

Electoral system and democratic instability in Niger

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This paper is part the on-going research conducted under the supervision of Pr Augustin Loada and initiated by the Center for Democratic Governance (CGD). It has started in January 2009 in Niger. We have not yet started writing the report as the research is going on. However, we can outline some the features of the research.

The impact of electoral system in democratic consolidation

One of the major impediments for democratic stability in Niger is related to the electoral system. The experience of Niger from 1993 to date has showed that proportional system *au plus fort reste* brings instability due to the high number of parties seating in parliament. The electoral reform brought about a change in the configuration of democratic institutions. In fact, with small number of parties, the democratic institutions became more stable.

However, the issue of exclusion of small parties constitutes another challenge of the party system. It is true that the electoral system is not the only factor explaining the political and institutional changes. There are other factors related to issues like weak resources for parties and the strategies of political actors in the political system.

But the electoral system is of great importance in democratic dispensation in Niger. This is why the electoral system is one of the major political issues in Niger. Interviews with politicians suggest that electoral system is still at the center of political controversy. The theoretical framework adopted in this study is based on new institutionalism as it developed in political science since the 80s.

Theoretical framework

The new institutionalism as a new approach in political science is very relevant in explaining the impact of electoral system on political behaviour and democratic stability. One of the main tenets of this theory is the proposition that institutions have the capacity to structure political behaviour. Actors are influenced by rules and norms defined by institutions. Electoral system is an institution. As such, it has an impact on the way politicians perceive their interests and how they behave in the political arena. In Niger, after the adoption of proportional system *à la plus forte moyenne*, many parties decided to enter in coalition

with other influential parties and then were able to get seat in Parliament. This change in political behaviour has been largely induced by the new institutional arrangement.

The new institutionalism states also that institutions, by creating asymmetrical power relations between actors, generate specific behaviour by actors. The experience of Niger gives the opportunity to test this hypothesis. Electoral systems are not neutral. Each system has political implications in terms of power relations. The system based on *le plus fort reste* allows weak parties to have an amount of influence in the political system by getting seats in parliament. The majoritarian system favours strong parties. In Niger, the MNSD, the former ruling party has always defended the view that majoritarian system was the best way to enhance democratic stability. Therefore, electoral systems are to be perceived as political resources in the hands of politicians and political parties.

Another tenets new institutionalism is the proposition that institutions have the natural tendency to maintain itself, to reproduce itself through the phenomena of path dependence. This hypothesis is relevant in explaining the way all reforms in the electoral system have become difficult. Changes will bring about many transformations in the political system, especially in the power relations between parties. The rationale behind the refusal to adopt a more representative electoral system is for the dominant parties to maintain the status quo.

These parties defend the view that the institutional stability of Niger is essentially due to the electoral system adopted since 1999. Electoral reform is problematic because of the dominance of strong parties in the parliament. The relevance of new institutionalism is that it allows us to investigate how actor's behaviour is structured by institutional arrangement, especially by the electoral system.

Methodology

The method employed in this research is empirical. It focused on parties experience from 1993 to date and it concentrates on how political actors react to institutional changes in the electoral system. Two types of parties are targeted, that is, the most influential parties and the weak parties which generally do not get seats in parliament. The study includes interviews with party leaders and activists as well as the systematic analysis of the scientific literature on the field. The sample of the study includes party actors at the national and regional levels. It includes also other actors like lawyers and civil society activists who have played a prominent role in the political process.

Some of the results of the study

Although we've not yet started analysing the results of the study, we can present some of the data collected which are to be analysed deeply:

1. Most of the big parties in Niger recognised the fact that the electoral system is for them a political tool for dealing with challenging parties. They defend the view that too many parties in National assembly will bring about instability, as what happened in the 3rd republic. They also argue that most of these small parties are no representatives; they're behaving like NGOs. The case of RVS is interesting in this regard. This party is defending green political theory, and most of the major parties perceive it like a NGOs interested in collecting resources from western green parties.
2. The small parties are relocating their activities at the local level. In fact, since it has become difficult for them to assert themselves at the national level, many of these parties are concentrating their activities in the local political arena. Thanks to the decentralisation process. In term of political behaviour, this tendency has impact on the political culture and behaviour. Parties are not necessarily viewed as organisations with national outlook. This new approach to politics may threaten national integration in the future.
3. At the national level, the main trend is for parties to go into coalition. Many small and regional-based parties are entering into large coalition with strong parties in order to get seats in national assembly. It seems that this political behaviour is induced by the institutional arrangement introduced through electoral system. It demonstrates the validity of the hypothesis of new institutionalism that political institutions are not neutral; they structure the behaviour of actors by influencing their attitudes.
4. The adoption of the new electoral system does not reduce the proliferation of political parties. The logic behind this policy was to discourage people from creating small parties which create confusion on the political arena. However, experience has showed that the number of parties has increased from 1993 to date. And still people continue to vote for these small parties. The implication of this trend is that institutional framework is not the only determinant of political behaviour. Political ideology and political loyalty are shaping electoral behaviour of the citizens.

These findings contradict the well-known idea that in Africa, political programme and ideologies are of no relevance in explaining political behaviour.

5. Politicians have an instrumental perception of political institutions. Institutions are viewed as instruments, mere tools for executing political strategies. Electoral system is not regarded as way of improving political governance; on the contrary, it is conceived as a tool for defeating political opponents and maintaining power. This rational perception of politicians shows that in Africa, political behaviour can be guided by rational thinking. The rational choice theory is relevant in explaining African politics. Africa has usually been analysed through culturalist paradigms generally inspired by some discipline such as anthropology or history.