

Niger military assassinates president

Stuart Nolan, Chris Talbot
13 April 1999

Niger President Ibrahim Bare Mainassara was assassinated on Friday, April 9. Eyewitness reports state that his own presidential guard shot him while he was boarding a plane in Niamey, the capital city. Niger diplomatic sources in Burkina Faso indicated that the coup had begun at first light on Friday morning. Telephone communications and borders were closed, and radio stations closed down. Mainassara was quickly buried the following Sunday, in a funeral attended only by family and foreign diplomats.

Troops positioned themselves at all key points around the capital, sealing off the International airport. In a broadcast, Prime Minister Ibrahim Assane Mayaki announced that the killing of the president had been a "tragic accident". He attempted to dissolve the National Assembly and to suspend all political activity. Opposition deputies opposed the dissolution and maintained that they would continue as normal. When news of the coup broke, deputies said that only the house speaker could dissolve the assembly on the death of the head of state.

In a further announcement, the Prime Minister stated that the military would rule until a new government of "national unity" had been decided upon. Military chiefs linked to the assassination, as well as politicians who were opposed to the former president's rule, met over the weekend and appointed Major Daouda Mallam Wanke as Mainassara's successor. Wanke commands the first military region and the presidential guard and is said to have played a direct part in the assassination.

Niger state radio said Wanke's position was of an "interim" character. He is supposed to govern a National Council for Reconciliation for the next nine months. Military leaders ordered the Supreme Court and National Assembly to be dissolved and suspended the constitution.

Niger's entire top military and police officers, and the head of the army, Colonel Moussa Moumouni

Djermakoye, have been removed from office. Djermakoye was initially mooted as a possible successor to Mainassara by other chiefs-of-staff and military officials. He is said to have demanded the arrest of those who gunned down the former president.

Mainassara himself came to power in a military coup in January 1996, overthrowing the civilian government of Mahamane Ousmane. Mainassara denounced Ousmane's government as the source of the country's political instability and said it was incapable of resolving Niger's severe economic crisis. Ousmane had come to power in 1993, after military rule dating back to 1960 when France handed power to the Niger military. Mainassara, with a long history in Niger's army, having participated in a coup in 1974, was appointed as army chief-of-staff in March 1995.

Mainassara's first significant political act after the coup was to negotiate a six-year package with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, under the auspices of the HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) debt relief scheme. After three years of drastic cuts, in what is already one of the poorest countries in the world, Niger's public health and education systems have almost ceased to function.

The country's external debt has increased to \$1.44 billion dollars, while the internal debt stands at \$320 million. The price of uranium, its most important export, continues to decline on the world market. In the February edition of *Kakaki*, a Niger newspaper, Mainassara's Minister of Finance, Ide Niandou, stated that if the country is to face its debt problem, "From now on, state spending will be a function of the revenue that comes in."

Mainassara, under US and French direction, had begun the process of reintroducing the formal appearance of democratic life, beginning with this February's local and regional elections. Opposition parties, under the Front for the Restoration and Defence

of Democracy (FRDD), were expected to make major gains from the ruling party. Although all the main parties have very little policy differences, elements of the military violently attacked polling booths and non-government party rallies and rounded up independent journalists, trade unionists and political campaigners.

The US and France tried to downplay the crisis surrounding the elections, and French diplomats even said that military violence and intimidation were not enough to affect the outcome. The results published only included 70 percent of municipal seats, 50 percent of local council seats and three out of eight regional councils--the outstanding results being from polls disrupted by military intervention. Opposition parties challenged the election outcome, pointing out that there was armed intervention in areas where they suspected they had done well. On Wednesday April 7, when Niger's Supreme Court Justice ordered a re-run of the elections but refused to set a date--effectively cancelling them--oppositionists called for massive demonstrations. This political instability appears to have exacerbated divisions within the army and led to Mainassara's assassination two days later.

Whilst the conflict inside the ruling elite over the elections was the immediate cause of the assassination, underlying the crisis is a growing wave of social unrest. In the first three months of this year, two general strikes took place. They were led by health and government workers demanding to be paid. Health workers, last paid in November 1998, have become increasingly desperate and in the latest strikes decided to withdraw minimum cover for the first time.

In television interviews, when questioned about the strikers' demands, Mainassara replied: "if there's no money in the pot they won't get paid." He insisted, "We are in the third year of a structural adjustment program and we intend more than ever to respect our commitment." He continued, "Certainly, there is nothing more normal than that a self-respecting state should be able to pay its civil servants, but if that is not the case, then there are reasons; we have to face our debt service."

During an official visit to France, Mainassara was further questioned about not paying public workers: "The solution is certainly not through tempestuous strikes. If there is money, they'll get their salaries. If there isn't, they won't get a radish. They can go on an

unlimited strike; that will allow us to save money on the mass of civil service salaries."

Social conditions throughout Niger have reached breaking point. One in ten of Niger's population lives in what are described as "food-insecure areas". The "food for work" programmes, launched to prevent the starvation of farmers whose land has been lost to the desert, have been closed. These farmers live in the poorest regions of one of the poorest countries in the world.

Mainassara's dedication to the IMF package even led him to risk upsetting the army. In February last year, soldiers were not paid, causing a near mutiny. It was at this point that Mainassara described the situation created by servicing the foreign debt as "increasingly intolerable."

During this last period, Mainassara spent more time abroad than at home. "Nigeriens are wondering if someone hasn't transformed the general into a 'kurciya' or turtledove", reported Kakaki. According to Hausa tribal tradition, changing a person into a turtledove is a way of getting rid of someone whose presence is unwanted.

Key sections of the military and ruling elite decided that Mainassara had become a liability. Those who organised the coup have so far given no reasons for their actions, or whether the bogus electoral process will eventually be resumed. But any attempt to continue imposing the World Bank package will give rise to yet more political instability and social unrest.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact