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Between Democracy and Militancy: Islam in Africa

LEONARDO A. VILLALÓN

Long peripheral in both government and scholarly considerations of the Muslim world, Islam in sub-Saharan Africa now finds itself center stage in policy discussions of acute international concern, most notably due to fears of a seemingly enhanced terrorist threat. While the trajectory of the Al Shabab movement in Somalia is complicated by schisms in its ranks and its handling of widespread famine, two other militant movements in western Africa have recently expanded their activities. In the past year Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has penetrated much further south into the Sahel—notably into central Mali—in carrying out kidnappings and ambushes from its Saharan bases.

And the shady Nigerian movement widely known as Boko Haram (“Western schooling is forbidden”) launched its first direct attack on an international target with the August 2011 bombing of the United Nations headquarters in Nigeria’s capital, Abuja. This was followed by a number of attacks on Nigerian government targets across the northeastern parts of the country, provoking virulent government reprisals, and causing extensive death and destruction. The movement of people and arms southward following the collapse of Muammar el-Qaddafi’s regime in Libya raised further concerns that militant movements across the region will benefit from the ensuing chaos. These fears proved well founded with the rapid expansion of a new militant group, Ansar Dine, in northern Mali following a March 2012 coup.

It is now clear that militant movements in Muslim Africa present larger challenges than seemed likely until very recently, and their disrupt-

tive potential in the region must be emphasized. At the same time, however, such movements represent only a tiny sliver of the contemporary dynamics of Islam in African politics. Fully understanding both the threat they present and their limitations requires that we consider radical Islamists in a broader context of religious trends south of the Sahara. There is a wide—and increasing—diversity to Muslim movements and organization in the region. These are in large part shaped by highly varying contexts, and the variety of regimes and political systems as well as very different patterns of religious demography are fundamental bases of this diversity. A narrow focus on militancy can cause us to lose sight of Islam’s complex—and often quite positive—participation in African debates about democratization.

THE MUSLIM THIRD

Census data in Africa are scarce and not always reliable, but the continent as a whole is at least half Muslim, and a conservative estimate would put the percentage of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa at one third of the population, perhaps more. The common analytic distinction made between the five North Africa countries—usually lumped with the Middle East, given their mostly Arab and Muslim populations—and the rest of the continent is an increasingly blurry one. Mauritania, and now Sudan (having been amputated of its primarily non-Arab and non-Muslim south) in many ways share more in common with their neighbors to the north than those to the south. And indeed social, political, and religious dynamics across the Sahel, from Senegal to Chad, bridge the Saharan divide. I will nevertheless focus the discussion here on the region classically described as sub-Saharan, thus excluding the Arab Spring dynamics of North Africa.

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Fully 32 of the 48 countries in the region today have significant Muslim populations, ranging widely from 10 percent to 100 percent. The demographic context in itself is often central in shaping national dynamics. In the 10 countries with Muslim majorities of some 85 percent or more (Comoros, Djibouti, Gambia, Guinea-Conakry, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, Somalia, and Sudan), the core question has often centered on the extent to which the state should be shaped by the religion of the vast majority. In what we might label the divided countries, with likely Muslim populations between 30 percent and 60 percent (Burkina Faso, Chad, Ivory Coast, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania), the relative influence of different religious communities in the state and the economy has an inherent potential for presenting a serious political fault line, though there is wide variation in the extent to which this has been the case.

And in the 13 countries with significant Muslim minorities of perhaps 10 percent to 20 percent (Benin, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, South Sudan, Togo, and Uganda), periodic debates center on the rights of religious minorities within national legal and political frameworks. It merits noting that another 10 African countries have small but at times politically significant Muslim minorities, South Africa and Gabon among them.

Within these very different demographic variations, Muslims in Africa also live across the highly varied range of political systems on the continent. The domestic environments of individual countries comprise the principal arenas for Islam and politics. At the same time, African Muslim societies find themselves caught up in global debates on Islam and tied to transnational Muslim dynamics. The trajectories of national religious communities are thus situated at the intersection of international trends with the local structures and organization of religious authority, as played out within the context of the political systems of specific states.

RELIGIOUS FERMENT

Doctrinally, Islam in Africa is overwhelmingly Sunni, with the Maliki legal school followed

across the northwestern parts of the continent, and the Shafi'i school followed by the majority in the east. Across the region the dominant practice of Islam has been shaped by the Sufi tradition, which emphasizes mysticism over legalism and assigns particular importance to saintly religious guides (sheikhs). There is significant variation in what this has meant in practice, in terms of both social organization and religious observance. Nevertheless, Sufism was key to the spread of Islam in Africa, and historically quite accommodating to local cultures and realities.

This has led to a long history of attempting to distinguish a supposedly more "peaceful" or "tolerant" African Islam from a more "rigid" or "fundamentalist" Arab Islam, an effort that marked much of colonial discourse and is still reflected in contemporary analyses. In fact, the very process of accommodating Islam to local cultures and societies has long fed debates about correct religious practice among Muslims in Africa. For example, West African jihads of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were in large part reformist movements aimed at purifying Islam, but squarely within Sufi traditions. The distinction between Sufis and puritanical reformists must thus be nuanced.

Nevertheless, Muslim societies in much of Africa have indeed been marked by the gradually increasing importance of explicitly anti-Sufi religious movements, often calling themselves simply "Sunrites," but frequently labeled by others as "Wahhabis" or "Salafists." In most cases, organized reformist movements had their genesis in the late colonial period. Frequently they appealed to Africans with Western educations in modern sectors, often as an alternative to the perceived quiescence of traditional Sufi leaders in relation to colonial rule, and in reaction to the perceived "backwardness" of rural religious practice.

Throughout most of Africa these movements stayed small and had very limited popular appeal until the 1980s, directing their attention primarily to critiques of religious practice for an audience of urban intellectuals. In the context of the apparent worldwide "Islamic revival" of the 1970s and 1980s, however, reformist movements began to exhibit a new dynamism and to take on more explicitly political orientations. Given the

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disillusionment both within the Muslim world and in Africa about the failure of the promises of independence, there was a new receptivity to arguments about the need for local alternatives to Western models of “modernization.”

Economic stagnation and the implementation of structural adjustment programs that marked the end of assured state employment for university graduates also fed demands for change, stimulating new reflections on the social and political role of Islam. Although its impact in Africa was limited and in retrospect rather brief, the Iranian revolution of 1979 sparked some unprecedented efforts to organize explicitly political movements based on religion in some parts of the continent. In the effervescence of the period, various new religious movements emerged, and small inroads were made by Muslim groups from outside the region, including Shiite Islam and the South Asian Ahmadiyya movement.

Increased contacts between sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world following independence accelerated in the wake of the oil booms of the 1970s, and across the region private schools teaching at least partially in Arabic proliferated as alternatives to official state schools teaching in the colonial languages. The new schools gradually channeled some students into the Arab world for advanced studies, and the oil wealth of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states expanded scholarship opportunities. Returning home after years in the Arab world, these “*arabisants*,” as they are known in the Francophone countries, tended to be less respectful of local authorities and to preach against what they perceived as the corrupt practices of local Islam.

The Wahhabi-inspired austerity and individualism that the *arabisants* often promoted found particular resonance with urban youth, as well as with merchants and the new business classes. In a number of African countries, this led to organized and ideologically motivated reform movements with increasing importance in the public sphere. Perhaps the most significant of these was a Nigerian movement founded in 1978, which came to be known as *Izala* (from its full name: *Jama't Izalat al Bid'a wa Iqamat as Sunna*, or Society for the Removal of Innovation and the Reestablishment of the Sunna), but parallel dynamics have been documented in Muslim communities in such far-flung countries as Ethiopia, Mozambique, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The diversification of religious voices and ideologies was to expand rapidly with the wave of democratization that began in Africa in the early 1990s. Regardless of the fate of given democratic transitions, the substantive liberalization of politics on the continent that began in this period produced a flourishing of social movements and organizations, ranging from an emergent “civil society” to new ideological and identity-based movements.

The consequent opening of a Muslim public sphere in many countries gave rise to intense debates about the authority to speak for Islam or for Muslim communities, and led in many ways to a real democratization of religion. New social actors, not only among those with Arabic or Islamic educations, but often from professional and modern sectors, formed Islamic associations claiming the right to speak on religious matters. Importantly, the emergence of Muslim women's voices added a new dimension to the religious public sphere.

With their authority under challenge, traditional religious leaders have often reinvented themselves in various ways, prompting further change. In the context of this plurality of religious voices, the attacks against America on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provoked significant internal debate—in Africa as elsewhere—regarding the relationship of Islam to politics in the modern world.

The result is that Muslim Africa today encompasses a broad diversity of religious ideologies, fully engaged in debates about the appropriate role for Islam and about the social and political organization of Muslim communities. While the old dichotomies—traditional versus reformist, or Sufis versus Salafists—maintain some relevance, the range of ideologies and religious postures in the African public sphere is much broader and varied, and often highly fluid.

IN THE SQUARE

Despite the globalization of Muslim discourse, and the possibilities provided by new communications technologies for actors in widely dispersed locales to engage in debates on religion and modernity, the major arena for Islamic politics in Africa, as elsewhere, remains the state context. It is within the domestic political sphere that issues of deep concern to religious actors—rights and duties of religious communities, religious education, the regulation of marriage and family life,

and more—are debated and shaped. The state context thus remains central to the vast majority of Muslim political actions.

Historically, the nondemocratic governments of Africa after independence had only limited interest in religion. To the extent that they did so in Muslim Africa, however, their actions were shaped by dual imperatives: first, trying to control religious organizations so as to preempt potential challenges to rule, and second, seeking legitimation of the regime through symbolic efforts in support of religion. With the increased mobilization of religion in the 1970s, a common strategy for governments was to create official Islamic organizations that could be controlled via state sponsorship while simultaneously demonstrating government solicitude toward Islam.

Examples of this strategy can be found in both Muslim majority and minority contexts: the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam or the Islamic Association of Niger in the francophone Sahel, and the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims or the Supreme Council of Tanzanian Muslims in anglophone East Africa. In each of these cases the state-sponsored organizations were the only legally recognized religious associations.

These corporatist arrangements were to collapse with the liberalization of politics in the 1990s. Although the old official Islamic associations often survived, they quickly found themselves rivaled by an explosion of new religious groups, part of a boom of voluntary associations in Africa in the 1990s. These diverse groups' entry into politics in an attempt to influence new state structures prompted some fears of a religious "backlash" against democratization.

But in fact there were very few, if any, efforts to impose religiously based systems as an alternative to democracy. The rise of religion in the public sphere, while it has brought tensions, might best be seen as a normal and predictable consequence of liberalization. And the primary political activities of such groups have been directed at democratic politics. Most efforts have centered on demands for states to ensure the rights of religious communities, and to take religious values into account in determining public policies.

In minority or divided cases of religious demographics, questions of communal rights are often linked to constitutional issues, and hence create a potential for politicizing the religious divide. Kenya and Tanzania, home to the largest popula-

tions of Swahili speaking Muslims, present especially important cases. Kenya in the 1970s and 1980s witnessed various efforts to limit special legal provisions for the Muslim community that had been enshrined in the constitution at independence. With the beginning of liberalization in the 1990s, the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims found itself rivaled by many new Muslim civil society groups, and together these religious actors took a central role in debates about the country's political institutions.

Most notably, a core issue in the decade-long struggle to write a new constitution for Kenya was the question of whether to maintain special *Kahdi* courts with jurisdiction for Muslim personal law. The issue proved to be one of the constitution's more controversial provisions, but in the end the new charter approved in a referendum in August 2010 maintained the courts, winning strong support from Kenya's large Muslim minority.

Similar debates have occurred in Tanzania, centering in part on whether legal provisions for Muslims on the mainland should parallel those on Zanzibar, the almost completely Muslim islands of the United Republic. As new Islamic groups have challenged the Supreme Council of Tanzanian Muslims, the country has seen a rise in religious tensions. To date, however, these appear to have been expressed and channeled within institutional politics.

In a wide range of other countries with Muslim minorities—including Benin, Ghana, and the interesting case of South Africa—Muslim politics in democratizing contexts has involved debates about special legal provisions for Muslim minorities within national political institutions. These debates can of course provoke tensions across religious lines, but to date democratic political institutions have managed them rather well. More worrisome in terms of potential religious conflict have been cases where nondemocratic governments in semi-liberal contexts have used claims of "extremism" to control dissent, a tactic that the Ethiopian regime, for example, seems to have embraced.

THE SHARIA DEBATE

Arguably the most significant experiment with political Islam in the context of democratization—not only in Africa but indeed anywhere in the Muslim world—was the adoption of the sharia penal code by 12 Muslim-majority states of northern Nigeria in the wake of that nation's

1999 transition to democracy. Nigeria, Africa's most populous country, is roughly equally divided between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the role of sharia courts in Nigeria's federal system has historically been a subject of intense acrimony. When the collapse of the particularly repressive authoritarian regime of Sani Abacha brought a new effort at democratization in 1999, the issue once again arose.

In this context an electoral campaign promise to enact sharia law by a candidate for governor in the small northern state of Zamfara struck a resonant popular chord, and the policy was quickly instituted after his election. Reaction in the other northern states was highly positive, and by 2002 11 others had followed suit, billing the move as a "return" to sharia as it had been practiced in the region before independence.

In the decade since, the implications of this unprecedented adoption of sharia via democracy have been complex and varied, but some trends can be discerned. Several initial harsh legal rulings in criminal cases (sentences of stoning for adultery, and such) have not been repeated, and indeed none of the initial ones was ever carried out. The principle of sharia has remained widely popular among northern Nigerian Muslims, and among virtually all social classes. But rather than imposing rigid adherence to an inflexible notion of sharia, the adoption of Islamic law has opened the door to wide-ranging debates about what "true" sharia should entail. These debates have given rise to varied interpretations, including important ones centered on social justice and demands for government accountability.

Strikingly, then, the adoption of sharia has helped empower social groups critical of the political class, thus increasing support for democracy. Many unsettled issues remain, and both the actual practice of politics in these states and other troubling trends could intervene, but the positive correlation between support for democratic development and sharia implementation is a striking aspect of the Nigerian context.

In a somewhat different mode, the experiences of three overwhelmingly Muslim countries of the francophone Sahel—Senegal, Mali, and Niger—are also interesting for the question of Islam and democracy in Africa. The political trajectories of the three nations have varied, and the tragic col-

lapse of the Malian regime in the spring of 2012 under pressures sparked by the post-Qaddafi chaos in Libya leaves the future of the region in question. But in all three countries there are lessons to be drawn from two decades of experimentation with democracy in the context of liberalized public spheres with widespread religious participation.

To be sure, the agenda of democratization as embraced in the early 1990s brought initial clashes between Islamic actors and secular civil society groups. And intense and sometimes angry debates have continued since then, notably on such issues as the meaning of secularism in public life, the adoption of family law, and the role of religion in education. Increasingly, however, religious actors of widely varying ideologies have moved from protesting that democracy as initially presented was not "compatible" with Islam, to embracing democracy and arguing that its practice in Muslim societies should mean policies that reflect Muslim values.

Support for democracy has been strengthened precisely because it has allowed religious groups to advocate for policies that are more accommodating of local cultural values than has ever been possible in postcolonial Africa. This of course is not to the liking of secular actors, and religious activism at times is presented as a sign of threats to democracy. Yet this tendency to debate policy issues in religious terms might well be considered a normal part of democracy in religious societies.

Much of the religious influence on Sahelian politics resembles nothing more than the religious involvement in many current American debates—about gay marriage, for example, or prayer in public schools. The Sahelian countries of West Africa thus present fertile ground for examining both the potential and the likely course of democratic debates in Muslim societies, with important lessons for Tunisia, Egypt, and other countries of the Arab Spring.

It is highly significant, in this context, that participation in democratic politics is not the purview of "moderate" Muslims alone, but in fact of Muslim citizens of widely varying ideologies. Future debates doubtless will be intense, but public opinion surveys by Afrobarometer and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life show broad and apparently strengthening support for both

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democracy *and* religion among Muslims across Africa. And considerable evidence suggests that democratic politics has proved a rather effective means of channeling Muslims' political concerns, whether as majorities or minorities, via institutional avenues. This is the case even though, in Africa as in the United States, the impact on public policies may not be to the liking of secular citizens.

BORN IN CHAOS

In addition to the new dynamic of Muslim politics in Africa's liberalized state arenas, the past decade has also witnessed the rise of militant religious groups, which though small in number have managed to carry out violent activities with very high impact. In fact, terrorism in the name of an Islamic ideology began in Africa well before the events of 9/11, most dramatically with the simultaneous bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998. All indications are that those early Al Qaeda actions were planned to take advantage of vulnerable targets, with no clear connections to Kenyan or Tanzanian politics or social groups.

Recently, however, some militant Islamic movements in Africa have appeared to be more rooted in local contexts, raising fears and questions about Africa as a potential new "front" in the "war on terror." The issue is deeply vexed and subject to competing interpretations. It is difficult to discern the extent to which various policy initiatives—not the least of which was the creation of AFRICOM, the US military command for Africa—are reactions to a rising threat or are responsible for creating the perception of increased threats.

If we consider the most worrisome cases, it is clear that the real dangers of militant religious movements are deeply embedded in very specific political contexts, even while they draw on global connections. In addition, though the forms of these movements can certainly be labeled as manifestations of militant or "extremist" Islam, there is no consensus on how to sort out the religious origins of militancy from other factors. To the extent that ideologies are at the base, how to explain the rise of such pockets of militancy in the context of the broad and diverse range of religious positions we have noted above? Or if poverty, underdevelopment, and disaffected youth are the ingredients

for militant action, as often asserted, how are we to understand the rarity of such movements in some of the poorest and least-developed countries, such as those of the Sahel?

If we have no clear answers to these and other critical questions, one important commonality does appear to emerge from a consideration of the militant religious movements currently of deepest concern: Each of them has arisen in highly fraught political environments and seems to feed on ongoing and longstanding conflicts.

Al Shabab, the Somali militant organization, is rooted in the chaos that followed the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s. But in many ways what is most striking in this 100 percent Muslim society is the fact that religious dynamics were for so long marginal to the effort to rebuild a political system. When religion did emerge as central to politics more than a decade after the state's collapse, it was in the form of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), the closest the country has come to a functional government in two decades, and now widely seen by Somalis as a moment of real promise and hope. The US-backed Ethiopian invasion of Somalia in late 2006 ended the rule of the ICU, and helped spawn a series of radical jihadist movements, as well as other threats to the international community, such as the rise of piracy.

Al Shabab, until then a small group linked to one particular court in Mogadishu, and with no known link to Al Qaeda at the time, was well placed to capitalize on the opportunity. Reinventing itself as an insurgency against the Transitional Federal Government, which was supported by outside powers, Al Shabab adopted terrorist tactics and saw its influence rise until 2008 or so. Since then the movement's trajectory has been complicated by its contentious relationship with Al Qaeda, and by its mishandling of the famine situation in 2011 (for example, by blocking humanitarian aid). Although the group clearly attempts to draw on transnational resources, it is striking that Al Shabab's very existence and its likely fate are intricately linked to the fate of Somalia.

HOMEGROWN MILITANTS

There are many more questions than answers about the Boko Haram movement in Nigeria, and in the conspiracy-prone culture of Nigerian poli-

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tics rumors abound about its origins, connections, and goals. There are questions about the extent of the movement itself, and reports that many acts claimed in its name are actually the work of ordinary criminals. Possible links to other organizations, including Al Qaeda, are far from clear and hotly debated. And competing accusations point fingers at both government and opposition politicians as supporters of the movement for political aims.

If we sift through the debate, Boko Haram appears to build on a reaction to the moderation of the sharia implementation process, and to feed on an extremely difficult socioeconomic context, in a country with a long history of militant minority religious movements. Boko Haram has focused its attacks primarily on Nigerian government targets, and Nigerian security forces have badly managed their reaction, almost certainly fanning the flames of the movement's militancy. YouTube videos of summary executions of the Boko Haram leader and other alleged members, sometimes with very tenuous or no evidence, have been widely circulated and have undermined support for the security forces. Although the movement is likely building ties to transnational organizations, its impact has to date remained very limited across national borders. The group clearly is deeply rooted in the Nigerian context, a new manifestation of the violent face of the country's historical religious politics.

And finally, in the Sahara and posing a particular threat to Niger, Mali, and Mauritania, the movement now known as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has provoked significant international reaction. AQIM's genealogy can be traced to the Algerian civil war that followed the aborted effort at a transition to democracy in 1991–92. Islamist militants who challenged the military regime at the time eventually renamed themselves AQIM in 2007.

The organization's tactics have focused primarily on kidnapping Western hostages for ransom, which raises questions about its ultimate goals. As opposed to the Somali and Nigerian groups discussed above, AQIM has had no apparent success in becoming a social movement, having found almost no ideological traction with local populations. Indeed, it is striking that despite massive poverty and misery in the countries where it is active, AQIM has so far found little popular

resonance and apparently managed only the rare recruit.

The fear remains, however, that the movement will spread its influence in the region, with the most significant concern being that it will draw support from the nomadic Tuareg populations of the Sahara, in the wake of the extreme disruption to Tuareg society that resulted from the fall of Qaddafi in Libya. Indeed, the rise of the Ansar Dine group in Mali this spring appears to reflect precisely this dynamic. The adoption of AQIM's current name of course points to an ideological link with the transnational jihadism of Al Qaeda, but its operations to date and its potential for future transformation are rooted squarely in the difficult political contexts of the Sahara, and continue to be largely shaped by the cleavages of Algerian politics.

DRAWING DISTINCTIONS

Islamism in the sense of an ideological commitment to shape political systems to Muslim values is a global movement, and globalization produces some commonalities in the forms it takes in different locales. But important variations are rooted in local contexts. The shape and form of Muslim political action are largely determined by specific political systems, even when claiming inspiration from elsewhere. Indeed, ideological resources for a wide range of "Islamic" political options are available in the international realm.

Muslim societies in sub-Saharan Africa have open to them the full diversity of options, including the significant resources available from Muslim history and tradition, for participating constructively in democratic politics in both majority and minority settings. While the threat of militant interpretations cannot be ignored, we must also not allow fears of militancy to derail or obscure the underlying wealth of this diversity.

Much of the concern about Islamic terrorism in Africa is expressed in terms of worries about the "spread of extremist ideologies," and efforts to combat it are often framed around promoting Muslim "moderates" and suppressing "extremists." But taking into consideration the broad variation in religious beliefs and forms of political participation across the continent, the effort to try to distinguish between good and bad Muslim ideologies may be much less important than the need to support functional political institutions. ■