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Author(s): Richard Higgott and Finn Fuglestad
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The 1974 Coup d'État in Niger: Towards an Explanation

by RICHARD HIGGOTT AND FINN FUGLESTAD*

IN the early hours of Easter Sunday, 14 April 1974, the army, led by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché, overthrew the Government which had held power in Niger since independence. President Hamani Diori's régime became the twenty-fifth in Africa to fall to a *coup d'état* in eleven years, and Niger the eighth republic of former French Africa to come under the control of the military.

In spite of the acknowledged problems of analysing such violent changes,[1] we feel that at least an initial explanation of the events in Niger should be attempted. Many different reasons are given for every *coup d'état*: economic crises, corruption of the ruling élite, contagion, the list is almost inexhaustible. Useful as theoretical explanations of military intervention may be at a general level, it would seem self-evident that each is unique, and the combinations of factors which apply are very rarely the same in any two countries.

This article will attempt to outline the major causal elements of a *coup d'état* which secured the downfall of one of black Africa's supposedly more stable régimes. We shall examine four main propositions:

(1) The underlying conflicts which were to be found in Niger prior to independence in 1960 were still of crucial importance in 1974. Hamani Diori's régime was not as strong as implied by his unanimous re-election in 1970, and by his position on the international scene as an African statesman.

(2) Throughout the life of the régime, the continued French involvement in all aspects of Niger's economic and political life was a constant focal point for resentment. The Government's unwillingness (and in many cases inability) to modify this influence, especially with regard to the French military presence, was to be a major factor in its downfall.

* Richard Higgott is Tutor in Political Science, University of Tasmania, Hobart, and Finn Fuglestad is Research Scholar of the Norwegian Research Council for Sciences and Humanities, Oslo.

[1] For a good discussion of these problems, especially relating to francophone Africa, see Samuel Decalo, 'Military Coups and Military Régimes in Africa', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), XI, 1, March 1973, pp. 105–27.

(3) By 1974, the socio-economic and political pressures on the régime had grown to a previously unexperienced level.

(4) Possibly of greatest significance was the army's belief that it needed to protect its 'corporate self-interest'.[1]

THE POLITICAL ANTECEDENTS OF DISAFFECTION

Of Niger's total population of four million people, approximately half are Hausa; the rest are divided unevenly between four main groups, the Zerma/Songhay, Fulani, Tuareg/Buzu, and Kanuri. This situation ensures that ethnicity is a significant political factor.[2] As with many African states, however, the ethnic arithmetic does not match the political arithmetic, which in Niger has been reflected by minority Zerma/Songhay domination of the political arena since World War II. As these two closely related groups inhabit western Niger, this ethnic political ascendancy also represents a regional predominance, a factor of considerable relevance for understanding the country's recent political history.

Briefly stated, and at the risk of over-simplification, it can be argued that the western (Zerma/Songhay) pre-colonial society was composed of warriors and slaves; the eastern, or Hausa society consisted of chiefs, peasants, and traders. The fighting of interminable wars against raiding Tuareg and Fulani had seen the western society, at the time of French penetration, reduced to a state of advanced disintegration.[3] The turbulent nineteenth-century history of this region helps to explain the welcome extended to the French, who were seen as potential allies by the Zerma/Songhay. They were more receptive to French influence than the rigidly structured Hausa, and prompt to grasp any benefits colonial rule had to offer, especially the opportunity to send their children to French schools. The peoples of the west were, on the other hand, the principal victims of colonialism, suffering more heavily from such measures as forced labour and the obligatory millet granaries. This situation was in part due to the fact that western Niger was always in closer contact with the French, especially after the capital of the terri-

[1] Samuel E. Finer, *The Man on Horseback* (London, 1969), p. 47.

[2] The population of Niger on 1 January 1972 was estimated to be 4,110,000, with the following ethnic breakdown in thousands: Hausa, 1,850; Zerma/Songhay, 870; Fulani, 565; Tuareg/Buzu, 465; Kanuri, 310; Foreigners, 50. 'La République du Niger', in *Notes et études documentaires* (Paris), July 1973, 3, 994–5, p. 8.

[3] On the pre-colonial history of Niger in general and the west in particular, see Yves Urvoy, *Histoire des populations du Soudan centrale (Colonie du Niger)* (Paris, 1936), and Jean Perié and Michel Sellier, 'Histoire des populations du cercle de Dosso (Niger)', in *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N.* (Dakar), 4, 1950, pp. 1015–74.

tory had been transferred from Zinder in the east to Niamey in 1927.[1] Western ascendancy was further enhanced by the French practice of treating all chiefs as equal, thus reinforcing the position of the weaker traditional rulers of the west at the expense of a reduction in power of the stronger Hausa chiefs of the east.[2]

In practical terms, western ascendancy ensured that the educated few who indulged in politics after 1946 were nearly all Zerma/Songhay *évolués*, and their *Parti progressiste nigérien* – the local branch of the *Rassemblement démocratique africain* – drew almost all its support from their kinsmen in the west. On the other hand, the Hausa looked for opportunities in the economic field; it was indeed thanks to their toil that the production of groundnuts increased steadily throughout the 1940s and 1950s.[3] Consequently, the east continually paid higher taxes than the west, a fact which did much to exacerbate the existing regional conflict.[4] The P.P.N. very quickly found itself faced by a formidable French-supported alliance of easterners (commoners and chiefs alike), western chiefs and, later on, urban manual workers. The P.P.N. remained a minority organisation throughout the colonial period, seizing power during 1958–9 because the leading politician at that time, Djibo Bakary – a westerner who had built up a considerable following among the Hausa[5] – made a fatal error of judgement by opting for the *Non* vote in the referendum of 1958.[6] More than half of Bakary's supporters deserted him, virtually overnight, and formed, together with the P.P.N. and another minor party, an electoral alliance which successfully contested the elections of December 1958.

It was understood by the junior members of this tactical alliance that a new political party would be formed after the elections. However, this was not to be: the leaders of the *Parti progressiste nigérien* were able to persuade their new collaborators, one by one, to renounce their old groups and join the P.P.N. itself. But it must be stressed that none of these allies was ever admitted into the *politburo* of the P.P.N., the major decision-making body in Niger, which remained unchanged from 1956 until the time of the coup, 18 years later.

[1] L. van Hoey, 'The Coercive Process of Urbanisation: the case of Niger', in S. Green et al., *The New Urbanisation* (New York, 1968), p. 25.

[2] Certain aspects of the opposition between the east and the west in Niger are discussed by Henri Raulin, *Techniques et bases socio-économiques des sociétés rurales nigériennes* (Paris and Niamey, n.d.).

[3] Yves Pehaut, 'L'Arachide au Niger', in *Etudes d'économie africaine* (Paris), I, 1970, pp. 9–103.

[4] Finn Fuglestad, 'Djibo Bakary, the French and the Referendum of 1958 in Niger', in *The Journal of African History* (Cambridge), XIV, 2, 1973, p. 319.

[5] On the career of Djibo Bakary, see Georges Chaffard, *Les Carnets secrets de la décolonisation*, Vol. II (Paris, 1967), pp. 270–3.

[6] Fuglestad, loc. cit. p. 330.

TABLE 1

The *Politburo* of the P.P.N., 1956–74[1]

Position	Holder	Ethnic group
Président	Boubou Hama	Songhay
Premier vice-président	Diamballa Maiga	Songhay
Deuxième vice-président	Toulou Mallam	Zerma
Secrétaire général	Hamani Diori	Zerma
Secrétaire adjoint	Dandhobi Mahamane	Mawri
Secrétaire politique	Courmo Barcourgne[a]	Zerma
Secrétaire économique	Noma Kaka	Mawri
Secrétaire social	René Delanne[a]	Métis
Trésorier général	Barkiré Halidou	Zerma
Secrétaire à la propagande	Alou Himadou	Songhay
Secrétaire à la propagande	Issa Garba	Zerma
Secrétaire de séance	Abdou Gao	Mawri

[a] These two members were dismissed during 1971.

As shown in Table 1, there were no Hausa, Tuareg, Fulani, or Kanuri inside the *politburo*, which effectively represented less than 30 per cent of the total population. From 1958 to 1974 Niger was ruled by an oligarchy which made full use of the state machinery to ensure its continuity in power. No opposition was tolerated, no attempt to enlarge the power base of the party was made, and no elections worthy of that name, either within the party or nation-wide, were ever held. The P.P.N. was further able to reinforce its position by swamping the higher echelons of the administration with Zerma/Songhay party stalwarts, especially after the expulsion of the Dahomean civil servants in 1963.[2]

It is not our intention to demonstrate that the *coup d'état* in Niger was inspired by any group opposed to the P.P.N. on ethnic or regional grounds, for this would appear not to be the case. What this article attempts to show is that the P.P.N., by rigidly opposing any change which might have widened the base of its support, as well as by refusing to allow any alternative forms of political activity, inevitably focused attention on itself as the butt for the grievances of the whole nation. The régime's widespread unpopularity was to give the army the perfect excuse for intervention. Given its unrepresentative nature, one is

[1] Source: the members of the *politburo* are listed in the special issue of *Bulletin de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1971), 'Répertoire de l'administration africaine'. The details of ethnic origin are from private sources. The Mawri, although Hausa-speaking, are considered to be a distinct ethnic group; they number about 200,000, and are to be found in the Dogondoutchi region.

[2] Guy Nicholas, 'Crise de l'état et affirmation ethnique en Afrique noire contemporaine', in *Revue française de sciences politiques* (Paris), XXII, 5, October 1972, pp. 1017–18.

tempted to ask not why the P.P.N. régime was overthrown, but why it was able to survive for more than 15 years.

Why had this situation not been readily apparent to outside observers? The answer is twofold. First, President Diori had carefully avoided allowing his Government to have the same regional and ethnic complexion as the P.P.N. *politburo*. Several notable Hausa, such as Amadou Issaka the Sarkinkantché, Issa Ibrahim, Boukari Sabo, and Maidah Mamoudou held various posts in the *cabinet*, and the Tuareg, Mouddour Zakara, was Minister of Saharan and Nomadic Affairs from independence until the coup. These men were naturally members of the P.P.N., but none of them was ever in the all-powerful *politburo*. Their ministerial function was to a certain extent window-dressing for outside consumption.

The second factor was the personal position of Hamani Diori, at both the national and international level. Very little is known of the inner workings of the *politburo*, although it seems that Diori, along with Courmo Barcourgne and René Delanne until their dismissal in 1971,[1] had represented the liberal and reform-minded wing of the party. These men were, however, a minority within the *politburo* which was almost certainly controlled by such immensely unpopular figures as Boubou Hama, the P.P.N. president, and Diamballa Yansambou Maiga, the Minister of the Interior. It is believed that they were responsible for forcing Diori to abandon his intended ministerial reshuffle in 1972. It is perhaps the personal tragedy of the President that he came to personify a régime which he had been unable to transform. That he remained unchallenged as leader was due to his own personal prestige; the very men who opposed Diori within the *politburo* knew that the régime they had done so much to fashion stood or fell with him.

Diori's success as francophone Africa's spokesman and 'broker' did much to draw attention away from the domestic situation in Niger. His foreign policy, which had been a source of strength to him at home throughout the 1960s was, however, to become a factor in his downfall. Diori had successfully ridden out many storms, including an abortive *coup d'état* in 1963,[2] the period of Sawaba subversion, and an unsuccessful assassination attempt in 1965,[3] to become – along with Senghor and

[1] It seems probable that Barcourgne had been compromised in an abortive and rather burlesque, if not altogether imaginary attempt to change the Government. He had believed, quite wrongly, that a *coup d'état* was under way, and had acted in support of it. Delanne was the leader of the Nigérien trade union movement, and had been dismissed for not supporting the Government when pay increases had been demanded. [2] Chaffard, op. cit. pp. 311–18.

[3] J. P. Morillon, 'La Tentative insurrectionnelle du Sawaba au Niger', in *Est et Ouest* (Paris), 342, May 1965, pp. 20–2.

Houphouët-Boigny – one of Africa's most accomplished 'stayers'. His position as the international negotiator for French-speaking Africa became unchallengeable. He had been the longest serving President of the *Organisation commune africaine et malgache*, and had done more than any other African leader to keep O.C.A.M. together. Along with Senghor and Bourguiba, he was the leading protagonist of the concept of 'la francophonie', and above all he was the acknowledged spokesman for the Associated African States in their relations with the European Economic Community.

The French orientation of Diori's international outlook was paralleled at home by his reliance on a large group of French advisers, known in Niamey as the 'Corsican Mafia', and the enormous influence France still held over her former colony. The changes which were to take place in franco-African relations during the 1970s were to give his foreign policy an air of unreality. Five specific factors at the international level succeeded in exposing Diori's position at home: (i) the demise of O.C.A.M., on which he personally had staked so much; (ii) the stillborn nature of 'la francophonie'; (iii) the application of the Commonwealth African States for associate membership of the E.E.C.; (iv) the call by some francophone states for a revision of their *accords de coopération*; and (v) Pompidou's less-than-successful visit to Niger in January 1972.

More than anything else, however, the redundancy of Diori's foreign policy seemed to highlight the size and power of his French entourage, the members and the activities of which were well known to the population of Niamey. With over 90 French citizens spread throughout its senior administrative structure Niger had, proportionately speaking, one of the least Africanised governments of francophone Africa.[1] Perhaps two figures attracted most resentment: Nicholas Leca, Diori's personal executive assistant and *directeur* of his *cabinet* from 1959 until the coup; and Don Jean Colombani, the last Governor, officially responsible for the marketing of Niger's groundnuts in France, but also unofficially a go-between for the two Governments. That there was heavy French involvement in Niger's economic life may be taken for granted.[2] Indeed, the continuing French presence was a constant source of annoyance to many sectors of Niger society, especially to the educated youth, who believed it to be the major obstacle to Africanisation and

[1] E. M. Corbett, *The French Presence in Black Africa* (Washington, 1972), p. 57.

[2] Although impossible to document accurately, an impression of the overall size of French involvement in the post-independence Niger economy can be gleaned by referring to the relevant sections of (i) 'Les 500 premières sociétés d'Afrique noire', in the special 1971 issue of *Bulletin de l'Afrique noire*, and (ii) Georges Ngango, *Les Investissements d'origine extérieure en Afrique noire francophone* (Paris, 1973).

their own advancement. This anti-French feeling reached a peak early in 1972 when President Pompidou's visit to Niger was greeted by a series of hostile demonstrations.[1]

Accordingly, Diori and the P.P.N. began to feel a domestic political need to seem less close to France, reflected by changes in foreign policy which were in part intended for home consumption. Diori set about improving Niger's links with non-francophone states, especially Nigeria, West Germany, Canada, and the Arab bloc.[2] Above all, in August 1972 he asked France for a revision of the bilateral agreements which had existed since 1961. These covered all aspects of France's relations with Niger, from cultural to military matters, as did similar *accords de coopération* with most of her former colonies.[3] These agreements, arguably the major factors in the patron–client relationship existing between France and her old colonies, had generated resentment not only in Niger but throughout former French Africa. Diori's policies, on a superficial level, gave the impression that Niger was becoming less susceptible to French domination, but in real terms the substance of relations between the two countries remained very much unchanged. The P.P.N.'s close association with a numerically small, but highly influential expatriate community, merely compounded the feeling of hostility which existed towards the Government from all sectors of the community. This situation had, however, existed for many years in Niger, and is not in its own right a sufficient explanation of the *coup d'état*. It should be seen, along with the inability of the P.P.N. to represent any interests but its own, as the foundation on which the events of 1973 and 1974 were to establish themselves.

THE AILING RÉGIME

Towards the end of 1972 the régime began to lose control of the domestic situation. By 1973 the drought was in its third year, as a consequence of which the country was in a general state of economic crisis and very low morale. The political discontent generated was, in the absence of any legal outlet for opposition, often of a violent nature. The whole period exhibited 'the almost structural nature of the vulner-

[1] *West Africa* (London), 22 September 1972, p. 1249.

[2] In 1973 Niger severed diplomatic relations with Israel.

[3] Details of the agreements have never been officially published, but their outline can be gained from Maurice Ligot, *Les Accords de coopération entre la France et les états africains et malgache d'expression française* (Paris, 1964), and 'Les Accords de coopération entre la France et les 4 états du conseil de l'entente', in *Bulletin de l'Afrique noire*, 187–9 and 192–3, May–June 1961.

ability of the state to subversion'.[1] The P.P.N. in general, and Diori in particular, were not unaware of their precarious political situation.

The Government's most urgent need was to alleviate the catastrophic situation which had arisen as a result of the drought.[2] This had brought with it a new level of misery and poverty, unprecedented even in a country of Niger's lowly means,[3] and was to succeed in exposing the excesses and incompetence of a corrupt régime which had, for so long, been obscured by the prestige of its leader. The Tuareg lost almost all their cattle, and tax receipts in Niger fell by over 40 per cent.[4] The last 18 months prior to the *coup d'état* saw an influx of nearly 500,000 refugees from Mali – a similar number of Nigériens were estimated to have gone south into Nigeria[5] – and small tented cities of people seeking respite from the rigours of the drought grew up around Niamey.

Obvious as the drought problem in general was as a factor for instability for Diori's régime, of greater political damage was the not only incompetent, but blatantly corrupt handling of the relief aid by members of the P.P.N. Immediately after the coup, over 40 vehicles supplied by international agencies were found plying for hire as taxis in Niamey, and over 3,000 tons of grain were discovered in a Zinder warehouse waiting for prices to rise.[6] According to Colonel Kountché, the leader of the Supreme Military Council, the army had brought the situation to the notice of the President on several occasions, without any action being taken.[7] The abuse of the relief aid was, however, merely the last excess of an already dishonest régime.

The corruption of the P.P.N. élite had been common knowledge in Niamey for several years, personified by Madame Diori, the President's wife, whom the students called 'l'Autrichienne' after Marie Antoinette. She had acquired a considerable fortune, including many luxury houses in Niamey which she rented to foreign embassies and state corporations at exorbitant rates. She had also obtained for herself some of the choicest areas of fertile land on the banks of the Niger, close to Niamey.[8] Many other members of the P.P.N. élite were also profiteering, but not, it must be stated, in as grand a fashion as Madame Diori. Regardless of the fact

[1] J. M. Lee, *African Armies and Civil Order* (New York, 1968), p. 171.

[2] On the drought, see David Dalby and R. J. Harrison Church (eds.), 'Drought in Africa: report of the 1973 symposium', School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1974, and E. Bernus, 'Drought in Niger', in *Savanna: a journal of the environmental and social sciences* (Zaria), II, 2, 1973, pp. 129–32.

[3] On earlier droughts, see Finn Fuglestad, 'La Grande famine de 1931 dans l'ouest du Niger', in *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* (Paris), 222, 1974.

[4] *The Guardian* (London), 16 April 1974, p. 12.

[5] *West Africa*, 22 April 1974, p. 454.

[6] B.B.C. 1 News Broadcast, 20 May 1974.

[7] *Le Monde* (Paris), 6 May 1974, p. 9.

[8] Ibid.

that corruption is more often than not a post-coup justification for a military take-over rather than a reason for the action itself, this was, if taken in conjunction with the drought, of considerable significance in Niger.

It is possible to argue that the excesses of the P.P.N. élite were a tragedy for Hamani Diori who was, perhaps more than anyone else, fully aware of the terrible plight of his country. Throughout 1974 he worked hard at what he believed would best help solve Niger's problems and be most likely to ensure his political survival. Diori's policy was to renegotiate the *accords de coopération* with France on terms which would be more advantageous to Niger – notably he hoped to secure a substantial increase in the price being paid for uranium. Prior to the oil crisis of 1973–4, Niger's uranium reserves, the exploitation of which was effectively controlled by France, were bringing in a meagre 23 million C.F.A. a year.[1]

In 1972 the French Atomic Energy Commission had announced a unilateral reduction in its Niger uranium commitment. This was a serious setback for Diori's Government because article 5 of the Defence Agreement of 1961 reserved to France the utilisation 'par priorité... des matières premières et produits stratégiques'.[2] Niger's chances of successfully exploiting her reserves without French support were minimal, but fortunately the oil crisis of 1973 provoked the French Government into rushing through a rapid nuclear energy programme. Diori saw this as his opportunity to relieve some of the pressures on his beleaguered régime. First, by changing the status of the negotiations, which had previously been conducted for the French by Péchiney-Mokta, on to a state-to-state basis, he hoped to counter some of the criticisms of the patron–client nature of franco-Nigérien relations. Secondly, the extra French payments would help to alleviate the disastrous economic situation prevailing in Niger: the loss of revenue from taxes, the increased cost of importing oil, and the need for expensive drought relief.

The tactics Diori used in the attempt to achieve these goals partly explain France's inertia at the time of the *coup d'état*. Obviously influenced by the success of O.P.E.C., Diori teamed up with President Bongo of Gabon to devise a joint strategy for the negotiations with Paris. Gabon was in virtually the same position as Niger, being forced to negotiate a rise in the uranium price not with the French Government, but with another filial body of the C.E.A.[3] The French were extremely

[1] Ibid. 25 April 1974, p. 12.
[2] Ligot, op. cit. p. 91.
[3] *Le Monde*, 25 April 1974, p. 12.

irritated by this attempt of their former colonies to present them, for the first time, with a united front. The success of such negotiations would have put franco-African relations on a completely new footing, more favourable to the African states. The French negotiating team, which had gone to Niamey in March 1974, greeted all the African requests with a negative response and returned to France, using Pompidou's ill-health as their excuse for being unable to conclude an agreement – a tactic they had employed continuously over the preceding 18 months. There seemed to be an *impasse*, the French having much more time to spare than a despondent Diori. The death o Pompidou was, however, to break this deadlock. Whilst in Paris for the funeral Diori was informed by Alain Poher, the interim President, that a new agreement, more favourable to Niger, would be drawn up. Jean de Lipkowski, *Secrétaire d'état aux affaires étrangères*, was to go to Niamey on 19 April to finalise and sign the new agreement.[1] Ironically for Diori, this relief was to come too late; five days before the planned meeting he was removed from office.

The failure of Diori's régime to solve its immediate economic problems was, not surprisingly, matched by a failure to cope with the political situation. From the time the P.P.N. had successfully overcome the challenge of Bakary and Sawaba in the middle 1960s until 1972, the domestic front in Niger had been fairly peaceful, despite the lack of a legal outlet for opposition. This relative tranquillity disappeared with the beginning of the rapid economic decline, and the régime, which had felt secure enough to release a number of political prisoners in 1970, cracked down fiercely on public demonstrations during 1972 and 1973. Students and civil servants were then to be seen distributing broadsheets condemning imprisonment without trial and the brutal nature of the suppression of strikes. There were even attempts to set up fresh political parties. The P.P.N. reacted against these events with extreme ferocity, and several students, teachers, and civil servants were sentenced to as much as ten years in prison for supposed subversion.[2] These people, along with the army, were the groups most bitterly opposed to Diori's régime.

The political community in Niger is extremely small, being restricted mainly to students, teachers, civil servants, and traders living in Zinder, Maradi, Tahoua, and above all Niamey. If Diori was to have re-established his control it was these groups he had to pacify, and it was partly in the hope of defusing what was rapidly becoming a militant political community that he agreed to hold the long-overdue P.P.N.

[1] Ibid. [2] Ibid. 17 April 1974, p. 8.

conference. Unfortunately for the régime, the idea was to backfire, and this was to have a significant bearing on the coup which took place less than a month before the conference could be held. The need to fill the two vacant posts in the *politburo* – which had arisen with the dismissal of Barcourgne and Delanne – was the official reason for calling the conference, but in reality it was to be used as a public relations exercise to show that the P.P.N. was widening participation in the hierarchy of the party by incorporating fresh blood. Diori also hoped that he could use the occasion to announce a new uranium agreement with France.

But if the expectation was that this P.P.N. conference would lower the political temperature in Niamey, in practical terms it was to have exactly the opposite effect. At a time when Niger as a nation was economically and morally at an all-time low, the idea of an expensive get-together with the old guard of the P.P.N. parading through Niamey was too much to contemplate, and was to generate an enormous amount of ill-feeling. The constant and open feuding among the ranks of the P.P.N. even made the conference unjustifiable as an exercise in unity at a time of crisis. At a national level it is possible to argue that this, more than the economic situation, caused the army to run out of patience. Kountché's own words are instructive; talking of the conference he said: 'les mêmes personnes étaient restées aux leviers de commande...mais au lieu du redressement attendu, c'est à une cission du parti qu'il fallait s'attendre'.[1]

THE MILITARY VARIABLE

In a *coup d'état* the final variable leading to intervention is always the position of the army. Drawing on the existing body of theoretical literature on the military in politics, our analysis of what happened in Niger will emphasise three factors: (i) the defence of national interest was of some significance; (ii) of greater importance, however, was the army's defence of its corporate interest, arising from a belief that its position was being undermined by Diori's régime; and (iii) the conditions for a military take-over in Niger could not have been more favourable.

The defence of national interest is more often than not a post-coup justification rather than an incipient reason for intervention.[2] Nevertheless, given the economic stagnation, human misery, and political inertia existing in Niger at the time, it would appear the ultimate in cynicism to ascribe the coup to purely selfish motives on the part of the army. While

[1] Ibid. 2 May 1974, p. 9.

[2] Finer, op. cit. p. 40.

not an overriding factor, the debilitating physical situation in which Niger found itself in 1974 would obviously have been influential in the military's thinking, if only from the point of view that it confirmed the growing belief that there would be little or no opposition to its action.

Certainly of greater significance was the undermining of the army's position by Diori's régime throughout the 1970s. The disaffection of the soldiers with the P.P.N. Government was not a recent innovation. Right from independence they had been used for tax collection, and this had been an underlying cause of resentment for 14 years. Noma Kaka's time in office as Minister of Defence also appears to have been bad for civil–military relations. Aware of this, Diori had personally taken on the post in 1970, only to hand it to Léopold Kaziendé in 1972. This uncertain shuffling and lack of continuity was a constant source of irritation to the Niger officer corps.

The army took greater exception, however, to the continued French military presence, which was considered to be increasingly anachronistic. Under the military co-operation agreements, France still had two companies of troops, plus 60–70 officers and N.C.O.s acting as technical assistants. This situation was aggravated by the bad relations which existed between French and Nigérien officers. Kountché accused the French of pursuing divisive tactics and being patronising in their behaviour towards their brother officers. The army's attitude to the French presence is confirmed by the immediate expulsion, after the coup, of the commander-in-chief of the French military mission in Niger.[1] It was followed several weeks later by a request that France recall the rest of her troops as soon as possible.

Even more hostility had been generated by Diori's attempt to weaken the position of the army as the ultimate controllers of the use of force in Niger. Under the pretext of democratisation the army was to have been gradually supplanted by 'la milice du parti', an operation having a direct parallel with Nkrumah's attempts to build up his President's Own Guard Regiment at the expense of the Ghanaian army. This degradation of the army's professional status, which authorities on the military in African politics see as the most widespread and potent motive for intervention,[2] went deeper still. Diori talked not only of getting the army on the cheap, but of putting it to work on non-military tasks: 'L'objectif est d'avoir une armée qui coûte le moins cher possible à la nation et qui soit directement utile à la politique de développe-

[1] *Le Monde*, 2 May 1974, p. 9.

[2] William F. Gutteridge, *The Military in African Politics* (London, 1969), p. 145, and Ruth First, *The Barrel of a Gun: political power in Africa and the coup d'état* (London, 1970), p. 429.

ment.'[1] Diori's intention was to use the soldiers on agricultural projects. During 1972–3 they had also been employed in a policing rôle to quell civil disturbances in Niamey. Not only did this injure their professional pride, it almost certainly demonstrated to them how simple it would be to stage a successful *coup d'état*.[2]

In almost its last act, the Government tactlessly snubbed an army which was soon to remove it. Diori signed a defence pact with the President of Libya without consulting the military at any stage of the negotiations. The abortive nature of this agreement, due to the temporary eclipse of Colonel Ghadaffi, merely compounded the offence in the eyes of the army. Interviewed after the coup, Kountché spoke strongly against this lack of consultation, and what he called 'les fantaisies' of Diori's foreign policy.[3] The naïve and insensitive treatment of the army by the P.P.N. was undoubtedly a major factor in its downfall. At a personal level, it was short-sighted of Diori in the extreme; Africa abounds with ex-Presidents who have not treated their armies with the necessary tact and consideration.

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that the Government fell when it did; with regard to the timing, organisation, and execution of the *coup d'état*, everything was in the military's favour. Had the army in fact needed further encouragement, which is doubtful, the death of Pompidou would certainly have provided this. But there was no need to disbelieve Kountché when he said: 'la date du déclenchement de cette affaire avait été arrêtée bien avant la mort de Pompidou'.[4] The death of the French President must surely have enhanced the coup-makers' chances of success. Such is the influence of France over her former territories that her part in the coup should be examined, even though she played what could be termed a negative rôle in Niger.

Despite Diori's difference with France over uranium, and his criticism of the terms of association with the E.E.C., he remained to the time of his fall one of France's most faithful African supporters. Why then, despite her past interventionist record and the existence of 'Opération cheval noir',[5] did France make no effort whatsoever to help Diori? One explanation suggests it was a failure of communication, and gives two major reasons for French inaction. First, the

[1] Interview with Diori, *Jeune Afrique* (Dakar), 6 April 1971.

[2] On the effects of the military being used in a policing rôle, see Claude E. Welch, Jr., *Soldier and State in Africa* (Evanston, 1970), p. 21.

[3] *Le Monde*, 2 May 1974, p. 9. [4] Ibid.

[5] 'Opération cheval noir' was the name of a contingency plan, to be implemented to take President and Madame Diori to the safety of Camp Leclerc, the French H.Q., in the eventuality of a *coup d'état*.

officer responsible for this contingency plan was supposed to have left Niamey without appointing a deputy who knew how to act in the eventuality of an attempted take-over. Secondly, as it was Easter, no one in Paris could be found to take a decision. When a meeting was finally arranged, attended *inter alia* by the Prime Minister, Pierre Messmer, and Jacques Foccart, *Secrétaire général aux affaires africaines et malgaches*, the military junta was already 18 hours old.[1] This inaction of French officials in Paris and Niamey seems inexplicable. Surely their intelligence network in Africa, for years so effective under the control of Foccart, could not have failed to sense the prevailing mood of the Niger officer corps? There were over 60 French officers and N.C.O.s in the Niger army, many of whom would have been in a position to supply information concerning the displacement of the troops, as well as their mood and morale.

The reasons for France's inaction and almost immediate recognition of the military junta must be looked for elsewhere. The most obvious reason was the power vacuum which existed in France at the time. With a presidential election only weeks away, it would have been electorally disastrous for the Gaullists to be seen indulging in the type of activities for which they had been so heavily criticised in Chad and Gabon. In reality, however, France had been relatively circumspect in her past behaviour, intervening only when requested to do so by the duly constituted government, as Léon Mba had done in Gabon in 1964, or indeed as Diori had done in December 1963. On another level, France had not intervened in Congo-Brazzaville, where the 1963 coup had received much popular support. It could even be argued that France's desire to keep Diori in power was itself a false assumption. Certainly the President of Niger had been one of France's staunchest supporters since independence, but his firm stand over the question of uranium appears to have irritated the Gaullist African policy-makers. With the overthrow of his régime, the uranium negotiations returned to square one.[2]

Undoubtedly of greater significance in prompting the army to action was the P.P.N.'s decision to call its conference. The unpopularity generated by this announcement made the army feel sure that any action it decided to take would be greeted, if not with active support, at least with the minimum of resistance – not that any opposition was expected, with the possible exception of the Republican Guard. The reports of the

[1] For a fuller discussion of the actual coup, see Gilbert Comte, 'Les Pâques nigériennes', in *Le Monde*, 26 April 1974, p. 17.

[2] By early 1975 the Niger military junta had still to sign a new agreement with France.

actual take-over, and the minimal conflict which occurred, would suggest that it had the total support of the army and the powerful armed *gendarmerie*. There have been enough parallels in Africa, and enough literature on the subject for the conspirators to realise that a successful *coup d'état* in Niger would not be difficult. Indeed, the relevant logistics are probably more favourable than almost anywhere else on the continent. Niamey, with a population of 100,000, occupies a position of greater central importance in Niger, a country of minimal urbanisation, than do most other African capital cities; and as Ruth First points out, it is a simple matter to seize control of a presidential régime whose power is concentrated in the hands of a small élite in one city.[1]

In fact the only difficulty the army had to contend with in carrying out the coup was the token resistance of the President's personal Tuareg guards, spurred on by Madame Diori, who along with several guards and soldiers was one of the few people to be killed during the action. The rest of the operation would appear to have gone very smoothly. The army rapidly gained control of the major strategic institutions, and made the customary arrests, which included Hamani Diori, all government ministers, the President of the National Assembly, Boubou Hama,[2] and several other leaders of the P.P.N. who were in Niamey preparing for the forthcoming conference.

Any fears the coup-makers may have had were political rather than military. In any event they need not have worried: the removal of the Government was greeted with feelings of relief or simply indifference at the national level, and by a singular lack of protest outside Niger. Despite Diori's popularity in Africa at large, the lack of international protest was predictable; military régimes long ago established that they presented little or no threat to outside interests. The Supreme Military Council of Niger very soon established its credentials in this respect, immediately guaranteeing all existing international agreements and Niger's continued membership of the international bodies to which it belonged. The conservative and purely corrective nature of the coup can best be understood from Kountché's own words:

> Nous n'avons pas l'intention de nous faire passer pour des révolutionnaires... nous n'avons pas l'intention en définitive d'adapter une nouvelle forme de société au Niger; celle que nous avons à besoin d'être purifiée... de remettre de l'ordre dans la maison.[3]

[1] Ruth First, op. cit. p. 4.

[2] Our interpretation of the rôle of Boubou Hama as the *éminence grise* of the P.P.N. régime would appear to be supported by the people of Niamey. Immediately after the coup the rallying cry in the streets of the capital was not without significance; 'A bas le *truand* Diori. A bas le *tyrand* Boubou.'

[3] *Le Monde*, 6 May 1974, p. 13.

As elsewhere in Africa, the army's *stated* aim was to carry out a 'cleansing' operation.[1] By the removal of the old P.P.N. élite, at least an end has been brought to the worst excesses of corruption. To be totally successful in this respect, however, the junta would have to remove many of Niger's civil servants. This it has clearly been unable (and unwilling) to do, as it has insufficient experienced replacements. The junta has set up a 'mission de contrôle et d'enquête', to investigate civil servants as well as politicians, but one is tempted to refer to the situation in Mali where seven years after the fall of Modibo Keita's régime, most members of the old administration, with the exception of the highest échelons of the *Union soudanaise*, are still in office and the commission of inquiry has yet to report.

It takes time for military juntas to realise that order – defined as the absence of open conflict – accompanied by military discipline, is not sufficient for the governing of a country. Many of the political grievances which existed in Niger prior to the coup still remain, even though the P.P.N.'s 'old brigade' has been swept away. The junta is no more representative of the country than was the previous régime; the divisions between east and west in Niger still remain. The political alternatives to a military administration are few: the P.P.N. is totally discredited, the exiled Sawaba opposition led by an ailing Djibo Bakary is equally unacceptable, and no other political groups have been allowed to develop in Niger since independence. The junta has had some success in checking the disaster brought about by the drought, although this can be seen as little more than a holding operation. The military's overall prospects of increasing the economic well-being of Niger are extremely slight. The leaders of the new régime should mark well the words of President Bongo of Gabon on hearing of the overthrow of Diori: he admonished those 'qui croient qu'avec des coups d'état on fait des miracles'.

[1] For a discussion of the army's 'cleansing' rôle, see Kenneth Grundy, *Conflicting Images of the Military* (Nairobi, 1968), pp. 11–21.