

Freedom in the World 2014 - Niger

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2014 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 4

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3

OVERVIEW

In August, President Mahamadou Issoufou of the Nigerien Party for Democracy and Socialism (PNDS) authorized a cabinet reshuffle to create what he called a government of national unity. The new cabinet was composed of 37 ministers – up from 26 – and 10 members of the existing cabinet were dismissed. While the unity cabinet included members of opposition parties, the president's party retained key positions.

Issoufou characterized the reshuffle in part as a response to two terrorist attacks that had struck northern Niger on May 23, one at a military base in Agadez and another at a uranium mine in Arlit. More than 20 people were reported killed, in addition to several suicide bombers, and many more were wounded. The Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa – a militant group that had become more active since a conflict erupted in neighboring Mali in 2012 – claimed responsibility. Algerian terrorist commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar also claimed a role in the attacks. Days later, on June 1, three guards were killed at a prison in the capital during what the government described as a botched escape attempt by four inmates held on terrorism charges.

In October, the government signed an agreement to cooperate with Nigeria against the Islamist militant groups Boko Haram and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Niger also authorized the U.S. government to establish bases for aerial surveillance in the region.

Already one of the world's poorest countries, Niger has been ravaged by extreme food shortages since a 2009 drought. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs announced that

around 800,000 people would require food aid during 2013. Nevertheless, a study released in October by Save the Children found that the Nigerien government had targeted hunger and poor health care so effectively that it had made the greatest strides of any country in reducing child mortality.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 26 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 9 / 12

A 2010 military coup that removed increasingly authoritarian president Mamadou Tandja led to the adoption of a new constitution that year. Drafted in broad consultation with civil society, the charter reinstated executive term limits, curbed executive power, and provided amnesty for the coup leaders. Under the constitution, the president is elected by popular vote for up to two five-year terms. Members of the 113-seat, unicameral National Assembly, who also serve five-year terms, are elected through party-list voting in eight multimember regional constituencies and eight single-member constituencies reserved for ethnic minorities.

Presidential, legislative, and municipal elections were held in January 2011 to replace the transitional government established by the junta and restore civilian rule. The junta forbade its members and representatives of the transitional government from running for office. The PNDS, headed by Issoufou, led the legislative voting with 37 seats. The pro-Tandja National Movement for a Developing Society (MNSD) – headed by former prime minister Seini Oumarou – placed second with 26 seats, while former prime minister Hama Amadou's Nigerien Democratic Movement for an African Federation took 25. Five smaller parties divided the remainder. In the first round of the presidential election, Issoufou and Oumarou emerged as the top two candidates; Issoufou then claimed victory with 58 percent of the vote in a March runoff election. Both the presidential and legislative elections were declared free and fair by international observers, despite minor irregularities. The PNDS and MNSD won the majority of positions across the country in local elections.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 10 / 16

After the 2010 military coup, Amadou returned from exile, three former legislators were released from jail, and there was a decrease in harassment of opposition politicians. Since assuming power in 2011, Issoufou has appointed former opponents and members of civil society to high positions in government to foster inclusivity, and the 2013 government reshuffle continued this pattern, though it left most key posts in the hands of Issoufou's allies.

The constitution reserves eight special constituency seats to ensure ethnic minorities' representation in the National Assembly. Such minorities, including the nomadic population, continue to have poor access to government services. Under a 2002 quota system, political parties must allocate 10 percent of their elected positions to women.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12

Corruption is a serious problem in Niger, and observers have raised concerns regarding uranium-mining contracts. However, the 2010 constitution provides for greater transparency in government reporting of revenues from the extractive industries, and for the declaration of personal assets by government officials, including the president. In July 2011, the government created the High Authority to Combat Corruption, and it opened an anticorruption hotline that August. Key officials from the previous administration were indicted for fraud and corruption during 2011, and in July of that year, Issoufou was the target of a foiled assassination attempt thought to be motivated by his crackdowns on corruption in the military. In February 2013, authorities arrested some 20 doctors and other health workers on suspicion of embezzling funds from an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), which reportedly suspended its activities in Niger as a result of the alleged theft. Niger was ranked 106 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 30 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 11 / 16

In 2010, the transitional government made significant efforts to restore freedoms of speech and of the press. In June of that year, the National Assembly adopted a new press law that eliminated prison terms for media offenses and reduced the threat of libel cases that journalists had faced under Tandja. In November 2011, Issoufou became the first head of state to sign the Table Mountain Declaration, which calls on African governments to promote press freedom. The media are largely allowed to publish political facts and critiques without interference, but journalists still sometimes face police violence while covering protests and prosecutions for libel. In June 2013, an Al-Jazeera television crew was detained for two days, allegedly because its members had not obtained the proper permits. The crew had been filming a story on the living conditions of refugees from Nigeria's civil conflict. The government does not restrict internet use, though less than 2 percent of the population has access.

Freedom of religion is generally respected in this overwhelmingly Muslim country. In the aftermath of the 2010 coup, both Muslim and Christian leaders worked with the junta to restore peace and democracy. Academic freedom is guaranteed but not always observed in practice.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 8 / 12

Constitutional guarantees of freedoms of assembly and association are largely upheld. However, police sometimes used force to break up labor and other protests during 2013, in one case allegedly causing the death of a bystander. The government does not restrict the operations of NGOs, although a lack of security in the north prevents such groups from accessing or functioning in the region. While the constitution and other laws guarantee workers the right to join unions and bargain for wages, over 95 percent of the workforce is employed in subsistence agriculture and small trading.

F. Rule of Law: 5 / 16

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and courts have shown some autonomy in the past, though the judicial system has at times been subject to executive interference. The Ministry of Justice supervises public prosecutors, and the president has the power to appoint judges.

Judicial corruption is fueled partly by low salaries and inadequate training. Prolonged pretrial detention is common, and police forces are underfunded and poorly trained. Prisons are characterized by overcrowding and poor health conditions.

Insecurity continues to plague many parts of the country, and several people have been kidnapped by groups such as AQIM. In October, four French citizens who had been abducted near Arlit and held by AQIM since 2010 were released.

The crisis in neighboring Mali led to an influx in 2012 of some 60,000 Malian refugees, of whom 47,000 remained in Niger in 2013, as well as 4,000 Nigerian refugees fleeing the situation in Northern Nigeria. This influx raised pressure on food supplies. Separately, in late October, the bodies of 92 migrants – predominantly women and children – who had died of thirst as they were attempting to cross illegally into Algeria were found close to Niger's border with that country. The government vowed to crack down on "criminal activities led by all types of trafficking networks," which it blamed for the deaths, and promised to close illegal migrant camps in the country's north. Just days after the discovery of the bodies, 127 migrants were stopped while attempting to cross via a similar route.

While two ethnic groups, Hausa and Djerma, still dominate many government and economic positions, minority groups are represented in these areas and their rights are protected by law. Same-sex sexual activity is not illegal in Niger, but same-sex rights are not recognized and there is no protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation. No NGOs work on LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) rights in Niger.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 6 / 16

The constitution guarantees freedom of movement and property rights and these are generally respected throughout the country, though bribery remains an issue for both.

Although the 2010 constitution prohibits gender discrimination, women suffer discrimination in practice. Family law gives women inferior status in property disputes, inheritance rights, and divorce. Sexual and domestic violence are reportedly widespread. Female genital mutilation was criminalized in 2003 and has declined, but it continues in a small percentage of the population.

While slavery was criminalized in 2003 and banned in the 2010 constitution, slavery remains a problem in Niger, with up to 43,000 individuals still in slavery. Niger remains a source, transit point, and destination for human trafficking. Despite a 2010 antitrafficking law and a five-year antitrafficking plan, investigation and prosecution efforts remained weak in 2013.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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