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Student activism in Niger: subverting the 'limited pluralism', 1960–83

Tatiana Smirnova

Introduction

'It was the challenge of that time, when nobody could really understand how it was possible that children were keeping their heads high facing the regime for the sake of syndicalism,'[1] maintained Abdou Ibo, one of the leaders of the Union des Scolaires Nigériens (USN), in his comments regarding the five days of negotiations between the student activist organization and Seyni Kountché's government. That the negotiations occurred at all was remarkable, given the repressive political context of the era. Yet the moment is nearly absent from the written political history of twentieth-century Niger.

One reason for this omission may be that the development of the USN is inconsistent with the common historical narrative regarding the regimes of Diori Hamani (1960–74) and Seyni Kountché (1974–87), which are often described as having been entirely closed to any alternative political expression or protest. Nevertheless, as this article shows, strong political dissent did exist, embodied by this student organization.

In Niger, a period of protests began at the end of the 1950s, and was deeply connected to the Sawaba movement (van Walraven 2013).[2] After ending violently in the mid-1960s, the baton was taken up by the USN; in the early 1970s, protests (following drought and severe food shortages) contributed to the 1974 fall of President Diori Hamani. When, in that same year, Seyni Kountché came to power through a military coup, protests continued despite the oppressive political climate. The USN thus became the nation's de facto political opposition, a role it maintained until the clashes of May 1983, when the group's leaders were either imprisoned or had to seek refuge in neighbouring countries.

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[1]Abdou Ibo was one of the USN's student leaders from 1970 to 1980; he participated in the 1982 negotiations. Interview, 6 June 2008.

[2]Founded in the mid-1950s by its charismatic leader, Djibo Bakary, Sawaba claimed Nigerien independence. The party had a solid social base in Niger that supported the vote for independence from the French community in a French 1958 referendum on the subject (van Walraven 2013). Outlawed in 1959, its activists prepared for a guerrilla war to overthrow Diori Hamani, Niger's president after independence in 1960, and his ruling Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN). In the autumn of 1964, armed Sawaba commandos infiltrated Niger and attempted to instigate an insurrection. They were violently repressed and imprisoned; two months after the invasion, however, a number of Sawaba commandos managed to escape, although many were arrested and sentenced to death. In April 1965, a young Sawabist tried to assassinate Diori Hamani with a grenade, but the attempt was aborted, thereby marking Bakary's definitive failure (*ibid.*).

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This period of student unrest in Niger is understudied,[3] but it raises a number of significant questions regarding the nature of Nigerien state power from the 1960s to the 1980s, often considered to be an 'authoritarian' era. It also situates the USN and its struggle within the greater contexts of regional solidarities, the Cold War, and relations of Niger with the East through the circulation of ideas, practices and people.[4] Two structural factors strengthened the USN's inter-regional identity: first, its historical links to Sawaba and to the Union Général des Étudiants d'Afrique de l'Ouest (UGEAO); and second, the creation of the Centre d'Enseignement Supérieur (CES) in 1971, accommodating students both from Niger and from Upper Volta.

Although a body of literature already exists detailing how schools and universities become sites of radical politicization (see, for example, Balsvik 1985; Bianchini 2004; Chouli 2012; Summers 2006; Zeilig 2007; Blum 2012), this article proposes to examine changing relations between student organizations and the state in the 1960s to the 1980s, and to explore the wider political history of Niger through the history of those student organizations. One purpose for this is to discern how the USN developed into a genuine alternative political movement, arguing for social transformation through educational and economic independence, and endeavouring to deconstruct the dominant narrative embraced by political authorities.

These ideas – distributed in activist literature and espoused by charismatic leaders – were incorporated into collective activist memory, symbolized by martyred activists such as Amadou Boubacar, an ordinary USN member. Following Boubacar's death during the May 1983 strike, the campus site where the student movement held its general assembly was baptized 'Amadou Boubacar Square'. Pivotal events related to strikes and mobilization, such as the 22 October 1973 protest, were also commemorated annually.[5] Moreover, memories of successful protests – such as the one that occurred in 1972, when French president Georges Pompidou was hit by a tomato thrown by a Nigerien university student on the former's official visit to Niamey – were cleverly used by student leaders ten years later as tools for political pressure. Thus, although the USN's tactics varied considerably from the early 1960s to the early 1980s, a striking political continuity remains between students of the earlier generation of the 1960s to the early 1970s, and the later generation of the late 1970s to the early 1980s. This continuity may be partly explained by the structural organization of the USN, which incorporated both high school and university students into the same leadership body – the *Comité Directeur* – ensuring the transmission of activist memory across generations.

[3]The USN has been mentioned frequently by researchers studying the social and political history of Niger (Adji 2014: 329–31; Bonnecase 2011: 18–20; Charlick 1991: 85–7; Malam Issa 2008: 132, 142, 147; Gazibo 1998: 132; Salifou 2010: 103). However, there is only one article devoted specifically to the USN's struggles of the early 1970s (Smirnova 2016) and one article on Niger's social movements of that period that quotes the USN leaflets, preserved in the French diplomatic archives in Nantes (Bonnecase 2011).

[4]The question of Nigerien students' international solidarities is developed in an article on the student movement in Niger in the 1950s to the 1970s (Smirnova 2016).

[5]'Une date une histoire. Le 22 octobre 1973: journée de lutte du scolaire Nigérien', USN leaflet, 22 October 1982, Student Archives, Niamey.

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From a Gramscian perspective, the USN was a counter-hegemonic movement in the sense that it provided for 'an alternative hegemony on the terrain of civil society in preparation for political change' (Pratt 2004). While considering changing forms of power in Niger, this article also explores the various socio-historical configurations that have allowed the emergence and development of this counter-hegemonic movement. To what extent can student protest in Niger be understood as constitutive of hegemonic order rather than external to it? Is counter-hegemony an inextricable element in the continuous process of the construction of different forms of hegemony? What are the relationships between the USN and Nigerien political authorities? In order to shed light on these questions, the article uses Gramscian concepts to comprehend the nature of state power in Niger in the early post-independence period. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: how was social protest possible at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s in the context of a still-fresh memory of the Sawaba movement and its violent repression? Why was the USN not completely eradicated after a number of strikes that occurred during the 1970s and early 1980s, but was systematically oppressed after the May 1983 clashes?

These contributions are inspired by research on hegemonic situations and on methods of subversion (see, for example, Geschiere 1986; Bayart 2008; Abbink *et al*. 2003); however, they maintain a historical, empirical orientation by drawing from extensive primary source material, including activist literature, student leaflets and journals that, to date, have not been studied thoroughly. The majority of these sources come from the student archives at Abdou Moumouni University in Niamey, Niger, while former militants kindly provided others. Interviews[6] with activists and government officials from the period 1960–80 were of immense value to the research, and helped reconstruct facts and events that had not been mentioned in state-controlled newspapers, the activist literature, or the *Official Journal of the Republic of Niger*. This diversity of sources helped illuminate the complexity of relations between students and political authorities, as well as the inherent paradox of an alternative political movement, and the history of power relations that remain at the heart of Niger's political life today.

Ambiguity of the first years of the USN: 1960s to the early 1970s

School protest emerged in Niger in the late 1950s, coinciding with the nation's struggles for independence, but also with prominent political rivalries between Djibo Bakary, the leader of the Sawaba movement, and Diori Hamani, the head of the Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN). The USN arose from this context in July 1960.[7] From its earliest days, the USN's positions reflected a

[6]Given high-ranking positions occupied nowadays by most student leaders of the 1970s–1980s, I chose to preserve their anonymity. All names of my interviewees, with the exception of Abdou Ibo, who died in 2013, are pseudonyms.

[7]According to Djouldé Laya, one of the USN's founding members, the project that led to the USN's establishment actually began two years earlier – in 1958 – well before independence was proclaimed on 3 August 1960. Interview with Djouldé Laya in Mailele and Penel (2010: 44); 'Principes généraux de l'USN', USN leaflet, probably 1980, Student Archives, Niamey.

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radical political ideology; in addition to its connections to the Fédération des Étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (FEANF) and UGEAO, the group also enjoyed close contact with the Sawaba movement. For example, in 1961, *Gaskiya*, a Sawaba journal, published an 'Open letter to the Republic of Niger government', signed by the USN and revealing its anti-government position: 'Since its installation by Colombani and by General de Gaulle, the PPN-RDA of the Niger Government expressed its docility by acts masterminded in Paris. The Sawaba Party was dissolved, its leaders – doctors, engineers are now in prison; its fearless leader, DJIBO BAKARY is in exile.'[8]

In the early 1960s, student protests were not well organized and were subject to violent repression due to their affiliation with the Sawaba movement. According to Klaas van Walraven, by the end of the 1960s, Niger held thousands of Sawaba detainees. Members of the movement were arrested, imprisoned and executed, at times without due process (van Walraven 2013: 771). The climate of terror pervading the country was also reinforced by the reputation of the Nigerien secret service and its methods of torture. In the beginning of the 1960s, Diori also created La Jeunesse Pionnière Nigérienne (JPN), a section of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA), partially comprised of members of the traditional youth association, the Samariya. The organization acted as a party militia, and was meant to guarantee security across Niger. The JPN participated in the persecution and torture of Sawaba activists (*ibid.*: 583–4, 705).

This context explains why the USN had been acting under cover or in semi-clandestine conditions. Nevertheless, it does not illuminate why, despite the obvious links between the student union and the Sawaba movement of previous years, the political authorities did not simply eradicate the USN. At least one researcher goes so far as to suggest that the creation of the USN was instigated by Diori (Charlick 1991: 86).[9] From 1964 to 1971, the USN was recognized by the authorities as a legitimate interlocutor, even while it continued to openly criticize the regime, calling it 'neocolonial'. Members of the USN obtained a 'non-permanent' vote at the Commission Nationale d'Attribution des Bourses[10] in 1964, and then two 'permanent' votes in 1971, which formally gave them some power to decide on the allocation of scholarships.[11] In July 1964, the USN was invited to attend a seminar held in the National Assembly under Diori's presidency, with the participation of the political bureau, the government and unions. The seminar was devoted to the discussion of a 'master plan' that was intended to define the nation's political, economic and social priorities (Salifou 2010: 103).[12]

[8]'Lettre ouverte au gouvernement de la République du Niger', *Gaskiya*, 1 June 1961.

[9]In Niger after independence, other unions were rapidly placed under state control: for example, the Union Nationale des Syndicats du Niger (UNSN), which was affiliated to the Confédération Générale des Travailleurs, a group holding radical communist views, was dissolved and replaced by the state-controlled Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Niger (UNTN), presided over by a member of Diori's PPN bureau (Gazibo 2005: 47).

[10]Decree no. 64–173/PRN, *Journal Officiel de la République du Niger (JORN)*, 1 September 1964, p. 2.

[11]Decree no. 71–165, *JORN*, 11 November 1971, p. 772.

[12]However, the USN's involvement in scholarship commissions and public policy seminars corresponded more with the goals of a 'populist' (Colin 1990: 31) movement than with any real ambition of engagement in a participatory decision-making process.

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Moreover, after their studies, some former USN and FEANF activists were re-inserted into the state apparatus, while Sawaba graduates were excluded from such jobs.[13] The example of the sociologist Djouldé Laya, a founding member of USN, is perhaps the most striking: in Niger, he had gradually built up a brilliant career, and was particularly close to Boubou Hama, the general secretary of the PPN. Likewise, in 1969, when FEANF co-founder Abdou Moumouni Dioffo returned from studying in the USSR, he was appointed as a director of the Office National de l'Energie Solaire. Several years later, in 1979, he became chancellor of the University of Niamey, a job he held until 1983. In other words, there was no systematic violent repression of former activists on their return to Niger.

To summarize, in the early years of Niger's independence from France, the USN's position in the political arena was paradoxical. The USN clearly expressed its anti-government orientation, yet in a conspicuous display of tolerance from the political authorities, Diori's PPN-RDA regime treated the organization as part of the hegemonic order, giving to the USN a token seat at the table as a political strategy. One partial explanation for this anomaly may lie with the internal divisions that existed between members of the Diori regime regarding the treatment of moderates and political radicals. A second explanation may be that the regime hoped to co-opt the movement – as it had co-opted other unions and popular organizations – through recruitment of former activists. Possibly, self-representations of the regime, embedded in the paternalistic 'teacher's ethos' (Jézéquel 2002), played a certain role in this specific relationship to the USN, casting the movement's members as 'poor children' deprived of any political agency. Thus, in the early 1960s, the authorities deliberately granted the student organization a certain degree of leeway, because it wrongly perceived the USN to be part of the hegemonic order. In the early 1970s, the new socio-economic context, marked by food shortages and the weakening of the Diori regime, contributed to the development and bolstering of activist structures.

USN grievances, mobilization, and the fall of the Diori regime

To understand student groups' relationships to wider society and to other social forces, it is necessary to provide a basic analysis of the socio-economic conditions of the students in the 1970s. In the early 1970s, Niger had only a very few university students: 103 in 1971–72, and 282 in 1973–74 (Foulani 1994: 5). The CES in Niamey was not founded until 1971, transforming two years later into the university.[14] Simultaneously, by the end of the 1970s, there were only four high schools in Niger, two of which were located in Niamey and the other two in important regional centres, Zinder and Tahoua (Tidjani Alou 1992: 235). High school and

[13]Niger wasn't the only place where the effective co-option of students was seen by the authorities as logical (Monaville 2012). On a sub-regional level, in the early 1960s and 1970s, there was a tendency to attempt the creation of parallel student associations in order to compete with organizations ideologically close to FEANF, such as the Mouvement des Élèves et Étudiants de Côte d'Ivoire in Côte d'Ivoire in 1966 and the Mouvement des Étudiants de l'Organisation Commune Africaine et Malgache in France (UNESCO 1994: 21).

[14]Law no. 71-31, *JORN*, 15 September 1973, p. 620; law no. 73-23, *JORN*, 1 October 1973, p. 437.

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university students were thus a tiny minority group within the population: in 1973 there were 221 students for 6.3 million people, while in 1989 there were 4,013 students for 8.3 million people (Foulani 1994) – still far less than 1 per cent of the population. Access to higher education was understood as a stepping stone to elite status. As we will see, this did not prevent students from adopting radical political views, but it did affect their relationships with the wider Nigerien population: social movements in 1973–74 were important, but students, workers and teachers acted in relative isolation from each other, even if strikes occurred simultaneously.[15]

Student activists[16] seized various opportunities to go on strike, many of them directly related to daily school and university life. They contested teachers' evaluations of a specific student case; criticized a professor's behaviour for being too strict; complained about unjust conditions for loaning textbooks; and protested against a school principal's administrative decisions, among other incidents. By airing these grievances, students in Niger – and elsewhere in Africa (Zeilig 2007) – were questioning the 'pillars of the established political order' (Mbembe 1985: 121). The triggers for their actions were usually connected to the education system, which they viewed as an extension of the established order. Viewed within this context, the students' actions take on a more profound meaning, as reflections of a counter-hegemonic narrative deeply rooted in the struggle for independence.

Abdou Moumouni Dioffo, a Nigerien and a FEANF co-founder, published a book, *Education in Africa* (1998 [1964]), which was a critical mouthpiece for this message. Moumouni's ideas, suggestions and calls to action to help break down 'neocolonial education' were widely distributed throughout Niger in leaflets and activist literature. For example, throughout the 1970s, the student journal *L'Étincelle* contained a special column entitled 'Regarding the reform of the education system',[17] noting that the 'education system is just an extension of the colonial school both in its goals and in its nature'.

In addition to criticizing the education system, such activist literature dealt with other matters relating to the national interest; for example, it compared the 1967 uranium treaties with France to the 'selling of a nation'. It also discussed more pragmatic issues of daily life, such as increases in rice prices, by denouncing the 'waffling' discourse of the state-controlled newspapers, *Le Sahel Hebdo* and *Le Sahel Dimanche*. *L'Étincelle* and other student leaflets manifested a genuine endeavour to deconstruct the dominant political discourse of the prevailing social order. Although these endeavours never led to violent assault on political authorities, mobilizations and the complexities of early 1970s Niger contributed in their own way to a military coup in 1974.

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[15]Nevertheless, the loss of elite status and further pauperization of students in the 1990s–2000s made it easier for students to empathize with the wider Nigerien population, and with other social movements. The fact that most leaders of civil society were also former student leaders helped facilitate encounters between students and wider society. See Zeilig on the student protest in sub-Saharan Africa (2007).

[16]Being more numerous, the high school students played an important role in triggering mobilizations throughout the country.

[17]*L'Étincelle*, 1975, 1976, 1977, 1978.

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On 24 January 1972, a wave of student strikes began, coinciding with the first official visit of President Georges Pompidou of France. High school pupils and university students participated in a mass distribution of leaflets denouncing the Diori Hamani regime.[18] Pompidou's visit was also marked by one singular incident. During his ceremonial trip from the airport to the city of Niamey, one pupil, hidden among his comrades, threw a tomato that stained the French president's jacket. Immediately after this incident, three young men and a girl were arrested in Niamey (Baulin 1986: 84). Meanwhile, the official French visit coincided with the Tabaski holidays, so schools were closed for a week. When they reopened on 31 January 1972, the students went on strike to fight for the release of their comrades. As a result of these incidents, the Minister of Education decided to expel thirty-one pupils and students from the Centre of Higher Education, the National High School and the College Mariama.[19] Despite these measures, the students' protests continued and, on 12 February 1972, Nigerien students in France invaded the embassy of Niger.

At the same time, government discourse stigmatizing students in Niger was growing stronger. After an enlarged meeting of the National Assembly, political bureau and government on 14 February 1972, a press release was issued. It referred to the strike as 'political', 'without cause', 'anti-national', 'economic sabotage' and 'a national treason'.[20] The following day, schools were closed for one week, reopening on 21 February. The authorities threatened to exclude any student who refused to attend their classes,[21] and forty-one students who did so were suspended from school.[22]

These accusations of national treason and subversion were sufficiently dramatic to have inspired measures beyond mere suspensions. But, contrary to all expectations, the students were allowed to continue their studies, with thirty-one of those suspended returning to class on 23 March 1972. Moreover, at the beginning of the new academic year, all pupils and students were formally forgiven for their participation in the strike. Minister of Education Dan Dicko Dan Koulodo announced on 18 September 1972 that this decision was intended to contribute to 'national reconciliation'.[23] However, the government's explanation for the discrepancy between its violent rhetoric and merciful actions is questionable; it is more likely explained by the pressure exercised by Nigerien activists in France in 1972. *L'Étincelle*, as mouthpiece of the USN, emphasized the link between the invasion of the Niger embassy in France on 12 February and the reintegration of students in school in Niamey.[24] It is likely that the regime was anxious about the idea of appearing 'authoritarian' and losing legitimacy in the eyes of the

[18]'Lettre ouverte du président Boubou Hama aux élèves et étudiants nigériens. Le conflit des générations?', *Le Niger*, 28 February 1972.

[19]'Meeting populaire au stade national', *Le Niger*, 7 February 1972.

[20]'Les cours reprennent dans les établissements scolaires touchés par la grève', *Le Niger*, 21 February 1972.

[21]Article no. 7 MEN, *JORN*, 15 February 1972, p. 91; article no. 10 MEN, *JORN*, 15 February 1972, p. 91.

[22]'Mesure de clémence en faveur des élèves renvoyés ils réintègrent leurs écoles à la rentrée', *Le Niger*, 18 September 1972.

[23]*Ibid.*

[24]'S'unir, s'organiser, pourquoi?', *L'Étincelle*, February 1976.

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international community. These incidents embody a certain 'paternalist' attitude, profoundly embedded within the regime's modus operandi, in which, as 'fathers' of the nation, they did not wish to appear to be authoritarian.

However, when – from February 1973 onwards – the unrest and discontent continued to grow, stimulated by drought and food shortages (Bonnecase 2011), this paternalistic attitude rapidly receded. Repression began on 22 October 1973,[25] when both students and teachers – later joined by workers – organized independently from each other to protest.[26] These events highlight the significance of students' elite social status, in terms of their isolation from other social forces and wider society. Diori's deeply unpopular regime finally fell in April 1974 following a military coup led by Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché (van Walraven 2014: 135). Thus, mobilizations of the early 1970s did not break down the hegemonic order, but paradoxically reproduced it.

First years of the Seyni Kountché regime: from seduction to repression, 1974–76

General Seyni Kountché justified his coup d'état in terms of economic necessity, ostensibly to rescue Niger from impending famine. Poorly known in Niger, Kountché was in search of social recognition, presenting himself as an incarnation of the national conscience striving to preserve social cohesion (Malam Issa 2008: 129). Meanwhile, due to its role in the 1972–74 strikes, the USN had built a reputation as an important political actor – by co-opting the group, Kountché saw an opportunity to strengthen the legitimacy of his rule.

In accordance with the posture of a respectful leader, Kountché attempted to garner USN sympathies by adopting numerous populist measures. He freed students and teachers imprisoned after the 1973–74 strikes. In July 1974, the head of the Conseil Militaire Suprême (CMS) declared in front of student representatives: 'The USN can and must continue its activities' (Raynaut 1990: 26). One student delegate noted the significance of this message and its direct departure from Diori's USN ban.[27] In October 1974, another meeting was organized between the USN and the CMS. Student leaders showed their support for the CMS while reserving the right to later denounce the regime politics. According to Raynaut, 'it was a real statement of independence vis-à-vis the military authorities, no other social category dared to do so openly' (*ibid.*: 26).

Kountché did not stop with speeches. In 1974, he was still attempting to legitimize his regime by involving USN delegates in committees overseeing food distribution. According to one student leader, however, this did not resolve the food problems, and was more of a 'charm operation than a real policy to feed the population'.[28] In spite of this apparent openness, on 13 March 1975, the military

[25]Interview with Abdoul Karim Zakaria, teacher at a high school in the 1970s, 10 June 2008.

[26]See Smirnova (2016) on USN movements in the early 1970s for further details of these events.

[27]*Ibid.*

[28]Interview with Mohamadou Youssoufou, student leader at the Lycée National de Niamey in the 1970s, 28 June 2008.

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regime banned high school pupils from participation in the USN, arguing that teenagers could not be responsible for student activities.[29] For some time, this measure prevented activist leaders from electing the USN *Comité Exécutif*, normally composed of both university and high school students.[30] However, the regime did allow the USN to organize its third congress, which took place from 5 to 12 August 1975.[31] This had never occurred in Nigerien territory and was an unprecedented event.

Besides these visible 'populist' measures, Kountché also offered important government positions to former student leaders. *L'Étincelle* illustrated the situation on several pages devoted to 'opportunistic issues':

> In exchange for honours and money, technocrats use their expertise to liquidate the USN, which they pretend to know well because of their activist experience in the organization. The CMS believes that by recruiting intellectuals, it is adopting a new progressive image. But, neither the massive entry of opportunistic intellectuals nor the all-out policy can contribute to the social and economic development let alone save the neocolonial apparatus already seriously damaged under Diori.[32]

The same text mentioned the symbolic example, 'inexplicable at first sight', of Mamane Brah, USN president between 1972 and 1973 and a political prisoner from 1973 to 1974.[33] In February 1976, while the country was going through a significant drought, Brah accepted the position of State Secretary for Rural Development.[34]

However, although these measures – designed to co-opt the USN into the dominant political order – echo similar tactics used by Diori during the early 1960s, there are clear differences between them. There is a distinction between Diori's paternalistic displays of tolerance, and Seyni Kountché's perception of students as political rivals whom he hoped to co-opt. When Kountché finally realized that his attempts to control the movement had failed, the USN was violently repressed.

In November 1976, high school students initiated a wave of protests. Students at the High School Issa Korombé were the first to strike, contesting the introduction of a 3,000 FCFA deposit for the use of textbooks in high schools, which the government justified by citing the disappearance of a large number of books (worth a total of 675,000 FCFA) at the school.[35] According to these students,[36] disputing the deposit measure was more of a 'pretext' to strike because a student scholarship could be compared to the average salary of a civil servant and was more than

[29]'L'explosion de la colère des scolaires Nigériens', USN leaflet, 8 May 1982, Student Archives, Niamey.

[30]Interview with Abdou Hamani, one of the student leaders of the 1970s and 1980s, 1 June 2008.

[31]'Une date une histoire. Le 22 octobre 1973: journée de lutte du scolaire Nigérien', USN leaflet, 22 October 1982, Student Archives, Niamey.

[32]'L'opportunisme', *L'Étincelle*, 1975, p. 20.

[33]*Ibid.*

[34]Mamane Brah occupied positions in different governments from February 1976 to November 1983. Decree no. 76-24, *JORN*, 1 March 1976, p. 125; decree no. 83–157/PCMS, *JORN*, 15 November 1983, p. 847.

[35]'Situation dans les lycées de Niamey', *Le Sahel Hebdo*, 15 November 1976.

[36]Interview with Abdou Hamani, 1 June 2008.

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sufficient to buy books and clothing. Another objective of the strike was to demand the departure of a mathematics professor, a French volunteer, considered by the students to be incompetent.[37] Events at the High School Issa Korombé inspired mobilizations at secondary schools across Niger. University students also joined the movement,[38] and the USN was formally banned.

To prevent any subsequent dissent, the regime acted ruthlessly: schools were closed for the entire 1976–77 academic year,[39] the first time this had happened in the history of Niger. When they reopened, a new disciplinary regime was introduced. Moreover, a large wall was erected, limiting the territory of the High School Issa Korombé. Symbolically, this emphasized the idea of the school as a source of danger to the stability and legitimacy of the regime. However, if the students perceived the construction of the wall as a profound injustice, it did not prevent them from going over it during non-statutory hours.[40]

According to Nigerien authorities, 743 students were suspended from colleges and high schools as a disciplinary measure. However, these authorities assured the nation that 629 of these students would be able to integrate into their respective institutions, arguing that Niger was 'in need of civil servants and could not afford the luxury of rejecting 743 students in a single school year'.[41] Nevertheless, some of the most visible students were assigned to the École Normale for Young Girls of Tillabéry as a way of humiliating them.[42] According to French scholar Claude Raynaut, 'the firmness of the reaction reflected the fear of the authorities vis-à-vis the unique and truly organized movement of alternative opinion it had to face' (1990: 26). The Kountché government's violent reaction may also have been reinforced by members of the Bureau de Coordination et de Liaison (BCL), the nation's secret services. An attempted military coup conducted in April 1976 by BCL commanding officer Bayéré Moussa and BCL captain Sidi Mohamed only ramped up the CMS's security agenda (Malam Issa 2008: 144).

The government's repressive response to the strikes finally forced activists to go underground.[43] The only secondary institution that safeguarded its activist bureau was the High School Issa Korombé. After the 1976 crackdown, other schools, especially in Niamey, experienced a period of 'demobilization'.[44] However, in order to keep up with some activism and even to recruit new members, the students used sport: 'It was our strategy: since political authorities did not allow us to get in touch with other school institutions, we organized sports activities which helped us to get in touch with other schools to identify potential activists

[37] *Ibid*. See also Charlick (1991: 87).

[38] Interview with Souley Omar, one of the student leaders at the end of the 1970s/early 1980s, 15 June 2008.

[39] Article no. 61 MEN/DEST/EX, *JORN*, 1 December 1976, p. 885; article no. 62 MEN/DEST/EX, *JORN*, 1 December 1976, p. 885.

[40] Interview with Issa Aboubacar, one of the leaders of the High School Issa Korombé during the late 1970s, 24 June 2008.

[41] 'Les élèves doivent entretenir leur materiel scolaire, travailler dur et être disciplinés, nous déclare le Commandant Moussa Sala à l'issue de sa tourné', *Le Sahel Hebdo*, 13 November 1978.

[42] Interview with Adamou Kouka, one of the student leaders at the beginning of the 1980s, 26 June 1980.

[43] Interview with Souley Omar, 15 June 2008.

[44] 'Lettre ouverte aux camarades du Lycée Kassai', AELIK leaflet supported by USN, 21 December 1981, Student Archives, Niamey.

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and to train them.'[45] Despite the period of demobilization or 'abeyance' (Taylor 2005), some forms of protest continued, and were rigorously repressed. For example, when college students complained about the behaviour of some teachers – in particular, the director of the college in Dakoro – asking for a 'relief in discipline regime', the prefect of Maradi, Mamadou Tanja,[46] used law enforcement officials to quell the unrest. *L'Étincelle* reported the events:

> Having conveyed students in an odious trap to his villa, he invited dialogue. But, instead, he launched his troops, rifle butts and tear gas in an inhuman fury. These wild beasts attacked the secondary school students who were flabbergasted! Conclusion: several pupils were seriously injured and evacuated to hospital. Ironically, although all the parents were poor, they were hit with a fine to pay for the subsequent damages![47]

Similarly, in November 1980, clashes took place between the police and students from the École Normale of Zinder when the students rejected the suppression of boarding schools, resulting in several victims.[48] In 1981, another strike occurred at the High School of Niamey (Montandon 2002: 235), followed by strikes in Maradi in March of that same year.[49] Following these events, the government implemented a set of measures with the objective of suffocating the dissent. On 9 February 1982, the president of the Association des Élèves du Lycée Issa Korombé (AELIK) was reassigned to the High School of Tahoua.[50] The authorities also tried to establish an 'association for the unity of pupils [*association pour l'unité des scolaires*] (AUS), an organization whose purpose was to indoctrinate pupils'.[51] The parents of some students were arrested and threatened several times because of the militant activities of their children. Meanwhile, some pupils at the High School Issa Korombé were paid for spying and sabotage.[52] Moreover, the military regime tried to impose the presence of Samariya[53] in schools and in the university.

The 'golden age' of the USN: the late 1970s to the early 1980s

From the end of the 1970s, Seyni Kountché managed to consolidate his power (Charlick 1991; Gazibo 2005), announcing in May 1978 that the military

[45]Interview with Abdou Hamani, 1 June 2008.

[46]Mamadou Tanja was the president of the Republic of Niger in 1999–2004 and in 2004–10.

[47]'A propos des C.E.G.: le masque est tombé!', *L'Étincelle*, 1980.

[48]'Ni tortures ni arrestations n'éteindrons le flambeau', USN leaflet, 26 November 1980, Student Archives, Niamey.

[49]'Motion sur l'arrestation de 16 camarades du lycée technique de Maradi', USN leaflet, April 1981, Student Archives, Niamey.

[50]'Mobilisons nous pour que vive l'USN', USN leaflet, 16 February 1982, Student Archives, Niamey. 'En effet il est classique que de tous temps et en tous lieux les régimes anti-populaires et anti-nationalistes véritables oppresseurs des masses populaires usent de deux principales tactiques pour se maintenir au pouvoir', USN leaflet, 16 December 1981, Student Archives, Niamey.

[51]'Lettre ouverte aux scolaires Nigériens', AELIK leaflet, 16 December 1981, Student Archives, Niamey.

[52]'Mobilisons nous pour que vive l'USN', USN leaflet, 16 February 1982, Student Archives, Niamey.

[53]The Samariya was a traditional youth organization, revived and instrumentalized first by Diori Hamani and subsequently by Seyni Kountché.

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regime would continue for another ten or twelve years.[54] Nonetheless, the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s became a true 'golden age' for the activist movement. After a brief period of internal divisions between 1976 and 1979, it managed to develop a clever strategy to challenge the authorities. In 1983, the USN launched an important confrontation, which resulted in violent state repression and an end to any further attempt at dissent for several years.

From divisions to consolidation: 1976–79

If the majority of pupils in the secondary and high schools of Niger were Nigeriens, the university students were more heterogeneous. This diversity served to exacerbate internal divisions within the activist movement, which was already weakened after the state's 1976 crackdown. In fact, the CES emerged in 1971 and was organized sub-regionally so that the scientific curriculum was based in Niamey, while human sciences were taught in the CES of Ouagadougou in Upper Volta.[55] When the University of Niamey was created in 1973, this 'regional' organization was abandoned and human sciences were introduced in Niamey, although the institution continued to accept many students from Ouagadougou. This socio-historic and demographic configuration of higher education in Niger was reflected in the way in which the students organized themselves; after 1974, students in Niger founded the Union Générale des Étudiants du Niger (UGEN), which included the Association des Étudiants Voltaïques du Niger (AEVN), while Nigerien students participated in the Union Nigérien des Étudiants de l'Université de Niamey (UENUN), an academic section of the USN.[56]

Tensions between the more diverse UGEN and the Nigerien UENUN emerged between 1978 and 1979, when *L'Étincelle* published an article entitled 'On the organizational crisis in the University of Niamey',[57] providing multiple examples of divergence mostly on ideological and political grounds regarding national liberation movements. According to *L'Étincelle*, the conflict between the groups began on 22 January 1976, when the UENUN organized a march to support the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). On that occasion, the UGEN and the AEVN backed the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), denounced by the USN and the UENUN because of its connections to 'the racist South Africa'. Divisions were further in evidence during the strike of 1976–77, launched by the USN for the purpose of 'denounc[ing] the sabotage of the formation of managers for Conseil Militaire Suprême'. When the UGEN participated in the strike, *L'Étincelle* noted that, two days later, the subsection of the UGEN, the AEVN, changed its opinion and adopted a 'neutral position'. According to *L'Étincelle*, the UGEN was incapable of acting on its anti-imperialist ideals: it amplified the ideological divergences within the movement, thus 'paralyzing' it.

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[54] *Discours et Messages: 15 avril 1979–15 avril 1980* by Seyni Kountché, cited in Malam Issa (2008: 140).

[55] This situation was common. For example, from 1965 to 1970, the University of Benin was also divided between Lomé (Togo) and Proto Novo (Dahomey), but in 1971 each country created its own university (Dieng 2011).

[56] 'De la crise organisationnelle à l'Université de Niamey', *L'Étincelle*, 1980.

[57] *Ibid.*

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Tensions between the UENUN and the UGEN/AEVN were also nurtured by the Sino-Soviet split of the mid-1970s, which divided in particular African students in France from those on the African continent. The University of Niamey's campus was filled with discussions of different orientations within the global 'left' discourse. There were three dominant trends: pro-Soviet, pro-Maoist and pro-Albanian. The Voltaic students of the UGEN and the AEVN aligned themselves with the model of Albanian communism advanced by Enver Hoxha,[58] a movement that contributed to the founding of the Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire Voltaïque in 1978. In Niger, they were considered 'pro-RNDP' due to their adherence to the ideas of the Révolution Nationale Démocratique et Populaire (RNDP) as a milestone in the process of struggle. Meanwhile, the Nigerien students, especially the ruling circle, were close to the 'pro-Soviet' trend, remaining under the influence of the Parti Africain de l'Indépendance.

According to student leaders, long theoretical discussions obstructed the USN's activities during this time, preventing it from advancing causes directly related to the daily lives of students and the political situation in the country.[59] *L'Étincelle* noted that the General Assembly, held at the beginning of the 1977–78 academic year, was dedicated 'in vain to discussions on the declaration of the general position regarding the [USSR] and China'.[60] Another General Assembly held in 1978 lasted more than six hours and 'only a few minutes were devoted to the practical problems of students, while the whole discussion was marked by sterile debate'.[61]

To preserve USN unity, and despite their pro-Soviet ideological convictions, student leaders chose to strictly follow the Fourth Article of the USN statute,[62] refusing any open ideological debate. As a member of the *Comité Directeur* commented: 'We have never said that we were pro-Soviet. We have never proclaimed it.'[63] This position was advanced by *L'Étincelle*: 'Saying that USSR, China or Albania present the only "bastion" of struggles is bizarre and, on the contrary, leads to turning away from the internationalist duty.'[64]

The USN functioned in accordance with the Leninist principle of democratic centralism, allowing a certain degree of freedom for members to discuss and debate, but they were unified in action once a decision was adopted by a majority vote at the General Assembly. Thus, student leaders' strategic advancement of the 'anti-UGEN' discourse in *L'Étincelle*, while proclaiming a neutral ideological position, successfully disposed of an organization that clearly threatened the unity of the activist movement. Not long afterwards, USN leaders proclaimed the UGEN to be 'the fifth column of neocolonialism'.[65] Simultaneously, deteriorating academic relations between Niger and Upper Volta (Bianchini and Korbéogo 2008: 39) led to the progressive disappearance of Voltaic students

[58]Enver Hoxha was the communist leader of Albania from 1944 until his death in 1985, serving as the first secretary of the Party of Labour of Albania.

[59]Interview with Idriss Laouali, one of the student leaders at the end of the 1970s and a union and political leader throughout the 1990s/2000s, 29 June 2008.

[60]'De la crise organisationnelle à l'Université de Niamey', *L'Étincelle*, 1980.

[61]*Ibid.*

[62]'S'unir, s'organiser, pourquoi?', *L'Étincelle*, February 1976.

[63]Interview with Idriss Laouali, 29 June 2008.

[64]'De la crise organisationnelle à l'Université de Niamey', *L'Étincelle*, 1980.

[65]*Ibid.*

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from the Niamey campus,[66] and, consequently, from the activist landscape. Thus, despite this short period of internal divisions during the mid-1970s, the USN managed to preserve its unity and coherence.

With progressive changes occurring in the forms of political power – connected to the personalization of Kountché's regime, and the progressive consolidation of its rule by the end of the 1970s – the student movement also underwent a transformation. For one, the USN reinforced its control over ordinary activists through diverse counter-hegemonic practices deeply embedded in the daily life of the campus. The main features were ideological education and 'exemplary conduct'. After the late 1970s, ideological training of ordinary activists was provided through 'special committees' systematizing the 'Marxist political' world view.[67] According to one student leader, younger activists were progressively initiated.[68] For example, an essay by French philosopher and Marxist theoretician Georges Politzer, 'The basic principles of philosophy', could be easily understood by an intelligent secondary school student. In the early 1980s, Marxist reading materials were in wide circulation on the university campus and in high schools, and it was even possible to buy such books during exhibitions organized by the embassies.[69] Being an activist on campus in the 1970s and early 1980s was not really optional; as one of the militants of the time stated: 'Those who do not take part in activism are necessarily known by the leaders who know everything that everyone is doing.'[70]

Student leaders themselves were knowledgeable on points of ideological contention. Besides, they had conviction as believers; as one explained, this tended to interfere with their daily lives and everyday commitments:

> During the football World Cup in 1982, the Soviet Union presented a great team; the goalkeeper was Dasayev. But the students liked Brazil. And the Soviet Union played against Brazil. And – even if everyone loves Brazil – we, however, supported the Soviet Union![71]

The fact that ideological convictions were deeply ingrained in corps practices is confirmed by numerous examples. Drinking alcohol or dancing was not encouraged because all free time was supposed to be filled by activism, in order to 'revive the USN after 1976'.[72] Activists were required to be 'physically fit' and available whenever the 'nation needs you'.[73] Therefore, the internal organization of the movement was marked by the imposition of an extraordinary code of conduct and discipline, related not only to political activism and training but also to the minutiae of daily life. Such discipline of activists – who derided the

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[66]Of 782 students enrolled in the university in 1977–78, only 422, or 54 per cent, were Nigeriens; in 1982–83 out of 2,142 students, 1,907 were Nigeriens (89 per cent) (Ministry of Planning 1984: 242).
[67]Interview with Abdou Ibo, 6 June 2008.
[68]Interview with Adamou Kouka, 26 June 1980.
[69]Interview with Abdou Hamani, 1 June 2008.
[70]Interview with Idriss Laouali, 29 June 2008.
[71]*Ibid.*
[72]Interview with Adamou Kouka, 26 June 1980.
[73]Interview with Issa Aboubacar, 24 June 2008.

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opposition as a 'neocolonial' military regime – also played a role in social control over ordinary students. Consequently, the domination operating within the movement constituted a means of resistance and subversion of the dominant order, incarnated by Seyni Kountché's rule.

By the beginning of the 1980s, after the brutal repression of 1976 and the internal divisions of 1976–79, the USN was clearly experiencing a period of regeneration or 'second wind'. It used this to take advantage of an official visit of the French head of state, scheduled for 19–22 May 1982, moving on to another stage of relations with the authorities.

François Mitterrand's official visit to Niger in 1982

As one senior state official explained: 'For us, it was very important that the official visit of the French president would go without incident, especially given the fact that Niger will be the first country in sub-Saharan Africa visited by President Mitterrand.'[74] But the tomato episode that had marked the trip of Georges Pompidou to Niger ten years earlier was far from erased from collective memory. Acting in their role as the supposed 'opposition', USN activists decided to 'put the regime under pressure'[75] before Mitterrand's arrival. Student leaders relied on the assumption that, in order 'to save the visit of the French president, Kountché will do everything'.[76] The strategy worked.

Strikes began after a public seminar on educational reforms, the 'Zinder Debates' of 22 February to 31 March 1982. Student leaflets, along with *L'Étincelle*, underlined the state's real objective in these debates: not to reflect on how to adapt the educational system to a local context, but to justify reductions in spending on public education.[77] This challenge to the 'Zinder Debates' was also symbolically important, as it targeted the education system in its role as a pillar of the dominant political order.

The USN launched its first strike on 26 April, supported by the main high schools as well as by university students. The following day, the USN organized a march in order to 'denounce the anti-social policies of CMS'.[78] Meanwhile, demonstrations continued for several days, taking place across Niger, in the regions of Dosso, Zinder, Tahoua, Diffa, Dogon Doutché, Say and Kollo.[79] In Niamey, activists distributed leaflets condemning the luxurious lifestyle of political leaders. According to one leaflet, issued on 7 May 1982, there were several thousand students and pupils present at this strike, accompanied by police, the republican guard, riot police and firefighters,[80] who did not hesitate to 'use tear

[74]Interview with Boubacar Mahaman, minister of the Seyni Kountché government in the 1980s, 24 June 2008.
[75]Interview with Adamou Kouka, 26 June 1980.
[76]*Ibid.*
[77]'Camarades, l'objet de la présente correspondance est de vous donner des informations relatives à notre participation au débat national sur l'éducation tenu à Zinder du 22 au 31 /3/82', USN leaflet, 14 April 1982, Student Archives, Niamey.
[78]*Ibid.*
[79]'L'explosion de la colère des scolaires Nigériens', USN leaflet, 8 May 1982, Student Archives, Niamey; 'Le système capitaliste mondiale traverse une crise structurelle sans précédent', USN leaflet, 2 January 1983, Student Archives, Niamey.
[80]*Ibid.*

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gas even in classrooms'.[81] On 8 May 1982, the USN distributed a paper entitled 'Explosion of anger in Nigerien schools'. It denounced the exorbitant public spending on youth festivals, sports infrastructure, socio-cultural complexes and the organization of championships, arguing that the regime was preoccupied with 'strengthening its international image'. Altogether, the mobilization lasted from 26 April until 10 May; at this point, the authorities decided to negotiate with the students, as only nine days were left before Mitterrand's official visit. The USN's strategy of putting the military regime 'under pressure' had been a clear success.

Negotiations between the student leaders and the government delegation took place on USN territory, in classrooms at the High School Issa Korombé.[82] The four ministers representing the authorities were all important figures in the Kountché government.[83] Mamane Brah, president of the USN, and another student leader, Abdou Ibo, were the main representatives of the activists. Negotiations lasted for five days, from 10 to 14 May, ending five days before the official visit of the French head of state. The accomplishments of the USN delegation exceeded all expectations, demonstrating the government's willingness to stop the student protests by any means, in order to protect Mitterrand's visit. The main achievement was the government's formal agreement to amend legislation to recognize the USN.[84]

The 1982 negotiations between government representatives and USN leaders were a clear indication of a break with the dominant political order: now, it was students who made political authorities negotiate with them, not the other way around. Almost a decade after the 1972–74 mobilization, the USN's struggle was finally gaining ground.

The May 1983 mobilization

However, recognition of the USN, as promised during the negotiations and visible in their minutes (which were signed by the delegation head, the Minister of Mines and Industry), was not conclusively effective, and strikes continued. In May 1983, a group of students from the Faculty of Agronomy received a collective 'zero grade' on their tests, which they contested.[85] This mobilization spread rapidly to other university faculties.[86] At that point, not all student leaders wanted to encourage unrest; some anticipated that severe repression would follow, similar to the events of 1976, and they chose to delay mobilization.

[81] 'Au Niger il est devenu chose courante, pour le pouvoir de développer la calomnie et le mensonge à travers la radio, la télévision et les journaux afin de mystifier l'opinion démocratique nigérienne', USN leaflet, 7 May 1982, Student Archives, Niamey.

[82] Interview with Abdou Ibo, 6 June 2008.

[83] Annou Mahamane was the Minister of Mines and Industry and also the delegation head; Illa Maikassousa was the former headmaster at High School Issa Korombé and, in June 1982 (i.e. just after Mitterrand's visit), he became the Minister of Higher Education; Oumar Diallo was the Minister of Public Works; and Maman Oumarou was the Minister of Youth, Sports and Culture.

[84] CD/USN, 'Procès-verbal des négociations du 10 mai 1982 au 14 mai 1982 entre le gouvernement et le Comité Directeur de l'USN', 17 May 1982, USN/UENUN Archives, Niamey.

[85] *Jeune Afrique*, 18 May 1983.

[86] Interview with Sani Mahaman, one of the student leaders at the beginning of the 1980s, 3 June 2008.

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Nevertheless, the radical trend prevailed and the General Assembly voted to continue the strike.

On 3 May 1983, police intervened on the campus and violent clashes began. According to the USN, several thousand activists participated in the mobilization,[87] but according to the French embassy it was 'a thousand'.[88] These confrontations resulted in the death of one student, Amadou Boubacar, in unexplained circumstances; some sources said that he died after an interrogation in a military camp.[89] While the Minister of Higher Education and Research released a statement announcing the arrest of fourteen students,[90] it is possible that this figure was an underestimate: according to other sources, 300 students were arrested and detained in severe conditions for many days (Raynaut 1990: 27; Montandon 2002: 235). The university reopened on 16 May 1983, with further forms of dissent and protest bringing systematic repression in various forms: arrests, dismissals from the university or secondary/high schools, and threats to families, among others. This situation prevailed until Kountché's death in 1987.

After the May 1983 strikes, several USN leaders managed to hide, while others were caught and severely punished. One leader was arrested and transported by a special plane to a penal camp in the Agadez desert region, about 1,000 kilometres from Niamey. After periods of imprisonment, other leaders arrested alongside him were sent to teach in remote areas far from the nation's capital. According to those who managed to escape from Niger, fair trials were not possible under military rule. As one of them explained:

> It is because, for us, our struggle is not only a struggle for students' rights: this is a struggle for the people of Niger. The trial would be an opportunity to let people know what the regime was really like. We were convinced that the regime would never let it happen.[91]

The activists chose to flee to Upper Volta for its 'revolutionary context', as they put it. Disguised as peasants, with their identity cards hidden in their clothing, they left Niamey and travelled on foot through the desert, risking their lives as the trip was extremely dangerous.[92] Upon their arrival in Ouagadougou, they received financial support from the local USN chapter as well as from one in Dakar; Nigerien activists from different countries regularly sent money, they were assisted by the Union Générale des Étudiants Burkinabés,[93] and they also managed to obtain student cards for the University of Ouagadougou. With the assistance of some former USN leaders (one of whom was working for an international organization), they

[87] 'À la mémoire des scolaires martyrs', USN manuscript, 1 May 1985, Diplomatic Archives (DA), Niamey-105, cited in Bonnecase (2011: 18).

[88] 'Lettre de l'ambassadeur de France au Niger au ministre des Affaires étrangères', 13 May 1983, DA, Niamey-106, cited in Bonnecase (2011: 18).

[89] *Ibid.* Leaflets commemorating the May 1983 strikes suggested that Amadou Boubacar died as a consequence of torture. For example, 'La stratégie du changement!', USN leaflet, 3 May 1993, Student Archives, Niamey.

[90] 'Déclaration du ministre de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche', *Le Sahel Hebdo*, 16 May 1983.

[91] Interview with Souley Omar, 15 June 2008.

[92] Interview with Issa Aboubacar, 24 June 2008.

[93] Interview with Souley Omar, 15 June 2008.

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obtained the status of political refugees.[94] This was particularly important, as the Kountché government tried in vain to negotiate with Thomas Sankara, president of Burkina Faso (1983–87), for the students' return to Niger.[95]

The 1983 strike was in many ways a disaster; internal disagreements on the methods of struggle and the absence of support from other social forces interfered with meaningful contributions to political change. Paradoxically, however, USN leaders arguably benefited as a result. The student organization's apparent withdrawal from the political arena allowed activists to distance themselves from direct confrontations with authorities, instead developing and strengthening their political ideas, particularly through alliances with other social groups, such as workers and teachers. The result was a far more organized and politically sophisticated ideological struggle. Exiled USN members also founded a clandestine political group[96] whose network spread across West Africa, Europe and a number of activist cells in Niger. After proclamation of the multiparty system in December 1990, former USN leaders founded the Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (PNDS-*Tarayya*), one of the principal political actors in Niger, whose leader, Mahamadou Issoufou, was elected in 2016 to serve as president for a second presidential term. Simultaneously, during the widespread political liberalization of the 1990s, former USN activists of a more 'Maoist' trend decamped to other parties, such as the Organisation Révolutionnaire pour la Démocratie Nouvelle (ORDN-*Tarmamoua*) and the Convention Démocratique et Sociale (CDS-*Rahama*), while those who supported the 'pro-RNDP' trend went on to help found the Parti pour la Libération du Travail (PLT-*Albarka*).

Thus, the ideological divisions of the 1970s between the pro-Maoist/RNDP and pro-Soviet students ultimately helped structure Nigerien politics after the multiparty system emerged in 1990. In this regard, as researchers Bianchini and Korbéogo note, a bifurcation occurred between two possible paths of student syndicalism. The first aspired to the exercise of revolutionary power; the second was more moderate, with a general counter-hegemonic attitude characterized by an alliance with trade unions (2008: 42). In Niger, the revolutionary vision of 1983 went unrealized, probably due to the violent clashes between students and security forces and the subsequent repression. Instead, Niger followed the second, more moderate path, which ultimately inspired the 1990 creation of a political party with strong social support (Smirnova 2015).

Conclusion

This article revisits the modern political history of Niger in the 1960s to the 1980s through an innovative lens: that of the student protests that embodied a transformative project of society via education and economic reforms deeply connected to the struggles for independence. The article has focused on the interaction

[94]Interview with Abdou Hamani, 1 June 2008.

[95]Interview with Illa Mahaman, one of the student leaders in the 1970s, 18 June 2008.

[96]Niger was not an exception. The best-known examples of clandestine parties are perhaps those of the Parti Communiste Révolutionnaire Voltaïque, founded in 1978, and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party, established in 1972 in Berlin (Zewede 2010).

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between political authorities and the Union des Scolaires Nigériens. It has explored how these relations gradually transformed the nature of political power in Niger, which ended up recognizing and tolerating the existence of a counter-hegemonic movement that had been challenging it in different ways for almost forty years. The article has shown how USN activists cultivated different logics of emancipation from political control, depending on the form of that control, and sometimes they were even nourished by it. This was the case with the increased control on ordinary activists at the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980 in order to overcome ideological divisions inside the activist movement. It was also the case when activists gave a false impression of being reconciled with the authorities, as occurred in the first two years after the Seyni Kountché coup in 1974, and when they used memories of previous student movements as a form of political pressure in 1982.

In the early 1960s, the USN's position within the political arena was fluid and ambiguous. Despite the group's proclaimed radical views and links with the Sawaba movement, the authorities initially treated it as part of the dominant political order; this was possibly due to the paternalist attitude of the PPN-RDA regime towards students, embedded in the 'teacher's ethos' values of the regime. Additionally, the weakening of the Diori regime, accompanied by food shortages, left the activist organization with margins to manoeuvre, and by the beginning of the 1970s it had reinforced its activist structures. The violent repression of the 1973–74 mobilizations did not erase the USN; rather, it had the opposite effect. The state's oppressive behaviour served to reinforce the organization's legitimacy as a political opposition that the authorities could not ignore.

Thus, when Seyni Kountché came to power in 1974, he not only liberated political prisoners, including USN members; he also tried to negotiate with activists in the hope of gaining social legitimacy for his regime. However, this approach, in which the USN was treated as a political rival he wanted to co-opt, only strengthened the USN's independence from the Kountché regime, and the authorities resorted to violent repression from the 1976 strike onwards.

With progressive changes occurring in the forms of political power – connected to the progressive consolidation of Kountché's rule by the end of the 1970s – the counter-hegemonic student movement also underwent some transformations. Specifically, it overcame internal divisions through the use of ideological education, which it used as a means of domination and social control. Political convictions and ideas became deeply embedded in the daily life and even in the physical routines of the activists. Consequently, although these years (1976–79) appear to have been a silent or quiescent era for the activist movement, they are ultimately critical to understanding the 1982 strikes. Cleverly, the USN seized the occasion of the 'Zinder Debates' on the education system to reverse government positions of domination, dictating its conditions to the government under the threat to compromise François Mitterrand's visit. In hindsight, the 1982 negotiations between governmental representatives and USN leaders emerge as a break in the dominant order.

The mobilization that took place the following year was a catastrophe for the USN. A lack of support from other social forces as well as internal divisions regarding methods of struggle interfered with the prospects of achieving political change. Movements were violently repressed and further dissent prevented. Paradoxically, however, these events were ultimately beneficial for activists, who

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used their time in exile to construct powerful alliances with other political forces in Niger and to reinforce their political project, bringing it to its contemporary form as a political party – the PNDS-*Tarayya* – in 1990.

Thus, this article has shown that, despite the USN's ambiguous connections to the dominant political order in the early 1960s, the gradual accumulation of activist experience by two generations of student leaders (those of the 1960s/early 1970s and late 1970s/early 1980s) nourished the creation of specific opportunities for political action, which found various outlets for expression depending on the form of state power as well as on the form and methods of activist work.

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Abstract

This article revisits the modern political history of Niger during the 1960s to the 1980s through an analysis of relations between student activists and government authorities. It explores how a student organization, the Union des Scolaires Nigériens (USN), managed to bypass multiple layers of political control to become a well-structured political movement, capable of seriously challenging the legitimacy of the authorities. Specifically, the article examines interactions between the USN and different bodies of political power, including the Diori and Kountché governments, in the larger context of regional solidarities and the Cold War. It analyses key moments of this struggle by showing how two generations of student leaders (those of the 1960s to early 1970s and the late 1970 to early 1980s) nourished the creation of specific windows of political action, which found various outlets for expression depending on the form of state power as well as the form and methods of activist work.

Résumé

Cet article revisite l'histoire politique moderne du Niger des années 1960 aux années 1980 à travers l'analyse des relations entre étudiants activistes et autorités gouvernementales. Il explore comment une organisation d'étudiants, l'Union des scolaires nigériens (USN), est parvenue à contourner plusieurs strates du contrôle politique pour devenir un mouvement politique bien structuré capable de défier sérieusement la légitimité des autorités. En particulier, l'article examine les interactions entre l'USN et les différents organes du pouvoir politique, y compris les gouvernements Diori et Kountché, dans le contexte plus large des solidarités régionales et de la guerre froide. Il analyse les moments clés de cette lutte en montrant comment deux générations de leaders étudiants (celle de la période 1960-début des années 1970, et fin des années 1970-début des années 1980) ont favorisé la création de fenêtres d'action politique spécifiques qui ont trouvé diverses voies d'expression selon la forme de pouvoir d'État, mais aussi selon la forme et les méthodes de travail activiste.

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