Ideology and Governance: Islam and Liberalism in Niger

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My research asks the question of whether the interaction of two ideologies—Islamism and Liberalism—that grew out of Niger's regime democratization in the early 1990s are creating a functioning political culture, one which would be productive of successful governing policies. To test the hypotheses that arose from this research question, I decided to look at issue areas that are actually or potentially divisive in Niger's current context: the nature of the political regime (Islamic or secular?), education (should it train subjects of God or citizens of the Republic?) and the gender question (the legal status of women). Key assumptions hold that Niger's Islamism is strongly influenced by evolutions in neighboring Northern Nigeria (where Shari'a had become a source of law in the late 1990s) while its Liberalism is marked by French "ésprit républicain," strongly in favor of political secularism (laïcité).

My field research was based on a combination of various qualitative methods, ranging from interviews to archival research, document analysis and participant observation. Over a one year period, I had the opportunity to see many aspects of the issues I was researching evolve and resolve themselves in a variety of ways. I was also able to work in a number of different sites: the capital (Niamey), a provincial town at the border with Nigeria (Maradi), trips to the countryside with members of both liberal and Islamist groups, and trips to Northern Nigeria.

My findings point toward the emergence of a new political culture in Niger, one that is still hard to define. Certainly, there is very little agreement between Islamists and "republicains" in Niger on any of the three issue areas I researched. However, by "functioning political culture" I do not mean to suggest there is consensus. During the authoritarian era, which largely continued the practice of the colonial government, state policies relied very little, if at all, on inputs from society, viewed essentially as amorphous and devoid of legitimate opinions. Repression made these perspectives a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Since the early 1990s, by contrast, regime democratization has permitted society to organize itself on public platforms and express ideals around specific issues. The construction of state legitimacy now rests on social organizations and depends on a flourishing and sophisticated political culture. The dissertation in progress examines the historical, theoretical and current conditions of this evolution. It suggests that the character and stridence of disagreements between Islamists and "republicains" might be productive as well as stunting with regards to political culture, but also that other parameters must be considered, including the fact that Islamists are just one key actor in a larger religious civil society, not completely opposable to "republicains."

Following fieldwork in 2006-2007, on-site writing during part of the Spring and the entire Summer of 2008 proved to be a highly rewarding experience. Active research provides the bulk of pertinent data, but settling into a meditative mindset in the course of writing better opens up the mind to incorporating quieter, unobtrusive information. When it comes to culture, such kind of information is invaluable.

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