

CONCLUSION

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Africa has deep religious diversity within countries and between countries. More than 1.2 billion people divided among 54 countries embrace a wide variety of religious traditions, and even within religions there is a wide spectrum of practice and belief.

Governments in Africa generally do not try to control religion, but religion on the continent has often had a political role. Opposition groups have invoked the two principal religions, Islam and Christianity, as tools to challenge states, and states have courted religious authorities to bolster their legitimacy.

The fluid intermingling of religion and politics carries with it risks for states. Embracing the clerical establishment too tightly risks delegitimizing religious authorities. If the public sees religious leaders justifying brutality, repression, and corruption, those clerics lose their moral authority and sacrifice their claim to spiritual leadership. Likewise, governments that use religious regulation as a cover to harass legitimate political opposition and repress marginalized communities risk exacerbating the conditions that fuel extremism. Too little intervention, however, is also a peril. It can foster communal conflicts and create space for extremists to recruit and operate. Growing radicalism would threaten both the host state and its neighbors.

Amidst the ethnic, sectarian, religious, economic, and political diversity of Africa, each government must find its own balance. It must reach an appropriate equilibrium that protects freedom of expression and worship while also preventing violent movements

from exploiting the religious sphere. Political-religious dynamics are not static, and states must constantly reassess and adjust their policies based on shifting internal and external trends as well as their own objectives. Each state does so in its own way.

In doing so, the religions are not treated equally. Within Muslim communities, there are groups that argue that their violent opposition—to the government, to ruling elites, to non-Muslim communities, and even to many of their coreligionists—is theologically justified. While these groups are a minority, they color the way that governments in Muslim-majority states and Muslim-minority states alike think about their ties to religious communities. Suppressing religious extremism becomes not merely a social imperative but a security imperative as well. Because such groups are exceedingly rare in Christian communities, nations with both Muslim and Christian communities treat them very differently, even if the principles of their engagement with religion are the same.

For Morocco, Islam is inseparably tied to the monarchy's legitimacy. Of all the countries in this study, Morocco has developed the most comprehensive strategy to bureaucratize religious institutions and shape religious discourse. Its overriding objective has been to strengthen monarchical power and undermine violent interpretations of Islam. Yet for Morocco's religious policy to be effective in the long run, it must look beyond the government's immediate political needs and develop policies that address the frustration and demands of the country's youth.

In Tunisia, political polarization has obstructed state efforts to align Islam and state institutions in a way to combat extremism. In response, the state has resorted to an often heavy-handed, security-oriented approach to monitoring religious space. One consequence is that the most important religious institutions in Tunisia have been unable to play a constructive role in broad government efforts to address the country's social, political, and security challenges. Equally importantly, religious space has become a growing source of division in Tunisian public life.

In Nigeria, a country evenly split between Muslim and Christian populations, the government applies religious regulation unevenly.

This approach creates vulnerabilities for the state and has consequences for religious institutions and communities. While there are growing calls for more effective governmental regulation of religion—both to counter extremism and to oversee murky church finances—Nigerian authorities are wary of provoking a popular backlash.

Kenya's government has largely avoided overt interference in religious affairs while aligning itself with the Christian majority. In doing so, the government has accentuated the second-class status of a Muslim minority population that mostly resides in regions associated with the political opposition. The ongoing marginalization of Kenya's Muslim community helps explain some of the appeal of extremist groups like al-Shabaab, which, in turn, have drawn a harsh counterterrorism response from the state.

Burkina Faso has a similar legacy of nonintervention in religion, but the rise of salafi groups and violent extremism has created new threats. In response, the government's regulation of Muslim affairs has taken on an increasingly security-oriented cast. Although the Catholic Church remains the country's most influential religious institution, the Muslim community is becoming increasingly politicized. Salafi leaders, in particular, are starting to criticize the ruling elite, and younger Muslims are making more demands of their government.

While conditions in each country are different, and each state employs different institutions and unique approaches to regulating religious life, a number of common themes emerge that provide important lessons for understanding the impact of state intervention in religious affairs more broadly across Africa.

- Undermining violent religious narratives is a priority for governments seeking to promote stability, and doing so requires policies that simultaneously protect freedom of expression without creating space for extremist discourse. Undermining those narratives requires more than monitoring speech or reforming religious education, however. It requires a parallel commitment to improve social, economic, and

political conditions to address widespread popular grievances. Troublingly, many governments have inadequate programs to improve conditions and use religious regulation to silence nonviolent opposition and religious doctrines that they consider hostile to their rule.

- Governments without any history of regulating religious affairs face steep challenges in their efforts to battle religious extremism. Not only do they cede space that extremists can exploit, but when they do intervene, their efforts are often highly securitized because they lack other noncoercive tools to engage with religious groups.
- There is an important difference between institutional reform of the religious sector and efforts to change or “modernize” doctrine so that it conforms to notions of “moderate Islam.” While some states are trying to do both simultaneously, the efforts require different strategies, tools, and resources. Institutional reform is often within governments’ grasp, but doctrinal reform is often elusive and can provoke damaging backlash.
- In most cases, neither governments nor civil society organizations manage religious issues in a vacuum. State efforts to dominate these activities without including voices from outside the state structure lose both credibility and dynamism, and they often foster greater conflict.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

There is no obvious role for the United States in African debates over religion. Yet, how African governments engage in the religious realm affects U.S. interests and policies on the continent and beyond. By intervening more aggressively in religious affairs, governments risk undermining legitimate religious institutions and deepening intercommunal tension. If religious regulation is used as a cover to harass marginalized communities, doing so risks enflaming security conditions rather than enhancing stability and security.

All of the country cases in this study are U.S. partners that receive U.S. economic and military assistance. U.S. officials should interest themselves in governments' approaches to religious communities, in particular toward Muslim populations, and to their political and social contexts. The lessons here are also applicable to understanding the religious dynamics in other countries on the continent with which the United States has less intimate security ties.

U.S. policymakers need to recognize and understand regional governments' motives, objectives, and methods for intervening in religious affairs. As U.S. policymakers learn more about religious dynamics in Africa, several important themes are important to highlight.

First, it is tempting to support state-defined narratives of "moderate" or "tolerant" Islam as an antidote to jihadi-salafism. While some governments may legitimately seek to promote the compatibility of Islam with human rights and tolerance, many also pursue socioeconomic, political, and security policies that vulnerable populations consider repressive and unjust. As long as citizens feel that their governments are failing them, extremists will recruit among marginalized youth.

Second, diplomatic outreach to religious actors in Africa is critical. But U.S. government officials risk creating further divisions by labeling religious groups or individuals as "moderate" or "extremist." In some cases, those individuals labeled as "moderates" can speak English and appeal to U.S. officials, though they may not represent their faith community. Those deemed "extremist" might not agree with all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, but in some cases they may be useful interlocutors in combatting violence because they command respect and legitimacy.

Third, countering violent extremism and preventing violent extremism programs can serve important U.S. foreign policy objectives in Africa. But these programs have limits that are important to recognize. Partner governments have become adept at using CVE language and accompanying financial assistance to further their own political objectives. In many cases this includes deploying U.S. security assistance to suppress nonviolent political opposition

groups and silence dissent. Such actions reinforce the grievances that drive people to use violence against regimes, creating a cycle of state repression and antiregime violence.

Finally, U.S. support for good governance and transparency creates the best opportunity for undermining extremists in the long run. Supporting both governments' and citizens' efforts for inclusive dialogue, effective education, professional political parties, independent media, and a robust civil society can build more resilient and less conflict-prone societies.

For the United States, the diversity and fragmentation of approaches to religion in Africa challenge efforts to engage more strategically on the continent. More informed policy requires a deeper understanding of the diversity of religious movements and the motives of government intervention in religious affairs.

States and opposition groups will continue to seek control over religious institutions and religious discourse for the foreseeable future. At stake for the countries analyzed in this study is more than merely elite competition for resources. The struggle is over the identity of the modern nation-state and the relationship between regimes and their citizens. Rather than producing a clear winner, the struggle will endure and change in the process. The battle over religious symbols, education, and discourse will shape the contours of politics and society in Africa for the next generation, and beyond.