

## **Niger: Foreign Investments in Uranium Polluting Politics**

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Paris — The reform of Niger's constitution to allow president Mamadou Tandja to remain in power beyond his original mandate and even become president for life, was motivated by the hundreds of millions of dollars flowing into the West African country as a consequence of opaque foreign, especially French, investments in the local uranium mines.

This is the opinion of environmental activists and pundits who consider the referendum a serious violation of elementary democratic rules.

Tandja, who has ruled Niger since 1999 and whose second mandate as president was scheduled to expire next December, defended the constitutional reform and the continuance of his term as an alleged "people's call" for his personal supervision of "all the important work that I started." This "work" is the foreign investment in uranium and other minerals.

According to official figures, more than 92 percent of Niger's population voted in the referendum on Aug 4 to extend Tandja's mandate for another three years and also approved the constitutional amendment which will allow him to extend his mandate for life.

But, critics say, the real reason for these steps is corruption. The financial windfall that Niamey receives from foreign investments in the uranium, gold and oil fields, is enormous and tempting, according to several sources.

The French environmental group Sortire du nucléaire ("Phase out nuclear power") called the referendum "a coup d'état" and accused the French government of complicity with Tandja as Paris's "silence condones the violation of human rights and corrupt practices" in Niger.

France, which has been exploiting uranium mines in Niger for 45 years, is the main foreign investor in Niger. Eight months ago, in Jan 2009, the French state-owned company Areva obtained a new concession to exploit the giant uranium mine of Imourarene, some 900 km north-east from the country's capital Niamey,

The mine is supposed to enter into operation in 2012 and shall produce 5,000 tonnes of uranium per year. The Areva investment in Imourarene is supposed to amount to 1.2 billion euros. Areva, which also builds and operates nuclear power plants, is considered the world's leading corporation in the nuclear power sector.

France, which does not possess uranium ore, completely relies on imports of the mineral to fuel its 58

nuclear power plants. The plants generate 80 percent of the country's electricity supply.

Other foreign countries investing heavily in Niger are the People's Republic of China, Australia and Canada. Niger, one of the poorest countries of the world, is the third largest uranium producer and is also rich in gold and oil. As of 2007, uranium exports accounts for 62 percent of exports by value and contributed 4.3 percent of government revenue.

Stephane Lhomme, spokesperson of the "Sortire du nucléaire", told IPS that the Nigerien government does not meet the "most elementary norms of transparency in the concession of exploitation rights for the uranium mines. France, through Areva, benefits from this lack of transparency," he said.

Thomas Hofnung, foreign affairs expert at the French daily newspaper Libération, also considered the referendum and the constitutional amendment in Niger a violation of elementary democratic rules. "Tandja wants to become president for life, whatever it takes," he wrote in an editorial commentary for the newspaper.

"Tandja dissolved the parliament and the constitutional court because both bodies opposed the constitutional reform and the extension of his mandate," he added.

The French daily newspaper Le Monde called the referendum "a sad moment for democracy in Africa" and recalled that, according to the constitutional amendment, Tandja can now be regarded as a lifelong ruler of Niger.

The Nigerien opposition has also denounced the constitutional reform. "The referendum constitutes a violation of the constitution and it did not have any legitimacy," the Coordination of Forces for Democracy and the Republic, a federation of opposition groups, said in a communiqué.

The murkiness surrounding uranium and other mineral concessions in Niger has often been denounced by international observers and activists. In a meeting in Niamey last July, international transparency campaigners complained that the Nigerien government failed to provide appropriate information about its recent mining contracts.

In a statement the campaigners, who had met under the umbrella of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), condemned the "opaqueness" surrounding Nigerien mining contracts, and demanded their "full publication in the official gazette and the elimination of confidentiality clauses."

EITI is a voluntary multilateral association created in 2002 to monitor "the proper and prudent management of natural resource wealth (to make it) an important engine for sustainable economic growth that contributes to sustainable development and poverty reduction."

Niger is since March 2005 a candidate country to the EITI.

As such, the government in Niamey has officially endorsed all EITI principles, including those "of transparency by governments and companies in the extractive industries and the need to enhance public financial management and accountability" and "of accountability by government to all citizens for the stewardship of revenue streams and public expenditure."

In its declaration, the EITI forum of last July urged the Niger government to introduce a law ensuring public access to mining industry documents. Nigerien environmental and civil society groups have also denounced the "vagueness" of the local authorities over numerous uranium and oil prospecting licences granted to foreign firms, including Areva.

"Despite Niger's membership of EITI, the authorities do not respect the principle of transparency in the extractive industry," EITI spokesperson Ali Idrissa said in an interview. Idrissa recalled that the Nigerien parliament last May had rejected the creation of a commission of inquiry into the mining contracts.

This lack of transparency is seen as suspicious. One European diplomat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told IPS that Tandja's son, Ousmane, is the country's commercial consul in Shanghai, China, and "is closely linked to Chinese investors in Niger.

"In Niamey, numerous foreign private companies, officially led by foreigners, mostly French or Chinese businesspeople, are directly linked to Tandja's sons or other relatives," the diplomat said.

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