

KEY POINTS

Niger's 27 December 2020 election has the potential to pave the way for an historic transition.

However, incumbent President Mahamadou Issoufou's likely successor, Mohamed Bazoum, inherits a sharply deteriorated security situation which threatens the fragile stabilisation achieved during Issoufou's presidency.

Should the next president fail to quell intensifying insurgency by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Niger faces the following risks:

- Further territorial expansion and more frequent attacks by ISGS in western Niger
- Diminished capacity to combat militant activity in the south-east
- Political instability as discontent among minority groups grows

About us

AKE has over 20 years of experience working with the financial sector, providing clients with political and economic risk consultancy. Our experienced team provides tailored analysis and strategic forecasting, allowing our clients to better assess risks in challenging environments.

OVERVIEW

On 2 January Niger's electoral commission declared ruling party candidate Mohamed Bazoum the winner of the 27 December 2020 first round of presidential elections with just over 39 per cent of the vote. The result means that Bazoum will face runner-up Mahamane Ousmane, who won 17 per cent, in a run-off on 20 February. Although voting was calm, the election comes amid a surge in attacks by suspected Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) militants in which nearly 150 people have been killed since early December.

The election marks a historic moment for Niger as incumbent President Mahamadou Issoufou's decision to stand down after two terms paves the way for the country's first peaceful power transition. However, Issoufou's successor – by most bets, Bazoum – will inherit a security environment that has sharply deteriorated over the past two years. Unless the next president adjusts the government's counter-militant strategy, extremist groups are likely to advance further inland and could create a self-reinforcing nationwide security crisis.

HISTORIC TRANSITION AMID ESCALATING VIOLENCE

Outgoing President Issoufou is Niger's first leader to step down voluntarily at the end of his mandate, a decision which goes against the trend in a region where third-termism has experienced a powerful comeback. The 27 December polls were hardly an exemplar of democratic ideals – Bazoum is Issoufou's handpicked successor, and opposition leader Hama Amadou was barred from running on likely trumped-up charges of having led a baby trafficking ring. The Cap 20/21 opposition alliance backing runner-up Mahamane Ousmane, a former prime minister, has alleged fraud and filed a petition to overturn part of the election results. Even so, the prospect of a peaceful power transfer is testament to Niger's gradual stabilisation during the presidency of Issoufou, who has forged a lasting, if fragile, truce with insurgents in the country's Saharan north. Yet, as Issoufou prepares to leave office, the country's security situation is more precarious than at any point during the past decade.

Niger has been an emerging hotspot of Islamist militancy since 2016, largely due to militants' ability to traverse porous borders from neighbouring Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya and Nigeria. Initially sporadic and limited to border regions, attacks by ISGS in western Niger have increased in frequency and scale since early 2019. This is due to the unfettered expansion of militant outfits in neighbouring countries and an erratic counter-terror strategy at home that has veered between heavy-handed military tactics perceived as indiscriminately targeting minority groups and half-hearted attempts at outreach to local militant leaders and communities.

ISGS has been most active in the south-western Tillaberi region, on the Mali-Niger border, where it initially carried out small-scale attacks on civilians and security forces. However, attacks have become increasingly sophisticated. On 2 January more than 100 people were killed by armed assailants in the villages of Tchombangou and Zaroumdareye near Tondi Kiwindi in Tillaberi. The twin attacks marked the highest civilian death toll in a militant attack in Niger since 2012.

The militants have also repeatedly inflicted significant damage to the country's security forces. On 9 January 2020, 89 soldiers were killed when Islamist militants attacked an army post in Chinagodrar, Tillaberi region. The attack, which was likely carried out by ISGS, was the deadliest recorded against the Nigerien military in the country's history. In a similar large-scale assault, at least 71 troops were killed when several hundred militants attacked an army base in Inates, Tillaberi region on 11 December 2019. The attacks signal the militants' ability and determination to deter counter-insurgency efforts led by security forces. Meanwhile, an attack in Koure, east of Niamey, in which six French nationals were killed in August 2020 as well as multiple smaller incidents in the southern Dosso region indicate that the militants are seeking to expand their presence inward.

As second-in-command of the ruling Nigerien Party for Socialism and Democracy (PNSD), Issoufou's prospective successor, Mohamed Bazoum, is a veteran of the outgoing government and one of the architects of its counter-insurgency strategy. That strategy has yielded limited success – ISGS's creeping expansion into areas south and east of Niamey suggest the government's militaristic approach has accelerated rather than

halted the militants' advance. Reports of summary justice and extrajudicial killings of presumed militant sympathisers by government forces have multiplied over the past two years. Such abuses have disproportionately targeted ethnic Fulani, a largely pastoralist and semi-nomadic community lacking political representation. Government neglect and frequent violent disputes with neighbouring communities over land rights have made the Fulani and other minority communities susceptible to overtures from ISGS militants who promise them protection and purpose. Niamey's recent scorched-earth offensives have reinforced disaffection toward the government among many Fulani and other minority groups. Meanwhile, the region's porous borders allow the militants to sit out Niamey's periodic anti-militant offensives in the ungoverned expanses of southern Mali. Once the government's overstretched troops move out, ISGS returns stronger than before, its abilities boosted by equipment looted in attacks on army positions.

Niger's Tuareg rebellions, the latest of which ended in 2009, could hold some lessons for the militant insurgency in western Niger. Through a combination of diplomatic engagement, disarmament initiatives and political inclusion, Niamey defused the revolt and has been able to maintain a semblance of stability in central and northern Niger for the past decade. Often on the initiative of Interior Minister Bazoum, some elements of this strategy have been applied in western Niger, but only half-heartedly. A council charged with demobilising and integrating Fulani militant fighters from the Tillabery region into the armed forces was set up in 2018 but lacks legitimacy in the eyes of those it is meant to address as it is headed by a Tuareg, one of the communities with which the Fulani compete for land and resources along the northern border. Attempts to broker peace deals to resolve the local conflicts that have fuelled communal militarisation have not been followed up consistently. In 2020, these initiatives were largely abandoned.

As a member of Niger's Arab minority who joined the cabinet in 2011, in part to assuage discontent among disenfranchised communities in the north, Bazoum will have to be careful to improve political representation of minority groups in western Niger, particularly the Fulani, if he is to avoid a further escalation of the insurgency. As a stalwart of the Issoufou government, Bazoum's likely presidency does not herald a radical break with the past. Military means will remain the government's preferred tool to combat insurgency, and Niamey will continue to cooperate closely with Western military partners. However, Bazoum's moderating role in the outgoing government – at times pitting him against the country's military officials – suggests Niger's next government could be more open to a multi-pronged strategy which revisits abandoned initiatives aimed at rebuilding trust in the government in peripheral areas.

OUTLOOK

ISGS could exploit the presidential transition period to step up its attacks in western Niger. To avoid the country going the way of its neighbours, President Issoufou's likely successor Bazoum will need to rethink the government's scorched earth tactics centred on periodic military surges which it does not have the capacity to maintain in the long term. Hit-and-run style army offensives have aggravated resentment among the marginalised ethnic groups from which ISGS recruits most of its fighters, allowing the militants to resurge once the government troops have moved out. Bazoum's expected election does not portend a radical departure from the current strategy. However, his support for local reconciliation initiatives and dialogue with militant leaders, efforts which were undermined by military officials in the outgoing government, suggests that Bazoum could place greater emphasis on restoring the government's credibility among disaffected communities such as the Fulani. Should the next government fail to halt ISGS's advance, swathes of western Niger could become ungovernable and other groups, including Burkina Faso's Ansarul Islam, could make inroads. This would increase the risk of attacks targeting commercial and military interests in Niamey and undermining the government's ability to rein in ISWAP in the south-east.