TRANSCRIPT

Event

“After the Coup d'état, What Comes Next? A Conversation With Niger's Prime Minister”
[ENG]

DATE
Tuesday, December 19, 2023 at 2:00 p.m. ET

FEATURING
H.E. Ali Lamine Zeine
Prime Minister of Niger

CSIS EXPERTS
Mvemba Phezo Dizolele
Director and Senior Fellow, Africa Program, CSIS
Cameron Hudson
Senior Associate (Non-resident), Africa Program, CSIS

Transcript By
Superior Transcriptions LLC
www.superiortranscriptions.com
Good afternoon. And welcome, everyone, to this session, “After the Coup d’état, What Comes Next?” – a conversation with His Excellency Ali Lamine Zeine, prime minister of Niger.

I’m joined today by my colleague Cameron Hudson and this conversation will be taking place in two languages. Cameron and I will speak in French, but the audience can choose which language they want to follow the session in. If you go to the bottom of your screen where all the icons are, there is a world icon like a globe that says “interpretation.” If you click on that, you can choose either English or French.

Welcome, again. And, Cameron, to you.

Thank you, Mvemba.

(Continues through interpreter.) Hello. Good afternoon. It’s my pleasure to welcome the prime minister of Niger, Mr. Zeine. He was named the prime minister in August of this year, about one year after the military junta removed from power President Bazoum. Before his nomination, the minister was a resident representative at the African Bank in Chad and other countries of the region. Before he was director of Cabinet of Mamadou Tandja, he was minister of finance and the economy from 2003 to 2007.

Mr. Prime Minister, we are very happy to welcome you here to have a talk with us. We are grateful for you’re willing to speak to the public in Washington, and to the world, on the situation in Niger now, five months after the coup d’état, and the way which you think you will be able to face the important challenges of your country and all over the region. I’d like to start with a question on the importance of the coup d’état for the public in Washington.

The shocking aspect of the coup d’état in Niger last July, from Washington’s point of view, was that Niger was a stable democratic partner in a very unstable region. But that Niger understood the value and benefits of a partnership with Washington – security assistance, development aid, institution building. Yet, the coup d’état, it feels like a rejection of this relationship and these values. How should we interpret what happened in Niger? Thank you.

Good evening. Can you hear me?

Very well, thank you.
I'd like to thank you in the name of the government of my country, in the name of Mr. Tchiani, head of state, for this opportunity that you have given us, and to also give our point of view and our versions of the facts. But before this, I would like to correct a little bit what you said regarding my career. In fact, I was minister of the economy and Finance from 2003 to 2010, not 2007.

So you'll understand later why I'm making this precision. It's important before speaking about the facts. This non-constitutional change, to remind everyone that the Sahel region is a region which has been heavily affected in 2011 following the Libyan war, and the attack by the NATO, and the assassination of Qaddafi by NATO. The consequences did not wait to spread out to Niger, Mali, Chad, and other countries in the region, Mauritania, which was not as much affected as those countries.

The results obviously – and we can also say, the results of the fight against terrorism, which began at that period, were completely mixed. And the countries were faced with their own selves. The insecurity in Libya had a devastating effect on the country. I'd like to underscore that Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are three countries which are part of an organization called ALG since the 1970s. Recently, they decided to create and to reinforce this organization, and by implementing the dimension of the struggle against insecurity in favor of development and defense.

And we must keep this in mind because to go back to the case of Niger, the coup d’etat, which happened on July 26th, was a coup d’etat which came to save the Nigerien people. Because if you take the years from 2011, to 2003, we saw the development of the insecurity, even though there was a massive presence and massive cooperation, military cooperation. This coup came to save the population because, aside from the insecurity, there was very bad governance. I can understand from an American point of view, you don't see it from a good point of view.

But for the Nigerians [sic; Nigeriens], we must say it’s complete deliverance from those problems, because we decided to take a path which will lead us to a better future – much better future, to go back to our true values, the values of good governance, the good – the values of a way, which will, for the first time, bring us to free and transparent elections. Why? Because what happened? Remember that in 2020, when there were the elections, everyone knows what happened. They didn't occur in a good way, not well.
Yet, the Nigerians [sic; Négière] stayed calm and close their eyes to give a chance to the person that was so-called elected, supposedly elected. We let him a chance to manage, but it didn't go as planned, as we hoped, rather. If you – it shocks you, in Nigeria [sic; Niger] we have a feeling of deliverance. We'll go back into the details later. Thank you.

Mr. Dizolele: Can you hear me?

Mr. Hudson: Yes, yes.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you very much, your excellency, for your explanations. But in the world, we knew Niger as a democracy – going into the process of democracy. The coup d'état seems to have derailed this, and the ECOWAS and other institutions are asking you to bring the country back on the path of democracy. What are you doing that you’re – what is your government doing in that direction? Thank you.

H.E. Zeine: You say in the world, but – maybe, yes. But in Niger, everyone knew that it wasn’t a real democracy for 10 years. We didn’t have the right to do any – to freedom of speech, to contest, and to protest. And what symbolizes democracy is the creation of structures which are maintained by political personnel. But there were great tears and disruptions that were provoked. Very bad governance. And I think if you look at – if you look objectively at the situation, you will see yourselves that there was a period during which we couldn’t really speak of democracy.

It’s not because I was part of the regime from 2000 to 2010 that I say otherwise. But it was a period of relative stability when I was there. All political parties had their say. Journalists were free to express what they wanted. The management of public funds was well done – very well done. And those that wanted to express themselves were free to do so. But what happened after this? You are a witness that there were no people able to express themselves. Is that what you call democracy? Me, I think that’s not the case. Once you cannot express one’s opinions, when you pillage public funds and mismanaged public funds, and when citizens do not have rights, you cannot speak of a democracy.

If the military, the Nigerian [sic; Nigerien] militaries, which are now the head of state, took on their responsibilities, it’s not military people that are simply of living rooms. They are people who have value, that are known in the region and further. And they thought that it was time to bring the country back to the path of democracy. They were the same that in ’99, with the help of the United States,
that bad elections would take place. We are convinced that the way things are going now we will go back to this path so that Niger really goes back to the image of a country where people can easily and freely express themselves, where public funds are well managed, where accountability is done to the population.

That’s what I can say on this level. So for me, maybe that’s – your opinion is different. But in Niger, we think that democracy was not respected before the coup d’etat. And I think that now we will go back to the principle of democracy.

Mr. Dizolele: Mr. Prime Minister, you are going to go back to this principle of democracy, when? When can we expect to find this transition towards democracy to put the country “back on the path,” as you say? End quote.

H.E. Zeine: You spoke about ECOWAS. It’s an organization whose objective is to work on regional integration, the sharing of solidarity, a better appreciation of values – common values of the different states and the different peoples. And faced with the events of July 26th, they abandoned the values of their charter. That institution itself does not respect the rules under which it was created, and took sanctions which I can qualify as punitive against the people which is standing near, in favor of its authorities, that is hoping for better cooperation with the international community and greater liberty based on equilibrium, mutual respect, and solidarity, in respect to our independence and the choices that we took to liberate ourselves from what came before.

With this institution, even though they punished us on the basis of – a completely subjective basis, we nonetheless in the next few days, the first week of January, we will fix a date, as we already said, which will not go over three years. Everyone knows that in Niger there were three non-constitutional changes. We never went beyond the three years. At the time – at the proper time, you will have details on this transition dates, and/or understanding with that institution of the ECOWAS. In due time, we will have more information on this.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you, your excellency. In the next few days, the French military forces will be completely out of Niger. At the same time, last week Niger held high-level talks with the United States and Russia. The United States wants to maintain its military presence in Niger, and the Russia minister proposed security assistance. Can you speak to us of your objectives and the way that you will balance out the interests of these great superpowers in Niger? Can these
superpowers coexist in Niger, according to yourself?

H.E. Zeine:

That’s what I was trying to tell you. Our choice to affirm our sovereignty rests on an essential point. That is, the free administration of our destiny, or our free choices to engage in different partners, all partners. All that are prepared to respect our country, and accepting the fact that we have interests to defend at the same time. We remember in 2007, Niger had decided to change the price of uranium. The next day, we know what happened. Our main partner armed part of our population. A few people in fact took arms. But thanks to the wisdom of Nigeria [sic; Niger], we were able to find a solution. We sat down together. We explained what –to this partner why it was important that our interests be safeguarded and bringing them to respect these interests.

Regarding our perspectives on the institutional and political plane, we decided to engage with all who are in favor of peace – any country, any people. We are in the Sahel. We are an ancient civilization which is open to the whole world. If you speak of the great powers that are coming to see us, we can only accept if they wish to come work with us, but with a clear and transparent method. With the United States, in their mission, we clearly express ourselves along these lines. We told them that Americans must decide if they want to stay with us, tell us exactly what they want to do here.

Americans have a military presence here. We told the American representatives that we would like to see American investors rather than American military. I remind you, before 2011 there was not a single foreign military officer in Niger. Not a single terrorist in Niger. We couldn’t help it if our average citizens created a link between the military presence and the forthcoming of terrorism. The Americans are our allies and our friends, but we want a transparent and clear attitude.

I will repeat what I said to the undersecretary. I said that in July 2023, we saw clouds coming on the horizon. The American Army and the Nigerian [sic; Nigerien], Army were side by side. The next day, the Americans left. Left their role next to us. When we really needed that strategic partner, they disengaged and the minister of defense is now working on the best way to collaborate with this historic partner, which we consider as a friend, the U.S., as an ally. It’s up to the United States to decide if they want to stay with us. They are welcome, if they do.

For the rest, it’s the same. Our cooperation with Russia is – dates
from many years now. We worked on them on the aeronautics sector. And they helped us in our defense work in the aeronautics sector. They have their place, just like the Americans have their place, and other partners that knock at our door. And we will make sure that the interests of all who come be preserved under the condition that they respect our interests. That’s what I can answer in regards to this question.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you.

Mr. Dizolele: Mr. Prime Minister, the world is worried about the condition – the health of President Bazoum, former President Bazoum. Where is he? And what are the conditions – and how is he doing? And what are the conditions for his liberation?

H.E. Zeine: I would like to hear you say rather that you – the world was concerned about the 26 million Nigerians [sic; Nigeriens] that are facing unfair sanctions by the ECOWAS. We don’t have enough energy. We don’t have electricity. We don’t have sufficient medication, simply because that organization decided to punish us. That’s 26 million Nigerians [sic; Nigeriens] that are being punished. The former president, I can assure you, he still lives in the presidential palace, the residence of the president of the republic. To General Tchiani, to show his goodwill, ordered that nothing be lacking to Mr. Bazoum, who is our compatriot, who manages the state, at a point, is in excellent condition. I can certify you. I accompanied the ECOWAS mission. And they themselves – he himself said to them that he knew no difficulties, whether healthwise or otherwise. President Tchiani, he is elsewhere. We would like, rather, to hear the world and you yourself worry about the 26 million Nigeriens that are suffering because the ECOWAS took as hostage the taxes of Niger. There’s a decision that comes from God knows where. In fact, we know it; it’s France that asked for this.

We must – if you would like to hear us, we should feel that you are worried about the fate of all the Nigeriens. There were five coup d’etats in Niger, six in total that are non-constitutional. The first president, Diori, he spent 13 years in a military camp. We never heard the international community worry about him. President Ousmane, he spent weeks and weeks in a military camp; ECOWAS or the international community or anyone else ever worried about his fate. President Baré was unlucky; he was killed. President Tandja, nobody reacted that was in with his own son 15 months in a prison. He, in fact, contracted diseases. He died three years ago, his son a year ago. No one worried about this. No one expressed a
word. Please have some justice in regards to us.

And Niger is a country that is a peaceful country. Niger has certain values. Human values are sacred in Niger; you can be sure of that. President Bazoum, I think for his own security, in fact, we don’t trust these countries that are asking for his freedom. We are afraid. Follow my eyes.

Mr. Dizolele: Speaking of the justice for Niger and its people, President Bazoum is being held as a prisoner. What are the adjectives do you attach to his detention?

And number two, since you spoke to ECOWAS sanctions, what are you planning to do so that those sanctions can be lifted and so that the people of Niger can be spared?

H.E. Zeine: Niger’s population cannot access to medicine, food. They are prisoners of these sanctions. What adjectives can I use regarding this? I think we should keep our heads clear.

Regarding ECOWAS, we started to talk with them. They demanded three conditions at the beginning.

The first was, despite the rapid application and unique nature of these sanctions, was to simply engage in dialogue. There were many missions between Nigeria and ourselves.

The second issue was about the health of the former president. They were able to see where and in what conditions he is living.

The third condition was about the length of the transition. This was also indicated.

We were expecting that these sanctions were to be lifted, yet they were maintained. So I invite you to ask this question to ECOWAS: When do they intend to lift these sanctions? We in the last summit expressed our availability the head of state of the Congo, and we received a mission from their foreign office. We expressed our desire to lift the sanctions and end this crisis. It’s up to them to decide if they want to continue to punish the Niger people.

Mr. Dizolele: And how do you consider the former president? Is he a political prisoner or otherwise?
H.E. Zeine: I will ask you, since this seems to preoccupy you very much; it's up to you to apply whatever adjectives you want. All I can say, that he is in good health, as the head of state himself said. He will be freed. Niger, as I said, is a peaceful people open to everything to find the best, most consensual solutions. So I hope very much that we will keep this in mind.

You know, it doesn't help the former president every time that people scream about him. I gave you all the list of the former presidents that were in the same situation but were never helped so much or never inquired so much in the past. So you must admit this on your side.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you. On this issue, last week the tribunal of ECOWAS ordered the freedom for President Bazoum, his liberation. What is your opinion on this judgment? And what are the relationships that you plan to have with ECOWAS in the future?

H.E. Zeine: This meeting seems to be all about the former president. I thought it would be more about the future – that it would be about how to get our country back on the road towards a modern democratic state, well-managed. And since we are – and since we are speaking about this institution, I can say why don't you go around Africa, West Africa, and ask them about this ECOWAS tribunal, which does whatever it wants? If you ask them their point of view, they answer any which way. Myself, I have no comment on this.

Mr. Hudson: Can you speak about the effects of the regional sanctions on Niger so that we can better understand the effects of these sanctions and the way in which you hope to improve the economic situation of your country?

H.E. Zeine: Now, since July 26th all of the resources of our country were taken hostage by those community institutions. So how did we deal with this void? Thanks to the resilience of our people, and everybody accepted to contribute to the common effort; and also, thanks to the great management of the public funds that was reimposed; and everything that we did to go towards the right path. Because now we think, in our opinion, that Niger has decided to refuse, finally, the dictates of those who always wanted to get subsidies, but in exchange they’re trying to force us to do something that they want us to do.

But Niger decided to open itself to all those who want to invest. We are a very rich country. We are taking all the measures so that all the investors who want to come can come with all the guarantees
that will be due to him.

For us, it’s a parentheses which now hurts. But, inshallah, these parentheses will be closed in the next few weeks. The resources which we are collecting locally are well-managed and are managed efficiently, and we’re able to meet our obligations. And all the Nigeriens today, from the small villages to the capital, everyone is participating in this war effort, the resilience efforts. This determination which we have is not a question of means, but it’s a question of will, of conviction. And in the next few days you will see, thanks be to God, how we will be able to get out of this situation.

As I said, many partners are proposing to us certain choices, important choices to make. And on issues of development, we have no doubt that the road that we have taken will finally free us definitively from our former state.

Mr. Dizolele: Mr. Prime Minister, Your Excellency, unfortunately, the time is limited. We would like to thank you. We would like to thank you for your participation. We hope to continue this conversation soon. Obviously, you have many things to share. Unfortunately, we don’t have a lot of time. Thanks again. Thanks again so much for having come, for having shared with us. Thank you to my colleague Cameron and everyone who joined us for this discussion with Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine of Niger. Thank you very much.

H.E. Zeine: I would like to thank you as well. I would like to express a wish: Please help us get investors to come to Niger. They will be welcome. Let’s have Niger renew with democratic principles. Help us do that through real elections that are not falsified; not through relations based on personal interests but relations based on a people that is proud, that is in favor of peace, that is open, and that decided to trace its own destiny. And I’m happy to continue the dialogue when you want.

Thank you. We will pursue this conversation.

Mr. Dizolele: Thank you.

(END.)