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Introduction: Sawaba and Niger’s ‘little folk’

In 1954, a number of young men in Niger founded a new political party, the Union Démocratique Nigérienne (UDN). Their aim was to fight colonial rule and achieve the social transformation of what, until then, had been a French colony, part of the inter-territorial federation known as Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF). The UDN’s leader was a charismatic political activist, Djibo Bakary, who articulated an impassioned nationalist discourse with militant Marxist-inspired undertones. As a teacher, he was what the French condescendingly called an évoluté, or what in Niger was known as a commis, i.e. someone who had been to a colonial school or worked in the lower echelons of the colonial administration.¹ The son of a chief in Soudouré (near the capital, Niamey) but of low birth, Bakary had received a modern education. He was a dynamic organizer with a background in the scouting movement and was involved in union work, including establishing contact with communist unions in France. As a one-time commercial gardener, he founded a union for marginalized agricultural workers in Niamey and made a point of associating himself politically with the lower classes. In 1953 Bakary organized the first general strike as a protest against wage levels in Niger, which were the lowest of all

AOF countries. This led to substantial wage increases and made his name among the poorer strata of Niger’s urban communities.

His political record then was a far cry from that of other politicians with a commis background, most of whom showed a strong predilection for European-inspired luxury styles. The majority of commis after World War II did not hail from aristocratic chiefly families but came from the ranks of the talakawa (commoners) who were often from former enslaved families and continued to suffer from low social standing in a society still largely marked by status ascription. Most commis, like Bakary, joined Niger’s first political party, the Parti Progressiste Nigérien (PPN), which was affiliated to an AOF-wide mother organization, the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (RDA). Bakary, however, abandoned the PPN when the RDA severed its links with the French communists (1950-1951). At the time, he was one of Niger’s first full-time nationalist politicians, who had broken with the colonial administration in 1948 by refusing a forced (teacher) transfer in retaliation for his anti-colonial campaigning. Dependent on money from the PPN and, later, on gifts from political friends and the union world, he became less vulnerable to pressure from the French.

Niger was still an overwhelmingly rural society but one that had undergone significant changes. Chiefs had been transformed into colonial civil servants and had compromised themselves in the eyes of the population by the role they played in tax collection, labour recruitment and the abuses that went with them. It was not only the commis who had a conflict of interest with chiefly authority but also groups of rural folk who were lower on the social ladder but through their economic activities had broken free of the confines of village life. With the onset of colonialism, commercial activity gained new dimensions as a result of technological innovations such as the motor car and the telegraph, while the demands of the modern administration led to the introduction of new professions and activities. Domestic servants, office boys, artisans, manufacturers and petty traders as well as telegraphists, postal workers, lorry drivers and mechanics all began flocking to Niger’s emerging urban conglomerations. Many of these were referred to as petit peuple – ‘small people’, ‘little folk’ – who, like most commis, belonged to the ranks of the talakawa. With the new investments after World War II, they developed into a semi-urban proletariat whose members retained close links with the rural areas, assuring a constant flow of goods

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3 Singular: Talaka.
4 This played partly on older traditions of pre-colonial trade, which had taken people, especially from Hausaland, to the far corners of the West African region. See P.E. Lovejoy, *Caravans of Kola: The hausa Kola trade, 1700-1900* (Zaria, 1980).