

## Africa Report by Jacques Cheminade

### National Conference in Niger

*A ray of hope against the "Bretton Woods order," and for the economic integration and development of Africa.*

I have just had the opportunity to view videotapes of the recent National Conference in Niger. I was struck by the seriousness of the debates and by the determination of many of the participants to ask some fundamental questions. During the course of the many interventions, the postwar "Bretton Woods order" was the subject of reasoned attacks, and the demand for national sovereignty was always accompanied by a call for African unity.

Many of the speakers pointed out that, once achieved, democracy would lose all its meaning, would remain an empty shell, if not accompanied by "a return of the economic resources of the continent to the real sovereignty of democratic regimes," and by the means to exercise the rights offered to all citizens, notably the means of material and social progress.

Niger, once a colony of the French, is a vast country in the sub-Saharan region of Africa inhabited by only 7 million people. The northern two-thirds of the country is desert, but also contains the uranium deposits that make Niger the world's fifth largest exporter of refined uranium ore. In 1980, only 20 years after independence, Niger was producing more than enough food to feed its people. But terrible drought conditions on and off since 1983 have left many in starvation conditions. The collapse of uranium prices on the "free" market (controlled by the multinational cartels) has greatly hampered Niger's economic efforts.

Niger, like many countries in Africa, is a one-party state. The National

Conferences which are taking place in many of the French-speaking countries in particular, are large assemblies of opposition leaders and members of the ruling party, out of which a new consensus is supposed to emerge regarding future elections and national program. In all too many cases, the conferences have degenerated into empty phrases about democracy and jockeying by opposition figures for their turn in the government seat.

Thus, the effort in Niger's National Conference to clarify the debate over democracy in Africa is of fundamental importance. This is the only way to avoid having countries fall from Charybdis into Scylla: from a blood-sucking bourgeoisie to the looters in three-piece suits of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. For the latter, the carrot of "democracy" hides the stick of usury and austerity conditionalities.

Among the documents voted up by the National Conference, of particular interest is the report on the work of the Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. Among the points of analysis, were:

- "The near-total disappearance of the solidarity which could have prevailed between the people of the developing sector and the developed countries of the planet";

- "The constant decrease of resources devoted to public aid for the development of these countries; which has meant more and more restrictive conditions for eligibility for outside financing";

- "The correlated persistence of the underdevelopment of African

peoples: a situation which has been aggravated, 30 years after the independence of the 1960s, by the maintenance of the micro-states born out of the colonial splitting of Africa";

- "The cumulative effects of the burden of the debt on the more and more anemic economies of the Third World countries";

- "The systematic looting of African national resources by the multinational companies."

Among the noteworthy recommendations made in the report:

- "Attachment to the principles and ideals of the United Nations and of Non-Alignment";

- Promotion of "African unity" and "North-South cooperation";

- The "quest for a more just and more democratic international order in the fields of politics, economics, science, and culture";

- Accelerating the access to the coast of Niger's inland population.

Niger's struggle will be long and difficult. There are many immediate and terrible problems facing the country, such as the constant advance of the desert, the reduction in the Niger River's flow, and the reckless cutting down of forests—the only accessible form of energy in a world defined by the speculation of the international cartels on the prices of raw materials. As a result, Niger, whose vast uranium deposits should give the country access to the energy of the present and of the future, finds itself forced to burn wood.

The struggle will be a long one, before Niger finds the conditions making its own and the continent's economic development possible. Nevertheless, as I watched the proceedings of the National Conference of Niger, I had the impression of witnessing a small part of the great dream of Cheikh Anta Diop for African economic integration and development.