

Segmental Autonomy in Mali and Niger

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Abstract

In 1999, Mali, in a bid to abate ethnic conflict in the northeast region, implemented segmental autonomy for the Tuareg population. Following similar ethnic violence Niger opted to include the Tuareg in a coalition government, explicitly avoiding autonomy. Given the mixed track-record of powersharing in ethnically fractious states, Mali's adoption of segmental autonomy provides a unique opportunity to contextualize our theoretical mechanisms of autonomy and provide a plausible account of its effectiveness. Niger, in implementing alternative provisions, allows us to compare the trajectories of both states. These two contiguous states provide an instructive qualitative comparison of the effects of segmental autonomy, allowing us to uncover the impetus behind the adoption of dispersive powersharing provisions, and the short and long term effects of such institutions. Substantively, we see segmental autonomy operating by proliferating the number of political focal points in Mali, targeting concessions to the Tuareg population, and allowing those minorities to serve as checks and balances on the central government. This paper also addresses the lack of consensus on powersharing institutions among scholars. Broad concepts of powersharing are contested and hinder our ability to aggregate results and generate cumulative findings. By studying the individual mechanisms behind powersharing, we may better understand the meaning, and effectiveness, of powersharing in conflictual polities.

Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Conceptualizing Power-Sharing	3
3	Theory and Hypothesis	3
3.1	Proliferation of Focal Points	3
3.2	Targeted Concessions to Regional Minorities	4
3.3	Checks and Balances on the Central Government	5
3.4	Interactions Between Provisions	5
3.5	Alternative Mechanisms	6
4	Controlled Case Study: Segmental Autonomy in Mali and Niger	7
5	Discussion	11
6	Conclusion	11

1 Introduction

2 Conceptualizing Power-Sharing

3 Theory and Hypothesis

Given that segmental autonomy is relatively common across countries, and continues to be implemented in conflictual societies today, governments and citizens must consider the provision effective to some degree. I hypothesize that states employing segmental autonomy provisions along with other provisions of power-sharing, either through peace accord or constitutional reform, are more likely to experience reduced intergroup tensions, prolonged peace, and ultimately, democratization. But how does the implementation of regional autonomy in an ethnically fractious and politically unstable state lead to peace? In other words, what are the underlying mechanisms that allow segmental autonomy to work in such a state? Building off of existing studies, I suggest that regional autonomy works in three distinct ways: through proliferating political focal points, through targeting concessions to regional minorities, and by allowing regional minorities to serve as checks and balances on the central government. In an ethnically fractionalized state, where certain groups may have faced powerlessness or discrimination, the implementation of regional autonomy—be it through regional elections, educational authority, linguistic autonomy, or otherwise—can be seen as a concerted effort by the central government to bring about peace. Assuming this basic logic, I lay out a more nuanced theory and causal mechanism, before presenting my core hypotheses.

The causal chains that justify the implementation of segmental autonomy in ethnically diverse states come from the work of Lijphart (1969), Nordlinger (1972), and Esman (1973). They argue that provisions such as regional autonomy and other forms of power-sharing serve to “reduce the long-range political salience of communal solidarities,” though each embed this outcome in a slightly different framework.¹ Moving beyond these broad theoretical arguments, I identify segmental autonomy operating in three distinct—but often overlapping—ways.

3.1 Proliferation of Focal Points

Regional autonomy increases the number of political focal points in a state. By proliferating the number of autonomous regions, the central government can reduce the possibility of any one faction having power over another. As a result, the likelihood that one group feels disadvantaged or oppressed by another is reduced. Increasing the number of political focal points not only reduces inter-faction tensions, it also takes pressure off of the central government as the newly autonomous regions can act independently, such as by implementing their own tax, education, or language policies. Demands are thus less likely to be aimed at the central government, given that matters related to the ethnic group are in the hands of the

¹Esman 1973, p. 55.

subnational political bodies. We see the proliferation of subnational units in states such as Uganda and Nigeria as examples of a central government's attempt to reduce the political salience of any given ethnic or regional group. The dispersive aspect of regional autonomy might reduce ethnic conflict and grievances by "tak[ing] the heat off of a single focal point".² In dispersing political focal points and creating new outlets for political competition, regional autonomy might also allow the central government to consolidate power. Consolidation is particularly useful for new governments and governments in the midst of a conflict or political crisis. In these instances, regional autonomy essentially serves to draw attention away from the government, giving politicians manoeuvrability and allowing the central government to tighten their grip on the state through reconfiguring their power.³

3.2 Targeted Concessions to Regional Minorities

The implementation of segmental autonomy provisions can serve as a concession to marginalized ethnic groups, potentially reducing the risk of conflict involving the central government or other ethnic groups. It is sometimes referred to as "cooptation".⁴ In order to avoid the breakup of a state or a conflict, regional autonomy can abate political instability by meeting the needs of a dissatisfied group. As above, this can manifest as the group exerting substantial control over regional policymaking. One common argument against regional autonomy as a concession is that it opens the floodgates to more serious demands such as secession, and may increase ethnic violence. Roeder makes a convincing argument against autonomy as it relates to ethnofederalism, stating that "[e]thnically homogeneous cantons that divide ethnic communities may encourage inter-regional competition within ethnic groups," strengthening regional identities and discouraging state consolidation.⁵ While this is clearly a potential threat, two points are worth noting. Firstly, secession itself is incredibly rare, and, whether successful or unsuccessful, secession is unlikely to be directly attributed to increased demands in autonomous locales.⁶ Secondly, segmental autonomy is designed in part to balance any regional power disparities, and so additional demands are likely to come from groups who perceive themselves as being left behind. As Lluch (2012) argues, autonomism succeeds because of its hybridity and multiplicity: "it can perfectly balance its anti-federalist stances with its grounding in the federalist principle of multiple levels of government within the same state apparatus, complemented by its anti-secessionism stance".⁷ There is clearly a mixed track record with dispersive forms of power-sharing and ethnofederalism. As such, this warrants empirical analysis of regional autonomy in order to establish what exactly makes decentralization effective or harmful in ethnically diverse states.

²Horowitz 1985, p. 598.

³Seely 2001; Gasper 1989.

⁴Seely 2001.

⁵Roeder 2009, p. 219.

⁶Mehler 2013; Roeder 2014.

⁷Lluch 2012, p. 155.

3.3 Checks and Balances on the Central Government

Segmental autonomy is not just dispersive in nature. In ethnically fractionalized states in particular, segmental autonomy is most effective when it allows ethnic minorities to act independently of the central government while also giving that group some level of representation and control in the central government. Regional elections are a perfect example of such a mechanism. In implementing regional elections for geographically distinct ethnic minorities, previously powerless or discriminated groups are able to elect representatives of the same ethnic group who might then implement policies appropriate to the groups' needs. These elected members also serve as checks on the central government, thus legitimizing the regime. In granting more autonomy to salient regions, the central government might be perceived as more democratic and inclusive. Of course, attributing perceptions of democracy to the integration of regional actors into a central government is challenging to establish, but we do see decentralization improving public perceptions of democracy in various countries.⁸ Beyond just perception, legitimization may in fact improve democracy given that regional actors, if integrated successfully, can serve as meaningful checks and balances on the central government.

3.4 Interactions Between Provisions

Lastly, in employing segmental autonomy alongside other consociational provisions, one can balance out the potential pitfalls of one mechanism with another. For example, the “accommodating” provisions of mutual veto and segmental autonomy, which grant additional powers to minority political actors may, as mentioned, entrench ethnic identities and potentially lead to conflict. By implementing more inherently “integrative” measures—those designed to break down ethnic identities and force cooperation—such as coalition cabinets and proportional representation, the potential for deepened ethnic divisions are reduced. Both Hartzell and Hoddie (2007) and Norris (2008) speak to the effectiveness of using multiple complementary power-sharing provisions. Given this, I expect to see any positive effects on my outcome variables either maintain a positive relationship or experience an increase in the relationship when incorporating multiple dimensions of power-sharing in addition to segmental autonomy.

With these theoretical mechanisms and assumptions in mind, I present my two core hypotheses:

H₁: *Ethnically diverse states that employ segmental autonomy provisions, either through peace accord or constitutional reform, will experience reduced intergroup tensions, prolonged peace, and democratization.*

H₂: *Ethnically diverse states that employ segmental autonomy provisions along with other provisions of power-sharing, either through peace accord or constitutional reform, will experience reduced intergroup tensions, prolonged peace, and democratization.*

In proliferating political focal points, responding to regional group demands, and integrating regional minorities into the central government, segmental autonomy can serve as an effective remedy to ethnically diverse states. In implementing multiple power-sharing mechanisms, the weaknesses of segmental autonomy

⁸Escobar-Lemmon and Ross 2014; World Values Survey 2007.

may be counterbalanced by more inherently inclusive provisions such as coalition cabinets and proportional representation. Conversely, if my results do not confirm my hypothesis, I will fail to reject the null:

H_{Null}: *There will be no significant relationship between the implementation of segmental autonomy provisions and the reduction in intergroup tensions, prolonged peace, and democratization in ethnically diverse states.*

3.5 Alternative Mechanisms

I also acknowledge some alternative theoretical arguments and potential threats of segmental autonomy. As mentioned, a common criticism of segmental autonomy is that it could lead to more aggressive demands, increased conflict, and potentially secession. The separation of groups along ethnic lines could reduce intergroup interactions to the point that prejudice and scapegoating may become the norm.⁹ Keller and Smith (2005) share a similar concern to Kelly (2019) in that segmental autonomy may go beyond political decentralization and group self-determination, instead exacerbating intergroup tensions and oppositional identities, and incentivizing more extreme concessions by the central government. They suggest that “[t]he long-term implications of [subnational autonomy] are unclear, but in the short term there has been a tendency for increased demands for further autonomy among distinct groups within regions”.¹⁰ While these are issues that undoubtedly need to be considered during the planning and implementation of regional autonomy provisions, there are a number of issues with these claims. First, segmental autonomy is seldom a completely dispersive institution. As we have seen, provisions such as regional elections are both accommodative and integrative in nature, and so it is unlikely that ethnic groups will be partitioned to the point that they are unable to interact with one another. Second, Keller and Smith (2005) use Ethiopia to argue against the effectiveness of segmental autonomy. Ethiopia is an interesting case given that there were calls for secession and hostile intergroup relations well before the implementation of ethnofederalism in 1991.¹¹ Moreover, much of the ethnic conflict that followed the regional autonomy in 1991 arose because of the incomplete nature of its implementation, rather than the provisions therein. Certain ethnic groups were still discriminated against, and the central government committed acts of violence against these marginalized groups.¹² It is therefore important to supplement case studies with more rigorous empirical methods to avoid misleading extrapolation. In any case, ethnically fractionalized states with marginalized populations will, in some respect, benefit from increased autonomy and state recognition. The degree to which this is the case will be analyzed in Chapter 5.

⁹Kelly 2019.

¹⁰Keller and Smith 2005, p. 240.

¹¹Vogt et al. 2015.

¹²Vogt et al. 2015.

4 Controlled Case Study: Segmental Autonomy in Mali and Niger

Having established the theoretical mechanisms through which segmental autonomy functions, how can these theories be tested in the real world? By process-tracing two well-matched countries, we are able to contextualize our theoretical mechanisms of autonomy and provide a plausible account of its effectiveness. The contiguous states of Mali and Niger provide an instructive qualitative comparison of the effects of regional autonomy and allow us to do just that.

Prior to Mali's implementation of regional autonomy in 1999, Mali and Niger bear striking similarities at baseline that warrant further investigation and comparison: they have similar population sizes and GDP; share the same political system; and have both been subject to French colonial rule. More importantly, both states have a significant Tuareg population within their borders and similar ethnic group structures. According to their respective censuses, Mali comprises 50% Mande, 16% Fula, 13% Voltaic, and 10% Tuareg while Niger consists of 55% Hausa, 21% Zarma-Songhai, and 9% Tuareg. Though interethnic relationships between most groups are peaceful, the Tuaregs—who are more regionalized in Mali and Niger—have historically faced discrimination. The Tuareg are traditionally nomadic pastoralists, though in Mali and Niger they are largely regionally consolidated in the north. The Tuareg are linguistically and culturally distinct; they speak Tamasheq and, unlike other ethnic groups in Mali and Niger, are matrilineal.¹³ In addition to economic marginalization, the Tuareg have faced cultural discrimination such as the prohibition of nomadism in Niger and a lack of representation in the central government in both states.¹⁴ The Tuareg's violence toward the central government, and their demands for increased autonomy and representation, can be attributed to their shift between powerlessness and discrimination post-independence.¹⁵

Since independence in 1960, the two countries have had similar political experiences. From military and one-party rule for most of the 1960s and 1970s, to various coups d'état against autocratic leaders, to democratic reforms throughout the 1990s, Mali and Niger's stories have been of ethnic tension and regional instability. The two countries diverged significantly in 1999 when Mali, in response to growing ethnic tensions, implemented regional autonomy in the form of regional elections. Following similar ethnic violence and a coup, Niger opted for the inclusion of Tuareg members as ministers in a coalition government, and explicitly avoided regional autonomy provisions for the Tuareg population.¹⁶ In not implementing regional autonomy, various reports suggest that relations between the Niger government and the Tuareg ethnic population have declined, especially when compared to the relative peace and amicability between the Tuareg and the Malian government following autonomy. These well-matched cases allow for

¹³A map showing the geographic spread of the Tuareg population across Mali and Niger can be found in the appendix.

¹⁴Ibrahim 1994.

¹⁵Vogt et al. 2015.

¹⁶Minorities at Risk Project 2009.

the use of John Stewart Mill’s “method of difference” which compares different outcomes associated with an independent variable across two cases.¹⁷ In Mali and Niger, the two states are also well-matched on the outcome variables prior to the implementation of segmental autonomy, where data exist. For example, both Mali and Niger ranked relatively low on the PolityIV index following independence and prior to democratization in the 1990s, and we see the two states diverge in purported levels of democracy and social trust ratings after 1999. For the other measures that these states have been matched on, Mali and Niger exhibit similar trends from independence through to the end of the century. This will be elucidated later in the section, but these similar characteristics and parallel trends on the variables and outcomes of interest provide justification to process-trace the impacts of segmental autonomy.

Country	Mali	Niger
Regional Autonomy?	Yes	No
Population (1999, millions)	10.6	10.9
Tuareg % of Population (2001)	10	9.3
GDP (1999, billion USD)	3.4	2.0
Ethnic Fractionalization (1999)	0.8	0.6
Area (million sq. km.)	1.2	1.3
Former French Colony?	Yes	Yes
Political System	Unitary semi-presidential republic	Unitary semi-presidential republic

Table 1: Country Characteristics Around Mali’s Decentralization

Prior to achieving autonomy in 1999, the Tuareg had been pressuring the Malian government to decentralize decision-making and grant them greater economic freedom. Though the Malian government were concerned that the Tuareg might push for a complete secession from the state, they refused to grant the Tuareg people regional autonomy or any form of power-sharing provision.¹⁸ Students and civil servants began protesting in January of 1991 as a result of persistent economic decline and oppressive rule.¹⁹ Exacerbated by Tuareg pressures to devolve powers, these protests culminated in a coup d’état in March of 1991 against authoritarian leader Moussa Traoré. The following year saw the introduction of peace accords granting the Tuareg some level of regional autonomy.²⁰ Though intended to abate tensions between the central government and the ethnic groups in Mali, the peace accords were not fully implemented until 1999 when the first Tuareg regional elections were held.²¹ Prior to the regional elections, rates of politically-motivated conflict between the Tuareg, the central government, and other minority ethnic populations, remained high. In the years following the *de facto* implementation of regional autonomy, conflict rates and fatalities appeared to decrease. The Ethnic Power-Relations Atlas (EPR)

¹⁷Mill 1843.

¹⁸Vogt et al. 2015.

¹⁹Unknown 1991b; Unknown 1991a.

²⁰Humphreys and Habaye 2005.

²¹Keita 1998; Seely 2001.

anecdotally remarks that following regional autonomy in the north east, conflict rates markedly decreased, especially within the Tuareg region.²² Similarly, the Minorities at Risk Project notes that, despite a recent history of rebellion and violence, Mali’s Tuareg population are “unlikely to engage in large-scale violence in the near future” as the government has provided, through decentralization “more openings for conventional and nonviolent political activity”.²³

The Tuareg in Niger faced similar discrimination post-independence. As in Mali, the Tuareg were economically marginalized and effectively unable to participate in government decision-making. In 1993, two years after especially intense violence between the military government and the Tuareg population, a power-sharing government was established in the form of a coalition cabinet. Though some government positions were held by Tuareg politicians, they were quickly sacked and detained.²⁴ It was not until 1994 that the Tuareg—though still in the midst of violence with state army—were successfully integrated into the governing coalition. While their inclusion pointed to reduced tensions, 2004 saw the removal (and execution) of Tuareg officials in government, effectively ending the coalition cabinet model of power-sharing. Again, the Tuareg were rendered powerless, and in 2007 a Tuareg rebellion broke out against the government demanding more representation. Interestingly, the 2007 Tuareg rebellions occurred in both Mali and Niger almost simultaneously, but where the violence in Mali focused on the government’s failure to implement economic reforms, the violence in Niger was attributed to their political exclusion.²⁵

Why did the Nigerien government refuse decentralization? Pons (1993) argues that the regions populated by the Tuareg happen to be rich in uranium, which, during the 1990s, accounted for about 80% of Niger’s exports. The central government did not wish to relinquish their most economically viable region to an ethnic minority and adversary and thus sought integration through alternative power-sharing provisions.²⁶ These provisions were never fully realized and, as a result, the Tuareg population in Niger—throughout the numerous democratic and authoritarian transitions since 1999—are purported to exhibit several risk factors for rebellion and increased violence.²⁷

Recall that segmental autonomy might reduce conflict through serving as a concession to marginalized and dissatisfied ethnic groups, and legitimize a regime by giving minority groups more policymaking power and political representation. There exists evidence of autonomy’s positive cooptive effect as, immediately after the implementation of autonomy, Tuareg rebels willingly “handed over mortars, anti-tank mines and grenade launchers” to the central government, who then destroyed these weapons.²⁸ This ceremonial event shows that the implementation of regional autonomy was a concession made by the central government to the Tuareg minority in a bid to reduce conflict. Empirically, little work has been conducted to assess

²²Vogt et al. 2015.

²³Minorities at Risk Project 2009.

²⁴Krings 1995.

²⁵Bertelsmann Stiftung 2020.

²⁶Krings 1995; Pons 1993.

²⁷Minorities at Risk Project 2009.

²⁸Unknown 2008.

whether the number of casualties has changed since the implementation of autonomy in Mali, though data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) indicates that the implementation of segmental autonomy was a contributing factor to the reduction of conflict.²⁹ Perhaps more importantly, regional autonomy also served to legitimize the Tuareg, who were represented in the central government following the regional elections in 1999. Evidence suggests that perceptions of democracy improved following the implementation of regional autonomy and several rounds of successful regional elections in northern Mali.³⁰

In process-tracing the political histories and trajectories of post-independence Mali and Niger, it is clear that Niger has faced greater political unrest as a result of dictatorial leadership (such as the constitutional crisis of 2009), economic and environmental factors, and other factors unrelated to the power-sharing institutions themselves. However, it is undeniable that much of the ethnic unrest and violence stems directly from the central government’s inability to meaningfully integrate or accommodate the Tuareg population. This includes their failure to grant regional autonomy to the Tuareg after several decades of Tuareg demands. While the political future of the Tuareg in Mali is uncertain and conflict persists as a result of underlying economic grievances, the level of violence between ethnic minorities and the central government is far less severe than in Niger.

As with the empirical conceptions of regional autonomy, *prima facie* evidence from Mali and Niger should be interpreted with caution and two caveats are in order. First, though this paper seeks to understand the impacts of regional autonomy across three dimensions—conflict, social and intergroup trust, and democratization—evidence and measurements for the latter two variables in the two states are scarce. Afrobarometer data exists for Mali in 2000, and suggests that there is broad support for democracy and a general satisfaction with democratic institutions.³¹ While these data support the findings of existing studies, that no pre-autonomy measures of these variables exist makes establishing causal or correlative relationships essentially impossible. Second, we see that these states are facing a plethora of dynamic political issues, making it difficult to isolate and attribute a single causal mechanism. To elucidate, if regional autonomy is in fact reducing intergroup tensions, there exists little data to analyze ethnic group trust for the Malian population in and around 1999, and even if the data did exist it would be difficult to isolate regional autonomy as the main cause, given that there are several other country-specific factors operating and interacting with autonomy and its implementation. It is worth mentioning the resource curse as one such country-specific factor in Niger. A large body of literature suggests that, because Niger relied on uranium as its primary export, the state is inherently more likely to face political instability and autocratic shifts.³² While this may have contributed to Niger’s overall instability, Tuareg violence occurred irrespective of resources; their focus was solely on achieving more political influence. In any

²⁹Raleigh et al. 2010; Brailey 2019, unpublished manuscript.

³⁰World Values Survey 2007.

³¹Afrobarometer 1991.

³²Mehlum, Moene, and Torvik 2006; Sachs and Warner 2001.

case, evidence from Mali and Niger, and the seemingly positive impacts of regional autonomy in the former state, warrants further investigation as to the substantive effects of regional autonomy in ethnically fractionalized polities.

5 Discussion

6 Conclusion

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