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# The “Protests against Charlie Hebdo” in Niger: A Background Analysis

Jannik Schritt

**Abstract:** In many Muslim countries in West Africa and beyond, “protests against Charlie Hebdo” occurred when citizens went out on the streets following Friday prayers on 16 January 2015. However, only in Niger did these protests turn extremely violent. This report analyses the social, political and religious workings behind the protests in Niger. In doing so, it shows that the so-called “protests against Charlie Hebdo” are only superficially linked to the Muhammad cartoons by the French satirical magazine. Similarly violent protests have occurred in Niger – often in the town of Zinder – for quite different reasons and on different occasions in recent years. The report therefore argues against simplistic notions of religious fundamentalism and shows that the protests can be explained more appropriately in terms of politics and socio-economic exclusion.

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**Keywords:** Niger, domestic political conflicts, religious fundamentalism, young people, political/societal mobilization, international relations, Boko Haram

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On 16 January 2015 protests took place following Friday prayers in Zinder, Niger's former capital, situated in southeastern Hausaland, and Agadez, in Niger's uranium-rich North, and ended in massive violence, particularly those in Zinder. By 17 January, these protests had spread to Niger's capital, Niamey. One day later, on 18 January, a meeting of the political opposition in Niamey resulted in clashes between opposition supporters and police forces. During these three days of protests, ten people died (five in Zinder and five in Niamey), 177 were injured and 382 were arrested (including 90 members of the political opposition). In addition, 45 churches, 36 bars and restaurants and five hotels and hostels were burned and pillaged; streets, cars and schools were set on fire; the Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (CCFN) in Zinder was burned down; and offices of the ruling party, Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme-Tarayya (PNDS-Tarayya), as well as several domiciles of PNDS party members were attacked. More than 300 Christians in Zinder were forced to seek refuge in military camps. The main protagonists of these protests were disaffected male youth. They built burning street barricades out of tyres and fuel, fought street battles with police forces, burned French flags and shouted slogans like "Je ne suis pas Charlie!"

According to public opinion in Niger, such violence had never occurred before, especially not against Christians. Although this is true for the extent of violence, similarly violent protests had occurred several times in Niger prior to the "protests against Charlie Hebdo", the most recent of which took place in the town of Zinder. The rise of a Salafi-oriented movement of reform called Yan Izala<sup>1</sup> in the early 1990s first triggered religious conflicts with the Tijaniyyah, the dominant Sufi order in West Africa, which turned particularly violent in 1992 and 1993 but calmed down by the early 2000s. Violence against Christians began in 1998, rose sharply in 1999 and again culminated in urban riots in Maradi and Niamey on 8 November 2000 "against the second annual International Festival of African Fashion", during which bars, churches and signs of Bori<sup>2</sup> spiritual culture were attacked and burned down. Whereas the riot in Maradi was mainly analysed in terms of religious fundamentalism (Cooper 2003), more recently – and going largely unnoticed by international media – protests have occurred on quite different occasions in the town of Zinder in response to various events not necessarily having exclusively religious con-

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1 Yan Izala is a Hausa acronym meaning "the society for the elimination of heresy and the erection of the Sunnah".

2 Bori is a traditional Hausa religion. It came under attack, especially by the Yan Izala, for being "pagan" and "un-Islamic".

notations, such as the inauguration of the oil refinery in 2011, water shortages in 2012, International Workers’ Day in 2012 and the American anti-Islamic movie *Innocence of Muslims* in 2012. These protests occurred in the town of Zinder after Mahamadou Issoufou came to power in March 2011 and formed a coalition of PNDS-Tarayya with the Mouvement Démocratique Nigérien pour une Fédération Africaine-Lumana Africa (MODEN FA Lumana) of Hama Amadou, through which Zinder became the stronghold of the political opposition, represented largely by the Convention Démocratique et Sociale-Rahama (CDS-Rahama), with its party head Mahamane Ousmane, and the Mouvement National de la Société de Développement-Nassara (MNSD-Nassara), led by former president Mamadou Tandja.<sup>3</sup> We should therefore be careful with mono-causal explanations such as “religious fundamentalism” and also focus on the socio-economic and political workings behind the protests.

What is striking about the “protests against Charlie Hebdo” and the previous protests in the town of Zinder is the similarity of the way they unfolded. The protests were not simply random violence but well-planned and carefully executed urban riots in which mainly disaffected male youth were mobilized through social media – especially text messages – and erected burning barricades in the streets out of tyres and fuel, attacked the police forces and pillaged and plundered stores, bars and churches. The protests thereby targeted not only religious symbols but also the Issoufou government, along with the governments of France, the United States and “the West” more generally.

In order to better understand these recurrent patterns of violence, we have to look closer into Nigerien politics, rhetorics of neocolonialism, and religion and religious coexistence, as well as the situation of youth in Niger. By doing so, I argue that the so-called “protests against Charlie Hebdo” are only superficially linked to the Muhammad cartoons and subsequent terrorist attacks on the French satirical magazine. Instead, they are primarily about politics and socio-economic exclusion. For one thing, what Western media mostly portrays as fundamentalist reactions of religious sentiments can be explained more appropriately by the notion of “politics by proxy”, whereby various topics or occasions are politically exploited in a context of political competition in multi-party systems that open new

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3 The town council (conseil de ville) of Zinder was installed in June 2011 by universal suffrage and is composed of 23 elected councils. Five political parties are represented within the council. The CDS and MNSD have the lion’s share of the seats: CDS, 14; MNSD, 4; PNDS, 2; Alliance pour le Renouveau Démocratique-Adaltchi Mutunchi (ARD), 2; Lumana, 1.

public spheres where political debates take place by “proxy” (Kaarsholm 2005: 152, 2009: 416).<sup>4</sup> In addition, the global capitalism that has produced enormous wealth in the West has rendered large parts of the Nigerien population redundant, thereby fuelling a general feeling of social exclusion, making youth prone to violence and turning them into easy targets for political machines and Islamist militant movements.

I start by describing the “protests against Charlie Hebdo” in more detail, then go on to explain the religious and political dimensions of these protests before finally analysing the situation of youth in Niger.

## “Protests against Charlie Hebdo”

The “protests against Charlie Hebdo” first started in Zinder and Agadez before spreading to Niamey one day later. It was Zinder’s religious authorities who first called for peaceful demonstrations after the Friday prayers. However, their protest call was banned by the governor and the sultan of Zinder. Nevertheless, an informal mobilization via text message among the urban youth continued. Starting on Monday, 12 January 2015, the day after the solidarity march in Paris, text messages were sent to voice grievances and build a collective in an effort to mobilize others:

Shame on President Issoufou, who attended the demonstration that was held in Paris because the enemies of Mhamd (S.A.W.) had been killed. Please share this message with Muslim citizens.<sup>5</sup>  
(Author’s translation)

Dear brother in ISLAM, charli hébdo again caricatured our PROPHET (S.A.W.) to insult ISLAM. Pray to ALLAH to protect ISLAM and to curse France, charli hébdo and all the presidents of the world who supported them. GOD is the strongest “ALLAH ya issa”. Please circulate this SMS.<sup>6</sup> (Author’s translation)

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4 I am grateful to Eva Riedke, who introduced me to the concept of “politics by proxy”.

5 “Honte au Presiden Issoufou ki a assistè a la marche ki se tenu a Paris parsk’on a tuè ls enemis du Mhamd (s.A.W). Partager ca svp o citoyens musulmans”.

6 “cher frère en ISLAM, charli hébdo a une fois d plus caricaturé notre PROPHETE (S.A.W) pr insulter L’ISLAM. prions ALLAH d protégé L’ISLAM et maudir la france,le charli hébdo et ts les présidents de ce monde qi les soutiennent.DIEU est le plus fort “ALLAH ya issa” faites circuler c sms svp”.

A close reading of their contents shows that a religious framing is only one element of these messages. The protests were also heavily directed against Issoufou and France. Youth shouted slogans like “À bas le régime!” and destroyed the party buildings of the PNDS-Tarayya. They also targeted French symbols – such as its national flag – and attacked French facilities Orange and Total in Niamey and the Centre Culturel Franco-Nigérien (CCFN) in Zinder.

During the violent protests in Zinder, messages were sent to add fuel to the fire.

The people of issoufou charlie are currently shooting at us in Zinder with live ammunition. That does not prevent us from fighting for the cause of the prophet (S.A.W.) because this is the real jihad. The protests continue today and all other days. Long live Islam. Peace and salute to our prophet. Send this SMS to every Muslim on Earth.<sup>7</sup> (Author’s translation)

In an initial analysis of the protests, long-time political observer of Niger and social anthropologist Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan confirmed the organized and carefully prepared character of the event and pointed to the dangers posed by the Nigerien opposition, who were politically exploiting the happenings (Olivier de Sardan 2015). In addition, national newspapers point out that mobile troops distributed tyres and fuel to the rioters to build street barricades and burn selected locations of religious, political and Western symbolism. However, the protests also led to pillage and plunder. It is reported that protesters stole a substantial amount of equipment and goods.

In order to urge calm, President Mahamadou Issoufou addressed the population in a message to the nation on 17 January 2015 in which he justified his presence in Paris as a sign that Niger opposes terrorism, but at the same time he sharply distanced himself from the Muhammad caricatures and forbade the distribution of the latest issue of Charlie Hebdo in Niger (which is not widely read there anyway). As a consequence of the violence of 16 and 17 January, the Ministry of the Interior forbade the opposition march that was planned for 18 January from taking place. When the opposition showed up despite the ban, opposi-

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7 “Les gens de issoufou charlie tir sur nou a bal reel presentmen a Zinder. sa nou empechera pas d lutter pour la cause du prophete SAW car c sa le vrai jihad. la marche continue orjud8 e tou ls otr jour. viv l’islam ,paix et salu a ntr prophete. circuler c sms a tou musulman sur terre”.

tion politicians and supporters as well as journalists who were present were met with police violence, and some of them were arrested.

The government blocked social networking sites and the short message service (texting) in Niger on 22 January and deployed the military in the cities to prevent disturbances around the Friday prayers the following day. The government further accused the political opposition of financing and orchestrating the demonstration by way of distributing tyres and fuel to the youth in order to overthrow the government. Nigerien Minister of the Interior Hassoumi Massaoudou also denounced the suspected presence of sergeants of Boko Haram at the protests in Zinder.<sup>8</sup> The government finally announced a police investigation to uncover the puppet masters of the riots and started to arrest suspects and plunderers. On 24 January, three political opponents of the current government – Soumana Sanda, former Minister of Health and member of MODEN FA Lumana, Ousseïni Salatou, spokesperson for the political opposition L'Alliance pour la Réconciliation, la Démocratie et la République (ARDR) and Youba Diallo, member of MODEN FA Lumana and former Secretary of Education and former State Director of Customs – were arrested in Niamey for inciting a national uprising. In Zinder, several other members of the political opposition were also arrested. The ARDR gathered on 26 January 2015 to issue a press statement regarding the socio-political situation of Niger after the violent protests. In their declaration, the ARDR blamed “la gouvernance satanique de Issoufou Mahamadou, alias Charlie” and “son clan” for the violence in Niger.

## Regional Identities, Political Machines and “Politics by Proxy” in Niger

The protests in Agadez and Zinder fit into the socio-economic and political situations of these regions. Since the initial French military conquest of Niger, the French presence was met with resistance in Zinder, and France started to systematically favour western Nigeriens and the Djerma ethnicity over eastern Nigeriens and other ethnic groups (Ibra-

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8 A friend of mine who filmed the protests in Zinder reported that the black flag of Boko Haram appeared during the protests. After the protests, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau threatened Chadian President Idriss Déby, Nigerien President Mahamadou Issoufou and Cameroonian President Paul Biya, all three of whom had decided shortly before the protests to start a joint counter-terrorism operation against Boko Haram.

him 1994). The historical political marginalization of Zinder is vividly remembered in present-day narratives and contributed to the emergence of a rebellious Zinderois identity (Danda 2004). This marginalization also served as the ideological foundation of a strong Hausa nationalist political party in Zinder, the CDS-Rahama, which was designed as an “‘eastern region’ response to the historical ‘western dominance’” (Lund 2001: 848). Agadez – as the region of uranium extraction in Niger – is also a region in which there are long-standing grievances against both national politics in Niamey and French extractive industrial practices, which triggered three Tuareg rebellions.

The introduction of a multi-party system and electoral competition in Niger in the early 1990s seems to have led to the emergence of political machines (for more on the concept of political machines in Africa, see Bienen 1971).<sup>9</sup> Political machines are characterized by urban reward networks in which particularistic, material rewards are used to extend control over personnel and to maximize electoral support, thereby favouring patronage, spoils and corruption (Scott 1969). Looking at the recurrent protests in Niger, it is striking that they mainly occurred in political opposition strongholds like Zinder and, more recently, Niamey. Niamey is the electoral stronghold of MODEN FA Lumana and Hama Amadou, who opted out of the government in 2013 when Issoufou called for a government of national unity that co-opted members of the political opposition into an enlarged governmental apparatus and thereby heavily weakened all political parties other than the PNDS-Tarayya. In addition, two of the political opponents who were arrested after the protests in Niamey (Soumana Sanda and Youba Diallo) had only recently been members of the Issoufou government but stepped down out of loyalty to Hama Amadou.

My fieldwork in 2011/2012 during the protests that occurred around the oil refinery’s inauguration ceremony in late 2011 helped me to understand how political machines function in Niger, as I witnessed how the protests in Zinder were organized by political opponents. A civil society association led by a rich businessman close to the former regime of Mamadou Tandja played a key role in the organization of the protests by assembling youth ahead of the refinery’s inauguration in so-called *comités de défense*. These committees were youth groupings in each neighbourhood of Zinder that were clandestinely attached to the civil society

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9 I am grateful to Kurt Beck and Klaus Schlichte, who pointed me towards the concept of “political machines”.



association and installed to execute orders. The issuing of orders and the collective framing of the protests took place through texting. Places were renamed in these text messages after locations significant in the “Arab Spring”; meeting points were arranged and misinformation was spread to add fuel to the fire. The mobilization of youth was guaranteed in part by the distribution of material rewards to youth leaders and in part by the highly hierarchical structure of these groupings that allows youth leaders to mobilize their followers by command.

Looking at the periodical patterns of violence in Zinder further shows that with the emergence of democracy and new media spaces in Niger (TV, radio, newspapers, internet, mobile phones), new public spheres sprouted up after years of authoritarian silence in which the politicization of topics and events took place by “proxy” (Kaarsholm 2005: 152, 2009: 416). As the recurrent patterns of violence and political debate in Zinder have shown, various topics or occasions are politically exploited in a context of political competition in which opponents accuse each other of being responsible for sparking the protests. However, not every topic or event is suitable as a “proxy”. “Politics by proxy” does not mean that the topic in question can be replaced arbitrarily by any subject whatsoever. The topic needs to possess a powerful signification that is loaded with high aspirations and hope (such as oil), be inextricably entangled with personal identities (such as religion), have an existential dimension (such as a water shortage) or already be a well-established public holiday (such as International Workers Day on 1 May), where the population routinely gathers. Thus, the political debate follows the logic of “politics by proxy” in which speech acts of “naming, blaming and claiming” (Felstiner et al. 1980-1981) are put to use to question the legitimacy of political opponents. Just as the government accuses the political opposition of being behind the protests, the opposition accuses the government of being the root cause of the protests. Therefore, the political opposition cannot be expected to deploy conciliatory mechanisms in order to restore peace. It is part of the political game in Niger for the government to do so by political manoeuvres of patronage, bribery, corruption and co-optation. However, this is a highly dangerous game because the violence can cause ethnic, regional and religious cleavages and thus fuel the risk of Niger falling apart along these lines.

## *Françafrique*, Rhetorics of Neocolonialism and Conspiracy Theories

The presence of the six African presidents (from Mali, Niger, Togo, Benin, Gabon and Senegal – all former colonies of France) at the “Je suis Charlie” demonstration in Paris on 11 January 2015 triggered forms of resistance in all these countries, attesting to the immediacy of the colonial history of *Françafrique* in the context of public national discourses in former French colonies. This is especially the case in Niger, for two reasons: First, the economy of Niger is closely tied to uranium production by AREVA/France in the North. Niger has been a uranium producer since 1968 and is currently the world’s fourth-largest producer of it, but the country is frequently ranked last in the Human Development Index. This incongruity is highly salient in the national public discourse and has triggered protests against AREVA and the “French neocolonial system”. Second, former Nigerien president Mamadou Tandja forcefully (re)produced the rhetoric of neocolonialism in Niger when his political project “Tazartché” (Hausa: “Continuation”) – which aimed to change the constitution in order that Tandja remain in power – incited the international community to enact sanctions against his regime. As a reaction, Tandja blamed “the West” and its meddling in Nigerien domestic politics for Niger’s underdevelopment, thereby portraying himself as a strong leader able to resist Western neo-colonial interference.

In social media outlets, such as in the Facebook group “15000 nigérien sur facebook”, users insulted President Issoufou, calling him a puppet of Western regimes. To give just one example, after Issoufou took part in the “Je suis Charlie” demonstration in Paris, a user posted a caricature of the French president, François Hollande, with a monkey on a leash who was drawn to look like Issoufou, who in turn had a baby monkey on his own back drawn with the likeness of Colonel Salou Djibo. Salou Djibo ousted Mamadou Tandja from power in a military coup in 2010. He claimed that his aim was to turn Niger into an example of democracy and good governance, and within one year of his reign he organized free elections that saw the former opposition party, PNDS-Tarayya, and its leader, Issoufou, come to power. The caricature thus signals the suspicion that France was deeply involved in the military coup of Djibo against Tandja in 2010, orchestrated in order to instal a president loyal to French interests. The same explanation of French involvement was (and still is) at work in the context of the Nigerien public national discourse about the 1974 military coup against Niger’s first post-independence president, Diouri Hamani, although new archive material

confirms that France was not involved in that overthrow (Higgott and Fuglestad 1975; van Walraven 2014).

A closer look at the aforementioned Facebook group shows that beside posts from the websites of Nigerien press outlets and risqué or controversial posts, anti-imperialist and/or anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are plentiful in which “France”, “the USA”, “the West” or “the Jews” are said to be behind all evils in Africa and the world.<sup>10</sup> From this, one can glean that many youth in Niger admire Islamist militant movements such as the Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda. After 9/11, for example, Osama bin Laden became a kind of hero in Hausaland (Charlick 2007: 33). The high currency of these conspiracy theories needs to be situated in the context of a global capitalism that, on the one hand, produces enormous wealth and, on the other, renders large parts of the population in the Global South redundant, thus fuelling a general feeling of a global marginalization. In the specific context of Niger, this feeling of marginalization is entangled with historical precedents of French colonial intrusion and Tandja’s appropriation of neocolonial narratives in his political project “Tazarchté”. We might further call the admiration for Islamist militant movements a “romanticism of resistance from a distance”. Not having been exposed to the brutal rule of IS and Al Qaeda and having hardly any knowledge of life on the ground in Iraq and the Levant, many young Nigeriens admire these distant Islamist militant organizations for what they see as the latter’s resistance against “the West”, in contrast to their negative views of Boko Haram, whose terror in Northern Nigeria they have experienced more intimately. Concerning Boko Haram, conspiracy theories are circulating in social media that portray the organization as a creation of “the West” – or, more particularly, of Mossad, the CIA or France – to destabilize West Africa in order to secure natural resources.<sup>11</sup> These conspiracy theories show another important point: They connect regional identities (“the West” vs. the Global South) with religious ones (Christians/Jews vs. Muslims). Notions of Western imperialism thus become entangled with a general feeling of Christian and Jewish world domination against a marginalized

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10 Many of these conspiracy theories involving colonialism, Zionism, superpowers, oil and the war on terror are theories from the Arab World that have travelled to Niger, perpetuated through channels such as Al Qaeda but also through media outlets such as Al Jazeera and various social media platforms (Gray 2010).

11 As alleged evidence, newspaper articles are posted that claim that white (Western) Boko Haram fighters have been arrested or that the United Nations has provided arms to Boko Haram.

Muslim world for which the Israel–Palestine conflict is often taken as the case of reference. Many Nigeriens shared the grievances against the caricatures by Charlie Hebdo but sharply distanced themselves from the rioters, who they denounced as “gangsters” and “hooligans”.

## Islam, Islamic Movements of Reform and Religious Coexistence in Niger

Niger is a predominantly Muslim society but a politically secular nation with a largely invisible Christian minority subculture. Approximately 94 per cent of the population are Muslims whereas 6 per cent follow African religious traditions or Christianity. With the advent of democratization, a Salafi-oriented movement of reform called Yan Izala emerged in Niger which contested the “pagan”, “supernatural” and “unwritten” Islamic practices of the historically dominant strain of Sunni Islam in Niger – the Tijaniyyah. Robert Charlick has argued that the success of Yan Izala should not be chalked up to simply a backlash against globalization, but would be more correctly viewed as filling a need on the part of certain segments of the Nigerien population to form a particular identity that seeks to modernize on their own terms, rejecting both Western-dominated modernization and the “traditional” social and normative constructs of their own society (2007). The Yan Izala therefore were supported in great numbers by rich traders and powerful merchants such as the *albazai*,<sup>12</sup> for whom membership became a sign of social distinction (Grégoire 1992), and by youth, for whom membership was an opportunity to challenge tradition and customary authorities and for whom the ideology of Yan Izala matched best with their aspirations of upward mobility.

The spread of Salafism in Niger, however, does not necessarily indicate a heightened probability of support for terrorism (Elischer 2014). Nevertheless, due to the long and porous border between Nigeria and Niger, Boko Haram members regularly seek refuge on Nigerien territory, especially in Diffa (but also Zinder), in order to escape police persecution in Nigeria. However, the organization has also begun to successfully recruit members in Niger. In early 2015 Boko Haram operations, including bombings and assassinations, started to take place in Diffa in response to a joint counter-terrorism operation against the organization led by Niger, Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria. However, Boko Haram’s

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12 The Hausa term “albazai” refers to those who have gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca (“hajji”).

ability to recruit members in Diffa is mostly based on material incentives, not ideological ones.<sup>13</sup> Journalist Thomas Fessy reported in April 2014 that Boko Haram members cross the border to Diffa looking for recruits especially among youth gangs, petty criminals and thugs. Boko Haram pays them for information, and they subsequently join terrorist training camps in Nigeria and help plan attacks and kidnappings (Fessy 2014). In contrast to their admiration of IS and Al Qaeda, the greatest part of the Nigerien population does not admire Boko Haram, the youth being particularly averse to implementing shari'a and leading a lifestyle of religious piety – rather, they tend to admire an “American way of life”. Whereas the Yan Izala movement, with its emphasis on written sources and reform, represents “development” in the Nigerien public imagination, Boko Haram, with its rejection of Western education, stands for “backwardness”. Moreover, Nigeriens living close to the border to Nigeria – who have traditionally had close social, cultural and economic ties with the Nigerian “Hausaland” – are well aware of the brutal role Boko Haram plays in Nigeria. Therefore, large protest marches against Boko Haram and in support of the Nigerien military were carried out in every major Nigerien town (even in Diffa) on 17 February 2015. In order to understand the seemingly contradictory stance of admiring IS and Al Qaeda while ideologically criticizing Boko Haram – despite the latter's successful recruitment of certain youth in Diffa based on material incentives – we have to focus more closely on the situation of youth in Niger.

## The Situation of Youth and the Phenomenon of Youth Violence in Zinder

Niger has the highest birth rate of any country in the world, with 6.89 children born per woman. The median age is 15 years old. Of the Nigerien population, 70 per cent are under 25 years of age, and 63 per cent of the

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13 According to the International Crisis Group report on Boko Haram violence in Nigeria, the Boko Haram border crossings benefit from Diffa's substantial Kanuri ethnicity, as Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau is also Kanuri (ICG 2014: 25). However, it seems to be first and foremost the proximity of Diffa to the Nigerian federal states of Yobe, Borno and Adamawa that explains Boko Haram's foothold in Diffa, thus an “ethnic reading” should not be overstated. As Mahamidou Aboubacar Attahirou, currently conducting his Ph.D. fieldwork with youth in Diffa, told me in a personal note, the dominant narratives among the youth in Diffa portray Boko Haram as a solely Nigerian affair and believe that recruitment is successful only because of the large amounts of money paid to recruits.

total population are said to live below the poverty line. Based on gender segregation which dictates that men dominate public life, the situation of male youth in Niger can be described as a “culture of masculine waiting” (Masquelier 2013: 473). Due to youth mass unemployment and low-paying jobs in Niger, young men are unable to marry, have families of their own and become contributing members of the community. Many of their grievances are directed against their own government and “the West”, which they blame for their lack of job opportunities.

A large part of the youth organize themselves into informal “conversation groups” called *fada* or *palais*.<sup>14</sup> One is normally in a *fada/palais* with other young people from the same neighbourhood. The *fada*, which started in the 1990s with the democratization process and the rise of unemployment fuelled by Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) to produce meaningful temporalities in a situation of boredom (Masquelier 2013), centre around tea ceremonies. The *palais* are a more recent phenomenon, having started around 2007. According to a study on youth violence in Zinder, there are approximately 320 *fada* or *palais*, of which 72.5 per cent are strictly masculine, 10.3 per cent consist uniquely of women and 17.2 per cent declare themselves to be mixed (Souley 2012: 10). In contrast to *fada*, the activities of *palais* centre on drug consumption, street fights, crime, violence and sex. Their violence has been a matter of growing concern for several years, especially in Zinder. Whereas the *fada* are mostly non-hierarchically organized, affirming the spirit of egalitarianism and comradeship, the *palais* are highly hierarchical organizations in which a leader, often called *chef*, boss or *président*, is the head of the gang. Neighbourhoods that are particularly affected by poverty display an especially high number of violent *palais*.

Due to the country’s demography, the youth are increasingly becoming a force to be reckoned with in Nigerien politics, especially due to their performance of violent masculinity in protests. They are the “critical mass” that has to be governed and controlled. They have thus become targets of the different political machines that rally behind either the government or the opposition. The *palais* are particularly easy prey for political machines that reward youth leaders for mobilizing their followers.

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14 “*Fada* literally means ‘the group of people attending the judgements at the leader’s palace’” (Lund 2009: 111; author’s translation). As the Hausa leader was traditionally the sultan, judgements took place in his palace. Therefore, *fada* is translated into French as *palais*. However, the usage of the two terms evinces a qualitative distinction.

## Conclusion

Whereas many of the social, political and religious workings behind the protests can also be found in other (West) African countries where “protests against Charlie Hebdo” either did not occur or remained largely peaceful, the combination and coincidence of these factors seem to make the Nigerien case unique. It is probably the assemblage of heterogeneous elements like the presence of Mahamadou Issoufou in Paris, a strong rhetoric of neocolonialism in public debate, the emergence of political machines and “politics by proxy” after democratization, the spread of Salafism, historical political marginalization of eastern Nigeriens and the emergence of regional identities – such as a rebellious Zinderois identity and a culture of “masculine waiting” paired with increasing youth violence – that led to the riots in Niger. The religious workings are thus only one element behind the protests and should not be taken as their mono-causal explanation. Quite to the contrary, the fact that similar patterns of violence occurred in response to events that had no religious connotation – such as the inauguration of the oil refinery, water shortages or International Workers’ Day in Zinder – shows that the protests can be explained more appropriately in terms of politics and socio-economic exclusion. As long as the youth in Niger (and elsewhere) continue to be largely excluded from the riches of capitalism in a globalized world, political machines will find henchmen for their political projects and Islamist militant movements will find easy prey for their brutal war economies, not necessarily because of recruits’ ideological commitment but simply due to both the sharing of grievances and material incentives.

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## **Die “Proteste gegen Charlie Hebdo” in Niger: Eine Hintergrundanalyse**

**Zusammenfassung:** Wie in vielen muslimischen Ländern nicht nur in Westafrika kam es auch in Niger zu „Protesten gegen Charlie Hebdo“; am 16. Januar 2015 gingen Menschen nach dem Freitagsgebet auf die Straße. Die Proteste verliefen jedoch nur in Niger extrem gewalttätig. Dieser Beitrag analysiert die sozialen, politischen und religiösen Hintergründe der Proteste in Niger. Der Autor legt dar, dass die sogenannten „Proteste gegen Charlie Hebdo“ nur oberflächlich gesehen auf die Mohammed-Karikaturen des französischen Satiremagazins zurückzuführen sind. Zu ähnlich gewalttätigen Protesten war es in Niger und insbesondere in der Stadt Zinder in den letzten Jahren wiederholt gekommen, und zwar aus ganz anderen Gründen und zu ganz unterschiedlichen Anlässen. Der Autor wendet sich daher gegen simplifizierende Vorstellungen eines islamistischen Fundamentalismus in Niger. Er belegt, dass die Proteste zutreffender mit politischen Dynamiken und sozioökonomischer Ausgrenzung erklärt werden können.

**Schlagwörter:** Niger, Innenpolitischer Konflikt, Religiöser Fundamentalismus, Jugendliche/Junge Menschen, Politische/Gesellschaftliche Mobilisierung, Internationale Beziehungen, Boko Haram