

Religious Statecraft in the Sahel

By Hisham Aidi

Abstract

In January 2020, French president Emmanuel Macron hosted an emergency summit for the heads of state of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad (the G5 Sahel group). The participants agreed to set up the Coalition for the Sahel to tackle the region's ongoing security crisis. The conflicts in the border regions of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have left more than 10,000 people dead, and displaced over a million. The French president committed an additional 600 troops to join the 4,500-strong French contingent that is leading Operation Barkhane. Macron is trying to persuade other states to contribute troops. The African Union recently said it would commit 3,000 troops. Estonia and the Czech Republic have also agreed to send soldiers, and negotiations are underway with Sweden, Finland, and Norway. As the Trump administration publicly considers withdrawing American troops and closing its airbase in Niger, it appears that France will be leading 'War on Terror' in the Sahel¹.

While most scholars view the security situation in the Sahel as a product of multiple factors—state weakness, poverty, desertification, ideology, and the effects of the Libyan civil war—and underline that not all the armed groups involved are jihadist, the mainstream media tends to focus on jihadism and Islamism, often using the terms interchangeably. The Sahelian crisis has

revived interest in West African Islam, as analysts try to understand why some Sahel governments have been better able than others to manage Islamist movements and jihadist groups. This debate has in turn resurrected the age-old argument that West African states are home to a form of Sufi Islam and a tradition of laïcité, or secularism (inherited from the French), that have long served as a buffer against Islamist militancy, but are now weakening in the face of the Islamist challenge. In this piece, we look at the different policies and institutional

¹ Ruth Maclean, 'Crisis in the Sahel Becomes France's Forever War,' The New York Times (March 29, 2020).

configurations used by states in the Sahel to deal with religion. We begin by examining Senegal—and the ‘Islamic-Wolof model’—which is touted as an African success story, and a regional model of secularism. We compare Senegal’s approach to religion to that of Mali and Mauritania. We will also address the question of why Islamist political parties have not taken hold in the Sahel. We conclude by proposing that an analysis that looks at specific institutions and policies—rather than broad categories such as ‘African Islam’ or *laïcité*²—is better able to explain the differences in the effectiveness of Sahel regimes in incorporating Islamist movements.

Geographic Designations

Before addressing specific state policies, it is worth parsing the concepts of ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ and the ‘Sahel’ to see how they have shaped the study of religion in West Africa. Historically, all kinds of economic and political interactions, commerce and conquest, migratory and cultural flows, have taken place across the Sahara. Yet the colonial view of the Sahara as a divide separating North Africa from the rest of the continent persists, though under different names. The specific parameters of ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ have been shaped by shifting political interests and ideological trends. During the eighteenth century, British colonialists would use the term ‘Negroland’ for the area stretching from Senegal to Ethiopia. By the nineteenth century, ‘Tropical Africa’ had become the preferred signifier for the vast area between the Sahara and the Limpopo. In the post-war era, ‘Black Africa’ and ‘Tropical Africa’ have been used to distinguish the supposedly more-developed northern tier from the rest of the continent.

The phrase ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ gained currency in the 1980s. The colonial and Hegelian roots of this phrase have been amply debated³, but it still forms the basis of the United Nations’, the World Bank’s and the International Monetary Fund’s approaches to the continent. The United Nations considers 46 of Africa’s 54 countries as sub-Saharan—excluding Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt,

Libya, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan, and Tunisia⁴. Eritrea is considered sub-Saharan but its neighbor Djibouti is not. Language, race, ethnicity, and level of economic development have determined how a country is classified. Sudan and Somalia are considered sub-Saharan as well. For the World Bank, Mauritania, which is located largely in the Sahara, is classified as sub-Saharan. Somalia and Djibouti, located in the Horn of Africa, are categorized as part of the Middle East. It’s worth recalling that the World Bank once placed apartheid South Africa in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) category, but once the country transitioned to black majority rule, it was put in the sub-Saharan box⁵. Since the 1960s, African inter-state institutions, including the Organization of African Unity and the African Development Bank, have pushed back against these arbitrary, externally imposed designations. They have adopted a continental approach, preferring to speak instead of regional organizations such as the East African Community and the Economic Community of West African States as its ‘building blocks’. The Sahel is a similarly broad category, with shifting borders. It is sometimes understood as a ‘shoreline’ (from Arabic *sahel*), separating the Middle East from sub-Saharan Africa; others claim that the term comes from *sahl* (which means plain)⁶. In most accounts, the Sahel is the sweep of land south of the Sahara, stretching from Senegal through the regions of southern Mauritania, to central Mali, northern Burkina Faso, southern Algeria, northern Nigeria, Chad, and central Sudan, to Eritrea on the Red Sea—sometimes even including northern parts of South Sudan and Ethiopia. Here, we discuss the states of the western Sahel.

The Senegalese Model

In the last decade, the idea of Sufism as an antidote to militant Islam, and as a type of Islam compatible with democracy and modernity, has gained currency. This argument has inspired policies and diplomatic initiatives from a range of states, from the United States and the United Kingdom, to Morocco and Pakistan, as governments have sought to mobilize Sufi organizations and practices against Salafism. The interest in Sufism has

2 I use Charles Taylor’s conception of secularization—as a change “which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.” See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007, p.3.

3 Babacar Camara, ‘The Falsity of Hegel’s Theses on Africa,’ *Journal of Black Studies* (Sep., 2005), pp. 82-96.

4 ‘About Africa,’ UNDP in Africa: <https://www.africa.undp.org/content/rba/en/home/regioninfo.html>.

5 ‘What is sub-Saharan Africa?’, *The Economist* (March 7, 2019).

6 For a reference to the Sahara as an “ocean of sand” see Nathaniel G. Huntington, *A System of Modern Geography* (New York: E. Huntington & Co E. Huntington & Co., 1834). pp. 287.

in recent years also directed attention to West Africa, where some have long argued that ““African Islam”” or ““l’Islam noire,” to use a colonial neologism, has served as a shield against illiberal Islamist tendencies⁷. Historian Zidane Mriboute has notably argued that unlike North African and Middle Eastern regimes, post-colonial African states “refrained from allowing themselves to be persuaded by the traditional ulema to try to stamp out the brotherhoods, as was the case under President Bourguiba in Tunisia and Boumedienne in Algeria,” where Sufi organizations that could have served as a “bulwark against fundamentalism” were destroyed⁸. Senegal in particular is considered a success story of Sufi-inspired pluralism, seen as a state that has remained stable and tolerant, as other regimes in the region were afflicted by coups and ethnic conflict. In explaining “Senegalese exceptionalism,” Donal O’Brien has argued that it is the social contract binding the Sufi leaders, their followers and the post-colonial elite (during the colonial era, the contract tied the *taalib*, the *marabouts*, and the colonial rulers)⁹, which made “the Senegalese state a uniquely effective apparatus”¹⁰. Scholars who have praised the Senegalese example have also warned of the threat that ““Islam in Africa”” (i.e. Islamism) poses to the country’s ““African Islam”” and how a “weakening of the Sufi spirit” could undermine the country’s social contract and political tolerance.

Much has been written about the paradoxical origins of Senegal’s social contract. In 1905, the French government promulgated ‘The Law Concerning the Separation of the Churches and the State,’ proscribing state funding for religious activities, and removing religious symbols from public buildings. But in Africa, following the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the French began acting, by their own admission, like a “Muslim power.” In Senegal, French colonialists, for all their contempt for religion, had to set up Quranic schools and Muslim tribunals, appoint Islamic judges, organize hajj, and collect taxes, and in this endeavor they began working with Sufi *marabouts*.

7 Mamadou Diouf, ‘The Public Role of “Good Islam:” Sufi Islam and the Administration of Pluralism’, in Mamadou Diouf, ed., *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

8 Zidane Meriboute, *Islam’s Fateful Path. The Critical Choices Facing Modern Muslims* (Trans., John King. New York: I. B. Taurus, 2009).

9 Donal B. Cruise O’Brien, *The Mourides of Senegal: The Economic and Political Organization of an Islamic Brotherhood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

10 Coulon, Christian and Donal B. Cruise O’Brien. “Senegal,” in eds., John Dunn and Richard Rathbone *Contemporary West African States*, eds., 145–164 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

France would establish a pluralistic legal system whereby the colonized populations of West Africa were allowed to observe their customs, if deemed “not contrary to humanity and civilization,” as noted by [BACHIR’S CHAPTER p.44 – SEE FOOTNOTE N 11]As philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne. In theory there was a difference between French (direct) rule and British (indirect) rule, but on the ground French colonialism was pragmatic and that meant working with Sufi *marabouts* as political intermediaries¹¹.

At independence, a power struggle erupted between Senegal’s founding president Leopold Senghor and the *président du Conseil* (prime minister) Mamadou Dia, who wanted to revamp state-society relations as inherited from France, and to sideline the Sufi powerbrokers. Senghor’s more conservative approach would triumph and he would go on to institutionalize a project of “*laïcité bien-comprise*,” whereby the political and religious spheres would be separate, but religions would be welcomed into the public square for the benefit of national development. Political scientist Alfred Stepan would develop this argument further, claiming that the Senegalese social contract rested on “Sufi-secular mutual respect,” noting the constant mutual display of respect between religions and the Senegalese state, which has allowed for cooperation on policies combating AIDS and FGM. Stepan would hold up the Senegalese model of secularism as a non-Western type of secularism, noting that, contrary to what observers of American and French secularism contend, a secular system does not require the complete separation of church and state to be democratic and to respect human rights.

The Senegalese experience is indeed impressive, and the importance of the foundational social contact which can be continuously remodeled cannot be overstated. Yet three important critiques have been presented of the social contract theory. As historian Cheikh Anta Babou has argued, because of globalization—increased migration and financial flows—the relationship between the Senegalese state and the Murid leaders, for instance, is less stable, just as the ties that bind adepts to the *sheikh* have weakened¹². Likewise, scholars have observed that the claim that Sufism is an antidote to

11 Souleymane Bachir Diagne, ‘A Secular Age and the World of Islam’, in Mamadou Diouf, ed., *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) pp. 36-50.

12 Cheikh Anta Babou, ‘Negotiating the Boundaries of Power: Abdoulaye Wade, the Muridiyya, and State Politics in Senegal, 2000–2012’, *Journal of West African History* (Spring 2016).

political Islam is unconvincing and rather grandiose, since “it depends on which face of Sufism you consider”: there are quietist Sufi groups and there are militant Sufi movements, such as those that resisted colonialism’s early incursions¹³. And for all the hoopla about Senegal being a ‘rare democracy’, critics have noted that under Senghor (1960 to 1980), and during the first decade of Diouf (1980-1990), the Senegalese state was stable and allowed for some opposition activity, but it was still an authoritarian regime dominated by a single party.

As in numerous other African countries, political liberalization in the late 1980s would make space for a multi-party opposition, but in 1998, when the Parti Socialiste won another victory, the ensuing protests were quashed and opposition leaders imprisoned. It was only in 2000—four decades after independence—that Senegal transitioned to democracy. Also, Abdoulaye Wade’s attempts to seek a third term in the 2012 elections by altering the Senegalese constitution prompted protest by the Y’En A Marre (We Have Had Enough) movement, touched off civil unrest, and cast doubt on the Senegalese “success story”¹⁴. In its 2020 report, Freedom House downgraded Senegal from free to partly free because the 2019 presidential election excluded two major opposition figures.

Notwithstanding these caveats, it is critical to recall that Senegal has known two peaceful transfers of power between rival parties, and remains one of Africa’s most stable democracies, but this has more to do with the specific organizational forms and institutional ties linking the Senegalese confreries and the regime, than with Sufism or *laïcité* writ large.

‘Democratization of Religion’

The political liberalization of the 1990s led to a proliferation of religious groups and associations, and the fracturing of “” sacred authority”” in some cases, prompting mobilization in others. Sahel states responded

13 Leonardo A. Villalon, ‘Negotiating Islam in the Era of Democracy: Senegal in Comparative Historical Perspective’, in Mamadou Diouf, ed., *Tolerance, Democracy, and Sufis in Senegal*.

14 Mara A. Leichtman, ‘Is Senegal still the African exception? Sufism and Democracy Revisited,’ *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* (Volume 2, Issue # 3, 2016).

disparately to this ‘democratization of religion.’ In Mali and Niger—like Senegal—single-party regimes would be toppled by popular mobilization. Viewing political developments in these states simply as secular regimes battling Islamism is imprecise. Historically, West African Islam has long been interpreted teleologically as an unavoidable process of Sufi revival and Salafi reformist backlash. It is important, in understanding the current Sahelian crisis, that we not fall back on reductive teleological arguments that see West African history as swinging between a secular Sufi Islam and an (anti-secular) Islamism¹⁵.

In Mali, it is worth recalling the institutional legacy of France’s ‘Muslim policy’. Despite the French state’s putative opposition to religion—the *marabout* in West Africa was often likened to the village *ure* in France, depicted as an exploitative philistine. But as in Senegal, French authorities in Mali would govern through Sufi intermediaries. As historian Alexander Thurston observed, “between favoritism and repression, French colonial rule [in Mali] was never ‘secular’ in the sense of removing religion from public life or structures of power.” Mali’s 1960 constitution—and the 1992 constitution that accompanied the transition to democracy—both proclaimed Mali a “secular republic”¹⁶. After independence, and following the short-lived union with Senegal, Modibo Keita’s socialist administration would render Islam “officially invisible”, prohibiting young Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Cultural Union, while also crushing the Touareg rebellion of 1963-64 (It is these historically suppressed political players—the Touareg and Islamist associations—who are at the heart of Mali’s conflict today).

But in subsequent decades, the government relaxed its position vis-à-vis religion, creating the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam (AMUPI) as a way to manage new Islamist organizations. In the early 2000s, the Konoré regime supported the creation of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), which would become an organ for Muslims to lobby the Malian government on various policies and issues, including the Code of Persons and the Family. Constitutional *laïcité* has not prevented the rise of Muslim mass organizations, nor has it defeated their attempts to inject Islamic mores into the public sphere and state policy. As the HCIM’s

15 Benjamin Soares, ‘The Historiography of Islam in West Africa: An Anthropologist’s View’, *The Journal of African History* (March 2014).

16 Alexander Thurston, ‘Towards an ‘Islamic Republic of Mali?’’, *Fletcher Forum on World Affairs* (Summer 2013).

secretary-general declared in 2010, “the [true] secular state integrates religions into the conduct of public affairs”¹⁷. Since multiparty elections were introduced in the 1990s, different strands of political Islam have gained a presence in Malian political life. And calls for sharia in Mali nowadays emanate from Bamako and other cities, and not just from the Islamist groups in the north that drove out the MNL (Mouvement national de libération de l’Azawad).

It appears that how states—whether Mali, Niger, or Burkina Faso—deal with religious movements and jihadist threats has more to do with specific policies, capabilities, and discourses, than with grand concepts like African Islam or Sufism. In fact, even regime type might not be an accurate predictor. In this regard, the example of Mauritania is instructive. Senegal and Mali (until 2011) were secular democracies, but Mauritania, an authoritarian Islamic republic, has managed to escape much of the instability afflicting the Sahel¹⁸.

Regime Type

In Mauritania, Islamic associations began appearing in the 1970s and, as elsewhere in the region, took advantage of the liberalization of the 1990s. Tawassul, inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood, would evolve into a political party, gaining legal status in 2007. Mauritanian state elites have used a mix of stick and carrot to define an appropriate place for Islam in the Islamic republic, in part because of acts of violence committed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb against Mauritanian targets in 2005, 2007, and 2011. Tawassul has been allowed to present electoral candidates, and has managed to have a say on the country’s counter-extremism efforts and policy on Israel. Mauritania’s former president Ould Abdel Aziz (2009-2019), also managed to coopt Tawassul’s rhetoric and to contain jihadist groups¹⁹. The Abdel Aziz regime sponsored theological discussions between militant and mainstream Islamists, often promoting the discourse of

17 Alexander Thurston, ‘Towards an ‘Islamic Republic of Mali’?', Fletcher Forum on World Affairs (Summer 2013).

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

19 Ould Ahmed Salem, Zekeria, ‘Islam in Mauritania between Political Expansion and Globalization: Elites, Institutions, Knowledge, and Networks’, in eds., Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007) pp. 27-46.

Sufi leaders such as Bin Bayaa. Observers have noted the irony: Mauritania suffered two coups—in 2005 and 2008—yet the regime shored up its support base, and launched a massive de-radicalization initiative, neutralizing a jihadist threat, while Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso remained besieged by militant groups and are at risk of splintering²⁰. Mauritania achieved this success through a range of policies, including security sector reform, increased military spending, broader anti-terrorism laws, more robust border controls, and a new biometric identification and civil registration system (Ould Abdel Aziz also played a prominent role in regional counter-terrorism projects, launching the Nouakchott process which would become the Sahel G5). Despite the muscular security policy and authoritarian rule, in 2019, in accordance with the constitution, Abdel Aziz stepped down and Mohammed Ould Ghazouani assumed office. That the Islamic republic of Mauritania and the secular democracy of Senegal have managed to peacefully find a role for Islam inside the state while remaining stable points to the importance of looking at specific (sub-regime) institutions.

Political Parties

Yet one question remains: if, historically, movements—from the Tijanniya to AQIM (both Algerian-derived)—have easily crossed the Sahara, why have Islamist political parties failed to take hold in the Sahel? Historian Alex Thurston has proposed various reasons. First, the clerical model of religious authority in the Sahel and Nigeria differs from that in North Africa. Despite the “fragmentation of sacred authority” in the Sahel, the phenomenon of a religious community headed by a sheikh continues to exist, and (unlike in North Africa) has not been supplanted by a Muslim Brotherhood-like organization headed by lay Muslim activists. As Thurston observes, “sub-Saharan Africa has relatively few Muslim activists whose primary aim is to create Islamic states.” Sufi brotherhoods served as intermediaries for French colonial rule in North and West Africa, but at independence, post-colonial regimes in the Maghreb (Tunisia under Bourguiba, Libya under Qaddafi, and

20 Alain Antil, “La déradicalisation en Mauritanie, un modèle pour le Sahel ?” [Deradicalization in Mauritania: A model for the Sahel?], *Afrique Décryptages* (blog), January 20, 2014: <https://afriquedecryptages.wordpress.com/2014/01/20/la-deradicalisation-en-mauritanie-un-modele-pour-le-sahel/>

Morocco under Hassan II) sidelined Sufi organizations, stripping the marabouts of their political power. This would create a political space for lay intellectuals to launch Islamist organizations and parties.

Second, at independence, all North African regimes claimed an Islamic identity. The constitutions of the Moroccan and Libyan monarchies (and then Libya under Gaddafi), and Algerian and Tunisian single-party regimes, established Islam as an official religion; Mauritania, in turn, would self-define itself as an Islamic Republic. But in the Sahel, the constitutions adopted at independence would give pride of place to *laïcité*. As we saw, Islamist organizations would still emerge—as seen in Mali’s *Ançar Dine* for instance—but these would be led by clerics more interested in spreading Islamic mores than in capturing state power. In northern Nigeria, after the 1999 transition, northern states put in place full sharia codes, but the implementers of these laws were politicians from major parties, who set up government committees dominated by Sufi clerics, who played politics in a secular institutional context. The Nigerian Sunni Islamist figures that emerged in the 1990s tended to be university professors lacking the mass following that the Sufi clerics boast²¹.

Third, in the Maghreb, North African Islamist movements expanded rapidly in urban areas the 1970s and 1980s, undergoing a process of organization and institution-building that may just be starting in the Sahel. The Islamist presence in North African cities thus points to another causal factor: the different levels of urbanization and economic development. As Thurston writes, “lower rates of urbanization, per capita GDP, and tertiary [educational] enrollments in the Sahel shrink the available constituencies for the kind of urban-based middle class, well-educated Islamist movements found in North Africa”²². Another possible factor worth looking at is national identity, which like *laïcité* may not be all-defining, but plays some role in shaping discourses and setting institutional limits. The membership of the North African states in the Arab league, and the official status of Arabic and Arab identity in constitutions, has over the decades created a much bigger audience for Islamist political thought and greater receptivity to ideational and media flows from the Arab East.

In conclusion: to understand the demands of Islamist groups in the Sahel, it necessary to understand how Islam was institutionalized in West Africa. And to that end, it is more useful to look at specific state policies, institutions, and discursive formations, rather than invoking lofty concepts of African Islam and Sufism, which are purportedly more amenable to secularism and liberalism.

21 Alex Thurston, ‘Muslim Politics and Shari’a in Kano, Nigeria,’ *African Affairs* (January 2015).

22 Alex Thurston, ‘Why Are There Few Islamist Parties South of the Sahara?’, mimeo (February 2020).

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In 2002–2003, Aidi was a consultant for UNDP's Human Development Report. From 2000 to 2003, he was part of Harvard University's *Encarta Africana* project, and worked as a cultural reporter, covering youth culture and immigration in Harlem and the Bronx, for *Africana*, *The New African* and *ColorLines*. More recently, his work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The New Yorker* and *Salon*. Since 2007, he has been a contributing editor of *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Culture, Politics and Society*. Aidi is the author most recently of *Rebel Music: Race, Empire and the New Muslim Youth Culture* (Pantheon, 2014), a study of American cultural diplomacy. Aidi teaches the SIPA MIA survey course *Conceptual Foundations of International Politics* and seminars in SIPA's summer program.

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