

Ethnic and Religious Dynamics of the North-South Conflict as a Colonial Legacy in Africa: An Analysis of the Sara Tribes

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Abstract: This study endeavors to scrutinize the effects of colonial-era political governance policies on the north-south conflict in the Republic of Chad, analyzed through the complex interplay of ethnic and religious dynamics. The research employs in-depth interview data collected from Chiefs of the Christian Sara tribes in southern Chad, utilizing Ted Gurr's "relative deprivation" model as a theoretical framework for analysis. Chad, a Francophone nation, emerged as a strategic outpost for France in the Sahel region following the Berlin West Africa Conference of 1884. This formal colonial regime persisted until the early 1960s, culminating in Chad's nominal independence. However, rather than entering a postcolonial phase, Chad's trajectory has been marked by a neocolonial continuity, with colonial powers, pioneered by France, maintaining their strategic interests in the region. Concurrently, the internal power struggles among Chadian political actors have exacerbated structural issues across various domains, including the economy and social fabric. This period witnessed the emergence of a dialectic rooted in ethnic and religious identities, particularly between the northern and southern regions of the country. Initially, this dialectic was dominated by the Christian Sara tribes, who held political power from 1960 to 1975. However, this dominance was reversed in the post-1975 period, especially with the ascension of the Deby family and the Zaghawa tribe in 1990, marking the onset of an era characterized by northern Muslim hegemony. Consequently, this shift in power dynamics fostered a sense of marginalization and exclusion among the Sara tribes, leading to an intensification of ethnic and religious division against the northern factions. Within the Sara tribes, who consider themselves the original and rightful inhabitants of Chad, there have been intermittent calls for secession, reflecting deep-seated grievances and a desire for autonomy.

Keywords: North-South Conflict, Sara Tribes, Chad, Africa, Sahel Region

Öz: Bu çalışma, Çad Cumhuriyeti'ndeki kuzey-güney çatışması üzerinde sömürge dönemi siyasi yönetim politikalarının etkilerini, etnik ve dini dinamiklerin karmaşık etkileşimi üzerinden incelemeye çalışmaktadır. Araştırmada, güney Çad'daki Hristiyan Sara kabile şeflerinden toplanan derinlemesine mülakat verilerinden faydalanılmış ve analiz için teorik çerçeve olarak Ted Gurr'un "göreceli yoksunluk" modeli kullanılmıştır. Frankofon bir ülke olan Çad, 1884 Berlin Batı Afrika Konferansı'nı takiben Sahel bölgesinde Fransa için stratejik bir karakol görevi gördü. Bu resmi sömürge rejimi 1960'ların başlarına kadar sürdü ve Çad'ın nominal bağımsızlığı ile sonuçlandı. Ancak, sömürge sonrası bir aşamaya girmek yerine, Çad'ın yörengesi, Fransa'nın öncülük ettiği sömürge güçlerinin bölgedeki stratejik çıkarlarını koruduğu bir neo-sömürgeci süreklilik ile belirlenmiştir. Eş zamanlı olarak, Çadlı siyasi aktörler arasındaki iç güç mücadeleleri, ekonomi ve sosyal doku dahil olmak üzere çeşitli alanlardaki yapısal sorunları şiddetlendirmiştir. Bu dönem, özellikle ülkenin kuzey ve güney bölgeleri arasında, etnik ve dini kimliklere dayalı bir diyalektik ortamı çıkışına tanık oldu. Başlangıçta bu diyalektik, 1960'tan 1975'e kadar siyasi gücü elinde tutan Hristiyan Sara kabileleri tarafından domine edildi. Ancak bu hakimiyet, 1975 sonrası dönemde tersine döndü, özellikle 1990'da Deby ailesi ve Zaghawa kabilesinin yükselişiyle birlikte, kuzey Müslüman hegemonyası ile karakterize edilen bir dönemin başlangıcını işaret etti. Sonuç olarak, güç dinamiklerindeki bu değişim, Sara kabileleri arasında marjinalleşme ve dışlanma hissi yarattı ve kuzey fraksiyonlarına karşı etnik ve dini bölünmenin yoğunlaşmasına yol açtı. Kendilerini Çad'ın asıl ve meşru sakinleri olarak gören Sara kabileleri içinde, derin köklü şikayetleri ve özerklik arzusunu yansıtan aralıklı ayrılma çağrıları oluşmaya başlamıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Afrika, Kuzey-Güney Çatışması, Çad, Sahel Bölgesi, Sara Kabileleri

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Introduction

In the modern history of Chad, France has undoubtedly exerted the most significant influence. On March 17, 1920, a decree formally integrated Chad as a colony under the direct administration of the French Equatorial Africa General Government (FEA). Initially, in 1905, Chad was annexed to three southern French colonies: Ubangi-Shari, Moyen-Congo (present-day Congo), and Gabon. However, Chad did not achieve the status of a separate colony or a unified administrative policy until 1920. These four colonies were collectively governed as French Equatorial Africa under a general governor based in Brazzaville (Colleo, 1998, pp. 12-13). This arrangement persisted both legally and practically until Chad gained its independence in 1960. Yet, despite Chad's formal independence from France *de facto* dependency continued to characterize the relationship between the two countries. For Chad, the post-independence era represented not so much decolonization as a period of neocolonization.

The primary issue that rendered escape from this neocolonial phase nearly impossible was the metastasizing nature of the colonial process itself. Economic interventions, multilateral foreign aid, trade agreements, and economic cooperation treaties, along with the manipulation of currency, allowed for continued intervention in national politics and the economy. These interventions were designed to reduce trade barriers and protect foreign investments in favor of the central powers (Nkrumah, 1965, p. xiii). Ferro, in describing the post-1960 period, characterized it not only as "neocolonialism" but also as "imperialism without settlers" (Ferro, 1997, p. 19). In the case of the Republic of Chad, which gained independence after 1960, it became apparent that the colonial powers, although nominally relinquishing their colonies on paper, had not abandoned their strategies for control in practice. Hence, this era has been aptly described as a neocolonial period or as "old wine in new bottles" (Olivier, 2011, p. 59, cited in Turan, 2020, p. 57). Furthermore, territories that had been subjected to classical colonialism became increasingly dependent on globalized economic structures serving imperialist objectives (Ferro, 2002, pp. 48-50).

Another legacy of imperialist interventions in Chad, both during the classical colonial period and post-1960, has been what could be termed as a form of "black imperialism." The spiritual interventions by France in the region, coupled with the power struggles among local actors, accelerated ethnic divisions within Chadian society. During the power struggle from 1960 to 1990, Chadian tribes and political elites, in their attempts to outmaneuver each other on the political stage, sought external support, thereby transforming from opponents of imperialism into instruments of it (Yacoub, 2022, p. 13). This dialectical process, characterized by shifts in power

between southern Christians in the early period and northern Muslims later on, frequently translated into conflict driven by the ethnic and political interpretations of exclusion.

This study aims to examine the position, attitudes, and motivational factors of the Christian Sara community, who were gradually marginalized from power post-1990. The research is grounded in extensive field observations and interviews with local actors, which serve as the primary data sources for the study. The primary research question in this study examines the extent and dynamics of the response by the Sara tribes to political marginalization. Another key inquiry investigates the underlying reasons for the north-south conflict in Chad. Finally, the study seeks to determine whether there exists a religious dimension to this divide.

Methodology and Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with prominent leaders and members of the Sara tribes to explore the root causes of the tension between northern and southern Chad. Since 2018, the country has been visited a total of 22 times, although these visits, until 2023, were unrelated to the research. Nonetheless, they provided the researcher with significant anthropological insights into both the general and specific conditions of Chad. The visits in 2023 were carried out specifically for the research, focusing on interviews and observations directly related to the research question.

Given that interviews are an effective data collection method involving open-ended questions, allowing for an exchange of information (Tekin, 2012, p. 101), they serve as a particularly useful tool for exploring the tribe's stance toward central authority. Magaldi and Berler (2020) define semi-structured interviews as exploratory discussions, enabling the researcher to delve deeper into the subject matter (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). For this study, interviews were conducted with three different tribal leaders from the Logone regions of Moundou and Goré, as well as ten individuals from various other regions, all using the semi-structured interview technique. The selection of these regions was based on their ethnic composition, with Sara tribes predominantly residing in these areas. Additionally, the tribal chiefs live in these regions. The interviews with the chiefs and members were conducted face-to-face in Arabic, one of Chad's two official languages alongside French. While tribes have their own languages, many of their leaders are fluent in Arabic or French, or both.

Throughout the interviews, the same questions were posed to each participant, ensuring consistency and thematic coherence. Responses were recorded by the researcher and categorized accordingly, as participants sometimes digressed into unrelated topics.

Participants in this study represented traditional authority figures in Chad, with tribal chiefs playing an essential role in the governance of their communities. The selection of tribal chiefs for the interviews was made with an understanding of the influence they wield over their members. In regions bordering the Lake Chad Basin, armed groups often operate in areas governed by traditional authorities (Molenaar, Tossell, & Schmauder, 2019, p. 18), making the stance of these leaders critical to the region's security dynamics. In Francophone countries like Chad, traditional leaders sometimes engage in political and economic partnerships independent of their communities, a factor considered in this study by interviewing not only tribal chiefs but also members. The selection of these members was based on their awareness of the community's broader dynamics and their lack of political affiliations.

The interviews with key Sara tribe figures and the subsequent observations of their respective regions have been scrutinized through Ted Gurr's "relative deprivation model". Gurr's conceptualization of relative deprivation, which examines the gap between expected and actual levels of well-being, was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study due to its focus on explaining the roots of collective dissatisfaction and rebellion. This model provides valuable insights into how disparities between expectations and lived realities can fuel unrest (Çelik, 2021, pp. 119-120) making it a fitting analytical tool for understanding the sociopolitical dynamics of the Sara tribes in Chad. This approach offers a robust interpretive framework, capturing the nuanced ways in which perceived marginalization fuels disillusionment, while simultaneously reinforcing the systemic nature of tribal discontent under centralized governance.

Ted Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory

The core theme of the relative deprivation theory centers on the notion that individuals or groups experience deprivation when they perceive their conditions (economic, political, social, cultural, etc.) unfavorably in comparison to those of others (Flynn, 2011, p. 108). In this context, relative deprivation is defined as the perceived inconsistency between an actor's value expectations and value capabilities. Value expectations refer to the goods and living conditions that people believe they deserve, while value capabilities denote the goods and conditions they think they can attain and maintain. Gurr's hypothesis emphasizes the perception of deprivation, which can manifest not only at the individual level but also collectively among groups. Gurr characterizes relative deprivation within groups as a state of collective dissatisfaction and resentment. The primary source of this dissatisfaction and resentment is rooted in the perceived cultural and/or socio-economic deficiencies experienced by a segment of society (Gurr, 1970, pp. 73-75).

The concept of relative deprivation is a broad social phenomenon that can be analyzed both at individual and collective levels. As Hudson (2018, p. 45) highlights, the perception of deprivation spans a wide spectrum, manifesting in both personal experiences and across societal groups. Gurr's theory places particular emphasis on group-level relative deprivation, describing it as a state of collective discontent and resentment that arises from shared experiences and collective consciousness. This collective emotion stems from perceived deficiencies, whether cultural or socio-economic, felt by a segment of society (Gurr, 1970, p. 76).

Wilson (2016, p. 488) extends this understanding by pointing out that these perceived deficiencies are not limited to material resources but also encompass intangible values such as social status, political representation, and cultural rights. One key feature of group-level relative deprivation is its reliance on a comparative perception system shaped by collective identity. Smith (2018, p. 152) demonstrates that when groups assess their situation, they not only consider their current conditions but also their past experiences and the advantages held by other groups. This comparative evaluation fosters a sense of injustice, which, in turn, fuels a shared feeling of dissatisfaction among group members.

Furthermore, Marcus and Raleigh (2013, p. 220) note that this collective dissatisfaction is a fundamental dynamic that enhances a group's potential for mobilization and shapes their demands for social change. In this light, the manifestation of relative deprivation at the group level is a complex phenomenon, one that extends beyond mere economic inequality to encompass intricate social, cultural, and political dimensions. This complexity significantly enhances the theory's explanatory power, particularly when analyzing conflicts involving ethnic, religious, or cultural groups.

Ted Gurr's Relative Deprivation Theory posits that the perceived gap between what individuals or groups possess and what they believe they are entitled to can lead to collective violence (Gurr, 1970, p.24). According to Gurr, this sense of deprivation is relative, not absolute, and as the gulf between expectations and reality widens, the potential for conflict escalates (Gurr, 2015, pp.57-58). This theoretical framework proves particularly useful in explaining the conflicts between tribes and the central authority in Chad. As Smith (2018, pp.147-149) highlights, tribes in Chad often feel marginalized, believing they are denied a fair share of the country's oil revenues and insufficiently represented in political decision-making processes.

The applicability of Relative Deprivation Theory to the Chadian context can be substantiated through three core indicators. First, economic data from tribal regions, when compared to central areas, reveals significant disparities in access

to public services and economic indicators (Wilson, 2016). Second, as Gurr (1970) emphasizes, the degree of political representation and participation in decision-making mechanisms underscores the tribes' disadvantaged position. Finally, socio-economic data during periods of heightened conflict demonstrates a direct correlation between the perception of relative deprivation and violent actions. These factors collectively affirm the relevance of the Relative Deprivation Theory in analyzing the tribal-central authority conflict in Chad.

Tribalism and the Sara Tribes in Chad

The concept of tribalism is fundamentally rooted in the pioneering scholarly work of Tajfel and Turner (1979) on social identity theory. Tribalism and ethnic identity are subsets within the broader framework of social identity theory. The literature defines social identity as an individual's sense of who they are based on their group membership. McLeod (2019) suggests that, according to Tajfel and Turner (1979), the groups people belong to—such as social class, family, or sports teams—serve as significant sources of pride and self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

This theory posits that individuals define themselves in relation to the groups they belong to and evaluate themselves through this group identity. According to Tajfel and Turner, people distinguish themselves as part of an “us” group, which they see as distinct from “them” groups, and they form social relationships based on this group identity. Social identity theory seeks to explain how group membership shapes individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of identity. Group membership plays a crucial role in individuals' processes of self-definition and meaning-making, where members may take pride in their own group while also displaying discrimination and prejudice against other groups. In this context, tribalism represents a core concept of social identity theory, and Tajfel and Turner's work has significantly contributed to understanding how group identity influences individual behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In conjunction with this, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that the colonial legacy of state structures in Africa has contributed to the persistent tensions between tribal identities and national identities. The author notes that in many African countries, attempts by central governments to undermine the traditional authority of tribal leaders have led to political instability (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023, p.28). The distribution of economic resources also constitutes a significant dimension of these conflicts. Osei-Tutu and Akonor assert that the struggle over control of natural resources has exacerbated tensions between central governments and local tribal communities. They emphasize that the demands of tribes residing in resource-rich regions for

an equitable share of national income are frequently disregarded (Osei-Tutu and Akonor, 2024, pp105-106).

Yeboah and Asante (2024, pp. 89-92) have demonstrated that the inequalities resulting from economic exclusion have intensified conflicts, particularly in relation to the control and distribution of natural resources. It is argued that the restriction of access to economic resources for tribes marginalized by the central authority has exacerbated existing social tensions, thereby increasing the potential for conflict. Diallo and Nkomo (2023, pp. 142-145) highlight that systematic exclusion in education and employment sectors has led to growing discontent among the youth. This is particularly evident in the Sahel region, where a large and dynamic youth population is increasingly contributing to internal unrest, sometimes leading to radicalization. In summary, the political tension resulting from tribal exclusion in Sahel countries has significantly eroded the legitimacy of state institutions, thereby escalating the potential for conflict. (Adebayo & Kwame 2024, pp. 115-118).

In the context of traditional authority, tribalism occupies a central position in Chadian society. In Chad, tribal allegiance often supersedes national consciousness, leaving Chadian society vulnerable and fragile in the face of internal and external interventions. Chad, home to approximately 270 tribes, is predominantly dominated by the Sara tribe in terms of ethnic composition (Yacoub, 2022, s. 12) .

Table 1

Tribal Distribution in Chad

Tribe Name	(%)	Tribe Name	(%)
Sara (Ngambaye/Sara/Madjingaye/Mbaye	30	Mundang	2,7
Kanembu/Borno/Buduma	9,8	Bidiyo/Migaama/Kenga/Dangleat	2,5
Arap	9,7	Dadjo/Kibet/Muro	2,4
Wadai/Maba/Masalit/Mimi	7	Tupuri/Kera	2
Gorane	5,8	Gabri/Kabalaye/Nanchere/Somrai	2
Masa/Musseye/Musgum	4,9	Fulani/Fulbe/Bodore	1,8
Bulala/Medogo/Kuka	3,7	Karo/Zime/Peve	1,3
Marba/Lele/Mesme	3,5	Zagawa/Bideyat/Kobe	2,1
Tama/Assongori/Mararit	1,1	Diğer	2,4

(www.cia.gov, 2024).

However, paradoxically, despite comprising only about 2% of the population, the Zaghawa tribe holds the reins of power in N'Djamena, which forms the first dynamic of the Conflict (Minority Rights Group, 2020). The Sara people, indigenous to southern Chad, northwestern regions of the Central African Republic, and the southern borders of northern Sudan, constitute the largest ethnic tribal structure in Chad. Unlike the Arab and Borno tribes, the majority of the Sara community is Christian, predominantly Catholic.

According to Grégoire and Tappa, the term “Sara” is used to describe several ethnic groups, particularly those in southern Chad, which are divided into various sub-groups, including Sara Kaba, Sara Madingaye, Sara Ngambaye, Sara Goulaye, Sara Kaba Ngangelbe, and others (Grégoire & Tappa, 2020). The Sara tribes are concentrated in the regions of Chari, Logone, Goré, and Tandjilé. The Sara people are specifically recognized as Francophone, having developed a closer cultural and socio-economic relationship with the French, particularly through French-centered education and compulsory labor and military service during World War I. When Chad gained independence from France in 1960, the Sara tribes had become more assimilated into French institutions than their northern counterparts. This assimilation was significantly influenced by the fact that Chad's first President, François Tombalbaye, was a southern Christian from the Sara community. Consequently, the Sara played a prominent role in the forefront of independence and in the emergence of party politics (Yacoub, 2022, pp. 9-11).

Political Marginalization Round-1: Southerners Versus Northerners

With the official end of France's colonial rule in 1960, a new era of hope for decolonization emerged for Chad. However, this period also brought challenges associated with the Francophone system. François Tombalbaye, also known as N'Garta Tombalbaye, served as Chad's first President from its independence in 1960 until his overthrow in 1975. As a southern Christian and member of the Sara tribe, Tombalbaye's presidency left a lasting impact on Chad (Powell, 2020). His administration, characterized by policies that emphasized tribal sensitivities, authoritarianism, and enduring political instability, is still regarded by many Chadians as one of the root causes of the country's ongoing problems.

Tombalbaye's rise in Chadian politics began in 1952 when he secured a seat in the Colonial Regional Assembly, and it continued as he was elected vice president of the French Equatorial Africa General Council in 1957. During this period, he garnered significant support from the southern Sara tribes. Following Chad's independence on August 11, 1960, Tombalbaye became the country's first head of government. Initially, he succeeded in forming a coalition of progressive forces from both the

northern and southern regions, though Muslim groups representing the North were sidelined in this process. This exclusion led to a rebellion in the northern region, prompting Tombalbaye to dissolve the National Assembly in 1963, a move that was widely perceived as authoritarian. Additionally, Tombalbaye implemented policies such as heavy taxation through the nationalization of public services and “national credit” to finance nationalization efforts. He also launched an “Africanization” program aimed at promoting Chadian culture. However, these efforts exacerbated divisions between the Muslim North and the Christian and animist South, fueling unrest and civil discontent (Colleo, 1998, pp. 18-21).

In the early years following independence, Tombalbaye initiated a national “purity” policy, encouraging Chadians to abandon European names in favor of Chadian ones. He himself changed his name from “François” to “N’Garta,” and colonial geographical names were replaced with Chadian names. The capital’s name was also changed as part of this wave of reform. Despite these symbolic changes, no significant progress was observed in addressing the country’s broader issues. During this period, Chad’s economic indicators continued to deteriorate, and discontent against the N’Djamena government grew. These tensions further alienated many Chadians, particularly the predominantly Muslim populations in the North and East. Faced with worsening economic, social, and political conditions, the Chadian military decided to act. On April 13, 1975, soldiers and police surrounded Tombalbaye’s residence, demanding his surrender. He resisted, was shot, and killed (Tubiana & Debos, 2017).

In his work on Chadian history, Samuel Decalo notes that after gaining independence and becoming Chad’s President in 1960, Tombalbaye systematically eliminated all political opposition outside of the Sara group. He banned all political parties except for those associated with the southern Sara ethnic group, and Muslim leaders opposing southern political dominance were arrested. Tombalbaye’s repressive regime explicitly marginalized the North (Decalo, 1997, pp. 1037-1040). This period under Tombalbaye also triggered a dialectic between Muslims and Christians within Chadian society. Although this dialectic did not escalate into major conflicts at the time, interviews with tribal leaders suggest that underlying tensions were growing.

Political Marginalization Round-2: Northerners Versus Southerners

Following Tombalbaye’s death, internal conflicts in Chad escalated, leading to a three-year period of clashes among rebel leaders. One of these leaders, Hissène Habré, seized control of the country in 1982, becoming Chad’s second most influential president after Tombalbaye. His eight-year rule was marked by conflict with Libya, support from France and the United States, widespread repression, and severe human rights violations (Tubiana & Debos, 2017, p. 6).

Habré, often referred to as the “Desert Warrior,” “Man of the Maki,” or “Warlord,” was born in 1942 in Faya-Largeau in the North. In 1963, he left Chad to study at the Institut des Hautes Études d’Outre-Mer in France. He later studied law in Paris, joined the Institute of Political Studies, and completed his education there. During that era, obtaining a French education was seen as a key stepping stone to political advancement in Chad. Upon returning to Chad in 1971, Habré joined the Chadian National Liberation Front (FROLINAT), which he led, and later co-founded the Northern Armed Forces Council (FAN) with Goukouni Weddeye, another northerner. According to Adewale, Habré’s rise to power in 1982 resulted from a combination of his ambition, Gaddafi’s expansionist policies towards northern Chad, and strong support from both the United States and France (Adewale, 2022, pp. 2-4).

Evidence uncovered by the Chadian Truth Commission and Human Rights Watch, among others, documents the widespread political killings, systematic torture, and arbitrary detentions carried out by Habré’s regime. His government routinely targeted civilians and various ethnic groups, including the Chadian Arabs, Hadjerai, and Zaghawa, particularly when the group’s leaders were perceived as threats to his government. Habré’s regime is accused of involvement in systematic killings and torture, primarily carried out by the Documentation and Security Directorate (DDS), resulting in the deaths of approximately 40,000 people (Adewale, 2022, pp. 4-5). In 1990, Habré was overthrown by his former advisor, Idriss Déby Itno.

Déby, accused of planning a coup against Habré in 1989, fled to Sudan, where he joined other opponents of the Habré regime to form the Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS). Supported by France, Sudan, and Libya, MPS rebels began fighting Habré’s forces in late 1989 and marched into Chad’s capital a year later. Habré fled to Senegal, and on December 5, 1990, Déby assumed the presidency of Chad (Powell, 2020). Déby’s first words as President were, “I promise you neither gold nor money, but freedom.”

In his first year as president, Déby pledged to bring democracy to Chad, releasing political prisoners, allowing the formation of new political parties, and increasing press freedom. For a time, he adhered to this initial commitment. However, various elites from different ethnic groups formed their political parties not as alternatives to Déby and the MPS, but rather to pursue their personal interests. By then, there were about 140 political parties in Chad, most of which were closely aligned with the ruling MPS, and the “democratic opposition” never managed to mount a serious challenge. In the 1996 Presidential Election, Déby received only 44% of the vote in the first round, forcing a runoff. In all subsequent presidential elections (2001, 2006, 2011, and 2016), Déby secured at least 60% of the vote in the first round,

consolidating his victory. Chad's first democratic Constitution, adopted in 1996, imposed a two-term limit on the presidency. Déby won both the 1996 and 2001 elections. However, in June 2005, amid widespread criticism of a "constitutional coup," Déby removed the term limit from the Constitution (Hansen, 2021, p. 189).

In the following years, Déby not only gained military strength and international prestige but also restructured the military to include more Zaghawa soldiers, who were better equipped and trained. By 2016, a U.S. Air Force official described Déby as "one of the best performers in the fight against terrorism and violent extremist organizations in Africa." Both the United States and France expressed confidence in Déby and his ability to maintain stability in Chad (Burgess, 2016, p. 316). This represented a significant shift for Déby. In his early years as president, military spending was relatively low. Chad's military expenditure was \$50 million in the year Déby took power, decreasing annually to \$24 million in 1998. However, with the regime facing repeated coup attempts, military spending increased dramatically, reaching \$640 million by February 2008 and remaining consistently high thereafter (Hansen, 2021, p. 190).

However, most Chadians did not benefit from Déby's rule or his strategic partnerships. As Déby's regime became more repressive, feelings of deprivation and public frustration grew, while violence, corruption, and the privatization of power became the norm. Additionally, the continued leadership of the same elderly men within both the "democratic opposition" and the "presidential majority" eroded confidence in democracy itself (Marchal, 2016). The Sara tribes were among the groups most affected by these developments. Déby's kleptocratic rule, which favored the Zaghawa and Goran tribes to which he was connected, displayed a reluctance to address the demands of Chad's more than 200 other tribes. Over time, this prolonged rule deepened the North-South divide, gradually fostering a division between northern Muslims and southern Christians.

Following the Tombalbaye regime, the hegemony of the southern regions began to steadily decline. By the 1990s, although southerners, particularly from the Sara tribe, continued to serve in the civil service and military, they found themselves increasingly marginalized from political power and bureaucratic influence. This marginalization led to a growing insurgency in the southernmost province of Logone Occidentale and the neighboring Logone Orientale, where the Sara tribe is predominantly concentrated. The discovery of oil in the region further intensified these uprisings against northern dominance (Yacoub, 2022, pp. 25-27).

During the Habré era, this insurgency, led by the Sara tribes, evolved into a cycle of armed rebellion, retaliation, and counter-retaliation. It is documented that approximately 40,000 people were killed during Habré's regime. From 1990 to 1995,

under Déby's government, over 2,000 people were killed by government forces, with villages burned and civilians terrorized. Rebel forces, in turn, began deliberately targeting Muslim northerners (UNHCR, 2008). These incidents in recent Sara history remain as frozen conflict zones and unresolved tensions in Chad today.

The Political Interpretation of Marginalization: Extremism or Fragmentation?

In a previous section, the ethnic and religious origins of the Sara tribe were discussed, highlighting their demographic majority in Chad but political minority status under the N'Djamena administration. Confronted with the economic consequences of this marginalization, members of the tribe have increasingly found themselves in conflict with northerners, particularly when these groups encroach on their lands for various reasons. This tension is most evident in the recurring conflicts between herders and farmers.

From 2021 to 2024, southern regions where the Sara tribes reside witnessed approximately 100 conflicts between farmers and herders from the North. These clashes resulted in over 1,000 deaths and more than 2,000 injuries. The food insecurity exacerbated by the Ukraine-Russia war has further deepened the North-South divide in the country. The multifaceted conflict, driven by identity-based grievances, has escalated as some herder groups have begun to arm themselves. A notable example occurred in February 2022 in the village of Sandana in the Moyen-Chari province of southern Chad, where armed herders killed thirteen people, sparking nationwide protests and accusations that central authorities were protecting the perpetrators (International Crisis Group, 2024).

The Sara tribe perceives northern intervention in their regions as a form of resource exploitation. Tribal leaders and members assert that they are the true indigenous people of Chad, while the northerners are seen as latecomers who arrived after the fact. This sentiment is particularly fueled by the perceived injustice in the distribution of resources following the discovery of oil in the country. The discovery and subsequent exploitation of oil have sparked conflicts between the N'Djamena government and southern tribes. The unequal distribution of oil revenues and the control of southern oil wealth by northern elites, particularly the Zaghawa and Goran tribes, have generated significant discontent among the Sara tribes. This situation has further exacerbated longstanding tensions between the North and South. The concentration of oil revenues in the hands of the Zaghawa and allied northern elites has led to the economic and political marginalization of southern tribes, prompting them to launch insurgencies and engage in armed conflict. This unrest was particularly evident in the Logone region and other southern provinces,

where armed resistance against the government emerged (Participant-9: 2023).

By the mid-2000s, the N'Djamena government's authoritarian policies and the unfair distribution of oil revenues led to increased rebellions in the South. These rebellions escalated into violent conflicts, which the government attempted to suppress through military operations in the southern regions. During this period, clashes between government forces and rebel groups, along with widespread human rights violations, further destabilized the region. This rising discontent among the Sara tribes was linked to their ethnic and religious identities, as highlighted in an interview conducted in the Moundou region.

"We are referred to as southern tribes. Many of us are Christians and Catholics. Essentially, the true indigenous people of Chad are the southern tribes, the Saral. We are the political founders of Chad after independence. The first President of Chad, François Tombalbaye, was a Christian Catholic from the Sara tribe. We have lived on these lands for hundreds of years, whereas the northerners came much later from different regions, many of them from Sudan and Libya" (Participant-1: 2023).

"The government in Chad is in the hands of northerners, while we are a southern Christian tribe. The root of our problems lies in our Christian faith and the fact that François Tombalbaye, the first President of Chad after independence from France in 1960, was a Christian from the Sara tribe. Under his rule, trade and governance were controlled by the Sara tribe. After Tombalbaye, Hissène Habré and Idriss Déby, both northern Muslims, came to power and excluded southerners from governance. This situation has never changed. During Tombalbaye's era, trade was predominantly under the control of southerners, but this has completely changed" (Participant-2: 2023).

Tribal leaders believe they have been marginalized by the N'Djamena administration, attributing this marginalization to their ethnic roots and religious beliefs. They assert that they are the original inhabitants of Chad, while they perceive the northerners as outsiders who have taken control of the government. The religious dimension of this perceived marginalization serves as an auxiliary factor in their political exclusion. Dr. Mohammed Khater, of the High Islamic Council of Chad, emphasized that Chad is a secular country according to its constitutional framework, and no religious group is marginalized based on faith. Dr. Khater cited the construction of the largest Catholic church in Central Africa, funded by the state and located opposite the Presidential Palace, as evidence of this commitment.

However, this unrest has been exacerbated by economic exclusion, which has deepened alongside political marginalization. Members of the tribes in the Logone region describe the impact of this situation as follows:

“The N’Djamena administration has allocated control of trade routes and the sesame market to northern Muslims, particularly Arabs, Gorans, and Zaghawas. Although we produce more agricultural and livestock goods than the North, the high taxes imposed by northerners undermine our economic activities. In the long term, this results in the South being deprived of development projects, leading to increased youth unemployment. Many of our young people are jobless and lack access to quality education. While we have schools in our region, their resources are very limited. There is no university here. We do not receive any share of the oil revenues from our region; these revenues are again taken by the Zaghawas and northerners. This is our rightful share” (Participants-3,4: 2023).

Interviews conducted in the Logone region reveal that the chronic problems facing the region are overlooked due to the political reasons mentioned above. As stated earlier, the Sara community comprises southern Christian tribes. Despite not being as well represented in the N’Djamena administration as the Zaghawa, Goran, and Arab communities, they form a significant opposition faction. Unlike the Borno, Buduma, and Arab communities, the Sara people experience both ethnic and religious marginalization.

For southerners, the climate adds positive value rather than negative, yet this value benefits northerners more than it does southerners. Consequently, the Sara tribes face challenges not only in the production phase but also in marketing their products, which they attribute to their southern identity. The primary reason for this situation is that Chad’s first President during the independence period was a Christian from the southern Sara tribe. During Tombalbaye’s presidency, the Sara tribes held significant control over trade activities, while northerners were marginalized. However, after a northerner assumed power following Tombalbaye’s era, the trade routes shifted from the South to the North. Tribal members explain this as follows:

“We produce goods in our region, our land is fertile, and we have water, but the trade is controlled by northerners. We cannot benefit from our resources as we should. The herders (Fulani and others) frequently invade our lands, plundering our fields. This situation leads to constant conflicts between us. We receive little support from the government to resolve this issue. Sometimes the military intervenes, but their efforts are insufficient. We are taking measures to protect ourselves. We cannot allow northerners to seize our lands” (Participants-5,6: 2023).

The southern tribes also believe that their Christian identity negatively impacts their economic situation. This belief has been propagated by Christian-motivated civil society organizations in the region. Over time, this propaganda has led to efforts by certain American-backed organizations to support the Transformation Party in the region as a political opposition actor against the France-backed Zaghawa tribe and the Déby family. Some members of the Sara tribe have even voiced the possibility of dividing the country into North and South if fairness in resource distribution is not achieved.

“The Déby family has been in power in Chad for years. This needs to change. Elections are often postponed or not conducted fairly. The opposition is not allowed, and there

is heavy pressure on opposition parties. Our primary struggle is to change this. If it doesn't happen, then yes, we as southerners will demand separation. As I said before, we are the true natives of Chad, and the northern Muslims arrived later on these lands. From time to time, our tribe members voice demands for separation, but not always. We simply want representation in government. Yes, we have representatives, but we believe they are there only in a symbolic capacity. If the Prime Minister truly represented us, he would at least support us in solving our problems" (Participants-8,10: 2023).

The conflict dynamics within the Sara tribe largely stem from the ethnic and religious interpretation of political and economic exclusion. Like the Borno and Buduma tribes, the Sara community feels economically and politically marginalized. However, unlike others, they attribute this marginalization to their Christian identity and the fact that the government is controlled by northern Muslims. The vacuum created by this marginalization is being filled by Christian organizations, particularly American-backed groups that encourage the Sara community to consider secession, similar to the South Sudan model. The Sara community views themselves as the true natives of Chad, believing that northern Muslims are outsiders who have usurped their place (Participant-9: 2023).

The situation faced by the Sara tribes can be understood through the lens of "relative deprivation" when compared to the Zaghawa, Goran, and northern Muslim tribes that hold power in the government. The central theme of Gurr's relative deprivation theory is that individuals or groups experience deprivation when they negatively compare their current conditions (economic, political, social, cultural, etc.) to those of others. Gurr's theory posits that uprisings and violence emerge when people can no longer tolerate the misery of their circumstances. In this context, relative deprivation is considered a key precondition for rebellion, violence, and radicalization (Çelik, 2020, p.120)

Since losing their previously held values to the northerners, the Sara tribes have experienced relative deprivation since 1990. This sense of deprivation has led tribe members to increasingly use terms such as "they," "northerners," and "Muslims" to describe the group perceived as the oppressors. While other tribes in Chad also experience feelings of marginalization, many attribute this to tribal differences. However, the Sara tribe feels not only ethnically marginalized but also religiously excluded due to their Christian identity¹.

1 Field research and in-depth interviews conducted with the Sara tribes in the Maundu and Gore regions during 2023 reveal the complex nature of the region's social dynamics. In these interviews, the local population's tendency to attribute the root of existing problems to ethnic and religious identities reflects the societal perception of deeper structural issues. The emphasis placed by members of the Sara tribe on their ethnic and religious identities when explaining their marginalization demonstrates the significant role these elements play in their collective memory.

Their exclusion from the N'Djamena administration has distanced them from economic opportunities. Rising unemployment among young people in the tribe has contributed to growing discontent within the community. Indeed, factors such as youth unemployment, underemployment, unequal access to education and resources, poor governance, and weak political participation are seen as contributing to young people's alienation from society. When young people subjected to these conditions compare themselves with their peers, they may experience a sense of relative deprivation, which can drive them toward radical actions (Hilker & Fraser, 2009, pp. 12-14).

In line with this motivation, Wiktorowicz argues that negative personal experiences, such as social alienation, can lead to a "cognitive opening" that makes individuals more sympathetic to and receptive toward potentially violent ideologies. The search for significance often becomes a crucial goal when individuals experience personal failure, rejection, or humiliation. Ideological narratives, which typically advocate extreme violence against perceived enemies of one's ethnic, religious, or social group, provide the motivation needed to reclaim significance and reinforce the shared belief system. Furthermore, ideological narratives offer moral justifications for violence against out-group members, making such actions not only acceptable but also desirable. Finally, individuals remain committed to these ideologies, morally justifying the use of violence to regain significance, and are motivated by the presence of similar groups. The universal motivation to achieve mutual understanding and a shared sense of reality suggests that people's beliefs are likely to influence the type of group they join. These epistemic and relational motivations are satisfied by being part of a group of like-minded individuals, providing a predictable and controllable environment (Belanger et al., 2019, pp. 2-3).

In the Sara community, this search for significance and struggle for existence has manifested through the formation of opposition movements, particularly supported by external (American) aid. The primary aim of this opposition is to reclaim the political and social status, along with the economic resources, that they perceive to have been lost due to their ethnic and religious beliefs. Driven by Christian motivations, this group has united under the Transformation Party in Chad and has expressed a demand for secession if they cannot achieve adequate representation in the government.

Conclusion

The complexities of the political and social landscape in Chad are intricately tied to the challenges faced by the Sara tribe in their interactions with the central authority. This dynamic cannot be understood in isolation from the multifaceted issues that have

emerged in the post-colonial period of the country. Consequently, an examination of the tensions between the Sara tribe and the central government necessitates a comprehensive analysis of Chad's state-building process and its socio-economic dynamics. The roots of the conflicts experienced by the Sara tribe vis-à-vis the central authority are fundamentally linked to economic and governance-related factors. In the post-independence era, members of the Sara tribe, under the leadership of Tombalbaye, secured a dominant position within the country's political framework. This period signified an era during which groups from southern Chad attained considerable political and economic advantages. However, the ascendance of Habré in 1982, followed by the continued dominance of the Déby family and the Zaghawa and Goran tribes from 1990 onwards, precipitated a shift of political power towards the north, resulting in the marginalization of the Sara community. This transformation extended beyond mere political power dynamics, instigating profound changes in the distribution of state resources and access to economic opportunities.

A pivotal dimension of the conflict between the Sara tribe and the central authority pertains to the struggle for control and allocation of the nation's economic resources. Notably, the management of oil revenues has emerged as a focal point of this tension. The central government's utilization of oil revenues to bolster its political base and ensure loyalty has exacerbated the economic marginalization of groups such as the Sara community. This situation has crystallized economic disparities along ethnic lines, culminating in heightened social unrest.

Another significant aspect of the challenges faced by the Sara tribe is the deficiency in political representation and governance. The central government's delegation of state institutions and decision-making mechanisms to select ethnic groups has led to the political exclusion of the Sara community. This exclusion transcends mere symbolic representation issues; it signifies the systematic disregard of the Sara community's interests in the formulation and implementation of public policies. Furthermore, the obstacles encountered in Chad's national integration process constitute another dimension of the tension between the Sara tribe and the central authority. The country's two-sided north-south structure and the divergent perceptions of national identity among various ethnic groups complicate the establishment of a cohesive Chadian identity. The Sara community's sense of alienation from the national framework, exacerbated by the governance strategies employed by the Zaghawa and Goran tribes, intensifies their estrangement from the central authority, thereby undermining social cohesion.

The socio-economic underdevelopment evident in regions predominantly inhabited by the Sara tribe represents another critical dimension of the issues arising

from their relationship with the central authority. The absence of infrastructure investment, obstacles to accessing education and healthcare services, and elevated unemployment rates reinforce the sense of marginalization among the populations in these areas. This scenario lays the groundwork for escalating unrest, particularly among the youth, who may resort to alternative modes of resistance.

The role of religious differences in the tensions between the Sara community and the central government of Chad represents a complex and multifaceted process rooted in sensitive historical and sociopolitical contexts. While the predominance of Christianity among the Sara and the Muslim identity of the central authority suggests a religious dimension to the conflict, it is more accurate to characterize this factor as a catalyst rather than a decisive element. The principal axis of this conflict revolves around the control of economic resources and political representation, indicating that religious differences are frequently instrumentalized in this struggle. Historical shifts in power dynamics have foregrounded ethnic and regional affiliations, suggesting that religious identities serve primarily as secondary factors within the broader framework of power relations. Although religiously motivated issues may emerge during the marginalization of the Sara community, the fundamental challenge lies in their exclusion from economic opportunities and political processes, thereby illustrating that religion alone is not the determining factor in this context. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that religious differences can contribute to social fragmentation and reinforce collective identities. The interplay of ethnic-based conflicts in other regions of Chad with religious disparities underscores the necessity of considering the religious dimension, while also recognizing its operation in conjunction with other socio-economic and political factors. In conclusion, the underlying causes of the tensions between the Sara tribe and the central authority can be attributed primarily to political, economic, and social factors, with religion acting as a reinforcing element that occasionally legitimizes these foundational issues.

Notwithstanding these dynamics, the current stance of the tribes in Chad does not exhibit radical tendencies. This suggests that targeted reforms addressing the feelings of exclusion among these tribes may strengthen their sense of belonging. A multifaceted and holistic approach is imperative to mitigate tensions between the tribes and the political authority in Chad. In this context, the establishment of an inclusive political framework is paramount; this should encompass the creation of a national dialogue platform that adequately represents all ethnic groups and tribes, along with reforms that enhance proportional representation within the electoral system. Given that the primary factor contributing to the Sara tribes' feelings of exclusion pertains to the distribution of economic resources, particularly oil

revenues, the development of mechanisms that ensure transparency and equity in this distribution will play a critical role in addressing regional disparities. Emphasizing multiculturalism within the education system and ensuring ethnic balance in the security sector are additional crucial steps to support national integration. When combined with the backing of the international community and a conciliatory stance from all parties involved, this multifaceted approach could significantly contribute to establishing a sustainable environment of peace and stability within Chad's intricate ethnic and political landscape.

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Interview Questions:

Do you believe you have been marginalized by the N'Djamena administration?
هل تعتقد أنك تم تهيمشك من قبل إدارة نجامينا؟

If you believe so, can you explain the reasons?
إذا كنت تعتقد ذلك، هل يمكنك توضيح الأسباب؟

Have you faced discrimination due to your ethnic or religious affiliation?
هل تعرضت للتمييز بسبب انتمائك العرقي أو الديني؟

If so, in what situations have you noticed this?
إذا كان الأمر كذلك، في أي مواقف لاحظت ذلك؟

What do you believe are the main reasons for the conflict between you and the Northerners?
ما هي الأسباب الرئيسية في رأيك للصراع بينك وبين الشماليين؟