

## WORKING PAPER

# Sahelian Dialogues: The Path to Resilience through Religious and Traditional Authority

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### **About the author**

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The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy is not responsible for the views expressed in this publication.

# 1. Introduction

The significance of religious dialogue as a catalyst for fostering peace, understanding, and social cohesion has garnered considerable scholarly attention (Driessen, 2023). Religious dialogue, often conceptualized as a structured and purposeful exchange of ideas, beliefs, and practices among followers of different faith traditions, holds remarkable potential in addressing the complexities of religious diversity and mitigating conflicts arising from religious tensions.

This working paper seeks to delve into the multifaceted dimensions of religious dialogue, highlighting some of its theoretical underpinnings, historical contexts, and practical implications for Sahelian contemporary societies. It contributes to the “Engaging Traditional and Religious Authorities in the Sahel: The Role of Interreligious Dialogue” project (ETRA-ID)<sup>1</sup> by acknowledging that the ongoing multidimensional crisis in the Sahel region necessitates a critical reevaluation of conflict management and resolution strategies. Traditional responses by the international community, including diplomacy, military interventions, development initiatives, and humanitarian aid, have demonstrated limited effectiveness in addressing the complexities of the crisis. This recognition emphasizes the importance of exploring the constructive potential of mediation efforts led by traditional and religious authorities. Historically, traditional authorities have played a pivotal role in initiating dialogue-based approaches that span interreligious, interdenominational, inter-communal, and intercultural dimensions. These initiatives aim not only at fostering post-conflict reconciliation but also at preventing the disintegration of societies along sectarian lines.

Against this backdrop, the ETRA-ID project investigates the role and potential of engaging with religious and traditional authorities to understand better and influence the local, national, and regional dynamics of violent conflict and peace. By delving into the mechanisms through which these authorities facilitate dialogue and reconciliation, the project contributes to the development of more nuanced and effective conflict resolution strategies that recognize the unique socio-political landscapes of the Sahelian region.

In light of the urgent threats to the security and cohesion of Sahelian communities posed by the spread of jihadist insurgencies and intra- and inter-community conflicts, it is crucial to assess whether, to what extent, and under which conditions dialogue initiatives led by religious and traditional authorities can enhance social cohesion, community resilience, and political stability in the region. Accordingly, the ETRA-ID project analyzes how religious and traditional leaders are promoting interreligious and community dialogue. Analyzing the Sahelian context, the ETRA-ID project aims to determine the significance of empowering traditional religious leaders in countering violent extremism and fostering interreligious, interdenominational, intercommunity, and intercultural reconciliation. Ultimately, it seeks to underscore the role of religious and traditional authorities in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, highlighting the extent to which they can drive societal change toward greater social cohesion and stability.

In central Mali, recent studies demonstrated how traditional authorities have facilitated the maintenance of strong social ties and mitigated the causes of inter- and intra-community

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<sup>1</sup> The “Engaging Traditional and Religious Authorities in the Sahel: the Role of Inter-religious Dialogue” (ETRA-ID) initiative is an action-research project supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. This project was conducted from December 2022 to March 2024 by a team of researchers from the Sant’Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa, under lead of Professor Francesco Strazzari.

conflict (Bøås et al. 2021). In areas of weak state penetration, traditional authorities can be a critical entry point for the resolution of local disputes and mediation initiatives. However, other studies have also shown how conflict contexts contribute to eroding the legitimacy of traditional authorities, making them susceptible to contestation, including violent disputes, especially at the intra-community level (Molenaar et al. 2019). Religious authority is not immune to these types of challenges, as evidenced by the rapid spread of more radical interpretations of Islam, especially in the Sahel. Given these divergent outcomes, the project ETRA-ID carried out a comparative study to elucidate the modes and conditions that govern the success or failure of dialogue instances promoted by religious and traditional authorities. The research questions that guided the study are as follows: To what extent can religious dialogue sustained by religious and traditional authorities contribute to promoting community resilience and consolidating peace? And what role do traditional authorities and religious leaders play?

The ETRA-ID project is structured around the comparative analysis of two emblematic cases showcasing the potential of dialogue promoted by traditional and religious authorities in the Sahel: Mauritania and Niger. In both cases, traditional and religious authorities have been involved in dialogue initiatives with extremist actors and insurgent groups, aiming to foster post-conflict social reconciliation and pre-conflict prevention amidst escalating conflicts. The relevance of both cases to the same region and the numerous socio-economic similarities support the feasibility of a comparative analysis. However, the two cases exhibit divergent outcomes: substantial pacification and resilience to violent extremism in Mauritania; recurrence of conflict, and suppression of mediation efforts in Niger. This heterogeneity provides an adequate spectrum of variation for examining the conditions and modalities that determine the success or failure of such dialogue initiatives in promoting social cohesion, community resilience, and political stability. The selected case studies are akin to a ‘most-different cases’ typology that ensures a diverse range of scenarios, while regional similarities provide a basis for comparability. Overall, the analysis wishes to provide valuable indications for contingently generalizable observations to the Sahel as well.

This working paper is structured as follows: after the introduction the contextual background discusses the socio-political contexts of Mauritania and Niger, then the research methodology and findings are outlined, and finally, conclusions are drawn with recommendations for future research.

## 2. Project rationale

In West Africa, the worsening of violent extremist expansion supported by jihadist insurgencies linked to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State destabilize the entire central Sahel region (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso) and spread towards coastal states of West Africa, such as Benin, Togo, and Ivory Coast.

The intertwining of these dynamics that define a context of regional crisis is linked to endemic factors, such as - to name just a few - socioeconomic vulnerabilities, intra- and inter-communal conflicts, weak political institutions, neopatrimonialism, and clientelistic practices carried out by the ruling elites, with a persistent inability to ensure effective governance throughout the territory. This creates a context of ‘fragility’ which, according to the OECD (Abel et al. 2016) results from “the combination of exposure to risk and inadequate capacity, on the part of the state, system, and community, to manage, absorb, or mitigate its consequences.”

The absence of the state in providing essential goods and services to populations in marginalized areas - whose economic and political value added is historically considered irrelevant by the elites of the capitals - leaves ample room for non-state actors, including insurgent actors who invoke jihad as armed struggle aimed at establishing a radical theological-political order, capable of compensating for state performance deficits and establishing forms of remote governance by alternating repressive measures with mechanisms of cooptation and social clientelism (Bøås and Strazzari 2020).

In this context, a large part of service management—or self-management in small communities, often in peripheral areas—is mediated (sometimes controlled) by traditional authorities, understood in the sense proposed by Max Weber, as authorities whose legitimacy is derived from criteria exogenous to the bureaucratic state logic, such as cultural lineages and religious affiliations. Therefore, traditional governance actors are sometimes referred to as informal or non-state actors (Swenson 2018), but such a designation overlooks the fact that in many African countries, these authorities are, by law, recognized as integral parts of the state and judicial system (as in the case of Niger), or else even if they are not officially recognized, they informally fulfill a quasi-institutional role. In both cases, they play crucial roles that configure a hybrid political order (Boege et al. 2009). The Sahel has been identified in various studies (Bagayoko et al. 2016; Raineri and Strazzari 2019) as emblematic of a hybrid order where formal and informal systems converge.

Thus, it is acknowledged that the role of traditional authority is not static but evolves with the changing values and social customs, internal dynamics within local communities, and due to exogenous events and political conjunctures that may alter power dynamics in a particular region (Lutz and Linder 2004). The category of traditional authorities is used heuristically to designate those social leaders who have performed or are performing a series of functions regulated by customary law: resolution of disputes, management of natural resources, and religious duties. In this sense, the project ETRA-ID focused on understanding the role religious authorities play in conflict resolution and to what extent they exert a strong influence over the rest of society and can be considered as reference points structuring political order.

## 2.1 Contextual background: Mauritania and Niger

Mauritania and Niger share a complex socio-political landscape characterized by diverse ethnicities, cultures, and religious affiliations. In terms of religious confessions, since independence, in Mauritania the dominant interpretation of Islam came to center, as in other parts of northwest Africa, upon three core components: in jurisprudence, the Maliki school of Sunni Islam; in creed, Ash‘arī theology; and in spirituality and social organization, Sufism and Sufi orders (Thurston 2022). Niger similarly has a predominantly Muslim population, with Sunni Islam being the dominant faith. However, there are also Christian and animist minorities. This religious diversity lays the groundwork for inter-religious interactions, cooperation, and potential conflicts, necessitating a deeper exploration of interfaith relations.

Secondly, the historical context of colonialism and post-colonialism has influenced the religious dynamics in Mauritania and Niger. Stemming from the legacy of problematic and contentious borders inherited from colonization and de-colonization, these countries struggled to establish national identities and governance structures that could accommodate their diverse populations. Consequently, issues of identity, power, and resource allocation have often intersected with religious affiliations, leading to tensions and conflicts.

Furthermore, socio-economic factors play a significant role in shaping religious relations in Mauritania and Niger. Both countries face challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to education and healthcare, particularly in rural areas. These socioeconomic disparities can exacerbate religious tensions, as marginalized communities may resort to religious identities as a source of cohesion and empowerment. Moreover, competition over scarce resources, such as land and water, can contribute to fuel inter-communal conflicts along religious lines.

In addition to these contextual factors, the granting of freedom of association, including religious organizations, and the proliferation of denominations outside the traditional spectrum, from Pakistani Tablighi Jamaat to Saudi-inspired Salafi and Wahhabi, through Sudanese reformist factions, reflect a significant shift in the socio-religious fabric. This diversification of religious expression, marked by the arrival and establishment of groups with varied ideological backgrounds, signals a transformative phase in the religious landscape, challenging traditional norms and potentially reshaping communal identities and power structures.

### **2.1.1 Mauritania**

Mauritania's identity has been sculpted by its Berber, Arab, African, and French colonial influences, resulting in a complex societal structure that interweaves tribal affiliations with modern political dynamics. Mauritania's path to its contemporary state has been marked by colonial legacies, the struggle for independence in 1960, and subsequent internal political upheavals, including military coups and efforts towards democratization. The religious landscape of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania is predominantly Islamic, with Sunni Islam of the Maliki school of jurisprudence serving as the bedrock of societal norms and values (Thurston 2022).

The country's approach to religious freedom is deeply intertwined with its adherence to Islamic law (Sharia), which significantly impacts the regulation and practice of religion, asserting Islam's role as the state religion while simultaneously navigating the legacy of French legal principles, particularly those related to public order and state governance. In Mauritania, the scope for religious freedom is very limited. However, it becomes a point of contention in instances where government policies or actions are perceived to challenge Islamic norms or the prevailing interpretation of Islamic principles. Such instances include efforts to modernize legal codes, regulate religious education, or address issues related to gender and ethnic equality and human rights within the framework of international conventions. These situations reveal underlying tensions between Islamic norms and contemporary human rights norms.

The Mauritanian government's strict adherence to Islamic law often places constraints on the practice and expression of non-Islamic faiths. While the constitution declares Islam as the state religion and prohibits the practice of other religions in public, this has led to a nuanced landscape of religious freedom, where the space for interfaith dialogue and the expression of minority religious beliefs is limited.

Incidents of religiously motivated violence are relatively rare in Mauritania, with the state maintaining a tight grip on religious practices and institutions to preserve social order and prevent extremism. Nonetheless, there have been instances of violence linked to interpretations of scriptures that purportedly authorize slavery, a very sensitive and contentious topic in Mauritania.

Also, interreligious dialogue, as a formal endeavor, remains limited in Mauritania, largely due to the homogeneity of religious practice and the state's strong identification with Islamic values. However, there are efforts, both within civil society and by some international organizations, to foster a broader understanding of religious freedom that encompasses respect for minority religions and beliefs. This includes advocating for the rights of non-Muslims and promoting a more inclusive interpretation of religious freedom that aligns with international human rights standards.

Lastly, the role of Islamic political parties, particularly Tewassoul, the National Rally for Reform and Development, the second-largest party in the National Assembly after the 2013, 2018, and 2023 elections, illustrates the delicate balance between its Islamic identity and legal framework, and the global calls for inter-community dialogue and religious freedom, amidst traditional and modern values.

### 2.1.2 Niger

Niger is characterized by its diverse socio-political, cultural, and historical landscape which stems from a rich confluence of ethnicities, including predominantly the Hausa, Djerma-Songhai, Tuareg, Tebu and Fulani groups, as well as others. Historically, Niger's trajectory from a French colonial possession to an independent republic in 1960 has been marked by a series of political upheavals, including military coups and democratic transitions, which have significantly influenced its socio-political fabric.

The religious landscape in Niger is predominantly Islamic, with Sunni Islam being the major religious tradition followed by approximately 99% of the population. This overwhelming majority fosters a relatively uniform religious identity, which has historically facilitated a stable environment for inter- and intra-religious interactions. Despite this homogeneity, small Christian and animist communities exist and generally coexist rather peacefully with the Muslim majority.

Regarding the institutional and regulatory framework of Niger, the regulation of religious freedom is influenced by French tradition, particularly in the management of religious practices. In this context, the doctrine of *laïcité* mandates a clear separation between the private sphere in which religious freedom is protected, and the public domain, treating all beliefs with equal dignity as long as they do not conflict with constitutional values. However, it is increasingly apparent that this formal distinction does not fully align with current social dynamics, which show an informal but growing influence of religion in the public sphere.

Religious freedom is not a central issue in public debate. Yet, it surfaces, sometimes violently, when specific public initiatives are perceived as disrespectful, threatening, or in conflict with the practice of Islam or supposed "local traditions." Examples include initiatives aimed at promoting demographic control, formalizing gender equality, and prohibiting child marriage and repudiation.

For instance, the participation of former President Issoufou in the march organized in Paris in 2015 to commemorate the victims of the Charlie Hebdo massacre was manipulated by Niger's political opposition, leading to violent clashes that also targeted the country's small Christian community. However, this was a relatively isolated incident in the framework of generally peaceful interreligious coexistence. Interconfessional relationships can be more tense: incidents between followers of different interpretations of Islam are not uncommon, in a

context characterized by the rapid delegitimization of traditional Sufi and Maliki's alleged syncretism.

In Niger, terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda are inspired by radical interpretations of armed jihadism. However, numerous studies suggest that cognitive indoctrination and religious radicalization are secondary factors in explaining the mobilization and appeal of these groups (UNDP 2023). Even in this scenario, the rhetoric and actions of jihadist militants are more often directed against members of other Islamic confessions than against adherents of other religions. The most notable case of jihadist violence against the Christian community involved the kidnapping of Italian missionary Pierluigi Macalli, which appeared to be motivated by extortion rather than religious-based intimidation: the missionary was released unharmed (following the alleged payment of a ransom), and his community did not suffer significant retaliation.

The topic of interreligious dialogue does not seem central to public debate. Nonetheless, some organizations support its promotion, such as the CDIR (Comité de Dialogue Inter- et Intra-Religieux), which brings together representatives of different faiths under the auspices of public authority. This initiative underscores the importance of fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding among Niger's diverse religious communities, aiming to contribute to social harmony and conflict prevention in a complex and multifaceted religious landscape.

### 3. Methodology

The methodological framework for this research was designed to attain a nuanced understanding of the roles, perceptions, and impacts wielded by traditional and religious leaders in the Sahel region, with a special focus on their contributions to religious dialogue and societal resilience. This study adopted a predominantly qualitative multi-methodological approach to facilitate a detailed, ground-level examination of the relevant dynamics and to align interpretations with the lived experiences of the involved participants. Over 50 qualitative interviews were conducted with a varied group of stakeholders, including religious leaders, traditional authorities, members of civil society, state officials, academics, and journalists in Mauritania and Niger. Interviews took place in states' capitals, between May 2023 and February 2024. In addition, the project team members could rely on extensive background knowledge about social and political trends in the Sahel acquired through more than 10 years of research experience in the region.

Additionally, the project employed a survey method to collect data from a wide demographic over 18 years old, utilizing a 50-item multiple-choice questionnaire administered by local researchers. In total, 200 questionnaires were administered, 100 in each country. The capital cities of Nouakchott and Niamey were chosen for this study, and within each, two neighborhoods were selected intending to test the hypothesis that traditional authorities - whether religious or ethnic - are more firmly rooted within long-settled communities, whereas displacement and migration from rural settings to sprawling urban peripheries erodes the grip and legitimacy of traditional authorities, and promotes instead the spread of new norms, patterns of socialization, and beliefs.

In Nouakchott, the districts of Tivragh Zeina (a central, well-established area predominantly inhabited by the wealthier class) and Dar Naim (a more peripheral, recently settled area with

poorer conditions) were selected. In Niamey, Goudel and Koira Tegui neighborhoods were chosen following the same criteria, with the latter being the neighborhood of more recent settlement. It is noteworthy that domestic immigration to both Dar Naim and Koira Tegui has been reportedly prompted, among other things, by acute environmental crises that hit the Sahel over the past half-century. Data collection occurred in various public spaces, including cafes, mosques, social gatherings, but also private households, thanks to the support of local enumerators well-versed in local languages and social codes. The questionnaire explored several variables, such as demographic details (residential neighborhood, duration of residence, gender, age, occupation, ethnicity, economic status, number of children, education level), religious knowledge, beliefs, practices, social cleavages, sources of authority, and perceptions of their effectiveness, legitimacy, and accessibility to citizens, as well as security perceptions. Responses included both categorical and ordinal variables, organized into Likert scales ranging from 0 to 5. Through descriptive statistical analysis using STATA, the questionnaires were analyzed to extract pertinent information.

The survey conducted in Nouakchott targeted two neighborhoods, specifically Tevragh Zeina—an established quarter known as one of the historic neighborhoods of the city since its foundation in the 1960s—and Dar Naim, a neighborhood characterized by more recent migration. The administration of the questionnaire to over 100 participants was carried out randomly in public spaces such as squares, cafes, and in randomly selected private homes (by selecting every third house on the right side of a given street, and one street out of every three). Although the sampling was random, careful attention was paid to ensure an equivalent distribution by neighborhood, gender, and age. The other socio-demographic variables aligned with the demographic characteristics of the Mauritanian population.

In terms of methodological limitations, it should be noted that in Mauritania the response rate was very low, with only 1 in 5 participating, due to a lack of familiarity with survey practices and a general mistrust regarding the use of collected data. Some limitations that were identified in the data collection process also include variations in response rates based on age—with older individuals being more reluctant to participate—limited familiarity with survey methodologies and certain concepts (such as social cleavages, religious practices, and security), and a general tendency towards underestimation in certain aspects.

In Niger, the questionnaires were administered using the same sampling criteria as those in Mauritania, comprising a randomly selected sample of 110 participants to ensure a fair representation across gender, neighborhoods, and age groups. All participants were over 18 years old and had given informed consent. The targeted neighborhoods were Goudel (a central historic district in Niamey) and Koira Tegui (a newer, more peripheral, and poorer district). The questionnaires were primarily distributed in public places (markets), at *fadas*<sup>2</sup>, private houses, and small shops. The response rate varied significantly between the two districts, with Koira Tegui seeing nearly 9 out of 10 participants engaging in the survey, compared to 6 out of 10 in Goudel<sup>3</sup>. Regarding the limitations in administering the questionnaire, translating certain terms and concepts from French into local languages (Zarma, Hausa, Tamashek, Fulani)

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<sup>2</sup> Social gatherings among young men that meet to discuss community issues while drinking tea.

<sup>3</sup> The easier access in Koira Tegui can be attributed to its poorer status, initially leading respondents to believe it was a census for potential aid distribution. It was clarified that participation was voluntary and uncompensated. In Goudel, a historical stronghold of political opposition, the response rate was lower because some believe the survey was aimed at comparing the current military regime to Bazoum's previous government.

was not always straightforward. The questionnaire was more readily administered among students and civil servants<sup>4</sup>.

Despite all precautions to ensure the scientific validity of data collection, the sample size is too limited to be representative of the inclinations of the Mauritanian and Nigerien population at large. Nonetheless, while the data cannot be generalized, they remain an important indication of trends concerning the local population's perceptions.

Following data collection and analysis of the case studies in Niamey and Nouakchott, the findings were shared with local stakeholders in two dialogue and feedback events held in the respective country cases capitals. These events included focus group sessions of five individuals each to discuss specific themes before opening to broader debate and group feedback. Focus group participants comprised various categories, including religious leaders of different faiths, traditional authorities, tribal leaders, local civil society members, journalists, academics, and international practitioners, with 18 participants in Nouakchott and 21 in Niamey. All data, including interviewees and event participants, was anonymized to ensure participant anonymity and privacy in accordance with established ethical and safety standards in social research. These feedback events were crucial for validating and refining research findings and identifying opportunities for initiatives aimed at enhancing the capacities of relevant actors in promoting dialogue as a tool for peace and resilience.

## 4. Results

The analysis of the questionnaires indicates that territorial up/rooting may influence the respondents' perceptions, including the legitimacy of traditional authorities and beliefs. This influence however is not systematic and varies significantly depending on the specific locality and topic surveyed. In general, it appears to be slightly more significant for the case of Mauritania, while the perceptions' variations between the two neighborhood samples in Niamey are usually lower.

### 4.1 Mauritania

In our sample, 44% identified themselves as Bidane (white Moors), 27% as Haratine (black Moors), 26% as Afro-Mauritanian, and 1% as other. The predominant economic condition was middle class, with nearly 20% identifying themselves as poor, very poor, or well-off, respectively. Only 3% of the sample declared themselves wealthy. A segment of 13% of the respondents professed to belong to the reformist or Salafist confession. The rest of the sample was divided between traditional Maliki Islam (38%) and Sufi brotherhood Islam<sup>5</sup> (30%), with 5% declaring other affiliations, and 14% did not respond.

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting that despite their higher propensity to participate, these groups also critiqued the survey, suspecting it was commissioned by the "whites". Some participants also expressed concerns about the data collection's purposes, fearing it might be a form of espionage potentially used against them or their religion. This reflects a climate of significant apprehension, caution, and distrust, often attributing "French" or "Western" influences as the root of Niger's problems.

<sup>5</sup> Historical accounts document numerous debates between Maliki and Sufi adherents in Mauritania and Morocco. Maliki Islam and Sufi refer to two distinct aspects within the broader Islamic tradition, as the first is one of the major schools of jurisprudence while the latter refers to a method of religious practice, concerning spirituality and social organizations (Thurston 2022). Sufism is often expressed through various orders, each with its practices and teachings. While these are distinct, these two categories are not mutually exclusive, as a person can follow

In your opinion, the diversity of religious beliefs is a source of...

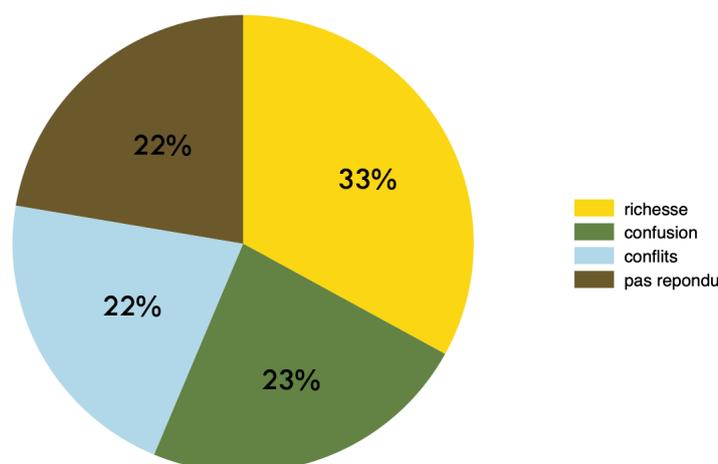


Fig. 1. Perceived effects of the plurality of religious confessions in Niger

According to the sample, the diversity of religious beliefs was seen as a source of richness by one-third of the respondents, as confusion by 23%, and as conflict by 22%. Thus, the prevalent idea was not that diverse religious beliefs could enrich social life but rather that the pluralization of religious beliefs represented a problem. From a disaggregated data analysis, it emerges that especially two groups thought that the diversity of religious beliefs represented a source of confusion or conflicts: women and Salafists. Among those who professed to belong to this religious current, none declared that diversity could be interpreted as a positive resource and means of enrichment, but rather predominantly as a cause of conflict.

Regarding religious knowledge, in line with the literature that characterizes Mauritania as a country where theological wisdom is profound compared to other West African countries, the sample indeed claimed to have pursued religious studies (whether informally or in a Quranic school), with only one-third of the sample stating they had received no religious education. The level of influence of religion in society was deemed to be strong by 55%, moderate by 20%, and only 13% considered it not strong. This level of influence was deemed appropriate by 54% of the sample; however, according to 21%, the influence was too great, while 13% thought it was not strong enough. The perception that the influence of religion was less pronounced was more widespread among Afro-Mauritanians than other ethnic groups, with more than a quarter of the sample estimating that the influence of religion is not at all strong in society. Among the other religious confessions, more than 70% of the Malikis thought that the influence of religion was strong, while only 30% of the Sufis thought the same.

According to the sample of respondents, the influence of religious leaders in society was strong for 68%, moderate for 16%, and not strong for 6%. Such a level of influence was considered too much by a third of the sample, just right by another third, and insufficient by 20%. The

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the Maliki school of jurisprudence for legal matters and also be part of a Sufi order for spiritual growth. Nonetheless, a significant portion of the Mauritanian population identifies as Maliki Muslims without practicing Sufism. Accounting for these distinctions, the two categories have been separated for two main reasons: to provide greater detail in the analysis and to allow interviewees to self-identify with the category that better represented their inclination and belonging.

influence of religious leaders was perceived as stronger among women than men, but they considered this level of influence to be adequate. Moreover, more than half of the inhabitants of Tevragh Zeina believed that the influence of religious leaders was too high.

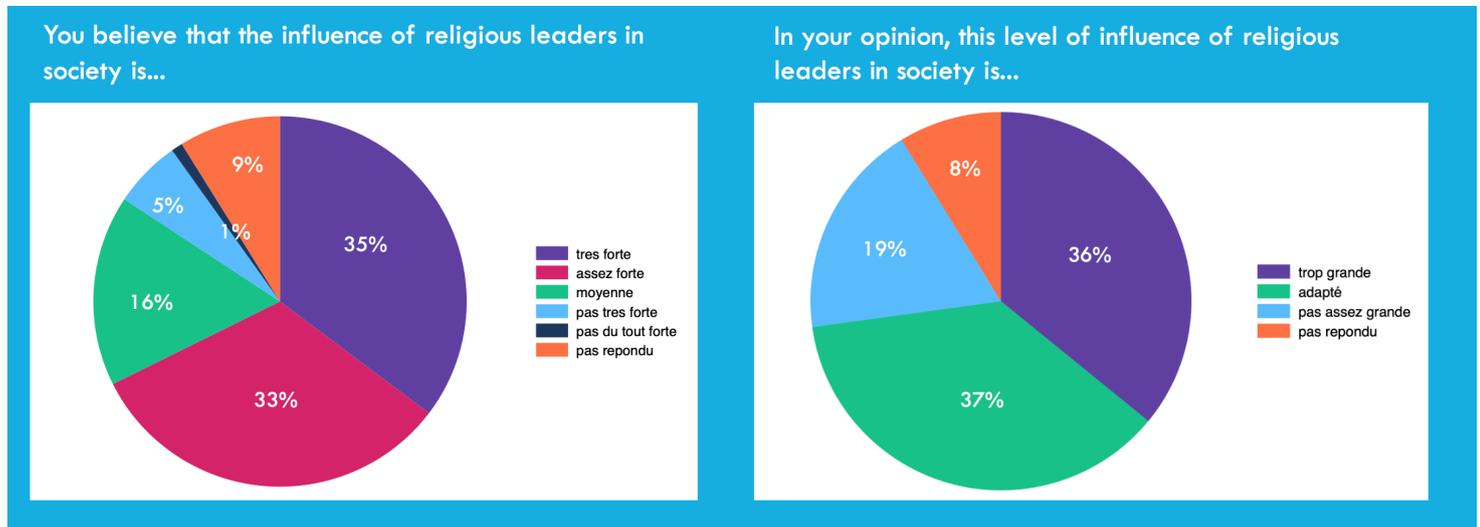


Fig. 2. Perceived societal influence of religious leaders in Mauritania

The survey also explored the respondents' perceptions of the sources of authority, in the event of economic, justice, health, and security issues. The sample's responses were polarized. The public administration was perceived as the most relevant authority by the absolute majority of respondents in cases of security (75%); justice (58%); and health (56%) issues, but not in the case of economic ones (14%). Traditional authorities were seen as relatively pertinent in cases of justice (22%), economic (17%), and health (14%). In the case of economic problems, friends and family were seen as the most pertinent authorities (60%). Religious authorities were rarely perceived as relevant authorities to address any of these issues.

Subsequently, we examined the evolution of perceptions regarding the legitimacy of various authorities over two decades. Twenty years ago, traditional chiefs were deemed the most legitimate authority, holding a legitimacy percentage of 29%, followed by security forces at 15%, state authorities at 14%, religious leaders at 7%, and local administration at 6%. A notable portion of the respondents abstained from responding, attributing their inability to their youth at the time.

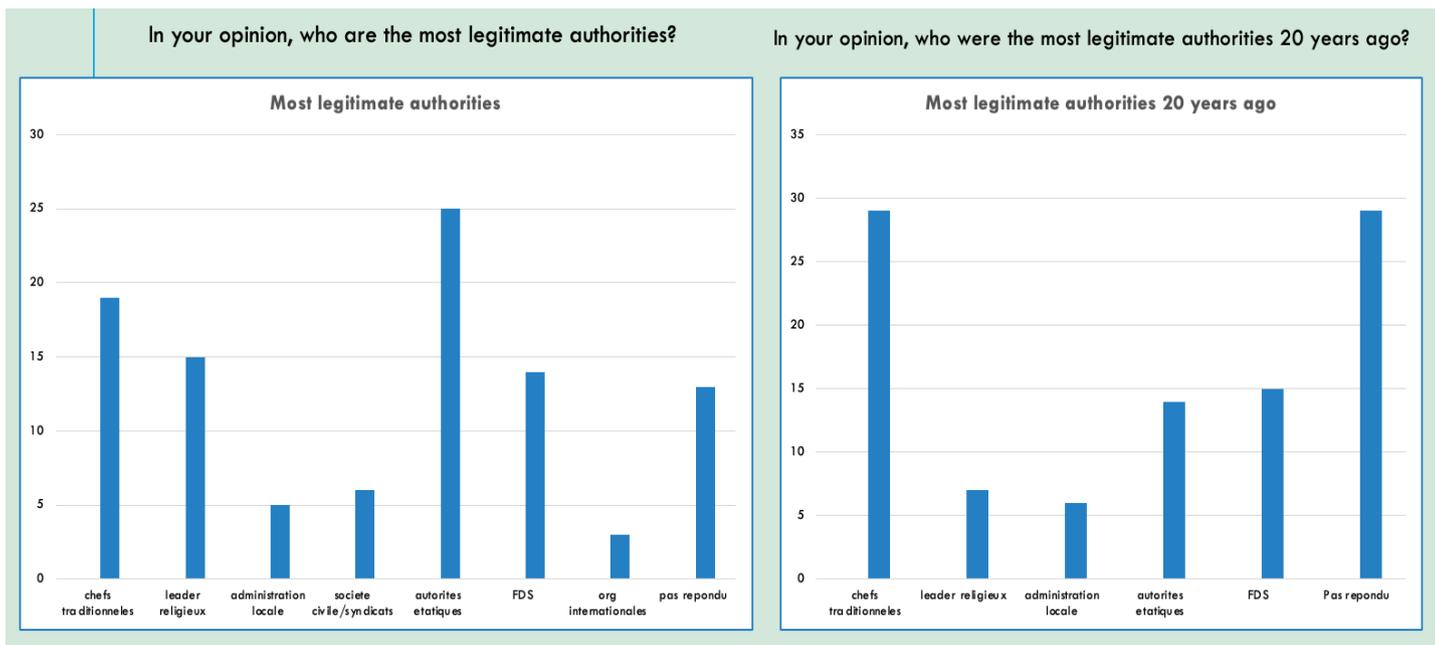


Fig. 3. Temporal variation of perceived authorities' legitimacy in Mauritania

Presently, the legitimacy perception towards authorities exhibits noticeable changes. Although traditional chiefs continue to possess a considerable degree of legitimacy, their percentage has diminished to 19%, reflecting a subtle shift in the community's confidence in traditional governance over the past twenty years. State authorities have now risen to be perceived as the most legitimate, with a 25% legitimacy rate. This marked increase underscores a significant transition towards the trust and esteem for government institutions and officials in today's social fabric. The legitimacy perception of security forces has remained relatively constant, evidenced by a current rate of 14%. Remarkably, religious leaders have seen their perceived legitimacy rise to 15%, indicating an enhanced recognition of their influence and authority within the community. Thus the perceived legitimacy of religious leaders doubled in the last 20 years, showcasing a heightened legitimacy, especially among respondents in Dar Naim and among those identifying as Salafist, while state authorities are viewed more favorably in Tevragh Zeina and among the Sufi.

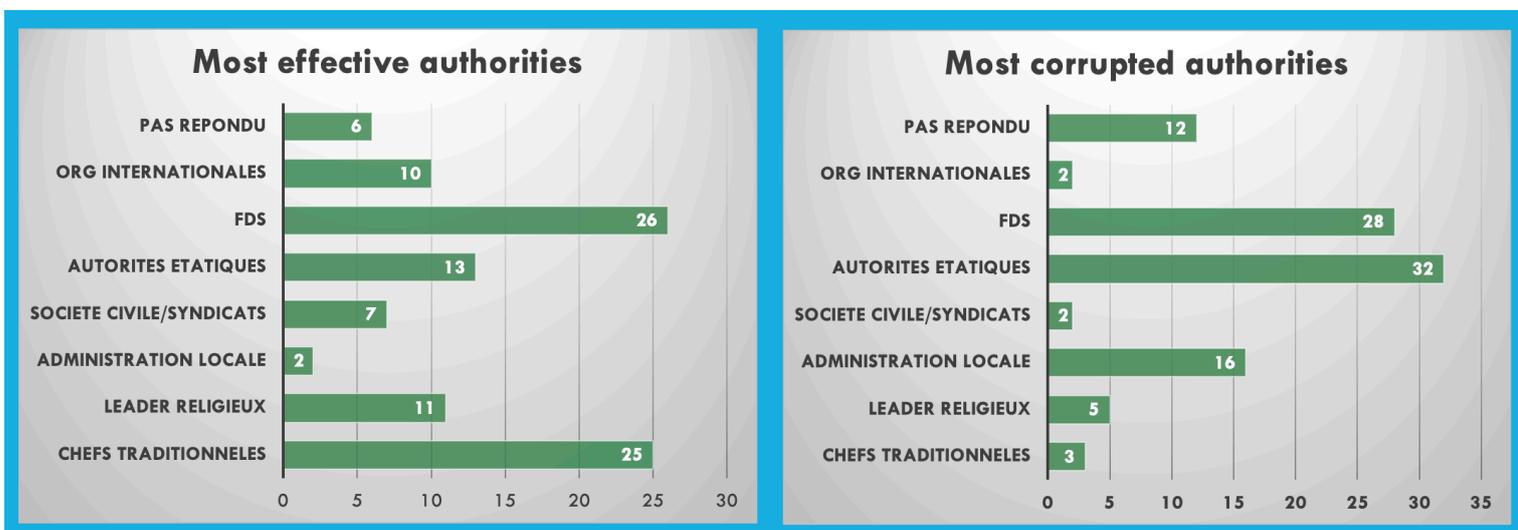


Fig.4. Perception of effectiveness and level of corruption of different authorities in Mauritania

In assessing the perceived effectiveness and corruption of authorities, state authorities are considered moderately effective (13%) yet are highly perceived as corrupt (32%), revealing a profound trust deficit towards government institutions. Security forces are seen as the most effective (26%) but also as the most corrupt (28%), illustrating a contradictory perception of their effectiveness and corruption. Despite their high effectiveness (25%), traditional chiefs are viewed as less corrupt (3%) in comparison to state authorities and security forces. Religious leaders are deemed moderately effective (11%) and are perceived as less corrupt (5%) than state and security forces. Notably, religious leaders are regarded as particularly effective by the Salafists and residents of Dar Naim, traditional authorities are seen as especially effective by the Bidane, and security and defense forces by the Sufi. These findings illuminate the intricate dynamics surrounding the perception of authority within the community, where effectiveness and corruption are not always in contradiction.

Asked about the cleavages threatening social cohesion within the community, over 40% of the respondents believe that religious differences are the most significant, encompassing both intra- and inter-religious disputes. In particular, the majority of Salafists view inter- and intra-religious conflicts as significant (82%), whereas, for most Malikites and Afro-Mauritanians, these conflicts are deemed of little to no importance. Approximately 25-30% of conflicts are attributed to ethnic differences, encompassing both inter- and intra-ethnic disputes. Political conflicts are perceived as less pressing, with only 15% of the sample considering them to be of significant concern.

Regarding the manifestations of insecurity, the most widely held perceptions of insecurity are linked to theft and banditry (55%) and abuses of state power (21%), much less to armed attacks (3%), food insecurity (9%), kidnappings (1%) or environmental degradation (4%). For 39% of the sample, poverty is seen as the main cause of such manifestations of insecurity, followed by injustice and poor governance (25%), state weakness (16%), intercommunity tensions (10%), and religious extremism (8%).

Moreover, traffickers and bandits are perceived as significant security threats by 57% of the respondents, while jihadists are viewed by 12% as perpetrators of extortion and attacks on the population. Conversely, the security and defense forces (SDF) are predominantly seen as protectors and allies of the people. However, there's a small percentage where views diverge: 8% report that the SDF extort money, and 5% say they attack the population. Interestingly, jihadists are not considered a threat by 12% of the respondents, who note that they do not disturb local communities. The perception of jihadists varies significantly with religious affiliation; for instance, 8% of Salafists regard them as protectors, 39% believe they leave the population alone, and 30% view them as aggressors.

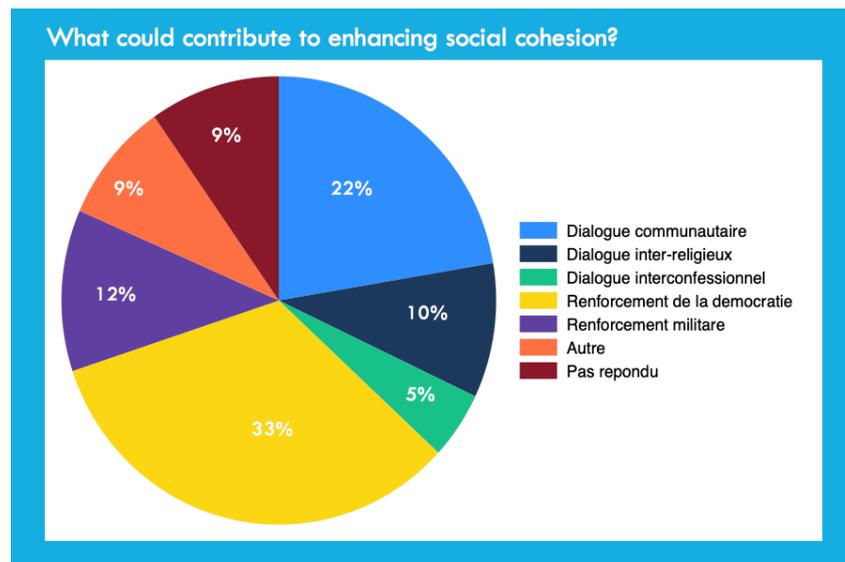


Fig. 5. Perceived tools to enhance social cohesion in Mauritania

When queried about factors that could contribute to enhancing social cohesion, the most common response was the strengthening of democracy (33%), followed by inter-community dialogue (22%), military reinforcement (12%), inter-religious dialogue (10%), and inter-confessional (i.e intra-religious) dialogue (5%). Nine percent of participants did not respond, and another 9% offered alternative suggestions. Looking at data disaggregated along biographic identifiers, the respondents of Tivragh Zeina are found more often among the advocates of the reinforcement of democracy. Afro-Mauritanians, in contrast, perceive community dialogue as particularly important, a sentiment not shared by the Salafists. The latter group also regards the strengthening of democracy as inconsequential (0%) to social resilience.

## 4.2 Niger

The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample tend to align with the trends of Niamey's inhabitants overall, although the sample is not representative, making the results non-generalizable to the broader Nigerien population. Half of the sample identified as Zarma-Songhai (52%), followed by Hausa (26%), Fulani (14%), Tuareg (5%), Toubou, Arab, or Gourmantché (2%), and 1% other, with no Kanuri respondents. The proportion of Haoussa individuals is higher in Goudel, whereas the Fulani community constitutes a larger percentage in Koira Tegui. The percentage of Zarma individuals is consistent across both neighborhoods. Additionally, in terms of economic conditions, a large majority of the sample declared themselves as lower class (63% poor and 9% very poor), with 27% middle class, 1% well-off, and 0% rich. The respondents from Koira Tegui exhibit a relatively lower economic status compared to the residents of Goudel. Regarding educational levels, most (65%) had not received any formal schooling, while 10% had attended primary, secondary, or university education, respectively. Among the respondents, the Fulani demonstrate the lowest levels of educational attainment.

In terms of religious denominations, 18% of the sample identified with the Salafist current, 58% with Sufi brotherhoods, and 6% with traditional Maliki practices<sup>6</sup>. The demographic distribution of religious affiliations reveals a higher concentration of Salafists in Goudel and a

<sup>6</sup> There were no Christians, Jews, or Shiites in the sample, despite their limited presence in Niamey's population.

predominance of Sufis in Koira Tegui, which at first sight appears to run counter the expectations linked to our research hypothesis. Salafists, who are typically students or employees, also tend to be more often women than men. In contrast, when compared to other ethnic groups, there is a noticeable prevalence of Salafists among the Hausa.

While schooling achievement is low, the level of religious education is higher. Only a third of the sample had not pursued religious studies, while 25% had received informal religious education, 41% had attended a Quranic school or similar, and 4% had advanced or university-level religious education.. Interestingly, the proportion of women attending Quranic schools is significantly higher than that of men, yet most women believe they possess a very basic level of religious knowledge, often referring to themselves as “talibisé”<sup>7</sup>.

Despite a relatively widespread religious education, most participants reported not having an in-depth knowledge of religion. However, a third (34%) claimed to adhere strictly to religious practices, 41% moderately so, and only 20% acknowledged not being strict in their practice. Interestingly, individuals who claim to abide by a rigorous religious practice are also prevalently those who claim to have little to no in-depth knowledge of their faith. Consequently, while the majority of the sample perceives their religious knowledge to be somewhat superficial, their adherence to religious practices is notably stringent. Moreover, the majority of the youth engage with religious sermons via their mobile devices, primarily accessing content from northern Nigerian preachers.

In terms of the perceived social influence of religion, respondents estimated it to be strong for the majority of the sample (58%), with only 17% thinking it was not strong. This level of religious influence in society was judged as too much (26%), adequate (30%), or not enough (27%)<sup>8</sup> by similar shares of respondents. Among them, Salafists deem the influence of religion in society as either suitable or not strong enough.

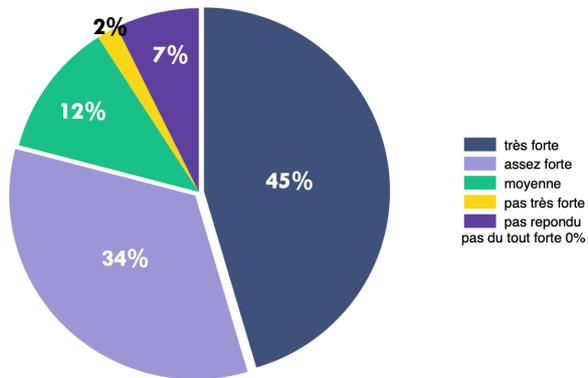
The perceived strong influence of religion in Nigerien society similarly extends to religious leaders, with nearly 80% of respondents viewing their influence as quite or very strong, with only 2% of respondents claiming instead that it is not so strong. Interestingly, this level of influence was deemed too great by a third of the sample (32%), while 43% found it appropriate, and only 14% found religious leaders’ influence not strong enough. The perceived influence of religion, as well as of religious leaders is more pronounced among women in general, and in Koira Tegui more than in Goudel.

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<sup>7</sup> This term refers to a Quranic student or disciple.

<sup>8</sup> The 17% of the sample did not respond to this question.

You believe that the influence of religious leaders in society is...



In your opinion, this level of influence of religious leaders in society is...

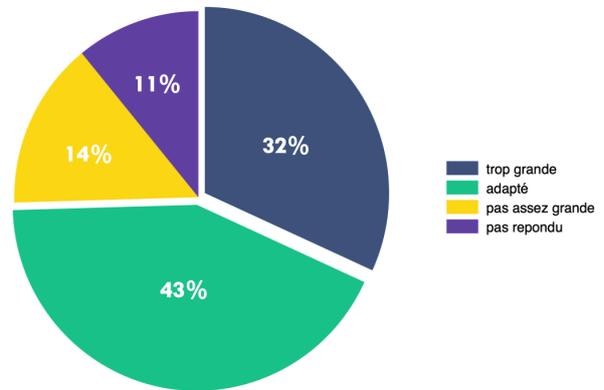


Fig.6. Perceived societal influence of religious leaders in Niger

Similar to Mauritania, the diversity of religious beliefs is mostly seen as a source of confusion (74%) and conflict (22%), with only 1% viewing it as enriching. For the majority of the Fulani people (60%), the diversity of religious beliefs serves as a source of confusion. In contrast, and somehow unexpectedly, Salafists exhibit a lesser degree of concern regarding conflicts that might arise from the diversity of religious beliefs compared to other religious groups. This divergence in perspectives highlights the varying degrees of tolerance and interpretation of religious pluralism within the community.

In your opinion, the diversity of religious beliefs is a source of...

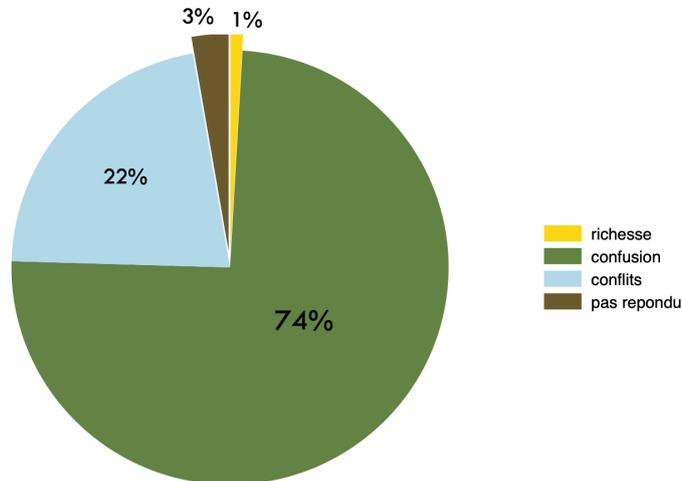


Fig. 7. Perceived effects of the plurality of religious confessions in Niger

Moreover, regarding social cleavages, the data portray a highly fragmented society where ethnic, religious, political, and economic tensions are felt by the majority (all above 60%). A disaggregated analysis reveals that inter-ethnic divides are the most pressing social concerns, overshadowing economic and intra-ethnic conflicts. Inter-ethnic tensions are viewed as particularly troubling among the Fulani and the poorer respondents, whereas inter-religious

conflicts are seen as less significant. Also, as wealth increases, the issue of inter-ethnic cleavage becomes more pronounced.

In terms of causes of insecurity, the strongest perceptions of insecurity are linked to armed attacks (23%) and theft and banditry (68%), much less to food insecurity, kidnappings, abuses of state power, or environmental degradation. For 57% of the sample, poverty is seen as the main cause of insecurity, followed by injustice and poor governance (21%), and state weakness (14%). Other causes such as intercommunity tensions and religious extremism are deemed less important. Age differences appear to influence threats' perceptions: the youth, particularly students, are more likely to attribute the insecurity situation to the West, whereas individuals aged between 40 and 60 identify poverty and poor governance as the main terrorism drivers.

Almost unanimously, traffickers/bandits and jihadists are seen as security threats, with the latter being viewed as extorters and attackers of the population, whereas the security and defense forces (SDF) are perceived as protectors and helpers of the people.

Similar to the case in Mauritania, public administration is seen as the most relevant authority in addressing matters of justice (82%), health (92%), and security (97%), but not in economic issues (0%). In economic problems, family (88%) and friends (6%) are deemed most pertinent. Religious and traditional authorities are very rarely perceived as relevant, with confidence levels in these areas always below 6%.

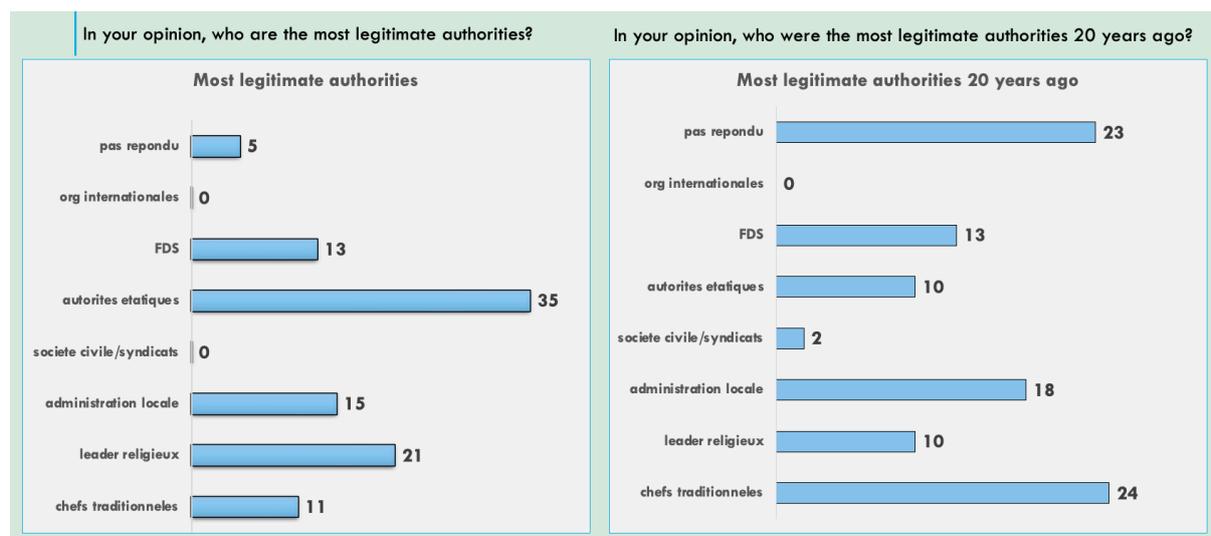


Fig. 8. Temporal variation of perceived authorities' legitimacy in Niger

The data show that the legitimacy of different types of authority has varied over time. While the perceived legitimacy of traditional authorities halved over the last 20 years (from 24% to 11%), that of religious leaders doubled (from 10% to 21%). International organizations, civil society organizations, and trade unions remain almost insignificant. The legitimacy level of the FDS has remained unchanged (13%) despite extensive literature on the effects of counterterrorism and FDS abuses against civilians, especially in rural areas. Interestingly, state authorities are perceived as the most legitimate (35%) and have significantly increased their legitimacy compared to 20 years ago (from 10%).

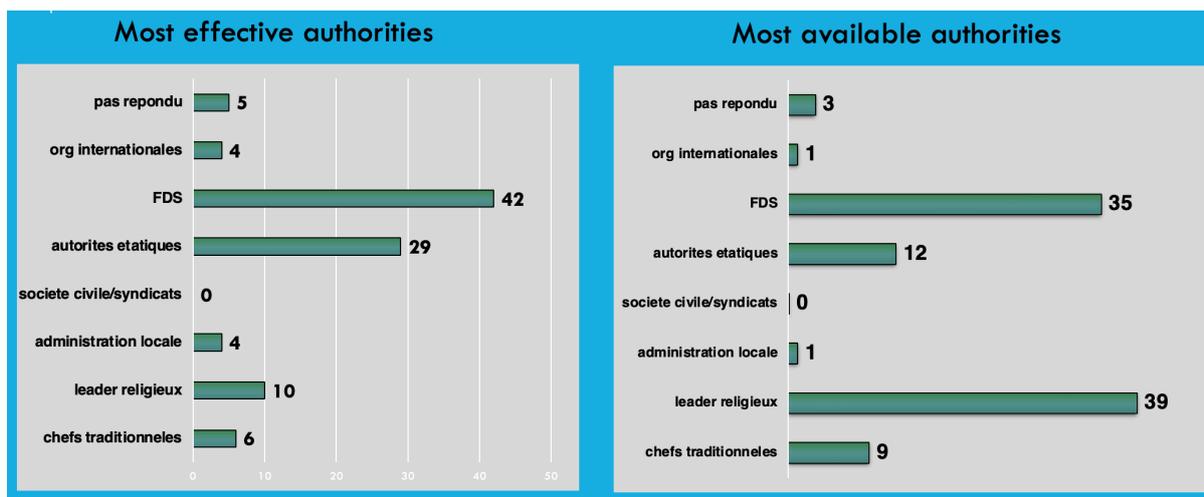


Fig. 9. Perception of the level of effectiveness and availability of different authorities in Niger

The FDS are also perceived as the most effective authorities (42%), followed by state authorities (29%), religious leaders (10%), and traditional chiefs (6%). Religious leaders, though not perceived as particularly effective, are regarded as the most willing to listen (39%), followed by the FDS (35%), state authorities (12%), and traditional authorities (9%). Traditional authorities are therefore not seen as particularly legitimate, effective, or receptive<sup>9</sup>. It's thus important to highlight a strong alignment in responses concerning the perception and legitimacy of authorities, revealing broad support for state authorities and the security forces. This phenomenon could be explained by the older generation's nostalgia for Kountché's era, viewed as a period of just governance, and the belief among some that military leadership from the onset of terrorism would have quickly resolved the issue. On the other hand, the younger generation, as well as some older individuals, resonate with a "sovereignist" mindset that emerged following the coup d'état on 26 July 2023. At this juncture, respondents do not hesitate to mention instances of financial mismanagement<sup>10</sup> and favoritism by the ousted authorities, as presented by the military in the media, to garner public support by portraying themselves as saviors.

While state authorities are perceived as the most legitimate (35%), and moderately effective (29%), they are also seen as the most corrupt (70%). Conversely, corruption hardly ever seems to apply, in the respondents' views, to religious leaders (0%), traditional chiefs (3%), civil society and unions (0%), the FDS (1%), and international organizations (0%).

<sup>9</sup> The role of traditional authorities varies depending on the intervention area. It is highly probable that in rural areas, the relevance of traditional authorities is greater compared to urban areas, like Niamey. Religious leaders are considered moderately legitimate, very close to the population and receptive, and not corrupt at all.

<sup>10</sup> Contrary to potential fears of criticism, the populace seems more trusting of the military than of civilian governments, perceiving politicians as morally corrupt or "*koura*" (hyena in Hausa). Furthermore, the younger generation, unfamiliar with Kountché's military regime, has experienced democratic governance firsthand and is notably disillusioned with it, preferring military authority over the perceived corruption within civilian administrations. This widespread sentiment - akin to a state of suspension or sleepwalking - reflects unconditional support for the military (as indicated in the answers concerning the perceived legitimacy, effectiveness and receptiveness of authorities), overlooking their involvement in financial scandals, such as the "MDN Gate", an affair involving the embezzlement by the Ministry of Defence of over 74 billion CFA francs.

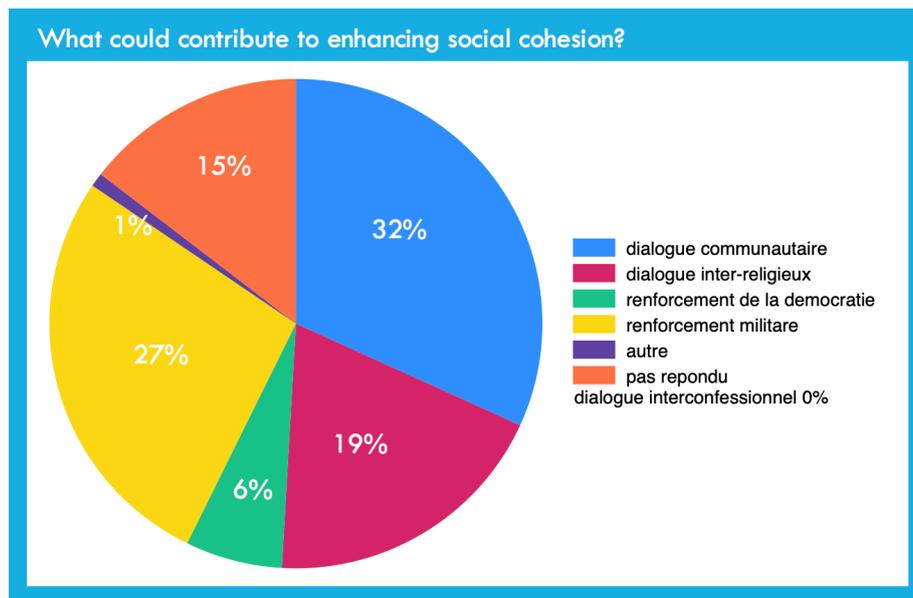


Fig. 10. Perceived tools to enhance social cohesion in Niger

Finally, in examining the tools for social resilience that could further enhance social cohesion, the surveyed sample predominantly believes that inter-community dialogue (32%), military strengthening (27%), and inter-religious dialogue (19%) are the leading responses. Strengthening democracy is considered significantly less impactful, with only a 6% attribution rate. Inter-religious dialogue is viewed as more significant by the self-proclaimed Sufis than by the Malikis in general, or the Salafists. The strengthening of the military holds greater significance among the impoverished, the extremely poor, and Salafists. Notably, inter-confessional dialogue is not perceived as a useful tool at all (0%).

## 5. Focus groups

In Mauritania, focus group discussions have highlighted the increasing societal influence of religious leaders. Inter-religious dialogue is generally not prioritized, whereas inter-confessional dialogue has gained importance, particularly due to the more recent influence of Shia Islam. This trend was also noted in Niger's focus groups, where initiatives of intra- and inter-religious dialogue are limited, while a growing sectarian divide between the Shiite and Sunni communities was also noted. Interestingly, in the Koirra Tegui district, where our questionnaire was distributed, a notable emergence of Shiite Islamic centers, mosques, and Quranic schools has been observed. Additionally, Shiite groups have ventured into television broadcasting. This development underscores the critical importance of intra-faith dialogue, particularly because in the period up until the late 1980s and early 1990s a more homogeneous religious education and understanding prevailed. In contrast, the present day sees a proliferation of groups, whose competition for followers often leads to inflammatory preaching.

A significant hurdle to establishing inter-confessional or inter-religious dialogue in Mauritania is the absence of a secure and open space for freedom of speech. Concurrently, the introduction of Salafism in Mauritania may coincide with a rise in obscurantism and the reinforcement of patriarchy, especially in rural areas.

Focus group discussions reveal that limited religious knowledge is a key factor contributing to confusion about religious beliefs and practices among individuals, as insufficient grounding in religious teachings undermines one's ability to navigate and interpret religious concepts accurately. Comparing the situation in Niger with that of Mauritania, it is evident that in Niger, religious knowledge is particularly limited, although religious practice remains vigorous. A key issue identified from the data analysis is the access to religious knowledge, which is not widespread, especially among the lower social classes who are also more susceptible to adhere to religious rigorism. The data suggests that both youth and women from Niger are often excluded from discussions on the religious sphere, despite being more receptive to Salafist doctrines. The contrast between knowledge and practice is further complicated by the increasing influence of preachings from Nigeria, contributing to an ever-more fragmented religious landscape.

In Niger, inter-religious dialogue is seen as less contentious compared to inter-confessional dialogue. Here, the influence of religious organizations appears considerably contained. A significant portion of the population, estimated between 60 and 65%, does not adhere to any religious brotherhood. This limited affiliation and knowledge of religious practices underline part of the problem faced by Nigerien society, where religion plays a central role but is characterized by superficial adherence.

This perception is due to the presence of reformist tendencies and the establishment of an Islamic University, which has led to challenges to the Tidjaniyyah Sufi order. In the Diffa region of southeastern Niger, the rise of Boko Haram is considered, at least partially, to be linked to poor religious knowledge combined with rigorous religious practice.

A significant observation applicable to both Mauritania and Niger is the variation in legitimacy attributed to religious authorities at local and national levels, as well as between urban and rural settings. Particularly in rural areas, religious leaders exert more influence within communities.

In both Mauritania and Niger, inter-community dialogue is deemed more crucial as identity issues are seen as drivers toward violent extremism. A peculiar aspect of Niger is the importance of identity and ethnic issues, which form the core of inter-communal conflicts. These conflicts, rooted in ethnic and identity claims, often act as catalysts for community groups' affiliation with jihadist organizations. This dynamic highlights the complexity of social tensions in Niger, where the religious dimension intersects with and amplifies ethnic and communal divisions, configuring an extremely complex and multifaceted social fabric.

## 6. Cross-case analysis

Comparing data from Mauritania and Niger case studies regarding the respondents' perceptions of religious trends, leaders, and norms in society, we observe several cross-cutting themes and notable differences regarding the role of authorities, religious dynamics, and social cohesion. In both countries' samples, the respondents' neighborhood shows an unsystematic and generally limited impact on attitudes towards authorities and religious dialogue. This outcome suggests that other factors may be more significant in shaping these attitudes, overshadowing the influence of up/rooting dynamics.

Respondents from Tevragh Zeina stand out vis-à-vis the overall sample in as much as they appear to consider that the influence of religious leaders on Mauritania's society remains higher

than it should be, especially as their legitimacy is viewed as declining and their effectiveness as limited. Respondents from Teveragh Zeina therefore concur with (and considerably contribute to) the overall majority view that the strengthening of democracy is key to bridging existing societal divides in Mauritania, while inter- and intra-religious dialogues are considered of limited utility. Instead, respondents from Dar Naim appear to hold a much more positive view of religious leaders. In contrast with the overall sample, they tend to see religious leaders' legitimacy as increasing, and especially praise religious leaders' steady effectiveness in addressing social problems. Overall, the views on religious (leaders') influence and relevance by respondents in Dar Naim tend to align more often with those held by Salafists, while respondents from Teveragh Zeina more often concur with those held by self-declared Sufis. These findings are consistent with the expectations of our research hypothesis.

In Niamey, the respondents' neighborhoods do not appear as a strong factor influencing attitudes and perceptions concerning religious and traditional authorities and beliefs. While a large share of Niger's sample considers that religion and religious leaders have a strong influence on Nigerien society, this trend is slightly less pronounced in Goudel. Apart from that, other factors than one's neighborhood – such as age, gender, ethnicity, and sectarian belonging – appear to condition the respondents' views on religious beliefs and leaders' significance, legitimacy, and the changes thereof.

In Mauritania, the data suggests that while diverse religious beliefs are recognized by one-third of the sample as a source of social richness, there is also a significant perception of religious pluralization as problematic, particularly among women and Salafists. Concerning religious knowledge, a large segment of the Mauritanian sample claims to have undertaken religious studies, aligning with the country's reputation for theological depth. However, in Niger, despite a substantial level of religious education, a deep knowledge of religion is not widely reported, which may point to the qualitative difference in religious understanding between the two populations.

The overall influence of religion in society is seen as strong and predominantly appropriate, with variations across different confessions and ethnic groups. Religious leaders are perceived as influential, although the public administration is seen as the go-to authority in most cases, except for economic issues where personal networks take precedence.

When examining the legitimacy and influence of different sources of authority, an interesting evolution is noted over the past two decades. Traditional chiefs' perceived legitimacy has declined in Mauritania, while in Niger it has halved. Conversely, the legitimacy of religious leaders has doubled in both countries, reflecting a surge in religious authority or perhaps an erosion of trust in traditional governance structures. In both countries, there is also a marked increase in the legitimacy ascribed to state authorities. However, this legitimacy is complicated by concurrent perceptions of corruption, especially in state institutions. Security forces in both countries are regarded as effective but also corrupt, indicating a complex trust relationship between the populace and their protectors. Yet, religious leaders in both nations are perceived as less corrupt, potentially enhancing their moral authority and influence.

The preferred tool to reinforce social cohesion is arguably inter-community dialogue, which ranks as the preferred option in Niger (32%) and the second best in Mauritania (22%). By contrast, Niger's second preferred option is military strengthening (27%), which contrasts sharply with Mauritania's other top option, which is the reinforcement of democracy (33%), while military strengthening in Mauritania doesn't look very popular (12%). This could reflect

Niger's ongoing governance by a military junta, influencing public opinion on the military's societal role. The low rate attributed to strengthening democracy (6%) may signal a lack of faith in political processes to resolve social challenges.

In both countries, inter-confessional (5% in Mauritania and 0% in Niger) dialogue is not seen as particularly relevant, while inter-religious dialogue is seen as more valuable in Niger than in Mauritania (10% in Mauritania and 19% in Niger) even if it does not represent the preferred tool to reinforce social cohesion.

Overall, these findings underscore a regional pattern where the role of religion and its leaders is pivotal in shaping social and political realities, and where the efficacy and legitimacy of state and traditional authorities are in flux.

## 7. Conclusions

The observations presented above provide useful indications, even if the non-representativity of the sample prevents from extrapolating conclusions of general validity for Mauritania or Niger, let alone the Sahel region as a whole. Notwithstanding this, the research has highlighted that studying religious dialogue in Mauritania and Niger serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it provides insights into the mechanisms of conflict resolution and peacebuilding in diverse societies. Secondly, studying religious dialogue contributes to the broader discourse on religious pluralism and human rights in the Sahel region. Moreover, it underscores the role of religious leaders and institutions as potential agents of change in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation.

While a cautious attitude in the interpretation of available data is warranted, the research has highlighted that despite initial hypotheses, territorial up/rooting does not appear to significantly affect attitudes towards religious authorities, beliefs and dialogue opportunities, especially in Niger. Other factors may therefore be of greater relevance in shaping people's perceptions. In Mauritania, there's a notable concern about the pluralization of religious beliefs, particularly among women and Salafists, with religious diversity often seen as problematic rather than enriching. The country's traditions of Islamic scholarship are reflected in its population's engagement with religious studies, which translates into widespread profound religious knowledge. Niger shows a similar pattern of strong religious influence and education, but, unlike Mauritania, a deep understanding of religion is not universally reported.

Over the past two decades, there has been a shift in the perception of the sources of authority and their respective legitimacy. Traditional chiefs have seen a decline in perceived legitimacy in Mauritania and halved in Niger, while the legitimacy of religious leaders has doubled in both contexts, suggesting a growing religious authority or diminishing trust in traditional governance structures. State authorities have also seen an increase in perceived legitimacy, though this is complicated by concurrent perceptions of corruption, particularly within state institutions.

The approach to enhancing social cohesion differs between the two, with Mauritania placing more value on the reinforcement of democracy while in Niger, there's an emphasis on military strengthening, reflecting the country's current governance by a military junta. Social cohesion strategies favored by respondents in both countries highlight the importance of inter-community dialogue. Overall, in both countries, intra-religious and inter-religious dialogues

are not considered particularly effective in addressing existing social cleavages and promoting social cohesion.

This comparison highlights the pivotal role of religious leaders in shaping social and political realities in both Mauritania and Niger, indicating a regional pattern where the efficacy and legitimacy of state, traditional authorities, and religious leaders are in flux, amid concerns over religious plurality and the need for stronger societal bonds.

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