

Democracy in Muslim Contexts: What Africa can Bring to the Discussion?*

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ABSTRACT

While the question of the relationship between Islam and democracy continues to attract significant attention from scholars and policy-makers, African cases have been largely absent from these debates. This article argues that the experiences of sub-Saharan African Muslim societies may nevertheless have much to contribute to our understanding of democratic prospects in the Muslim world. Considering the experiences of three Francophone countries of Sahelian West Africa, it explores the ways in which the democratization experiments led by secular civil society activists in the early 1990s moved from the initial resistance of deeply religious Muslim majorities to an acceptance of democracy as the only legitimating bases of political systems. The article argues that this was possible due to the significant negotiation both within religious society and between religious groups and the secular elite on the actual content of democracy. These cases thus suggest a number of tentative but important lessons for our understanding of democratic possibilities in the Muslim world.

In both scholarly and policy circles, the question of the relationship between Islam and democracy continues to sustain a small research industry and to generate a steady stream of publications, reports and commentaries. Strikingly absent from much of this debate, however, are the Muslim-majority countries of Africa south of the Sahara. The omission is glaring; at times whole books on “Islam and democracy” make virtually no mention of African cases. This not only misses an important part of the empirical reality of the Muslim world today, but it ignores some cases with potentially very instructive experiences for the broader debate.

The question of which countries might be considered “democracies” in the Muslim

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world depends largely on how one counts, in other words, on what criteria are used and how countries are judged to meet such criteria. By virtually any criteria, however, African cases must be considered. One recent effort, around which a panel was organized at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, used various comparative indices to identify five democracies among Muslim-majority countries: Indonesia, Turkey, Albania, Mali and Senegal.¹ This is of course a highly eclectic set of countries, and it is unclear what if anything they might share that makes of them exceptional cases in the Muslim world. But it is nevertheless striking that two of the five are sub-Saharan African countries.

It is true that both of these countries are still subject to debate on whether they are fully democratic or not, and each clearly has its shortcomings. This, however, is in fact true of all five of these “exceptional” cases. At the same time, it is also the case that both Senegal and Mali, along with Niger, their neighbor to the east, represent three cases of overwhelmingly Muslim countries (at least 90% Muslim in each case) which have been at the forefront of debating and negotiating how democracy might be embraced—and what substantive content it might have—in the Muslim world. All three of these countries embarked on significant processes of democratization in the early 1990s and have spent the period since then mostly under elected governments and constitutional frameworks. To be sure, these have significant limitations, and recent events have shown some significant backsliding in Niger, and to some extent Senegal.

But despite their limitations, the important point for our purposes here is that democracy is today very widely accepted as the appropriate goal and the only legitimating rationale for a political system in each of these countries, and in each case political debate centers around the “democratic” nature of policies, reforms and initiatives. Democracy, while imperfect in its institutional forms and sometimes subject to significant manipulation by incumbent elites, is nevertheless the “only game in town” for these countries. How these Muslim societies have come to embrace the notion of democracy, and how they have negotiated, discussed, and argued about what democracy means, therefore, may prove instructive to those concerned with the debate about Islam and democracy elsewhere in the world.

Secular States and Muslim societies: Dual Legacies of the Francophone Sahel

Senegal, Mali and Niger all arrived at independence in 1960 as part of the fragmentation of France’s West African empire, *L’Afrique Occidentale Française* (AOF), into a series of relatively small and dependent states—what Léopold S.

Senghor, Senegal's first president, called the "Balkanization" of West Africa. With relatively few resources and located in the ecologically precarious semi-arid Sahelian zone, all three are materially very poor countries; Niger again this year finds itself dead last of the 182 countries on the UNDP's Human Development Index, and all three are in the bottom 20.² While overwhelming Muslim, these countries are marked by significant ethnic and linguistic diversity, and the national identity of each is questioned by marginalized populations with lingering grievances against the political center.³ Their post-colonial histories have been marked by deep external dependency, with a strong French sway over the economy and politics accompanying steadily declining standards of living. In short, the Francophone Sahelian states represented the kind of countries that virtually all of political science theory predicated had virtually no chance of democratization.

And for a long time this was indeed the case. Both Mali and Niger followed an African post-independence model of military coups (in 1968 in Mali; 1974 in Niger) leading to authoritarian regimes eventually organized as single-party corporatist states. While Senegal was long presented as an exceptional case in the African context—and indeed it was more stable and less repressive than most—it nevertheless also consolidated a *de facto* if not *de jure* single party regime shortly after independence, a regime that was to stay in power for 40 years under two presidents. In different ways and with some shifts over time, these countries also maintained very close elite ties with their former colonial power, and the ideological underpinnings of the state in each case remained firmly in the French mold.

These post-colonial states were built on the French conquest of Sahelian West Africa. The societies of this savannah zone south of the Sahara have a very long history of Islam, dating to the eighth century CE in some places and variously linked to the Maghrebian states to the north. A series of *jihads* in the 18th and 19th centuries helped to further spread Muslim influence, and by the time of the colonial conquest in the late 19th century the French found themselves ruling Muslim-majority societies in the region. Largely through the influence of Sufi *shaykhs* or *marabouts* whose messages found resonance in the wake of colonial dislocations, Islam continued to spread throughout the 20th century, and by independence each

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of these countries were overwhelmingly Muslim. Although there are no reliable census data for Mali and Niger, we may reasonably assert that, like Senegal, some 95% of the population in those countries would call themselves Muslim today.

As the French constructed colonial state institutions across their West African empire, the Muslim societies of the Sahel rather quickly abandoned relatively futile efforts at resistance to find what the historian David Robinson has called “paths of accommodation” with the colonial power.⁴ In exchange for benign non-interference in religious affairs and relative autonomy in the personal domain, religious societies accepted (or at least did not challenge) the political and economic foundations of the colonial project. Indeed, in some cases (especially Senegal) symbiotic relationships developed between the colonial state and religious institutions. And despite having relinquished much authority in the social domain, the state maintained an official ideology of secularism in the elaboration of formal institutions.

Decolonization in 1960 was marked by a transfer of authority to a new African elite trained in the French colonial mold, but it did not bring a rupture with the existing model of state-society relations. The (non-democratic) governments which quickly emerged in the post-colonial period largely inherited and maintained the pattern of relations with religious authorities that had been established by the French. In Senegal, this meant very close and mutually beneficial relations between the state elite and the religious families who presided over a highly structured and socially dominant system of Sufi orders.⁵ In the relatively less-organized religious societies of Mali and Niger, the corporatist regimes moved to structure and harness religious dynamics by the creation of a single authorized national Islamic association in each case, each dependent on government patronage for its survival. The post-colonial state thus maintained the pattern established by the colonial power: religious authority in family and personal affairs was tolerated as long as it did not challenge the economic and political underpinnings of these official “*etats laïques*.”

There was, of course, evolutionary change. Like elsewhere in the Muslim world (and indeed across the globe with the phenomenon of the “desecularization” of the world), social and religious change marked Sahelian societies in the 1970s and 1980s. A new generation of youth with no direct knowledge of the colonial experience, and increasingly frustrated as economic decline eroded the optimism that had been generated by independence, looked at times to the Iranian revolutionary model and other contestatory movements in the Muslim world for inspiration. Signs of increased personal religiosity flourished and led to an increasing pres-

ence of religion in the public sphere.⁶ In the high schools and universities, the leftist parties of varying ideological stripes that had dominated in the early post-independence years gradually gave way to a proliferation of student religious associations and movements. Confronted with these dynamics, the non-democratic governments of the era attempted, to varying degrees, to simultaneously control these social dynamics and to harness them in an effort to sustain their legitimacy, but the fundamental model remained little challenged for the first three decades of independence.

Riding the Third Wave: Embracing Democracy

Entering the fourth decade of independence in the early 1990s, however, countries across the African continent found themselves at a critical juncture. Under significant external pressure following the collapse of the bi-polar world order, and facing unprecedented social mobilization and popular protests fueled by economic conditions, it became clear that existing models would not hold. As some countries collapsed into anarchy and incumbent authoritarians in others struggled to maintain control, much of the continent was to embrace the “third wave” of democratization. Each in their own way, the three Muslim Sahelian countries considered here found themselves following the democratic option. In Mali and Niger, authoritarian regimes came to an end in 1991 (via an overthrow in Mali and a marginalization in Niger), and “national conferences” were convened to establish the basis of a new order and put in place transitional governments with a mandate to midwife it. In Senegal the process was more gradual and incremental, but here too the early years of the 1990s were spent in intense negotiations between the incumbent party and the opposition about democratic reforms to the rules of the game, and the agreements that were reached were finally to produce an electoral transition in power in 2000.

Much could be said about the form and substance of these processes of democratization, and of their accomplishments and limitations. But for our purposes two important points of commonality should be underlined.

First, the democratization processes in all of these countries, while they were fueled in part by popular uprisings among urban (and especially youthful) populations, were in fact led by the small Francophone and educated elite that had become disenchanted with the ruling regimes. Students, teachers, lawyers, and journalists (and unemployed youth with ambitions to enter such professions) became the core of the proliferation of “civil society” organizations leading the demand for political change. In the heady years of the immediate post-Cold War context,

there was much international enthusiasm for the promise of such social organizations, and “democracy aid” money poured in to support the development of innumerable women’s groups, human rights associations, journalists’ associations and independent media. Crucially, this Francophone elite took their inspiration for what a new democratic system might look like from the model they knew best: the French Fifth Republic. And new constitutions across the region borrowed heavily from this model. Democratization, thus, largely marked a re-appropriation of French institutions rather than a definitive rupture with the colonial legacy.⁷

Secondly, and no doubt following logically from this dynamic, the democracy demanded by the Francophone elite and which built on French notions of a republican state (“secular, democratic, and social”) had a vision of democratization based on social *transformation* rather than *representation*. That is, the leaders of the civil society organizations (and their outside allies) believed that building a democratic society would necessitate significant social and cultural change, replacing the prevailing norms and values of their (overwhelmingly Muslim) societies with other (“democratic”) values. Almost completely absent from this vision was a sense of democracy as a system for translating popular will as reflected in prevailing cultural values into public policy. Democracy, that is, would not be a system built on local values, but rather an instrument for changing them.

So What Democracy for These Muslim Societies?

Given this vision, it did not take long for religious groups to protest that the allegedly “democratic” systems being proposed did not reflect the Muslim majority’s views of the good society and how it should be organized, and hence to question whether democracy was even desirable. Strikingly, however, it was the very fact of democratization that gave these religious groups a voice, and this fact was not lost on them. From initial protests that democracy was not appropriate to Muslim societies or compatible with Islam, religious groups then moved rather quickly to arguing instead that democracy in Muslim societies should reflect Muslim values and interests. In the cases of Mali and Niger, with their rapid and dramatic transitions, this shift was particularly apparent. Hence in Niger, for example, the French-inspired “family code” that the civil society activists leading the democratization effort had identified as a “fundamental text” for the new regime was quickly stalemated as religious groups shifted their discourse to argue—in the name of democracy—that family law should be publicly debated and reflect popular will.

But, importantly, while democracy opened the door to religious challenges to political initiatives, it also allowed for a new pluralism of religious voices to make

themselves heard. With the collapse of the old single Muslim organizations in Mali and Niger, and with the declining central authority of Sufi elites in Senegal, democratization opened the door to new and varied religious actors, and thus to a public debate about religion itself. Groups variously described as “reformist,” “Islamist,” or “Salafist,” challenged established orthodoxies, eventually producing in turn a conscious elaboration of a Sufi discourse in response. Muslim women’s organizations of various ideological stripes also proliferated. And Muslim intellectuals with an Arabist (rather than Francophone) background emerged for the first time as significant commentators on public affairs.

The point is that rather quickly the democratic debate moved from what might have seemed a two-sided struggle between “secular” and “Islamic” actors to a much more fluid and open debate about what the content of democracy should be in a Muslim society. And this included an internal debate among Muslims about what—in fact—is the “correct” position of Islam on any given issue. Should polygamy be banned? Is the death penalty acceptable or required? These and similar questions became not just subjects for contention between secularist and religious groups, but internal debates *within* Muslim society. This dynamic has led to a series of parallel and inter-related political and policy discussions in the three countries, with significant implications for how democracy might be negotiated in Muslim contexts.

Most centrally of these issues, perhaps, has been a discussion about secularism (*laïcité*) itself. The negative connotations of the French term for religious groups provoked an initial challenge as to whether it should be used at all, and all three countries witnessed debates about whether it should be included in the new constitutions. In Niger, in fact, it was in the end replaced in the constitution by a statement about the “non-confessional” nature of the state, though the term remains in common political usage to describe the state officially. But gradually, however, the debate has moved not to whether there should be “*un état laïc*”, but rather about what “*laïcité*” actually means. Almost universally, political actors of all sorts have distanced themselves from what Ahmet Kuru calls “combative secularism” in the French mode to adopt something closer to an American

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impact on public life is not only compatible with, but is a natural part of, a democratic political order.

understanding of the term: Freedom to freely practice religion includes the need for the state to make space for religious practice.⁸ There is a broad consensus in the region, as in the US, that a religious

More concretely, there has been significant political discussion about how being “democratic” and “Muslim” should shape policy in the domains of family law and issues related to gender. In all of these countries the politics surrounding the efforts to pass or reform “family codes” have been particularly heated and intense.⁹ While these are still inconclusive and ongoing to varying degrees, the notable fact about the nature of the debate now is the following: It is clear that any legislation that is to have any reasonable legitimacy (and hence a chance at being observed/enforced) will have to emerge from an intensive discussion and negotiation among alternative visions, and this must inevitably include the positions of actors whose positions are primarily religiously based. At the same time, the debate itself is feeding an intense debate among actors claiming to speak in the name of religion, but offering different interpretations of its injunctions. In this, there is a striking parallel to current debates in the USA about gay rights and gay marriage, where internal debate within churches and other religious organizations intersect with secular “rights-based” arguments on both sides of the debate.

There are parallel dynamics in a number of other domains: the status of the death penalty; the ratification of international treaties on human rights, and especially on the rights of women and children; the acceptability of religious symbolism such as swearing oaths of office on a Qur’an for public officials; and the appropriateness of religious instruction in educational systems. In all of these the debates are intense, and sometimes acrimonious. But, I would suggest, rather than seeing these as issues that pit “democrats” against “undemocratic” forces, we should understand these debates as the functioning of democracy itself. Democracy in the Sahel, as elsewhere, serves not as an end but rather as a means to structure a discussion about how political systems should be organized within a given cultural and religious reality.

Tentative Lessons: Bringing Africa into the Debate

The sketches above cannot do full justice to the complexity of the debates in each of these countries, and indeed their ongoing experiments will no doubt

still yield unexpected outcomes and face perhaps daunting difficulties. Nevertheless, I would argue that these three remarkable experiments at establishing democracies in overwhelmingly Muslim and deeply religious societies suggest some important implications for how we might understand the relationship between Islam and democracy, and thus deserve much more attention than they have received to date. At a very general level, I would suggest there are three lessons we might want to consider:

The Sahelian cases suggest that the development of a workable political arrangement between religion and the state must flow from a process that is historical, contingent, and evolutionary and rooted in a specific social context

First, we must accept the fact that democracy, by its nature, brings religion into the public sphere. The modernization theorists' assumptions that democracy would grow out of a process of "development" that would include secularization of social life has clearly been proven false by the facts of the contemporary world. For those of us with secular outlooks, the fact that policy outcomes are thus often likely to be shaped by popular religious sentiments is uncomfortable, and may indeed seem threatening, but this is democracy at work.

Secondly, the Sahelian cases suggest that the development of a workable political arrangement between religion and the state must flow from a process that is historical, contingent, and evolutionary and rooted in a specific social context. As the Sudanese scholar Abdullahi an-Naim has argued in his incisive work, *African Constitutionalism and the Role of Islam*, all constitutions need to be allowed to evolve "organically" with their societies if they are to enjoy the necessary legitimacy to actually regulate social and political realities.¹⁰ No one model fits all, or even others. Constitutions need to reflect arrangements for managing *specific* societies, each with their own histories, dynamics, and tensions.

Finally, I would suggest, a close look at the Sahelian cases suggests that allowing open debate to occur, including the participation of actors with a religious vision as well as others, tends to moderate positions and push towards compromise arrangements. As a corollary, efforts to silence or stifle positions—and especially those with an explicit religious inspiration—is most likely to read to radicalization and undermining of the democratic process. The liberal belief that open debate moderates positions, and allows for further change and moderation, finds at least some vindication in the experience of these African Muslim societies.

Endnotes

1. Mirjam Künkler and Julia Leininger, "Religious Actors in Democratization Processes: Evidence from the five Muslim Democracies," Concept paper for a panel of the same title at the American Political Science Association annual meeting; Toronto, 6 September 2009.

2. See the UNDP *Human Development Report 2009*, available on-line at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/>

3. Mali and Niger have both been plagued by periodic "rebellions" from the nomadic Tuareg populations in the Saharan north of each country, while Senegal has faced a low-intensity but resilient movement in the southern region of Casamance.

4. David Robinson, *Paths of Accommodation: Muslim Societies and French Colonial Authorities in Senegal and Mauritania, 1880-1920*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000.

5. The political implications of the unique Senegalese religious system have received a fair amount of scholarly attention. For my own contribution to this literature see, Leonardo A. Villalón, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal: Disciples and Citizens in Fatick*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

6. For some discussion of this trend in these countries, see: Benjamin F. Soares. "Islam in Mali in the Neoliberal Era," *African Affairs*, 105 /418, 2005, pp. 77-95; Hassane, Moulaye, Marthe Diarra et Oumarou Makama, "Etude sur les Pratiques de l'Islam au Niger," Niamey: République du Niger, Ministère de l'Intérieur et de la Décentralization, Direction des Affaires Coutumières et Religieuses, and DANIDA: Bureau de Cooperation Danoise-Niger, Unpublished document, 2006; and Leonardo A. Villalón. "Sufi Modernities in Contemporary Senegal: Religious Dynamics between the Local and the Global," In Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, eds., *Sufism and the Modern in Islam*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2007, pp. 172-191

7. André Cabanis and Michel Louis Marti, *Les Constitutions d'Afrique francophone: Evolutions récentes*, Paris: Karthala, 1999.

8. Ahmet T. Kuru. "Secularism, State Policies, and Muslims in Europe: Analyzing French Exceptionalism," *Comparative Politics* 40, 2008.

9. See, e.g.: Marie Brossier. "Les Débats sur la réforme du Code de la Famille au Sénégal: La Redéfinition de la laïcité comme enjeu du processus de démocratisation," Mémoire (thesis) for DEA in Etudes Africaines, option Science Politique, Université Paris I, 2004; Dorothea E. Schulz, "Political Factions, ideological Fictions: The Controversy over Family Law Reform in Democratic Mali." *Islamic Law and Society* 10:1: 132-164, 2003; Leonardo A. Villalón, "The Moral and the Political in African Democratization: The *Code de la Famille* in Niger's Troubled Transition" in *Democratization* 3:2, pp. 41-68, 1996.

10. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *African Constitutionalism and the Role of Islam*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.