

Democracy is Like Rice. We Need to Grow It Ourselves: The Twelfth Pan-Africa Newsletter (2024)



Collage of six people: From left to right, top to bottom: Tinibu, a self-described CNSP supporter and entertainer; Hamadou Salamou, president of the Association of Women in Action for Combat; Mohammed Larré, organiser in the Union for the Promotion of Nigerien Women; Khadija Abdullah, an English teacher; Ocean Sawadogo, a musician and artist; Rakia Hassane, one of the conference organisers. Credit: Mika Erskog.

Greetings from the desk of Tricontinental Pan-Africa,

A hopeful gathering was held in Niamey, Niger, in late November. At the opening ceremony of the International Conference for Solidarity with the People of the Sahel on 19 November 2024, the Governor of Niamey, Brigadier General Abdou Assoumane Harouna, a senior leader in the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homelands (CNSP), described the conditions that compelled the 26th July Movement, and how it evolved into the ejection of French military and diplomatic forces. He saw this movement as a process of reclaiming sovereignty and dignity, and the creation of the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES or Alliance of Sahel States) as a historic, conscious process that is ‘irreversible... [and] cannot be stopped by the old

[Western-dominated] order’.

Seated next to him was Niger Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine, as part of a diverse panel of speakers from different national, regional, and international progressive organisations. Alongside the highest civilian leader in government (Zeine) and the military leader (Harouna) were representatives of Niger’s National Organising Committee, the West African Peoples’ Organisation (WAPO), Pan Africanism Today, and the International Peoples’ Assembly.



Security personnel outside the conference venue. Credit: Mika Erskog.

Recent coups in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mali have been painted as acts of chaos and instability characterised by ‘ethnic rivalry’ and interpersonal power grabs. With the broad inclusion of so many kinds of leaders in the opening ceremony, it is immediately clear that the processes unfolding in the Sahel cannot be understood from the perspective of the archetypal ‘colonel’ coup.

Absent from many narratives about recent events in the Sahel is the historical and material conditions informing them. These coups are expressions of deep-rooted discontent with decades of exploitation, poverty, and foreign domination. Frequently, decontextualised reporting by Western media separates the actions of the coup governments from the aspirations of their people. What they fail to show, or refuse to acknowledge, is the deep popular support these movements command and the mass character of the struggle.

The conference exhibited the rich social diversity present in this new patriotic process. We could see in real time the people who are driving and rallying the popular forces in support of the coup leaders and the new regional alliance; young, old, women and men, students of all ages, cultural workers, trade unions, community organisations for health, safety, environmental protections, and religious groups all in favour of anti-imperialist action. (In a rare occurrence for political gatherings, the opening prayer was led jointly by an Islamic imam and a Catholic bishop, side by side, instead of in separate slots. Choices such as these reinforced the values of unity espoused by the AES).

In the wake of the coups in Mali (2021), and Burkina Faso (2022), progressive organisations in Niger, emboldened by the strides taken by their neighbours, began calling for the rejection of French neocolonial activities. They saw the writing was on the wall. When the coup in Niger was initially orchestrated last year in July, these were the organisations who quickly mobilised the masses in defence of the coup leaders. Whether last year in the streets, or at the conference, they did not appear to be a rent-a-crowd. The people – as a result of decades of grassroots political organising – took the opportunity to set the public agenda collectively: *France Dégage!* or ‘France, get out!’. The military honoured the peoples’ demand by severing military and diplomatic ties with France.

Against the prevailing conception of the character and motives of junta governments in Africa, WAPO President Philippe Toyo Noudjroume, explained that the AES countries were seeing an entirely different situation: ‘military intervention for sovereignty’. Like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, these military personnel are widely considered to have first-hand experience of the failures of former regimes to serve and protect the people while advancing a sovereign national interest.

On the flight to Niamey, we were seated next to a Malian agricultural meteorologist, returning from the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP29) held in Baku, Azerbaijan. He had lived in Niamey for twenty years, working at an NGO. When asked if he had seen the coup coming, he replied, ‘It was not an “if” but a “when”’. He spoke of how NATO’s involvement in Libya worsened jihadist violence in the whole region. He explained how the French troops deployed to Niger from Mali and Burkina Faso only concentrated the grievances against French neocolonialism. The meteorologist was well-versed in conceptions of Western democracy, but in his view, given the deep economic and political crisis in the country, the coup was a legitimate act in *service* of democracy, rather than one acting against it. Throughout our trip, we would encounter similar sentiments over and over again from all, each with different interests in the cause of

freedom in the Sahel.



Four flags of the AES countries, and Russia were carried by young boys throughout the conference. Credit: Mika Erskog.

Renewing Peoples' Confidence

M62's Filmata Taya made a speech emblematic of the strong anti-imperialist line running throughout the proceedings. He addressed Western imperialism head-on: 'You put it in our minds that we are the poor. But it is you [lacking resources and ideas], that are the poor'. Participants from all walks of life displayed a ferocious appetite for back-and-forth style political engagement, tempered by graciously worded criticisms of any shortcomings. Ordinary people were given the podium to engage speakers, each taking the mic as confident as the last. Though ideas around how to achieve sovereign development varied, debates were engaging and thoughtful, prioritising a more comprehensive analysis of Niger's past and theorisation to support better strategies for the future.

In the air, there was a palpable sense of peoples' ownership over the direction of development. 'Democracy is like rice', shared student leader Anass Djibril, during the panel on youth struggles. 'Either it can be imported at great cost, profiting another and possibly harmful for consumption if there is chemical residue. Or we can grow it ourselves, on our own terms, for our benefit'. Their support for the new leaders, neither blind, nor cultish, came with conditions. 'We support you as long as you are for the people', **explained** the Secretary General of the Nigerien School Union, Effred Mouloul Al-Hassan in his address.



Participants queuing to raise questions and share comments. Credit: Mika Erskog.

In April 1899, Sarraounia Mangou, a guerilla fighter and leader of the Anza people of Lougou and Tougana, in a city 233 km east of Niamey, led a fierce resistance to the French expedition known as the Central Africa-Chad Mission. Led by Paul Voulet and Julien Chanoine, the French military set off from Senegal in 1898 to conquer the Chad Basin and unify all French territories in West Africa. Alongside this mission were two parallel expeditions, the Foureau-Lamy and Gentil missions, which sought to subjugate Algeria and central Congo respectively. Voulet had already led successful campaigns that seized Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso and ransacked scores across Mali as they moved towards Niger, with their sights on Chad.

It is said that, prior to the French attack, Mangou sent the army command a provocative letter filled with insults, to ward off the expedition and bar its expansion. These insults took the French by surprise. They hastily launched an attack that initially was unsuccessful against Mangou's employment of guerilla tactics – using the bush thicket as cover for tactical strikes and retreats. Though the colonial army would strike back a month later in one of the bloodiest massacres in French colonial history, the fight for self-determination has been an intrinsic part of Sahelian people's history.



Saoudeth Mohamed a.k.a 'Baby Patriot'. Credit: Mika Erskog.

On the last day of the conference, Saoudeth Mohamed, known in Niger as 'Baby Patriot', was dressed as Mangou. This was striking because of the clear projection of anti-colonial resistance, a call to revolutionary ancestry to wage the new battle for self-determination. It also represented defiance of regional colonial subjugation and its expansionist project in the present day.



Closing the conference with attendees singing 'The Internationale'. Credit: Mika Erskog.

Niamey: A New Centre of Anti-Imperialist Internationalism

Niger is amongst the poorest and most exploited countries in the world. It was considered to be a peripheral colonial outpost despite the immense amount of mineral wealth extracted from its territory. Today, it is shifting the geography of political leadership in West Africa. In a world where the advanced and the urban are deemed leaders of progress, the proverbial afterthought, the 'countrysides', are saying no to marginalisation. Niamey, a capital city that sits in the shadows of regional capitals such as Abajian, Dakar, Accra, Ougodougo, and Cotonou, is centring itself.

Whilst the conference had the official endorsement of the military government, with large posters of Colonel Abdourahamane Tchiani's face being the focal point in the conference venue, it was the efforts of civilian patriotic organisations that made it all happen. The event offered the world a glimpse into what is really happening in the Sahel and Niger. It was also a stunning testament to the strategic symbiosis between the military government and the people. While neocolonialism is endemic to all corners of the African continent, the countries ensnared by Françafrique have particularly heavy shackles to cast off. The AES is pioneering new regionalism, new hope for sovereignty and potential organisation, and a wave of progressive revolutions

on the continent.

On to the new year.

A luta continua!

Warmly,

Tariro and Mika



Tariro Takuva

Tariro Takuva has extensive experience in finance and operations. She works in different capacities to support organisations and movements on the African continent that are focused on facilitating community and societal engagement, education, advancing and promoting social justice, human rights, and furthering democracy and equality.



Mikaela Erskog

Mika is an educator and researcher at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. She is part of the Pan Africanism Today Secretariat, which coordinates the regional articulation of the **International People's Assembly** and is also part of the **No Cold War** coordination committee, a peace platform promoting multilateralism and maximum global cooperation. She is also part of Dongsheng, an international collective of researchers interested in Chinese politics and society, and hosts *The Crane: An Africa-China Podcast*.