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Erosion of Traditional Authority: Accidental Radicalism In The Case of Chad under Déby Regime

There has been renewed interest in traditional authority, which constitutes a genuinely African form of governance. Nevertheless, how changing traditional authority could be a push factor for radicalism remains an uncharted terrain. By focusing on Chad’s Borno-Buduma-Kanembu ethnic groups, this article provides a nuanced case study that maps how specific communities are disproportionately affected by the tribe-oriented Déby regime ultimately fuelling radicalism. Based on first and second-hand information through semi-structured interviews with local leaders, state officials, youth and former Boko-Haram affiliates, supported by 12 field works in Chad, this paper finds a deliberate retreat of local authority during the Déby regime which has led to institutional decay of traditional authority, exacerbated feelings of marginalization among local groups. This shift paved the way for radicalisation among excluded youth, driving them towards radical groups like Boko Haram as a form of resistance or belonging, which this paper introduces “accidental radicalism” as a distinct pathway, where affiliation stems from structural marginalization rather than ideological alignment. This accidental pathway reflects pragmatic survivalism of youth which subsequently weaponized by radicals. This micro-level analysis adds depth to the broader discussion on radicalism in Africa.

Keywords: Radicalization, Traditional Authority, Post-colonialism, Chad, Boko Haram

Introduction

Africa is fertile soil for fringe elements of radicalism to take hold (Stith, 2010). The continent's unique social fabric, political and economic fragilities inherited from the colonial period, and divergent approaches to heterogeneity have led to the emergence of a vulnerable security environment (Brown, 2018). This structural weakness has undermined regional security and has turned Africa into one of the operational hubs of radical organizations. As of 2023, it has been reported that half of the world's sixteen countries most affected by attacks from radical groups are located in Africa (Global Terrorism Index, 2024). Organizations such as the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM), Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab have begun to establish pragmatic alliances with marginalized communities by exploiting weak state capacities. Thus, the concept of radicalization has become an escalating problem within the continent.

This article revisits the impact of colonialism on the postcolonial traditional power structure and decolonial developments in Africa. It argues that colonialism played a pivotal role in regulating power structure and traditional governance in Africa. Citing that, the British meticulously endeavoured to appoint legitimate traditional leaders, carefully considering local dynamics and socio-political fault lines. In stark contrast, the Francophone system saw the French adopt a more utilitarian and less scrupulous approach, showing a marked reluctance to secure legitimacy or prioritize social acceptance (Cooper, 2011; Geschiere, 1993). In Chad, this system has been the entrenched asymmetry between traditional authority and centralized state power. From here, we argue that during the presidency of Idriss Déby Itno, spanning from 1990 to 2021, both colonial legacy and its trajectories of unstructured political system became the major push-factor for radicalisation. The asymmetric relationship, stemming from the central authority's policy towards local authorities, inadvertently stirred radicalisation among Borno-Buduma-Kanembu ethnic groups in Chad, driving their alignment with Boko Haram in 2015.

Overall, this research provides two broad contributions to the literature. First, it presents a unique case of accidental radicalism, a phenomenon that is currently regarded as rare, while offering a fresh insight on the side-effects of the legacy of post-colonialism over domestic structure. Unlike other forms of radicalism, such as ideological, political, or grievance-based radicalism ect, accidental radicalism is distinct in that it reflects a pragmatic survival strategy among Chad's Borno-Buduma-Kanembu ethnic groups, which is subsequently weaponized by Boko Haram. Second, it finds a strong correlation between centralisation of power and tendency

towards radicalism in remotes part of Chad. This positive relationship is shown to be mainly driven by the experiences of former French colonies. Therefore, our findings align with mainstream literature on the impact of post-colonial legacy as a push factor, while spotlighting more nuanced, home-grown and indirect consequences of such legacies.

The article is composed of four themed sections. The first part outlines the methodology used for this study. It explains the main hypothesis of research, the theoretical framework it relies on and the strategy applied in collecting field data. The second part covers what traditional authority means in general and its specific implication in Africa. The third part traces the historical retrospective of Chad’s traditional authority interacting with tribalism. By sketching out the origin of present-day features linked to the legacies of weak ruling systems and lopsided power symmetry, it examines theoretical aspects of the impact of post-colonial implication on Chad’s local authority and how ruling structure affects contemporary radicalisation in remote regions of Chad. The fourth part scrutinizes how the shrinking of authority and retreat of local power have had a serious consequence on local power dynamics, paving the way of radicalisation among excluded youth towards Boko Haram. This section analyses the results of interviews (fieldwork’s uniqueness in accessing to former Boko Haram members) and focus group discussions conducted in 2023 and 2024, supported by the authors’ field observations conducted in various part of Chad.

Methodology

This paper pursues an interpretive and descriptive qualitative research, based on primary and secondary data. This data was gathered through face-to-face semi-structured interviews in Arabic. The informants ranged from senior representatives of 10 Chadian Tribal Chiefs (Borno-Buduma-Kanembu), local youths, officers from the Chadian Supreme Islamic Council and former Boko Haram affiliates, alongside high-level officials from the Chadian General Staff and the N'Djamena Police Department. Respondents were selected from amongst the high-level and the senior level administrative positions, namely people who have extensive background knowledge on the Déby regime era. The interview data are also supported by the authors’ personal observations in 12 different field visits (from 2020 to 2024) to Chad. Though the result of this paper does not seek to generalise from available data, it seeks to understand link between changing traditional authority and radicalisation, a case selection which was performed by purposive sampling. In addition to ethics committee approval, permission was granted by some

respondents to refer to their name in the research, yet to retain uniformity in the qualitative method, all respondents are anonymous.

Despite the newfound approach offered by this research, there are some limitations. As it referred that this research does not seek to generalise from available data, which the sample is highly specific, meaning that the findings are deeply contextual and not statistically representative of the wider Chadian population or other regions. Therefore, this paper does not generalise the results of Chad to other countries, since there is no “one size fits all” outcome of power distractions in the context of radicalism in Africa’s culture and geography. Neither does this claim the singular marginalization of specific African ethnic groups, as Niger’s Diffa region exhibits comparable marginalization patterns among its Arab populations. Rather, it highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of Chad’s distinct and accelerating radicalization pathways. However, the study claims that, *ceteris paribus*, the risk of radicalism is greater in regions with weak traditional authority than in those with strong institutions, and this relationship can manifest across various parts of Africa where analogous socio-political landscapes occur.

Reliance on self-reported and retrospective data is another limitation of this paper. While we valued cross-reading during the analysis of interviews, data from interviews, especially with former Boko Haram affiliates, is based on personal recollection, which could be subject to memory lapses, hindsight bias, or strategic presentation (e.g., downplaying personal agency, exaggerating grievances). In order to minimise this limitation, the interviews were conducted with various people in the same ethnic group at a different time and location to match the consistency of the shared information. Adding to this, more than two interviews were conducted with the relevant state organizations to verify the information given by Chadian official authorities.

In short, the qualitative approach is still ideal for understanding complex, sensitive phenomena like radicalization, which allows us to capture nuance, contradiction, and rich detail that quantitative methods would miss. The use of multiple data sources (primary interviews with diverse actors, secondary data, and personal observation) is aimed to strengthen the validity of the findings through triangulation. The methodology of this paper excels at providing a deep, nuanced, and contextually rich analysis of radicalization in Chad

Pathways to Radicalization: An Accidental Radicalism

Radicalization is a process whereby individuals or groups adopt increasingly extremist ideologies and behaviours, which can escalate from non-violent coercion to political violence and, ultimately, to terrorism and war crimes (Schmid, 2016a). The sources of radicalization is much multifaceted, cannot be reduced to a single explanation or a linear set of factors; rather, the process is shaped by a complex interplay of local conditions, socio-economic dynamics, psychological elements, and ideological influences. Therefore, scholars have examined radicalism through multiple lenses, such as ideological radicalism (Sageman, 2017), grievance-based radicalism (Gurr, 2011), political radicalism (Jeffries, 1978), economic radicalism (Mazrui, 1967), racial radicalism and black radicalism (Al-Bulushi, 2022) or religious radicalism (de Graaf & van den Bos, 2021), each seeking to define its limits or catalogue its content. The literature expands further when considering ontological aspects of radicalism: radicalism as a commitment, radicalism as an approach, radicalism as a set of interests (Waterman, 1973).

As Jensen and Porta utter that radicalisation is as set of complex causal processes, where various factors work together to produce extremist outcomes (Jensen vd., 2018; Porta, 2018). Among these factors, economic, political, religious, ideological causes, existential commitments, social bonds, identity construction, traumatic experiences, structural inequalities are some of them which emphasise nonlinear and context-sensitive dynamics of the term. The mainstream radicalization studies often frame the pathways of radicalisation either through endogenous (Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Koomen & Pligt, 2015; Misiak vd., 2019; Vergani vd., 2020), or exogenous laden (Franklin & Tabb, 1974; Richards, 2002, 2003; Wintrobe, 2006). This is in line with two principal forces: push factors (poverty, colonialism, marginalization ect) and pull factors (ideological appeal, sense of belonging ect.)

Endogenous radicalism revolves around in-group identity, psychological traumas, and interpersonal dynamics. This process is often metaphorically described as a “slippery slope” and is linked to identity conflicts, relative deprivation within the group, and individual psychological traits (Hafez & Mullins, 2015; Koomen & Pligt, 2015; Misiak et al., 2019; Vergani et al., 2020; King & Taylor, 2011). It is deeply intertwined with individual psychological processes and social networks such as personal grievances, traumas, and social bonds are of critical importance in steering radicalization (Sageman, 2017). Jensen et al. stress the importance of considering psychological, social, and political factors together in

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3 understanding radicalization, contending that ideological motivations are not the sole
4 determinants in an individual's entry into radicalization, but rather identity-seeking, the need
5 for belonging, social networks, and experiences of marginalization are also decisive factor to
6 align with extremist group (Jensen and at al., 2018). Similarly, McGilloway (2015) highlights
7 the importance of individuals' psychosocial needs and life experiences in understanding the
8 radicalization process, nothing some factors such as identity-seeking, the need for belonging,
9 traumatic past experiences, and social exclusion interact in a complex manner (McGilloway
10 and et al., 2015).

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12 Exogenous radicalization, on the other hand, is associated with external factors that increase
13 the sense of crisis and urgency, such as democratic deficits, economic deprivation, and
14 geographic scarcity (Franklin & Tabb, 1974; Richards, 2002, 2003; Wintrobe, 2006). In
15 addition to economic and democratic backslide, one of the most significant push factors in the
16 case of sub-Africa for radicalism is colonialism and its enduring legacies. Since the eighteenth
17 century, colonialism has systematically established economic and political dominance over
18 indigenous populations, creating inequalities that have provided fertile ground for radicalization
19 (Cain, 1978; Griffin & Gurley, 1985; Munford, 1975; Wolfe, 1997; Acemoglu et al., 2012;
20 Bertocchi & Canova, 2002; Englebert, 2000; Grier, 1999; Taylor, 2018; Rodney, 1973).

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22 Although African states had experience a post-colonial process in 1960s, the exploitation of
23 Africa's political structure by the colonial citadels entrenched worldwide expansion of colonial
24 domination, the structure of hegemony, power and a specific group of dominating people, in
25 short as Quijano described, "coloniality of power", constituted the practical domains of political
26 administration (Quijano, 2000: 537). Such colonial legacies delegated power after the
27 independence which mediated racial domination by means of specific community-based
28 authorities, reinforcing racial identity and division in citizens (Mamdani, 1996). In the decade
29 that followed African political independence, African leaders centralised power and created
30 political monopolies with one-party systems, increasing the jeopardy of ethnic-based exclusion
31 (Bauer, 1963). Such shifts overturned the balance of power, which had previously been crafted
32 by the absolute rule of king, with power in the hands of village council or village headman
33 (Lawson, 1984, s. 6).

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35 Present literatures on the role of post-colonial systems over the traditional structure of authority
36 has mostly been confined to limited case study comparison, most of which have been
37 descriptive in nature. In this regard causal factors leading to radicalism due to post-colonial
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implications remains a shortcoming in the literature. Traditional radicalization models often depict the process through push and pull factors, including those of socio-economic causes and ideology-laden trajectory. For example, Horgan (2005) conceptualizes radicalization as a cumulative outcome of interactions(Horgan, 2005), Moghaddam’s (2005) “staircase” outlines a progression from injustice, Sageman’s (2004) model highlights social ties, Neumann (2016) frames it as an ideological journey(Neumann, 2016), Schmid (2016) presents a multi-layered framework of radicalism(Schmid, 2016b), and Borum’s (2011) model proposes a complex set of diverse pathways influenced by a combination of social movement dynamics, group psychology, and individual conversion stages triggered by perceived injustice (Borum, 2011).

These explanations, however, do not often reflect Africa’s specific dynamics, and explaining the process solely through ideology is incomplete and misleading. Structural inequalities, colonial legacy, kleptocratic regimes, ethnic rivalries, economic marginalization, and the limited state capacity, to some extent, enable tribes to form pragmatic relationships with radical organizations. The bonds tribes form with radical organizations are, in most cases, shaped not by a conscious ideological choice but by contextual imperatives in which they find themselves. At this juncture, the phenomenon of “accidental radicalization” emerge in the African context is a critical concept to be considered. It increases the human resources and local legitimacy of radical organizations, while ideological and theological doctrines remain limited, and pragmatic participation becomes a central element. This explains a paradoxical situations, such as communities belong to Sufi Tijaniyya religious groups can integrate into ideologically opposite Salafist religious groups due to marginalization.

Through a case study of the Borno-Buduma-Kanembu groups in Chad, this article frames radicalization through the interplay of ideological-theological pull factors and structural push factors (breakdown of traditional authority). It proposes an "accidental radicalism" to interpret existing dynamic that synthesizes structural and agentic perspectives to explain these atypical instances of radicalism. In this context, the concept of “accidental radicalization” offers a more nuanced explanation for recruitment into religious radical groups in Africa. This concept refers to the joining of radical organizations by individuals for some reason without prior ideological or theological transformation. Therefore, individuals join violent extremist groups for primarily practical, non-ideological reasons, ranging from protection, or revenge, and only adopt the group's radical ideology after they have become members, often in a superficial way.

Participation is not a conscious ideological choice but rather an incidental outcome of push factors (poverty, marginalization, security needs) and pull factors (sense of belonging, feeling of empowerment). Individuals do not initially know the religious or ideological structure of the organization; indeed, even if it contradicts their own traditional beliefs (e.g., Islamic schools such as Maliki or Tijaniyya diametrically opposed to Salafi Boko Haram), they join for pragmatic motivations (survival, revenge, or economic benefits). In this process, radicalization occurs “accidentally,” and ideology becomes a by-product acquired after participation. This concept, in fact, challenges orthodox linear model of radicalisation, which often treat that people are first convinced by an ideology and then seek out a group to enact it (ideology first, action second). However, accidental radicalism reverses this sequence, claiming that “action first, ideology second.”

There are four distinguishing components of accidental radicalism. First, there is an ideological and theological gap. The majority of individuals in the Sahel follow traditional Islamic schools such as Maliki or Tijaniyya. However, when they join groups with Salafi-Jihadist ideologies such as Boko Haram, they learn the ideology superficially without developing crystallized commitment. Second, there is structural disconnection. This means that the gap between central authority and traditional authority is filled by radical organizations. Individuals join radical groups pragmatically rather than through a gradual radicalization process. Third is instrumental participation. Joining is motivated by pragmatic considerations such as survival, revenge, economic benefits, or avoidance of authoritarian repression; ideology emerges as a consequence of participation. Fourth is delayed radicalization. Individuals experience ideological radicalization after joining the group. This reverses the classical “ideology first, group second” sequence, as most members possess limited knowledge of the group’s core doctrines or theorists.

Betwixt and Between: Traditional Authority

Traditional authorities in Africa are defined as institutions rooted in long-standing historical traditions that coexist parallel to central state authority. It plays significant roles across social, cultural, religious, economic, and political domains and are organized hierarchically, comprising kings, chiefs, and village leaders (Ubink, 2008; Visser, Stetler & Chigwata, 2020). Lauren Honig (2019) emphasizes that these leaders perform multifaceted functions in development processes, including lobbying, political patronage, local governance, and

authority over land, with their influence varying according to contextual factors and their relationships with the state. This form of authority, situated within Max Weber’s typology of legitimate authority, is legitimized by deep-seated customs grounded in the belief that “it has always been this way” (Weber, 2012).

The efficacy of traditional authority is largely derived from their core functions, including but limited to the provision of communal goods, the implementation of social norms and its relationship with the state. Soeren J. Henn’s (2022) study reveals that the relationship between state capacity and traditional authorities assumes either complementary or proxy roles depending on the degree of institutional integration (Henn, 2023). He later argues that if traditional authorities are not integrated into the country constitutions, then the state and traditional authorities compete with each other, working as substitutes. In particular, in regions where state capacity is robust and traditional authorities are constitutionally integrated, cooperation between the state and traditional authorities strengthens the provision of public goods; conversely, in areas lacking such integration, traditional authorities assume an independent role by filling state vacuums(Henn, 2023). These dynamics shape local governance and development processes, while regions characterized by weak state capacity and non-integrated traditional authorities tend to experience structural gaps (Henn, 2022). Henn’s analysis makes a crucial contribution by demonstrating the pivotal role of structural and institutional factors in the diffusion of extremism within the context of “accidental radicalization.”

Boasiako & Bonna (2009) scopes the traditional institutions to explain the political status quo of Africa, claiming that the chains of colonialism have perpetually defeated democracy in Africa to control former colonies by politically and financially (Antwi-Boasiako & Bonna, 2009). Linking data on how today's traditional institutions mirror their precolonial predecessors, Wentz and Crepon (2023) built on the same logic, saying that that the persistence of traditional institutions in Africa is largely due to the degree of reliance (Neupert-Wentz & Müller-Crepon, 2024). More in detail work, Mengisteab and Hagg (2019) seek for “why traditional institutions have remained entrenched, what the socioeconomic implications of fragmented institutional systems are, and whether they facilitate or impede democratization”(Mengisteab & Hagg, 2009). The authors deeply investigate not only organisational structure of the traditional authority but also its role on gender relations, resources allocation and dispute resolution. Based on extensive survey data from 19 African countries run by Caroly Lagon, she finds that

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3 traditional authorities enjoy widespread popular legitimacy and resilience (Logan, 2013). Such
4 power stem from their both organisational strength and moral value as well as their symbolic
5 representation of community identity and stability. Christian Lund's (2006) concept of "twilight
6 institutions" elucidates the provision of public services and the filling of governance voids in
7 areas where state authority is weak through these structures; such institutions can sometimes
8 become fertile grounds for radicalization (Lund, 2006).
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14 Consequently, the nature, scope and sources of traditional leaders are clearly resilient lot,
15 exercising local authority in rural zone of most of sub-Saharan Africa. Each ethnic group,
16 Chadians by no means exclusion from this, hold a pivotal position when security challenges
17 arise. Tribe leaders help state's military capacity through mobilizing their own people and
18 providing field information as leverage because they uphold the geographical outposts
19 (Berkeley, 2001; Ranger, 1982, 1982). In areas where state authority is weak or limited, they
20 use their knowledge as power at the expense of central government, applying it as an agency
21 factor.
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28 However, a deliberate retreat of traditional authority from the Borno-Buduma-Kanembu leaders
29 during the Deby regime resulted radicalisation among youth. This radicalisation emerged
30 despite the absence of direct ideological alignment between youth and terrorist organisation,
31 but rather as a result of prevailing destructive local authority conditions. Structural
32 vulnerabilities such as political exclusion, poverty, and security deficits experienced by
33 individuals or tribes reflected rather different form.
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41 **Why Traditional Authority Matter in Chad**

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43 Chad is home to hundreds of ethnic groups dispersed across arbitrarily drawn national borders.
44 Due to its geographic location, at the crossroads for East-West and North-South trade routes,
45 the country has become home to numerous ethnic groups with diverse ethnic affiliations. While
46 the exact number of ethnic groups is not known, it is estimated that approximately 270 ethnic
47 groups reside within the country, each with its own local identity. Ethnic groups in Chad include
48 various groups, the majority belongs to Sara (Ngambaye/Sara/Madjingaye/Mbaye) which
49 account for nearly 30.5 per cent of the population. The second largest group is the
50 Kanembu/Bornu/Buduma that accounts for 9.8 per cent of population. The remaining
51 significant groups are (in per cent): Arab -9.7, Wadai/Maba/Masalit/Mimi -7, Gorane - 5.8,
52 Masa/Musseye/Musgum - 4.9, Bulala/Medogo/Kuka - 3.7, Marba/Lele/Mesme -3.5 (Yacoub,
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2022). While a segment of the population, 22.2 per cent, has adapted to the modern world by settling in urban areas, the majority of communities have remained attached to nomadic and semi-nomadic lifestyles.

The rise of the modern Chadian state since the 1960s until the Idriss Déby Itno came to power in 1990s, tribal dynamics and the relationship between the central authority and ethnic groups was concerted (Lyammouri, 2019, p. 1). Traditional local authorities in the region are typically represented by leaders or tribal elders who possess a deep-seated influence over their communities. These leaders wield significant power among their groups or villages and often act as mediators in social, security, economic, and political matters gathering (Berkeley, 2001; Ranger, 1982, 1982). Therefore, local authorities in Chad are perceived as focal points of political legitimacy for political leaders and their parties (including both government and opposition factions).

The administration of local governance in Chad is conducted by committees appointed with careful consideration of the ethnic composition. In regions outside of the capital N'Djamena, governance structures include representatives at the levels of governorate, sub-governorate, and village. These representatives play a pivotal role in the prevention and resolution of conflicts among farmers, herders, and the broader local populace. Typically, these committees are composed of local leaders and representatives from community organizations, including livestock and farming associations. Different ethnic group in Chad also boast about their participation in the policy-making process thanks to grassroots adherents and representatives.

Traditional authorities in Chad have long played an essential role in the economic and social development of their communities. Providing leadership in areas such as agricultural production, water resource management, or infrastructure development, most of the local income (either through foreign aid or home-made surplus) has being managed by these groups. However, since the 1990s, the potential constructive role of traditional authorities in Chad's socio-political landscape has been systematically eroded under the Déby regime. From its inception, the regime has relied heavily on domestic neopatrimonial structures (McDonald, 2024), which have progressively weakened the omnibalancing of power within the state apparatus. Ocheni and Nwankwo attribute this phenomenon primarily to colonial-era class stratifications, which were subsequently reinforced and institutionalized by the Déby regime's governance practices (Ocheni, & Nwankwo, 2012). The severe impoverishment of most

Chadians by concomitant leaders, coupled with the marginalization and oppression of the masses by those with access to state power, is a direct legacy of coloniality of power (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012, p.53).

The Déby era practices in Chad have gradually delineated the boundaries of the relationship between traditional authority and tribal structure. Because, he mainly envisaged traditional authority as repressive collaborators of the colonial masters, as adversarial to their own consolidation of power and impediments to the modernization and nation-building projects. This view is related to post-colonial systems of governance, which had incorporated traditional leaders as an extension of colonial regimes. The Déby regime, thus, aimed to prevent any possible organized resistance so as not to re-emerge in the newly established Republic. Consequently, there was a deliberately concerted effort to marginalize the involvement of traditional authority in governance at both the local and national levels.

Furthermore, President Déby's tenure from 1991 onward, has demonstrated a propensity for leaders to consolidate their tribal influence upon reaching prominent positions within the government. This is often achieved by appointing members of their own ethnic groups to key state institutions, thereby reinforcing their tribal power base. A striking example of this is the disproportionate power wielded by members of the Zaghawa ethnic group, to which the Déby family belongs, who despite comprising less than 2% of Chad's population, hold significant influence in government and politics. Members of President Déby's Zaghawa ethnic group are disproportionately represented in critical institutions, including the officer corps, elite military units, and presidential staff. This is confirmed by the U.S. which states that the Zaghawa people in Chad are "overrepresented in key institutions, including the officer corps, elite military units, and presidential staff" (USA Department of State, 2019). This deliberate attenuation of traditional authority engendered a gradual estrangement of tribal entities from the central government, sowing the seeds of conflict. In response to the kleptocratic tendencies of the Chadian regime, it has been discerned that among members of the Borno-Buduma-Kanembu ethnic group, where the Tijaniyyah order predominates, the radicalization within the frame of push factors manifested through support for Boko Haram.

Push Factors Toward Boko Haram: Radicalisation of The Borno-Buduma-Kanembu Ethnic Group

The marginalisation and extremism in Chad gained prominence following Boko Haram’s emergence as a significant security threat, marked by its first attack in Ngouboua, in the Lac region, on February 12, 2015. Boko Haram initially refrained from targeting Chad, adhering to a tacit non-aggression understanding. However, this changed with the Chadian government’s involvement alongside Nigeria in the conflict, and by 2013 its militants had established a base in Baga Kawa, located near the Chad border and Lake Chad. This often-overlooked group’s actions and the complexity of the issue have not been sufficiently appreciated by Chadian security authorities (International Crisis Group, 2017, p. 11). Since then, Chad has become actively ensnared in the on-going conflict with Boko Haram (Gnanguênon, 2021, p. 13-14).

The Lake Chad Basin and the Borno and Buduma ethnic group residing in this region have become the primary targets of Boko Haram's activities in Chad. An interview with informant 1 from the N'Djamena Police Department alleges that these groups have provided intelligence to Boko Haram. Similarly, informant 3 from the Counterterrorism Directorate of the Chadian General Staff mentioned that there are ties between Boko Haram and certain members of the Borno and Buduma Groups (Participant 3: 2023). It was further stated that some individuals from these groups, particularly those living near the Nigerian border, have collaborated with the organization by sheltering its members. However, both participants were careful to avoid blaming the Borno and Buduma Group as a whole, instead asserting that this covert relationship primarily involves certain youth within these communities.

Paradoxically, informant 4 from the Chadian Supreme Islamic Council, argues that the Borno and Buduma ethnic groups are all affiliated to Tijaniyyah, a Sufi order, and are far removed from Boko Haram’s ideology, stating that:

Chadian society is generally a Sufi-oriented community. Tijaniyyah is quite prevalent. I, too, am a Tijani. As you know, there is a significant difference between Tijani teachings and Salafi (Boko-Haram) doctrine. In this regard, I can say that Tijaniyyah stands as a considerable barrier to Salafism... We do follow the Maliki school of thought, as do the majority of other African nations, and our belief does not endorse the activities of Boko Haram. As followers of the Tijani Sufi tradition, Salafi groups like Boko Haram present an irreconcilable doctrinal contradiction within our community. From the point of leadership, neither the path of Imam Malik nor that of Ahmed al-Tijani condones or legitimizes groups like Boko Haram (Participant 4: 2023).

As Informant 4 clearly indentifies that the Sufi Tijaniyyah tradition, rooted in the Maliki school of thought, is a native and powerful ideological barrier against the spread of Salafist extremism which represent a fundamental ideological contradiction. The core tenant of Salafi ideology is based particularly rejection of Sufi practice, diametrically opposed sacred traditions of devotional spirituality. Given the fact that Salafism is an artificial construct stemming from the region's transitory nature, this theological incompatibility necessitates a critical examination, as Buduma ethnic group's support to Boko Haram requires beyond ideological or religious convictions.

The inconsistency of certain members of the Borno and Buduma supporting a Salafi organization like Boko Haram, despite their adherence to the Tijaniyyah Sufi order, presents a compelling anomaly. To explore the underlying reasons for this support, interviews were conducted with individuals from these tribes in 2023 and 2024. The tribal chiefs of both the Borno and Buduma communities confirmed that some members, particularly the youth, become more susceptible to recruitment by Boko Haram. However, the Borno tribal chiefs emphasized that this issue should not be generalised, pointing out that their communities have been among the most affected by Boko Haram's attacks, while the central government has done little to address their plight:

There are indeed individuals among us who support Boko Haram. Some do so willingly, while others are coerced into providing support. We live on the border of Chad, and Boko Haram is present all around the lake. We have no power or resources to combat them. We used to have direct cooperation with central government in any security issue, but now we are left alone. A few years ago, Idriss Déby visited our area, accused us of supporting Boko Haram, and then left. Nothing was done afterward. He promised logistic support for our people, but those promises were never fulfilled. As a leader of this tribe, our leadership now wields negligible influence over the youth and fails to recognise by Déby regime. Our children remain unemployed, and many are illiterate. Boko Haram predominantly targets these young people who feel excluded and abandoned from the government (Participant 5, 2023).

Informant 6 from the Borno group provides similar supportive assertions: "We lack the means to prevent this, neither military means nor authority. Boko Haram offers jobs and financial support, which leads some of our youth to join them. Most of our people are illiterate and have no religious education. We are not Salafi; our people follow the Maliki school, and many are Tijanis" (Participant 6, 2023). As two components of accidental radicalisms, both statements

confirm an authority gap filled by the Boko Haram as push factors, and instrumental participation of youth for economic benefit as pull factor.

Informant 7 from the same ethnic group underlines the deep local security gap in the regions and Boko Haram’s exploitation of this situation:

Those who provide support out of compulsion do so because they don’t feel inclusion to the country. Boko Haram frequently utilises it, offering membership, and sometimes threatening. If they refuse, they kill the captives. Some of them even join Boko Haram to seek revenge for those whom caused of it. This is actually quite common (Participant 7, 2024).

Tribal members also expressed feelings of marginalization by the central government, particularly highlighting the lack of employment opportunities for the youth, and the absence of educational and healthcare services in their region. Even basic amenities such as clean water and electricity are lacking. During the our field works, unrest was quite frequent among the youth whom we encountered. Such sentiments were either absence among elders or they were hiding to expresses on public, due to security concern. Such situation leaves the tribal members vulnerable to any radical group’s propaganda:

The roots of our problems are manifold. We are acutely aware of the challenges in our region. However, we believe that the central government’s marginalization of our ethnic group and the distribution of our resources to outsiders are the primary causes of our economic difficulties. I can confidently say that if we were Zaghawa (Déby ethnicity) or Goran, we would not be facing many of the issues we are discussing today. Our members can’t find jobs in the government. Our children see this fact and react with their anger by all means (Participant 8, 2023).

I can say with certainty that we receive almost no services from the government. The primary reason for this is the marginalization of our ethnicity. We have no representatives in the government. Our demands are not responded to, since there is no single person in our tribe working in the government... There are hardly any fully equipped educational institutions in our region. They only have access to basic literacy education in Quranic schools and madrasas, and even these were not established by the central government but rather by our own tribal members or with the help of foreign aid (Participant 9, 2023).

Regarding healthcare, there isn’t even a standard hospital in our region. We have to take our patients to N'Djamena, but we have very limited access to vehicles and transportation. This is not the case in Zaghawa regions (populated with Déby’s ethnicity). There are small clinics in our area, but they are either staffed with one doctor or none at all (Participant 10, 2023).

I am 18 years old, no job no future. What can I do? I wanted to have an education but my family couldn't afford it. Many of my friends went to the capital to seek jobs. Some of those who remain here affiliated to Boko Haram, because it provides a sense of belonging, giving money and respect, which our leaders have never provided (Participant 11, 2023).

The responses from both youth and community leaders reveal a distinct cultural-ethnic identity that sets them apart from Zaghawa ethnic groups, so do central authority. The Déby regime dismissed this identity as inconsequential, fostering a sense of marginalization among local youth that ultimately contributed to radicalization. Parallel dynamics emerge when examining former Boko Haram affiliates within the Borno ethnic group, raising similar questions about identity, exclusion, and extremism:

I joined Boko Haram nearly 4 years ago with some friends. Like me, many young people living in this region feel forgotten by the Déby regime. Some of them live here with us and some of them died in the fighting. There was no choice but to join them. Those who joined were paid and had a job opportunity. When I first joined, I received a monthly salary of around 40,000 CFA. The first day I joined, they gave me money and weapons. Later, this fee was stopped. But we were allowed to smuggle animals... Eventually, I escaped from Boko Haram. The government put me in jail for a while, then they promised me that they would give a job opportunity. But nothing has changed. I know some of my relatives who, like me, left Boko Haram but later re-joined because the Déby regime failed to fulfill its promises and made them feel excluded from the nation. Now the government accuses us of supporting Boko Haram (Participant 12, 2023).

Boko Haram kidnapped my sister and aunt. As a condition to be released, they demanded money. I sought help from our leaders, they could not do anything due to lack of money and military equipment. In return, I and one of my relatives, who later died during a clash, joined them to free the women. Most of us who joined Boko Haram like me, were very young people, even children. No one, including me, could read and write. They taught us Muslim clears who do not govern by Sharia to be apostates (kuffar) and it is permissible to rebel against an apostate ruler. We later learned their deviant ideology, but most of recruits did have no option but to join them (Participant 13, 2023).

It is a clear that affiliations to Boko Haram are somewhat more exogenously sourced. The long-lasting structural effects of local authority neglect by the central government, poverty and illiteracy have left a sense of discriminations and exclusion among youth, which has in turn led to the support of radical Boko Haram, a development that literally occurred inadvertently.

Based on theological and material interpretation of informants, the case of Case fits within the frame of “accidental radicalisation”. The term denotes a process by which groups or individuals become over time radicalized unintentionally, such as appealing extreme political, ideological or religious views. This process often related to endogenous pressures (ethnic exclusion), structural conditions (lack of local authority mechanism) or policy failure rather than through deliberate recruitment or ideological conviction. However, individuals over time may undergo an ideological transformation within the groups (Crenshaw, 1981, p. 379). Individuals who initially join such groups without prior ideological commitment are more likely to internalise radical ideas through in-group socialisation processes than those who join with ideological motivation.

The Lake Chad Basin area provides a striking portrait of the deep poverty and marginalisation, experienced by Borno and Buduma communities, in which the majority of people live in conditions much below internationally accepted humanitarian standards. The authors’ observations during the field work are consistent with informants’ comments as vulnerability of the region is starkly evident. This part of region’s people repeatedly stated that they are not recognised as a part of the country by the Déby government, nor do they have any legitimacy in the eyes of the government. It is not surprising, therefore, that the deep sense of anger, revenge and marginalisation among youth has been channelled and exploited by Boko Haram. It is fair to say that this process was neither intentionally planned by the central government nor orchestrated by Boko Haram militants.

Beyond the specific case of Boko Haram, this article contends that the underlying conditions fostering radicalization are structurally deterministic. It argues that if another extremist movement, such as al-Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) or analogous groups, emerged in the region under similar socioeconomic and political circumstances, Borno and Buduma ethnic group would have exhibited comparable susceptibility to recruitment. This suggests that the drivers of radicalization (e.g., governance failures, or identity-based grievances) operate independently of any particular militant organization, making affiliation contingent on certain external factors rather than ideological contradictory.

The radicalisation of youth in Chad clearly aligns with the initial stages of McCauley and Moskalkenko's radicalization model, which explains the process leading to violence through individual motivations (McCauley & Moskalkenko, 2008) as well as with the early steps of

Moghaddam's Staircase model of radicalization (Moghaddam, 2005). Both models identify the initial stages as involving the political interpretation and reaction to perceived grievances. The Borno and Buduma have been accidentally driven to support Boko Haram, rather than doing so out of deliberate intent. This is important to note, as there exists a dialectical relationship between the ideology of the organization and the groups. The asymmetrical relationship between the ethnic groups and the central authority plays a fundamental role in the emergence of this situation. The statement from the N'Djamena Police Department regarding this issue offers a particularly insightful perspective:

This can be explained by two factors: the vacuum of authority and the pressure of authority. Both scenarios can push our people towards radical groups. The presence of Boko Haram in the region is a reality, although they are not particularly dominant. The Chadian society, as you may know, is not inherently inclined to support Boko Haram. However, support for such organizations isn't always voluntary; sometimes it is coerced...Our security forces' presence in the region hinders Boko Haram's activities, but the harsh or violent actions of some of our soldiers and police officers can alienate the tribes from us. Once we withdrew from the area, Boko Haram made contact and incited the youth against us (Participants 2, 2023).

Conclusion

This paper underscores profound tribal divisions within Chad that permeate the country's governance, military, civil society, and education sectors. The Zaghawa (Déby's ethnicity) and Goran (ethnic group of Déby's wife), representing only around 7% of the population, dominate key positions in both government and military leadership. For over 30 years, from 1991 to the present day (as of September 2025, the President of Chad is Mahamat Déby, son of Idriss Déby), governance in Chad has been dominated by the Zaghawa and Goran ethnic group, to which the Déby family belongs. Although the Arab ethnicity do not wield as much influence as the Zaghawa, they still hold significant sway, particularly in commerce and within the military ranks. In stark contrast, the Borno and Buduma ethnic group, who are geographically and politically marginalized from N'Djamena, though representing nearly 10% of the population, find themselves excluded from both governance and military representation. This exclusion fuelled their sense of disenfranchisement and rendered them increasingly vulnerable to Boko Haram's influence.

The governance vacuum in the region, coupled with the ineffective and often counterproductive military interventions, has not only left the area defenceless against Boko Haram but has also inadvertently pushed the local population toward the extremist group. At the root of this situation is the political elite's relentless pursuit of power and control over natural resources. These elites have exploited existing socioeconomic inequalities and ethnic-religious divisions to weaken social cohesion, manipulate local grievances, and consolidate their own legitimacy. Throughout the current regime's tenure, an asymmetric relationship between the N'Djamena government and the ethnic group of the Lake Chad Basin deepened a dynamic that was accentuated following Boko Haram's activities in 2015.

Consequently, policymakers have increasingly focused on short-term, self-serving gains rather than committing to long-term, structural reforms. Weak local governance, along with a lack of material factors, have exacerbated public grievances and facilitated the capture of hope for the sake of terrorism. This situation, which was further compounded by fragmented ethnic authority and inefficient public service delivery, has turned Chad into an incubator for extremists. The Borno, Buduma, and Kanembu ethnic groups, predominantly located in the Lake Chad region, has become by far the most vulnerable section of society. In addition to the central authorities' negligence, the region has been significantly affected by power vacuum, coupled with lack of employment in an undereducated population. These factors, along with the political ramifications of the youth's marginalization, leave them increasingly susceptible to Boko Haram's influence. These conditions have led to increasingly hostile actions, a hardening of attitudes and deepening polarisation, further exacerbating ethnic divisions within the social fabric of Chad. It is not surprising that affiliation of youth to Boko Haram much deeper and severe than those are elderly people. This is partly because they have never enjoyed a sense of belonging to Chad's national unity, as the Déby regime has been effectively in power for over 34 years, longer than the lifetime of many of the youth informants interviewed.

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