NIGER '91: THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF THE

NIGERIEN NATIONAL SOVEREIGN CONFERENCE OF 1991

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ABSTRACT

The 1990s were a time of political rebirth in Niger. On July 29, 1991, the

Nigerien National Sovereign Conference convened, and it led to the revamping of

Niger's political system. The previous constitution was suspended. The sitting president

was stripped of his power, and the people of Niger made an organized effort to create a

new constitution and bring the nation under civilian rule. However, the effects of the

National Sovereign Conference led to a weak transitional government and had little social

impact on the nation.

CHAPTER 1


INTRODUCTION TO NIGER


> *During the 20th Century the people of Niger*
> *were determined to have their voices heard*
> *in the shaping of their own future.*
> *—Finn Fuglestad*

The nation of Niger sits in the heart of Africa. It covers parts of the Sahara Desert

and the Sahel region. Niger borders Algeria and Libya to the north, Burkina Faso and

Mali to the west, Chad to the east, and Nigeria to the south. The majority of Niger's land

lies in the sands of the Sahara, and much of the population is concentrated in the southern

part of Sahel, near the Niger River, which provides the namesake for the country.

The area once served as a prosperous location and was the epicenter of the Trans-

Saharan trade caravans (Kurlansky 48). Tens of thousands of traveling traders once

walked Niger's sands, dealing gold, leather, acacia gum (used for fabric), seeds, West

African fruit, and the most vital commodity, salt (48). However, by the midtwentieth

century, the prosperity of Niger's caravan trade had dwindled. The nation had lived under

French rule for decades, and, as independence came, it was time to rebuild a country.

After achieving independence in 1960, Niger instantly fell into political decay

under the rule of its first president, Diori Hamani (Decalo, *Coups* 255). From the moment

Diori came into office, the weak regime constantly surveyed the land for potential

uprisings and coups. Within three years in office, Diori had eighty-six people arrested for

planning and conspiring in a 1963 *coup d'état* (255). This would stand as a core

characteristic of weakness found in military-led regimes. Because of the enormous

amount of pressure on the Diori regime's own security interests, many of the nation's resources are devoted to protecting the government against future coups, which hinders what the regime can do for its citizens.

For the first ten years after independence, Niger's economy was centered on its principal crop, peanuts (Decalo, *Coups* 248). However, by 1980, the peanut industry was incidental compared to uranium, which remains the country's largest economic commodity (249). Still, Niger's economic issues deal with far more than imports, exports, and investment from foreign countries. As a nation comprised mostly of arid Saharan land, the economy frequently faces the effects of the desert.

In 1974, the Diori regime came to an end through a military-backed *coup d'état*. Diori Hamani was exiled to Morocco, where he would live for the remainder of his life, and, on April 22, 1974, Seyni Kountche became Niger's head of state. Kountche instituted complete military rule over the nation. Every departmental ministry was managed by the military (Alou, "Military Politicians" 16). The president had changed, but Niger remained a dictatorship. After Kountche died in office in 1987, his cousin, Ali Saibou, was appointed president of Niger and continued the military dictatorship. Military rule in Niger would continue until 1991, when the National Sovereign Conference convened and suspended the constitution.

This thesis assesses the impacts of the Nigerien National Sovereign Conference of 1991. Chapters 2 and 3 address the events prior to 1991 and the convening of the conference, and chapters 4, 5, and 6 focus on the political, economic, and social effects resulting from the conference. Chapter 7 summarizes the results.

CHAPTER 2

THE GOVERNMENT PRIOR TO 1991

Niger is the largest nation in West Africa. Much of the country's land is covered by the sands of the Sahara Desert. The West African nation had two major opportunities in the twentieth century to empower its citizens: first with Niger obtaining independence from France in 1960, and second with the National Sovereign Conference of 1991, which served as a turning point in the nation's history.

In 1991, the Nigerien administration encountered intense domestic and international pressure. First, drought had plagued the Sahara and the Sahel region, and members of the indigenous nomadic group, the Tuareg, took refuge in Niger. Amid the refugee crisis, an internal uprising was organized (Heath 234). The government was also dealing with its own financial issues prior to the protest, and, in a drastic move, civil servant salaries were cut, and scholarships for many university students were canceled. In retaliation, students took to the streets and organized a major protest (233). To quell the protesters, the military fired shots into the crowd, and the event turned into a massacre that received global attention.

The reigning president of Niger, Ali Saibou (family name Ali and first name Saibou), was desperate to alleviate the domestic and international pressures facing the nation. He had little choice other than to allow the National Sovereign Conference to convene. Hailed by some as a success, it allowed the transition from a one-party system with dictatorial rule (under Ali) to a more democratic, multiparty system. However,

although the National Sovereign Conference achieved one of its primary political goals, it led to several economic, political, and social failures.

President Ali took the place of Seyni Kountche as head of the West African nation after Kountche died in office in 1987 (Decalo, *Coups* 283). Compared to his predecessors, Ali Saibou faced an enormous amount of international pressure within a short time. The first president of the Republic of Niger, Diori Hamani, was able to serve as president for thirteen and a half years before reaching his ultimate demise in a *coup d'état* (279). Niger's next president, Seyni Kountche, reigned for thirteen years as well and died in office. However, only two years after becoming Niger's leader, Ali Saibou faced losing the presidency. Yet, with all the calamities facing the head of the Nigerien state, he differed from his two predecessors. Ali became the first individual in Niger to command the military, the presidency, and the only functioning political party at the same time. All three were under the simultaneous rule of a single individual.

In *Army and Politics in Niger*, Kimba Idrissa labels Ali Saibou's presidency a military regime, which, throughout the nation's history since its independence in 1960, has become the dominant force in Nigerien politics. Ali Saibou, Seyni Kountche's cousin, was a career military individual. However, to understand his role in the Nigerien National Sovereign Conference (or to understand how his actions led to the outrage prior to the conference in the first place) three critical concepts must be identified: the first is Afro-Marxism, the second is personal dictatorship, and the third is single-party rule.

The concept of Afro-Marxism is defined as a hybrid radical development path (Decalo, *Coups* 33). Afro-Marxism contains three core distinctions: a single-party

political system, authoritarian rule, and the nationalization of industries. The presence of actual Marxist thought and rhetoric is sometimes almost nonexistent, and, in some cases, military officers and lower-level politicians might not even have a deep understanding of Marxism at all. Within two years of taking office, Ali attained control of the Supreme Military Council and instituted a single-party political system in which his party was the only legal and functional political party.

The nation of Niger was not alone in its move toward an Afro-Marxist regime. In fact, Afro-Marxism became a fast-moving form of political thought and spread across Africa during the early 1970s. The Afro-Marxist political state first appeared in Congo-Brazzaville in early 1970 (Young 22). Then, similar regimes began spreading across the continent: Somalia in 1970, Benin in 1974, Niger in 1974, Madagascar in 1975, and Ethiopia in 1976 (22).

Afro-Marxism calls for the supremacy of the state, and the ruling government holds an enormous amount of power (Young 27). This limits the liberties of a nation's citizens. Also, Afro-Marxist regimes (such as Niger) tend to harbor weak economies, which already limit progress and development. Most African nations during the 1970s did not have the means to utilize comprehensive planning or a political model akin to that of a European power or even the Soviet Union (30).

As for the authoritarian component in Afro-Marxism, authoritarianism focuses on a ruling government, which takes control of all the freedoms and civil liberties of its citizens (McMullin 1). The authoritarian regime often exaggerates its power to appear stronger than it is actually is, making opposition to the government appear futile.

Furthermore, regimes of this nature tend to falsify the public perception and popularity of the regime. An authoritarian regime can erode confidence in the voting, elections, and representative bodies of the government to give itself a freer hand to wield more power (1). In short, the force driving authoritarianism is complete control of not only the government but also of the people.

A personal dictatorship is one where the single leader of a nation is not focused on or concerned with the well-being of the nation or its citizens. A personal dictator's only concern and interest is oneself. The motivations behind a personal dictatorship can be obtaining power, accumulating wealth, or even fueling one's ego and drive for self-gratification (Decalo, *Coups* 135). These elements and characteristics are found in Ali Saibou's presidency. He rose to power after the death of his cousin, gained control of the military, gained control of the presidency, and demolished other potential candidates and opposition to prevent them from forming a legal political party—these are the workings of a personal dictatorship. Ali Saibou was attempting to extend his power and dominance over the nation of Niger.

Mahamane Tidjani Alou's article, "The Military Politicians," offers the explanation that, in Niger, the military elite act as a high class concerned with making decisions that exclusively benefit their military and political careers (2). Ali Saibou is a textbook example of putting this into action. This scenario is also a defining characteristic of authoritarian rule. A democratic government is created to protect the rights of the people. An authoritarian government creates laws that benefit only a few (Napolitano 1).

Ali's transition to single-party rule not only allowed for the new president to increase his power and control over Niger; it also served as a major setback for democracy. Alou deduces that a key characteristic in the rise of military regimes is promising the people that the traditions of the past will stay in place and that democracy will be protected ("Military Politicians" 3). Ali once stated, "The ideals and objectives of President Kountche will be pursued in continuity" (Decalo, *Coups* 284). Within two years, he revamped the political system to further his own interests, and democracy was pushed aside.

CHAPTER 3


THE CONFERENCE


Preparations for the National Sovereign Conference began as early as November

1990 when Ali Saibou announced the formation of a preparatory committee, which

consisted of 68 individuals: sixty-three men and five women ("Niger Women Campaign

for Inclusion"). Despite the small number of women, their inclusion and direct access to

the president and prime minister marked a major step forward, giving them serious

involvement for the first time through a leading organization, the Union of Women in

Niger ("Niger Women Campaign for Inclusion").

On July 29, the conference convened with 1,204 members (Decalo, *Historical*

*Dictionary* 135). In addition to women's participation in the planning the conference, a

few members had previously been involved with the regime. Of the 1,204 members, only

100 were from the government. The remainder of the body came from sixty-nine

nongovernmental organizations representing much of the population, including human

rights agencies and religious groups (136). One of the events that had put so much

pressure on the Ali presidency was the student protest, which turned into a massacre. In

response, university students were included as members in the conference.

The first order of business was to elect a president of the conference, and history

professor, scholar, and writer Andre Salifou was elected. On August 9, the Nigerien

constitution was suspended, but on this day it was also determined that Ali Saibou would

remain as Niger's president during the conference until a new constitution could be

implemented (136). However, Ali was stripped of his powers and could act as a president in name only.

A key ambition expressed at the National Sovereign Conference was to redistribute power among the nation's people. Instead of a government dominated by military rule, the conference voted to adopt a government run by civilian rule (Decalo, *Coups* 135). At the conclusion of the conference in November 1991, the members voted that the new form of government would be a multiparty democracy. The head of state would be a president limited to a five-year term, and the number of terms a president could serve was capped at two.

The National Conference lasted from July 29 to November 3 of 1991. During this time, a new dawn broke for the people of Niger. The regime of the previous years was suspended, and democracy and civilian rule were implemented. Furthermore, the accomplishments of the conference went beyond removing Ali Saibou from presidential power. Ali had also served as the head of his political party, the National Movement for Society and Development. Prior to 1991, Ali's party was the only functioning political party in Niger; following the conference, it was temporarily rendered obsolete. Even the majority of military officials that had once been under Ali rejected the party and agreed to support the new plans for civilian rule (Decalo, *Historical Dictionary* 135).

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICAL IMPACTS OF
THE 1991 CONFERENCE

Peter Harris and Ben Reilly authored *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict*, which explains how a national sovereign conference forms and the goals it hopes to achieve. The most important goal of the National Sovereign Conference is to resolve conflict and move a nation away from authoritarian rule toward a pluralistic democracy. The conference in Niger achieved this goal. However, another major ambition of a national sovereign conference is to create a new political culture. Three and a half years following the Nigerien transitional government, the new constitution would meet its end in a *coup d'état*. The ambitions of the conference were short-lived.

Abolishing the Single-Party System

A democratic government focuses on securing the liberties of its people as opposed to controlling them (Sekulow 193). Prior to the National Sovereign Conference, Niger's single-party system had one individual in charge of the military, the presidency, and the only functioning political party. One person ruled the highest levels of government, and the citizens had almost no say in the discourse of Nigerien politics. To elaborate, a single-party system can consolidate and marshal all the powers of government (McGann and Morris 1). In the case of Ali Saibou, the system was marshaled around a single individual.

A single-party system also eliminates a great portion of checks and balances, as the single party functions without a key opponent (McGann and Morris 2). This allows an authoritarian dictator to use the existing party as a façade that follows the dictator's own will or ego (2). In a single-party system, resistance is difficult, as the party and the president are not challenged by any legitimate political faction (4).

The abolishment of the single-party system created a chance for the people to participate in government through the democratic process. A multiparty democracy avoids authoritarian rule and relishes rights such as free speech and expression (Shipler 299). Promoting the expansive power of the executive branch, for instance, a commander in chief or a military dictator, limits the rights of the citizens (302). The power is not checked or balanced.

A temporary halt to the Afro-Marxist principles in Nigerien politics followed the conference. In an Afro-Marxist political system, allegiance to the single party becomes a prerequisite for many influential careers (Shipler 303). To illustrate, it becomes difficult to try and advance one's career in the military or government for someone who speaks out against the only political party or regime. Opposing the party and its leader hinders one's ascension. The multiparty democratic system empowered the citizens, regardless of political ideology.

Lessening the Military Influence

One of the immediate effects on the political scene was the implementation of a multiparty democracy. Another was the reduction in the role of the military and its power to manage the government ministries. After the conference, the military had chosen to

distance itself from the weakened National Movement for Society and Development party, which Ali Saibou had led. Prior to the conference in 1991, the military had managed nine government ministries: Defense, Equipment, the Interior, National Education, Public Health, Sports and Culture, Transportation and Tourism, and Youth (Alou, "Military Politicians" 17). When the transitional government commenced, the number of ministries managed by the military was reduced to zero, and every ministry in the Nigerien government was directed by civilian rule (17). The military stepped back and allowed the decisions of the conference to move forward.

Following the conference's conclusion in November 1991, Prime Minister Aliou Mahamidou, who had worked alongside Ali Saibou, was replaced by Amadou Cheiffou, a participant at the National Sovereign Conference who had represented the Nigerien Citizens Abroad (Clark 96). Much like the conference's president, Andre Salifou, Cheiffou was chosen for this position for his pro-democracy stance and little connection to the previous government. With President Ali Saibou maintaining his executive title and holding almost no actual powers, Amadou Cheiffou became the top political official in Niger. Cheiffou would serve as the prime minister of the transitional government until a democratic election could take place in 1993.

<center>Decentralization</center>

The National Sovereign Conference also marked the first time that the issue of decentralization was examined. This term is defined as public policy conceived or implemented by the state for the purpose of inducing precise effects in some of their activities (Alou, "Decentralization" 1). Members of the conference argued that

individuals in the political system could manipulate the actions of local politics throughout the country, particularly in partially autonomous regions (2).

The activities associated with decentralization are: redistricting areas to the advantage of politicians, and using administrative powers to exclusively benefit the local politicians and administrators. When a political or social group uses democracy to enhance its own wealth and power, it leads to catastrophically bad policy choices (Gore 93). When the government is controlled by a group of elites who are not concerned with the social welfare of the nation's citizens, the rights of the people begin to suffocate under the poor policy decisions. In a democratic government, the people must make the government work (Howitt 1), as opposed to the government creating laws and passing legislation that only benefits individuals in the government.

Members of the conference argued that decentralization hinders the democratic process, for it favors decisions made by a class of political elites as opposed to decisions voted upon by universal suffrage (Alou, "Decentralization" 3). A key effect of the National Sovereign Conference could be found in the new constitution in 1992, which instituted a constitutional obligation that controlled public authorities on decentralization. The new constitution held ministers criminally responsible for conceiving the decentralization policy (3).

Negotiations with the Indigenous Rebels

One of the key factors that led to the National Sovereign Conference was the Tuareg uprising. Following the Tuareg revolt another indigenous group, the Toubou, launched its own uprising (Heath 236), yet no attention was given to the Tuareg or the

Toubou at the conference. No major resolution was established to end the internal uprisings caused by the indigenous groups in Niger, and it was not until 1995 that peace accords were signed between the two major rebel groups, the Coordination for Armed Resistance and the Organization of Armed Resistance (236). The terms of the peace agreements called for reintegrating the Tuareg and the Toubou into Nigerien society, and the uprisings ceased. In 1998, three years after the peace accords, all parties associated with the uprisings were given formal amnesty (236). The 1991 conference did not address the role of the indigenous people, nor did it produce a significant piece of legislation to end the uprisings.

## The Rise and Fall of Mahamane Ousmane

In 1993, Niger was able to host the first democratic election for the presidency in the nation's history. Mahamane Ousmane, a former engineer, a mathematician, and the president of the Mutual Association for Cultural and Artistic Animation, was elected president. On March 27, Ousmane took 56% of the vote and won the general election ("Le Presidence"). Although another individual unassociated with the Ali presidency was elected president in the nation's first ever democratic election, the problems were not resolved. Much like Amadou Cheiffou, Ousmane inherited the task of managing a nation under intense economic deterioration. Niger had gone from a weak transitional government to a weak democratically elected government, and, on January 27, 1996 Ousmane was ousted in a military-backed *coup d'état*.

The first democratically elected president of Niger was only able to serve for three years in office before meeting the same fate as Niger's first president, Diori

Hamani, in 1974. The National Sovereign Conference and the transitional government led to the creation of a democracy that did not complete a full presidential term. Following the 1996 *coup d'état*, the military's influence over the government began to expand. During Ousmane's presidency, the military had retaken control of the ministry of defense, and, following his ousting, the military took over managing the ministries of youth and of sports and culture (Alou, "Decentralization" 18). The dream of a new political culture in Niger could not survive for even five years.

CHAPTER 5

THE ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF THE CONFERENCE

Niger is one of the hottest, poorest, and most thinly populated countries in the world (Fuglestad 1). The majority of Niger's workforce is in subsistence agriculture. Niger's demographics and physical geographical characteristics are practically a recipe for poverty (Sowell, *Wealth* 12), for the nation hosts a sparse population, much of the land is infertile, and the governmental regimes have often been unorganized.

After the 1974 military-backed coup ousted president Diori and installed the regime of Seyni Kountche, new laws (along with a new vision) were implemented. Kountche declared that the land belonged to the tiller of the soil; that is, a plot of land was considered private property for the person cultivating it (Lund 5). After a vague attempt at land reform in 1986, the nation still faced with many ambiguities regarding land ownership. The National Sovereign Conference of 1991 had three main economic effects: the implementation of rural codes relating to land ownership, a decline in the gross domestic product, and a rupture in diplomatic relations with the Chinese government.

Land Reform and Rural Codes

Without proper documentation for private property, an individual could not make an official land purchase. Land was claimed, obtained, and transferred between citizens by informal or traditional methods, such as tribal claims or Seyni Kountche's plan of granting land to its tiller (Lund 5). Also, the government could not collect taxes on the

informal land transactions. Without this ability, the government was missing out on millions of tax dollars (Sowell, *Reader* 78). Collecting taxes on land can also reduce the risk of high inflation (79). In addition, creating the revenue from land taxes puts less pressure on a government to make desperate moves, such as cutting government salaries or raiding the scholarship funds, as Ali Saibou had done. The National Sovereign Conference led to the nation's first successful land reform, which allowed for certified documentation of private property ownership, allowing land to be bought and sold in formal business transactions.

To elaborate, this also highlights legitimacy. Without a democratic constitution, no clear reference point legitimized the state or provided a basis for or incentive to uphold the government's laws (Lund 4). A constitutional democracy motivates people to follow the laws of the nation and to have a greater respect for its authority (4). This relates to the economy, as it eased the processes by which decisions were made within institutions, management, and infrastructure projects. However, it was not until 1995, when a high commission was instituted that would hold ministers accountable for violating the economic reforms from 1991 (Alou, "Decentralization" 3).

Economic Downturn

A healthy economy does not decline, nor does it stand still. For a nation to have a strong and productive economy, it needs to rise and grow consistently and upward (Hess 120). During the transitional government, the economy declined. The gross domestic product for 1990—prior to the conference—grew by 7.1%. In 1991, GDP decreased by 3.3% and continued to wane in 1992, when it decreased an additional 3.3% ("Niger").

Pearl T. Robinson's *The National Conference Phenomenon in Francophone Africa* reports that Niger did not experience a significant increase in consumer income from 1991 to 1998 to deal with the economic effects of the conference on citizens. Following the conference, the economy did not increase at the national or the individual level.

The drop in GDP had two significant implications: it led to the reduction of wealth for most of the population, and, in Niger's case, it also led to a failure to distribute wealth to the poor (Sowell, *Wealth* 8). Following the conference, Niger's transitional government was too weak to make any significant changes regarding wealth distribution.

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The 1992 Suspension of
Niger–China Relations

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During the conference, many new reforms were discussed, but the transitional government had almost no available funds to start essential infrastructure projects. Amadou Cheiffou attempted to solve Niger's financial issues with a bold move on June 19, 1992, by reestablishing relations with Taiwan. Cheiffou made this move so that he could loan the equivalent of 25 million USD from the Taiwanese government. Mainland China did not take long to respond, and on July 30 of the same year, the People's Republic of China suspended diplomatic relations with Niger ("Niger: Political Relations").

The suspension caused Niger to lose one of its biggest financial investors. Prior to 1991, the Chinese government had been a key investor in Niger's agricultural sector, particularly in hydro-agricultural development. China had also financed construction projects, such as the Tera Water Reservoir, which provided a critical amount of water to

the arid nation ("*Relations entre Niger et la Chine*"). After suspending diplomatic

relations, the Chinese government ceased to finance any projects in Niger, and the

potential for major Chinese investment was lost. Even the Tera Water Reservoir stopped

functioning, and it was not until 1996, when relations were reestablished with China, that

it would work again.

Freer Markets and Tax Credits

Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, advocated for freer markets out of

dissatisfaction (Sowell, *Reader* 125). However, with the exception of collecting taxes on

land, Niger's economy following the 1991 conference did not make another strong move

toward economic stratification. The economy remained weak, and as it continued to wane

under the transitional government, Niger's citizens saw few benefits of a freer and more

prosperous economy.

The economic choices discussed at the conference were also limited. Niger lacked

a taxpayer advocate service, and the conference did not discuss tax credits for existing

businesses. Creating an advocate service and a business tax credit system shows that

businesses are treated fairly under the law (Sekulow 74). Without having such institutions

in place, Niger's businesses and markets had almost no support network from the

government.

CHAPTER 6

THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF THE CONFERENCE

*Any law that degrades human*
*personality is unjust.*
*—St. Thomas Aquinas*

The 1990s began with the potential to empower the citizens of Niger, yet,

following the 1991 National Sovereign Conference, few citizens saw a change in their

social circumstances. The 1991 conference had three main social effects: the women's

rights movement, a stagnation in the standard of living, and the failure to address the

issue of modern-day slavery.

The Inclusion of Women in the Conference

Transitioning from military rule to civilian rule and adopting the multiparty

political system were not only steps toward democracy; they also served as a milestone

for women's rights, as women demanded an initial role in the Nigerien political process.

However, although the women's rights movement of the early 1990s showed signs of

progress, poor negotiations slowed the movement. A preparatory committee for the

National Sovereign Conference began forming in November of 1990.

The Prime Minister, Aliou Mahamidou, announced that the preparatory

committee would contain sixty-eight individuals: sixty-seven men and only one woman,

Houa Alio ("Niger Women Campaign for Inclusion"). The announcement triggered an

intense response from Houa and the women of Niger, who could not accept such a low

number. On May 11, 1991, a leading women's rights organization, The Union of Women

in Niger, met with the prime minister, and it was proposed that the number of women involved in the preparatory committee would be raised from one to seven, but the campaign leaders did not accept this offer. Houa Alio vowed to resign from the preparatory committee and to lead the women's rights movement ("Niger Women Campaign for Inclusion").

What followed was the nation's first major female-led protest. On May 13, two days following the prime minister's meeting with the Union of Women in Niger, more than two thousand women took to the streets of Niamey to protest the low numbers of Nigerien women involved in the conference's preparatory committee. The goals of the protest were to obtain equal representation in Nigerien politics and the National Sovereign Conference ("Niger Women Campaign for Inclusion"). After intense negotiations, both sides agreed that five female participants would participate in the preparatory committee. The women's rights movement put forth enormous effort, but if the Union of Women in Niger had accepted Aliou Mahamidou's original offer, seven women would have been involved in the preparatory committee instead of five.

The Standard of Living

Following the conference, Nigeriens had great hope for an increased standard of living. The people believed that the arbitrary rule of Ali Saibou's single-party political system had been eliminated, and the country's economy, political sphere, and social standing would excel. Under arbitrary rule, people are apt to become lethargic (Nkrumah 50). Without a deep respect for the government, the constitution, and the laws of the land, it is difficult to keep order, for the people tend to view the law as an act of oppression

enforced upon them by a dictator. To improve this situation, the participants at the conference envisioned a plan where all the citizens of the country would (hopefully) submit to the new constitution in a disciplined manner (50) because representatives who were primarily unassociated with the previous regime developed it through a more democratic process. Participants anticipated that the new constitution would contribute to eroding the lethargy throughout the country and apathy toward the law. The results appear to have been less than desirable.

The National Sovereign Conference concluded on November 3, 1991, and the remainder of the decade showed no significant change in the nation's overall standard of living. Four factors hindered the standard of living throughout the 1990s: school enrollment, the infant mortality rate, child malnutrition, and a lack of medical coverage for the majority of the population. The school enrollment rate remained at 29 percent. One in four infants died before the age of five. One in six was underweight from malnutrition, and 78 percent of the population remained without healthcare ("Third United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries").

Modern-Day Slavery

Despite being illegal since Niger's independence in 1960, slavery has continued to exist in the country. Politicians remained silent on the issue (Galy 3). Slavery is a factor that has serious political, social, and economic impacts on a state, for it can be viewed as leading not only to human rights violations but also to economic disparity (Sowell, *Wealth* 5). The modern form of the barbaric custom touches a wide spectrum of human rights issues. It includes forcing individuals into hard labor without pay, as well as

punishments, such as binding workers together, denying them food, and verbal abuse (Galy 91). It was not until May 15, 1991 that Niger's first domestic nongovernmental organization, Timidria, was formed to tackle the issues of slavery. The organization was established on May 15, 1991, under the leadership of Ilguis Weila (Galy 75). Neither Weila nor Timidria had a representing member at the National Sovereign Conference, and the priority for almost all other nongovernmental organizations was to establish democracy and a new constitution (57). It was not until Timidria held its first congress in May 1992 that an organized attempt was made to confront the issue of modern-day slavery in Niger (75).

In 1999, Niger's constitution was revised again and included a direct change to municipal law to target modern-day slavery (Galy 102). The 1999 constitution detailed specific instances that would constitute the crime of slavery, ranging from forcing women into marriage to any form of total submission to a master. If found guilty of crimes related to slavery, an individual could face the death penalty (102). The 1991 National Sovereign Conference failed to address slavery. It was eight years later, through the work of Timidria, that one of Niger's most serious human rights crimes received national attention and was corrected.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The 1991 National Sovereign Conference achieved three of its primary political

goals: implementing a multiparty democracy, instituting a new constitution, and bringing

the nation under civilian rule with a transitional government, rather than military rule. In

addition to these three major accomplishments, the implementation of rural codes also

allowed for a more organized land-management system. Following the conference, land

ownership was well documented, and taxes could be collected on the sale of property.

Another credible achievement was addressing decentralization, and the new constitution

contained specific lines condemning the practice, which was only beneficial to certain

political elites.

The people of Niger needed a change in government. The Afro-Marxist

dictatorship limited human liberty. Authoritarian rule benefited the dictator and not

Niger's citizens. The participants of the conference appeared aware of that, and the

installation of a multiparty democratic system was designed to empower the citizens and

to give the people a vote. Perhaps the attempt to create a new government by the people

and for the people is a noteworthy accomplishment itself. However, the plan's execution

did not translate to prosperity.

Perhaps it is easy to label Ali Saibou as a villain or a tyrant; however, the

presidents before him (Diori and Kountche) had also run dictatorial regimes. In many

ways, Ali had continued the way of the past, but he went to larger lengths than Diori and

Kountche, for he had been the first individual to control the presidency, the military, and the only functioning party. Moreover, to support his weak regime, he took drastic measures, such as canceling pensions and scholarships. The administration in Niger made major changes to the economic, political, and social spheres.

At the conference, participants discussed economic reforms, but they were not put into action due to fiscal weakness, which resulted partially from the rupture in Chinese relations, which, in turn, halted the development of infrastructure projects. For the already impoverished nation, the economy weakened during the transitional government, the standard of living did not improve, and consumer income did not change significantly. Conference participants had become very good at talking about solutions, but implementing the new plans was easier said than done.

Furthermore, the conference's failure to address the situation of modern-day slavery left thousands vulnerable and showed negligence on a critical issue. Slavery should be treated as a crime, for it has no place in any nation in the world. More could have been done at the conference. At the very least, it could have been addressed as a critical issue and brought to the discussion table. Instead, they chose to ignore the issue.

The conference did not lead to the creation of a new political culture, as the new constitution and government following the conference lasted fewer than five years and was disposed of in a military-backed coup. Despite certain vital political accomplishments, the Nigerien National Sovereign Conference of 1991 was an economic and social failure. Proposing economic reforms was not enough, for the majority of the propositions at the conference were not implemented because of governmental weakness.

Civilian rule and democracy were important for the Nigerien people, but with a continuously weak economy and poor social conditions for many, the efforts of the National Sovereign Conference were insufficient.

Furthermore, the slow development of peace accords between the Nigerien government and the indigenous groups was also insufficient. The Tuareg uprising was a principle factor, which led to President Ali to allow the National Sovereign Conference to take place, yet no peace agreement was achieved during the conference. It is commendable that student delegates were allowed to participate in the process as a response to the bloody student protest, but the issue regarding the indigenous uprising was not managed effectively.

In 1991, the citizens of Niger attempted to change their nation's history. Their efforts began a long and rough journey into the transition from a military-backed dictatorship to a multiparty democracy. Regardless of the outcome, it was ambitious to convene a conference and try to bring more freedom and opportunity to the people of the largest nation in West Africa. Although the results were less than perfect, the conference delegates made a valiant effort. Perhaps the 1991 Nigerien National Sovereign Conference can be viewed as the first step forward for a nation seeking democracy, empowerment, and change.

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