

Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy
On
Political Repression in Niger
Congressional Record
July 17, 2018

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, as Vice Chairman of the Appropriations Committee I want to draw the Senate's attention to the plight of civil society leaders in Niger, where political and civil rights have been deteriorating over the last several years. This disturbing trend threatens the U.S. – Niger partnership, and should concern each of us.

Mahamadou Issoufou was elected President of Niger in 2011, and in the following years worked cooperatively with Niger's international partners, including the United States, to make progress toward the restoration of democratic governance in that country. Our countries have partnered together on health, development, and humanitarian assistance programs, and as we all know, we have suffered tragic losses together in the fight against terrorism.

But progress toward democratic governance has been significantly eroded. Since the run up to President Issoufou's reelection in 2016, the government has increasingly persecuted opposition politicians, journalists, peaceful protesters, and civil society leaders in a manner that has undermined progress and stability in the country.

This trend has not gone unnoticed. The State Department noted in its most recent Human Rights Report that Niger's significant human rights issues include harsh and life-threatening prison and detention center conditions, detention of opposition politicians, and restrictions on freedom of assembly. And in November 2017, Niger withdrew from the global Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative after being suspended for failing to meet good governance standards, including for its repression of civil society.

An example of this disturbing trend involves the arrest of several dozen civil society leaders between March and April of this year, in connection with demonstrations against the country's new finance law. Many of these individuals, like Ali Idrissa, the Coordinator for the Network of Organizations for Budgetary Transparency and Analysis, are affiliated with Publish What You Pay and are advocates for transparency and accountability of Niger's revenues in order to

combat corruption. That effort should be a shared goal in Niger. Peaceful public assembly and calls for accountability should not result in imprisonment.

I urge the Trump Administration, other donor governments, including the EU, and the international financial institutions to hold the Government of Niger accountable for respecting its citizens' right to freedom of expression and assembly, and to join me in calling on President Issoufou to release the detainees and to dismiss the charges against these individuals. This is now a matter of urgency, as four civil society leaders reportedly face jail sentences at a judgment hearing on July 24.

Doing so would be a positive step by the Government of Niger toward proving that it is serious about upholding the values that underscore our partnership, including to maintain its eligibility under the recently initiated Millennium Challenge Corporation Compact. That Compact is now subject to heightened scrutiny by the Appropriations Committee, which provides the funding for it.

I yield the floor.

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