

INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS AND STATE MANAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY IN THE SAHEL

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More often than not African states are described as too weak to influence the daily affairs of their citizens. However, in recent years a variety of political scientists has successfully shown that weak statehood does not stand in the way of providing specific state functions. My project builds on these recent findings. It examines how particularly weak African states try to influence the religious practices of their citizens. The project traces the emergence and path-dependence of institutions that regulate access to Friday prayer mosques in Mauritania, Niger, Mali and Chad between independence and today. All four are francophone Muslim countries and all four display a weak aggregate level of statehood. The project is particularly interested in the relationship between the state and Salafi communities, i.e. whether and how Sahel states have regulated access to their religious sphere.

I spent the last two years conducting extensive field research in all four countries. During these stays I conducted archival research in conjunction with semi-structured interviews of Salafi and

Sufi clerics, high-ranking civil servants, Sahel politicians and academics in all four countries. This has provided me with new and unique findings into the diverse political dynamics of an understudied African sub-region.

At this stage there are several important interim findings, which I have published in a recent issue of *African Affairs* and which I hope to publish in a number of follow-up articles over the coming months. First, I find a number of Sahel states – Niger and Chad – restrict access to their Friday prayer mosques with the help of informal procedures. Between independence and the early 1990s Sahel governments created national Islamic associations and provided them with the informal mandate to confine the building of Friday prayer mosques to the Sufi brotherhoods. The liberalization of Africa's political landscape led to a readjustment of these regulations. The construction of Salafi Friday prayer mosques is now tied to a number of informal criteria. Second, informal religious control emerges in weak states in which political and religious elites have a vested interest in controlling the religious sphere. As Sahel populations are among the most religious societies on Earth, any kind of state intervention in religious life is likely

to provoke tensions. Informal institutions are inconspicuous and as such difficult to detect. Third, informal religious control has a visible effect on the modus operandi of Sahel communities. In countries without regulatory mechanism (Mali and Mauritania) some domestic Salafi communities got involved in party politics and turned into powerful political actors. Other domestic groups referred to violence to promote their doctrinal goals. In countries with regulatory mechanisms (Niger and Chad) domestic Salafi groups remained politically inactive and refrained from jihadi violence.

In the summer of 2016 I intend to conduct additional field research in Kenya and Uganda. These two countries serve as important contrasting cases. Both are Anglophone Muslim minority countries and will provide additional insights under which conditions weak states try and manage Salafi activity.

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