All candidates in Niger elections pledge to enforce IMF and World Bank dictates

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The West African state of Niger went to the polls on October 17 to elect a new head of state, following the assassination of former President General Ibrahim Bare Mainassara in April. Seven candidates stood in the election, but this was merely a pretence of democracy meant to comply with current demands from Western governments. The candidates included ex-president Mahamane Ousmane, two former prime ministers and two retired army colonels, all of whom promised to continue with World Bank and IMF agreements, including the privatisation of state-owned enterprises.

A run-off election will be needed, as no candidate gained a clear majority. The two proceeding to the next ballot are Tandja Mamadou of the National Movement for the Development of Society, a retired Lieutenant Colonel and former ambassador to Nigeria who received 32.3 percent of the vote, and ex-Prime Minister Mahamadou Issoufou of the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism who received 22.8 percent of the vote. Ousmane came in a close third with 22.5 percent. The election is to be held on November 24.

A United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) report of October 20 lays out the future for the victor in Niger's election. Ukowa Ukiwe, a regional analyst from the Centre for Advanced Social Sciences in Nigeria, suggests that the new regime must aggressively seek direct foreign investment, as Niger's uranium—its chief export—can only be harnessed by external private initiative. Private investors, he added, will need legislation that guarantees the repatriation of their profits. Otherwise foreign companies would side with insurrectionary groups in order to gain access to solid mineral deposits. “This has been a factor in Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo,” Ukiwe said.

Following the April coup, almost all foreign government aid was withdrawn from Niger, though World Bank and International Monetary Fund schemes remained in place. This withdrawal resulted in the cutting of various development projects and added to the government's fiscal problems—already strained due to falling uranium prices. Consequently, public sector salaries have not been paid since April, when they were already many months behind.

Civil disquiet is increasingly a problem. As many as 40,000 public sector employees have taken strike action in the last two years, some demanding 11 months' unpaid wages. Eighteen thousand teachers boycotted the opening of schools in October, along with a strike by six thousand nurses, midwives and laboratory staff, all of whom were demanding wages owed them. Late-paid salaries provoked army mutinies in April and October.

It is thought that European government aid might resume if the elections are seen to establish a civilian government. The World Bank suspended its aid to Niger on September 15 due to the non-payment of the country's share of projects sponsored by the bank. This affected educational and agricultural schemes, which have been cut.

Mainassara's overthrow was decried in the West, particularly in France, as the ousting of a “democratic regime”. However, Mainassara himself came to power in a military coup in January 1996, overthrowing the civilian government of Mahamane Ousmane. Mainassara had denounced Ousmane's administration as the source of the country's instability. There had been continuous conflicts, to the point of impasse, between the president and the prime minister, who came from different parties.

Mainassara's own coup was widely welcomed by Western governments as a turn to a more stable and

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compliant regime. There have been accusations that France, for whom he became a virtual puppet, may even have aided it. French interests lie in Niger's uranium, which fuels 25 percent of France's energy production.

Following the coup, every aspect of Niger's economy was put under World Bank direction. A six-year debt repayment package was negotiated with the IMF and the World Bank, under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) debt relief scheme, and government spending was severely cut, with plans laid to privatise state industry.

Six months after seizing power, Mainassara attempted to legitimise his rule by holding a rigged election. He replaced the existing independent electoral commission with his own commission, and instructed the military to seize ballot boxes all over the country and take them to a secret location before delivering them to “election central”. He then arrested all the opposing candidates.

Under pressure from the US and France, Mainassara began the process of reintroducing the trappings of democratic rule, with elections held in February this year. Again there were cries of foul play, as the published results included only 70 percent of municipal seats and only 50 percent of local council seats. On April 7, two days before his assassination, the country's Supreme Court effectively annulled the election by ordering a rerun, but did not set a date.

The ensuing instability was the main factor in the Presidential Guard deciding to get rid of Mainassara on behalf of the ruling elite. Prime Minister Ibrahim Assane Mayaki described the assassination as “an unfortunate accident”.

However, in an astonishingly frank interview with *Jeune Afrique* on September 21, Mayaki explained why he had lied: “You need to place my words, for which I assume complete responsibility, in their context. My consistent objective, right from the announcement of the assassination of President Bare, was to avoid a bloodbath. It was necessary to find the right words that, although they were not true, could calm the vengeful ardour and the resentment of the dead President's supporters; all the more so because, confronting them, the soldiers appeared determined. When one is in the middle of a conflict, one must keep cool-headed and put the general interest first.”

He continued, “To sum up, on April 9, I had to make up something to explain the events. It was either the ‘unfortunate accident' or Sierra Leone.” In other words, either accept the fiction of an accident or face the descent into civil war—as in Sierra Leone.

A former French colony, Niger is ranked as the second poorest country in the world and has been run by military regimes for most of the time since independence. Fully 80 percent of its people are illiterate, 63 percent live below the official poverty line and life expectancy is just 47 years. Whoever wins the election in November, Niger's military and political elite's subservience to IMF and World Bank dictates will ensure that debt maintenance and access to uranium are top on the priority list.

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