

Niger - Minority Rights Group

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Main religions: Islam, traditional religions.

Main languages: French (official), Hausa, Arabic, Tamashek (Tuareg Berber) Djerma (Songhai), Fulani.

The results of the 2012 Census have yet to be finalized; the previous Census was conducted in 2001. Estimates by the US government for 2006 suggest a population made up of a majority of Hausa (53.1 per cent), followed by Zarma (Djerma/Songhai) (21.2 per cent), Tuareg (11 per cent), Fulani/Peulh (6.5 per cent), Kanuri (5.9 per cent), Gurma (0.8 per cent), Arab (0.4 per cent) and Toubou (0.4 per cent). However, in the absence of universally accepted figures, estimates vary. IWGIA, for example, in its 2011 figures for Niger's indigenous population puts Peulh at 8.5 per cent, Tuareg at 8.3 per cent and Toubou at 1.5 per cent.

In any case, over half of Niger's population is Hausa, settled agriculturists who live in the south.

Second to them, comprising a fifth of the population, are Songhai cultivators whose homeland is located west of the Hausa territory. Songhai are a broad constellation of ethnic clans including the Dendi, Djerma, Gube, Kurtey, Sorko and Woga. Dendi who live on the Niger-Benin border are essentially descendants of the Songhai who resisted the Moroccan conquest of central Songhai and Gao. Djerma are found east of the River Niger between Niamey and the Hausa belt, and along the River Niger. They are believed to be descended from Malinké and the Sarakolé and to have migrated southward from Mali before the rise of the Songhai empire and to have adopted Islam in the tenth century. Dosso, their loose confederacy of small clans and village states, developed a feeling of deeper affinity only after wars with the Fulani and pressure from the Tuareg and became powerful in the nineteenth century, especially under colonial rule.

The arid north and centre are home to Tuareg camel and goat herders, who speak Tamashek, a Berber language.

The traditionally pastoralist Peulh (also known as Fulani, Fula and Toucouleur), nomadic cattle herders who live across the West African Sahel from Senegal and Guinea to Cameroon. Today, most are sedentary. In Niger they are dispersed throughout much of the country, with concentrations in the south-central and west. Their ancestors were known as Bororo, who form a subgroup today which is less Islamicised than sedentary Peulh. The origins of the Peulh is uncertain; it has been postulated that they may be of Ethiopian origin.

Toubou are inhabitants of Tu, the local name for the Tibesti Mountains that are centred in the Sahara of northern Chad and reach into Libya and north-eastern Niger. They are nomadic, traditionally extracting a levy on all caravans and tribute from

sedentary villages. There are at least three distinct castes in Toubou society, and intermarriage is rare. In Niger, Toubou control the salt pans, acting as intermediaries between the Kanuri population of the oases and the Tuareg overlords. Toubou are comprised of Teda (Braouia) and Daza (Gorane). Teda are a branch of the Toubou found mostly in northern Chad and in small numbers in eastern Niger. They call themselves Tedagada (those who speak Tegada) and are related to Kanuri. In Niger they are found in the Kaouar and Djado areas. There are very small numbers of Daza in north-eastern Niger, around Lake Chad. They call themselves Dazagada. Toubou are Muslim, but Islam was not widely followed until well into the 20th century.

Related by language but not livelihood are Kanuri agriculturists of the south-east, near Lake Chad, but many are now urban dwellers. Kanuri are known in Niger by their Hausa name, 'Beri Beri' which Kanuri consider derogatory. With Toubou nomads, some Kanuri continue to exploit remote salt pans and desert oases of Kaouar.

Manga, who speak Kanuri and are sometimes regarded as a sub-group of the Kanuri, live east of Zindar in Agadiz department on the Niger-Chad border.

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With Libya to the north, Mali to the west and Boko Haram-affected areas of Nigeria to the southeast, Niger is susceptible to the spread of insecurity from its neighbours. Currently home to more than 170,000 refugees from Mali and Nigeria, it has taken steps to prevent the spill-over of conflict from either country, though violence by armed groups has escalated in its border regions. This is a particular concern given that, like other areas of the Central Sahel, its population includes numerous overlapping ethnic groupings, including Hausa, Tuareg and Kanuri, whose identities and loyalties in the absence of a strong central state are defined locally rather than nationally.

While the country has face previous outbreaks of ethnic violence – notably, the Tuareg-led armed uprising that consumed the north of the country between 2007 and 2009 – these tensions have not approached the same level of violence as elsewhere in the region, in part because of a more conciliatory approach by authorities to resolving internal disputes. In neighbouring countries such as Mali, extremist groups have effectively exploited tensions between different communities. The government has invested heavily in international peacekeeping efforts across the region, including the African Union (AU)-backed Multinational Joint Task Force to combat Boko Haram across national borders, as well as the 'FC-G5S' force alongside Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Mauritania to fight armed extremist groups in the Sahel. The extent of international involvement in Niger was highlighted in October 2017 when an ambush by militants left at least five Nigerien and three US soldiers dead while on joint patrol in the area.

Nevertheless, in Niger, as in other areas of the Sahel, marginalized nomadic pastoralist minorities are forced to compete with settled farming communities for use of land. There is also conflict between different pastoralist groups. On the border with Mali, economic competition between pastoralist Tuareg and Peulh (Fulani) communities has been exacerbated by political and military factors and capitalized on by extremists, with Fulani youth at times targeted for recruitment by extremists. In these cases, it is likely that communal grievance rather than ideology or religious doctrine is the primary motivation. In this context, existing ethnic divisions have been exacerbated by militant operations and the counter-terrorism strategies of the

Nigerien government, such as the mobilization of Tuareg militias who have been accused of perpetrating attacks against Fulani civilians. Both sides have accused each other of abuses.

Many members of the country's Kanuri ethnic group reside in Diffa, a marginalized region of southeast Niger prone to frequent droughts and flooding. Kanuri make up a large proportion of Boko Haram, the violent extremist organization in neighbouring Nigeria, though this reflects only a small proportion of the Kanuri community as a whole; many Kanuri have also joined anti-Boko Haram civilian militias in Nigeria. Beginning in 2014, Boko Haram's operations in Niger have escalated into attacks on both military and civilian targets, including a camp for internally displaced. State counter-insurgency efforts, meanwhile, have included the displacement of entire villages in Boko Haram-affected areas around Lake Chad, affecting tens of thousands of people including members of the Kanuri and Buduma minorities.

This has exacerbated competition for resources between ethnic groups, something exploited wherever possible by Boko Haram. The authorities suspect some local populations of supporting the armed group, but the reality, according to experts, is that some communities do not have much choice, joining more out of fear, poverty, lack of opportunity and reaction against the state's heavy-handed counter-insurgency tactics than ideological conviction. In parallel to the situation on the Malian border, in the Lake Chad region some Peulh communities reportedly accuse those of the local Buduma group of supporting Boko Haram in order to gain privileged access to the lake for their own economic benefit, while Peulh are accused of using Boko Haram as a pretext for organizing ethnic militias to seize resources for themselves.

The overwhelming majority (around 98 per cent) of Niger's population are Muslim, predominantly Sunni, with less than 2 per cent belonging to various Christian denominations. In January 2015 Niger saw violent riots in several cities sparked in part by President Mahamadou Issoufou's public statement, 'We are all Charlie', following the attacks in Paris on the office of the Charlie Hebdo magazine by sympathizers of the militant Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS), but these protests were also fuelled by wider grievances. However, members of both majority Muslims and the Christian minority made efforts to repair relations between communities.

Despite being banned in 2003, descent-based slavery is still prevalent in Niger, with some estimates suggesting tens of thousands of people are still living as slaves in the country. In particular, slavery continues to be practiced in Tuareg communities, among whom a caste-like hierarchy persists, as well as among Maure and Peulh. The majority are born into slavery and while identifying as Tuareg, many are descended from African communities enslaved by Tuareg raiders generations before. Without rights or recognition, their situation is characterized by abuse, exploitation and sexual assault. For young girls, in particular, the practice of *wahaya* – the sale of a slave as a 'fifth wife' – persists and is predominantly carried out among Tuaregs, with many sold to wealthy Hausa families.

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Environment

The Republic of Niger is a landlocked state on the southern edge of the Sahara in West Africa. Niger is bordered by Algeria, Libya, Chad, Nigeria, Benin, Burkina Faso

and Mali. The north lies in the heart of the Sahara Desert and most of the rest of the country are savannas of the Sahel, although these are giving way as a result of desertification. Southern Niger has some forests. Lake Chad lies in the south-east and the Niger River flows through the extreme west of the country, including the capital, Niamey. Niger has large deposits of uranium.

History

Niger was first inhabited by pastoralists tens of thousands of years ago. As rainfall decreased, they gradually migrated south and became sedentary farmers. Islam was introduced in the 11th century, and in the 14th century, Hausa city-states were established in the south. The Mali Empire to the west controlled parts of present-day Niger until its defeat by the Songhai in the 14th and 15th centuries. The Songhai Empire thrived on trade in salt and gold that depended on Tuareg, Toubou and Peulh traders. It eventually fell to the Moroccan army in 1591.

Meanwhile, in the east of present-day Niger, Kanuri people built the Bornu Empire, which emerged out of the remnants of the centuries-old Kanem Empire that had been centred in present-day Chad. The Bornu Empire captured many slaves and imposed heavy taxes on its subjects. During the 19th century Bornu lost its western Hausa territories to the Peulh-based Sokoto Caliphate, which had risen across today's northern Nigeria and into Niger and Cameroon in the jihad of 1804-1808. Tuaregs and Hausa continuously clashed with the Caliphate.

Europeans explorers arrived late in the 18th century, and in the late 1800s competed to claim African lands. Britain, France and Germany divided the Bornu Empire between the four colonies of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad. The British and the French disrupted the profitable trans-Saharan trade, subjecting the Kanuri to the colonial economy.

In 1892, the French established the capital of the territory it now called 'Soudan' at Kayes, in the west of present-day Mali. French Soudan took on various other names under different geographical configurations, until Niger was finally declared a colony within French West Africa in 1922. France had first conquered sedentary groups in the south, but Tuaregs and Toubou put up armed resistance in response to French efforts to tax their trade. France pursued scorched-earth tactics in the north and east, killing many Tuaregs and Toubou, and driving many more into Nigeria.

For the Songhai the French were sought-after allies who could assist them to stem the dual pressure from Tuaregs in the north and Peulh in the south. The Djerma sub-group in particular were avidly Francophile and joined in the French military pacification of the north.

In 1946 France granted French citizenship to Nigeriens and other colonized peoples. Then in 1957, the French parliament passed a measure allowing broad self-governance. As Niger became autonomous within the French Community in 1958, Hamani Diori was elected as President. Diori's Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN) was one of three main parties, and it was dominated by Songhai, and especially the Djerma sub-group.

Diori remained President upon Niger's full independence on 3 August 1960. He banned other parties and appointed Djerma loyalists to positions of power. High world prices for peanuts, a Nigerien export, and the beginning of uranium exports in the 1960s helped to keep Niger's economy afloat and Diori in power. However, a drop

in peanut prices in the 1970s converged with major drought to turn the economy sour and sharpen political opposition. Additionally, the mining of uranium deposits on traditional Tuareg land led to conflict over the mining and proceeds. In 1974 a group of military officers overthrew and arrested Diouri on grounds that he had embezzled aid sent in response to the drought. Lieutenant Colonel Seyni Kountché, also a Djerma, became President, dissolving the Constitution and the National Assembly. Upon his death from natural causes in 1987, Army Chief of Staff Ali Saibou – another Djerma – assumed the presidency. He formed a new ruling party and confirmed himself as President through a single-party election in December 1989.

Students and union members protested for multi-party democracy. Initially the military opened fire on the protesters, but they persisted and international pressure mounted. Meanwhile, Tuaregs mounted a rebellion in the large northern province of Agadez that was repressed by the military. By the end of 1990, Saibou agreed to a national conference. This was held in 1991, and a transitional government took over in November 1991. Niger held its first democratic elections in 1993, electing Mahamane Ousmane of the ethnic Hausa majority as President. His tenure in office was politically turbulent, but he managed to negotiate a peace agreement with Tuareg fighters in 1995.

In January 1996, Colonel Ibrahim Baré Mainassara, another Hausa, mounted a successful coup. In flawed elections that year, Mainassara became President. He introduced economic reforms in order to gain support from the International Monetary Fund, but western support waned in response to his undemocratic rule. Clashes with Tuaregs continued, and there were two additional peace agreements in 1997 and 1998. Mainassara brutally repressed the opposition and in April 1999 his own presidential guard assassinated him in the course of Niger's third coup d'état since independence.

The putsch leader, Major Daouda Mallam Wanke, served as head of a transitional National Reconciliation Council for nine months. The transitional government drafted a new Constitution that was approved by popular referendum in July 1999. In October and November 1999, Niger held legislative and presidential elections deemed free and fair by international observers. In a second-round runoff against former President Ousmane, Tandja Mamadou won the Presidency with 60 per cent of the vote. Tandja is of Peulh and Kanuri descent, and thus the first non-Hausa and non-Djerma to lead Niger. Following the elections, tensions with the Tuareg community eased somewhat, although there were clashes between Toubou and Tuaregs in 2003.

Tandja survived in power through an army mutiny in the east in 2002. In the December 2004 elections, also deemed free and fair by international observers, he was re-elected to a second five-year term.

In 2003, after years of campaigning by Anti-Slavery International and a local human rights organization called Timidria, the government passed legislation to criminalize slavery. The new law introduced 30-year sentences for those found guilty of the practice, which had been formally banned in 1960 but never punished. Tuareg leaders, in particular, still owned slaves into the 2000s and the practice is believed to continue to this day.

Despite the return to civilian, democratic rule, Niger remained one of the poorest countries in the world. Recurrent drought, expected to continue and worsen with global warming, has plagued its pastoralists and agriculturalist peoples and catalyzed conflict between them. This included the emergence in 2007 of tensions between the

government and the newly formed Tuareg-led Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ), including a number of deadly clashes with government forces, with MNJ fighters targeting the region's uranium extraction sector – a lucrative industry, spearheaded by the French conglomerate Areva, that the group accused of neglecting the health and environment of the local, largely Tuareg population. After extended negotiations, however, the Tuareg insurgency in the north ended with a peace deal in 2009.

However, at the same time Niger was consumed by another source of political instability in the wake of the proposal by Mamadou's party of a constitutional referendum that would have allowed him to stay on beyond the 10-year limit. When refused by the constitutional court, he suspended the Constitution and assumed emergency powers. A political deadlock ensued, characterised by repressive measures against Tandja's critics and political opponents. A military coup in 2010 was followed by a democratic transition. In 2011, and again in 2016, former opposition leader Mahamadou Issoufou was elected President.

Governance

While Niger has in recent years managed to avoid the turmoil and civil conflict that has affected neighbouring countries such as Mali, it nevertheless continues to struggle with internal divisions, political instability and widespread deprivation.

While Niger has substantial uranium reserves and began extracting oil in 2011, earnings from its natural resources have not been distributed equitably. Indeed, inequality and extreme poverty are so widespread that the country was ranked at the very bottom of the 189 countries in UNDP's 2018 Human Development Report.

Numerous ethnic groupings in the Central Sahel – including Hausa, Tuareg and Kanuri – overlap and surpass national borders. With weak and distant central state systems, their identities and loyalties are defined locally rather than nationally. As international bodies such as the UN Security Council have pointed out, extremist groups have proven themselves adept at exploiting existing tensions between pastoralists and farmers and between various ethnic groups in order to perpetuate violence for their own ends. Niger has joined the African Union (AU)-backed Multinational Joint Task Force to combat Boko Haram across national borders, as well as the 'FC-G5S' force alongside Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Mauritania to combat armed extremist groups in the Sahel: this force will join French and Mali-based UN forces patrolling the region.

November 2015 saw the arrest on child-trafficking charges of Hama Amadou, the one-time head of the National Assembly and a political opponent of the current President, Mahamadou Issoufou. Amadou was subsequently released after the February 2016 polls, boycotted by the opposition and won by Issoufou. Despite concerns among political opponents that he may, like his predecessor, seek to extend his rule beyond the constitutional two-term limit, Issoufou promised in April 2017 not to seek a third term.

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Minority based and advocacy organisations

Sources and further reading

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Peoples Under Threat map

Our interactive map highlights countries most at risk of genocide and mass killing.

[See where Niger ranks](#)