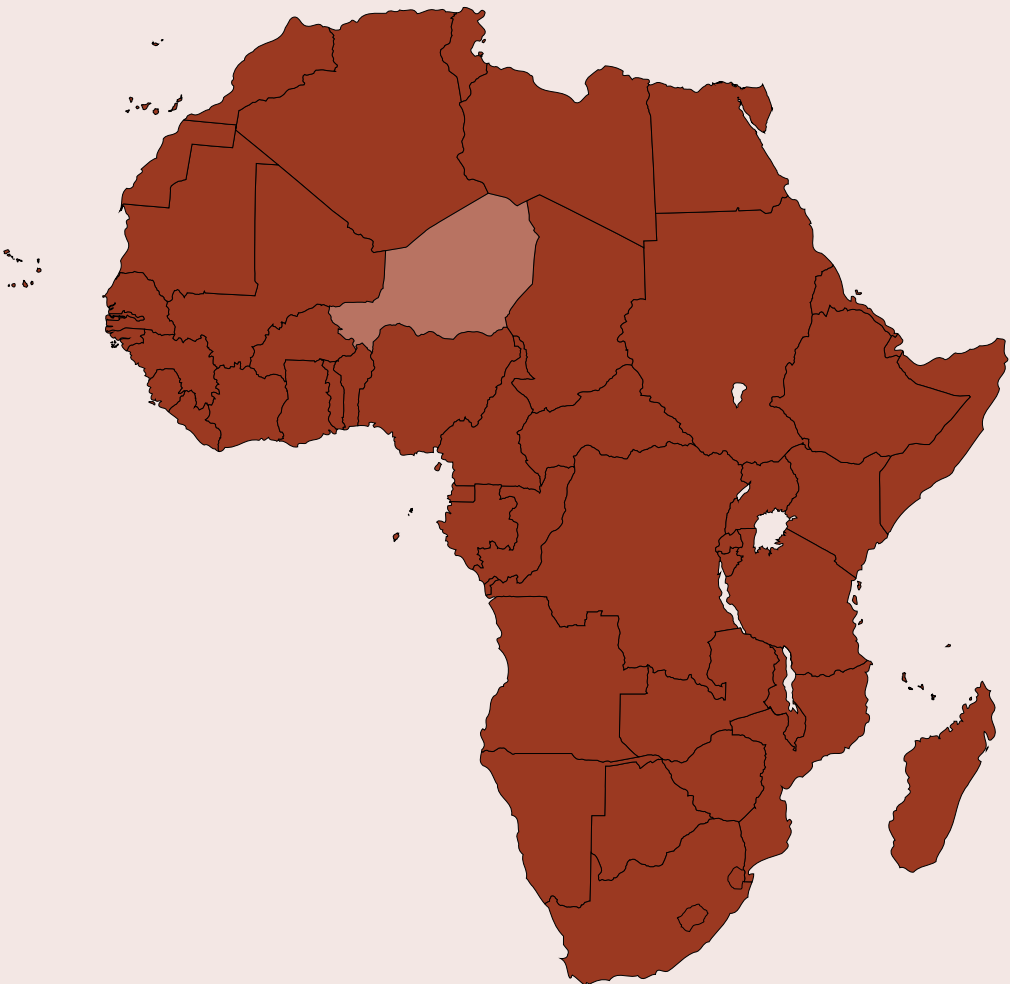




# Situation Analysis: Niger

*February 2016*







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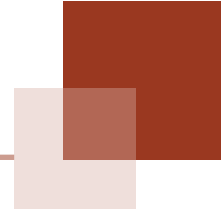
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# **Situation Analysis: Niger**



# Situation Analysis: Niger



## Introduction

General elections will be held in Niger on 21 February 2016. This is a significant moment for the country, which has faced years of unstable governments since gaining independence in 1960. Following its last national dialogue that ushered in a new government in 1993, Niger has alternated between democratic and military regimes. There have been three confirmed coups d'état as well as a more recent alleged coup attempt in December 2015, although this has been dismissed by many opposition politicians as an attempt on the part of the incumbent administration to hold onto power and justify a crackdown on opposition politicians.

Since gaining independence, Niger has been caught in many political, social and economic crises. Although Niger has significant natural resources, with the largest deposits of uranium in Africa, its economy remains reliant on agriculture and foreign aid. The security situation in the country is unstable, as Niger is currently caught between the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria and the crises in northern Mali and Libya. Boko Haram insurgencies into Niger have not only led to loss of lives and property in the country, but the Nigerian refugees displaced by Boko Haram to southern Niger are also straining Niger's minimal resources. The dormant Tuareg uprisings, combined with the flourishing market for trafficking in arms, drugs and humans, are further destabilizing Niger. The upcoming elections are therefore crucial but they also present many challenges, as this Situation Analysis details.

## Electoral context

### *Presidential candidates and election management*

In April 2015, the Nigerien Government created a new electoral management body (EMB), the Independent National Electoral Commission (Commission Electorale Nationale Indépendante, CENI), appointing Boubé Ibrahim and Kadri Oumarou Sanda as president and first vice-president, respectively. CENI is tasked with the organization and supervision of elections and the declaration of the provisional election results. Following its appointment, the

commission released its electoral calendar for elections into the positions of the presidential, legislative and municipal elections. The first round of the presidential elections and legislative elections will be held on 21 February 2016, with a second round for the presidential elections on 20 March 2016. This is to be followed by the local elections, scheduled for 9 May 2016.

This is the first time that the local elections will take place after the presidential elections. As a result, this sequence of elections has been criticized and the neutrality of the CENI questioned. The electoral calendar ignited a crisis of confidence between the opposition and the ruling party. The Alliance for Reconciliation, Democracy and the Republic (l'Alliance pour la république, la démocratie et la réconciliation au Niger, ARDR), a coalition of Nigerien opposition parties, rejected the timetable. They argued it was designed unilaterally, before a consensus could be reached with other political parties. The opposition also accused the Constitutional Court of working in consonance with Niger's President, Mahamadou Issoufou.

The Constitutional Court is charged with the validation of candidates in elections and announces the final results of elections after verification and any necessary corrections are made (Nigerien Constitutional Court 2014). Niger's Constitutional Court has since approved 15 candidates out of the 16 presidential candidates for the scheduled 21 February presidential elections. These candidates include the imprisoned Nigerien Democratic Movement (Democratique Nigérien pour une Fédération Africaine, MODEN) presidential candidate, Hama Amadou. The only candidate of the original 16 to be declared ineligible to contest is Abdoul-Karim Bakasso, as he was unable to provide a valid medical certificate. The front-runners in the election are the incumbent, President Issoufou, elected in 2011; chief opposition leader Seini Oumarou; and former Speaker of National Assembly, Hama Amadou, who is currently in jail on baby trafficking charges.

### ***Voters' register***

The voters' register initially generated some controversies, with opposition parties calling for its audit. A joint audit proposed by the government was rejected by opposition figures. The demand for an impartial arbiter was made and this informed CENI's decision to invite the Organization of Francophonie (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie, OIF) to assess the voter register and electoral processes. The OIF recommended the removal of about 300 'ghost' polling stations and 25,000 voters who had been counted twice. This change has since been made, and the register held valid and reliable for the polls.



However, in a sudden twist, an estimated 1.5 million people may not vote in the February election. This is because these potential voters lack documentation to prove their identity. CENI had proposed a system of using witnesses to vouch for those affected, but the politicians failed to agree on the modalities. This challenge has further heightened the stakes in the forthcoming elections. The voters' register includes an estimated 7.5 million voters out of Niger's total population of 17 million. How the exclusion of a further 1.5 million potential voters will play out in terms of legitimacy, and how it will affect the opposition parties, remains to be seen.

### ***Voter apathy***

There is also a strong likelihood of voter apathy. Niger has an illiteracy rate of over 70 per cent (Care2 2013), and therefore substantive information has to be given to the populace before they vote. The challenge of registering people to vote and the difficulties in distributing voter cards are further obstacles to voter participation—the distribution of voter cards will run from 21 January to 20 February 2016 (CENI 2016). Many voters also lack salient documents, such as a national identity card or birth certificate, to guarantee their participation in the electoral process. All these factors will affect voter turn out for the elections.

### ***Opposition parties, coalitions and clampdowns***

In August 2015, opposition parties formed a coalition (Agence France-Press 2015) to present a formidable front against the incumbent President Issoufou's Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme, PNDS). The coalition, known as the Patriotic and Republican Front (Republican Patriotic Front, FPR), comprises around 30 political parties, civil society organizations and labour unions. Front-line politicians in the coalition include former parliamentary speaker Hama Amadou, ex-prime minister Seyni Oumarou and former president Mahamane Ousmane.

Earlier, in October 2013, 15 opposition parties also coalesced under the umbrella of Alliance for the Republic, Democracy and Reconciliation in Niger (l'Alliance pour la république, la démocratie et la réconciliation au Niger, ARDR). Although the opposition has formed coalitions, they are not presenting a single candidate for the presidential elections, as would be expected. Instead, politicians within the coalitions, including Oumarou, Amadou and others, are each contesting the presidency. If the elections move into a second round it will be seen what, if any, alliances are formed.

Tensions have been rising in Niger ahead of the elections. President Issoufou's administration has been accused of stifling the opposition. Several political actors have been arrested arbitrarily. For example, in July 2014 six opposition figures—including former Health Minister Soumana Sanda, former Niamey Mayor Oumarou Dogari, retired Army Colonels Abdourahamane Saidou and Amadou Salah—were arrested for violating state security. In the same period, another 44 members of MODEN were also arrested for involvement in a bomb attack on the headquarters of the ruling party (E-News Channel Africa 2014). In January 2015 an estimated 100 people, including several opposition figures, were arrested for organizing a protest march in Niger's capital city Niamey, under the auspices of the ARDR (Xinhua 2015). The march had previously been banned by the government.

The clampdown on opposition politicians continues: since October 2015, several more opposition politicians, as well as journalists, have been arrested. On 26 December 2015, Oumarou Dogari, a former mayor of Niger's capital city, Niamey, was arrested for the second time since July 2014. In the same period, four relatives of Hama Amadou were arrested. The authorities gave no reasons for these arrests. Ibrahim Hamidou was also arrested on 19 December 2015 for questioning the alleged coup plot against the state in a televised debate (Radio France Internationale 2016). There are allegations of a sustained witch hunt by the government against the opposition candidates in the legislative and presidential elections, in particular members of the MODEN and National Movement for the Development of Society (Mouvement national pour la société du développement, MNSD-Nassara). The members of the executive of the MNSD-Nassara have been arrested. These targeted arrests have several potential implications, including the radicalization of the opposition, a possible refusal to accept electoral outcomes and outbreaks of violence.

The former Speaker of the Parliament, Hama Amadou, will play a significant role in the forthcoming elections. After coming third in the first round of the 2011 presidential elections, Hama Amadou supported Issoufou in his bid for the presidency. However, he subsequently pulled out of the Government of National Unity to join the opposition. The race for the elections allegedly became tense upon his declaration of interest to run in the presidential election in 2013. In 2014, Hama Amadou fled Niger for France, where he sought refuge following allegations of complicity in a baby-smuggling ring from Nigeria. His wife and 29 others were charged with smuggling newborn babies from Nigeria to sell to rich families in Niger. Amadou, claiming a political witch hunt, returned to the country on 14 November 2015 to contest the presidential elections. He was arrested immediately on his return, alongside

party stalwarts and journalists (Massalaki 2015), and is now being held in Flingué prison outside Niamey. The Constitutional Court has since cleared Amadou to contest in the 21 February presidential elections. However, a bail application brought by Amadou's lawyers to secure his release was refused by the court (BBC News 2016). Even so, Amadou and his political party have decided to go ahead and contest the elections. The party will conduct his campaign while he remains in captivity, ensuring that Amadou remains a strong force in the elections.

The continuing clampdown on opposition figures led lawyers to organize a 24-hour strike on January 11, 2016 to oppose what they call the arbitrary arrest of government opponents and the refusal of authorities to let them see their detained clients (Africa News 2016). This will be the third time the Niger Bar association will go on strike.

The Issoufou-led government has been accused of human rights violations. Of particular importance in this regard is the violation of the freedom of association and of the press. The government has forcibly dispersed student demonstrations, with several students arrested and others injured on 21 May 2014. The above-mentioned January 2015 protest called by opposition politicians under the auspices of the ARDR to protest bad governance and contravention of the constitution led to around 100 arrests. Several civil society activists have also been unlawfully arrested (United States Department of State n.d.).

### ***The alleged coup d'état of December 2015***

Niger has historically suffered from repeated coups d'état. Since its return to democratic rule in 1993, there have been three 'official' coups d'état. However, in December 2015, as a prelude to the forthcoming elections, President Issoufou announced a foiled coup attempt, stating 'The government has just foiled an evil attempt at destabilization . . . the objective of these individuals, motivated by I don't know what, was to overthrow the democratically elected power' (*The Guardian* 2015). Several military personnel and civilians have since been arrested for the attempted coup. According to the Defence Minister, Mahamdaou Karidjo, four of the army officers arrested for plotting the alleged coup d'état have since confessed (Associated Press 2016).

The aborted coup d'état has been generating much discussion in the country. Many citizens have dismissed the coup as a rumour, while opposition politicians claim it is just another of President Issoufou's plans to stifle opposition. Amadou Boubacar Cisse, a candidate in the February presidential elections, has claimed that the president has provided no proof of the coup

whatsoever (Al Jazeera 2016). He further accused the government of seeking to manipulate the political climate ahead of the elections.

An analysis of both social and traditional media sources in Niger reveals that a majority of citizens question the credibility of the allegations, with some arguing that it represents an opportunity for the government to further clamp down on opposition and divert attention from the security and economic challenges plaguing the country. In contrast, others believe that the attempted coup may be true after all, considering the high levels of tension currently permeating the polity. Another school of thought claims that previous elections have always been truncated by a coup d'état, so an historical analysis makes the possibility of a coup d'état likely. It is questionable what outcome such a coup may have elicited, considering the intolerance of regional organizations, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) for power acquired through unconstitutional means (Omotola and Hassan 2014).

### ***Security concerns across Niger***

Many view Niger primarily as a launching pad for the so-called war on terror in the Sahel. However, Niger has had its fair share of terrorist attacks, including the Tuareg uprisings. For instance, on 23 May 2013, Islamist militants launched simultaneous suicide attacks in Agadez and at a uranium mine in Arlit (Lebowitch 2013). On several occasions, foreigners have been kidnapped and held for ransom. There have also been several suicide car bomb attacks. However, the country is presently battling an insurgency by the Islamic militant group Boko Haram, with a state of emergency declared in the Diffa region. Based in northern Nigeria, Boko Haram is making regular incursions into Niger, killing and maiming people, looting and burning villages. The spillovers from the crises in north-east Nigeria and northern Mali have further affected the country, with Niger having to cater for several refugees. This strains the financial resources of the country. Therefore, security is a major issue in the elections, that will also influence who emerges as the winner in the presidential elections.

### **Stakeholder interventions**

As mentioned above, tensions in Niger are high, both socially and politically. Traditional rulers are very important stakeholders in the country, and the Association of Traditional Leaders (l'Association des Chefs traditionnels du Niger, ACTN) has decried the inflammatory statements made by several political actors ahead of the elections, and issued a press statement calling for

caution and the need to preserve peace before and after the elections (Agence France-Press 2016).

Young people are key stakeholders in the electioneering process, and have been very active during debates on social media. One youth organization, the Lumana Youth in Niamey, issued a statement condemning the political situation in the country, particularly the detention of opposition members (including Hama Amadou). They also called on the opposition to unite in order to oust the incumbent government (Tamtam Info 2016).

The civil-society observatory on elections (La Coordination Exécutive Nationale de l'Observatoire du Processus Electoral, OPELE), led by veteran activist Ali Idrissa, has been working towards promoting free, fair and credible elections. Following an extraordinary meeting in Niamey on 25 January 2016—convened in response to the heated political space in Niger, including the continuing hate campaigns and the potential for the exclusion of 1.5 million voters from the elections—OPELE condemned the non-adherence to electoral laws by the political parties, particularly with regard to campaigns and propaganda. They also enjoined citizens to collect their voter cards (OPELE 2016).

ECOWAS has also deployed long-term observers in the country, as well as envoys. It will also deploy short-term observers to monitor the polls.

However, there are few ongoing election-related projects, with several donor agencies and development partners having decreased their support in the country. Considering the volatile electoral atmosphere, a peace education programme could have had a significant impact on the running of the elections. Although the illiteracy rate in Niger is over 70 per cent and previous elections witnessed low voter turnouts—the 2011 parliamentary elections, for example, saw a 49 per cent turnout (International IDEA n.d.)—there are few civic or voter education programmes in the country. Voter education programmes could explain the voting process to citizens, including the change in the sequence of elections, how to collect the voter card, what documents to provide and how to vote on election day. The need to transmit this key information to voters makes voter education imperative. Even so, there are fewer voter education programmes compared to other countries that recently held elections, such as Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea.

## Conclusions

Tension remains high in Niger in the run-up to the elections. President Issoufou's administration has been criticized for its high-handedness in dealing with the opposition, as well as for corruption and its inability to properly manage the insecurity plaguing the country.

The opposition has coalesced under the FPR umbrella in a bid to displace Issoufou and PNDS in the elections. In spite of this, there are still 15 candidates in the presidential election, showing fragmentation among the opposition. President Issoufou remains the front-runner in the polls, although there is a likelihood of the elections moving into a second round. The Boko Haram insurgency will play a significant role in the elections, as it is likely to determine the voting pattern, and could potentially disrupt the elections by carrying out an attack on polling day. The likelihood of the opposition parties rejecting the electoral outcomes remains strong, particularly within the context of the manipulation of the ruling party, and the inability to resolve question of the 1.5 million disputed voters. These issues make it more likely that the legitimacy of the outcome will be questioned. It is imperative that ECOWAS and other partners immediately step in to forestall a repeat of the aftermath of the 2011 elections, where opposition groups clashed over the electoral outcome.

Despite these issues around election management, the possibility of a coup d'état is very low. The responses of ECOWAS and the African Union to any unconstitutional changes in government across Africa have clearly made coups d'état unfashionable. The recent response of the people and other actors in Burkina Faso's failed coup impasse further offers a clear example of intolerance for power acquired through unconstitutional means.

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# About International IDEA

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The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. International IDEA's mission is to support sustainable democratic change by providing comparative knowledge, assisting in democratic reform, and influencing policies and politics.

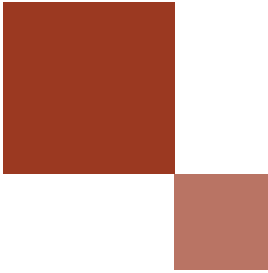
## **What does International IDEA do?**

In the fields of elections, constitution-building, political parties, gender in democracy and women's political empowerment, democracy self-assessments, and democracy and development, we undertake our work in three activity areas:

1. providing comparative knowledge derived from practical experience on democracy building processes from diverse contexts around the world;
2. assisting political actors in reforming democratic institutions and processes, and engaging in political processes when invited to do so; and
3. influencing democracy building policies through the provision of our comparative knowledge resources and assistance to political actors.

## **Where does International IDEA work?**

International IDEA works worldwide. Based in Stockholm, it has offices in Africa and West Asia, the Asia-Pacific, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations.



Since gaining independence in 1960, Niger has been caught in many political, social and economic crises. The security situation in the country is unstable, as Niger is currently caught between the Boko Haram crisis in Nigeria and the crises in northern Mali and Libya. The dormant Tuareg uprisings, combined with the flourishing market for trafficking in arms, drugs and humans, are further destabilizing Niger. The upcoming elections are therefore crucial but they also present many challenges, as this Situation Analysis details.



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