

PREFACE

It is indisputable that religion has become a more prominent factor in politics in the twenty-first century. Cases from every continent and nearly every religion demonstrate the rising salience of religion in defining identity and in organizing societies, at the same time that confidence in and competence of governments are on the decline. What was once a clearly understood boundary in modernizing societies between the secular function of the state and the personal, communal bonds of religion or ethnicity has become newly contested terrain. Formal institutions of government in both developed and developing countries are on the defensive, as newly empowered citizens and civil society challenge the dominance of formal public institutions to deliver services and define national and individual identity.

At the turn of the millennium, many political analysts celebrated the unifying and homogenizing effects of globalization. With greater mobility and improved access to information and technology, people around the world would become more alike, as millions of young global citizens, mostly in developed countries, were eager to shed the constraints of traditional cultural norms, including religion and the political affiliations of their parents.

But that was not really the experience of most people, and a backlash against what was seen as the new inequalities of globalization led to the realities of identity politics in many countries. Religion is often, though not always, the driver of identity politics and has become a powerful determinant of state-society relations in dozens of countries. In 2004, the National Intelligence Council's quadrennial Global Trends report noted that "over the next fifteen years, religious

identity is likely to become an increasingly important factor in how people define themselves.”¹

Al Qaeda’s attacks against the United States in East Africa in 1998 and in New York and Washington in 2001 transformed the discourse about religion in politics to a focus on extremism—and on Islam in particular. But extremism and hardline interpretations of religion were rising in other faith communities as well, from different sects of Christianity, Judaism, and Hinduism, sometimes as an expression of political opposition and sometimes within political parties that won elections and took power.

In her 2007 book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, former U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright traces the evolution of thinking in at least one Western capital, where diplomats have been trained to treat religion as a private, personal matter, not a topic for official policy exchanges. But that bright red line between state and church has become increasingly blurry and anachronistic, and she came to recognize the importance of learning about religious traditions, organizations, and belief systems as a normal part of understanding foreign cultures and the political-cultural realities that shape leaders’ capacity to act.

This important and timely study, *Faith in the Balance: Regulating Religious Affairs in Africa*, provides unique insights into how five governments on the African continent do just that: manage the politics of religion and the role of religion in politics. The study looks at each case—Morocco, Tunisia, Nigeria, Kenya, and Burkina Faso—from the perspective of the state, complementing work that has explained religious organizations and belief systems as they relate to the state, seeking to address grievances, or to access resources and security. One important insight from the various cases is the centrality of politics and power relationships, more than doctrinal theological debates, in shaping the state-religion interactions.

In this study, the key questions relate to the changing strategies of states towards religious communities and institutions: What are

1. “Mapping the Global Future,” National Intelligence Council, 2004, 79, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/cia/nic2020/map_global_future.pdf.

states' goals in regulating religious space? What are the consequences of intervening or not intervening in religious life? Does a more robust government role in religious affairs lead to more domestic peace and consensus, or does it prove to be counterproductive and lead to more religious opposition to the state? Can ministries of religious affairs or education change the direction of religious beliefs and behavior over time, or are those phenomena beyond the control or influence of the state?

The five country chapters represent a fascinating mix of cases. First is the diverse demographic realities they provide: two Muslim-majority (over 98 percent) states,² of mixed Arab and Amazigh ethnicity, where religion is a unifying factor (Morocco and Tunisia), one nearly evenly divided Christian/Muslim state (Nigeria), one strong Christian majority state (Kenya, 85 percent Christian, 11 percent Muslim),³ and one Muslim-majority state with a sizeable Christian minority (Burkina Faso, 61 percent Muslim, 23 percent Christian).⁴ These demographics are constantly shifting, with nontraditional religious movements leading to increased fragmentation of religious affiliation.

There is similar diversity in state approaches to religion: a monarchy that traces its lineage to the earliest days of Islam, states that have clear constitutional mandates to protect religious freedoms, and two states struggling to redefine the state's responsibilities towards religious activity in the face of a dramatic political transition or the violent extremist spillover from a neighboring state. But none of the state approaches have proven sufficient to deter or prevent extremism or to provide a sustainable political culture of religious tolerance.

2. "Morocco Population 2019," World Population Review, June 14, 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/morocco-population/>; "Tunisia Population 2019," World Population Review, June 14, 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/tunisia-population/>.

3. "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050," Pew Research Center, April 2, 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

4. "Burkina Faso 2016 International Religious Freedom Report," U.S. Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report*, 2016, 1, <https://bf.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/159/IRFR-Burkina-Faso-FINAL-ENGLISH.pdf>.

The cases do not dwell on the roles of external security providers or aid donors, but there are useful observations about how states respond to Western—and particularly U.S.—framing of the concerns about extremism and its post-9/11 significance as the animating theme of security cooperation. States in the Maghreb, Sahel, and even sub-Saharan Africa have learned to use the jargon of countering or preventing violent extremism (CVE and PVE) to improve prospects for bringing in resources to support government programs. Such cooperation may create the misleading impression in donor capitals that there is a shared understanding of the problem set; in fact, for many African states, CVE is a controversial and even counterproductive strategy that can delegitimize government efforts, exacerbate intercommunal differences, and possibly facilitate recruitment to extremist organizations.

Governments will continue to search for the right balance between regulating religious activity for the common good while permitting freedom of worship and accepting the independence of faith communities. Too much government control weakens the legitimacy of religious leaders, but too little can undermine the capacity of the state to provide security for all its citizens. Project director Haim Malka and contributing authors Alex Thurston, Richard Downie, and Sebastian Elischer have provided deeply illuminating studies that show how hard it is to find that balance.

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