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Islamism in the South, Jihadism in the North: Why has Islamic activism in Mali taken different forms?

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Summary

- During the last few years, Mali has experienced an unprecedented surge of Islamic activism.

- The presence of Islam in the Malian public sphere goes back decades or even centuries. Yet, the Muslim actors' ambition to exercise political power has never been as assertive as it has appeared recently.

- The jihadists' invasion of northern territories in 2012 and the influential role that Sabati 2012 has played since the 2014 elections, are some of the most salient manifestations of this new dynamic.

- Why some Muslim activists in Mali engage in political struggle by means of peaceful participation in the state and democratic systems, while others Muslim activists choose to do "politics by other means"?

- The form that their activism takes is largely determined by the congruence between the type of Islamic ideology that they embrace and the structure of the local context in which they operate.

During the last few years, Mali has experienced an unprecedented surge of Islamic activism. An emerging Muslim elite has recently manifested increasing willingness to defend Islamic values and promote an Islamic agenda in the Malian public sphere. As a result, Islam has become a source of inspiration and an important motive for political activism. The presence of Islam in the Malian public sphere goes back decades or even centuries. Yet, the Muslim actors' ambition to exercise political power has never been as assertive as it has appeared recently. The jihadists' invasion of northern territories in 2012 and the influential role that Sabati 2012 has played since the 2014 elections, are some of the most salient manifestations of this new dynamic.

The Jihadist occupation of the north and the Islamist resurgence in the South have been considered as two sides of the same coin. However, although the use of Islamic discourse

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> ***« Even though Muslim activists have now established themselves as major actors in the Malian public arena, they are yet to be fully accepted as legitimate actors with a constructive agenda ».***

is a common denominator of Islamic activism, the form of expression that these episodes have taken has varied significantly. Some have been peaceful and participatory, while others have been violent and insurrectional. In Bamako, Muslim activists in the High Islamic Council of Mali and in Sabati 2012 recognize the legitimacy of the Malian state and seek to wield influence on politicians and the government through protest and bargaining strategies. Their goal is to change laws and direct state resources toward the promotion of an Islamic agenda. In the north, however, jihadist insurgent groups deny the legitimacy of the Malian state and seek to overthrow the regime through violent confrontation, and then replace the Malian state system with a system of Caliphate.

This dual form of expression of Islamic activism in Mali raises an important question: Why some Muslim activists in Mali engage in political struggle by means of peaceful participation in the state and democratic systems, while others Muslim activists choose to do “politics by other means?”

Islamic activism is often considered to be inherently violent or potentially leading to violence. A certain interpretation of Islamic activism construes jihadist violence as a stage in the gradual process of radicalization that evolve from peaceful to violent activism[1]. The rise of Islamic associations in Mali and the challenges that they pose in the face of liberal reforms has brought secular elites to raise red flags and warn against the danger of fundamentalism and the threat to it poses to the Malian democracy.[2] Even though Muslim activists have now established themselves as major actors in the Malian public arena, they are yet to be fully accepted as legitimate actors with a constructive agenda.

This paper departs from this view of Islamic activism. It attempts to differentiate between peaceful Islamist activism and violent jihadism by identifying the ideological discourse that inspires them and the structural context that make their incidence possible. The central argument of the paper is that the process of political liberalization and the Malian authorities’ particular understanding of the notion of laïcité have created a permissive environment that allowed Muslim elites to organize themselves into powerful organizations capable of mobilizing the masses for political purposes. Malian Muslim activists inspire from three different Islamic ideologies—pietism, Islamism and jihadism—to frame discourses that challenge secular elites and propose alternative solutions to the problems of governance. The form that their activism takes is largely determined by the congruence between the type of Islamic ideology that they embrace and the structure of the local context in which they operate. Areas of *consolidated statehood*, such as Bamako, provide a better opportunity for Muslim activists drawing on the Islamist ideology to promote their Islamic agenda through participation from within—not without—the framework of state institutions, whereas areas of *limited statehood* such as Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu offer a fertile ground for jihadist activists to challenge the state through violent confrontation.

Islamic Activism in Mali

Three recent cases will help shade light on the scope and diversity of the phenomenon of Islamic activisms in Mali. In 2009, a number of civil society organizations, particularly women associations, put together a family code reform that aimed at reducing gender inequality - in such issues as inheritance and child custody after divorce - and limiting the minimum age of marriage for young girls to 18.[3] The reform received the support of international organizations, secular civil society, and a great number of politicians. When the reform bill was put to vote at the National Assembly, Malian parliamentarians voted overwhelmingly in favor of it.[4] Islamic organizations, however, opposed the bill, which they deemed too “Western” and incompatible with the Malian culture and Islamic values.

> ***« What has emerged as a breaking point between the Muslim elites is their ideological views on what they consider to be the best “strategy for action” to defend Islam and/or advance an Islamic agenda in Mali ».***

Islamic organizations led by the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM in French acronym) organized a protest against the new family code bill, mobilizing an estimated fifty thousand protesters in Bamako to condemn the reform.[4] This strong mobilization pushed President Amadou Toumani Toure (2002 – 2012) to back off from signing the bill into law and to rather form an ad hoc committee —made of both civil society actors and Muslim activists— to revise the bill. The President’s decision was largely interpreted as the biggest victory ever won by Muslim activists in the Malian public arena.

Only three years after the family code controversy, other Muslim activists in the northern regions initiated a violent uprising against the Malian state system, which they wanted to overthrow and replace with a system of caliphate that would be ruled according to their specific interpretation of the sharia law.[7] In 2012, jihadist insurgent movements, including Iyad Ag Ghali’s Ansar Dine and the Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO in French acronym), in alliance with Tuareg separatist rebels defeated and ousted the Malian army from the regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. For nine months, the jihadist occupied these northern territories where they implemented a harsh interpretation of the sharia criminal code. Although a military intervention led by France in January 2013 formally defeated the jihadists and liberated the northern cities, jihadist activism still persisted and spread further south in the central regions of Mopti and Segou.[8]

Around March 2012, at the very moment when jihadists began their conquest of the northern territories, a group of young Muslim activists in Bamako initiated a new form of Islamic activism. They created a political lobbying group called Sabati 2012, with the goal of promoting an Islamic agenda in the Malian public sphere by participating in/and influencing legislative and presidential elections.[9] Sabati 2012 is a group of political activists that is less than a formal political party but more than a normal civil society organization. In 2013, the group put together a memorandum that summarizes its agenda, which included the increase of public funding for religious institutions, the creation of a training center for imams and preachers, and the regulation of bars, brothels, and the medias in a way that is compatible with the Malian culture and religious values.[10]

Many members of the group ran for legislative seats as independent candidates in the 2014 legislative elections. While the group did not present a candidate for the presidential elections, they lobbied presidential candidates from other political parties. They proposed to campaign in favor of the candidate that commit to promoting their Islamic agenda. They finally supported the candidacy of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and actively participated in his campaign.[11] Their support was widely viewed as highly instrumental in securing Keita’s victory in the 2014 presidential elections.

Not only these cases show how Islamic actors played an increasingly influential role in Malian politics but also the varied forms that this influence has taken: insurrectional and violent in the north and democratic and non-violent in Bamako. The following section will attempt to explain the factors behind these variations.

Islamic political ideologies in Mali

The recent wave of Islamic activism in Mali takes its root in the democratization reform of the early 1990s when the Malian state liberalized the political sphere and allowed political parties and civil society organizations to operate openly and freely. Capitalizing on the new liberal democratic reforms and the permissive environment that they created, an emerging Muslim elite organized themselves into associations with the objective of defending Islamic values and advancing an Islamic agenda in the public sphere.[12] Many of these early Muslim elites who became activists starting from the 1990s were graduates from Islamic Universities around the world, including the University Al Azhar in Egypt, the University of Medina in Saudi Arabia, and the Islamic University of Say in Niger. Others were former students in secular universities who have particular interest in Islam, and participated in Student Islamic Associations, including the Association of Malian Student (AEEM in French Acronym) at the University of Bamako.

The adoption - in the 1992 constitution - of the principle of laïcité interpreted as a "complete separation between the state and religion", led the Malian authorities to distance themselves from involvement in religious matter, to the extent that even the management of the religious sphere was perceived as infringement of the principle of laïcité.[13] This state's disengagement from religious affairs resulted in a *laisser-faire* that not only permitted the emerging Muslim elites to establish powerful Muslim associations, but also left the task of regulating the Islamic spheres to the Muslim elites themselves. In the process of their self-management, the Muslim elites were able to establish a certain inclusiveness within the Islamic sphere, a sort of unity in diversity. Although important theological differences existed between these Muslim elites, particularly between sufi and salafi, these difference were rarely an obstacle when it comes to defending the interest of Islam in the face of the state or the secular elite. Islamic organizations such as the HCIM, Sabati 2012, and MUJAO reflect this inclusiveness to a great extent.

However, what has emerged as a breaking point between the Muslim elites is their ideological views on what they consider to be the best "strategy for action" to defend Islam and/or advance an Islamic agenda in Mali. In their approach to Islamic activism, Malian Muslim activists are inspired by global Islamic ideologies to frame their discourse. These Islamic ideologies are conceptualized and disseminated by canonic Muslim activists and scholars around the world based on the interpretations of Islamic scriptures in relation to a particular understanding of current political affairs. Three major ideological orientations can be identified among Malian Muslim elites.

First, there are Muslim activists who endorse a compliant and acquiescent stance vis-à-vis the state and the political system, and who often maintain close ties with the government. These Muslim elites whom we might call *pietist* support secularism, and keep themselves at a distance from the Malian political battlefield. They give priority to spirituality, personal piety, and religious education as means to address social and political problems—rather than meddling into political competition. The majority of Malian religious leaders are pietists, but the movement Ansar Dine International led by Sheikh Ousmane Madani Haidara better incarnate the pietist category.[14]

Other Muslim activists, however, advocate for Islamizing and moralizing the Malian public sphere. These Muslim activists are influenced by the ideology of Muslim Brotherhood movements, and can be referred to as *Islamists*. They attempt to inscribe Islamic contents and values unto the Malian state and its democratic system by participating in the secular state system, including participation in electoral politics. Malian Islamists participate in debates and negotiations with secular groups to define the "form and substance" of such concepts as the state, democracy, human right, and family code. Sabati 2012 and the Collectif of 2002 epitomize this Islamist tendency.

Finally, a more recent tendency within Muslim activists in Mali has emerged and called for violent uprising on behalf of Islam against the Malian state. These activists —referred to as *jihadists*— reject the nation-state system and aim to replace it with the caliphate. Contrary to Islamist activists, the jihadists view democracy as ungodly and consider all rulers who do not implement their specific interpretation of sharia as a *Taghut* —meaning an anti-Islamic government— that need to be removed forcefully. The Movement of Oneness and Jihad in West Africa that occupied the region of Gao in 2012 is a good illustration of the jihadist tendency.

These different ideological views shape the Malian Muslim activists' interpretation of current affairs but they also influence their decision on the chain of actions that are appropriate in order to advance the Islamic agenda in Mali. Malian pietists reject all confrontations with the state as un-Islamic, and aim for changing individuals' behavior—not laws or public institutions—through religious education, spirituality and personal piety. Malian Islamists, however, have used peaceful protest and political lobbying strategy to challenge policies or advance an Islamic agenda in the public sphere. Finally, jihadist activists view violence as the unique way to advance their agenda. They have used suicide bombing and insurgency strategies to operate their desired changes.

The recent debate about alcohol consumption illustrates the different ways in which each one of these groups of Muslim activists interpret the same reality and suggest different course of actions to address the same issue. In 2013, a report by the World Health Organization reveals that alcohol consumers in Mali drink an average of 29.9 liters of alcohol per year. This was the third highest average among alcohol consumers in Africa according to the report, after Chad and Gambia.[15] The report created a strong controversy in Mali as some commentators misinterpreted the statistics and made the claim that Mali is the third country in terms of alcohol consumption in Africa. This appeared to be a scandal given Islam prohibits alcohol consumption and an estimated 95% of the Malian population are considered Muslim.

Muslim activists reacted to the report in three different ways: for the Islamists who were first to raise the controversy, the report denotes a decay in public morality. In a speech addressed to President IBK, Mahmoud Dicko, the leader of HCIM said that the report shows that “public morality is dropping dramatically in Mali”. Calling the president by name, he declared: “IBK, the country is falling into complete decay. The consumption of alcohol increases. This is not a problem of religion. It is a question of morality”.[16] Dicko suggested that the solution to alcohol consumption is the adoption of a law that bans bars. Pietists, however, interpreted the problem differently and suggested a different solution. They attributed the high rate of alcohol consumption in Mali to the problem of religious education. In an interview Cherif Ousmane Madani Haidara said, referring to the report: “(…) it is an educational deficit in our society. Closing bars and other places of recreation is not the solution, it is necessary that people educate their children ... the bars are only filled with Muslims’ children. If these kids do not go to bars ... there will be no drinkers...[and the bars will close]".[17] Jihadist activists however, view alcohol as *Haram*, meaning prohibited in Islam. Drinking alcohol is an act of disobedience to God that needs to be severely sanctioned. Jihadists activist destroyed all the bars in Gao and Timbuktu and people found guilty of drinking alcohol receive punishment of a 100 lashes. In one bar that they attacked in Gao, one person was killed and 6 others were wounded.[18]

Belief in an ideology, however, is not sufficient for Muslim elites to engage in activism. In fact, not all Muslim elites who believe in an ideology are capable to act on it. While Muslim elites—pietists, Islamists, or jihadists—are likely to be present everywhere in Mali, both in urban and rural areas, the pattern of Islamic activism has not been uniform across Mali. Islamist activism has tended to be prominent only in the capital city Bamako, whereas jihadist activism has prevailed in rural and peripheral areas. Dynamics at the local contexts therefore determine the type of activism that takes place.

Local context and individual motivation

For any collective action to be possible there has to be a context of political opportunity that makes its organization possible and its success likely. Islamic activism like all other activism starts only when “first movers” or “social entrepreneurs” decide to organize a collective action, frame a discourse that resonates well with local social and political demands, and decide on the best “strategy for action” to achieve the desired goals. The context in which Muslim entrepreneurs emerge, as well as the process by which they frame their discourse and mobilize followers is a determinant factor for the occurrence of activism. The structure of the local context—notably the pattern of state and society relations in a particular space—determine which ideology is likely to be enacted. Certain contexts are more suitable for the development of certain political ideologies. A context of limited statehood —meaning a place where government is unable to project authority, regulate social behavior, and provide social welfare— and social and political disorder provide a greater opportunity for politicizing and enacting the jihadist ideology, whereas a context of “consolidated statehood” where democracy, social and political stability prevail is more amenable to the enactment of Islamist ideology.[19]

Despite its overall weakness the Malian state has a greater control over its capital city Bamako. The government has a greater capacity to enforce law and order, and a fairly effective administration to regulate social behavior and implement policies. Political parties and civil society organizations are well-structured and have their headquarters. Social and political activism by different groups is prominent. Student and labor unions, alter-globalization movements, youth organizations and feminist groups often take it to the street to express grievances, decry government policies, and/or ask for reforms. However, they do this through well-regulated and institutionalized methods of collective actions —such as protest, sit-ins, and strikes— and often after receiving a formal government’s authorization.[20]

As newcomers in the *field* of political activism, Muslim activists in Bamako had to adapt to this institutionalized environment of collective action. Although they inspire their activism from Islam, their mode of actions had to adapt and fit with the institutionalized field of social and political activism in Bamako. Given their different approach to activism—violent, participatory, and compliant—the three Islamic ideologies mentioned above do not have equal opportunity to adapt effectively to the contestatory field in Bamako. In other words, Bamako’s contestatory field raises the cost of organizing violent jihadist insurgency while lowering the cost of peaceful and participatory activism. In Bamako, Muslim “entrepreneurs”, who adhere to Islamism find a fertile environment to engage into the form of activism that they deem necessary and most efficient to advance Islam in the Malian public sphere, including bargaining with the secular elites, organizing protests to demand changes in government policies, and political lobbying.

However, in the regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu, where the Malian state has had a limited presence, a variety of movements and actors have for a long time competed for political influence as well as control over trafficking routes using violence.[21] In this context of social and political disorder in northern Mali where rebellions against the Malian state and military confrontation between multiple armed groups have become standardized forms of political activism, jihadist entrepreneurs have found ample opportunity to organize their insurgency, including the absence of capable state army, the availability of weapon, and rogued terrain. This insurrectional field prompted certain activists to adopt the jihadist ideology, which has recently made significant inroads within the Northern Malian societies, as a legitimizing and mobilizing discourse to engage the state of Mali and the other armed groups intervening within the political field. The use of the Jihadist ideology was strategically rewarding. It provided fighters with a symbolically greater and nobler cause to fight for, allowed for the creation of a larger coalition that bridges the tribal, ethnic, and racial cleavages, and it opened the door for foreign jihadist to come in support of their group. But the actors’ inspiration by jihadist ideology was also motivational. While some jihadists appeared clearly not interested in religion, many of them took religion seriously and acted on the belief that Jihad is an Islamic duty.

Finally, the motivation that prompt “Islamic entrepreneurs” is often different from the motives of the masses. Individuals from particular social and economic backgrounds and motivated by a variety of factors, including religious, situational, and strategic, have supported and participated in episodes of Islamic activism.[22] MUJAO has been successful in mobilizing large number of fighters from different social and economic backgrounds, and beyond the traditional ethnic and tribal cleavages that have often characterized most insurgencies. It has mobilized groups such as pastoralists Peul who have been at the margin of the state and adherents to certain theological sects such as the Tabligh Jama’at and the Wahariji in Gao. Sabati 2012 has attracted devout Muslims from the middle class, university students, and educated women.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that although Malian activists have attempted to advance Islam in the public sphere, their approach to activism has varied significantly. Muslim activists in Bamako have used peaceful and participatory form of Islamic activism whereas in the north, violent and insurrectional activism has prevailed. This variation is due to different ideological perspectives as well as the structural context in which these Muslim activists operate. By studying the variations of Islamic activism in Mali, this paper has attempted to address two major confusions regarding the understanding of Islamic political contestations. First, Islamic activism is often viewed as inherently violent, extremist, and anti-democratic. This view became dominant following the 9/11attacks largely due to the media’s over-emphasis on jihadist violence, which overshadowed other more peaceful expressions of Islamic activism. Second, there is a conceptual confusion between *Islamism* and *Jihadism*. The concept of “Islamism” has often been used to refer interchangeably to jihadist activism, which is revolutionary and violent, as well as the more reformist and peaceful activism. But these two concepts refer to two different ideologies that should not be conflated.

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News and announcements

- Jonathan Sears made a news appearance on Radio-Canada's "Les samedis du monde", on November 25th, regarding the political challenges in Mali and the presidential election in 2018.

- Bruno Charbonneau published on November 29th in the online journal *Policy Options* "Do you believe in peacekeeping?".

- Emmanuel Goffi published on December 7th in the newspaper *Le Devoir* the article "Will armed drones replace the Canadian peacekeeper?".

- Adib Benchérif is consultant for Lawyers without Borders since october to assist the Commission for Truth, Justice and Reconciliation (CVJR) in Mali, in the framework of the national reconciliation process.

- Niagalé Bagayoko participated to the Dakar Forum on November 13th and 14th, for which she wrote a framework note in the context of the Conference n°1 on security sector reform: "Evolution of the reform processes of the security systems on the African continent", see page 66. She also took part in the conference "RSS, prévention, et paix durable" organized by UNOWAS in Dakar on December 15th, as well as to the third meeting of authors of the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSVR) in the framework of the African Comparative Study of Transitional Justice, in Johannesburg, South Africa, from November 30th to December 5th.

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