

Niger: Power through Ethnicity

Introduction

- Niger is a very densely populated sahelien landlocked country. Ranking on the second place of the “least livable” countries (published by the UN 2003) it is one of the poorest countries in the world.
- In precolonial history the people of today’s Niger met the challenges of the rise and fall of different empires (Songhai, Hausa) and Invadors (Tuareg, Fulani).
- Niger is made up of several very distinctive ethnic groups. The biggest group constitute the Hausa followed by the Zarma, Fulani and Tuareg. Even though ethnicity is played down by the government it is an important factor of Nigerien society.

French colonization

<< to colonize is to alter identity>> (Miles1994, p.42)

After pulling the borders of colonial territories in Europe, the French met strong resistance when conquering the sahelian region and first could establish the colony in 1922. After dividing Niger into cantons and groupments they took the existing social hierarchy and changed it to their needs. These new “traditional” chefs de canton acted as administrative helpers and intermediaries but they had no claim to ruler ship or legitimacy in a traditional way. (Chefs were appointed by the French and not by the Africans)

The French had different impacts on the different ethnic groups. The Zarma started to collaborate closely with the French and caused the change of the capital to Niamey which brought them privileges concerning education, military and work in the administration. The Hausa reacted with passive resistance and Hausa society was barely changed by French influence. Nomads like the Tuareg were urged to become seditary. By freeing the slaves the social system of the Tuareg was turned up side down. It also caused tensions among the “originally” free Hausa and Zarma community because of land claims of the former slaves.

As the French didn’t have any economic interests in Niger, economy or education was hardly promoted. As result only 2% of Nigerien children were visiting primary school by the end of French rule. Due to their tax policy Nigerien farmers had changed their food crops to cash crops and made the country much more vulnerable to famines.

The independent State

The independent Niger started out with a presidential system meaning dominance of one person, the president. The first President and the inner political circle consisted only of members of the Zarma ethnic group. The in the colonial time created traditional chefs de canton (traditional chiefs) continued to be an important power factor in Niger as they had direct influence on the decision making process in the villages.

In 1974 a military regime was established through a coup d’etat of military officers. The new Leader was from the Zarma too and built his leadership to a personal rule of Niger.

Due to social dissatisfaction Niger tried to establish a democracy in the 90ies, with some starting problems a democtaric government was acived in 1999 with Mamadou Tandja (Kanuri) as current president.

Tuareg

Social dissatisfaction was expressed most significantly by the Tuareg in the 90ies. Because promised new infrastructure wasn’t realized and the Tuareg wanted to profit from the uranium mining in their region, a rebellion arouse.

The main aim of the Tuareg was more autonomy, decentralisation and profit from the uranium mining. As many people in Niger were unhappy with the current government this conflict led to a change of the political structure. The political instability and economic problems prevented any success in carrying out the peace agreement. Only in the year 2000 through pressure of foreign countries a, as it seems, definitive peace agreement could be found.

National feelings

It is difficult to say if the Nigeriens feel united because of their nation or religion. The survey from Miles shows that there is a certain national consciousness, but it doesn't come in first place (most important religion). 44 Years of common history has defiantly created a feeling of unity and maybe this feeling will be in an other 44 years stronger.

Conclusion

There has never been a struggle for power between the ethnic groups in Niger. Reasons are probably the different reactions towards the colonialists. Through cooperating with the French the Zarma were educated and employed in the colonial administration and ensured their dominance in the independent state and leadership. The Hausa who are actually the most dominant ethnic group numerically reacted with passive resistance and tried not to be influenced by the French. They succeeded and were classified as "conservative" that closed the way to a right to have a proper voice in the "modern" state. The Nomads especially the Tuareg answered with open resistance that led to the total exclusion of any support.

An other reason might be the rurality of Niger and the hard conditions of life. Most of the people are farmers and live on the country ($\frac{3}{4}$), still over 70% of Nigers inhabitants are illiterate today and they might just be more occupied with their survival than with politics. Also the emerge of towns has created new problems: inequality, alcoholism, prostitution (among teenage girls too) - due to the breakdown of traditional social patterns - neglected children and abig gap between urban and rural people.

With its bad economic situation and poverty Niger has many economic and social problems to tackle. Ethnicity doesn't seem to be favoured but as the ethnic groups still remain very distinctive and many social problems exist, it is an issue that has to be well looked after.

Literature

Charlick, Robert B. 1991: Niger, Personal Rule and Survival in the Sahel. Westview Press Boulder, Colorado.

Fuglestad Finn 1983: A History of Niger 1850 – 1960. Cambridge University Press, London.

Lund Christian 1998: Law, Power and Politics in Niger. Land Struggles and the Rural Code. Lit Verlag Hamburg

Miles William F.S. 1994: Hausaland divided. Colonialism and Independence in Nigeria and Niger. Cornell University Press Ithaca and London.

Wegemund Regina 2000: Tuareg in Mali und Niger – Rebellion einer Ethnie. Vergleichbare Konfliktursachen, unterschiedlicher Verlauf. In Internationales Afrikaforum, Issue 4/ 2000, p.379 – 387.