



President of Niger Awarded “African Nobel Prize” for Leadership

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The Mo Ibrahim Foundation on 8 March awarded Mohammadou Issoufou, the outgoing president of Niger, a country that is the European Union’s most important partner in the control of irregular migration, a prestigious award for exemplary leadership. The 10 years of Issoufou’s rule serve as an example for neighbouring Mali and could be helpful in limiting the problem of unconstitutional third cadencies in West Africa.

What is the Mo Ibrahim Prize?

The foundation of Mo Ibrahim, a Sudanese-British telecommunications tycoon and philanthropist, runs the most comprehensive index of governance quality in Africa. Since 2007, the foundation has awarded a \$5 million prize to presidents who retire after fulfilling their mandate and displayed outstanding leadership achievements. The award is intended to promote good governance practices and discourage unconstitutional prolongation of rule (as seen last year in Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire; a similar situation may occur in Senegal this year). Although the award was to be annual, it has only been awarded for the fifth time and for just the first time since 2017. In most years, the jury recognised that there was no suitable candidate.

Why was the president of Niger awarded?

In 2010, Issoufou took power in a country on the brink of collapse. Niger, the poorest country in West Africa, was surrounded by instability. Islamic extremists from Boko Haram had infiltrated it from Nigeria, Algerian and Mauritanian jihadists from Mali, and, as a result of the war in Libya, armed Tuaregs seeking to win their own state. In the next decade, despite international military intervention, groups associated with Al-Qaida and ISIS intensified attacks in the region. Despite difficult conditions, Niger maintained political stability and good economic performance. Between 2011 and 2021, the number of Nigeriens living below the poverty line fell from 48% to 40%. By 2019, GDP

per capita in Niger increased by \$76.70 (16%) with the average for African countries a decline of \$54.50.

Was the choice without controversy?

The decisions not to grant the award in recent years has led to a relaxing of the criteria in selecting candidates. Issoufou does not correspond to the ideal model of a leader that the creators of the prize wanted to promote—one who is widely respected in their own countries and on the continent. Issoufou’s rule was marred by accusations of authoritarian tendencies. In 2016, the opposition boycotted the vote due to the arrest of Issoufou’s rival, and the incumbent leader won 92% of the vote. In the elections at the turn of 2020 to 2021, the state apparatus effectively worked for the victory of Issoufou’s right-hand man, Mohamed Bazoum. However, the regional context may turn out to be more important: in pointing out the benefits of not extending one’s rule, the award may help defuse the most serious crisis in Senegal in years.

What is the meaning of this international award?

Viewing Niger as a success could set it as a benchmark for EU policy towards Mali, a country with similar demographics and geography. To weaken separatism, Niger focused on better integration of the northern Tuareg people with the rest of the population, created more economic ties, and reduced the disproportion between the north and the centre. Issoufou integrated some of the fighters returning from Libya with the state apparatus. He

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did not support, as in Mali, the creation of local, ethnic “self-defence forces” whose activities were seen as a threat by local populations. The gradual improvement in the quality of local governance and justice in Niger has lowered the feeling of disenchantment with the state that drives

recruitment to armed groups in Mali. In Niger itself, the EU should strive to ensure that the country’s internal stability is not compromised by, for example, over-strengthening of border services as part of the Union’s wider migration-control policy.