

Political Choices of Youth in the City of Zinder, Niger Republic: between Ethnic and Geographical Affiliation

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Abstract: *The goal of this paper is to examine the relationships between political choice and ethnic and geographical affiliation. Drawing on previous work, we seek to identify the level of influence of ethnic and geographical affiliation on the political choices of young people in the city of Zinder, Niger. The data collection was mainly done through semi-directive interviews, focus groups, case studies, and direct observations. The results show that some young people support political leaders with whom they share the same ethnic or local geographical affiliations. However, these young people's choices are not determined by ethno-regionalist considerations (sentiments). In other words, it is not an identity-based choice founded on their preference for their ethnicity and rejection of others. What is most important to many of the interviewees are their proximity to politicians, the social relationships that political leaders maintain with militants, and the benefits they can access.*

Keywords: *Young People's Political Choices, Republic of Niger, Zinder, Ethnic and Geographical Affiliation*

Résumé : *Cet article a pour objectif d'analyser les rapports entre le choix politique et l'appartenance ethnique et géographique. En s'inspirant des travaux réalisés auparavant, nous cherchons à identifier le niveau d'influence de cette appartenance ethnique et géographique dans le choix politique des jeunes de la ville de Zinder au Niger. La collecte des données a été faite principalement à partir des entretiens semi-directifs, des focus group, des études de cas et des observations directes. Les résultats obtenus montrent que certains jeunes soutiennent les leaders politiques avec lesquels ils sont de la même ethnie ou de la même localité. Cependant, le choix de ces jeunes n'est pas forcément déterminé par des considérations (sentiments) ethno-régionalistes. En d'autres termes, il ne s'agit pas d'un choix identitaire basé sur l'amour de leur ethnie et le rejet de celle d'autrui. Les plus importants aux yeux de beaucoup de personnes interviewées sont la proximité avec les hommes politiques, les relations sociales que les leaders politiques entretiennent avec les militants et les avantages auxquels ils peuvent accéder.*

Mots clés : *Choix Politique des Jeunes, République du Niger, Zinder, Appartenance Ethnique et Géographique*

I. Introduction

Many authors such as Bourdieu (1977; 1981), Bréchon (2010), Gaxie (1987), Mayer (2007), Muxel (2002), etc., argue that young people's political choices and their political engagement are determined by several factors. According to these authors, the factors are mainly socio-economic, cultural, ideological, and political.

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In other words, the choice to vote or to join a political party is never entirely neutral and autonomous. It is often influenced by the environment in which the individual lives. This environment can be the family, friends, or other social institutions such as schools, religion, justice, military, etc. Identity and affiliation with the same locality as the candidates are also significant elements in individuals' political choices, whether in Africa or in some European countries where ethnic minorities from immigration live. In this sense, FaustKakai (2011) states that whether in Africa or elsewhere, ethnicity is one of the important variables that can explain voters' choices.

Several ethnic groups coexist within Nigerien society. This ethnic diversity is also present in several African countries such as Cameroon, Benin, Nigeria, Togo, etc. Far from being a handicap in itself, ethnic diversity is a source of wealth and solidarity for African societies. As Tossou (2010: 6) notes, "the instrumentalization of ethnicity by intellectuals for political purposes can constitute a danger to national integration." In Niger Republic, some research and studies conducted by Grégoire (1994), Ibrahim (1994), McCullough and al. (2016) have shown that individuals' party affiliations are sometimes based on ethnic or regional considerations. For Makama Bawa (2012) and Olivier de Sardan (2015), the ethnic factor is not essential in mobilizing voters in Niger, but it is still used by candidates during electoral campaigns incidentally or occasionally.

Through this article, we are interested in the evidence of ethnic and local origin factors in young people's political choices. While using other studies conducted in the past on these issues, the aim is to deepen the analysis to see the extent of these factors currently in use, using local concepts and the logics underlying them.

II. Method

In this research, a qualitative method is applied. For data collection, in-depth interviews were conducted with those who could provide us with information on the subject of this research. Six categories of groups were interviewed, including young people engaged in politics or not, media actors, civil society actors, political analysts or specialists, and customary and religious leaders. For this study, non-probabilistic samples (snowball sampling and purposive sampling) were used to access a considerable number of participants who were better informed about the subject being studied. The data was processed using content analysis. Therefore, all recorded and unrecorded interviews were first synthesized. Then, grouped the information by thematic similarity. To do this, at the end of each transcription, we summarized the information and proposed a plan based on the information collected. At the end of all the syntheses, we cross-checked the different plans to create a general plan. Finally, the information was developed, examined and interpreted while being compared with other sources.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Zinder: A Cosmopolitan and Multi-ethnic City

By definition, cosmopolitan cities are characterized by populations of different races and in which numerous cultures coexist and mingle. At the end of the 19th century, Zinder was first the capital of the Damagaram empire long before the arrival of French colonizers. The city was already at the time a cosmopolitan city where North African traders, Tuareg caravaners, Kanuri and Hausa farmers, and Fulani herders live (Lefebvre, 2019). These characteristics of cosmopolitan cities have now even more significance and are observable in Zinder due to demographics, immigration, and internal displacement. Indeed, in Zinder, not only do populations from other countries such as Nigeria, Chad, coexist, but also almost all ethnic groups in Niger.

Political choices are in some areas of the world influenced by belonging to the same ethnicity or locality (Faust Kakai, 2011; Jacobs, Pilet and Kelbel, 2014; Bako-Arifari, 1995). In other words, it is possible to vote for a candidate or join a political party because one shares the same ethnicity or locality. For the case of Zinder city, this question cannot be analysed without taking into account the socio-political and historical context of Niger. This context, as described above, is one where there has been peaceful coexistence between different ethnic groups for several years. It is also a context where voting or political affiliation based on the ethnic factor is not favourable. Thus, the views of the majority of participants encountered in the field are unanimous that the ethnic factor is a shell, a set, which deserves to be examined, researched and analysed with great care,

openness and attention³. The data collected shows that in general, young urban residents of Zinder, regardless of their education status (enrolled, dropped out, or non-enrolled), support the leaders of their locality when making a political choice. It is important to note that this choice is not guided by ethno-regional considerations, even though it may appear so at first glance. Rather, it is a strategy developed by young people to ensure their political future. Though, there are some respondents who believe that depending on the political parties and leaders, the choice may be based on ethnic factors.

It is no coincidence that the peoples of Niger live in harmony and peace despite their cultural and ethnic differences and this situation can be explained by several factors. Firstly, there is cultural mingling through inter-ethnic marriages. In fact, exchanges through marriage constitute real factors of solidarity and mutual understanding among populations (Olivier de Sardan, 2015: 35). Secondly, it is important to note that if these inter-ethnic exchanges have become a reality, it is because since the 1970s, the Nigerien authorities have implemented strategies consisting of assigning state officials to localities different from their ethnic groups in the interests of 'national integration'. Coexisting with other ethnic groups allows them to discover another culture and also learn another language. Another no less important factor is joking relationships, a social practice present in several African countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Niger, and many other West and Central African countries. It is a social practice that takes place between the different ethnic groups of a country that gives members of ethnic groups the opportunity to tease and insult each other in mutual respect and without any negative or unpleasant consequences. These inter-ethnic verbal exchanges and confrontations are important means of relaxation, conflict resolution, reconciliation, or social cohesion. It is practiced in Niger between ethnic groups such as Songhay/Tuaregs, Fulani/Kanuri, Zarma/Maouri, etc. (Olivier de Sardan, 2019: 414-415). According to Danda (2004: 241), "historical works on Niger reveal that communities were framed by the mechanism of interethnic alliances, individual or collective; commercial exchanges, etc. which means that the different Nigerien customary communities were not formed artificially, but share a long history, interpenetrations, links long woven by history. This long past explains the practice and strength of cousinship and joking relationships that contribute to the appeasement in case of malaise and/or social conflicts." This practice is highly developed in Niger Republic and is practiced from the top of the state to the common people to the point where it has been classified since 2014 as part of UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage⁴.

In the city of Zinder, whenever the relationship between political choices and ethnic sentiment is discussed, all eyes turn to the political leader Mahamane Ousmane and his party, a well-established, well-liked and well-followed leader by young people and a significant part of the population of this city and beyond. This is directly linked to the political history of the leader and the context in which his party was created. His best-known initial party is the Democratic and Social Convention (CDS Rahama), which later gave birth to the Democratic and Republican Renewal (RDR Tchanji) for political and legal reasons. Historically, the CDS Rahama party was created in a particular context where the predominantly Hausa Eastern part of Niger felt marginalized and dominated by the predominantly Zarma Western part. According to Danda (2004: 290), before the creation of CDS Rahama, there was an association of natives from the Zinder region. This is the Mutual Association for Cultural and Artistic Action (AMACA), which is presented by initiators and promoters as an association whose objective is to promote the Hausa or Zinder culture. This association is the basis of the creation of the CDS Rahama party and aims to be avant-garde and defender of the Hausa population representing the Eastern part of Niger. AMACA was created in the image of the Reflexion Centre on Development (CERDI) created by natives of Tillabéry and mainly comprising the elites of Western Niger. The attachment of the Zinder population to the CDS Rahama party and its remarkable scores in the 1993, 1995 and 1999 elections seem to contain "political signs of an identity tremor in this part of Niger" (Danda, 2004: 277).

³ Interview on 28.08.2021 with a political specialist. The term "shell" was used by this interviewee during our discussions.

⁴<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/practices-and-expressions-of-the-joyful-parentage-custom-in-niger-01009>. Accessed on 05.04.2022.

The idea of identity voting put forward by some interviewees is light and does not quite reflect the reality of what is happening on the ground today. Perhaps these arguments prevailed at some point in Niger's history, as Mohamadou (2018: 93) points out with parties such as the Union for Democracy and Social Progress (UDPS Amana), CDS Rahama and Nigerien Coalition for Democracy and Progress (ANDP Zaman Lahiya), but there are not enough convincing and palpable elements to support them today, especially when considering the social realities and cultural mixing within the Zinder population. Moreover, what some call ethnic or identity voting can be apprehended as a vote based on the charisma of a leader and his proximity to the populations of his locality. This proximity strengthens the social relationships between leaders and their supporters. Also, the knowledge of the leader, his availability and the hope that once elected, he will help those from his locality guide the political choices and behaviours of young people. This seems to confirm "the logic of the son of the land" that Arifari Bako (1995) talked about in his writings on the Republic of Benin.

3.2. The Theory of "Nagida"⁵ or The Logic of The Son of The Soil: A strategy For Mobilizing The electorate.

When discussing the issue of political choice in Niger, particularly in the city of Zinder, it seems that ethnicity is not a determining factor. In this sense, Gazibo (2006:12) points out that "while an African party may limit itself to a region or ethnicity in order to monetize its base within a coalition, there are few countries in which a party can hope to win national elections (which after all is the ultimate objective of any party) by playing the ethnic card." Indeed, in the same locality of Niger, there are different ethnic groups who support or adhere to the same political party. In other words, just as Zinder is a multi-ethnic city, the electorate of different political parties is also multi-ethnic. All the political parties present on the national scene are established in this city and beyond in all localities of Niger. At the same time, in all localities of Niger, political parties have their supporters, whether or not the leaders of these parties are from the same ethnicity or region as their supporters. However, it should be noted that in general, political leaders are kings in their own home and more popular, hence the theory of "Nagida" which plays a predominant role in the eyes of young people. This theory shows that political choice is largely guided by belonging to the same locality. Young people generally choose candidates who are close to them and with whom they share common interests. This choice is not based on ethnocentrism or regionalism, but responds to a strategy developed by young people that can allow them to benefit and establish themselves politically. The evidence is that even if all leaders are popular in their place of birth, it is important to note that some are more popular than others, which shows that being from the same locality as a leader is not enough to support him. It all depends on the opportunities that this leader presents to young people and the type of relationship they have with them.

Studies conducted by Grégoire (1994), Ibrahim (1994) and Danda (2004) show that at the beginning of the democratic era, that is, just after the sovereign national conference, political choices in Niger may have been determined by ethno-regionalist sentiments. But it must be recognized that this trend is being overcome by a political trend where young people reason much more based on what they can gain. In this sense, a young person expresses himself as follows:

"Even if it falls from the sky, if I can get ahead, I will join this party". (Interview realized on August 25, 2021, in Zinder with a young politician).

These statements above show that ethnicity or locality is not primary factors in this young person's political choice. What is important to him are the opportunities and advantages he can access.

In the same manner, the following statements analyse the relationship between political choices and ethno-regionalist sentiments in Niger in general and in Zinder particularly:

"I am convinced of one thing in life: the sense of belonging is a reality everywhere in the world. I belong to a community, this community has principles that I adhere to, I love my family, I love my neighbourhood, I love my city, I love my municipality, I love my region, I

⁵ The word "nagida" literally means "a candidate from our locality" in Hausa.

love my country, that's universal. But this East/West or North/South issue in Niger is an old theory that cannot hold true today. There are those who, when faced with a deceitful politician or who have a sense of ethnic or regional belonging, can develop that sentiment. But the current reality of the country does not show that. The proof is that the current President of Niger was elected thanks to the Tahoua region, although he is not from that region. Hama Amadou, a Western leader, has a significant electorate in the Diffa region located in the East of the country". (Interview realized on September 06, 2021, in Zinder with a political specialist).

Several lessons can be learnt from extracts of this interview. First, having a preference or love for one's locality seems to be a natural sentiment that can be found in every individual. Secondly, today, voting and supporting a candidate based on their ethnicity is far from being a reality. Finally, if the current president of Niger was elected, it was thanks to the support of a region he is not originally from. It is true that if the Tahoua region voted massively for the PNDS Tarayya, it is because President Bazoum benefited from the support and blessing of former President Issoufou Mahamadou who is a native of that region. Therefore, proximity to candidates seems to be more decisive than ethnic origin.

Furthermore, there are several adages and popular speeches in local languages that are used to symbolize and at the same time legitimize the logic of the "son of the soil". Illustrative adages include "*da nasu gara namu*⁶", "*abar dan gari da garinsu*⁷", "*namunamune*⁸", "*kayanaro baya ado*⁹", etc. These speeches have become, to some extent, the slogan of the RDR Tchanji party, President Mahamane Ousmane's party, in the city of Zinder. There are still others that are more up-to-date and convey many messages. This is the case of "*baarobahaya*¹⁰", which is the most popular slogan used by RDR Tchanji during the last presidential elections that allowed Mahamane Ousmane to reach the second round.

3.3. "Ba Aro Ba Haya"¹¹: Between Political Slogan and Voter Mobilization Strategy

The Hausa language is undoubtedly rich in proverbs, expressions, and adages used daily in society, expressing various wisdom and conveying multiple messages. Some are used to impart moral lessons, while others educate or encourage individuals to cultivate tolerance and love for others. "*Ba arobahaya*," which is the subject of this section, did not exist before as an adage; it is a political slogan that emerged in the context of elections to convey specific messages to party militants. It can only be understood and analysed by situating it in the context in which it was used. To understand the meaning of this slogan, one must analyse how party leaders mobilize militants during elections. It should be noted that RDR Tchanji is one of Niger's opposition parties. By chanting the slogan "*baarobahaya*," its militants show that the ruling parties, notably PNDS Tarayya, mobilize militants based on money, in other words, "they rent and borrow militants" who are not genuinely committed to their cause. During election campaigns, political parties organize receptions for leaders, followed by meetings in stadiums and other public places. To do this, young people constitute the category of the population most used in these kinds of activities. On this occasion, political party leaders distribute money to mobilize young people to attend meetings and receptions. Young people who do not support the ruling parties still participate in these activities because they are mobilized with money. But when President Mahamane Ousmane comes, they receive nothing as money. On the contrary, they often finance their trip by putting fuel in their motorcycles, tricycles, and vehicles to attend his reception and meeting.

It can be observed here that the youth of the city of Zinder are more attached to Mahamane Ousmane, whom they consider as one of their own, a son of the land who is supposed to help and defend them and their city. It is somewhat exaggerated, if not abusive, to describe these sentiments as regionalism or ethnocentrism, but one

⁶ This Hausa saying literally means "better ours than theirs."

⁷ This Hausa saying literally means "let the indigenous person stay at home."

⁸ This Hausa proverb literally means "what is ours, is ours."

⁹ This Hausa proverb literally means "something you have borrowed cannot serve you."

¹⁰ This Hausa proverb literally means "we neither borrowed nor rented."

¹¹ we neither borrowed nor rented

thing is certain, there is a desire and intention to defend one's region, locality, and leaders with whom one feels closer. Other reasons can be noted to show that this choice is not based on ethno-regional considerations. For example, President Mahamane Ousmane himself comes from diverse ethnic backgrounds, like other leaders. Furthermore, not all leaders native to the city of Zinder have yet achieved his audience or popularity. This is undoubtedly related to his charisma, intrinsic qualities, and political experiences. Another more plausible reason is that Mahamane Ousmane is not supported one hundred percent by the youth in the city of Zinder. There are those who love him for his integrity and honesty, while others do not support him because they believe he is a stingy man who has done nothing for the city of Zinder. It should be noted that since the arrival of the PNDS Tarayya party in power, the influence and popularity of Mahamane Ousmane in the city of Zinder seems to have diminished. This is due to the strategies developed by the ruling party to win the hearts of Zinder's youth. The party, notably thanks to their new president Mohamed Bazoum, is "buying" political space in the city of Zinder, both in a noble and pejorative sense. It should be emphasized that buying people's consciences is not a pathology in the African context; on the contrary, the practice is an integral part of the electoral process. Moreover, in many cases, it is the electorate itself that encourages political actors to donate and a political candidate is 'evaluated' on his or her capacity to distribute money, but also other goods in kind (Banegas, 1998). According to observations and interviews conducted, the results seem to show that the youth in general do not have any faith, love, or conviction in this party, but the party has "bought" political space through actions and an unusual generosity compared to Mahamane Ousmane, who is not in this field. Mahamane Ousmane therefore risks being dethroned or losing the hearts of his great traditional leaders, opinion leaders, and some of the youth to the generosity of Bazoum, who has shown that he is different from him. Bazoum, like the PNDS, has made 'redistribution' his strategy for mobilising young people. The emergence of Bazoum in Zinder refocuses the leadership stakes between him and Mahamane Ousmane. However, in terms of social legitimacy, Ousmane is better off than Bazoum, who comes from an ethnic minority in the Zinder region. The remarks below explain to what extent the youth of Zinder are attached to leader Mahamane Ousmane and his person:

"Here in Zinder, people believe in Mahamane Ousmane, there is what we can dare to call political faith; because when you ask 1000 young people in Zinder about the reasons for their support for this leader, 20 of them may not be able to give you a reason, but they love him, they believe in him because it is transmitted from generation to generation, even if it is too much to say, but on a smaller and local scale, demographics excluded, the love for Mahamane Ousmane is beyond doubt. His voice is always a voice that continues to charm the people of Zinder". (Interview realized on September 03, 2021, in Zinder with a political specialist).

These statements demonstrate the attachment of the population of the city of Zinder to Mahamane Ousmane. This attachment and love towards him do not date from today. Indeed, the first democratic elections of 1993 clearly show this, where Mahamane Ousmane was elected thanks to the 75% of votes received in Zinder (Grégoire, 1994). It is true that other political parties have since managed to establish themselves in this city, but despite this, Zinder remains his electoral stronghold. The results of the latest presidential elections in February 2021 place him at the top in that city.

IV. Conclusion

African societies are characterized by gerontocratic power relations (the famous birthright). Can we say that voting or political affiliation obeys/reinforces this reality? If so, then in Zinder, as in other Nigerien communities, there are learning environments where young people are socialized. And one element of this political socialization is the appropriation of shared opinions by social structures. The various proverbs used locally remind young people of their duty to remain 'loyal' to the candidate from the locality. These proverbs help to determine the choice of young people, for fear of betraying the will of their elders. Without saying so,

it is a relationship between generations¹²: one (older) reminding the other (young people) of the duty to vote for a 'Nagida'. In short, we are not far from the holistic paradigm of political action among the youth of Zinder.

The aim of this article was to examine the level of influence of ethnic and geographical affiliation in the political choices of young people in the city of Zinder. To this end, and drawing on previous research on this issue, we have shown that some young people support political leaders who share the same ethnicity or place of birth. However, our results show that the choices of these young people are not determined by ethno-regionalist considerations (feelings). In other words, it is not an identity-based choice based on love for their own ethnicity and rejection of others. What is most important to many of the interviewee are the proximity to the politicians, the social relationships that political leaders maintain with the militants, and the benefits they can access. Nevertheless, it should be noted that these results should be nuanced as our analysis is based on a small sample of young people from the city of Zinder. Our work could be further expanded in various ways by taking into account other variables and categories of people. An extension of this study to other cities in Niger should also be considered to confirm or refute its conclusions. However, this could raise other difficulties related to the heterogeneity of the data since these cities have somewhat different realities.

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¹²(Cf. Donal Cruise O'Brien, 1996, " A lost generation? Youth identity and state decay in west Africa ", in WERBNER Richard (dir.) *Postcolonial identities in Africa*, London, zed Books, pp. 55-74).

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