

# **Democratic Revolutionaries or Pocketbook Protestors? The Comparative Salience of Personal Rule and Famine in the Nigerien Uprisings of 2009-2010**

Lisa Mueller<sup>1</sup>

Ph.D Candidate

UCLA Department of Political Science

[lisatangmueller@gmail.com](mailto:lisatangmueller@gmail.com)

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## **Abstract**

Are supposed “pro-democracy” protests really about democracy? This paper compares the salience of political and economic grievances in Niger, a country that recently experienced mass demonstrations amidst a famine and President Mamadou Tandja’s attempt to defy the constitution and seek a third term in office. Using original survey data from a random sample of Niamey residents, I find that having *low prospects of upward mobility* is associated with a higher likelihood of protest participation, whereas opposition to Tandja’s anti-constitutional politics is not. Hence, the Nigerien uprisings of 2009-2010 seem to have been driven mainly by economic, rather than political, grievances.

Membership in civic organizations is also associated with higher protest participation, confirming earlier findings. I explore the mechanism behind this relationship and show that group membership facilitates protesting via mobilization and not framing effects.

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Although the 2011 protests in North Africa and the Middle East had varied outcomes, most pundits and scholars agree that the citizens who took to the streets in Egypt, Libya, and elsewhere in the Arab world wanted democracy. Dissent against authoritarian governments was overt and dramatic: a young Tunisian merchant set himself ablaze in front of a government building to protest mistreatment from municipal authorities (Howard et al. 2011, 2); for over two weeks, tens of thousands of Egyptians occupied Tahir Square in Cairo demanding a regime change (BBC News 2011). Despite autocrats' demonstrated willingness to repress the opposition, high protest turnout and the long duration of the Arab Spring signaled a "democratic fervor" (Sly 2011) that seemingly arose from mounting frustration with longstanding restrictions on civil liberties and political participation.

These events mirrored earlier waves of democratization, such as the one that swept Sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s. Over that decade, nineteen African countries instituted multiparty politics and held their first competitive elections in the wake of mass demonstrations led by labor unions and student organizations. Although many of Africa's new democracies remained weak and eventually reverted to authoritarianism (Kapstein and Converse 2008), research suggests that constraints on heads of state have tightened for good (Posner and Young 2007). Staffan I. Lindberg further asserts that elections in Sub-Saharan Africa, even if not perfectly free and fair, have promoted democratic behavior among rulers and "democratic culture" among citizens (Lindberg 2006, xii). This might explain why Africans seem ready to defend their hard-won democracies against abuses of executive power. Leaders seeking extra-constitutional means of

extending their terms in office often face public outrage and coup attempts, as did Guinea's Dadis Camara and Niger's Mamadou Tandja in recent years.

But the question remains: How much do attitudes toward democracy really drive protests in transitional regimes? Emerging democracies with high protest participation rates tend to have other characteristics—such as bad economies and young populations—that could also account for uprisings. Could it be that some or most of the people who join pro-democracy movements see a political opening to pursue material gains? Answering this question is important, because if “democratic fervor” is weaker than it appears, then optimism for democratic consolidation may be misplaced.

There are several reasons why researchers have yet to answer the above questions. First, the study of democratic transitions has traditionally occurred at a macro-institutional level (e.g. North and Weingast 1989; Przeworski et al. 2000; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006) rather than an individual-behavioral level. Second, studies on why some people protest and others do not tend to focus either exclusively on economic grievances (eg. Golstone and McAdam 2002; Shapiro 2002) or on political grievances in countries that are already democratic (e.g. Fernandez and McAdam 1988; Morris 1981; Walgrave and Manssens 2000); this precludes researchers from comparing the salience of economic and regime-related grievances, making it difficult to explain protest behavior in the developing world. Third, few studies about attitudinal variables also consider structural variables—i.e. the ability of would-be protestors to overcome collective action dilemmas. Finally, surveys conducted during protests often overlook the possibility that different citizens might be protesting (or not protesting) for different reasons.

The present study attempts to overcome these problems by analyzing original data from Niger, an unstable democracy that recently underwent simultaneous economic and political upheaval. It addresses why some people protest and others do not, while paying attention to the specific grievances that drive protest participation. The main finding is that economic grievances, namely *low prospects of upward mobility*, had a more significant influence on Nigeriens' decisions to protest than dissatisfaction with Mamadou Tandja's efforts to circumvent presidential term limits. This finding, along with evidence that many Nigeriens actually *supported* the extension of Tandja's tenure, contradicts international perceptions of the protests as a public cry for democracy. It also casts doubt on interpretations of other supposed pro-democracy movements, namely those that unfold in contexts where autocracy and poverty coincide.

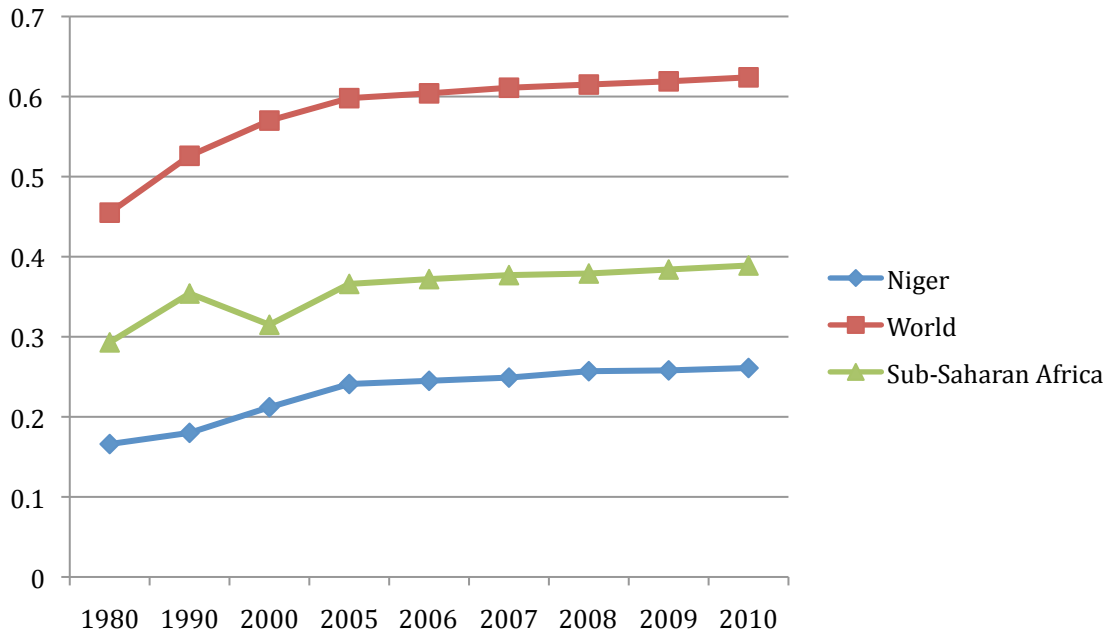
The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: the first section provides background on Niger's famine, constitutional crisis, and subsequent protests; the second section reviews protest theories and outlines hypotheses; the third section describes data and methods; the fourth section summarizes main results and robustness tests; a final section concludes with policy implications and suggestions for further research.

## **FAMINE, *TAZARTCHÉ*, AND PROTEST IN NIGER**

Niger, a landlocked and semiarid country whose neighbors include Nigeria, Libya, and Chad, is one of the least developed countries in the world. Although it has seen slight improvements in its Human Development Index (a composite measure of various dimensions of living standards), it consistently ranks far below the global average and even the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa (Figure 1). Life expectancy is 53 years; less than

a third of the population is literate; and two-thirds of the population lives below the international poverty line of US\$1.25 per day (UNICEF 2011).

**Figure 1: Human Development Index**



Source: United Nations Development Program 2011

One of Niger’s most profound and urgent development problems is food insecurity. Even in relatively bountiful years, food producers struggle with low rainfall and volatile markets. Niger has experienced successive famines as a result of droughts and locust invasions, including one that reached its height in 2005 and continues to the present day (*Economist* 2005; Tsai 2010). Supplies are often imported over long distances from coastal ports and more fertile regions, making the little food that is available extremely expensive for the average citizen. USAID’s Famine Early Warning Systems Network estimates that over seven million Nigeriens are at risk for moderate to extreme food insecurity (USAID, cited in Tsai 2010). Meanwhile, international food aid

has been unable to compensate for the government's mismanagement of the crisis, a fact that Niger's leaders have tried unsuccessfully to conceal. While he was still in office, President Mamadou Tandja forbade public debate on the famine and accused journalists who covered the topic of being anti-patriotic (Nossiter 2010). He refused to distribute grain stored in state warehouses, vehemently denying the population's urgent need for relief (Nossiter 2010).

Despite his failure to alleviate the country's food shortage, Tandja announced in 2008 that he would seek a third term in office "to satisfy the popular will" and to continue his development program (Baudais and Chauzal 2011, 298). To that end, he tried in 2009 to hold a referendum on revising the constitution's two-term limit. This attempt, known as *tazartché* (or "continuity" in Hausa), prompted lawmakers and judges to invoke Article 49 of the constitution, which prohibits referenda on constitutional amendments. Tandja nevertheless dissolved the National Assembly and began ruling by decree, effectively dismantling the democratic institutions established at the National Conference of 1990. He eventually held and won a referendum to change the constitution, flouting condemnation from opposition members and the international community. The ruling MNSD party also swept local and parliamentary elections amidst an opposition boycott.

During this period, thousands of anti-government protestors took the streets of the capital and labor unions declared a 48-hour nationwide strike. The government dispersed crowds with tear gas (BBC News 2009) and declared strikes illegal (RFI 2009), drawing sharp criticism from diplomats and regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). While reprimanding Tandja, foreign

governments were also quick to praise the protestors and striking workers as defenders of democracy. A former United States ambassador to South Africa and Nigeria called on the international community “to commend the Nigeriens for continuing in this fight to sustain and return democracy to Niger” (RFI 2010). Reinforcing international perceptions of Nigeriens as committed democrats, foreign media published quotes from opposition members admonishing Tandja and denouncing *tazartché* (e.g. Nossiter 2009).

On 18 February 2010 a military faction calling itself the Supreme Council for the Restoration of Democracy captured the president and dissolved the government. The junta promised to address food insecurity and hold free and fair elections, using rhetoric that was “eminently well adapted to international democratic standards” (Baudais and Chauzal 2011, 299). True to their word, the junta leaders staged elections nine months later and yielded power to the winners. Although the military had intervened in politics in a decidedly irregular manner, the international community regarded this intervention as a “corrective coup” that restored some semblance of democracy to Niger (Baudais and Chauzal 2011, 299). Thousands of Nigeriens again spilled into the streets, this time to celebrate Tandja’s ouster (*The Economist* 2010). The public reaction to the coup reinforced the image of Nigeriens as committed democrats and of Niger as “a compelling test case for the viability of meaningful democracy in the poorest countries (Davis and Kossomi 2001, 87). Seldom did the international news media mention food insecurity in their coverage of the 2009-2010 demonstrations.

## PROTEST THEORIES AND HYPOTHESES

At first glance, it is clear why Nigeriens protested: they were unhappy with Tandja's personal rule. However, a crowd does not have a single mind (Granovetter 1978; Kuran 1991, 16) and individuals' decisions of whether to protest or stay home presumably result from a complex combination of factors that *push* them to challenge the status quo and *pull* them into collective action (Scacco 2008). The following paragraphs review theories about individual protest behavior and derive testable hypotheses from them. These theories can be grouped into two general categories: *grievance theories* and *collective action theories*. Together, they address the circumstances under which people have both *the will* and *the way* to protest.

### Grievance Theories

At the most basic level, people protest because they are upset. The prevailing wisdom is that Nigeriens protested in 2010 because they were unwilling to accept Tandja's efforts to revise the constitution and remain in power. However, as later sections of the paper detail, a sizeable portion of Niger's population actually thought Tandja's unconstitutional move was justified. By exploiting variation in attitudes toward *tazartché*, it is possible to systematically test the following hypothesis:

*H<sub>1</sub>: People who oppose tazartché are more likely to protest than people who support it.*

In addition to political grievances, Nigeriens may have been motivated by grievances related to their poverty and the ongoing famine:

*H<sub>2</sub>: People who perceive their living conditions to be bad are more likely to protest.*

Some research suggests that it is not *absolute*, but rather *relative* deprivation that drives protests. This idea gained prominence with the publication in 1970 of Ted Robert

Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*. Some studies estimate that relative deprivation (RD) has little or no effect on protest participation (e.g. Sayles 2007), while others find that only certain types of RD matter. Motivated by the theoretical literature distinguishing "egoistic" from "fraternal" RD (Crosby 1976; Olson 1995; Runciman 1966), Dubé and Guimond (1983) and Walker and Mann (1987) find that personal discontent with one's relative social position (*egoistic* RD) has less of an effect on protest behavior than an individual's discontent with the social position of her or his identity group (*fraternal* RD). Some scholars also highlight *temporal* RD, whereby individuals assess their wellbeing relative to their own wellbeing in the past (Shapiro 2002, 121). In short, the effects of relative deprivation on protest behavior suggest three hypotheses:

*H<sub>3</sub>: People who feel that they are less advantaged than other people are more likely to protest. (Egoistic RD Hypothesis)*

*H<sub>4</sub>: People who feel that their social group is less advantaged than other social groups are more likely to protest. (Fraternal RD Hypothesis)*

*H<sub>5</sub>: People who feel that their current living conditions are worse than their living conditions in the past are more likely protest. (Temporal RD Hypothesis)*

Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) pioneered the *prospects of upward mobility* (POUM) hypothesis, which states that people will be less inclined to resist the status quo if they expect their wellbeing to improve. To explain the intuition behind this hypothesis, they use an analogy of a two-lane tunnel with all traffic heading in the same direction and slow to a standstill. The tunnel is so long that nobody can see to the end. If a driver suddenly notices cars beginning to accelerate in the next lane, she will not initially be bitter, but will instead take this as a sign that her lane might also start to move sometime

soon. This acceptance of one's current suffering is called "the tunnel effect." However, if after a while the driver's lane does not begin to speed up, the driver will get angry and switch lanes, possibly even despite signs prohibiting lane switching. Hirschman and Rothschild note that when the tunnel effect wears off, the immobile "experience the turnaround from hopefulness to disenchantment," a situation that "clearly contains much potential for social upheaval" and "might even qualify as a theory of revolution" (1973, 552). As long as people have prospects of upward mobility, though, they will be disinclined to protest the status quo. Using a formal model, Bénabou and Ok (2001) illustrate that this theory is compatible with rational choice.

Several studies have empirically corroborated the POUM hypothesis. Using survey data from Russia, Ravallion and Lokshin (2000) estimate that people with better expectations for their future welfare are less likely to support government limits on the incomes of the rich. This relationship held even if respondents' incomes are below average. Alesina and La Ferrara (2004) similarly observe that Americans who believe that their families will experience improved living conditions are less likely to support redistribution. Checchi and Filippin (2003) conducted a laboratory experiment in which subjects chose levels of income redistribution after viewing simulations of how different tax rates might change their incomes over time. Respondents who saw a matrix depicting higher prospects of upward mobility consistently preferred lower tax rates.

While earlier research has explored the effects of POUM on political preferences, it has generally ignored the effects of POUM on political behavior. The relevance of the POUM hypothesis to the study of protest lies in the sources of grievances. Whereas relative deprivation theories attribute frustration to the disparity between a person's

current wellbeing and the wellbeing of others, the POUM literature argues that grievances derive from the disparity between a person's current wellbeing and that person's projected future wellbeing. It contends that even the most objectively dismal living conditions will not necessarily fuel people's desire to challenge the state of affairs if people believe that they will become better off eventually. This would help explain widespread political quiescence in extremely poor societies.

*H<sub>6</sub>: People with low prospects of upward mobility are more likely to protest than people with high prospects of upward mobility.*

### **Collective Action Theories**

Collective action theories acknowledge that even the most aggrieved people will not protest if they cannot cooperate and coordinate around their collective goals (McAdam 1986). Mancur Olson (1965) popularized the idea that members of a group will "free-ride" if they expect others to bear the costs and the risks of mounting a social movement. If the collective goal is a public good such as democracy or lower food prices, a rational person will prefer to consume the good without shouldering any burden associated with obtaining it. If all members of the community are equally rational, then collective action never occurs. Only if group members receive selective incentives or are coerced into participating will a protest materialize.

Other theories of collective action center on communication dilemmas (Kielbowicz and Scherer 1986; Tarrow 1998, 114-116). Here, the problem is not cooperation but coordination. For people to work together toward a common goal, they must agree on a course of action, i.e. where to meet, which message to convey, etc. It can be especially difficult to coordinate protests in developing countries where the mail

system is slow, internet service limited, and cellular phone reception unreliable. Repressive governments compound communication problems by restricting the media. Under heavy censorship, people might not even know whom to target with their demands, let alone how to coordinate the logistics of a demonstration. In societies with low levels of wage labor (namely agricultural societies), less on-the-job socialization translates into less information-sharing and higher barriers to collective action (Ross 2008, 108). Therefore, collective action can fail even provided a group's common desire to protest and the presence of mechanisms to prevent free-riding.

Scacco (2007; 2008) finds that Nigerians who attend community meetings are more likely to participate in ethnic riots. Using a variety of tests, she shows that this relationship obtains not because rioters are already more likely to socialize or because community meetings drum up grievances, but rather because community meetings expose people to social networks that "pull" rioters to the front lines. By exerting social pressure that discourages free-riding (hence solving cooperation problems) and by facilitating the exchange of information (hence solving coordination problems), community meetings might likewise encourage protest participation.

However, it is often difficult to determine whether people protest because they attend community meetings or the other way around. To avoid this problem of causal inference, one can examine another measure of community involvement that is less likely to be endogenous to protest participation. Numerous studies have cited correlations between membership in organizations and other forms of civic involvement (e.g. Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba et al. 1995). Being a member of a group such as a student organization or a labor union is typically less *ad hoc* than attending community

meetings. Whereas community meetings may be organized specifically around a protest event, civil society groups generally exist to address ongoing grievances apart from those that inspire a given protest. Therefore, to the extent that protestors are more likely, *ceteris paribus*, to be members of civil society organizations, it is reasonable to assume that contact with fellow members was the mobilizing factor:

*H<sub>7</sub>: People who are members of civil society organizations are more likely to protest than people who are not.*

Informal social networks might also be important for mobilizing protestors. Scacco (2008), McAdam (1986), and others emphasize “prior contact” with friends and family, which is important for mobilizing protestors especially in recruitment contexts where political activism is not the norm (Fernandez and McAdam 1988). Their research suggests the following more general hypothesis, which applies to people who are members of organizations, as well as to those who are not:

*H<sub>8</sub>: People who are asked to protest are more likely to protest.*

## **DATA AND METHODS**

I test the above hypotheses with original survey data collected in the capital of Niger during the summer of 2011. Questions focused on citizens’ attitudes toward *tazartché* and economic conditions, and some resembled questions from the popular Afrobarometer surveys, which cover twenty African countries from 1999 to 2008. Because the Afrobarometer sample does not include Niger, the present study is an opportunity to supplement existing data and to test the validity of analyses that show a

correlation between protest participation and low prospects of upward mobility (Mueller 2010).

### **Sampling Procedure**

I restrict the sample to the capital city, because that is where the protests of 2009-2010 were concentrated and where citizens likely faced the decision of whether or not to participate. The urban milieu is representative of mobilization contexts in most developing countries, where urban populations are less likely than their rural counterparts to protest. Rural dwellers often face coordination problems associated with being geographically dispersed<sup>2</sup> and are excluded from technological or employment-based information networks. Robert Bates (1981) famously highlighted this phenomenon in his explanation of why African leaders exhibit political bias toward urbanites in order to appease their would-be opponents. Looking beyond Africa, John Bohstedt (1983) likewise observed that riots in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England and Wales were most likely to occur in towns.

Local enumerators used a quasi-random sampling procedure to administer questionnaires to over 300 men and women in 40 Niamey neighborhoods. On each day of the ten-day survey period, enumerators began at a central location (usually a taxi stop) and walked in opposite directions. They selected houses at intervals determined by randomly drawing a number from one to five (for example, drawing a “3” would mean knocking on the door of every third house). Although enumerators generally surveyed the first person to answer the door, they were instructed to sample approximately the same

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to coordination effects, Rule (1988) proposes that physical proximity may affect protest propensity through emotional or grievance-based mechanisms: “The shared experience of reacting to a single source of stimulation, or sharing a strong emotion, almost irresistibly draws the exposed individual into the crowd state” (94).

number of men as women each day, which sometimes required asking members of a household whether a woman was available for an interview.<sup>3</sup> Surveys were conducted in the respondent's language of choice—usually Hausa, Zarma, or French.

## Variables

The dichotomous dependent variable is *Protest Participation*, derived from a question asking respondents whether they participated in a protest during the previous year. Independent variables include the following:

- *Opposition to Tazartché*: whether a respondent opposes Tandja's attempt to change the constitution and seek a third term in office. This variable was coded from responses to the open-ended question, "What is your opinion on *tazartché*?"
- *Absolute Deprivation*: whether a respondent considers her or his present living conditions to be either "bad" or "very bad."
- *Relative Deprivation (Egoistic)*: whether a respondent considers her or his living conditions to be worse than those of other Nigeriens.
- *Relative Deprivation (Fraternal)*: whether a respondent considers the living conditions of her or his ethnic group to be worse than those of other ethnic groups in the country.
- *Relative Deprivation (Temporal)*: whether a respondent considers her or his living conditions to be worse now than they were a year ago.

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<sup>3</sup> In a similar study conducted in Malawi a month earlier, enumerators found that women were the most likely to be at home during the day, resulting in the under-sampling of men. In Niamey, our research team encountered the opposite problem: women did not usually answer the door and were sometimes discouraged by their male relatives from participating in the survey. According to focus groups conducted mid-study, this tendency stems from religious customs (most Nigeriens are observant Muslims). Although enumerators gently inquired about the availability of women to answer questions, in the end only about 30% of the sample was female.

- *Low Prospects of Upward Mobility (POUM)*: whether a respondent expects her or his living conditions to be no better in the next five years.
- *Organization Member*: whether a respondent is a member of an organization such as a student group, a labor union, or a neighborhood association.

Regressions also include the following control variables:

- *Female*: a variable that takes a value of “1” if the respondent is female and “0” if the respondent is male. In Niger more than in many Sub-Saharan African countries, men are more visible in political life than women and are presumably more likely to protest.
- *Age*: Younger people can be expected to protest more, because they are more likely to be students and free from familial or vocational obligations that raise the opportunity costs of protesting. Scholars have attributed historical events such as the American civil rights movement and the decomposition of the Soviet Union to demographic shifts and “life-course processes” that produce large populations of frustrated young people: “Political generations emerge when particular birth cohorts are exposed to highly distinctive life experiences during adolescence or young adulthood” (Goldstone and McAdam 2002, 195). Similar processes may explain recent uprisings in Niger and the Arab world, where teenagers and young adults comprise a sizeable portion of the population.
- *Education*: a categorical variable indicating the respondent’s highest level of education: primary school or less, Koranic (religious) school, secondary school, or post-secondary school. Kirwin and Cho (2009) find a significant and positive

effect of education on protest participation in Africa, proposing that better educated people are more politically aware than less educated people.

- *Religiosity*: a variable indicating whether a respondent is “very religious,” “religious,” “somewhat religious,” or “not religious.” In focus groups and open-ended survey questions, many Nigeriens attributed their economic conditions to God’s will, suggesting that people who are more religious may be less likely to protest.<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars have argued that social movements are “ecology-dependent,” meaning that physical spaces organize people into networks that facilitate or impede protest mobilization (e.g. Fantasia 1988; Zhao 1998). In addition to exposing people to grievances and affecting their ability to coordinate, location might simply make it more or less convenient to protest. All of these considerations are salient in Niamey, which is divided into two sections by the Niger River, with businesses and government buildings concentrated on one side and residences concentrated on the other. Examining the data revealed that protesters indeed lived mainly on one side of the river and in downtown neighborhoods. Some of the 40 neighborhoods surveyed had protest participation rates as low as seven percent, whereas others had rates as high as sixty percent. To account for this spatial variation, the models include neighborhood fixed effects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This contrasts with other African contexts, such as Malawi, where churches led protests against the Banda dictatorship (Posner 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Despite the apparent geographic concentration of protest activity, the coefficients for neighborhood effects were almost all statistically insignificant.

## RESULTS

Table 1 displays summary statistics for all variables. Considering Niger's objective levels of poverty and hunger, strikingly few respondents expressed grievances of any kind. The most common economic grievance was *absolute deprivation*, although less than one fifth of respondents said that their current economic situations were bad or very bad. Nigeriens were also very hopeful for the future: most expected their economic situations to improve in the next year.

At first glance, Nigeriens appear more politically than economically aggrieved. Forty-two percent of respondents opposed Tandja's attempt to stay in power, although international observers might be surprised that opposition to *tazartché* was not higher. While some respondents opined that *tazartché* led to famine and anarchy, many stated that it was good for the country. Twelve percent of respondents even associated *tazartché* with democracy, echoing Tandja's claim that changing the constitution was in line with popular wishes.

***Table 1: Summary Statistics***

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Protest participation	30%
Opposition to <i>tazartché</i>	42%
Absolute deprivation	19%
Relative deprivation (egoistic)	10%
Relative deprivation (fraternal)	7%
Relative deprivation (temporal)	18%
Low prospects of upward mobility	47%
Organization member	18%
Female	30%
Age 18-29	37%
Age 30-39	32%
Age 40 and over	31%
Primary education or less	22%
Koranic school	21%
Secondary education	23%
Post-secondary education	34%
Very religious	31%
Religious	37%
Somewhat religious	13%
Not religious	19%

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However, grievances do not necessarily compel people to protest. To systematically investigate the effects of grievances on protest behavior, I estimate the logistic regression model summarized in Table 2. Having low prospects of upward mobility is the only economic grievance with a statistically and substantively significant effect: controlling for other variables, expecting that one's economic situation will not improve over the next five years increases one's odds of protesting by a factor of two. In keeping with earlier research and theoretical predictions, being a member of an organization also makes one more likely to protest.

**Table 2: Logit Model of Protest Participation<sup>a</sup>**

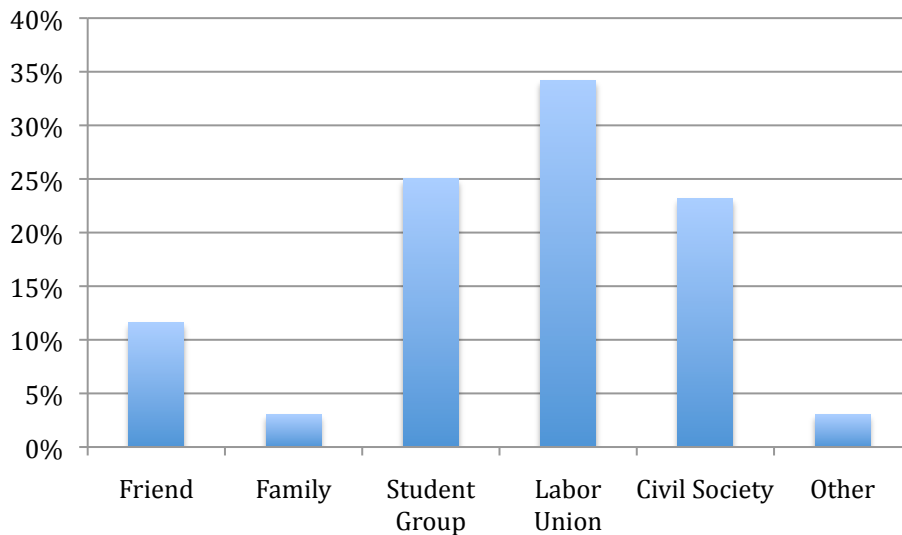
Opposition to <i>tazartché</i>	0.198 (0.363)
Absolute deprivation	-0.081 (0.567)
Relative deprivation (egoistic)	-0.090 (0.664)
Relative deprivation (fraternal)	-0.485 (0.795)
Relative deprivation (temporal)	0.713 (0.512)
Low prospects of upward mobility	<b>0.801</b> <b>(0.415)</b>
Organization member	<b>1.442</b> <b>(0.408)</b>
Female	-0.467 (0.406)
Age	-0.011 (0.017)
Koranic school (vs. primary education or less)	<b>-2.400</b> <b>(0.722)</b>
Secondary education (vs. primary education or less)	-0.427 (0.514)
Post-secondary education (vs. primary education or less)	0.570 (0.475)
Religious (vs. very religious)	-0.355 (0.431)
Somewhat religious (vs. very religious)	-0.433 (0.674)
Not religious (vs. very religious)	-0.257 (0.687)
$R^2$	0.249
$N$	311

<sup>a</sup>Logit estimates using neighborhood fixed effects, with standard errors in parentheses. Bold type indicates statistical significance at the 10% level or better.

Social networks, too, seem to influence the likelihood that a respondent protested in the past year. Hypothesis 8 states that people will be more likely to protest if they are asked to do so. A preliminary analysis of the data confirmed that virtually all protest participants had been asked to participate, whereas virtually all respondents who did not protest had not been asked. Hypothesis 8 finds support in the finding that being asked to

protest almost perfectly determines protest participation.<sup>6</sup> The fact that respondents report having been asked to protest by student groups and labor unions (Figure 2)<sup>7</sup> suggests a mobilization mechanism and not simply a self-selection mechanism (whereby people who join civic organizations are already more likely to protest).

**Figure 2: “Who asked you to protest?”**



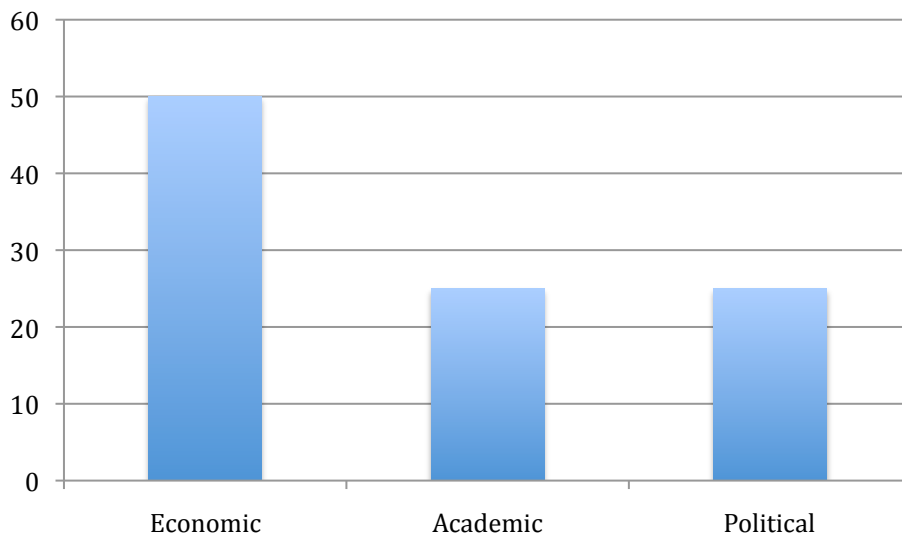
On the other hand, attending Koranic school has a *negative* effect on protest participation, although religiosity does not. This suggests that membership in a religious network, and not faith per se, deters protest participation. This finding also squares with previous research showing that “social ties may constrain as well as encourage activism” (McAdam and Paulsen 1993, 645).

<sup>6</sup> To avoid estimation problems related to colinearity, I include only one of these covariates in the regression model.

<sup>7</sup> Mueller (2009) likewise finds using Afrobarometer data that members of labor unions are more likely to protest than non-members.

In sum, attitudes toward *tazartché* have no apparent effect on protest participation. The primacy of economic (vs. political) grievances is also evident in responses to the open-ended question, “What were you protesting against?” Figure 3 shows that the minority of protestors had political concerns, whereas most said they were protesting “*la vie chère*” (the high cost of living). The most politically salient economic grievance is low prospects of upward mobility—a finding that supports aforementioned theories about why present economic conditions tend not to correlate with demands for redistribution.

**Figure 3: Protestors’ Grievances**



### **Robustness**

In addition to asking whether respondents expect their economic situations to be worse in the next five years, enumerators asked about respondents’ expectations for the next year alone. To check the robustness my results, I re-estimated the model using this alternative measure of prospects of upward mobility. Shorter-term prospects of upward

mobility do not have a significant effect on protest propensity, suggesting that people who joined the 2010 protests had long time horizons and were targeting a president that they expected to remain in power for a third term.

Since it is plausible that older people are not as anxious about future economic conditions as younger people, I also re-estimated the model while including an interaction term between age and prospects of upward mobility. This term was negative and statistically significant, suggesting that, indeed, the older one is, the lower the effect of POUM on one's likelihood of protesting. Including the interaction term did not, however, change the significance of the main effect: people with low POUM were still more likely to protest, all else equal.

### **Explaining the Relative Salience of Grievances**

Observing that having low prospects of upward mobility was the most salient grievance in Niger's recent protests, one might wonder why. Did civil society groups rhetorically frame events to make people believe that the economic future was bleak and warranted protesting? Did Tandja manage to paint *tazartché* as democratic, thereby allaying concerns about his attempt to stay in power? Although it is beyond the scope of this paper and political science to explain individuals' psychological responses to political and economic shocks, existing data permit a general analysis of the sources of grievances in the Nigerien uprisings.

#### *Political Entrepreneurship*

Numerous studies have underlined the role of social contacts in conditioning grievances (Christopoulos 2006; Morris and Staggenborg 2005; Popkin 1988; Robnett 1996). Political entrepreneurs such as labor union leaders can strategically frame current

events and convince people a) that they have low prospects of upward mobility; and b) that they should therefore protest. Hence, being a member of an organization might encourage protest participation not only through *coordination effects* (i.e. by facilitating communication about protest logistics) and *cooperation effects* (i.e. by facilitating social sanctioning and the transfer of selective incentives), but also through *framing effects*. However, simple cross-tabulation suggests that group membership is *not* the reason why people have low prospects of upward mobility. In fact, group members are relatively optimistic: thirty-five percent of them have low POUM, versus half of non-members. To test whether group membership encourages people with low POUM to protest, I re-estimated the main model while including an interaction term between low POUM and group membership. This term was statistically significant and negative, implying that group membership *reduces* the effect of POUM on protest participation (possibly because civic organizations provide a forum outside of the streets for voicing grievances). In short, framing effects do not seem to explain the relative salience of POUM in the 2010 protests. To the extent that group membership is correlated with protest participation, it is more likely through mobilization (i.e. coordination and cooperation) effects.

Despite the coup that eventually removed him from power, there are signs that Tandja was rather successful at managing popular dissatisfaction with his rule. Having helped to overthrow President Hamani Diori in 1974, Tandja likely foresaw the risks of appearing to defy citizens' will. He accordingly launched an aggressive *pro-tazartché* public relations campaign, benefiting from a strong democratic mandate acquired by winning two bids for office that were widely considered to be free and fair. There is quantitative and qualitative evidence suggesting that these efforts convinced a sizeable

portion of the population that revising the constitution was both democratic and necessary for completing development projects such as a uranium mine and a dam on the Niger River. Thirty-eight percent of survey respondents who protested also supported *tazartché*; some respondents specifically lauded the president's projects when answering the open-ended question, "What do you think about *tazartché*?" Despite the international media's focus on opposition demonstrations, thousands of Nigeriens marched in support of Tandja, carrying portraits of the leader and shouting, "Long live *tazartché*!" (AFP 2009). According to news reports and original interviews conducted in Niamey during the summer of 2011, Tandja supplemented his populist rhetoric by distributing patronage and censoring the media (BBC News 2010; FIDH 2011). His more extreme tactics, such as detaining journalists and shutting down the constitutional court, were a last resort after public relations failed. Although the anti-*tazartché* movement ultimately succeeded, there is compelling evidence that the president's strategic use of soft and hard power helps explain the relatively low level of political grievances during the protests of 2009-2010.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper has compared the salience of political and economic grievances in the Nigerian protests of 2009-2010. It supported theories that harboring grievances does not necessarily lead to political action, finding instead that only specific grievances compelled Nigeriens to take to the streets. Although the Niamey protests appeared to international audiences to be expressions of discontent with President Tandja's antidemocratic tendencies, opposition to *tazartché* had no measurable influence on the likelihood of protest participation. It seems that the international press misreported events

on the ground, especially compared to Nigerien newspapers that tended to cover the constitutional debate in the broader context of economic crisis. Indeed, the majority of those surveyed actually *supported* revising the constitution to allow Tandja to remain in power, and some even considered *tazartché* to be democratic. Taken together, these observations put into question whether supposed pro-democracy movements like those in the Arab world necessarily reflect popular preferences for Western-style democracy. These protests might in reality stem from economic grievances. More specifically, people's expectations for their future economic conditions might be an important influence on whether they are willing to bear the considerable costs and risks of challenging entrenched autocratic regimes.

Future research might explore further how some grievances become more politicized than others. Besides *frames*, or “interpretive schemata” that political entrepreneurs use to generate feelings of optimism or pessimism (Snow and Benford 1992, 137), latent *narratives* might also affect the political salience of grievances. Narratives are the stories, tales, anecdotes, and allegories that a society develops over time. They can help people place themselves in a longer history of activism and lend a moral imperative to resist the status quo (Polletta 1998, 140). Hence, future research on the role of grievances in driving protest behavior will ideally be multidisciplinary, incorporating psychological, sociological, and even literary methods.

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