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Understanding Tuareg Insurgency In Northern Niger: A Study Of Nigerien Movement For Justice (Mnj)

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Abstract: *Tuareg ethnic rebels group emerged in February 2007 the Nigerien Movement for Justice and they attacked several military targets in Niger's northern region throughout 2007 and 2008. Events have since evolved into a full fledging insurgency. Their claim for collective rights as indigenous people therefore arises from their marginalization as nomads, first under colonialism and then later by independent state, all of which are dominated by sedentary agricultural people living in the South of the country. Commitment to a nomadic pastoralist culture and identity; marginalization from the dominant political and economic system as a result of non-agricultural economic base and traditional cultural identity; and claim to specific territory including a close relations between culture and particular biodiversity ecological specificity. The aims of this essay are to interrogate how the political, economic and cultural marginalization of Tuareg in Northern Niger led to Insurgency.*

Keywords: Understanding, Tuareg, Insurgency, Northern Niger.

1. Introduction

The republic of Niger covers 1,267,000 square kilometers (490,000 square miles). Landlocked, it is bordered by seven countries - Algeria and Libya to the north, Chad to the east, Nigeria and Benin to the south, Burkina Faso to the southwest, and Mali to the west. Niger is in the heart of the Sahel, the transitional zone between the tropical West African coast and the Sahara Desert. Northern Niger is part of the Sahara, with vast expanses of rocky and sandy wilderness broken only by occasional oases. From north-central Niger to its northeast corner are the Air and Djado Mountains with peaks rising to 1,850 meters (6,000 feet) while partially arable savanna is found in the southern part of the country(Republic of Niger, 2006).

The Nigerien movement for justice was initially formed by two ex-rebels; Amoumane Kalakoua and Aboubacar Alambo. Both men were suspected of committing crimes after a rebellion in the 1990's. In a few weeks, the movement gained numerous members from a more credible stake of the Tuareg community such as Aghaly Alambo, and some local representatives. (Yvan, 2007). The Tuareg Rebellion of 2007–2009 was an insurgency that began in February 2007 amongst elements of the Tuareg people living in the Sahara desert regions of northern Mali and Niger (Wikipedia 2007. Retrieved 2017). The movement is composed of people frustrated by their social, material or political situations. Deserters from rebel forces integrated within Niger's Armed Forces after the 1995 peace agreements; a group of former soldiers who rallied around Kindo Zada (who claimed elucidation for the president Bare's assassination); former rebels of the Aïr et de Azawak Liberation front (F.L.A.A.) ejected from the Peace Consolidation Programe in Aïr and Azawak (PCPAA); and Youths from Agadez infuriated by the Army's acts of violence (Yvan, 2007).

The Nigerien movement for justice was created against the backdrop of Tuaregs' longstanding social, political and economic destitution, a process that started under French colonization and resulted in recurrent armed contestations, the first of them being the revolt led by Kaocen in 1917. In the late 80s, armed struggle resumed, this time targeting the post-independence centralized regime run from the southern state capital Niamey. This wave of low intensity unrest only ended in the mid-90s. Formerly 'lords of the desert' where they controlled long-distance trade and pastoral activities (camels, donkeys and goats), organized in separate nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes under the firm grip of a caste of noble 'warriors', the Tuaregs lost most of their political hegemony over the century following French occupation of the Sahara.

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The French defeated the revolt some of them carried out in 1917 and pursued a classic 'divide and rule' policy preventing any further mass mobilisation. When establishing the administrative structures of the colony, France promoted in to offices an educated elite mostly coming from the South of Niger and, particularly, from the Djerma and Songhay ethnic groups (Abadie, 1927: 116-117). This bias partly stems from the Tuareg communities' reluctance to send their children from noble casts to school (Rasmussen, 1992). It resulted, at the time of independence, in the early 60s, in an alienation of the Tuaregs from state positions (Grégoire, 2001).

Reinforced by a demographic disadvantage compared to other Niger ethnic groups following a design of state boundaries leaving them scattered over five national territories: Niger, Mali, Haute-Volta (now Burkina Faso), Algeria and Libya. Although the figures are contested, recent demographic surveys estimate that the Tuaregs constitute a mere 10 per cent of the Niger' population, while the Hausas represent more than 50 per cent of the population and the Djerma/Songhay around 20 per cent (République du Niger, 2007). This political destitution was paralleled by a rapid economic decline. The livestock of Tuareg herdsmen was dramatically downsized following Kaocen's military defeat (Triaud, 1993) and was hit again by major droughts in the 70s and the 80s. Long-distance trans-Saharan trade progressively became obsolete due to the opening of new commercial routes (by air or boat from the Gulf of Guinea coastal metropolis, see Brachet (2004) and Grégoire (2001)).

Thus forcing large sections of the population to abandon their nomadic mode of production, at the price of serious internal hierarchical reversals, Partial abandonment of caravanning and nomadic activities meant that nobles and their tributary chiefs, owners of camels par excellence lost prestige and political influence over their obliged traditional subalterns, namely the blacksmiths (providing them with tools, jewels and arms and singing their praises during social events) and former slaves (looking after livestock and performing domestic chores) attached to their families. In the new economic climate, blacksmiths as well as slaves had a relatively greater disposition to Adapt to sedentary activities such as artisanship or gardening and sometimes became economically better off than their former masters (Ag Ahar, 1990).

Another major consequence of economic deprivation was the migration of many youths of Tuareg origin in to cities of neighbouring countries, Algeria or Libya (Tamanrasset, Ghat, Sabha). In Libya particularly, some of them benefited from the hospitality of Col. Ghaddafi at a time when his country was supporting many liberation movements on the African continent (Chad) and beyond (Lebanon). Disgruntled Tuareg youths became a welcome labour force in Ghaddafi's Islamic Legion where they received military training and contributed to military actions in various war theaters. They also performed urban activities known to most Tuaregs so far or participated in cross-border smuggling of cigarettes or Algerian subsidized goods, taking advantage of the price difference between Algeria and Mali and Niger and using their deep knowledge of the desert to escape Algerian or Nigérien borders control (Ag Ahar, 1990).

Many of them remained unemployed which earned them the label ishumar (after the French word chômeur, that is unemployed). Rejecting total cultural alienation, Tuareg migrants of the teshumara movement (that is the identity created abroad by the ishumar) elaborated an egalitarian, revolutionary form of nationalism, spread across the desert through the songs of activist musicians, the most famous of them being the Malian collective Tinariwen ('deserts') whom explicitly and powerfully advocated armed rebellion (Belalimat, 2003; Lecocq, 2004). Ideologically converted to insurgency and militarily trained by Libya, the ishumar were the revengeful vanguard of the rebel movements that formed in the late 80s. In the mid-80s, Tuareg activists allied with the son of former and first post-independence President of Niger Diori Hamani overthrown by General Seyni Kountche in 1974. They perpetrated an unsuccessful attack against the city of Tchintabaraden, north east of Niamey. Much more serious rebellious attempts were made in the end of the 80s as democracy was introduced in Niger following France's conversion for multiparty in Africa after decades of support to monolithic authoritarian regimes. Social tensions were then mounting. On many Tuareg migrants to returned to Niger as they were promised some assistance to settle back in the country. Default in the delivery of the promised assistance by authorities triggered the anger of some youths who then decided to attack a military post in Tchintabaraden.

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The national security forces retaliated forcefully, killing hundreds of Tuareg men and women in what resembled a pogrom operation. The absence of serious prosecution against the perpetrators of the 'Tchintabaraden massacres' in times of democratic aspirations coinciding with the organization of a national conference meant to promote a new political deal sealed a political divorce between Tuareg leaders and Niamey's central authorities. The rebel project, envisaged before the Tchintabaraden massacres (Casajus, 1995).

2. Conceptual clarifications:

2.1. The concept of Tuareg

The Tuareg are part of the indigenous Amazigh people (generally known as the Berbers). They live mainly in Southern Algeria, northern Mali and in Niger, with pockets of them found in Libya, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Their precise numbers are not known but estimated at between 300,000 to 3 million. The Tuareg of Niger probably number about 736,000. (Republic of Niger, 2006).

2.2. The concept of Insurgency

According to Mohammed (2014:6) argued that there was no single definition for insurgency in the sense that it could mean different things to different people. He explained that while those who fought for independence were regarded as terrorists by colonial powers, they were however seen by their own people as freedom fighters and liberators. In the light of this, he offered two definitions of insurgency namely, technical and political. According to him, technical definition refers to the strategic factual activities and the use of violence to achieve political objectives, while political definition refers to an armed group with organized leadership and command structure exercising control over a territory in order to implement ideological and political programs.

2.3. Types of Insurgency

Mohammed (2014:6). He went further to explain that there are two types of insurgency namely National Insurgency and Liberation or Anti-colonial Insurgency. According to him, national insurgency is confined to politics within States as a result of agitation from groups who feel marginalized or denied justice and seeking a solution from the State. He explained that Liberation or Anti-colonial insurgency refers to anti-colonial struggle for liberation, independence or secession and autonomy. Also pointed out the social element which notably was the claim by the insurgents that their grievances could not be met through political means due to lack of political will or the refusal of government to respond positively to their grievances.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this work is Relative Depravation theory. First to understand relative deprivation as a theory of political violence propounded by Dollard, Millard, *et al.* (1939) were the first to propose the theory, postulating that frustration leads men to act aggressively Gurr (1970) explains in is work "why men Rebels" that instead of an absolute standard of deprivation, a gap between expected and achieved welfare creates collective discontent. This theory also applies to individuals who find their own welfare to be inferior to that of others to whom they compare themselves Gurr (1970). Explains political violence as the result of collective discontent caused by a sense of relative deprivation. He writes, "'Relative deprivation' is the term used to denote the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the "ought" and the "is" of collective value satisfaction, and that disposes men to violence." This gap between an individual's expected and achieved welfare results in collective discontent.

According to Michael (2011) the concept of relative deprivation dates back to ancient Greece. Aristotle articulated the idea that revolution is driven by a *relative* sense or feeling of inequality, rather than an *absolute* measure. "For Aristotle the principal cause of revolution is the aspiration for economic or political equality on the part of the common people who lack it, and the aspiration of oligarchs for greater inequality than they have, that is a discrepancy in both instances between what people have of political and economic goods relative to what they think is justly theirs".

Walter (1966) defines the preconditions of "relative" deprivation as follows (where Person A feels deprived of object X): Person A does not have X; Person A wants to have X; Person A knows of other people who have X; Person A believes obtaining X is realistic. How might feelings of relative deprivation translate into terrorism? Gurr(1970) provides a psychological approach to

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explain how collective discontent is manifested as political violence: "The primary source of the human capacity for violence appears to be the frustration-aggression mechanism the anger induced by frustration is a motivating force that disposes men to aggression, irrespective of its instrumentalities. As a result of political, economy, and cultural marginalization of Tuareg causes Tuareg insurgency in Northern Niger.

4. Political, Economic Marginalization and Tuareg Insurgency in Northern Niger

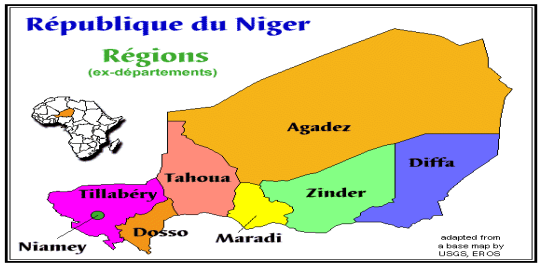
According to its founders, political and economic marginalization of the northern populations, unequal and opaque distribution of the uranium rent - exploited in the northern mining Town of Arlit were the two main reasons why the MNJ was born. A few months later, the MNJ gathered more than 1,000 combatants, mostly concentrated in the Aïr Mountains around Tamgak From this stronghold, the rebels proved capable of hitting any location of the vast northern Niger desert territory (Yvan, 2007:). Also what happened in the 70s when AREVA settled in Arlit and recruited most of their skilled labor force in Niamey, the far away state capital, the Tuaregs who are the inhabitant of the area are not consider for employment (Yvan, 2007:19).

After independence, the situation of the Tuareg in Niger did not improve, as they remained physically, politically, economically, and socially isolated from the new country's centers of power in the south. Governments dominated by the Djerma/Songhai ethnic groups since 1946 have subordinated the Tuareg, and Tuaregs were also drastically affected by the desertification of the Sahel during the droughts of 1968-74 and 1984-85, with the resulting diminished sources of goods and income from trading. Many were forced to migrate to cities, where they were culturally and economically alienated. Completely impoverished, many lived in refugee camps outside of major cities in Niger and Mali. Others migrated to Algeria and Libya (Republic of Niger, 2006).

In the 1980s the government promised resettlement projects if the Tuaregs would return from Algeria and Libya. Those projects never materialized, and the Tuareg who returned found instead a hostile political climate throughout the region. When they spoke out about their dissatisfaction, they were met with repression at the hands of state authorities. The government refused to assist the drought-stricken Tuareg regions, while they expropriated humanitarian assistance funds designated for the Tuareg by external donors, failed to inform the international community of the gravity of the situation, and in general ignored Tuareg needs, while directing most development funds to projects affecting non-Tuareg populations Dissatisfaction with the government, which had been for the last several decades, erupted in the form of Tuareg insurgency in the spring of 1990. In April and May of 1990, Nigerien officials arrested hundreds of Tuareg for attacks on official buildings. Several dozen people were killed in fighting, and the violence escalated from there. Government officials saw the Tuareg as a security threat, while the Tuareg feared torture and execution by the government (Republic 0f Niger, 2006).

According to Tuareg activists the conflict was around the frustrations of northerners to the abuse of power by southern elites. They claimed the north was being drained of resources and corruption was widespread in government. The government had extracted great wealth out of the uranium price boom, and failed to translate this into any sustainable development in the north. When this was combined with heavy handed attempts at controlling the people in the Tuareg region, it led to full scale conflict. The conflict was bloody, involving extreme human rights abuses, and was for the most part ignored by the world media. The armed conflict ended in 1995-96, with the signing of peace accords in both Niger and Mali. The refugees returned but little effort was made by either government to help people resettle or address any of the concerns that led to the original conflict (Republic 0f Niger, 2006).

Figure 1: The map of Niger showing Agadez the Tuareg strong hold



Source: Republic du Niger, 2015

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5. Cultural Marginalization and Tuareg Insurgency in Northern Niger

There is also a particularly sensitive land ownership issue for all nomad societies in Northern Niger. It is increasingly difficult for shepherds to graze their herds and to reach the wells in large parts of the country because Southern farmers are settling on land that was once available to Nomads. Consequently there are less pastoral zones, while farmers from the South are gaining more areas. Simultaneously impoverishment is causing nomads to settle on the periphery of Agadez or Arlit. This changes their way of life (Bouhlel, *et al* 2007).Also points out how this aggravated the frustrations within the pastoral populations of Northern Niger. The way in which the 2005 food crisis was handled highlighted deficiencies with the State's approach towards pastoral populations. While agricultural populations benefited from warning alerts and programs to surmount the crisis, no such large-scale action was organized to warn and help the pastoral populations. Pastoral communities in the North lost fifty to ninety per cent of their livestock (Bouhlel, *et al* 2007). Governments dominated by the Djerma/Songhai ethnic groups since 1946 have subordinated the Tuareg and prohibited the public use of Tamasheq, the Tuareg language in Niger (Republic of Niger, 2006).

Niger is a divided country, with the Tuareg living in the north and the dominant Hausa ethnic group in the south. The capital is in the south, and the south controls the country. Uranium revenues from the north are used to buy weapons in the south, which the government then uses to keep the north in check. The Agadez Region is home of the Tuareg, the "Lords of the Desert": estimated at 1.5 million, they are a tribe without a country. They have wandered the deserts of the Sahara since the 7th century, across the borders of present day nation states. Both the French colonists and the modern governments that have followed have continued to marginalize the Tuareg and dismiss their claims to land rights and autonomy. By the time French Uranium campany AREVA arrived, they had repeatedly lost the land and resources they need to survive. A lack of clean water and fertile soil, in particular, threatens to destroy these nomadic herders. Angry and desperate, a Tuareg rebellion arose two decades ago, and in 2007 they organized a rebel group called Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice (The Nigerien movement for justice MNJ,) that fights for self of the Tuareg in the region and for a greater share of the revenues from northern Niger's uranium wealth to be invested in the region. MNJ activities have caused instability and led to security probe on and off for many years despite negotiations (Ejolt**,** 2015).

Uranium was found in the area of the Air Mountains in the Agadez region, northern Niger, approximately 800 kilometres (km) North of Niamey, the capital of Niger, and 210 km north of the Town of Agadez, one of the main settlements of the Tuareg, the indigenous people of the Sahara desert.The mining area being far away from any infrastructure, the French companies SOMAIR and COMINAK (both subsidiaries of COGEMA, the French state-owned uranium today known as AREVA), created the towns of Arlit and Akokan. With no electricity provided, the companies built a coal approximately 190 km south of the mining areas, near the village of Tchirozerine, exploiting dirty coal. Today, people in the area (more than 100,000 inhabitants) are complaining about respiratory problems, birth defects, leukemia and cancer. Death rates linked to respiratory problems are twice that of the rest of the country. The pollution for thousands years to come the water is poisoned and the aquifers drained, the soil and the air are contaminated, making a return to the traditional way of life of the local agro pastoralists very difficult impossible. In spite of its wealth in mineral resources, Niger doesn't benefit from mining activities, meanwhile the nuclear French giant AREVA earns billions from its corporation, leaving little behind but environmental disasters and health risks for the people of Niger (Ejolt, 2015).

In March 2008, one of the Nigerian movements for justice (MNJ) spokesmen based in France, Issouf Maha, was offered the opportunity to give a press conference at the French National Assembly, following the invitation of a prominent Green Party MP. Maha accused AREVA, the French nuclear Company for holding a *de facto* monopoly on uranium exploitation in Niger, of causing ecological damage and of ignoring the interests of the, mostly Tuareg, inhabitants of the North (Yvan 2007-2009) .

In 2006 and 2007, the government of Niger granted a series of concessions for mining, gas and petrol exploration, divided between almost all of the mining companies present on the international market (Chinese, Americans, Australians, Canadians, Indians, etc). These areas are all located on the livable zones of the pastoral populations of the North (Tim Mersoi's region: Aïr valley). However, the nature of contracts, the amount of taxes paid, the cost of the deals, the employment distribution and the impact on the environment have not been made public. Above all, it is not known if clauses regarding

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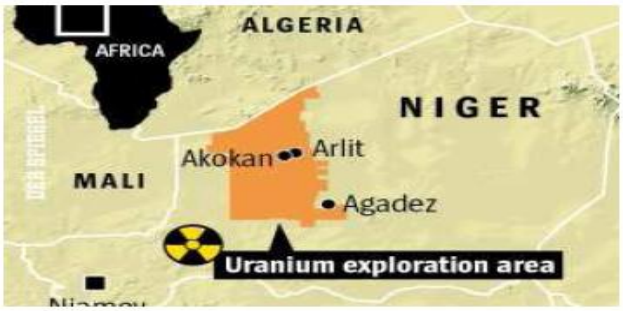
rights of the local populations to reach pastures or wells were included in these contracts (Bouhlel, *et al* 2007).

Figure 2: Location of Uranium mines in Niger,



Source: Cordula Meyer, Spiegel.

6. Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ) Demand from Niger Government

(Bouhlel, *et al* 2007).Describes how and why the issue of decentralization is an important part of Nigerien Movement for Justice MNJ's demands. Decentralization first appeared in the 1995 peace agreement and created hope for collective management and autonomy. The integration of the above social issues and cultural Dimensions such as teaching the Tamasheq language,(Tuareg) are taken into account in MNJ's political platform.

Guichaoua *et al* (2007). Underlines the following central and recurring demands made by the Nigerien Movement for Justice MNJ: effective implementation of the decentralization process, economic development, respect for the cultural diversity; more representation of Northern populations within state authorities, the administration and the army. Other demands are dressed in a discourse intended for the Western public (governance, ecology, autochthonous peoples, and visible minorities).

The movement wants to avoid appearing too ethnic in its claims. It uses themes (uranium-bearing pension, increased subsidies for Northern regions) in which all the populations of the northern regions can meet themselves. The movement respects institutions that resulted from the peace agreements of 1995. It focuses its grievances on the delays in implementing decentralization law, such as the lack of granting a suitable budget and the provision of technical assistance. The MNJ wants institutions to be funded by a larger stake of the uranium-bearing pension (at the regional level) Guichaoua *et al* (2007).

7. Lack of Strong Political Will

The armed conflict ended in 1995-96, with the signing of peace accords in both Niger and Mali. The refugees returned but little effort was made by either government to help people resettle or address any of the concerns that led to the original conflict. The Niger government has included a small group of rebels in the government. Some progress has been made in implementing certain provisions of the peace accord, such as a limited reintegration of former rebels into the police and military. As an example of the government reintegration plan, in 2003, many of the Republican Guard members were former Tuareg rebels. Consistent efforts at negotiation, some efforts at reform and transnational support for peaceful change all mitigate against another and will cause Tuareg rebellion in the near future (Republic of Niger, 2006).

What is clear however is that the origin of the conflict has not been addressed? The economies of the north are vulnerable. At the heart of the 1990 Tuareg uprising was the protection of Tuareg culture, and the nomadic way of life, which sustains that culture. Thousands of Tuareg affected by drought were forced to abandon their nomadic life style. By early 1997 all major Tuareg factions claimed to be committed to a peaceful resolution of their differences with the government. Yet claiming the government had not fulfilled its obligations, and that the government had launched a massive military assault on Tuareg strongholds in the Lake Chad region, the Tuareg resumed their armed struggle with the government in September 1997. Following a month of heavy fighting the government recommitted itself to peacefully resolving the dispute. After creating a new timetable for disarming and integrating Tuareg into Niger's military and police forces the country was relatively stable for the rest of 1997 through 1998 (Republic 0f Niger,2006).In a nutshell, many of the grievances that sparked the

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1990 uprising have not yet been resolved. Niger Tuareg still desire greater regional autonomy in addition to increased funds for development projects and increased economic opportunities. Cultural grievances, especially regarding language, are also still salient (Republic of Niger, 2006).

8.

Conclusion

In February 2007, the Tuareg in Niger, apparently frustrated by continuing inequalities, took up arms and formed the rebels group called Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ). A series of attacks by the group on government facilities in the Sahara ignited another rebellion, which ended in late 2009. Today's Tuareg in Niger are poorly represented in governments and militaries. The result, they say, has been marginalization and a continued failure to tackle poverty endemic among the Tuareg. The new peace is fragile and the region has not recovered economically. The tourist industry, which employed many Tuareg, has collapsed in the northern region as result of arms contestation between Tuareg rebels and Nigerien Government.

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