

Niger takes on the trappings of civilian rule

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The West African state of Niger held a referendum July 18 on a new civilian constitution for the country.

In April this year Niger President Ibrahim Barre Mainassara was assassinated by his security guards in what was officially described as "an unfortunate accident". Following the coup, military chief Major Dauda Mallam Wanke established the Council for National Reconciliation (CRN). The CRN scrapped the old constitution, proposed a new one and promised to hand over power to civilian rule by the end of the year. Elections are scheduled for October and November, from which military officers (serving and retired) are barred as candidates.

A majority of those voting in the July 18 referendum backed the proposed constitution, but the turnout was very low with only 31 percent of four million registered voters going to the polling booths. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), the turnout was as low as five percent in some regions.

CENI suggested this was partly because the vote came at a busy time for farmers, in the midst of the rainy season, and that the weather rendered polling stations inaccessible in three regions. A more likely interpretation is widespread scepticism about the turn to parliamentary rule and a belief that the proposed political changes will do little to overcome the appalling level of poverty that afflicts the mass of the people.

The new constitution proposes a form of power-sharing between the president and the prime minister, described as a "semi-presidential regime". In the past there were continual conflicts between the president and prime minister, who were from different parties, which led to the coup of 1996 that brought Ibrahim Barre Mainassara to power. The new constitution also provides for an amnesty for those responsible for the coups of 1996 and 1999.

Pressure for the proposed constitutional changes is

coming from the United States and other major imperialist powers. Mainassara's seizure of power in 1996 was widely welcomed by Western governments, who hoped it would bring a measure of political stability to Niger. A six-year debt repayment package was negotiated with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief scheme. Every aspect of the country's economy was put under World Bank direction.

Government spending was severely cut and plans laid to privatise state industry. The Western governments also demanded that moves toward some form of civilian rule be instituted.

Six months after taking power, Mainassara organised a general election, having promoted himself from colonel to general. His own party, the National Salvation Council, won with 52 percent of the vote, but the elections were widely regarded as rigged.

His unpopularity grew over the next three years as the social and economic conditions of the majority of the population deteriorated. Again under pressure from France and the United States, Mainassara held local elections in February this year. Again there were reports of vote rigging. Oppositionists were attacked and rounded up by the military.

The day before Mainassara was assassinated the Supreme Court had to annul the election results of certain districts because of irregularities. At that time civil servants were on strike, with pay arrears of six months outstanding.

More details of why Mainassara was shot by his security guards have been put forward by the *Independent* of Ghana. The paper explains that the main factor was the change in leadership in Nigeria following the death of military dictator Sani Abacha.

The *Independent* interviewed "a number of Nigerian business executives and Nigerian journalists" at a

recent world congress who have "unanimously disclosed that Mainassara was killed because Abubakar [who took over from Abacha] had refused to carry on to the letter an agreement by Nigerian former dictator, General Abacha, to bankroll the security guards of Mainassara".

The *Independent* then states that "in the words of the Nigerian participants, agitation amongst Mainassara's security men rose to dizzy heights when, for four months, their monthly salaries were delayed". Apparently Abacha paid the salaries of security guards in a number of countries surrounding Nigeria to help maintain his rule.

This *Independent* report does not address any connections between the security guards and sections of the ruling elite in Niger, or take into account the fact that their chief was none other than Major Wanke.

Since coming to power in April, the transitional CRN government has made clear its intention to abide by the demands of its imperialist creditors and maintain debt repayments at whatever cost to the Niger people. In May the newspaper *Kakaki* reported the warning of Sidibe Seydou of the Finance Ministry: "It's a question of compressing expenditure to get it down to the essential items, and to put into effect all the measures necessary to improve revenue and to save the program negotiated with the IMF and the World Bank."

Seydou also observed that the budget for the next three months shows expenditure of 58 million dollars, but anticipates revenues of only 27 million dollars. He said the salaries of some senior civil servants would be cut in half.

Approximately 43,000 civil servants are already owed eight months back pay. The trade unions, unhappy with these salary cuts, have broken the "social truce" that was declared when the CRN took office. Teachers, health workers and university professors have all been on strike in the last few months.

Captain Djbrilla Hima, spokesman for the CRN, has announced that Niger will continue to make payments on its foreign debt at the expense of salary arrears. Anticipating criticism, he declared: "Those who think that one only has to stop repaying external debts in order to pay salaries are mistaken. That would compromise our structural adjustment program with the IMF and the World Bank, and for us that is out of the question."

The World Bank has praised Niger for keeping economic reform efforts "on course". Visiting World Bank officials are said to be "particularly pleased with the transparency in the privatisation of Niger's state enterprises", according to Reuters.

Niger is an exceptionally impoverished country that relies heavily on foreign assistance. For the most part, this was withdrawn following the April coup. Niger had hoped for debt relief from the G7's Jubilee 2000 plan, but was overlooked. With a population of 10 million, Niger is almost twice the size of Texas and is largely desert. It is ranked 173rd in the UN's annual report on Human Development—with only Sierra Leone ranked lower.

Like many other impoverished ex-colonial countries, Niger is in the untenable position of being instructed to repay enormous debts and at the same time introduce "democratic reforms". When the politics are not acceptable to Western governments, as in Mainassara's rigged 1996 election or the assassination that removed him from power earlier this year, the country is punished with the withdrawal of aid.

The subservience of Niger's political and military elite to IMF and World Bank demands ensures that the constitutional changes will not lead to genuine democracy for the mass of workers and peasants, whose conditions are to be made even worse. This can only be imposed through military and police repression, whether or not it is clothed in the formal trappings of civilian rule.



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