

STATE MANAGEMENT OF THE ISLAMIC SPHERE IN KENYA AND UGANDA

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During the summer of 2016 I conducted two lengthy periods of field research in Kenya and Uganda. The research goal was to analyze how these two East African states interact with their Muslim populations. In both countries Islam is the minority religion. I was particularly interested in how various post-independent governments have engaged with the Salafi and other fundamentalist Muslim communities between independence and today. UF financed my research through the Humanities Scholarship Enhancement Grant. The two research stays were part of a larger comparative project on the relationship between weak states and Islam in Francophone and Anglophone Africa. During my stays in Kenya and Uganda I conducted archival research and semi-structured interviews with high-ranking state administrators, political party officials, local academics and Muslim clerics from different theological backgrounds. In both countries fundamentalist Muslim groups have resorted to violence against the state and fellow Muslims. However, the manner in which the two states have engaged with their respective Islamic spheres differs significantly.

In Kenya the state historically has been a major source of radicalization and politicization of Islam. All post-independent governments failed to establish a meaningful institutional exchange mechanisms with the Muslim community. While some Muslim administrators enjoyed half-hearted state recognition as the official representatives of Islam, large sections of the Muslim community were never consulted on important social and economic matters. The failure of the Kenyan state to engage with the Muslim community in an all-inclusive manner led to the emergence of political Islam. The absence of state involvement in the religious sphere facilitated the rise of external and radicalized Muslim clerics. The state reacted to the emergence of political

Islam with indiscriminate violence and the political marginalization of Muslims. This in turn provoked further radicalization. The Salafi community is particularly affected by these developments. On the one hand the current Kenyan government labels the community as a whole as security challenge. On the other hand peaceful Salafi clerics have become the main victims of radicalized members of their own community.

In Uganda the state has sought closer relations with the Muslim community. Although the involvement of the state in religious affairs was largely driven by the state's desire to exercise societal control, various governments regularly consulted with all representatives the Muslim community. The Ugandan state distinguished between the Muslim community as a whole and a small radicalized minority, which emerged in the early 1990s. The first response of the Ugandan state to radicalization was a nationwide amnesty program in which radicalized ("jihadi") elements could participate. The state only applied violence to those elements, which refused to participate in the amnesty program and which previously had applied violence



against the state. Interestingly the differences approaches that the Kenyan and the Uganda states pursue vis-à-vis their Islamic sphere can both be found across the Muslim-dominated Sahel. This indicates that states engage with the Islamic sphere independently of whether Islam is the minority or the majority religion.

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