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Religious reorientation in Southern Mali – A summary



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Abstract

Following the advances of militant Islamist groups and the French intervention in Northern Mali in 2012, popular discussions about the spread of “Salafist” versions of Islam have flourished in the Malian web-based media. Claims about the increasing popularity of versions of Islam that originate in the Arab Middle East, variably referred to as Wahhabism and Salafism in Mali, tend to conflate Muslim reformist movements with “terrorism”. Some of the Islamist groupings in the north, for instance AQIM (Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) claim adherence to Salafism. However, the popularity of Salafist Islam has also become a subject of popular debate with reference to southern Mali.

As in other countries on the African continent, religion takes up an increasingly large part of public space in Mali. This is seen in the popular appeal of religious associations, the multiplication of religious schools and organisations, an increase in media coverage and the use of media for religious messages, the participation of religious leaders in political debates, and a more active role of women in religious life. However, Islam has become more important in daily life among Muslims in general – and not only in reformist or religiously conservative circles. Based on data from a quantitative survey of perceptions of religion and politics carried out in Southern Mali in 2014, and data from interviews and conversations during a qualitative fieldwork, this report discusses some of the ways in which the religious scene has changed in recent years. We address what the changes entail in terms of the practice of state secularism, conditions of religious pluralism and women’s participation, and some implications for the engagement with Malian authorities and civil society. A main point is that the religious revival seen in Mali cannot be interpreted as a one-way process of “radicalisation” or adoption of extremist views.

Foreword

This report is the result of research commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The project has been a collaboration between The Fafo Research Foundation and the Malian research institution GREAT (“Groupe de Recherche en Économie Appliquée et Théorique”). The findings build on empirical material produced during fieldwork carried out in Mali in May and June 2014, using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. GREAT Mali, led by Massa Coulibaly and Moussa Coulobaly, were responsible for carrying out the quantitative survey. They collaborated closely with researchers in Fafo, and especially with Anne Hatløy and Jing Liu. The qualitative fieldwork was carried out by Tone Sommerfelt and Kristin Jesnes from Fafo.

The authors would like to thank the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their funding of this study, which otherwise would not have been made possible. We are grateful to the staff and

the numerous fieldworkers of GREAT in Mali, for all their input during the project. We would also like to thank all those Malians who agreed to participate in interviews and discussions with Tone Sommerfelt and Kristin Jesnes during our fieldwork in Mopti, Segou, Bamako, Koutiala and Sikasso. The different regional councils of the HCIM (High Islamic Council of Mali) deserve particular words of thanks for participation and facilitation in the field. Finally, we are indebted to Mr. Mamadou Konaté for his participation during the qualitative fieldwork and to Jon Pedersen and Mark Taylor for input during the various stages of the research process.

Needless to say, our words of thanks do not reduce the authors’ responsibility for arguments and analysis in this text.

Oslo, October 2015

Tone Sommerfelt, Anne Hatløy and
Kristin Jesnes

Introduction

The characterisation of Mali as a country that is experiencing a popular shift towards Wahhabist versions of Islam forms part of a broader descriptive tendency of and in West Africa and across the Sahel. In Mali, the political relevance of Wahhabism and Wahhabists is perhaps one of the hottest topics in online newspapers.¹ In meeting places in local neighbourhoods, people listen to radio broadcasts from religious leaders and politicians that debate the health of particular religious communities – Wahhabist communities in particular – and they discuss the role of Islam, religious institutions and organisations in national politics. Many people in Bamako worry about the growth in the number of Wahhabist mosques, the relevance of Wahhabism in political circles, in spite of Wahhabist minority status, and the economic backing from alliances with wealthy Arab countries – Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf states.

This characterisation is not new, however. The distinction between Wahhabism (or “Salafism”), and Sufi Islam, allegedly reflecting a distinction between a “newly imported” version of Islam and traditional African practices of Islam, reflects French colonial attempts to distinguish between “benign” Sufi practices and “bad” Salafi / Wahhabi practices (see Soares 2013). Descriptions of the increasing popularity of Wahhabist Islam in Bamako, and its spread from the merchant class to broader layers of the population, urban youngsters in particular, were published in the mid-1980s (see, e.g. Amselle 1985). Against this background, this report describes some of the changes in the religious scene in Southern Mali during the past years, asking what the implications are of religious revival on the future of the Malian secular state and religious freedom, and with respect to gender issues and women’s participation.

¹ In Mali, the term *Wahhabiyya* is used to designate a wide category of Muslim reformists. The term derives from the movement founded by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in Saudi Arabia the late eighteenth century. Soares points out that many Malians use this term broadly, also to designate people who do not necessarily follow the teachings of al-Wahhab (2005b: xii, 181).

Methodology

This analysis is based on fieldwork carried out in May and June 2014. One of the main sources of data is a perception survey, involving a representative sample of households in urban and rural areas of all the regions in Southern Mali (Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Segou, Mopti and Bamako), six of the nine regions of the country, thus excluding the three regions of the north. A total of 1,210 adults (18 years or older) responded to the questionnaire, of which 56 per cent were women. To do this, as many households were selected, and the total number of household members was 15,363. Fifty-one per cent of the household members were women and 56 per cent of them lived in rural areas. In each household, the household head, or other person who was available, was asked to respond to information concerning all the household members. This was information about gender, age, education and main activity (see details in Hatløy et al. 2015). Based on this list of household members, one of the adults was selected randomly and asked additional questions. The questionnaire used was a modified version of the questionnaire used as a background-survey for the World Development Report 2011. While the 2011 questionnaire focused on the perceptions of conflict, security and development, the 2014 questionnaire had a larger emphasis on religious life. The results from the survey are presented in full in a tabulation report (Hatløy et al. 2015).

The second component of the research is qualitative data from fieldwork that was carried out in Bamako, Mopti, Segou, Koutiala and Sikasso. Thirty interviews and ten focus group discussions (of four to twenty participants each) were organised. The respondents included religious leaders and teachers, political leaders, community workers, government representatives and laymen of both genders. The group settings included discussions with the regional and local branches of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), and with groups of women taking part in religious education organised in local communities through HCIM. Among the main

topics during interviews and discussion were the notion of state secularism (“laïcité”), the religious leaders’ involvement in political debates over family law and the conflict in the north, views on the different religious groupings in southern Mali today, and recent changes in religious life, especially with respect to gender and effects of the advances of Islamists in the north.

Religious revival: A changing scene in Southern Mali

During the two past decades, religion has come to occupy an increasingly large part of Malian public space (see for instance Schulz 2003, 2011; Soares 2005a, 2005b) The new visibility of religion in public space takes the form of the multiplication of religious schools, associations and new mosques, the broadcasting of religious and political speeches by popular Muslim leaders on private radio stations, and moreover, the active participation of Muslim religious leaders in political debates. Women’s participation in religious life is also changing, and is visible in Malian women’s changing attire. Many Muslim women are replacing traditional headscarves with the *hijab*. The *niqab* is also more frequent than it used to be. Presently, debates about “correct” Muslim practices, and what should be considered as such, are common.

The formation of diverse Muslim communities in Mali was facilitated by the introduction of freedom of association in the 1990s (Thurston 2013). New media politics have also contributed to transforming the way in which issues of religious identity and organisation are articulated and developed (cf. Soares 2005a). Liberalisation efforts by development agencies in recent years have encouraged the strengthening of civil society, including religious associations (cf. Thurston 2013). Also, increased missionary activity from the 1980s onwards, financed by Saudi Arabia, has contributed to a momentum in Malian urban milieus of Muslim renewal movements

that encourage moral transformation through personal piety (Schulz 2011).

In Bamako, it is a commonly held view that the new significance of Islam in public space is an expression of a general rise in the number of Wahhabist adherents and that this leads to “African Islam” gradually changing into a religious practice imported from Arab-speaking cultures in the Middle East. A rise in the number of Wahhabist mosques in Bamako is obvious, many of them led by imams who have returned to Mali following religious education in Egypt.

However, the number of adherents does not seem to match an impression of a widespread recruitment into Wahhabist congregations in Southern Mali: according to our survey, about four per cent of the population claim such an affiliation. Moreover, new religious influences never lead to a predictable, one-way process of change. Islam has become more important in the everyday lives of Muslims in general, and not only among people who seek to change Islam towards presumed scripturally correct practices.

Nearly all Malians consider themselves Muslims (92 per cent in southern Mali, according to our figures). In contrast to neighbouring Senegal, where different Sufi brotherhoods have shaped economic and political development both during colonialism and in the post-colonial era, most Malians have not adhered to any particular Muslim order (cf. Soares 2004). Earlier, affiliations to Sufi orders were also not mutually exclusive, and people could belong to several orders simultaneously (cf. Soares 2005b: 38). Still, many Malians go to pray without considerations of mosque leadership. Moreover, in spite of the appearance of new religious organisations in Mali, most Malians do not relate to distinctions of religious brotherhood or order: In our survey, three out of five Muslims identified themselves as “Muslim only”. This makes up approximately 62 per cent of the population (*Figure 1*). This may to some extent reflect respondents’ need to express support for the overarching community of Muslims (*Ummah* in Arabic), but at the same time, conveys that affiliation to a Muslim order does not constitute an essential aspect of personal identity for all Muslims in southern Mali.

Sufism, Wahhabism, and religious affiliations

The general distribution of religious affiliations is presented in *Figure 1*. Overall, a total of 92 per cent of our respondents said they are Muslims, three per cent said they do not adhere to any religion, three per cent are Christian, one per cent said they are animist, i.e. adhering to so-called “traditional beliefs” in spiritual beings that dwell in the landscape, and finally one per cent state that they belong to “other” religions (neither Christian nor Muslim).

Benjamin Soares describes Sufism as “the mystical tradition in Islam” that “involves ... special litanies of prayer and techniques of invoking or reciting God’s name ... to approach God” (2005b: 37). Knowledge about the power of words in worship is considered a particular talent. Secrecy is fundamental to reaching higher spiritual states within the orders. Some exceptional religious specialists/leaders (*shayks*, *cheikhs*, *marabouts*) are recognised as Saints, and pilgrimage to the tombs of Sufi Saints has become a hallmark of the practice of Islam in West Africa. Many Sufi traditions, which French colonial administrators referred to as “Islam noir” (or “African Islam” as opposed to “Arab Islam” in British), have been appropriated as a symbol of Malian national culture.

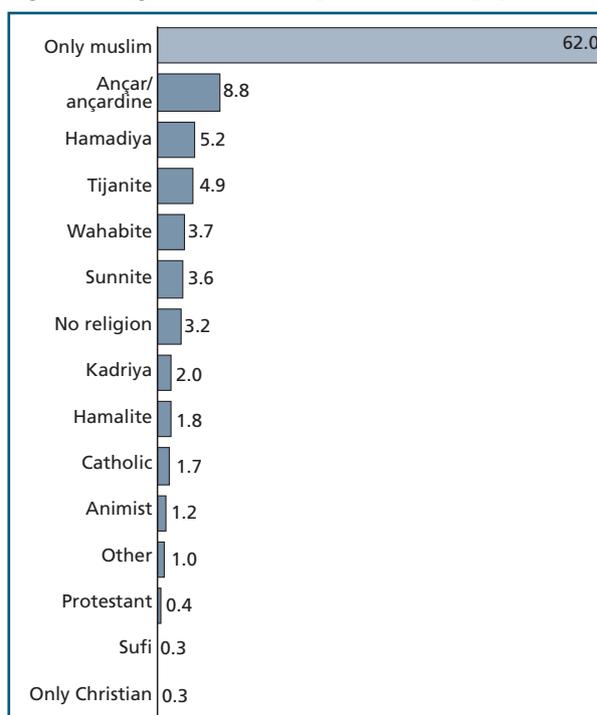
It is unclear when Sufi practices were first taken up in West Africa, but organised Sufi orders gained importance in the beginning of the eighteenth century (Soares 2005b: 37). Religious specialists who worked up a reputation for their skills often started their own brotherhoods, and the number of brotherhoods multiplied and spread (cf. Le Vine 2004: 183). The gradual conversion of the majority of the Malian population to Islam in the twentieth century coincided with this process of diffusion of Sufi orders.

At present, one of the most popular Sufi communities in southern Mali is Ançar Dine.²

² The Ançar Dine led by Madani Haidara is not to be confused with Ansar Din, or Ansar al Din, a militant group in the north led by Iyad Ag Ghali.

Founded as late as in 1991, Ançar Dine draws followers from many of the other, and older, Sufi orders. Its leader, Cherif Madani Haidara, attracts thousands of Malians to public stadium events, and his media activity and charisma have made him immensely popular. An explicit non-Wahhabist movement, the Ançar Dine promotes “African reform” and Muslim practice based on Malian cultural traditions. Haidara is an outspoken critic of corruption and moral degeneration (see Holder 2012; Peterson 2012).

Figure 1 Religions affiliation in per cent of total population



The Tijaniyya (Tijani, Tidjani) is an older Sufi brotherhood in Southern Mali which originally came from North Africa. Approximately five per cent claim to belong to this brotherhood. The Hamalite (Hamawiyya), a sub-group of the Tijaniyya centered in Nioro, makes up about two per cent. Hamalites follow the spiritual guidance of Cheikh Hamallah, a Malian born from a Mauritanian father and a Fulbe (Peul) mother. The Kadriya (Qadiriyya) is the oldest Sufi brotherhood in West Africa, and currently holds a following that is at the same level as the Hamalite. The “Soufi” is the only brotherhood that actively uses the Sufi term (and many Malians associate the term “Sufi” with this group only). It

forms a small minority, and is often portrayed as an example of “new sufism” which attracts young urbanites who stereotypically grow dreadlocks. The leader, Cheikh Soufi Bilal, is a keen writer of pamphlets and is active in web-based media (cf. Soares 2007: 81ff.). The Mouride (Mouridiyya) brotherhood, which is an offshoot of the Kadriya, is too small in Mali to show up as a separate category in our figures, but is one of the largest groups in neighbouring Senegal.

In Bamako, the number of mosques labelled Wahhabist rose following the return in 1945 of the first students with diplomas from the University of Al-Azhar in Cairo (Amselle 1985: 346). The term Wahhabiyya generally refers to the doctrine that has been adopted by the house of Saud, the monarchy of Saudi Arabia, and is based on the teachings of Muhammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Wahhabism can be seen as a reformist movement aiming for a return to a “pure” form of Islam. The Wahhabi mission (*ad-Da’wa al-Wahhābiya* in Arabic) encourages religious revival through a return to the ways of the Prophet and personal moral renewal via religious learning. In theological terms, Wahhabism challenges the worship of Muslim tombs and saints as well as the way that life cycle ceremonies have been celebrated – traditions that have long been common to Malian religious practice. In urban Bamako, many Wahhabist religious leaders criticise what they see as the disintegration of moral values, and encourage a turn to religious virtues of restraint. Some are explicitly non-political, whereas others argue for bringing Muslim values into politics, a position for which the leader of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), Mahmoud Dicko, is known.

As noted, our survey shows that less than four per cent of the population in Southern Mali claim adherence to Wahhabism. An almost equal percentage of respondents describe themselves as “Sunni”. This self-ascription is difficult to interpret: it may include people who do not want to stress any particular Muslim affiliation, but is occasionally also employed by persons who want to emphasise that they follow the exemplary traditions and sayings of the Prophet, i.e. the *hadiths* that make up the *sunna*. Such an emphasis

on living a “purer” form of religious practice is expressed by Wahhabiya as well as adherents of the Dawa Tablighi congregation (see below). However, statements about “following the Sunna” are also common in the Sufi brotherhoods, e.g. Tijani and Hamalite (cf. Soares 2005b: 182). Moreover, self-ascriptions as “Sunni” in a survey-interview context cannot be referred to more specific Muslim affiliations.

Wahhabism is often described as a form of Salafism. Preachers of Salafism argue for abandoning of non-Muslim practices (cf. Meijer 2009; Haykel 2009). In Mali, however, the term “Salafism” is taken to mean more than an orthodox and strict form of Islam. Most often, it is equated with the term “extremist” and “terrorist”, and the terms “Salafist”, “Wahhabist” and “terrorist” tend to conflate.

The Dawa Tablighi (*Tablighi Jama’at*, “organisation for proselytisation” in Urdu) is a group which is regularly ascribed a Wahhabi label in Mali, in spite of the fact that they cannot be described by such a theological label (cf. Janson 2014, on the movement in The Gambia). The movement originated in India, and has been present in Bamako since the 1980s. The Dawa Tablighi are not numerous enough to appear in our *Figure 1*, but they are important for an understanding of religious revival in Mali, as their “call to Islam” (*da’wa* in Arabic) entails missionary activity for moral and personal renewal in religious terms, similar to the revival movement of Wahhabism. Thus, in spite of theological differences (related to emphases of founding fathers), both Dawa Tablighi and Wahhabiyya differ from mainstream Sufi Muslims in Mali in their encouragement of a turn to a “purer” form of religious practice, in contrast to religious practice inspired by African traditions. Many Dawa Tablighi and Wahhabiyya women veil in full and wear niqab/burqa, and many male adherents grow beards. These characteristics are associated with terrorists in the north and they are a source of fear among many mainstream Muslims in the south of Mali.

As elsewhere, the Hamadiya (Ahmadiyya) are described as a category “apart” from “ordinary” Muslims in Mali, and many do not recognise

Hamadiya as a part of Islam. They make up about five percent of the population. In addition, Shia (Chiite) Muslims make up a small minority.

In some respects, distinctions between religious affiliations reflect diverging cultural orientations of long standing in Mali, that appeal to different layers of the population. On the one hand, a Wahhabi elite in Bamako is educated in Arabic-speaking countries and is perceived to have strong business relations with and receive funding from Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf States. On the other hand, the French-speaking urban elite is educated in a French schooling system, and they tend to be more oriented towards European educational and cultural ideals (see, e.g. Schulz 2003). They claim to practice an open form of “African Islam” and are among the most vocal Wahhabiya-sceptics. Many of the latter perceive Wahhabists as dominating religious life and political discourse, and point to the fact that Wahhabists occupy many of the seats in the HCIM in spite of making up a religious minority.

At the same time, the distinction between Sufism and Wahhabism is oversimplified and exaggerated. Many Muslims seek the religious advice of leaders without paying attention to their affiliation (cf. Bell 2013). With respect to religious practice, many of the self-proclaimed Wahhabis in our sample wore religious amulets and sought the assistance of traditional healers, which undermines any categorical distinctions between Wahhabi and non-Wahhabi. Importantly, calls for a moral rearmament of Malian society, respect for the authority of elders, concentration on hard work and education, and criticism of corruption, derives from leaders across the Muslim religious board. Many adults, across religious and political orientations, emphasise that a range of social problems, including corruption, lack of economic development, crime and participation of youth in jihadist groups in the north can be attributed to moral degradation, and that a return to core Muslim values is a solution for this social ill. Lately, religious leaders like Madani Haidara and Mahmoud Dicko have established platforms across the “divide” in a joint effort to fight federalism, i.e. self-determination in the north.

Religious leaders: political messaging and popular confidence

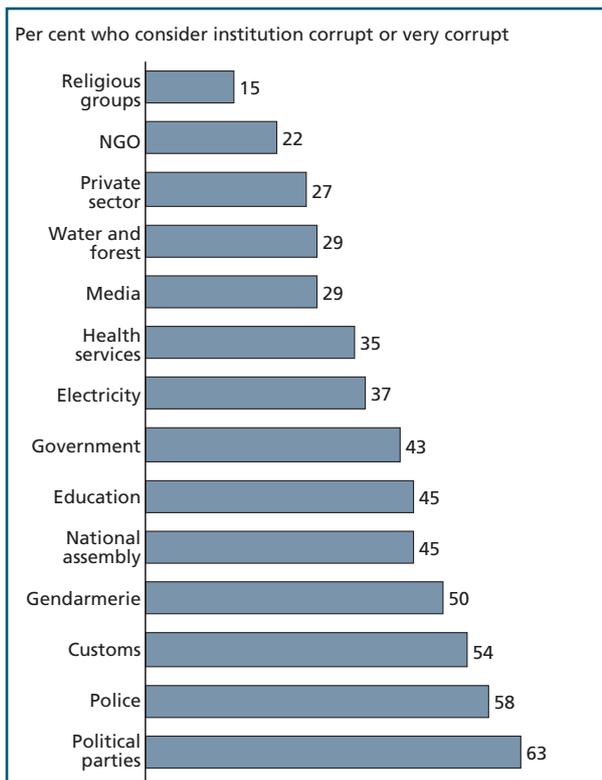
With the increase in the number of religious organisations, prominent Muslim leaders have developed explicit political agendas. This applies to leaders across the (blurred) distinction of Wahhabi and Sufi: both Dicko, leader of the High Islamic Council (HCIM) and a Wahhabi, and the Ançar Dine leader Madani Haidara (vice president of the HCIM), even though the latter is a more explicit defender of the principle of state secularism (*laïcité*) in Mali. The High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) is a religious association established in 2000, intended to serve as an intermediary between different Muslim communities and the state.

In 2009, the public debate concerning the Family Code (*Code de la Famille*), which regulates marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other matters pertaining to the family, reinforced discussions about how “*laïcité*” was applied in Mali. In de facto legal practice, Arabic jurisprudence of the Maliki school as well as locally specific custom has been applied in Mali since independence, along with the French inherited legal system (cf. Soares 2005a: 83). The attempt to revise the law gained momentum following the UN Women Fourth World Conference in Beijing in 1995. The Family Code had thus been a topic for discussion for more than a decade before a revised version of the law was passed in the National Assembly in 2009. The revised law raised the legal age of marriage, recognised only civil marriages, and provided greater inheritance rights to women (Leininger 2010). The international donor community and Malian politicians promoting a global human rights discourse had striven to harmonise the law in the direction of the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for action on women’s equality. The revised version was therefore seen by many as a sign of Euro-American influence in Malian cultural affairs and politics. Religious leaders, as well as many laymen, described the revision of the Family Code as an attack by the state on traditional authority structures in Malian

families, on religious practice, and on the moral considerations of the large majority of the population.

The opposition came from far wider circles than the most conservative religious schools. One of the respondents we interviewed held that the revised law created a “shock of the majority”. Through the HCIM, religious leaders mobilised masses of people in Bamako to protest against the revised version. As a result of the massive opposition, the Family Code was eventually withdrawn. Subsequently, in 2011, a new version, modified to take into account the concerns of Muslim leaders, was passed in parliament (Thurston 2013: 52).

Figure 2 Considerations of corruption

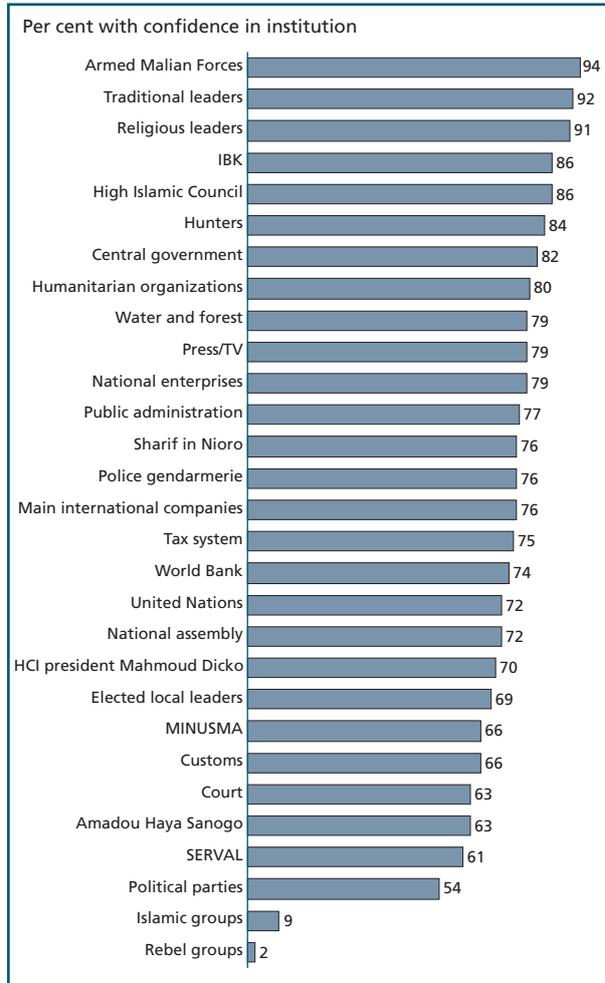


In contrast to politicians, Muslim religious leaders have, in recent times, demonstrated great capacity to mobilise large groups of people around political issues, both through the HCIM and individually. There are two reasons for this; the leaders’ active use of media in distributing their ideas, and the relatively low trust in the government and politicians (cf. Sommerfelt & Jesnes 2015a). When asked in our survey about corruption, the lack of faith in political parties is

striking, whereas religious groups are seen as the least corrupt (Figure 2).

Similarly, when we asked respondents about their confidence in different social institutions, religious leaders score high (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Confidence in public figures and institutions



Changes in the public expression of religion in southern Mali reflect a general tendency in the region towards religious revival, which cannot be seen as mere reflections of developments in the north, nor of “foreign” Salafist missionary activity alone (cf. Sommerfelt & Jesnes 2015a). Religious revival runs across the African continent, and in other African countries, it encompasses a growth in Christian charismatic milieus (e.g. Pentecostalism).

Debates on state secularism (*laïcité*)

The increasing participation of religious leaders in the political scene implies that the principle of state secularism is reshaped (cf. Sommerfelt & Jesnes 2015a). The way that the secularity principle has been understood in Mali following independence is a direct reflection of the French conceptualisation of “*laïcité*”, which entails the formal separation of state and religious institutions, the absence of religious engagement in government affairs and the absence of government involvement in religious affairs. The more particular fashioning of this principle in Mali can be considered a colonial legacy, though the idea of the separation of the state and religion “in Muslim societies is not a twentieth century innovation in this region” (Brenner 2001: 2). The French conceptualisation is based on a strict separation between the private and public spheres, leaving religious instruction out of public schools, banning political parties with a religious value base, and prohibiting government economic support to private religious schools and organisations.

The renegotiation of state secularism entails, firstly, a renegotiation of the principle of religiously “neutral” governance. Many Malian Muslims in the urban elite emphasise that Islam is a democratic religion (see e.g. Gakou 2013) and retain the right to express political arguments based on Muslim values. Given the variety of Muslim identities in Mali, “Muslim values” are diverse and contested. Thus, many of the defenders of the right to express political views with reference to Muslim values stress the equal right of all citizens to participate in political debate and to hold office. In effect, this renegotiation of religiously “neutral” governance entails an increased emphasis on freedom to practice religion, rather than an insistence upon the “absence” of religious affairs in governance. This reassertion of religious freedom and pluralism is simultaneously a defence against “federalism” and an increased autonomy of the

northern areas, and thus, the protection of the territorial integrity of Malian nationhood.

Secondly, renegotiation of “*laïcité*” also takes the form of increased government involvement in and control over religious affairs. In an effort to distance Mali from extremist Islam, and in response to the advances of extremist Salafist groups in northern Mali, the state is seeking to control religious groupings. In 2012, a Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship was established. The minister, Thierno Amadou Omar Hass Diallo, to whom we spoke in June 2014, emphasised that the mandate of the ministry is to regulate religious matters. This process of regulation includes control of preachers through the development of guidelines for the contents of prayers and sermons presented in mosques and broadcast on Malian radio stations. It also includes the active shaping of the education of imams and overseeing the educational content in the many Quranic schools in the country. The regulation of religious matters by the Ministry is partly done in close cooperation with the national body of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) (see Sommerfelt & Jesnes 2015b).

In late 2013, Mali signed a religious affairs accord with Morocco for the training in that country of 500 Malian imams selected by the Malian government (see Waterman 2013). According to Minister Diallo, this programme is intended to work against extremist viewpoints. Moreover, the initiative should be regarded as a way to strengthen the influence of Sufist Islam, and the agreement represents a more general orientation towards Morocco by the Malian government. In Morocco, Islam is the state religion, and the state exercises heavy control over religious affairs, requiring ministry certification of all imams, regulating mosque hours, and seeking to screen sermons and exclude extremist messaging from them (Sakthivel 2014). The accord with the Moroccan government also encompasses a partnership between the ministries of religious affairs of the two countries in order to “cooperate on Malikite jurisprudence and interpretation in order to promote moderation and fight hard-line ideologies” (Sakthivel 2014). Alaoui (2015) comments that Morocco appears to be attempting

to establish itself as “the African Muslim hub” for a “tolerance-based religious model”.

Another initiative to control religious matters can be seen in the debate over the possibility of incorporating parts of the current Quranic education into the formal school system (see Sommerfelt & Jesnes 2015b). This sector is growing as a result of the return of many religious leaders from religious education in Arabic-speaking countries. With limited opportunities for employment in the French-speaking school system and unable to further their studies in Malian universities, many establish their own small religious schools or offer their services to already established Quranic schools (Soares 2005a: 85). This debate mirrors longstanding interests by the state in controlling informal religious schools in Mali (cf. Brenner 2001: 209ff.). It goes beyond the current mandate of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship of overseeing educational contents, and potentially entails an attempt to eradicate the informal schooling sector.

Many parents send their children to *madrasas* in order to provide them with religious training, which is not offered in the formal education system at present, given the Malian formulation of state secularism (*laïcité*). According to our figures, as many as 29 per cent of the population see *madrasas* as an alternative to other schooling options (Coulibaly & Hatløy 2015). The HCIM is in favour of incorporating religious education into the formal school system, as is Sabati 2012, a political movement rooted in the HCIM and established with the aim of increasing political consciousness among Muslims in Mali (see Sommerfelt & Jesnes 2015a). HCIM and Sabati 2012 thus support the incorporation of religious schools into the formal school system as a way to strengthen religious education rather than strengthening *control* of religious education. In any case, the incorporation of *madrasas* into the formal school system would entail breaking with one of the principles of the version of state secularity practised in Mali since decolonisation. Moreover, the increased state participation in the religious domain further accentuates the visibility of religious issues in public debate.

The fear of Wahhabism

It should be emphasised that religious influences in public debate derive as much from populist, “anti-Wahhabist” movements as from Wahhabi or Salafist missionary activities. The advances of Islamist extremists in the north have led to an increase in the fear of Wahhabist adherents that are portrayed as Salafi jihadists in a relatively aggressive anti-Wahhabist public rhetoric. This may have an impact on reconciliation processes in southern Mali, as some of the most engaged anti-Wahhabist voices derive from milieus claiming to promote inter-religious dialogue, and seek the economic support of European governments.

In March 2015, five people were killed by the jihadist group Al-Marabitoun in an attack on a restaurant in Bamako. This shows that the threat of jihadist attacks in the south is continuing. However, in Bamako, the widespread fear of “Salafists” is directed towards non-violent religious minorities, and not only towards terrorist groups. Many self-proclaimed tolerant Muslim leaders in Bamako cultivate a fear of Wahhabists in general, even of women and children and of those Wahhabists who are explicit about their non-political agenda and who actively take a stand against militants in the north. We spoke with religious leaders in elite circles in Bamako in June 2014, who held that Wahhabists are “Satanists” or “jihadists”, and that “They [the Wahhabists] try to take over our country”. Similar views were expressed in statements such as: “We must get them”, “We are ready to go to war against them”, “They have arms; we must arm ourselves”. Some informants stated that “Their skin will not be damaged if you try to hit them”, suggesting that Wahhabists are beyond the realm of the human. The latter expressions resemble hate speech, and similar messages are regularly expressed in Malian radio stations. These religious leaders use the examples of Boko Haram, AQIM and MUJAO to underline the danger of Wahhabists in general.

Paradoxically, many of the religious leaders who are the most active in accusing *all* Wahhabists of being terrorists at heart, and who whip up public fear of Muslim “foreign” denomination, describe themselves as defenders

of “interreligious communication”. In alleged pursuit of preserving Mali as religiously moderate, they solicit economic support from European NGOs and state agencies – but the milieus they invite to the table of inter-religious dialogue are Christians, a tiny minority in Mali, and not Muslim urban minorities.

Labels of terrorism also tend to be ascribed indiscriminately to other Muslim minorities represented among the religious plethora in Bamako, notably to adherents of the Dawa Tablighi congregation. In September 2012, Malian troops killed 16 civilian Dawa preachers in the village of Diabaly. The first reports said that the troops had assumed that the preachers were associated with the al-Qaeda linked Ansar Dine faction (not to be confused with the Ançar Dine movement of Madani Haidara, described above), as many of the preachers had long beards. Since 2013, the Dawa Tablighi Markaz mosque in Bamako has seen public demonstrations, demonstrators claiming that the mosque harbours terrorists (which led to arrests by police, for instance, in January 2013). Moreover, rumours of Wahhabist and Dawa mosques harbouring northern terrorists abound.

Distrust and intensified social exclusion of religious minorities on the basis of unfounded rumours and suspicions of armed extremism will only aggravate worries about insecurity among mainstream Malians and runs the risk of driving further polarisation. Stigmatisation of religious minorities through ascriptions of terrorist labels is another aspect of the changes of the religious scene, and represents a threat to religious freedom in contemporary Mali.

Women’s increased participation in religious milieus

Another mark of processes of religious revival in Mali is the appeal to women. As in other parts of the Muslim world, the “call to Islam” (*da’wa*) in Islamic renewal movements in Mali encourages women’s religious learning. Until the 1980s, women were largely excluded from the more scholarly religious domain (Schulz 2011: 98). Many women embark on a process of moral renewal and education through participation in neighbourhood groups for Quranic studies and joint prayer activities (cf. Schulz 2011, 2012; and for Niger, see Masquelier 2009). As part of a process of religious renewal, women emphasise social and moral values of endurance, patience and sincerity in daily work and life, and assert that married women’s place is in the home (cf. Schulz 2011). At the same time, this has encouraged women’s participation in religious organisations outside of the domestic sphere, not only in religious learning groups but also in other civil society organisations and at the different levels of the HCIM. It has also introduced women as religious teachers and missionaries, and as preachers in public media. What is more, both women and men reinterpret and renegotiate the confines of “the domestic” in the Malian context, emphasising that proper moral conduct is not “sitting down doing nothing” and that securing a livelihood for the family requires women’s engagement outside of the home. Many of our informants, including an imam who identified himself as a Wahhabi adherent, stated that women’s confinement to the home does not fit West African economic realities.

The more active participation of women in religious life has had an impact beyond the “purist” religious movements. Women of all Muslim affiliations participate more actively in religious life as compared to previously, through prayer in mosques, reading circles of the Quran, Quranic schools, teaching other women about Islam, and in Muslim celebrations that are associated with the Sufi brotherhoods. Veiling is

not necessarily a sign of affiliation to Wahhabism, but gains popularity among women who portray themselves as “only Muslim”.

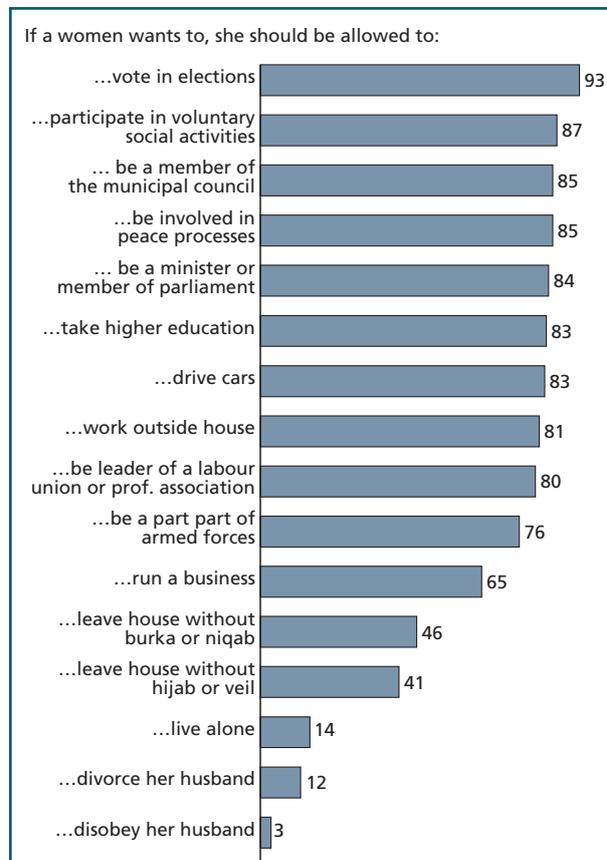
Our survey data echo the distinction of gender roles in public and domestic domains respectively: In the public sphere, gender roles are defined as more “equal” than in the domestic realm. In general terms, Malians do not oppose women’s participation in the public domain, and the support for women holding public office is strong (Figure 4).

With respect to the private sphere, however, male–female relationships are characterised by *difference*. For instance, when asked questions about gender roles in marriage, answers reflect wives’ formal subordination in relation to their husbands. Difference in the home sphere is also related to the division of labour in West Africa more broadly, both in agricultural and domestic work. Women’s and men’s separate tasks in the private sphere are accompanied by a distinct notion of men’s and women’s complementary duties: Under Islam, men are responsible for “feeding” and economically supporting their wives, and not vice versa.³

Many foreign observers and representatives of western aid agencies consider the popularity of Muslim missionary activity among women as a sign of a reversal of developmental achievements for women. They argue that women’s freedoms are curtailed by the relegation to the home, and that new views on proper female behaviour are far more restrictive than gender roles in Mali traditionally have been. At the same time, many Malian women represent their increased participation in religious life as an element of their own empowerment – and as an extension of women’s engagement to a new sphere. In their opinion, their increased participation in religious education, leadership and networks are signs of inclusion in the Muslim community, formerly a male domain. Moreover, processes of women’s religious engagement remain paradoxical,

and effects of women’s religious renewal on participation in *different arenas* are not univocal.

Figure 4 Female participation in different parts of the society



³This gives rise to particular and varied Islamic feminist movements, but it is outside of the scope of this summary to discuss the topic here. For an assessment of Tunisia in this respect, see Honwana 2013: 167ff.

Implications

Muslim organisations and leaders will continue to influence political processes and debates in Mali. Leininger points out that, “In a democracy, all social forces must be warranted the right to formally participate in the political process and articulate, accumulate, and represent their concerns as long as they respect democratic rule” (2010: 3). As the ban on religious parties remains, religious actors are left to exert their influence through alternative channels. This raises particular demands for transparency, from both Malian politicians and civil society actors.

At the same time, the significance of religious interests and concerns in Mali should be taken into consideration in future engagements in Mali, both with respect to development efforts and political dialogue. Involvement with Malian civil society and authorities should in particular bear the following in mind:

- Debates over relationships between the Malian state and religious organisations, and over initiatives to tighten state control over the religious sphere, must be understood within a broader regional context of religious reorientation, and not only in light of religious extremism.
- Religious reorientation and revival should not be interpreted as a one-way process either of increased conservatism or radicalism. Policy dialogues should include Muslim associations and reassess their potential as contributors in development and various reconciliation efforts – as they have with respect to Christian organisations in Malian civil society.
- Demonisation of religious movements threatens religious freedom in Mali. Donors must pay attention to the security discourse that portrays violent extremists of the north as equivalent to non-violent Wahhabis in the south. Moreover, dialogue with civil society must encompass a broader spectrum of Muslim religious organisations and leadership.
- Support for the Malian government in controlling extremist elements must be sensitive to the tendency to project extremist labels onto non-violent Wahhabi Muslims and other Muslim minorities.
- The entrance of women into religious life provides new entry points for engagements with civil society. Development efforts should enter into dialogue with religious organisations with the aim of reaching potentially new groups of women and youngsters, e.g. for the purpose of education.
- The religious educational system will become a point of contention and needs scrutiny. The debate on the incorporation of informal religious schools in the formal schooling sector must be based on a better knowledge of the current curriculums in the *madrasas* and of differences in educational quality.

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Religious reorientation in Southern Mali

– A summary

While the increasing significance of radical Salafist Islam in the North of Mali is well known, religious reorientation in the South has received much less public attention. In a series of reports, we focus on changes in views on politics, religion and social conditions among Muslims in Southern Mali. The studies are based on data collected in Mali in June 2014, both during in-depth interviews with religious and political leaders, and in a perception survey among 1210 adults in Southern Mali. The study was funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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