Well-Oiled Protest: Adding Fuel to Political Conflicts in Niger

Jannik Schritt

Abstract: The article focuses on disputes and protests around the inauguration of Niger's first oil refinery in late 2011. Drawing on theory of the resource curse and the literature on African politics and the state, it analyzes the transformative potential of oil in Nigerien politics and society, showing how oil was received in an already well-structured political arena, sparking political conflicts rather than conflicts about oil. With the start of oil production adding fuel to these conflicts, it argues that in oil's immediate presence, historically sedimented politics were played out through the idiom of oil, through which not only is oil-age Niger made a social and political reality, but political difference is also reconstructed, and patterns of domination are reinforced.

Résumé: Cet article se penche sur les conflits et les protestations à propos de l'inauguration de la première raffinerie de pétrole du Niger à la fin de 2011. Il s'inspire de la théorie de la malédiction des ressources et de la littérature sur la politique et l'état en Afrique et analyse ainsi le potentiel de transformation généré par le pétrole dans la politique et la société nigérienne, montrant comment le pétrole a été accueilli sur une scène politique déjà bien structurée et engendrant avant tout des conflits politiques plutôt que des conflits à propos du pétrole. Avec le début de la production pétrolière qui a ajouté du carburant à ces conflits, nous faisons valoir qu'avec la proximité directe du pétrole, des politiques historiquement sédimentées se sont réglées à travers l'idiome du pétrole. Non seulement le Niger de l'ère du pétrole devient une réalité sociale et politique définie à travers cet idiome, mais la différence politique est également reconstruite, et les schémas de domination sont renforcés.

Resumo: Este artigo trata das disputas e dos protestos em torno da abertura da primeira refinaria de petróleo do Níger, no final de 2011. Partindo da teoria da

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maldição deste recurso natural e da literatura sobre a política e o Estado africanos, analisa-se o potencial do petróleo enquanto fator de transformação política e social do Níger; tendo o petróleo sido recebido num cenário político que já se encontrava bem estruturado, os conflitos que então se geraram foram mais de caráter político do que especificamente sobre o petróleo. Segundo o autor, o arranque da produção de petróleo exacerbou estes conflitos políticos e, perante a disponibilidade imediata de petróleo, a política – historicamente sedimentada – passou a ser discutida no idioma do petróleo. Através deste idioma, ergueu-se no Níger a realidade social e política da era do petróleo, mas também se reconstruiu a divergência política e se reforçaram os padrões de dominação.

Keywords: Oil; African state; politics; resource curse; Niger

Introduction

On November 28, 2011, Niger's first oil refinery was inaugurated near Bakin Birgi, fifty kilometers north of Zinder, the second largest city, situated in the southeast of the country. What had been prepared as a huge celebration to usher in a new era of Nigerian oil production—the oil-age—turned out to be a highly contested event. Diverse political actors in Zinder, such as the regional and municipal councilors, government representatives, opposition politicians, businessmen, civil society activists, and youths, engaged in talking oil politics, by releasing press statements via private radio stations, organizing radio debates, and texting chain messages via mobile phones. Two weeks before the refinery's inauguration, the government had fixed the new official Nigerien fuel price at FCFA579 per liter (USD1.23), well above the FCFA250 per liter (USD0.51) maximum that Zinder's political and social actors were demanding.[1] Although the new price was lower than the former fuel price of FCFA670 (USD1.37), a new surge of mass messages spread rapidly among the population, especially the youth of Zinder. These short messages in Hausa and French were sent initially from unregistered SIM cards and called on the population to resist and fight the government, organizing themselves to boycott the presidential arrival for the inauguration ceremony. With new president Mahamadou Issoufou (since 2011) in Zinder to mark the occasion, youths set alight tires as street barricades and clashed with the police. In the phone messages and talk-back shows on local radio that followed, the riots were glorified as resistance against Issoufou and western Nigerian domination, and as a profession of faith in the former government under Mamadou Tandja (1999–2010), who had been ousted in a military coup the year before. Equally, the arrest of a rich businessman, civil society activist, and politician in Zinder named Dan Dubai some days before the refinery's inauguration assumed major importance in these messages.[2] Presentations of Dubai increasingly portrayed him as a "folk hero" who dared to speak the truth in the name of the poor.

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On the day of Dan Dubai's court trial, the short messages called on the population to lend support to his case. The hearing was followed by three days of disorder in which youths fought with security forces in the streets, burned down a police station, destroyed traffic lights, and robbed and burned a bank. The short messages added fuel to the fire by disseminating misinformation such as, "100 police cars are on their way from Niamey to Zinder to massacre the Zinderois." Two people died in these riots, and several more were injured. The government responded with the temporary shutdown of the entire SMS network in Zinder and used the state-owned media station Office du Radiodiffusion Télévision du Niger (ORTN) to announce initial calming measures: the dismissal of executive police officers, a visit of Prime Minister Birgi Rafini to Zinder, and the convening of a commission to uncover the masterminds of the riots. On December 8, Prime Minister Rafini met with the sultan, the governor, high religious authorities, and representatives of teachers, parents, and students. Directly after the meeting, they appealed publicly for an end to the violence and protests. Following the appeal, the situation in Zinder remained calm, albeit tense. Afterwards, it became publicly known that the prime minister had distributed money to the different representatives present at the meeting to defuse the situation.[3]

This article focuses on Zinder's "local political arena" (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998), which was formed around the time of the inauguration. Understood as a social space constituted by different strategic groups that contest, cooperate, and negotiate with each other around a specific issue (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 1998), this political arena is analyzed to examine how the celebration turned first into contestation and violence and then temporarily back to social peace. The focus is on three interrelated aspects of politics: First, building on Goffman's (1959) notion of "frontstage" and "backstage," the frontstage narratives and the backstage political agendas of the various actors are traced in order to connect public politics surrounding oil with the political actors' hidden projects.

Second, the ordering technologies such as radios, mobile phones, tires, fuel, stones, and money through which the disputes and protests moved are examined. Such a focus is important to enable an analysis of how access to the media and other ordering technologies is a critical condition for participation in public politics, and how privileged access to these technologies is a means of domination (van Dijk 1996). Socioeconomic inequalities thereby inhibit groups such as dispossessed workers, poor youths, or women from gaining significant access to public politics in the first place (Fraser 1990).

Third, the article focuses on the historical sedimentation of colonial and postcolonial practices and experiences into a fragmented political and socio-cultural order (Bierschenk 2014). Such a historical and processual perspective on the emergence and logic of the political game facilitates an understanding of the structural dynamics and patterns of domination in Nigerien politics and society as factors in the emergence

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of the protests around oil production. Building on this interrelated analysis, this study argues that, rather than a one-sided focus on conflicts over access to the oil rent as in the resource curse framework, the conflicts in oil-age Niger were inherently of a political nature. The addition of oil production simply added fuel to pre-existing conflicts that were then expressed through the idiom of oil, rather than completely restructuring politics and society in Niger.

Such a multi-pronged analysis of the protests that unfolded around the refinery's opening necessitated an extended case study in the tradition of the Manchester School (Burawoy 1998). In-depth ethnographic material was collected over thirteen months of fieldwork from 2011 to 2014 by conducting participant observation in the buildup to, during, and in the aftermath of the oil refinery's inauguration ceremony, and the events were then analyzed in the larger historical and social contexts. This involved participation in a civil society committee called Comité Regional des Associations et Syndicats de la Région de Zinder (CRAS), in youth groupings called *fada*, and in evening meetings of political opponents, especially Dan Dubai's Mouvement Populaire pour la Pérennisation des Actions du Développement (MPPAD).[4]

To begin, this study presents two competing explanations of the protests, namely resource curse theory and (African) politics and the state. Next, an examination of the context of oil-age Niger is conducted, to highlight the historical and socio-political conditions in which the opening ceremony was held, followed by an analysis of the political game as it was played in the town of Zinder before, during, and after the oil refinery's inauguration in late 2011. Finally, the case study is discussed in the light of these two competing narratives.

Resource Curse vs. African Politics

With numerous studies since the 1990s delivering counterintuitive empirical findings, claiming that many—but not all—oil states were worse off after years of oil production, the dominant analytical model in economics and political science has been the thesis of the "resource curse" (Auty 1993). Over the last two decades, resource curse theorists have claimed that a number of causal relations between resource wealth and economic, social, and political transformations exist. Those of importance for this article include increased conflict (Humphreys 2005), corruption (Leite & Weidmann 1999), and gender discrimination (Ross 2008).

Although not uncontested, the causal mechanisms function roughly as follows (Yates 1996): External oil revenues establish a "rentier mentality" or a "something for nothing" reward system in which the only game left in town is the elites' greed to pocket as much of the oil rent as possible. The rentier mentality leads to corruption, institutional inefficiency, and an overall decline in state legitimacy. Moreover, traded in U.S. dollars, petroleum wealth relaxes the foreign exchange rate, thereby making

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export-oriented agriculture and manufacturing internationally less competitive and thus unprofitable—a mechanism referred to as Dutch Disease. This mechanism triggers underemployment (especially of women, who often occupy jobs in the declining manufacturing sector), poverty, rising (gender) inequality, and increased grievances, which together with greed, corruption, and institutional deficiency lead to increased conflicts.

By contrast, the literature on African politics and the state seems to agree, despite its conceptual differences, that many factors that the resource curse literature identifies as transformations due to oil production—corruption, institutional deficiency, violent conflict, (gender) inequality—are rather general features of politics in Africa (Médard 1982; Bayart 1989; Chabal & Daloz 1999). These authors share an understanding of African politics as characterized by a plurality of norms—private and public, formal and informal—that coexist alongside one another. Pointing to the heterogeneity, fragmentation, and multiple administrative layers within African states, anthropologists proposed to look at the concrete practices of state institutions, politicians, and bureaucrats, and how their practices of "doing the state" are interwoven with representations of "seeing the state" (Bierschenk & Olivier de Sardan 2014).

In exploring these different perspectives as possible explanations for the conflicts around the refinery's opening, this study attempts to decode the logics of the political game in Niger and the role oil has played in this game. Before it elaborates on and contextualizes the actors' public narratives of "seeing the state" and their (hidden) practices of "doing the state," it traces the event of the inauguration back in time to account for the historical sedimentation of Nigerien politics and society.

From Uranium- to Oil-age Niger

In its desire for Niger's uranium, France forcefully intervened in the country's independence process in the late 1950s, thereby laying the foundation for the postcolonial autocratic regimes which followed and remained in place until the democratic transition in the early 1990s (van Walraven 2009). With the Hausa Damagaram sultanate, which predated French colonization in the east of contemporary Niger, having violently resisted the French, Zinder served as the first capital of Niger Military Territory after its creation by France in 1911 for only a short time, with this status being transferred then to Niamey, situated in the west of the country, in 1926 (Fuglestad 1983:49–66). France systematically favored western Nigerien belonging and Zarma people with respect to higher education, the administration, and the army, and thus this western cohort constituted the political elite of the country until the National Conference and the transition to democracy in 1990 (Ibrahim 1994).

In post-colonial Niger, political conflicts have always gone hand in hand with the political economy of the country (Robinson 1991). The

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period under Diori (1960–1974), the first Nigerien president, largely coincided with the phase of export-oriented groundnut production. The boom in groundnut sales in the early 1960s gave Diori the financial capital to build clientelist networks and to consolidate his position within the party through the appropriation and distribution of state revenues among the political class—a process that the resource curse theory, however, considers to be a specific characteristic of an economic rent, and therefore not an attribute of productive activities such as crop farming. From 1968 onwards, shrinking revenues from groundnut production led to the disintegration of Diori's clientelist base, and internal conflicts within his party, the Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN), began to emerge. The impossibility of adhering to the high costs of clientelism, exacerbated by the drought of 1973, led to Diori's being overthrown in a military coup by Lieutenant-Colonel Seyni Kountché, who ruled the country as military head of state until his death in 1987.

The beginning of uranium mining in Niger in 1971 brought a radical change in the country's political economy. The boom in uranium exports since 1974/75 led to the decline of Nigerien groundnut production—the Dutch Disease phenomenon. In the following years, uranium mining generated previously-unexpected financial resources for the Nigerien government. As Diori had done with the groundnut revenues, President Kountché also redistributed the uranium revenues as a means to remain in power. He established a "development society" based on uranium revenues and announced a series of ambitious development goals. The beneficiaries of Kountché's development programs were primarily civil servants, administrative chiefs, wage earners, and traders—groups which would have to be appeased when the revenue from uranium exports suddenly collapsed in the 1980s (Gervais 1997).

In the context of shrinking uranium revenues, external pressures from the IMF and the World Bank at the time of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), and internal pressures from student and labor unions, the Nigerien military regime of General Ali Saibou, who took over after Kountché's death in 1987, had to give way in 1990 to a National Conference and the introduction of a multi-party system. The introduction of a multi-party system changed the rules of the game for political competition, sponsorship of political parties by rich businessmen, civil society activism, and media pluralism. A number of new political parties emerged, whereby the political party Convention Démocratique et Sociale (CDS-Rahama) was established in Zinder in the early 1990s as an eastern Nigerien and Hausa ethnic response to historical western Nigerien and Zarma dominance (Lund 2001); it is in Zinder that the party still has its electoral stronghold. With the foundation of several new political parties and the beginning of political competition, repetitive breakdowns of the institutional order and a decade of experimentation and unstable democracy emerged in Niger (Villalón & Idrissa 2005). Multi-party politics thereby triggered the emergence of a merchant class in Nigerien politics, with major traders and merchants holding

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over 80 percent of the seats in the National Assembly by 2010 (Maccatory et al. 2010:351; Villalón & Idrissa 2005:45). Moreover, since their legitimization as a counter-power to the state in the National Conference, civil society has had an ambiguous role in the regime changes of Niger, contributing to both autocratic and democratic breakdowns of power (Elischer 2013). Finally, with the active support of private media and in a situation of growing unemployment after the implementation of SAP, fada emerged in the urban centers and increased the presence of youth in public spheres (Lund 2001; Göpfert 2012; Masquelier 2013). It was in this context that the oil project started in 2008 and was put to use in political disputes.

In 2008, the Nigerien government under President Mamadou Tandja signed a production-sharing agreement with China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) which agreed on the construction of a joint-venture oil refinery in the Zinder region.[5] At the oil refinery's foundation stone ceremony in Zinder in late 2008, the political entourage of Tandja from the political party Mouvement National pour une Société de Développement (MNSD-Nassara) launched a political campaign called *Tazarce* (Hausa for "prolongation" or "continuity") to change the constitution in order to allow for his third term re-election (Baudais & Chauzal 2011). Here, youths in particular were mobilized to welcome Tandja with Tazarce t-shirts and slogans. This political mobilization built on the justification that Tandja had opted for Zinder as the site of the oil refinery, a region which had always felt marginalized by and dissatisfied with national politics in the capital Niamey. In response to colonial and postcolonial politics, Zinder had even developed a "rebellious Zinderois identity" (Danda 2004).

As a reaction to Tazarce, the political elite in Niger firmly united against this attempt to centralize power and called on the international community for sanctions against Tandja's regime. On February 18, 2010, in a tense political situation resulting from international sanctions enacted against Niger and protests of the political opposition, Tandja was overthrown by a military coup led by Commander Salou Djibo. This was well before the first barrel of oil had been produced. Djibo claimed that his aim was to turn Niger into an example of democracy and good governance. Within one year of his reign Djibo had organized new elections that saw the former political opposition parties, the Parti Nigerien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (PNDS-Tarayya) and the Mouvement Démocratique Nigérien pour une Fédération Africaine-Lumana Africa (MODEN-FA Lumana) come to power in March 2011, in the person of Mahamadou Issoufou from PNDS-Tarayya. When newly elected President Issoufou came to Zinder to hold the oil refinery's inauguration ceremony in late 2011, in the electoral stronghold of what was now the political opposition (CDS-Rahama and MNSD-Nassara), youths staged a violent protest against his arrival. In contrast to the country's uranium production which, due to its particular colonial and post-colonial history, most of Niger's civil society and the wider population discursively frame as "neocolonialism" by Areva/France, the blame of the coming oil production was not so much put on the CNPC/China but on the incumbent

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Issoufou government (Schritt 2016). The oil refinery's opening ceremony in Zinder on November 28, 2011, thus became the theater in which these pre-existing political conflicts were played out.

This study will now analyze the actors' frontstage oil talk and their backstage practices and projects before, during, and after the refinery's opening. Moreover, it will depict the ordering technologies through which their public involvement moved to highlight the socio-economic inequalities that prevented parts of the population from articulating a public voice in the first place.

Zinder's Regional and Municipal Councilors

On October 24, 2011, one month before the refinery's opening, the regional and municipal councilors—most of them from the political parties CDS-Rahama and MNSD-Nassara that were forming new opposition at the national level but that in Zinder still had the political majority—released a press statement concerning the potential risks of a social explosion due to the oil refinery's imminent inauguration, which was set for November 28, 2011.[6] Shortly before this press release, the government had announced the nominations of the nine directors of the Societé de la Raffinerie à Zinder (SORAZ), none of whom originated from the Zinder region. With the impending recruitment of more than three hundred positions at SORAZ, the regional and municipal councilors saw the social equilibrium of Zinder as being in danger. According to them, high youth unemployment had already contributed to the creation of male-dominated youth gangs called *palais*, which were well known for committing crimes in Zinder. If western Nigerien belonging and Zarma ethnicity were favored in the hiring process, they predicted social unrest would ensue. Thus, they installed a regional committee to observe the hiring process.

The link between the nomination of directors at SORAZ and youth gangs seems far-fetched. The distribution of directorial positions is a matter of political affiliation. Claiming these posts for Zinderois means that it is first of all the locally-elected representatives from within the government majority who will be rewarded with these positions. Indeed, not long after the press statement, the first nominations were canceled and the directorial positions newly redistributed. Three of the nine posts were distributed to persons originating from the Diffa region (the site of oil extraction) and another three were assigned to persons originating from the Zinder region who were part of the government majority.

Moreover, at the time of the press release, the construction phase of the oil refinery was nearly completed and the refinery ready for inauguration. In the operational phase of oil production, unskilled workers are no longer needed. They had been heavily recruited as laborers in the construction phase, but by the time of the press release they were already experiencing mass layoffs. Instead of unskilled workers, only about three hundred highly qualified young university graduates in the fields of petro-chemistry and mechanics are needed for maintenance, surveillance, and refining in the

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operational phase. Although there are unemployed young university graduates in Zinder, they are not the well-known criminals organized in the palais that dominate the most socially and economically marginalized city quarters. The regional committee supervising the hiring process in order to guarantee the recruitment of Zinderois did not intend to include the youth gangs. Education, especially university education, in Niger is still dominated by the country's elite. Thus, the supervisory committee that was installed ended up first of all guaranteeing the regional and municipal councilors' own children and extended family members access to job opportunities at SORAZ. Indeed, rumor in Zinder claimed that their children were the first to occupy the three hundred highly qualified positions at SORAZ.

As shown by this example, the primary import of youth in public political disputes is first of all discursive, as a "generation at risk" due to "the correlation between young men and violence" (Masquelier 2010:236). The political representation of unemployed youth in press statements, radio debates, and TV shows is an ideological tool that masks individual gains as collective injury or political projects for the common good and serves to legitimate the political positions of the locally elected representatives. Their public narratives on the frontstage as speaking in the interest of Zinder region masked backstage projects to access much sought-after positions in the oil industry.

Dan Dubai and the MPPAD

On November 2, 2011, about three and a half weeks before the refinery's inauguration, the civil society association MPPAD followed the regional and municipal councilors by issuing a declaration in Zinder. In this declaration, the MPPAD celebrated former President Tandja as the father of oil production in Niger whose "pragmatism," "patriotism," and "nationalism" had allowed Niger to become an oil producer. The civil society association then cited negative effects of the oil industry such as waste deposits and pollution of water and air. They (rightly) anticipated or even exaggerated the risk of fire and disturbances in citing the absence of fire security and fire brigades. They pointed to poor living and working conditions for oil workers. They accused the newly-elected government authorities of breaking their promise to supply health infrastructures, such as a hospital, and of bad governance, political patronage, and marginalizing the region of Zinder with respect to possible oil benefits. The MPPAD equally harshly rejected the first nominations of positions of responsibility at SORAZ that it judged "sectarian," "ethnic," and "politically motivated," and asked the minister of oil to recall them. Finally, their declaration called upon the population to resist and fight against the government.

The president of the MPPAD is Dan Dubai—a wealthy businessman who earned his money as a broker in the Dubai oil business. He claims to be of eastern Nigerien belonging and Kanuri ethnicity. After living most of his life outside Niger, mostly in Dubai, he returned to Niger in 2007, when the Nigerien government under Tandja was looking for new commercial partners

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in oil exploration and production, that is, after ESSO and PETRONAS had abandoned the Agadem oil block in 2006 but before the Nigerien government under Tandja reached a production-sharing agreement with CNPC in 2008. Dan Dubai is regarded in Niger as the founding father of Tazarce. At the oil refinery's foundation stone ceremony on October 27, 2008, Dan Dubai had mobilized masses of the rural and urban population of Zinder region to give Tandja a rapturous reception upon his arrival in Zinder, which marked the launch of Tazarce. It was during this campaign that Dan Dubai founded the civil society association MPPAD, in order to demand, in the name of the Nigerien population, for Tandja to remain in office, in order to complete "the great construction sites" (especially the oil project) that he had initiated. He also personally affiliated himself with the MNSD-Nassara, the political party of Tandja.

Understanding the logic of Nigerien multi-party politics since the early 1990s, in which wealthy businessmen invest in political candidates and are reimbursed afterwards with posts or public markets (Olivier de Sardan 2017), it seems evident that Dan Dubai would have been rewarded after the successful constitutional change of 2009 with either a foothold in the Nigerien oil business or a position in the Nigerien government, had Tandja not been removed from office only some months later, in 2010, in a military coup led by Commander Djibo. After Djibo organized new elections in 2011 that saw former opposition leader Issoufou come to power, Dan Dubai became a member of the political opposition. Wealthy businessmen who supported Issoufou's electoral campaign, on the other hand, had by 2011–12 formed an oligopoly in the Nigerien oil and transport business.

In sum, Dan Dubai and his MPPAD used his financial power and all kinds of media and other organizing technologies to re-engage in the public political game after the military coup left him empty-handed. The MPPAD organized youth in Zinder in so-called *comités de défense* and sent short messages to arrange the time and place of meetings, calling on the population to incite social unrest. Frontstage, the proliferation of private radio broadcasting and mobile phone texting thus offered new means of public representation in Niger, leading to the emergence of new forms of charismatic authority. Dan Dubai successfully used radio and texting to present himself as a folk hero daring to speak truth in the name of the poor. Backstage, however, he pursued ambitious political and economic goals, not only drawing discursively on the youth but also making a concerted effort to organize and influence them. His case shows that the production of disorder, which seemed at first place to be "politics from below," was also "politics from above," in that the text messages were designed by influential political players to mobilize the population against the government.

CRAS and a Hybrid Civil Society

On October 16, 2011, about two weeks before the opening ceremony, a group of activists from civil society associations and labor unions met to form a new

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civil society structure. The intent was to regroup as many civil society associations and labor unions as possible under a single umbrella organization that they later called CRAS. However, CRAS did not include all of the important civil society associations in Zinder, with several others working closely with the government or trying to stay neutral. These included highly significant associations such as the Réseau des Organisations pour la Transparence et l'Analyse Budgétaire (ROTAB), a member of the international transparency network Publish What You Pay (PWYP); the Groupe de Réflexion et d'Action sur les industries Extractives (GREN), a member of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and the largest human rights organization in Niger, the Association Nigérienne de Défense des Droits de l'Homme (ANDDH), which all depended on international donors and therefore pursued a rather conspicuous agenda invoking their "political neutrality."[7]

On my way to the kick-off meeting, I met a man who was a well-known civil society activist, unionist, and local representative of ROTAB in Zinder, just in front of the meeting place. Earlier in the morning of the same day, he had come to my house to grant me an interview about his vision of the role of Niger's civil society in the upcoming oil future of the country. There, he explained that the task of Niger's civil society should be the sensitization of the population, especially of the violence-prone youth and the expropriated rural population, in close cooperation with the government authorities, to guarantee social peace and stability and to turn the oil exploitation into a blessing. In this interview he repeatedly stressed the good relationship between civil society and government authorities and noted that he was heavily involved in several governmental committees, such as the organizational committee for the oil refinery's inauguration ceremony, and was therefore always around at the governorate. Yet later that day, when I asked him if he would participate in the kick-off meeting, he sharply retorted: "These are the people of Tazarce. We don't do politics. We are not involved. In any case!"

During the meeting, I realized that the committee members of CRAS were taking exactly the opposite position from that of the activist I had encountered at the entrance. Although oil production had not yet begun, they were already listing all the negative associations and images of oil production such as environmental pollution, conflicts, failure of infrastructural projects, and poor social development in terms of access to health services, water, and education. Moreover, they demanded that article 146 of the Nigerien oil law that prescribed that the central state had to redistribute 15 percent of the revenues from oil production to the *communes* of the affected *région* for local development were to be alloted not only to Diffa region but to Zinder region as well. Whereas the activist at the entrance had emphasized his good relationship with the government authorities, CRAS as a body strongly blamed the government for being corrupt and incompetent. Finally, they claimed that they should become members of regional government committees such as the committee to supervise the hiring process of oil workers that had been installed by the regional and municipal councilors, the committee to determine the future fuel price that had been set up in Niamey by

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the government, or the organizational committee for the refinery's inauguration: precisely some of the positions the other activist claimed to occupy. Furthermore, whereas the activist at the entrance had claimed to speak in the name of the whole of civil society, the absence of some civil society associations at the meeting place was commented on by one attendee with the statement that they are "unjust people who betrayed the civil society of Zinder." The stated objective of CRAS was to counteract what they saw as infiltration and sabotage of civil society by the state. They blamed the civil society activists who were members of governmental committees for only "eating, drinking, applauding and dispersing afterwards" and thus giving their blessing to everything the government proposed. CRAS instead portrayed themselves as defending the interests of the Zinder region against the national government and their regional representatives, such as the governor, and against particular civil society associations such as ROTAB, GREN, and ANDDH.

Here it is important to note that Tazarce caused a division of Niger's civil society into supporters of Tazarce and opponents who joined the political opposition in their international call for democracy. After democratization had spurred a vibrant civil society movement "against the high cost of living" in Niger in 2005 (Tidjani Alou 2007), Tandja made a concerted effort to influence their leaders (Abdoul Azizou 2010). He rewarded his supporters with political posts in governmental committees or with envelopes of money. When Tandja was overthrown by the military coup and the former opposition came to power, those civil society associations, from within governmental bodies, that had supported Tazarce were removed and replaced by civil society associations that were formerly fighting hand in hand with new President Issoufou against Tazarce. CRAS was left empty-handed after the military coup in 2010 and therefore used the opportunity of regional and national attention that surrounded the oil refinery's inauguration to regroup, in order to restore the political visibility they had lost and to press for a renewed incorporation into the government with the resulting receipt of distributed envelopes.

When the prime minister came to Zinder after the riots, the members of CRAS were disappointed that they had not been invited to the meeting and did not receive any envelopes. Thus, in the following months, CRAS continued to sharply criticize the government. In March 2012 CRAS tried to organize a mass demonstration. Shortly before the demonstration took place, two of the organization's most influential members claimed that they had received information that some opposition politicians planned to hijack the demonstration by distributing tires and fuel to youth gangs. Nevertheless, one member of CRAS claimed to have proof that those members of CRAS who argued against the demonstration had been bribed by a rich businessman on behalf of the governor to stop the demonstration. Here it is important to note that the accusations did not aim at the members' taking of money, but at its non-redistribution among all members of CRAS. In accusing the leading activists, one of the members of CRAS said that when Tandja distributed envelopes for supporting Tazarce, he equally

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shared the money among all of the participating activists. With CRAS ceasing to function after these accusations, the bribery case shows both the "moral economy of corruption" (Olivier de Sardan 1999), that demands the redistribution of spoils within social networks, and the historically sedimented socio-political order, which through long-term experiences of civil society leaders even turns bribery and corruption into anticipated spoils of the political game.[8]

In sum, CRAS emerged and disappeared as a result of Niger's becoming an oil producer, by re-grouping established civil society activists who were left unrewarded after the regime change from Tandja to Issoufou. Frontstage, CRAS made use of press statements, radio debates, and pamphlets to present itself as a collective to defend the interests of Zinder region. Backstage, at least the more influential and experienced members sought ways to get access to the benefits of formal and informal political networks.

Urban Youth

The situation of urban youths in Niger is characterized by a lack of formal employment, economic production, or social stability. With democratization in the 1990s that newly allowed for public assemblies at night, and in a context of unemployment and "waiting" (Masquelier 2013), youth not only gained public presence but also became a preoccupation in politics. One the one hand, vigilante groups called *yan banga* emerged after the retreat of the police state under Kountché (1974–1987) had resulted in the rise of petty crime. They were mobilized by merchants and equipped by the police to protect against criminals (Lund 2001:859–62; Göpfert 2012:61–63).[9] On the other hand, youth established neighborhood groups around the preparation of tea—the fada. Some of these tea-circles recently turned into youth gangs—the palais—that are additionally involved in drug consumption, violence, and girls after dark (Souley 2012).[10] Those youths who make a living are mostly motorcycle taxi drivers called *kabou kabou* or small street fuel vendors. During the oil refinery's construction phase they were also heavily recruited as laborers, but shortly before the refinery's opening they were laid off in large numbers.

The urban youth have little access to Niger's radio landscape, which restricts their ability to participate in the public political game. Although private radio stations allow for the release of press statements or the organization of radio debates for political actors, the youth are not included in this kind of broadcasting format. Their voice on the radio is limited to phone-in shows. The most popular and infamous talk-back radio program among the youth in Zinder is "planète reggae." This radio program of private radio station Radio Shukurah is broadcast once a week on Fridays from 23:00 p.m—24:00 p.m. In between reggae songs, the youth call in to talk about all sorts of life issues in Zinder, including politics. In the broadcast of December 9, 2011, the first program after the riots, youths called in to blame the political authorities and their bad governance for the happenings in Zinder. Others even called for violence and threatened the political

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authorities that they would "make Boko Haram." This example shows that the youth are also aware of their political representation as a social threat and appropriate this rhetoric to gain political leverage.

Displeased by the youths' statements on the radio show "planète reggae," a rich businessman of Zinder from within the governmental clientelist network approached a member of CRAS, who was also a friend of the radio moderator for "planète reggae," to persuade him to stop broadcasting youth statements publicly. This member of CRAS told me that he took the envelope of FCFA20,000 (USD41) but did not talk to his friend the moderator, because, being also a youth leader himself, he wanted the youth to have at least a voice. "Planète reggae" thus continued to broadcast as before.

Having been at the forefront of the riots in December 2011, the youth of Zinder gained political leverage and attracted the attention of government policymakers. The riots thus endowed the rebellious youth with new instruments of power in the political arena. In order to avoid riots and other uprisings, the government addressed the youth issues by creating formal structures that could be more easily governed by political authorities. Between May and June 2012, the Mouvement de Fada et Palais pour la Promotion des Jeunes (MFPPJ) was founded on the initiative of local political authorities and the Sultan. Shortly afterwards, the MFPPJ declared their support for the government and President Issoufou and dissociated themselves from the MPPAD of Dan Dubai, whom they named as being responsible for the incidents which took place in Zinder between December 6 and 8, 2011, by organizing demonstrations in a "politically anarchist way." When Issoufou came to Zinder a second time for the foundation stone ceremony for construction of a road, he was received by a large audience that was said to have been even bigger than the audience receiving Tandja for the foundation stone ceremony of the oil refinery and the launching of Tazarce. However, just afterwards, a conflict within the MFPPJ erupted over the contributions they had received from government politicians (it is said that they received an Opel car and fuel as well as monetary contributions). Following this conflict, the leadership split into two and the youth association became inoperational.

This example shows that the youth of Zinder are the "critical mass" that must be governed and controlled. Due to their violent performances in protests and the country's demography (75 percent of the Nigerien population is under twenty-five years of age), male youth are able to gain public visibility. They have become targets of mobilization politics, exhorted to rally either behind the government majority or the political opposition. In organizing demonstrations, youth leaders are awarded with money or other material contributions and protection in case of arrests.

Non-publics

Some sections of Zinder's civil society did not engage in public politics, as illustrated by the civil society activist of ROTAB in front of the kick-off

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meeting. Like him, other civil society representatives did not participate in political disputes, instead refraining from the public protests because they had either close relationships with the incumbent government or with international donors that demanded a "neutral" political agenda such as human rights activism. The same could be said of the Sultan, who only engaged in the public debate to conciliate the protesters after the Prime Minister had visited him. The Sultan was only recently reinstated under the new President Issoufou in July of 2011. Before that, in 2001, he had been deposed and sentenced to two years in prison under the regime of Tandja for fraud, receipt of stolen goods, and drug trafficking. His case shows that, although the Sultan of Zinder only retains symbolic power in postcolonial Niger, political parties nonetheless try to influence him and to make him compliant (Danda 2004). Finally, the religious authorities of Zinder also only engaged with the public via radio to calm things down after the prime minister distributed money to them. Religious authorities, including an increasing number of Salafists, mostly remain politically neutral, as it is difficult to claim a pious lifestyle when connected to the overwhelmingly negatively loaded emic notion of politics in Niger (Sounaye 2016).[11] Moreover, access to the religious sphere in Niger is heavily regulated by the Conseil Islamique du Niger (CIN)—a state institution charged with the supervision of the daily practice of Islam—which retains a profound state influence on Islamic associations in Niger (Elischer 2015), although the CIN cannot completely control the religious radicalization currently taking place in the country (Olivier de Sardan 2015; Mueller 2016). Taken together, these well-established political players either refrained from public protests or conformed to the official position of the incumbent government, which in radio debates and political speeches literally accused the political opposition of being responsible for the "resource curse" by inciting social unrest.

In contrast to those social and political players who voluntarily refrain from the public debate, the subaltern effectively lack access to the radio landscape and the public sphere. Even more than the urban youth who still have call-back radio shows, text messages, or tires and fuel with which to create alternative publics, the farmers expropriated by the oil refinery barely have a voice at all in the public political game. Rather, they depend on paternalistic representatives such as journalists, lawyers, and civil society activists to defend their cause, or to talk on radio shows about their situation. As the rural farmers affected by the oil refinery had no financial means, two lawyers took up their case for compensation in 2011 on the condition of receiving 19 percent of any final indemnity payments. In actuality, the farmers only received a part of the compensation that the state had transferred to the lawyers, but CRAS publicly defended the lawyer whom they had a close relation with rather than the rural farmers. Finally, it appears women have even less of a voice than male youth or farmers in the public sphere in Zinder. None of the political actors who engaged in the public were women, and all CRAS members were men. Whereas members of

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civil society and the political opposition claimed directorial positions for regional residents at SORAZ or a regional quota for oil workers, these were both inherently considered male roles. Male political players in Zinder claim to speak in the name of the entire regional population, but implicitly speak only for men, thus reinforcing patterns of domination (patriarchy). Women's situation is further being aggravated with the rise of Salafism and the practice of wife seclusion in Niger that increasingly locks women in the private sphere inside the house compound (Henquinet 2007). Women's participation in the public debate is mainly restricted to fora of non-governmental organizations or to the fulfillment of quotas in national politics which are financed and encouraged by international measures for gender equality.[12]

Conclusion by way of Discussion

This article began with the politics that surrounded the oil refinery's inaugural event. Although the government did manage to temporarily restore peace after the December 6 to 8 riots through the cooptation and bribery of potential rivals in Zinder, this peace would prove short-lived. Violent youth demonstrations reoccurred only four months later, first against water shortages in April of 2012, and then on International Workers Day on May 1. In September of that year, further violence erupted after Friday prayers, when hundreds of youth gathered to protest against the anti-Islamic movie "Innocence of Muslims." In 2015, even larger religiously-framed protests took place "against Charlie Hebdo" (for more on these protests see Schritt [2015], Mueller [2016], and Olivier de Sardan [2015]). In 2016, the presidential elections were accompanied by violent protests by supporters of presidential rival Hama Amadou and his MODEN-FA Lumana-party, and a government crackdown on civil society associations that were deemed to be playing politics for the opposition followed. In February of 2018, civil society organizations (such as those that were represented within CRAS) publicly joined with the political opposition against a new finance act, with thousands of people protesting in the streets of Niamey.

What is striking about the recurrent protests in Niger is the similarity of the way they have unfolded. Most protests were not simply random violence, but well-planned and carefully executed urban riots in which mainly disaffected male youth were mobilized through social media—especially text messages—and erected burning barricades of tires and fuel in the streets, attacked the police forces, and pillaged and plundered stores, bars, and churches. This study argues that the recurrent patterns of protests in Niger are better understood through the lens of multi-party politics and political competition in Africa rather than through the resource curse's focus on the distribution of the oil rent. Building on this analysis of the protests, one can observe four main dimensions of Nigerien (and African) politics and society more generally.

Firstly, we have to remember the Zinder region's history as a sultanate that resisted French colonialism and became politically marginalized for it

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in colonial and post-colonial Nigerien politics until the emergence of the multi-party system in 1990. The multi-party system established political competition, media pluralism, and civil society activism which enabled the public disputes around the refinery's initial opening. As it often happens with an increase in political competition (Eifert et al. 2010), ethnic identification in Niger also increased with the introduction of the multi-party system. Not only had the CDS-Rahama emerged in response to western Nigerien and Zarma ethnic dominance, but narratives of historical political marginalization of the Zinder region also played an important role for all actors in the region's political arena to attack the incumbent government in Niamey, establish political legitimacy as Zinderois, and demand positions in the oil industry or in the government.

Secondly, since the introduction of national elections, the logic of the political game in Niger can best be described by the notion of machine politics. Machine politics are characterized by urban reward networks in which particularistic, material rewards are used to extend control over personnel and to maximize electoral support, thereby favoring patronage, spoils, and corruption (Scott 1969). From a comparative perspective, machine politics appear to primarily occur in political arenas featuring elections, universal suffrage, and a high degree of electoral competition, but in a social context that is considered prone to patronage, spoils, and corruption (Scott 1969). These machines are not primarily programmatic or ideological in nature, but highly personalized to gain privilege, bribes, and postings, something which has led to widespread disappointment with democracy among the Nigerien population. As in Africa more generally (van de Walle 2003; Carbone 2006), Nigerien political parties are dominated by their founding leaders, and have somewhat underdeveloped electoral programs. It is therefore no surprise that economic and political power are deeply intertwined in Niger. On the one hand, political positions not only allow for embezzlement of public markets, tax evasion, and receipts of favors, but additionally, once actors are in a powerful position, the redistribution of spoils is even demanded within social networks, as illustrated by the corruption affair within CRAS. On the other hand, the case of Dan Dubai shows how wealthy businessmen are able to quickly rise in the political hierarchy by investing their economic power in political parties and electoral campaigns.

Thirdly, in Nigerien politics there is only a weak differentiation between civil society and the state. As the case of Zinder's civil society has shown, with their ability to act as counter-powers to the state in a multiparty system, civil society organizations have to be appeased, repressed, or incorporated into the government by political maneuvers such as bribery, cooption, intimidation, and political arrest. In hybrid political systems (such as the system in Niger), we therefore observe an episodic civil society engagement in the political game, with phases of high activity when it is seeking to pressure the government, and phases of low activity or invisibility when it has become coopted, or simply calmed down, by informal redistribution (de Waal & Ibreck 2013). In this sense, civil society in Niger (as elsewhere in Africa) does not

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necessarily follow a logic of Western modernization but has its own historical predecessors and emerges from an African agency (Bayart 1986). The normative and moral framework of civil society that entails positive connotations of political progress, legitimate grievances, and a better social order is therefore misleading (Mamdani 1995). Democratic values are first appropriated to acquire political legitimacy and do not signal emancipatory politics per se.

Fourth, as in other African postcolonies (see e.g., Honwana 2012; Vigh 2008), the situation of urban youth in Niger, which offers little formal employment, economic production, or social stability, is characterized by marginality, "irregularity," and militancy, through which they move, navigate, or circulate to make ends meet. As has been described for other African countries as well, such as South Africa (Langa & Kiguwa 2013), due to their performance of "violent masculinity" in protests and the country's demography, male youths increasingly become the critical mass that has to be governed and controlled. This was exemplified by the MPPAD's comités de défense to mobilize against the incumbent regime, and the MFPPJ switching sites to the government after having received monetary contributions. The whole protest cycle thereby showed how effective protests lead to the development of formal movement organizations, which in turn make the leaders easier to co-opt, separating them from the mass base, and thereby taming the protests (Piven & Cloward 1979). Thus, rather than fighting along lines of political ideology, youth violence in the postcolony is about hard work that can be bought and is for sale on the market (Hoffman 2011). However, the rural farmers who were expropriated by the oil refinery had even less of a voice in the Zinder public sphere, as did women as well. Political representation in oil-age Niger thus reinforces structures of (gender) inequality and subordination, as the first to profit from the oil industry were well-established political actors and their families and not socially deprived or subaltern groups such as unemployed youth, farmers, or women (Spivak 1988).

The resource curse, by contrast, is not the cause for the political dynamics described in this article, as conflicts, corruption, (gender) inequality, and a small political elite predated oil production in Niger. Although oil production does not appear to have helped women as a group to improve their social, economic, and political status, Michael Ross's (2008) somewhat deterministic argument, that petroleum wealth makes export-oriented factories unprofitable and thus discourages women from working outside the home, is problematic in Niger, as these manufacturing industries barely existed prior to oil production. Moreover, although greed and grievance definitely played a role in the conflicts, they were not created by the incoming oil rent but pre-existed in the logics of the political game and the patterns of domination in pre-oil boom society. Although revenues (rents) of groundnuts, uranium, and development aid had surely helped shape the pre-oil sociopolitical constellation in Niger, oil as a newcomer to Niger acts more or less as a catalyst, adding fuel to pre-existing political conflicts. In the moment when Niger entered the oil age, the immediate presence of oil acted as an

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idiom within which political conflicts were expressed and through which political representation continues to be an ideological tool, serving to legitimate political positions of the better-off and thereby reinforcing structures of inequality and subordination.

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Notes

1. All currency conversions refer to the exchange rate of November 15, 2011.
2. Dan Dubai is Hausa and means "Son of Dubai."
3. It is reported that the religious authorities and the parent teacher association each received FCFA1,000,000 (USD2132). The USN received FCFA300,000 (USD640). The distribution of envelopes of money became public due to an internal conflict within the student union USN about how to distribute the money.
4. Fada literally means "the group of people attending the judgements at the leader's palace" (Lund 2009:111, own translation).
5. CNPC and the Nigerien government under Tandja agreed on a division of oil profit by 40 percent for Niger and 60 percent for CNPC. The profits of CNPC are taxed by a 12.5 percent ad valorem royalty. The contract defines the operation of the refinery through a joint venture company, the Société de Raffinage de Zinder (SORAZ), in which CNPC holds a 60 percent share and the Nigerien government 40 percent. The refinery has a capacity of 20,000 bpd and is designed for national consumption (in 2008 estimated at 7000 bpd) and the provision of the West African sub region. Since 2012, government revenues from the integrated oil project have been slightly over USD100,000,000 annually and have thus already slightly exceeded the annual revenues from uranium extraction by Areva which have made Niger the world's fourth largest uranium producer. With the beginning of oil production in January 2012, Niger's GDP growth jumped from about two percent in 2011 to nearly 13 percent in 2012, which was mainly due to the refinery.
6. The town council of Zinder was installed in June 2011 by universal suffrage and is composed of 23 elected councilors. Five political parties are represented within the council (number of seats): CDS 14; MNSD 4; PNDS 2; ARD 2; Lumana 1. The regional council was also installed in June 2011 by universal suffrage and is composed of 41 elected councilors, 8 administrative chiefs ("traditional authorities") and 20 deputies. Seven political parties are represented within the council (number of seats): CDS 12; MNSD 8; PNDS 9; ARD 5; Lumana 3; RPD 2; RSD 2. The results show the dominance of CDS (and MNSD) in Zinder.
7. Nevertheless, the national coordinator of ROTAB in Niamey, Ali Idrissa, is publicly known to have close ties with the Lumana party, which was part of the government at that time.
8. Although, in playing the political game, civil society leaders anticipate spoils, this is not to say that the social and political actors do not have any moral considerations. They may still think that they are doing better politics than their opponents. However, there are "normative double binds" (Bierschenk 2014) that tie these actors at once to the roles they obtain in the political game and to their obligations of redistribution within social networks that even have an existential dimension in a country with hardly any social security system.

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9. The yan banga have by now mostly ceased to exist, and their role of policing neighborhoods has been largely taken over by fada. After the police stopped supporting them, they started to collaborate with the thieves or even became thieves themselves, which eroded their social legitimacy (Göpfert 2012:61).
10. In Zinder, there are about 320 informal youth groupings called fada or palais, of which the majority of 72.5 percent is strictly masculine, 10.3 percent consist uniquely of women, and 17.2 percent declare themselves to be mixed (Souley 2012:10).
11. "Doing politics" ("*Faire la politique*"), as it is generally referred to in Niger, is seen paradoxically as both acting outside the moral and ethical values of the community, and as the only way to find employment or to be included in redistribution networks. Indeed, the words *politik* in Zarma or *dan ubanci* in Hausa signify conflicts, rivalry, disputes, and disunity, and evoke a nostalgic view of the "stability" of the former military regime of Kountché (Olivier de Sardan 2017:120).
12. In 2015, the National Assembly adopted a law specifying a gender quota at 15 percent for candidate lists for the 2016 elections. Twenty-six women are currently represented in the National Assembly.

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