

INTRODUCTION

Haim Malka

Religion and politics have been inexorably tied in Africa for centuries. Both Muslim and Christian movements have a history of pressuring governments on a range of social and political demands, including human rights and good governance. In countries where politics are characterized by corruption, repression, and discrimination, religious movements distinguish themselves by claiming moral authority. At the same time, governments are increasingly wading into religious affairs as they seek to silence dissent and amplify voices of religious authorities who legitimize their policies.

This study argues that state intervention and management of religious affairs are fundamentally aimed at expanding state powers and undermining political opposition rather than promoting a specific religious dogma or set of beliefs. Given the appeal and importance of religion as a political tool, governments cannot afford to ignore it. Finding the right balance is an urgent task, because how states manage and intervene in religious affairs has far-reaching consequences for politics, security, and social stability in Africa.

Africa's religious and ethnic diversity is staggering in its size and complexity, and it continues evolving. Muslim communities are not monolithic within Africa. Islamic opposition movements have used religion as a tool for political opposition just as governments have to justify their policies. Ultraconservative salafi groups have drawn adherents wherever Muslim communities exist. Many salafis, who were traditionally apolitical, have increasingly rejected quietism in favor of political action. A small but vocal minority of jihadi-salafists

use violence to promote their agenda.¹ Previously outlawed political parties that espouse Islamic ideals, especially in the North African Maghreb, have also leveraged their popularity since 2011 to win parliamentary elections. In some cases, these Islamic-inspired parties have formed coalition governments where they share power with other entrenched elites. In Tunisia, for example, the Islamic-inspired Ennahda Party won the largest share of votes for the constituent assembly in 2011, forming a coalition government. In every such case, political Islamists' electoral successes had a populist tinge and were based in part on perceptions that these religious actors were credible, authentic, and untainted by ruling elites who had abused their powers for decades.

Christian political opposition movements have also used religious messaging and activism to challenge state control and socio-political norms. Historically, Christian groups have been at the forefront of social change movements on the continent, including the push for independence and decolonization. Christian leaders led calls for democratic change in Kenya, for example, at the end of Daniel arap Moi's repressive reign, and they provided powerful moral voices in the fight against apartheid South Africa. More recently, there are signs that expanding Evangelical and Pentecostal groups are beginning to mobilize their followers for political objectives. Not only do these newer Christian movements threaten the influence of mainline Protestant and Catholic churches that have dominated Africa's Christian space for more than a century, they pose a potential challenge to governments due to their growing numbers, influence, and ambivalent attitude toward engaging with authorities.

While most religious tension in Africa takes place within and not between Muslim and Christian communities, the two religions do

1. Salafism is a movement within Sunni Islam whose adherents aim to emulate the practices of the early generations of Muslims. The three main branches of salafism include quietists, who do not participate in formal politics and instead focus on spiritual outreach; political salafists, who seek to compete in formal politics and elections; and jihadi-salafists, who employ violence to achieve their aims. For more on this movement, see Bernard Haykel, "On the Nature of Salafi Thought and Action," in *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*, ed. Roel Meijer (London: Hurst, 2009), 33–57.

compete with each other in sub-Saharan Africa. In northern Africa, only Egypt has a sizeable Christian population. But in much of the continent, Muslim and Christian populations live alongside each other. When intercommunal violence does occur, it is often driven by secondary factors such as resource competition or ethnic divides that transcend religious rivalries. Governments are often called upon to arbitrate or intervene in these conflicts, though they are rarely neutral in how they do so.

States also have a long history of trying to co-opt religious symbols, authorities, and institutions.² In precolonial times, religious leaders and political leaders were often intertwined. During the colonial period, traditional sources of power often existed alongside colonial institutions, and in some cases colonial powers sought to strengthen religious movements to counter pro-independence forces. Sufi brotherhoods, which wielded considerable influence in many Muslim societies, were often seen as useful allies by colonial powers. After independence, some regimes used salafists to undermine communist or leftist opposition forces. King Hassan II of Morocco, for example, used apolitical salafists and Islamists as a counterweight to socialist opposition forces in the 1970s and 1980s. There are numerous examples throughout Africa of regimes aligning with religious movements. What they all have in common is the desire to mobilize the credibility of religious movements to further state political objectives.

But the recent political successes of religiously inspired opposition groups have forced regimes to approach religious affairs in new ways. In some cases, governments have been active in religious affairs for decades and have developed multifaceted strategies for influencing mosques, churches, schools, charities, and religious bureaucracies. In others, governments are intervening cautiously and slowly, with less

2. This creates what some scholars have referred to as “state religion” or “official Islam.” See Nathan Brown, “Official Islam in the Arab World: The Contest for Religious Authority,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 11, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/11/official-islam-in-arab-world-contest-for-religious-authority-pub-69929>; Michael Robbins and Lawrence Rubin, “The Ascendance of Official Islams,” *Democracy and Security* 13, no. 4 (2017): 363–391.

developed policies. Much of this recent intervention is shaped by the fight against terrorist groups who claim religious authority. Across the continent, a battle between states and opposition groups over control of religious spaces is intensifying. Mosques and churches have been one arena of contestation, but education systems, civil society, and social media are increasingly important in this conflict.

While some degree of state intervention in religious affairs is unavoidable—and even necessary—it also carries risks. Too little intervention in religious affairs creates a vacuum that can be easily exploited by religious opposition groups, including those with violent tendencies. Mali's lack of regulation, for example, while not the only driver of extremism, gave salafi preachers widespread influence in the country and created an opening for jihadi-salafists to hijack an armed separatist uprising in 2012. Too much state management and regulation, however, risks undermining the credibility of religious actors if they are viewed as messengers of an unjust state or regime. In 2012, Ethiopia's government triggered widespread Muslim protests when it attempted to impose a little-known Islamic doctrine that emphasized obedience to the state. Overly aggressive intervention can also restrict religious freedom and trigger conflict with powerful religious movements.³

Many states are justifying their religious intervention as a means of combating religious groups that use violence, particularly in Muslim communities. Africa has been particularly vulnerable to groups, such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State group (ISG), that claim religious legitimacy to advance their goals. In Tunisia, for example, thousands of young people left the country after 2011 to join al Qaeda and the ISG, and from 2013 to 2016 the country faced a protracted terrorism campaign that threatened to derail its political transition. The terrorist group al-Shabaab has spread outward from its origins in Somalia, training fighters and developing affiliate organizations that have launched attacks in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and, most recently, Mozambique. In Nigeria, a deeply divided country, Boko

3. See Sebastian Elischer, "Governing the Faithful: State Management of Salafi Activity in the Francophone Sahel," *Comparative Politics* 51, no. 2 (January 2019): 199–218.

Haram has seized territory, imposed a narrow interpretation of Islamic law, and terrorized populations in the northeast.

As governments develop policies to address these challenges, many have adopted U.S.-defined countering violent extremism or preventing violent extremism discourse to justify their security-based actions.⁴ This approach favors noncoercive, long-term efforts to undermine violent ideologies and address the underlying causes of violent extremism.

One subset of the CVE/PVE field argues that “moderate” or “tolerant” state-supported religious discourse is critical to undermining violent religious narratives and movements. Promoting state-sanctioned religious discourse includes monitoring and regulating religious spaces including mosques, churches, and schools for extremist discourse; retraining religious leaders and preachers; reforming religious curricula; engaging in social and broadcast media to promote state-approved religious discourse; and developing alternative religious narratives that can compete with violent religious discourse. There is some merit and rationale to this approach. If governments do not seek to regulate religious space and create some legal standards and boundaries to undermine hate speech, then violent extremists could fill the vacuum. Yet, the temptation of regimes to broadly apply this approach to marginalize minority populations or manipulate it for their own political objectives is strong. This has been the case in Kenya, where the government has justified abusive security operations against Muslim communities in the name of fighting terrorism.

The emphasis on CVE/PVE is targeted primarily at Muslim populations, despite the fact that Christian movements have also used violence and spread intolerant ideas about other faiths. Some Christian denominations, such as the diffuse Pentecostal movement, contain churches whose preachers have been accused of spreading

4. “CVE measures also include initiatives for counter-messaging and the use of social media and other communications channels to counter terrorist narratives and promote alternative visions based on respect for human rights and human dignity.” “Countering Violent Extremism,” UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee, <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/focus-areas/countering-violent-extremism/>.

hate speech and driving a wedge between faith communities. This has contributed to a climate of intolerance, anti-Muslim violence, and intercommunal conflict in religiously plural countries such as Nigeria and Kenya. While some governments may view these churches and preachers as problematic, few see them as a security threat requiring greater intervention.

What emerges is a nexus between counterterrorism and religious regulation that is inherently unhelpful. When states look at religious regulation through a countering violent extremism lens, it limits their tools for interacting with religious actors. Although security operations against violent extremists are necessary, in some cases state intervention in religious affairs is used as cover to persecute minority populations, preserve their status as second-class citizens, or sideline legitimate political opposition. That is, governments justify a wide range of abuses in the name of combating terrorism. Marginalized communities that are excluded from elite economic and political opportunities, and thus pose a challenge to regimes, are the most vulnerable. In many cases, state repression further radicalizes marginalized individuals and communities, creating a cycle of ongoing radicalization, anti-state violence, and regime repression.

While states speak of undermining violent religious narratives—a legitimate objective—violent extremists do not generally threaten the foundations of state control. Religious regulation may exclude violent discourse in some quarters, but attempting to silence legitimate opposition under the cover of religious regulation will further marginalize and alienate populations that are susceptible to recruitment by violent extremists.

Though governments have adopted CVE/PVE language and frequently frame their policies either in terms of counterterrorism or countering extremism, this study is not intended to analyze CVE/PVE programs. Nor is it intended to explain the drivers and conditions that foster extremism and political violence in Africa, which have been well explained elsewhere.⁵ Instead, it asks questions about

5. See “Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment” (New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2017), <https://>

states' motives, constraints, and the consequences of their intervention in religious affairs and explores the impact of those policies on the nature of the state, opposition groups, and society and politics more broadly.

In examining state intervention in religious affairs, this study seeks to answer a number of questions that shape the intersection of religion and public life: What are the different objectives states are pursuing in the religious sector? What are the internal and external constraints or influences on each government as it engages in religious spaces and what tools is it using? How do these policies shape governments' interaction with religious movements, political parties, NGOs, and opposition groups? How do these policies affect state-society relations and relations between different faith communities? What is the impact of government policies on religious institutions and religious identity? Untangling these threads and identifying the impacts of state efforts to intervene in religious affairs are critical to understanding the trajectory of politics and security in contemporary Africa.

What makes this challenge more daunting is that Africa is undergoing rapid transformational change. The continent's population is expected to double in the next generation to more than two billion people; internal migration and urbanization are moving populations faster than ever; and young people are demanding more from their governments. Unemployment, youth marginalization, urbanization, and failing services coalesce to create tumultuous sociopolitical environments and disenfranchised youth. Regimes are struggling to meet the demands of populations as debates over political participation and representative government intensify. Religion, either as a source of identity or a political tool wielded by both governments and opposition, is at the center of many of those debates.

As they navigate the religious sphere, governments face several paradoxes. First, by attempting to prevent opposition groups from using religion for political objectives, governments are reinforcing

the importance of religion as a political factor and arena for competition. Many states are attempting to keep religion out of politics while simultaneously politicizing religion. Second, governments seek the legitimacy of traditional religious institutions, but government overreach can delegitimize religious actors who could potentially play an important role in public debates.

The case studies in this volume represent a wide spectrum of regime types and highlight diverse models for state engagement in religious affairs across five countries. They are very different, but all struggle with problems of groups manipulating local grievances to recruit young followers or using religion to justify violence, and the establishment of political opposition groups that are religiously based.

Two North African Maghreb countries in the study, Morocco and Tunisia, share an Arab-Amazigh heritage and are more than 98 percent Muslim.⁶ In the Maghreb, where Arab and Amazigh cultural-ethnic identities have historically divided people, Islam has been both a unifying force and increasingly divisive. This is important because Maghreb societies are diverse and are often divided by socioeconomic class, language, education, and geographic location.

A second group of case studies includes two countries in sub-Saharan Africa that have historically shied away from regulating religious affairs—Kenya with a Christian majority and Burkina Faso with a Muslim majority overshadowed by a Christian elite that dominates the state. A fifth case study, Nigeria, has large, evenly matched Christian and Muslim populations with competing demands that the federal state has struggled to balance.

Unlike Morocco and Tunisia, which are religiously homogeneous, the governments of Nigeria, Kenya, and Burkina Faso operate in a fundamentally different context of societies that are divided between Muslims and Christians. This means the state has the additional responsibility of arbitrating and mediating between religious commu-

6. Both Morocco and Tunisia have small Jewish communities that are remnants of once-thriving populations that dwindled following the creation of Israel in 1948 and independence from French colonial rule in 1956. Jewish communities in both countries are protected minorities and are allowed to practice Judaism freely. "Morocco Population 2019," 2019; "Tunisia Population 2019," June 14, 2019.

nities. What all these case studies have in common is increasing state intervention in religious affairs, partly justified by the growing challenge of salafi opposition and violent jihadi-salafi groups.

Each country is unique and has different tools to pursue their policies. At the same time, a number of overlapping themes emerge to guide the study.

- Religion is a fundamental part of personal, social, and national identity in Africa, which is diverse and continuously evolving. In the Maghreb, it both unifies and divides states and societies like no other source of identity while in sub-Saharan Africa it is interconnected with ethnicity, which is often a primary source of identity. In all cases, religion is more than a set of beliefs and practices; religious debates are at the heart of the identity of states and citizens alike.
- Many of Africa's current debates over religion are unresolved questions from earlier periods. In some cases, where populations are divided between faiths, these divisions reflect historic imbalances where one religious community has been favored over another. Fundamental debates today over religious identity, the role of the state in religious affairs, the status of religious education, and the role of religious scholars and preachers are long-standing debates that continue evolving.
- Both states and opposition groups politicize religion for their own benefit. For governments, using religious symbols, tools, and institutions can potentially provide legitimacy or at least religious cover for their policies. For opposition groups, religion—and the moral authority of religion—is a powerful tool to challenge incumbent powers who are often corrupt and abuse their authority. What is different now is the diversity and breadth of religious movements that operate across religious landscapes that are highly fragmented between different denominations, movements, civil society organizations, and institutions.
- There is an important role for states in managing religious affairs. Yet, there are also consequences and risks of

government intervention. If governments do not operate in religious affairs, opposition groups, including those with violent agendas, will fill the vacuum. Even as some states attempt to control religious discourse and co-opt religious institutions, they risk undermining the legitimacy of those same sacred institutions if they are aligned too closely with a state that is seen as unjust or unresponsive to the needs of its citizens. Finding the right balance of state intervention is critical.

- Partner states are adept at leveraging U.S. assistance and training to further their political objectives of regime survival. U.S. assistance and training can be important to improve state capacity, but it can also be used against legitimate political opposition in the name of fighting terrorism or CVE/PVE. Understanding state motives then is critical to understanding the impact of U.S. support and aid.
- Violence and religiously motivated extremism are real threats. But they are not the primary threats to societies in Africa. The conditions that create violent extremism, including marginalization, unemployment, indignity, and hopelessness, are a far greater threat to states and societies in Africa. As long as those conditions exist, they will motivate people to use violence for political objectives and create recruits for violent movements that claim religious authority.

For U.S. policymakers, analysis of Africa tends to underappreciate the way religious dynamics affect social and political trends. When policymakers do take into account the impact of religion on politics, it is often through a narrow counterterrorism lens that interprets Islam as an outlier for its lack of distinction between the political and religious realms. These assumptions are not only unhelpful, they skew our assessment of social, political, and security dynamics. Ultimately, this study aims to understand the motives behind state intervention in religious affairs in an effort to more accurately assess political contestation and social stability in African states and societies.