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**Contingent Democrats in Action:
Organized Labor and Regime Change in
the Republic of Niger**

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Abstract

The effects of organized labor on regime change in developing countries are not clear-cut. Optimists argue that union agitation is conducive to both democratic transition and consolidation processes. Pessimists hold that unions will support any regime that is conducive to their demands. Accordingly, unions may support regime transitions; however, once their economic interests are under threat, they will jeopardize the subsequent consolidation process. Systematic studies on the effects of organized labor on regime change in sub-Saharan Africa are sparse and largely confined to the (pre)transition phase. This article examines the role of organized labor in Niger between 1990 and 2010. Given the high number of regime breakdowns during the period, a longitudinal study of Nigerien labor enables a critical examination of motives and actions of organized labor toward different regime types. In contrast to other recent findings on African unionism, the article confirms the pessimistic view.

Keywords: political science, democratization, sub-Saharan Africa, trade unions, Niger, civil society, francophone Africa

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Contingent Democrats in Action: Organized Labor and Regime Change in the Republic of Niger

Sebastian Elischer

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1 Introduction

Organized labor occupies a central place in the study of democratization. Several scholars highlight the positive contribution of unions in mobilizing citizens against autocratic rule in Europe (Collier and Mahoney 1995; Collier 1999; Moore 1966; Rueschemeyer et al. 1992; Therborn 1977).

The effects of organized labor on regime change in developing countries are not clear cut. In many countries, organized labor is seen as too frail to initiate regime change (Levitsky and

Mainwaring 2006; Valenzuela 1989). Others claim that even where unions do hold considerable political leverage, organized labor relies almost exclusively on the financial support of the state because the size of the private economy is negligible. Organized labor might support regime change in instances where its access to state resources is under threat and for only as long as the new regime caters to their economic demands. Labor unions constitute “contingent democrats” as their support for democratic transitions is based on material interests (Bellin 2000). Given the privileged status of salaried workers in non-OECD countries, unions do not practice solidarity with groups that suffer from far worse socioeconomic conditions. Unions try to reinforce the benefits of the privileged few who have secured employment in the state apparatus (Beckman 2002; Bellin 2000; Rakner 1992). In the aftermath of a democratic transition, unions are therefore likely to espouse (extremely) radical economic demands, thereby destabilizing the new democratic dispensation; this is likely, in turn, to provoke autocratic backlashes (Bermeo 1997; Huntington 2009; Levine 1988). Accordingly, strong unions may initiate democratic transitions, but will become a threat to democratic consolidation in the aftermath of a transition.

Optimistic scholars hold that organized labor can contribute to the democratization processes as a whole. For this to occur, unions need to reach out and form meaningful organizational and ideational linkages with political parties whose political orientations are compatible with the basic tenets of liberal democracy (LeBas 2011; Levitsky and Mainwaring 2006). Scholars working on contentious politics (Tarrow 1989) and on social movement unionism (Lambert and Webster 2001; Waterman 1993) have shown that in some instances unions link up with other civil society groups and formulate goals beyond economic concerns. In doing so, unions use their mobilization potential for political issues that affect society at large. By acting in concert with other civil society groups and/or political parties, unions help organize coalitions across class lines, integrate interpersonal solidarities into public politics, and equalize the resources among political participants (Boix and Stokes 2007; Tarrow 1989, 2006; Tilly 2004). Organized labor thus has the potential to be a champion of democracy during both the democratic transition and consolidation phase.

The substantial disagreement over the democratization capacity of organized labor in developing countries owes to the case-based nature of empirical research. Much of this research has focused on Latin America (Collier and Mahoney 1995; Levitsky and Mainwaring 2006) and Eastern Europe (Robertson 2004). The role of African labor has received little systematic attention despite being involved in bringing about 28 of the 40 democratic transition attempts in the early 1990s (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010; Bratton and van de Walle 1997; Kraus 2007). Existing research is confined to the role of African unions during the early stages of protest against autocratic rule (Beckman and Sachikonye 2010; Kester and Sidibé 1997; Konings 2004; Kraus 2007; Rakner 1992). There are two exceptions to this: First, studies on trade unionism in South Africa make an essential contribution to the literature on social movement unionism. These studies illustrate the mechanisms under which trade unions

have fused successfully with other social movements and subsequently contributed to the democratic consolidation of South African society (Hirschsohn 1998; von Holdt 2002; Lambert and Webster 2001). Second, the only comparative study on the effects of organized labor in sub-Saharan Africa is that conducted by LeBas (2011), who attempts to illustrate that a high degree of political polarization by the unions is conducive to democratization. Drawing on the literature on contentious politics and social movement unionism, she examines three Anglophone cases: Zimbabwe, Zambia and Kenya. Only in the Zimbabwean case do the unions manage to create a meaningful link with democratic opposition parties and civil society groups (see also LeBas 2006). In Kenya and Zambia, the unions are unable to do so due to the institutional legacy of one-party rule. Unfortunately, LeBas' study says little about the effects of African labor on democratization processes. In two of the cases (Kenya and Zambia), trade unions are too fragile to initiate change; in the other case (Zimbabwe), no democratic transition occurred despite a high degree of political polarization by the unions and the democratic opposition.

In this article, I examine the effect of organized labor on the different regime changes the Republic of Niger underwent between 1990 and 2010. So far, Niger has been significantly underresearched by democratization scholars working on Africa. However, the desperate socioeconomic situation of the country (ranked among the four poorest countries for the last three decades) in combination with recurring cycles of democratization attempts make it an interesting case study for democratization research in general and for the role of organized labor in democratization processes in particular. In contrast to most African nations, Niger has experienced several autocratic and democratic regime breakdowns (see Table 1). A longitudinal study on Nigerien labor therefore enables a critical analysis of how labor has interacted with different types of political regime across time.

Table 1: Regime Changes in Niger between 1960 and 2011

Type of Regime Change	Beginning of Transition	Posttransition Trajectory/ Regime Consolidation Phase
Independence from France	August 1960	August 1960 to April 1974: First Republic
Multiparty democracy to military dictatorship	April 1974	April 1974 to December 1989: Military rule
Military dictatorship to one-party state	December 1989	December 1989 to November 1991: Second Republic
One-party state to multiparty democracy First democratic transition	February 1990	August 1991 to November 1991: National Conference November 1991 to April 1993: Transition period April 1993 to January 1996: Third Republic
Multiparty democracy to military rule First democratic breakdown	January 1996	January 1996 to April 1999: Fourth Republic
Military rule to multiparty democracy Second democratic transition	April 1999	November 1999 to October 2009: Fifth Republic October 2009 to February 2010: Sixth Republic
Multiparty democracy to military rule Second democratic breakdown	February 2010	February 2010 to April 2011: Interim military rule
Military rule to multiparty democracy	April 2011	April 2011 to present day: Seventh Republic

Source: Author's Compilation.

All existing studies praise the democratization potential of Nigerien labor (Charlick 2007; Robinson 1994). By contrast, the Nigerien military is consistently seen as major obstacle to democratization (Baudais and Chauzal 2011; Decoudras and Gazibo 1997; Villalón and Abdourahmane 2005). If the Nigerien unions constitute contingent democrats, we should see no differences in their approach toward democratic and autocratic governments; their actions will be driven by economic self-interest. If organized labor in Niger is an agent of democratic change, we should see close collaboration between the unions and other civil society organizations. We should also see mobilization against autocratic rule, yet support for democratic rulers. The following sections will analyze the effects of the unions on regime change and subsequent regime development. Scholars disagree about what the terms “democratic transition” and “democratic consolidation” constitute. I regard the beginning of protest against autocratic continuity as the beginning of a democratic transition. The democratic transition process ends when the first free and fair presidential and parliamentary elections are held. I regard the period after the first free and fair elections as the starting point of the democratic consolidation process (Schedler 1998, 2001). As scholars have focused on the change from autocratic to democratic rule (Bogaards 2009), there is no definition of autocratic transition or consolidation. For the purpose of this paper, I regard the overthrow of a democratic regime as the beginning of an autocratic transition. The transition is complete if the new autocratic rulers decide to remain in power through rigged elections. The period after the rigged elections is the starting point of the autocratic consolidation process.

2 Autocratic Breakdown, Democratic Transition and Trade Union Ascendancy (1990 and 1993)

Between 1974 and 1989, Niger was a military dictatorship. President General Kountché governed with the help of local advisory bodies that consulted the largely rural and illiterate population. These so-called development councils included representatives of the chieftaincy, the national youth movement, the peasantry and Islamic preachers. At the apex of Niger’s “neotraditionalist corporatist state” (Robinson 1991) stood the National Development Council (NDC), the chief advisory body of the Military Supreme Council (Robinson 1991). In 1989, General Ali Saibou transformed Niger into a one-party state led by the Mouvement National pour la Société du Développement (MNSD). Although a civilian regime by name, Saibou remained president for life (Ibrahim and Souley 2000).

Niger’s autocratic state began to crumble in earnest in February 1990 when mass protests by Niger’s umbrella trade union organization, the Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Niger (USTN), paralyzed the streets of Niamey. The strikes targeted the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) the government had begun to implement in the late 1980s. The SAPs sought drastic cuts in public spending and a reduction in the provision of teacher salaries and student grants. It was thus no surprise that the Union des Scholaires Nigériens (USN), a

union of Nigerien students and member organization of the USTN, was particularly active in organizing the strikes (Charlick 2007; Robinson 1994)

Because the USTN had been an integral part of the autocratic regime in place, the strikes shook the foundation of the Seybou government. Committed to the principle of “responsible participation,” the USTN had never challenged the government (Charlick 2007; Robinson 1991, 1994); this was partly a result of the oppressive nature of military rule and partly down to the fact that graduate students and civil servants – who account for roughly 80 percent of the Nigerien workforce in the formal employment sector – enjoyed a comparatively high income in an otherwise poverty stricken country. The uneven distribution of public expenditure in favor of this tiny segment of Nigerien society was a corollary of the uranium boom of the 1970s. In the early 1980s, Niger began to suffer from the decline of the world market price for uranium. In addition, Niger’s domestic tax revenue dried up (Gervais 1995; Robinson 1994; Ziemer 1978). In return for financial aid from the Bretton Woods institutions, Niger agreed to reform its public finances by curbing the size of its public sector. Nevertheless, the service increased by 40 percent between 1982 and 1989. The main beneficiaries were recent graduates from the University of Niamey, who joined the public sector by virtue of having a degree (Gervais 1995). By 1990, the state coffers were virtually empty; the oversized public sector had become unsustainable.¹

A closer look at the content and the sequence of the 1990 protests reveals an insight into the initial motives of union protest. During the February riots, demonstrators demanded the maintenance of the status quo in the public sector (Rayna 1991).² The USTN used the subsequent May Day parade to call on the government to increase public spending. It was on that occasion that several union leaders called for the establishment of multiparty democracy. These sparse initiatives in favor of institutional reform were based on an instrumental view of democracy; that is, as military rule had become firmly associated with the implementation of SAPs, an increasing number of union leaders came to view democratic procedures as a protection mechanism against public sector reform (Adji 2000; Salifou 2002).³

Given Niger’s financial destitution, growing social unrest and early signs of a Tuareg rebellion in northern Niger, the Saibou government volunteered to relinquish power. Internal government documents reveal that the government arrived at this decision as early as June 1990, but waited until November 1990 to communicate their decision to the Nigerien public (Comité de Réflexion sur la Révision de la Charte et de la Constitution 1990; Souley 2008).

1 Interviews with Mohamed Bagoum, vice-president of the PNDS, and Rabiou Daounda, former secretary-general of the USN. Both interviews were conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

2 Interviews with Nouhou Arzika, delegate at the National Conference, Dibo Hamani, history professor at the University of Niamey, and Rabiou Daounda, former secretary-general of the USN. All interviews were conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

3 Interviews with Nouhou Arzika, civil society activist. This interpretation is confirmed by Dibo Hamani, history professor at the University of Niamey and Boubacar Diallo, director of the press house.

The government's announcement that multiparty democracy was to be reestablished made the call for democratic reforms the leitmotif of union agitation (Rayna 1991). The government thus provided the political vocabulary with which purely economic demands could be disguised as wider political goals.⁴

In the run-up to the National Conference, the USTN established itself as Niger's preeminent political player. While some regard the National Conference as an important milestone (Gazibo 2004, 2005; Robinson 1994), these scholars have overlooked the fact that the National Conference was rubber-stamping decisions by the much less known Preparatory Committee of the National Conference. The committee comprised 72 delegates: 8 delegates represented the government, 20 delegates represented the USTN, 36 delegates represented a vast array of newly registered political parties and the remaining 8 delegates represented other interest groups (Republique du Niger 1991a). From the beginning, the USTN insisted on excluding representatives of other interest groups (e.g., layers and privately funded organizations) from the preparatory committee (Koudizé 1992). The committee elected the deputy secretary-general of the USTN as president. Throughout the preparatory meetings, the USTN managed to vote together as a united bloc, while other delegates were consistently unable to form any alliances. On the initiative of the USTN, the preparatory committee decided that the National Conference would be a sovereign body with the power to make binding decisions for the country. The preparatory committee also defined the topics the plenary and the committees of the National Conference were to discuss (Republique du Niger 1991a).

Two decisions of the preparatory committee had a lasting effect on Niger. First, an interim body, the so-called High Council of the Republic (HCR), was established to govern Niger between the end of the National Conference in November 1991 and the inauguration of its first democratically elected government in April 1993. The USTN provided the institutional blueprint for the composition and the mandate of the HCR. Second, the decision was made to open the plenary of the National Conference to a debate on the crimes committed by the various postindependence governments. The Nigerien army was blamed for 36 out of 49 crimes that were to be discussed at the subsequent National Conference (Republique du Niger 1991b).

The National Conference ran from 29 July 1991 to 3 November 1991. In order to pass a motion or to be elected into a leadership position, a majority among seven voting blocs was required. Each bloc comprised 100 delegates and represented a societal interest group. The seven voting blocs included the USTN, the USN, the union of employees, independent unions, the government, all registered political parties (united in one bloc) and nonunion civil

4 Interviews with Nouhou Arzika, delegate at the National Conference, Issoufou Lavali, head of industrial relations for the CMT trade union, Dibo Hamani, history professor at the University of Niamey, and Boubacar Diallo, director of the press house. All interviews were conducted in Niamey in November 2009 and August 2010. All interview partners stated that President Mitterrand's speech at La Baule in June also contributed to the creation of a new "democratic vocabulary."

society associations (Robinson 1994). The decision-making procedure was highly contested as it demonstrated the degree of political power the unions had acquired vis-à-vis the government and other opposition groups (Adji 1998; Koudizé 1992). The conference elected the historian André Salifou as president of the HCR, while several leadership positions in the HCR went to union functionaries (Chaibou 2000: 92–93). Between 9 August and 23 October, delegates debated the various political and economic affairs of the army. After two and a half decades of being at the helm of the Nigerien state, the Nigerien senior military command suddenly faced open contempt by representatives of all walks of life. In particular, the “Tchin Tabaraden affair” became a central theme of the conference (Republique du Niger 1991b). In May 1991, violent clashes between the army and Tuareg returnees from Libya occurred near Tchin Tabaraden.⁵ Until today, the army regards the National Conference as a civilian coup orchestrated by the unions and designed to humiliate and divide the armed forces.⁶

The National Conference produced a scope statement the interim government was legally obliged to follow. It forbade the HCR from reducing the size of the public workforce and from cooperating with the Bretton Woods institutions. The booklet lists 141 demands calling for an extension of the public service, which was to be financed by cutbacks in the military budget. Furthermore, all major streets were to be named after the Tchin Tabaraden affair or after the February riots of 1990 (Republique du Niger 1993).

3 Successful Transition, Failed Consolidation and Democratic Breakdown (1993–1996)

At the time of the National Conference, the public wage bill accounted for 90 percent of the tax revenue of the Nigerien state (Kotoudi 1993). As the preparatory committee had cajoled the HCR interim government to refrain from any cooperation with the Bretton Woods institutions, the influx of foreign aid was at an all time low (Gazibo 2005; Robinson 1994).

From December 1991 onward, the HCR was under constant pressure from the unions to implement the decisions of the National Conference and to improve the situation for public sector employees. A stream of USTN-led general strikes characterized the period between December 1991 and May 1992.⁷ More often than not, organized-labor protests coincided with military mutinies – the most noticeable incident occurred in February 1992 when the army abducted the minister of the interior. While the unions took a clear stance against the army by publically supporting the democratic transition process, the USTN-led strikes considerably weakened the political legitimacy of the HCR, which had failed to achieve even a modicum of political stability (Ibrahim 1994; Kotoudi 1993; Souley 2008). In order to keep the

5 During the National Conference, Niger’s first independent newspaper *Haské* covered the issue in detail. All data is with the author.

6 Confidential interview with two colonels of the Nigerien army. Both interviews were held in Niamey in August 2010.

7 *Le Républicain*, various issues between August 1991 and September 1992.

transition process alive, the government had to appease the unions. In June 1992, the HCR recognized the Republic of Taiwan in exchange for a one-off payment of USD 50 million, which went toward the compensation of public employees. The minister in charge of development cooperation summarized the predicament of the HCR as follows: "It's Taiwan or it's chaos" (Ibrahim 1994; Kotoudi 1993: 27). Between 1989 and the end of 1992, the public wage bill further increased from CFA 35 to 39 billion; the number of civil servants increased from thirty-seven thousand to thirty-nine thousand (Gervais 1995).

In December 1992, Niger experienced its first democratic presidential and parliamentary elections. The MNSD, the party of Niger's autocratic past, neither claimed victory in the presidential elections nor was able to lead a coalition in parliament. Instead, the semi-presidential system of the Third Republic was led by Mahamane Ousmane, the newly elected president, from the Convention Démocratique et Sociale (CDS) – a party strongly associated with the Hausa bureaucratic elite (Alou 2009; Idrissa and Decalo 2012). The CDS formed an unstable parliamentary coalition with the Parti National pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme (PNDS) and several other smaller parties. Ousmane (CDS) appointed Mahamadou Issoufou (PNDS) as his prime minister.

Of all the parliamentary parties, the PNDS could be expected to be the most likely to evolve into an ally of the unions. The party recruited many of its members from the intellectual left, while many PNDS leaders had played an important role in emancipating the state-sponsored unions from the former military regime (Charlick 2007). Prime Minister Issoufou had risen through the ranks of the civil service and was an active member of the USTN (Ibrahim 1994; Idrissa and Decalo 2012),⁸ while Ibrahim Malayaki, also a PNDS member, was the leader of the USTN (Wegemund 1994: 132). However, the political arena remained split between three factions: the army and supporters of the former MNSD regime, the former democratic opposition now in charge of the government, and the trade unions of the public sector.

In his farewell speech as interim prime minister, Amadou Cheiffou warned that the future of Niger depended heavily on the willingness of the unions to accept an end to their privileged position (Wegemund 1993). The incoming prime minister, Mahamadou Issoufou, echoed these sentiments in his inaugural speech in April 1993. He highlighted the nation's desperate need for financial support and indicated that cutbacks and negotiations with the Bretton Woods institutions had to be resumed (Charlick 2007). His government proposed a 24 percent pay cut for all public sector employees. However, a series of general strikes throughout 1993 led to the abandonment of this project (EIU 1994 and 1995). In a remarkable turnaround, the government offered a 12 percent salary increase. Due to the detrimental consequences of the devaluations of the West African CFA franc in early 1994, the USTN demanded a 30–50 percent increase in return. The decision by the government to reopen nego-

8 Interview with Mohammed Bagoum, former vice-president of the PNDS, currently the foreign minister of Niger. Interview was conducted in Niamey in November 2009.

tiations with the IMF and the World Bank exacerbated the tensions between the government and organized labor; several individual unions staged walkouts. Inside the cabinet, the CDS and the PNDS were at loggerheads over the question of how to deal with union unrest (Wegemund 1994).

In September 1994, the CDS-PNDS government eventually fell apart. Because the constitution of the Third Republic was unclear about the mandate of the prime minister, President Ousmane and Prime Minister Issoufou clashed over executive functions (Starace 2010). Issoufou's resignation in September 1994 triggered a new round of parliamentary elections in January 1995, which produced an almost identical electoral outcome (Basedau and Stroh 2012; Idrissa and Decalo 2012). Somewhat surprisingly, the PNDS opted for a parliamentary coalition with the MNSD, the party of the former regime. After several rounds of political bargaining, President Ousmane (CDS) was forced to appoint Hama Amadou (MNSD) as prime minister. Although Amadou and the MNSD were staunch defenders of the Kountché regime, the USTN encouraged Amadou's appointment due to his reinvention as a champion of union interests in parliament (Decoudras and Gazibo 1997).

However, Niger remained ungovernable. The USTN general strikes over salary arrears, living conditions and future cooperation with the Bretton Woods institutions continued. The rapid decline of army living conditions led to a new wave of mutinies in 1995. Caught between the demands of organized labor and the demands of the military in a context of insufficient resources, the government delayed the passing of the 1994 budget by two years in order to mitigate political tensions. Divisions between the new prime minister and the president over who was legally entitled to name the directors of Niger's state-run companies and whether or not the president could ask for a second reading of the annual budget paralyzed the government in late 1995 (Decoudras and Gazibo 1997).⁹ In early January 1996, most domestic observers warned that a military coup was imminent.¹⁰ Despite these warnings, the USTN staged a series of mass strikes against a newly implemented progressive tax system (Charlick 2007).

The military coup of 26 January 1996 ended the Third Republic. Scholars have attributed the coup to Niger's semi-presidential system, the army's unwillingness to accept civilian rule and internal divisions within the civilian government (Gazibo 1998, 2004; Ibrahim 1994). Although all of these factors are relevant, the role of organized labor in delegitimizing Niger's nascent democratic system has generally been overlooked (Decoudras and Gazibo 1997; Gazibo 1998). Focused on the interests of its core clientele, organized labor did not form any meaningful links with other organizations. In doing so, it exacerbated political tensions and provoked an autocratic backlash.

9 *Le Républicain*, 25–31 January 1996.

10 Interview with Boubacar Diallo, director of the press house. Interview was conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

4 Autocratic Transition and Breakdown (1996 to 1999)

Niger's traditional leaders and a large segment of the MNSD openly welcomed the coup.¹¹ Coup leader Ibrahim Baré Mainassara had served as Kountché's head of staff for 25 years and was well connected among the former autocratic political and business elite. Members of the overthrown civilian government expressed relief that the political deadlock in the country had been resolved. Both former prime ministers called on civil society and the international community to cooperate with the military government (Gazibo 1998).

In line with other political actors, organized labor also welcomed the coup (Decoudras and Gazibo 1997; Gazibo 1998). However, Mainassara's decision to exclude the unions from the 1996 National Conference dealt a first blow to the budding relationship between the government and the USTN.¹² The low-key conference settled on a presidential system with extensive presidential powers (Fourth Republic). Mainassara's appointment of Boukary Adj, a World Bank official, as interim prime minister provoked the first note of protest by the USTN against the new government (Adj 1998).

In April 1996, Mainassara formed the *Rassemblement pour la Démocratie et le Progrès* (RDP) – an umbrella group of former autocratic elites and big men who had lost their political and financial clout following the National Conference in 1991.¹³ The Mainassara government directly intervened in the electoral process and forcefully dissolved the independent electoral commission after the first day of voting. Members of the new commission announced Mainassara the winner after the first round of voting. The incarceration of all opposition candidates triggered an opposition boycott of the subsequent parliamentary elections in November 1996 (Gazibo 1999). Opposition parties and several civil society groups formed the *Front pour la Restauration et la Défense de la Démocratie* (FRDD). Even the MNSD, which had initially welcomed Baré's coup, joined this alliance. The USTN refrained from joining,¹⁴ although it did embark on joint protests with the FRDD; however, these concerted campaigns remained the exception.

Economic motives remained the preeminent factors behind union agitation. Immediately after the rigged 1996 presidential elections, the USTN demanded a salary increase and protested against the regime's willingness to follow the policy recommendations of the Bretton Woods institution.¹⁵ Mainassara announced a 30 percent reduction in the public wage bill. As it had done previously, the USTN engaged in a series of general strikes in the last quarter of 1996 (Gazibo 1998). In 1997 the government encouraged the formation of the *Confédération*

11 Interview with Sabou Saidou – rapporteur at the National Conference, secretary-general of the HCR and member of the national assembly between 1995 and 1996. Interview was conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

12 *Le Républicain*, 15–21 January 1996. Mainassara justified this decision by referring to the paralyzing effects of union agitation between 1990 and 1996 (Mainassara 1997).

13 Confidential interview with two Nigerien colonels. Interviews were held in Niamey in August 2010.

14 *Le Républicain*, 16 January 1997.

15 *Le Républicain*, 6 June 1996.

Nigérienne du Travail (CNT), a rival trade union federation. Traditionally the USTN president acted as the national chairman of the Nigerien social security fund, a position that was now handed over to the CNT on the behest of the government. Open hostility characterized the relationship between the CNT and the USTN (Adji 2000; International Labour Office 2010). The second half of 1997 was characterized by waves of strikes by the USTN and the FRDD. Often these strikes ran parallel, with the USTN protesting against the reduction of salaries and the FRDD protesting against restrictive press laws and political suppression.¹⁶ Throughout 1998, the USTN protested several privatization campaigns and engaged in at least one 72-hour general strike per month. In December 1998, the government announced the reduction of the retirement age of civil servants from 55 to 50 and the reduction of the civil service by a few thousand positions. The announcement led to several months-long general strikes between January and March 1999.¹⁷

On 9 April 1999, the Mainassara government was overthrown by a military coup led by Daouda Malam Wanké, the head of Mainassara's presidential guard. As in 1996, a number of factors caused the military coup. First, the ongoing FRDD and USTN strikes meant that the country was as ungovernable and as unstable as it had been between 1990 and 1996. This deepened an already existing rift inside the military. The National Conference of 1991 had divided the Nigerien officer corps. One faction was broadly supportive of civilian rule; a second one was keen on returning to the thrones of power. The 1996 coup was carried out by the latter faction, which caused the alienation of the politically more progressive camp. Mainassara's failure to instill any political order led to a surge in the number of officers who believed in a withdrawal from power.¹⁸ The unequal treatment of the officer corps by Mainassara accelerated this development. Officers from Niamey in particular were rising quickly through the ranks, while those who had previously served in different battalions had little to no chance of professional progression. The tensions between hardliners and political reformists were increasingly visible inside the RDP (Gazibo 1999). The resignation of the RDP parliamentary leader, Issaka Karanta, in March 1999 was a clear sign that Mainassara could no longer rely on unconditional support.¹⁹

5 Democratic Transitions, Deceptive Stability and Democratic Breakdown (2000–2009)

This time the Nigerien military gave way to a democratically elected government. The MNSD candidate, Mamadou Tandja, won the presidential elections in December 1999. The MNSD further commanded a majority in parliament, where it formed a solid alliance with

¹⁶ *Le Républicain*, various issues between July 1997 and October 1997.

¹⁷ For an overview see *Le Républicain*, 4 March and 21 April 1999.

¹⁸ Confidential interviews with two Western military advisors. Interview with Gagale Souley, military prefect in Gouré. All interviews were conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

¹⁹ *Le Démocrate*, 15 March 1999.

the CDS, its former archrival. For the second time in his political career, Hama Amadou became prime minister. President Tandja was reelected in 2004, while the MNSD/CSD coalition also remained in place for a second term. As a result, the semi-presidential Fifth Republic (2000–2009) proved to be the most stable constitutional dispensation since 1991. As this section will show, Niger's newly found political stability rested on an unprecedented influx of donor money. The government diverted these funds in order to pacify union and other demands. At the same time, organized labor suffered from internal fission, which greatly weakened its mobilization capacity. As in previous periods, the trade unions failed to engage with civil society at large. It equally failed to develop a broad set of goals.

In its first year in office, the Tandja government benefitted from an immediate influx of financial aid in return for the successful conduct of the 1999 elections. Maybe for the first time in decades, the government was able to regularly pay the forty thousand public workers over the course of several months (Economist Intelligence Unit 2000). In June 2000, the government reached a breakthrough agreement with the USTN, which foresaw the early retirement of 1,043 public employees. The deal had detrimental consequences for the USTN, with several unions declaring their departure from the USTN. Among the defectors were some of the most active unions, including the student unions. In the following months, the breakaway unions formed a new trade union organization, the *Confédération Démocratique des Travailleurs du Niger* (CDTN), which defied the government's reform agenda (Adji 2000; International Labour Office 2010; Phelan 2011). The union breakaway greatly weakened Nigerien labor. Due to the disintegration of the USTN, union agitation remained limited to certain sectors and thus never led to the degree of instability that had characterized the previous decade. General strikes – a typical feature of the Nigerien political landscape in the 1990s – disappeared as joint actions became very cumbersome following the division of the erstwhile powerful USTN into the USTN, the CNT and the DCTN.²⁰

From 2002 onward, Niger's annual budget grew substantially. The influx of new income was attributable to three factors: First, stable world market prices for uranium ensured a steady export income. Second, the return of multiparty democracy led to a sizable increase of development aid. Between 2001 and 2009, development aid to Niger increased by roughly a third compared to the previous decade (see Table 2). Third, and most important, Niger experienced a decline in its colossal debt repayment service as it qualified for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative (International Monetary Fund 2000). Between 2002 and 2008, Niger profited from annual debt forgiveness grants equaling USD 195 million.²¹

20 Interviews with Sabou Saidou, rapporteur at the 1991 National Conference, Massoudon Hassouri, first deputy secretary of the PNDS, and Kassoum Bamdamassi, chef de division of law at the National Assembly. All interviews were conducted in August 2010 in Niamey.

21 The amount of the debt forgiveness grant is the total amount of principal debt forgiven plus the interest due and arrears. The data is provided by the World Bank database.

Table 2: New Official Development Assistance and Official Aid Received

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
Million USD	n/a	505	492	516	348	328	476	421	272	325
Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Million USD	417	454	626	646	604	611	565	591	466	744

Average annual official development assistance between 1992 and 1999: USD 419 million.

Average annual official development assistance between 2000 and 2009: USD 604 million.

Source: OECD Database.

Niger's increased export income and foreign aid went directly to the Nigerien treasury in order to keep public expenditure afloat. The intention of HIPC funds was to finance poverty mitigation programs with resources that no longer had to be spent on debt repayment. However, the lion's share (around 70 percent) of these sources went to President Tandja's special presidential poverty reduction program, for which there was no auditing scheme in place (International Monetary Fund 2004). Even funds that did not go into the president's program were hardly accounted for. The Bretton Woods institutions only accounted for HIPC funds dispersed between 2002 and 2004; accounts for the much larger funds paid out between 2005 and 2008 were never conducted (International Monetary Fund 2004, 2011). Neither civil society nor parliament was at any stage included in the decision-making process on how to spend the HIPC funds (Phelan 2011). The high illiteracy rates among Nigerien MPs rendered any parliamentary inquiries obsolete.²² Therefore, the majority of the HIPC funds remained in the treasury to cover the public wage bill and to provide study grants to future civil servants.²³

While tracing foreign aid streams is notoriously difficult, Niger's newly found financial leverage is clearly visible in the manner in which its president was able to appease societal interest groups. In the spring of 2005, the newly formed Coalition Contre la Vie Chère (CCVC) effectively shut down public life in the capital in order to protest a VAT increase from 15 percent to 19 percent. Tandja used Niger's newly found financial leverage power and withdrew the increase. In addition, the government reduced the prices for several selected basic commodities.²⁴

With external financing at an all time high and no meaningful accounting system in place, Tandja became the first president to meet the demands of organized labor. In 2005, he granted a 10 percent pay rise to all civil servants. He further established a generous retirement package for teachers and increased their housing allowances (EIU 2005). By 2007, severe student protests (once a characteristic feature of Nigerien politics) vanished following an increase in student grants, an improvement of university facilities and a decrease of maintenance costs for students

22 Confirmed in several interviews with representatives from the MNSD, the CDS and the PND.

23 Interview with Iralid Ihivi, president of the Nigerien Association of the Defense of Human Rights, Kana Abdoulaye, secretary-general for the association of human rights, Jina Abdoulaye, secretary-general of the CDS, Rabivu Nafidu, secretary-general of the national assembly, and several representatives of Western donors. Interviews were conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

24 Interview with Nouhou Arzika, former president of the CCVC. Interview conducted in Niamey in November 2009 and August 2010.

(EIU 2007 to 2008). The civil service did not suffer any further cutbacks. Instead, the size of the workforce stabilized just above the oversized level of the 1980s (see Table 3).

Table 3: Size of the Public Workforce

Year	1961	1976	1985	1995	2005	2009
Employees	3,755	19,902	32,297	40,857	34,288	34,682

Source: Idrissa and Decalo (2012: 127).

Niger's unprecedented degree of social peace was thus not due to a change in the attitudes of the trade unions, but the result of weaker unions and the ability of the government to meet union demands. As in previous periods, organized labor failed to establish links with other social actors. The demonstrations of the CCVC in 2005 occurred without active union support. The Nigerien media even argued that the CCVC was about to replace the unions as the preeminent social actor.²⁵

In May 2009, Tandja announced his intention to remain in office beyond his constitutionally prescribed second term in office. In the following weeks, the president declared that a referendum on a new constitution (Sixth Republic) would be held on 4 August. The new constitution allowed him to remain in office for another three years and the possibility to contest any future presidential election (République du Niger 2009).

In the run-up to the constitutional referendum, Tandja engaged in a titanic struggle with the country's political institutions. In May 2009, the Constitutional Court opined that the referendum was not in line with the legal provisions of the current constitution; Tandja responded by dissolving the court. After the CDS abandoned the government coalition over the illegal dissolution of the court, Tandja dissolved the National Assembly. On 26 June 2009, Tandja declared a state of emergency. Several private media outlets that had been critical of Tandja's conduct were violently shut down. Leading opposition figures, such as Mahamadou Issoufou and Hama Amadou, were arrested. After a decade of stability, Niger was on the verge of being turned into a presidential dictatorship (van Walraven 2009).

Tandja's supporters gathered in the Mouvement Patriotique pour la Défense de la Nation et du Peuple (MPDNP), the democratic opposition in the Coordination des Forces Pour la Démocratie et la République (CFDR). All political parties except for the MNSD joined the CFDR. The vast majority of rural chiefs, Islamic clerks and peasant associations joined the MPDNP.²⁶ The situation is more complex with regard to civil society groups. Members of the CCVC were firmly committed to a third Tandja term, with CCVC leaders such as Nouhou Arzika stressing that the Tandja period had provided stability and a minimum of basic provisions.²⁷ Other organizations could not agree on a position and remained silent.²⁸

²⁵ *Grain de Sel*, 31, June 2005.

²⁶ *Notre Pays*, La Fronde des Faux Démocrates, 2, Interview with Dibo Hamani, history professor at the University of Niamey. Interview was conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

²⁷ Interviews with Nouhou Arzika, leader of the CCVC. Interviews were conducted in Niamey in November 2009 and August 2010.

The position of the trade unions was highly ambivalent. Officially, organized labor tried to protect the Fifth Republic. In May 2009, the leadership of all umbrella organizations condemned Tandja's constitutional referendum. Below the surface, however, things were not as straightforward; numerous individual unions boycotted the struggle against Tandja. Particularly noteworthy was the silence of the student unions, traditionally the vanguard of union opposition. Previously one of the most active unions, the USN openly supported Tandja (Idrissa and Decalo 2012).²⁹ Although the three major trade union organizations (USTN, CDTN and CDT) closely coordinated their actions, their attempt to organize a general strike in late June failed. The cabinet's decision to raise all public salaries by 50 percent ensured that many public employees did not follow the unions' call for action (EIU 2009). International observers noted that many protest rallies organized by the unions suffered from low turnouts compared to meetings organized by opposition parties or antireferendum civil society groups.³⁰ Many middle-ranking trade union functionaries appeared at MPDNP rallies and supported a third Tandja term.³¹

After extensive international and regional protests, the Nigerien military once more intervened and overthrew the Tandja government. As in 1999, the Nigerien military paved the way for a new democratic dispensation.

6 Conclusion: Contingent Democrats in Action

This article examined the attitudes and effects of organized labor on regime change in Niger. In contrast to recent studies on the role of trade unions in sub-Saharan Africa (Kraus 2007; LeBas 2011), it was not confined to the (pre)transition stage. This paper comes to a sobering result: organized labor in Niger posed a consistent and serious threat to all regime types. It supported both democratic and autocratic rule so long as the government met union economic demands. It failed to form any meaningful links with other civil society organizations as it never went beyond the economic interests of public sector workers.

The democratic transition process of the early 1990s was clearly driven by the USTN, which emerged as Niger's most powerful political actor in the run-up to the National Conference. Throughout this process and thereafter (1990 to 1993), economic motives were clearly at the heart of union agitation. This proved detrimental for the subsequent democratic consolidation process. By humiliating the Nigerien army at the National Conference and by delegitimizing the democratically elected government of the Third Republic (1993 to 1996), Ni-

28 The Nigerien media covered numerous examples.

29 *La Rouse de L'Histoire*, Crise Politique au Niger: Le SNECS, 11 November 2009, 2.

30 Interview with Thomas Weber, first secretary of the German embassy in Niamey, and with Thomas Syga, third secretary of the embassy of the United States of America. All interviews were conducted in Niamey in August 2010.

31 *Le Temoin*, La CFDR a désormais un répondant: Le MPDR, 14 November 2009, 2.

ger's unions actively provoked the 1996 coup. Niger's democratic breakdown of 1996 is thus a textbook case of contingent democrats in action (Bellin 2000; Bermeo 1997).

The motives and the actions of organized labor did not change under autocratic rule (1996 to 1999). As the government was keen on public sector reform, organized labor challenged autocratic rule. Although Nigerien labor at times engaged with other societal organizations in protesting autocratic rule, no ideational or organizational linkage emerged between the unions and civil society at large. Organized labor did not become a champion of inclusion and participation as outlined by social movement scholars.

After the second autocratic breakdown in 1999, Niger returned to democratic rule under President Tandja. Due to the disintegration of the USTN into three umbrella union organizations, organized labor lost much of its political leverage. The influx of donor aid and stable world market prices for uranium allowed Tandja to accommodate the economic demands of the unions and other societal actors. The failure of the unions to build a united front against Tandja's third term agenda once more illustrates their fixation with the economic interests of their respective core clientele.

While organized labor has *contributed* to autocratic and democratic breakdowns, the actor that *brought about* regime change was the Nigerien army. Although the Nigerien army installed an autocratic regime in 1996, 1999 and 2010, it initiated democratic transitions. Based on the evidence presented in this article, it seems plausible to argue that the future democratization process in Niger is likely to be more successful given that union power has been weakened and the army appears to have turned into a guardian of republican rule (Baudais and Chauzal 2011).

In contrast to recent writings on democratization potential and organized labor in sub-Saharan Africa (von Holdt 2002; Kraus 2007; LeBas 2011), this article has shown that organized labor can have a negative effect on democratization processes. As such, it contributes to this nascent strand of democratization literature. Of course, the findings here do not falsify the findings from other African cases. As outlined in the introduction, the study on the effects of labor on regime change is based on case studies. The findings from the Nigerien case, however, should serve as a warning that civil society organizations are not, *per se*, agents of democratization. However, the article does counter the findings of those few scholars who worked on Nigerien politics and who regard Niger's unions as "democratic forces" (Charlick 2007; Gazibo 1998; Robinson 1994). The sobering findings on the effects of organized labor in Niger should encourage other political scientists working on African democratization to examine the role of civil society across longer periods of time and vis-à-vis other domestic and international political actors. More often than not, the study of African civil society is confined to the democratic transition stage or to individual political events such as elections or constitutional referenda. The overly optimistic findings on the role of Nigerien labor in the democratization process by other scholars are an outcome of much shorter observation periods.

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