

When France is no longer a dream | The example of Niger

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Niger, a country particularly exposed to the jihadist threat that burdens the Sahel-Saharan strip, is generally regarded in France as a reliable partner that is aware of the security issues. Seen from Niger, however, away from the corridors of power, Franco-Nigerien relationship has showed significant deterioration in recent years. And while this deterioration is not inexorable, it cannot be neglected. Considering that Niger is no exception...

On 16 and 17 January 2015, after the publication in one of the prophet Mohammed cartoons in the newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, particularly violent riots targeted Christian places of worship, bars and shops, mainly in the towns of Niamey and Zinder. The weekend toll was heavy: fatalities, twenty churches and temples burned throughout the territory, bars ransacked, points of sale of Orange telephone cards vandalised, the French cultural centre in Zinder set ablaze, shops looted, President Mahamadou Issoufou party's headquarters (PNDS) in Agadez attacked...

These riots came as electric shock. Not because the symbols of France and the ruling party were attacked, since these represent traditional targets of protests in francophone Africa. But in addition to their particularly violent and structured nature as well as the role played by imams in sparking them, they were the first attacks in Niger aimed at the Christian religion in this way.

In this context, they were associated to the emergence in the country of the Boko Haram sect and the rise of radical religious players having filled the vacuum left by the State: preachers, imams schooled by the Izala movement in the North of Nigeria and largely inspired by the Saudi Wahhabi theology as well as salafist reformist practices (1). *“A radical salafist ideology has [...] little by little dug a hole in Nigerien society”*, observes the Franco-Nigerien anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan. *“It was able to grow by surfing the Wahhabi wave, in other words a fundamentalist Islam that has swept Niger and the Sahel countries for more than 20 years, promoted by Saudi Arabia and the Qatar, with massive funding, training of clerics and media propaganda.”* (2)

Beyond this religious development, the political weight of religious players - sometimes qualified as the *“first opposition force”* (3) – and the lack of supervision by representatives of a criticised State that lacks popular legitimacy, these demonstrations raise the question of the evolution of France’s image in the country. This interpretation based on the manipulation by the opposition or various leaders tends in fact to hide a growing hostility towards France beyond the simple religious factors or a fertile breeding ground resulting from poverty, the rejection of a Western model of education and development, or even radical Islam justifying the use of violence and allowing preachers to have a *“leverage effect”* on their followers.

As a French expatriate in the country said to a journalist, *“the protesters attacked symbols of French interests, as if the evangelical and Catholic churches could be associated with these same interests...”* (4). This remark deserves to be qualified considering the targets attacked and the presence of looters among the demonstrators. However, it highlights that a number of rioters have primarily targeted France and the symbols of its presence and influence.*

(1) The Izala movement (*Jama’at Izalat’al-bid’a wa’iqamat al-Sunna*) was created in Jos, in the State of Plateau (Nigeria) at the end of the 1970s by Cheick Ismaïla Ibrahim. It is radically opposed to and sometimes violent towards other branches of Islam, brotherhoods in particular. Mohamed Yusuf, the founder of the Boko Haram sect, was an Izala member before dissenting.

(2) Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, *“Comment le salafisme a pu prospérer au Niger”*, *Marianne*, 21 January 2015.

(3) International Crisis Group, *Niger : un autre maillon faible dans le Sahel ?*, Rapport Afrique no. 208, 19 September 2013, p. 28.

(4) Quoted by Jean-Louis Le Touzet, *“Émeutes anti-Charlie : le double visage du Niger”*, *Libération*, 18 January 2015.

A degraded image

In the streets and the suburbs of Niamey (5), the looks directed towards the former colonial power are particularly critical. Indeed, there is a clear hostility, somewhat reminiscent of anti-American feelings of the 2000s, a decade during which the US became aware that a large part of the world did not like them, while trying to remedy it. France is seen as responsible for the difficulties faced by the people of Niger. Far from being an ally, it would be at best a partner defending its interests above all – at the expense of the sovereignty of Niger and without seeking reciprocity –, at worst an opponent hiding its real intentions of domination and control.

More specifically, it is possible to distinguish two types of criticism. Firstly, France's military intervention does not address the root causes of violence and even contributes to maintain Niger as an under-developed state. *"This is not a solution, we are not doing what it takes"*, notes a PhD student at Abdou Moumouni University in Niamey. *"Niger's commitment in war is useless. It is development, education, health that could have allowed us to progress further"*. While the country is facing critical challenges concerning food security, development, health or education systems, the fight against terrorist groups is diverting attention from the priorities. In most regions of Niger in effect, the main factors of insecurity are not jihadist groups and their terrorist actions, but poverty, deprivation and hardship (6). Westerners are aiming at the wrong target. As summarised by a humanitarian working for several years in the country, *"there is a paradox between the concerns of the people, the major problems of Niger and the difficulties of daily life, and this issue of regional terrorism"*.

Secondly, and following from the first criticism, the French as well as Americans are supposedly lying about the reasons for their presence, going as far as maintaining a violence that serves their ideological, geo-strategic and geo-economic interests in line with their dominant ambitions. How else can we explain, it is argued, the military intervention in Libya against Gaddafi the consequences of which will have a knock-on effect on the sub-region for several more years? Why does Boko Haram subsist despite the efforts made by the international partners from the Lake Chad basin States? How is it possible to understand that the Nigerien sect could still carry out offensive actions despite the multiple intelligence tools available to the French and the Americans? *"If the fight is not effective, it is because the strategic partners are not playing fair"* according to a lawyer close

(5) This note is based on about 60 interviews in Niamey and its suburbs of players from civil society - middle-class and intellectual bourgeoisie mainly - and foreigners living in the country for several years. The interviews were conducted in May-June 2015 and in March 2016. They did not concern France's image but rather the perception of terrorism... a topic which was seized by our interviewees as an opportunity to talk spontaneously about France's action.

(6) *Étude des perceptions sur les facteurs de l'insécurité et de l'extrémisme violent dans les régions frontalières du Sahel. Addenda : éclairages thématiques et statistiques*, hd/PNUD, March 2016.

to the government in mid-2015. *"Public hostility escalated following the attack on the island of Karamga [25 April 2015, resulting in the death of about 50 Nigerien soldiers]"*, observed for his part a Nigerien humanitarian worker one month after the facts. *"The Americans and the French were blamed for not doing anything to prevent it. [...] There's a kind of hatred [...] with respect to the behaviour of the two armies. The communities do not understand that, despite all the technology deployed, the attack on the island occurred."* (7)

These criticisms, exacerbated during 2015 in the context of the fight against Boko Haram, refer to the salience of the conspiracy theories and widespread fantasies. Firstly, Boko Haram and AQIM are supposedly instruments at the service of Western interests by preventing non-US and non-French companies from prospecting and extracting strategic raw materials. *"For the conspiracists"*, notes a consultant from the Agadez region, *"France does not want to exploit [the mine] at Imouraren [...] But the existence of a red zone prevents the attribution of a permit to those who are not on-site, i.e. others than the Americans and the French."* As for the Lake Chad region, Boko Haram fighters represent an embodiment of the battles engaged by external powers to gain control over local resources. Furthermore, to believe that the US and French military, using their means, are able to know everything, is a fantasy that recalls the debates on the revolution in military affairs in the United States prior to the intervention in Iraq in 2003: thanks to technology, the "fog of war" would disappear, granting the US army the power of ubiquity.

Is it possible however to cast aside these beliefs with a swipe of the hand on the pretext of their incongruity? In addition to having their own rationality, they reveal what a number of Nigerien men and women are thinking today. Such theories give force to the social and economic interpretation of the violence in the analysis of the security situation, rather than religious factors and masking effects. Above all, they reflect a misunderstanding of France's action and goals, and even a shift in expectations, while revealing a distrust and hostility which are not new but have become stronger in recent years.

(7) The attack by Boko Haram fighters of Bosso, on the border with Nigeria and in the vicinity of Lake Chad in the first days of June, provoke similar reactions. However, while a rumour was circulating the days later in Niamey about a warning by French soldiers of Barkhane of the likelihood of an attack, the hostility focused against a government held responsible for the lack of air support and the clientelistic practices inside armed forces (see in particular Nathalie Prevost, "Au Niger, l'attaque de Bosso révèle la faiblesse de l'armée et fait débat", *Le Monde*, 8 June 2016).



Genealogy of hostility

The emergence of a free press, a sovereign national Conference held in 1991, and the multipartite elections all served as a framework that was conducive to criticism and reprimands against France in the early 1990s. During this period, which marks the emergence of a public debate on the Franco-Nigerien relationship, the French flag was actually burned during a demonstration. In Niger as elsewhere in Africa, the anti-French sentiment is indeed widespread, fuelled by resentment surrounding the colonisation, the “progressive” speeches from teachers then anti-Western sermons from clerics (8), the networks surrounding the governments, and the generalised feeling of an omnipotent France placing and toppling leaders since independence. The Nigerien understanding of the Seyni Kountché coup in 1974 against Hamani Diori is eloquent. While President Diori antagonised France by demanding higher prices for uranium, the general feeling is that of an operation *a minima* condoned by Paris. But contrary to this perception, the “*French were not involved in the coup, but they were caught totally unaware by this event*” due to a series of failures from the French intelligence apparatus and the precautions taken by the persons involved in the coup to maintain their intentions secret from partners (9).

Against this historical background, France’s image has become heavily tarnished in recent years, under the influence of several factors and crystallising around a few symbols. The companies Areva and Bolloré are seen as the archetypal corporation that fail to listen to local people and who ignore their needs. In the Tahoua and Agadez regions for example, French interests are thus assimilated to those of Areva, a company whose activity has heavily damaged the environment without generating the development expected by local communities (10). Then, the establishment by the French Foreign Affairs department of a risk map in 2010, on which to base visa restrictions and intended both to warn travellers and deter them from visiting certain areas, is seen as an “*absolute injustice*” feeding resentment and questions about its true function (11). Firstly, it was accompanied by the forced departure of humanitarian aid organisations, threatened with losing their subsidies if they did not conform. Secondly, many Nigeriens condemn the situation of “double standards”. They do not understand that France – not contemplated by the Quai d’Orsay – or even Turkey, are not classified as orange or red zones owing to the recent attacks in

(8) This is the case in the Zinder region for example, and more generally in the areas affected by the spread of the Izala movement. The French and American presence is seen as an open door to cultural westernisation and a criticism of the way of life promoted by the preachers.

(9) Klaas van Walraven, ““Opération Somme”: La *French Connection* et le coup d’État de Seyni Kountché au Niger en avril 1974”, *Politique africaine*, no.134, 2014/2, pp. 133-154.

(10) Whether the reasons are linked to Areva, to the corruption of the Nigerien administration, or other causes...

(11) On areas at risk, see: Nicolas Bombacci, “Les zones à risques du ministère des Affaires étrangères: une tragicomédie?”, Fondation Jean Jaurès, note no.137, 25 juin 2012.

both countries, while nearly all of Niger features these two colours (12). Thirdly, the migration policy associated with Nicolas Sarkozy's term of office is particularly badly perceived, summarising both the lack of reciprocity in Franco-Nigerien relationships and the gap that exists between the values invoked by France, using and argument of the long friendly relationship, and the reality of the inequalities.

Finally, the Franco-British intervention in Libya weighs heavily on France's image. This was the initiating factor of the last rebellion in Mali, led against an extremely popular leader in the Agadez region and even in Niamey, in particular because of investments he realised in the country and the pomp accompanying his visits (13). This military operation illustrates the gap between the Nigerien and French interests as it crystallises the questions about French involvement in the sub-region in the name of the fight against terrorist groups. Libya was a "strategic error, [...] there are things that we can't really grasp", summarizes a Nigerien MP. And, in this context, the conspiracy machine works at full capacity.

A widening gap

The election of François Holland allowed hope for change after the particularly pernicious mandated of Nicolas Sarkozy. However, four years after his arrival in power, his actions are more often associated with deception, and the gap between France and Nigeriens has continued to widen. On the altar of the fight against terrorism and an old relationship between the two presidents, human rights infringements are forgiven, just like corruption and demagogic practices. The election campaign climate in the spring of 2016 and the tensions between the authorities and the opposition have also contributed towards exacerbating hostility against France. For opponents of the regime, not without recalling the tendency to interpret Nigerien political life through the prism of a France that appoints and ousts presidents at will, Mahamadou Issoufou's victory is explained by the French support and, more generally, by that of Westerners.

If the first months of 2016 must be seen from the perspective of an election campaign rife with clashes and the search for funding and support, it is clear that France is today associated with excesses of power, thus feeding the rejection of the political and social Western model - or the perception of that model - and the advance of a discourse calling for an Islamic Republic. "Democracy is not for Africa, power goes to those who have the most

(12) Recent exceptions: the Kouré Park as well as the towns of Niamey, Kanazi and Dosso are under "enhanced vigilance".

(13) Visiting Agadez for the Mouloud festivities (commemoration of the birth of Prophet Mohammed) in 2007, Gaddafi built villas, street lights, roads and organised celebrations. This splendour comes with magical powers. When on 30 March 2007, Gaddafi prayed with Tandja in the main stadium in Niamey, rain fell 30 minutes later. Thus people still remember. "When Gaddafi prays, it rains."

money. Dictatorships are not accepted by the international community. An Islamic Republic is needed to moralise society”, stated a Nigerien discussion partner two weeks after Mahamadou Issoufou's election victory. This link between the moralisation of political mores and the Islamic Republic can be strongly questioned, as is proven by the classification of Mauritania by the NGO *Transparency International* concerning the perception of corruption (112th in 168 countries, Mali being 95th and Niger 99th) (14) or also the accounts from Mauritians on the operation of the regime and administrations in their country. This being so, it is a sign of disappointed expectations, the exhaustion of certain models, and how religion appears today as one of the few untainted areas on which it is possible to build reform and regenerate the political and social body.

The focus on migration issues by European States today also shows the differences in expectations and perceptions. While Europeans decided at the Valletta Summit to create an “Emergency Trust Fund for stability and the fight against the root causes of irregular migration and the phenomenon of displaced persons in Africa” (1.8 billion euros), the freedom of movement is seen as a basic right in Niger (15). Similarly, in contrast to the negative vision of migration, immigrating to Europe or another continent is experienced by the migrants and the different players of civil society from the countries of origin as a quest for security and well-being, an opportunity for their families and their loved ones. Leaving to try one’s luck is common sense in a country where 50% of the population is under 15 years old, where young people spend much of their day on a plastic chair, and where the consumption of drugs has become a major public health issue (16).

An inexorable ground swell?

Such patterns of conduct are obviously not fixed and form part of “*situational ethics*” (17). In the early 2000s, young Nigerien people especially hostile to the United States were among the most eager to migrate to that country in order to seek their fortunes. Similarly, criticising European policy does not mean refusing the opportunity to receive aid.

(14) The 2015 corruption perception index, *Transparency International*. The construction of the new airport in Nouakchott appears as a summary of certain practices of the government (Alain Antil, “L’étoile pâlie du président Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz”, blog *Afrique Décryptages de l’IFRI*, 3 May 2016).

(15) It should be noted that the Nigeriens are not amongst the nationals who migrate most to Europe. On the contrary even ...

(16) In addition to a consumption of tramol (or tramadol) increasingly more widespread in all social strata, a dose of krach is available at 10,000 CFA francs in the streets of Niamey (30,000 CFA francs for a dose of cocaine). As for the Diffa region, many young people go into the bush to smoke cannabis. If the increase of consumption concerns the services faced with this development, the authorities have not embarked on any risk reduction approach.

(17) Adeline Masquelier, “Négocier l’avenir. L’islam, les jeunes et l’État au Niger”, in René Otayek and Benjamin Soares (dir.), *Islam, État et société en Afrique*, Paris, Karthala, 2009, pp. 459-490.

However, beyond this observation, the evolution of France's image in Niger raises the question of a process that cannot be reduced to the spread of radical Islamic currents, its implications and, *ultimately*, of French politics in the country, or even in West Africa.

With the Serval and Barkhane military operations, France (re)-established itself as a major player in the Sahel-Saharan strip by playing the security card, to the point where several observers denounced a policy entrapped by the priorities of the fight against terrorism. Of course, such priorities put other considerations in a secondary position. However, the mistakes of French politics exceed them widely, with a mixture of "short-termism", blind spots and navel-gazing. The fluctuation of political guidelines since the early 1990s between intervention and multi-lateralisation (Africanisation or internationalisation *via* the UN) (18), the restrictions on movement, the reduction in aid in the field of education, the reduction of the number of international technical experts and the decline in their budgets, are all signs of a lack of clarity in policy guidelines and the failure to take into account the needs of local stakeholders. Similarly, the personalisation of relations between leaders and the disappointments of the first Mahamadou Issoufou mandate (19) feed the hostility towards French authorities that are too willing to tolerate behaviour of their partner while failing to heed the expectations of the people, claiming to embody democracy without defending it with the expected force (20).

The current ground swell is not inexorable. However, to eradicate it, several efforts and clarifications are necessary. The first is to engage in a sincere discourse on the errors of military intervention in Libya in 2011 and the interests, priorities, and with respect to its partners, the limits of France's action. The second is that of greater attention to youth and civil society, its resentments and expectations, in particular in terms of balancing the values invoked and the policies deployed, but also with regard to education or development. The third effort, which may be the main one, stems from the need to make mentalities evolve. *"The win-win scenario has not played a part in France's posture towards with its former colonies"*, says an international expert present in the country for many years. *"Speaking with the same people, we get the same old story. We don't play to win. We play to prevent others. There is no generosity. We fight against people who have everything to gain; we behave like people who have everything to lose. In this way, France's outreach will never increase."*

(18) The Ivorian example is noteworthy here (Richard Banégas, "Le retour du "gendarme de l'Afrique " Politique du "yo-yo" en Côte d'Ivoire", *Revue de la défense nationale*, no. 763, October 2013, pp. 21-26).

(19) See for example Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, "Niger. Lettre à mes amis du parti vainqueur : saurez-vous ne pas reproduire les erreurs du passé?", *Marianne*, 18 April 2016.

(20) Whereas Mahamadou Issoufou was re-elected to the presidency with 92% of the votes in April 2016, the conditions of the second round – marked in particular by the imprisonment of his main challenger Hama Amadou then his departure to France for health reasons – and simple electoral arithmetic are not without raising questions (Christian Bouquet, "In Niger, was President Issoufou elected "in the real sense of the word"?", *The Conversation*, 18 April 2016).



In the absence of change, disappointment and resentment will contribute to diverting those who support democracy away from France along with the model of society that the French soldiers deployed continue to defend. As a second consequence, France will continue to appear more and more like a figure from the past and a vector of immobility, widening the gap with public opinion and nourishing anti-imperialist and pro-sovereignty discourses liable to generate opposition and resistance while encouraging radicalised trends which cannot be reduced to the progression of Muslim currents beyond the authority of the State or controlled by external manipulation.

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