



Decentralization in Niger: An Attempted Approach

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Decentralization in Niger can be understood as being a public institutional policy, conceived and implemented by the State for the purpose of inducing precise effects in some of their activities.

In general this policy is exemplified by the desire to establish the liberal administration of partially autonomous regions as opposed to a situation long characterized by the practice of delegating administrative powers. Thus, the decentralization of Niger appears to be more of a reform policy which seeks to break with the centralized type of radical "Jacobin" administration which often denies the validity of local characteristics which it is not familiar with.

The policy of decentralization, as it currently attempts to take form in Niger, is closely linked to the democratic process which began in the early 1990s. Although documents established this principle based on the idea of "liberal, partially autonomous administrative

regions”, we had to wait for the first constitution formed in a democratic age to have decentralization clearly declared as an administrative and organizational principle. It is also in the course of this period that a Federal Department, followed by a High Commission, was instructed to think about decentralization with a view towards its actual implementation. This step was reinforced by the inclusion of decentralization principles in the 1995 peace agreements between the government and the rebel army. Today, this agreement meets with widespread political consensus and makes decentralization an essential organizational principle to which each successive government has been committed to since 1995.



A long period of development

The liberal administration of partially autonomous regions was the object of numerous reforms, the most important among them undoubtedly being the reform of 1964. Although it was not implemented in its entirety, especially with regard to actually establishing the organizations which it founded and appointing the local authorities elected under universal suffrage, it nevertheless continues to affect the administrative organization of Niger. It did result in the institutionalization of administrative departments, divisions and districts, to mention only the organizational structure of the territory which has been in existence the longest.

In view of the territorial organizations they reflect, the 1983 documents – which establish the development of society – comply more with the logic of popular supervision than they fit into a decentralization perspective.

We had to wait for the National Sovereign Conference in 1991 before decentralization was placed on the agenda of public politics to be implemented by the future transition government. The

Constitution issued in December 1992 explicitly placed decentralization at the top of administrative regional principles in Niger, thus creating a constitutional obligation which was obviously *binding* on public authorities. A minister would thus be held responsible for conceiving the decentralization policy in Niger. Until a High Commission was established in 1995 and entrusted with administrative reforms and decentralization – which we know assures a certain amount of continuity in following up the question – the various succeeding governments who ruled the State on a ministerial level were always preoccupied with decentralization. Agreed upon in 1994 and reviewed in 1996, our legal documents date back to this period. In fact, the 1996 documents control decentralization. Their difference is based on the level of authority as prescribed by each document.

The first document considers only the administrative divisions and districts while the second includes local authorities at the regional and district level. During this period a very ambitious administrative redistricting proposal was promoted which, based on an analysis of the historical realities and social-politics of Niger, challenged the diagram established in 1964 and at the same time previewed a complete overhaul of regional administration.



Current status and issues

Decentralization will undoubtedly constitute the potential for a break on the local political scene, indisputably increasing the centers of power which will no longer be limited to decentralized State structures. Decentralization, in this multiparty democratic context, favors the emergence of new local powers endowed with supplementary capacities. The local elite will also have a great deal more power to establish local development priorities and implement defined policies. The decentralized expressions of government will also see their function redefined in a new context,

according to which the government will basically limit its role to conform with the strict dimensions defined by the laws of decentralization.

Currently, the process of decentralization is in the last stage of organizing local elections. These elections arouse great interest in Niger because those silent partners who reduced their financial commitments towards Niger make the organization of local elections and the creation of decentralized authorities a condition for normalizing their cooperation. At last, the process is accelerating and its outcome takes on an urgent character which forces those in control "to react quickly". For example, the redistricting proposals, formerly judged to be too ambitious in view of the government's limited resources, are currently oriented towards nursing the status quo, i.e. of maintaining the present regional administrative organization. It also appears that we are heading towards an option which will favor the progressive and gradual appointment of local authorities. Complete local elections appear to be risky, considering the extent of the political motion which they will certainly create. Furthermore, the government initiated an extensive survey on its own role, with the main purpose of identifying through exact analysis the areas of responsibility, among other things, which from now on should be yielded to the partially autonomous regions.

However, things would be too simple if limited only to these technical considerations. In effect, if political power shows no ambiguity in its option for decentralization, and if this principle is generally shared by politicians, then it can be assumed that the process itself is simply slow. Neither the participants, who through decentralization are directly expected to know the traditional district in order to support the government in administering the area, nor the political parties, who wish to gain local power, contest the importance of decentralization in politics and administrative reform in Niger. Even if some differences remain at the implementation level, decentralization has progressed to the extent that it

has become a major political issue around which political forces establish themselves in their struggle for power.

The traditional political division leaders and controllers of regional administration soon expressed their dislike of any administrative territorial redistricting, believing this could question their local authority. Also, it is not at all certain that they would be entrusted with any newly established powers resulting from local elections.

The political opposition parties, who had boycotted legislative elections, expressed their desire to participate in local elections. Their reluctance to participate in legislative elections was primarily due to the establishment of the electoral wards and the practical conditions surrounding the organization of the elections, which had suddenly become a major commercial issue under the circumstances presently found in Niger.

The present holders of political power consider the appointment of decentralized bodies as being a way to end the current political crisis, manifested mainly by the absence of parliamentary opposition.

For these reasons, we must look at some questions concerning the real issues of decentralization in Niger.



Open questions

We fear that these elections in effect will revolve around national instead of local issues, precisely because of the multifaceted crisis which is gripping the country.

We also know that institutional reforms are expensive. Can the Niger Government find the financial resources necessary to install decentralized authorities in the framework of structural adjustment programs controlled by public financing?

The institutionalization of local politics also implies that the new actors fit totally into their new roles. In addition, it is important that local entities embrace the institutions to be founded in accordance with the decentralization process and that the locally established powers accept the new order. Unfortunately, we are aware of the distance which these organizations maintain towards government-established institutions, the latter of which will always be confronted with competitive loyalties which in turn could prevent them from achieving any results in their work.

We could also raise some questions as to the viability of the decentralized institutions which would lead to a renewal of the local political scene. Will the people recognize them? And will they apply the "institutional rules" necessary for such local institutions to be effective? In addition, we fear that the subprefect or prefect will not simply be replaced by the elected authorities unless accompanied by a radical transformation of roles.

We could also look at the local institutions and their present handling capacity with respect to their human and financial resources. Of course we are talking about moving government officials into local public functions, but we cannot predict the extent of this movement, nor do we know how it will be received.

There is also the problem of relationship to the Government, considering the fact that from now on the involved parties must adjust themselves completely to new roles which differ from their traditional assignments.

Obviously there are many problems to be faced if we want to avoid decentralization from being just another failing reform.

(translated from French)