

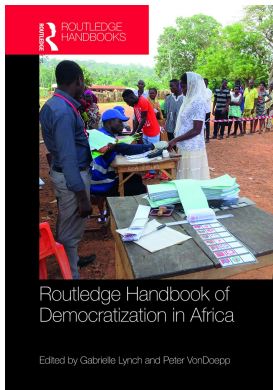
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Gabrielle Lynch, Peter VonDoepp

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Brandon Kendhammer

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ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

Brandon Kendhammer

The question of Islam's relationship with democracy is of great interest to academics and policymakers, yet the more than 250 million Muslims who live in sub-Saharan Africa are rarely represented in these conversations. From the French imperial discourse of "*l'islam noir*," which alleged that Islam in Africa was inherently heterodox, syncretic, and "moderate," to contemporary policymakers' preoccupation with the "peaceful" nature of African Sufi brotherhoods,¹ African Muslims have long been treated as fundamentally different from their global co-religionists, peripheral players in the story of their own faith (Harrison 1988; Hill 2010). Yet with major demographic changes afoot and clear evidence that Muslims influence democratic governments where they exist and demand them where they do not, it is time to ask what contributions the study of Islam and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa might make to the broader field.

Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa are a minority (recent estimates are about 30 percent), although a sizeable one. Only twelve countries can claim Muslim majorities, with another (Nigeria) exceedingly close to 50 percent (see Table 20.1). Recent estimates suggest that even the region's rapid and massive population growth (the number of Muslims on the continent is expected to grow from approximately 250 million in 2010 to nearly 670 million by 2050) by the mid-twenty-first century will do little to change these basic ratios (Pew Research Center 2017). Nonetheless, it is hard to overstate the political importance of the region's Muslim communities. For hundreds of years, Islam has been a crucial terrain for contesting questions like who "counts" as a member of the political community and how leaders ought to be held accountable. Today, Muslim citizens, activists, and politicians play important roles in shaping conversations about what democracy can and should be and how it can be reconciled with the aspirations and ideals of their faith.

For brevity's sake, this chapter cannot offer comprehensive coverage of Muslim politics and its impact on democracy in sub-Saharan Africa. Instead, it focuses on several key issues and claims that are central to regional dynamics and that contribute to global debates about Islam and democracy. The first is that the historical, demographic, and political experiences of African Muslims are incredibly diverse, and there is no single "relationship" (however understood) between Islam and democracy on the continent. Certainly, there are prominent and visible Muslim actors critical of democracy and its spread, but public opinion research finds that the majority of Muslims across the region demand democracy where it does not exist, and support

Table 20.1 Religious demographics of sub-Saharan Africa (selected)

Country	Total Population (est)	Total Muslims (est)	% Muslims
Mauritania	3,460,000	3,430,000	>99.0
Somalia	9,330,000	9,310,000	>99.0
Niger	15,510,000	15,270,000	98.4
Comoros	730,000	720,000	98.3
Djibouti	890,000	860,000	96.9
Senegal	12,430,000	11,980,000	96.4
Gambia	1,730,000	1,640,000	95.1
Mali	15,370,000	14,510,000	94.4
Guinea	9,980,000	8,430,000	84.4
Sierra Leone	5,870,000	4,580,000	78
Burkina Faso	16,470,000	10,150,000	61.6
Chad	11,230,000	6,210,000	55.3
Nigeria	158,420,000	77,300,000	48.8
Tanzania	44,840,000	15,770,000	35.2
Ethiopia	82,950,000	28,680,000	34.6
Mozambique	23,390,000	4,200,000	18
Kenya	40,510,000	3,920,000	9.7

Source: Data taken from Pew Research Center (2017).

it (sometimes with trepidation and well-founded concerns) where it does. More importantly, new research also argues that when Muslims engage with the questions of what sort of government is best for them and how to live in diverse societies, they do so in ways that clearly resemble the political reasoning strategies that exist in democracies around the world.

Second, beginning with a wave of political openings and cautious liberalizations in the 1990s, this demand has begun to remake not only the ways in which Muslims mobilize for democracy, but their ideas about and expectations of “good” democratic practice, with mixed results. How are we to understand why these outcomes have varied so widely? Aside from the obvious differences of demographics and local context, there are several important themes that have shaped how African Muslims have engaged with democratization movements and their own democratic aspirations. One is the legacy of colonial policymaking around Islam, where patterns of coopting religious leaders into state affairs continue to shape how contemporary Muslim activists can (and cannot) effectively challenge authoritarian regimes and mobilize for participation in electoral politics. Another is a region-wide trend, with its roots in the response to the collapse of democracy in the 1960s and rising ethnic and religious conflict in the 1970s and 1980s, towards bans or limitations on ethnic, religious, and sectarian political parties.

Finally, while an increasing number of African Muslims have found it possible to take part in frank and productive conversations about how to “make democracy work” in their communities, tentative democratization has also tested the limits of religious toleration in some of Africa’s most plural societies. Meanwhile, the growth of politically active Salafi² movements and the rise of Islamic violent extremism on the continent have also posed (different, but related) challenges to building and sustaining democracy. These challenges contributed to the collapse of the seemingly stable Muslim-majority democracy in Mali in 2012, and how they might be addressed is among the most important political questions on the continent today.

Perceptions of Islam and democracy in Africa

How (and how much) does Islam shape politics and the prospects for democratization in sub-Saharan Africa? This is a hard question, one made harder by a long scholarly legacy that regards “African Islam” as exceptionally “moderate” by virtue of its alleged dilution by indigenous values and traditions, and exceptionally vulnerable to influence—and especially radicalization—by outside forces originating in the Middle East. As Soares argues, research on Islam and politics in Africa has long suffered from intellectual siloing into case studies of “local Islams” that focus on local idiosyncrasies and cultural dynamics, while ignoring the fact that most African Muslims see themselves as participants in a global community of faith (Soares 2000, 278–9). Much of the existing literature also perpetuates the stereotype that Islam is a timeless, static faith with a single orthodoxy against which all Muslim communities should be implicitly measured, rather than a set of traditions, symbols, texts, and discourses that all Muslims share, but whose meanings are contested and negotiated.

Over the past several decades, a range of research has punctured these myths and misconceptions, demonstrating how African Muslims construct their religious identities and negotiate the relationship between their faith and their political values, beliefs, and priorities in democratic (and semi-democratic) contexts. This research has shown simply—but importantly—that African religious identities (and the societal cleavages they represent) are unevenly salient across the continent, and whether or not Muslims (and Christians) mobilize politically along religious lines seems to depend more on local political context than piety (McCauley and Posner 2019). The fact that conflicts over land, resource control, and access to power in places like Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso can and do shift between those perceived as primarily religious or ethnic (McCauley 2017) speaks to the power of local circumstances and the strategic calculations of political elites, rather than to the ineffable “essences” of religions.

What about democracy specifically? Do Muslim-majority countries on the continent suffer from less democracy than their neighbors? As Stepan and Robertson (2003) have argued, the “democratic deficit” often attributed to Muslim-majority countries is an artifact of the Arab-majority countries of the Middle East and North Africa and their economic and political histories — notably, the role of oil and gas in their national economies and their geopolitical circumstances. Meanwhile, although in absolute terms there are no consolidated democracies among Muslim-majority nations in sub-Saharan Africa, countries like Senegal and Niger have often been relative “over-performers” compared to their level of economic prosperity, a variable that nearly all research agrees plays a significant role in delineating democratic potential.

To be clear, these (now fifteen-year-old) findings do not tell us much about how Islam actually *does* matter (positively or negatively) in shaping the field of democratic possibilities in sub-Saharan Africa. But despite recent high-profile democratic setbacks in Mali and Gambia’s continued democratic struggles in the wake of Jammeh’s surprising exit from power in 2016, there is little evidence that Muslim-majority countries do any better or worse than the rest of the continent when it comes to democratization. Similarly, Africa’s Muslim-majority competitive autocracies and authoritarian states clearly share many of the same basic political and governance challenges as their Christian-majority neighbors.

Equally importantly, a growing body of work on Muslim politics in sub-Saharan Africa has drawn attention to the fact that much of the political activity, activism, and mobilization undertaken by Muslims on the continent is structured by the same dynamics that impact *all* African politics generally. From the proliferation of Islamic NGOs in the wake of the structural adjustment era of the late 1980s (Adama 2007) to the importance of Muslim women’s mobilization and democratic activism following the liberalization wave of the early 1990s (Alidou 2005),

Muslim politics around issues of democracy and democratization have paralleled more general regional patterns. To be sure, a growing literature also suggests that the region's evangelical and Pentecostal populations differ from Muslims in important ways with respect to their democratic political engagement (Kalu 2008; but see Obadare 2016 for evidence of the emergence of a "charismatic Islam" in Nigeria that borrows directly from the organizational and discursive models of Pentecostal Christianity). Yet from their common internal debates over the utility of direct political action in bringing about God's kingdom to their movements' frequent capture by "Big Men" who depend on cozy relationships with state elites, both communities have experienced similar ups and downs in their efforts to carve out new space for political engagement in the continent's increasingly competitive public spheres.

Do Muslims support democracy?

What do Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa say about democracy? Although we lack important information about long-term trends in beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, survey-based research beginning in the early 2000s paints a picture of both widespread personal piety among Muslims and favorable attitudes towards, and support of, democratic government. This is in turn consistent with a growing body of comparative research that finds Muslims demand democracy to roughly the same degree and with the same intensity as Christians and members of other religious traditions (Bratton 2003). The available research largely rejects any suggestion that Muslims on the continent are "exceptional" in their political attitudes and values, particularly when compared to their Christian neighbors.

Although there's significant variation across countries, Muslims in Africa self-report exceptionally high religiosity (upwards of 96 percent report that religion is "somewhat" or "very" important to them), numbers that are at time of writing roughly in line with the continent's equally pious evangelical Christian communities, and slightly (but significantly) higher than Catholics and mainline Protestants. As in many other regions, there is at least some evidence suggesting that personal piety and involvement in religious life is correlated with greater interest in public affairs, but little that this interest translates into either support for or criticism of democratic institutions. Muslims are as likely as Christians and other non-Muslims to express frustration and dissatisfaction with existing democratic institutions on the continent, suggesting that longstanding efforts by African governments of all types (authoritarian, hybrid, and new and uncertain democracies) to play up their religious credentials do not prevent ordinary citizens from recognizing the flawed democracies in their midst (McCauley and Gyimah-Boadi 2009).

Another important realm in which African Muslims have proven to be unexceptional is political and social tolerance, issues that are widely recognized as central to democratic politics. Globally, one of the few areas in which survey research finds actual differences between Muslims and non-Muslims is in their tolerance of morally "controversial" behavior, including divorce, homosexuality, and abortion. Yet while we lack the evidence to directly compare, intolerance towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities in Africa seems to be a trait shared by Christians and Muslims, who have both proven willing to engage in inter-faith cooperation to adopt laws and public policies that expand official discrimination against homosexuals in countries like Nigeria and Uganda (Obadare 2015). Moreover, new evidence suggests that increased political competition and democratization have made anti-gay sentiments worse, as politicians see them as wedge issues to mobilize voters struggling to navigate an increasingly competitive electoral environment (Grossman 2015).

This mixed record extends to broader questions of how African Muslims think about social pluralism in democratic contexts. As the Pew Research Center (2010) has found, large numbers

(including majorities in Niger, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, among others) of African Muslims express strong support for the proposition that their countries be governed according to the Sharia. Not surprisingly, these findings have often been interpreted as a sign that Muslims reject liberal values, democracy, and coexistence with their non-Muslim neighbors. However, research by Dowd (2015) and Vinson (2017), who both focused on local communities and experiences in an effort to delve behind the headlines, found that Muslims (and Christians) who live in religiously plural communities, know their neighbors, and are embedded in multi-religious social and business networks are more likely to participate in democratic politics, and that their communities are less likely to experience violence between religious groups. In practice, piety and devotion do not seem to actually prevent Muslims from cooperating and sharing power with Christians, even as they continue to demand a greater role for Islam and Islamic values in political life.

Research on northern Nigeria, sub-Saharan Africa's largest single Muslim-majority community (albeit within an incredibly religiously diverse nation in which Muslims are likely not a majority), illustrates many of the complexities associated with these dynamics (Kendhammer 2016). This research's focus was on the co-occurrence of two major transformations in Nigerian politics in the late 1990s: a widely supported return to democratic rule after the death of military dictator Sani Abacha; and the rise of a popular, grassroots movement to implement a strict, literal version of Islamic law (Sharia) in twelve Muslim-majority federal states. Although they may appear as incompatible or even contradictory goals, the analysis of public debate surrounding Nigeria's "Sharia controversy" found that a surprisingly large proportion of Muslim discourse around the issue presented Sharia and democracy as compatible projects, both seen as possible strategies for remedying the country's longstanding history of economic inequality, corruption, and poor government service provision.

How did Nigerian Muslims come to demand *both* democracy and Sharia? Drawing on research from American public opinion scholarship and the sociology of religion and based on data from a unique set of peer group interviews with working-class Muslims in 2007 and 2008, one study found that Muslims in Nigeria think and talk about democracy by relying on a combination of personal experiences, cues from their friends, family, and neighbors, and the messages supplied by political elites via the media (Kendhammer 2016). In other words, their engagement with the question of Islam's "compatibility" with democracy was driven not simply by theology, but by a process of political reasoning that included their practical experiences with government and political participation, and which reflected a keen sense of how both God's law and democratic processes might work together to hold their country's wealthy and powerful elites to account.

To be clear, the vision of democracy these respondents articulated was not entirely liberal, nor was it always tolerant of non-Muslims (very few interviewees saw any reason for a Muslim-majority state government not to favor Muslims and their interests over those of local Christians). But it was also not overdetermined by any particular theological standpoint or interpretation, and their religious values and commitments did not prevent them from articulating a wide range of opinions and views about democracy's actual performance, even in the hands of the same Muslim leaders they were counting on to implement Sharia. In other words, the "relationship" between Islam and democracy is a social construct, shaped by regional histories and local political dynamics, bounded by a shared commitment to participation in a transnational Islamic community, and influenced by an entirely human desire to solve the governance problems that have plagued many African countries since independence.

Islam, secularism, and legacies of state control

If there is significant evidence that the old view of African Islamic exceptionalism is incorrect, and that the “relationship” between Islam and democracy in Africa is dynamic and shaped by local circumstances, where might we look for important long-term factors that have shaped how Muslims on the continent mobilize, organize, and engage with the politics of democratization? Obviously, Africa’s Islamic past is a powerful source of symbolic inspiration for movements both supporting and opposing democracy. For instance, the ambiguous legacy of the Sokoto Caliphate—a social and religious reform movement that attacked political corruption and immorality while also perpetuating one of the world’s largest slave economies—provides a powerful reference point for contemporary Nigerian Muslim political activists, who have found in its historical and textual record everything from a legacy of “great Muslim democrats” to justifications for violence against Christians and the Nigerian state (Kendhammer 2016).

As argued in the introduction, there are also several durable institutional legacies that shape the strategies and tactics of Muslim participants in the continent’s emerging democratic game. The first is a direct consequence of colonial policy and practice. Most textbook approaches to colonial policy in sub-Saharan Africa emphasize the differences between French and British colonial rule strategies, highlighting the significance of France’s commitment to secularism (*laïcité*) as opposed to Britain’s reliance on “indirect” rule strategies that included bargains with key political and religious elites and the propping up of local “traditional” legal structures, including Sharia courts. But despite their differences, what both colonial systems have most clearly in common is a legacy of centralization and the expectation of state management and control of religious institutions.

Islamic leaders and scholars in the colonial era were deeply enmeshed in networks of state power and political contestation, and these relationships have long had significant impacts on electoral politics. In both French and British colonies, decades of quasi-formal bargains between strategically valuable religious leaders and the colonial state (Robinson 2000), and efforts to marginalize groups perceived as dangerous to colonial interests, produced patterns of winners and losers that in many instances have clear echoes in contemporary politics. As a result, while Muslim religious leaders are generally excluded from partisan politics, many also maintain central positions within patron/client networks and interest groups that have often become increasingly influential as elections have become more competitive. At the same time, in recent decades the openings afforded by political liberalization and tentative democratization have also encouraged challenges to their privileged position by reform-minded outsiders, many of whom have secured powerful new allies through electoral activism.

A second important dynamic that continues to shape contemporary Muslim democratic politics on the continent is the widespread absence of explicitly Islamic political parties. Globally, Islamic political parties have often been less successful at the ballot box and in government than the attention they receive suggests (Pepinsky, Liddle, and Mujani 2012). Yet the fact that they have been essentially absent from African politics has had an important impact on how Muslim activists and political leaders mobilize within the confines of their institutional circumstances.

What explains this absence? Concluding that the tendency towards ethnic political mobilization and outbidding were key sources of instability and violence, at least forty countries on the continent enacted some sort of ban on ethnic, sectarian, or “particularist” political parties between the late 1970s and the late 1990s (Moroff 2010). Although in many cases the underlying goal was to prevent the mobilization of regional and ethnic parties, these laws have often been extended—intentionally or otherwise—to include religion. Particularly in Francophone countries, these regulations have paired with strong constitutional commitments to *laïcité* to

serve as a strong check on the types of Islamic mobilization into party politics common elsewhere in the Muslim world. Indeed, even Mauritania, an avowedly theocratic state, has used its ban to prevent the registration of sectarian parties when it has suited authorities, while in Senegal it has played a key role in preventing Sufi leaders from taking a more direct hand in electoral politics (Bleck and van de Walle 2011, 1129). A short-lived exception is the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK), founded in 1992 in response to widespread dissatisfaction with Kenya's "official" Muslim body, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM). The IPK was ultimately denied registration and the ability to run candidates, effectively shutting it down and forcing its leadership into uneasy alliances with other opposition bodies that diluted their message and ability to mobilize popular support (Ndzovu 2014, 86–90).

How have these legacies impacted trajectories of democratization in Muslim-majority Africa? In general, as Diallo and Kelly (2016) argue, Muslim leaders and organizations from across the ideological spectrum have encouraged their supporters to participate in democratic politics, even if reluctantly, in order to ensure Muslim voices and interests are represented. Yet particularly during the "national conference" movement in Francophone West Africa in the early 1990s, as well as in Nigeria during the Abacha dictatorship (1993–8), the legacy of state-sponsored and quasi-state "official" Muslim organizations and the Muslim elite's deep ties to state power limited the role of Muslim civil society in the African wave of democratization in the 1990s and 2000s. Describing this ambivalence, Villalón (2015) has argued that it is not always clear when Muslim religious leaders are acting as "agents" of democratization or simply pursuing their own interests, working within the system and calling for significant changes (while generally accepting the electoral "rules of the game") according to their own calculations.

Two brief examples illustrate these complexities well. In Senegal, the powerful but largely informal relationship between the leading Sufi brotherhoods and the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) forged during the late colonial period continued a pattern of mutually beneficial state/Islam relationships under French rule. It also played a key role in maintaining Senegal's relatively unique status as a one-party, non-democratic state that nonetheless maintained a degree of political openness and commitment to religious tolerance. State authorities were able to maintain a secular distance from religious activism, while nonetheless relying on the steadfast support of key Sufi leaders and their "political" *ndiggal* (religious instruction) to vote for the PS, usually in exchange for funneling of resources into brotherhood-sponsored projects and businesses.

The breakdown of this bargain in the late 1980s and early 1990s helped to open the door to more open and competitive elections, but also endangered the power and influence of the brotherhoods themselves. The weakening of the brotherhood/state bargain helped to foster a more democratic and open Muslim public sphere, which included new opportunities for religious actors—and even politicians themselves—to advance their case for a greater role for Islam in public life, and even to challenge the status of *laïcité* itself. This dynamic also impacted Sufi orders, as former opposition leader and eventual President Abdoulaye Wade made direct political appeals on the basis of his affiliation with the Mouride brotherhood into an integral part of his campaign even as the group's official leadership sought to stay nominally above the partisan fray in an effort to maintain their influence behind the scenes. As such, while religious elites and institutions remain crucial political actors and powerbrokers, they have rarely shown the energy or enthusiasm for democratic activism of secular (or at least, non-religiously affiliated) actors like the *Y'en a Marre* movement (Nelson 2014; see also Mueller's chapter in this volume).

In Mali, slightly different independence-era circumstances have contributed to a similar basic pattern, albeit with even more ambivalent democratic results. As Leininger (2016) has argued, subsequent Malian governments—authoritarian and democratic alike—have continued the French colonial state's heavy-handed cooptation of Muslim leadership into state service via

the creation of official and quasi-official organizations. This arrangement proved largely acceptable to most Muslim religious elites, who used the platform they were afforded—most notably through the Malian Association for Unity and the Progress of Islam (AMUPI), founded in 1980—to lobby for policy changes, assert moral leadership over thorny national issues, and marginalize voices that challenged their status, particularly the new Salafi preachers and movements that began to emerge in the 1980s.

Like in Senegal, a wave of political liberalization in the early 1990s placed these elites in a difficult position. AMUPI's leadership had closer ties to the political class than to the mass social movements (labor unions, students, women's groups) that were democratization's most effective proponents. Not surprisingly, they were largely caught off-guard by the massive increase in the number of religiously oriented civil society organizations registered with the state between the mid-1980s and the late 1990s, many of which were less inclined to defer to state interests. AMUPI's neutral (leaning pro-authoritarian) position during the Malian national conference and its reluctance to embrace a more open position vis-à-vis other Muslim groups contributed to what Leininger (2016) has called the "informalization" of Muslim politics, empowering both new reformist groups less inclined towards *laïcité* but still basically in support of democracy as well as the extremist tendencies that eventually contributed to the civilian regime's collapse in 2012.

These larger trends of fragmentation and informalization are also in evidence outside the Muslim-majority societies of the Sahel. In Kenya, the Moi government's ban on the IPK played a key role in accelerating the formation of new institutional opponents to SUPKEM, like the National Muslim Leaders Forum and the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya. These groups subsequently jockeyed for potential alliances with the legal opposition movement, defended the role of Islam in Kenyan family law, and advocated for Muslims who saw themselves as targets of Kenya's mounting legislative efforts to fight terrorism (Ndzovu 2014). Similarly, the rapid growth of explicitly religious media, or the massive expansion of religious programming on state and national television and radio stations (Kendhammer 2016), across the continent have redefined how Muslims participate in public conversations about national values and public policy, and empowering new voices.

"Democratizing" the Muslim public sphere or promoting radicalization?

Who has benefited most from the "democratization" of the Muslim public sphere brought about by the democratic waves of the 1990s and 2000s? As suggested above, some traditional Islamic authorities have been successful in entrenching their power and privilege, and across the continent state-sponsored and quasi-official Islamic organizations remain important—even central—actors in electoral politics. This has been especially true in countries like Cameroon, where the halting liberalization of the 1990s has transformed into full-blown competitive authoritarianism. In this context, Muslim minorities struggle to balance the need for good relations with state authorities that govern civil society with a heavy hand and the desire to challenge their own marginalization within the country's ruling coalition.

More often, however, these dynamics have favored new participants, ideologies, and identities, many of which are much more willing to engage directly in electoral politics and policy advocacy through the democratic process. Particularly in more religiously plural countries like Kenya and Nigeria, one important factor in politicizing Muslim civil society is the concomitant growth of evangelical and Pentecostal churches across the continent in the 1980s and 1990s (see Patterson, this volume). Although these churches have often had complicated relationships with the desire to shape public life through politics, their sheer size and evangelical

ambitions inevitably put them into increasing contact—and conflict—with Muslim reformist organizations emerging with equal energy. As both types of movements began to dominate the airwaves and local media, physical spaces (the proliferation of church revival camps and mosques), and popular discourses of development and empowerment (the so-called “prosperity” gospel and the discourse of “spiritual warfare” among Pentecostals), they clashed with increasing regularity around elections and “ownership” of public spaces and services (particularly university campuses). Although the trend was not universal, these clashes often presaged a growing demonization (literally) of Muslims in Pentecostal rhetoric, depicting them as forces of darkness whose own expansionist energies constituted a plot to Islamize the continent (Kalu 2008, 243–6). Muslim organizations have often responded in turn by doubling down on their own political engagement, including efforts to elect explicitly Muslim candidates to office.

Another important factor in the rise of new Muslim political voices on the continent has been the growing efforts of democratically elected governments—often supported by new and increasingly influential Muslim women’s organizations—to reform and reimagine the role of religion and Islamic values in national family and civil law. Although some contemporary Muslim women’s associations on the continent have much older roots, since the mid-1980s (and especially following the political liberalization wave of the 1990s) a wide range of new groups have emerged looking to promote women’s rights on Islamic grounds. Many relied on explicitly Islamic rhetoric, arguing that Islamic courts and religious institutions that failed to protect and defend women’s interests were acting not out of a commitment to “authentic” Islamic doctrine, but from embedded cultural misogyny (Kendhammer 2013). And although these reforms—most notably, efforts to ratify and institutionalize their states’ participation in international treaties regarding the rights of women, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Maputo Protocol—have sometimes been defeated, when Muslim women’s groups are able to effectively organize and lobby elected governments, they have a strong track record of winning (Kang 2015).

Finally, although there is little direct evidence of their numbers, it seems clear that Salafi-influenced Islamic “reform” movements have made remarkable strides across the continent over the past several decades. To be clear, Salafi movements across the continent have evolved in different directions and with different political consequences based on local circumstances, and to speak of a single “African Salafism” would be deeply misleading. Yet most Salafi-influenced movements on the continent today have at least some roots in efforts to challenge the leadership of the quasi-official Muslim interest groups described above, particularly those dominated by Sufi leaders. These movements have in turn become increasingly central to democratic politics where they exist, bringing questions of Islam’s role in public life to the fore and playing key roles as informal powerbrokers during election seasons.

In Senegal, the growth of the Jama’atou Ibadou Rahmane (JIR) was driven by the activism of university students attentive to a changing international landscape in the 1970s as well as growing youth dissatisfaction with the longstanding PS leadership (and their links to the Sufi establishment) (Gomez-Perez 2017). Similarly, in Nigeria the *Izala* movement owes much of its initial energy to its spiritual leader Abubakar Gumi, whose Salafi scholarship was paired with a longstanding closeness to the northern Muslim political elite. Indeed, Gumi’s 1982 announcement that voting was a religious obligation for Muslims, who needed to turn out (particularly women) to prevent the defeat of Muslim incumbent President Shehu Shagari, played a key role in cementing the group’s association with prominent members of the Muslim business and political classes. Gumi’s spiritual (and in many ways, political) successor, Ja’afar Mahmud Adam, overcame his initial reluctance to engage in direct partisanship to play a key

role in the 2007 elections in Kano, Nigeria's largest Muslim-majority city and state (a role that likely contributed to his assassination a day before voting took place) (Thurston 2014). And in Ethiopia, while leading Salafi groups have remained strategically unengaged in most public political debates out of a recognition that doing so would endanger fragile Muslim-Christian relations in a country where they are not in the majority, they have nonetheless used the political space available to them to defend the political rights of Muslims and defend the Muslim community from political attacks attempting to link them to violence and radical movements in the Arab world (Østebø 2014).

But while "mainstream" Salafi organizations on the continent have rarely rejected the state's legitimacy, democracy (at least completely), or supported violence, they have sometimes been training grounds and launching pads for those who have. The impact of Salafi-jihadi violent extremist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its offshoots, Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, and various regional affiliates of the Islamic State network, have led to hard conversations about the role of Salafi theology and activists in endangering democracy on the continent. In the case of Nigeria's Boko Haram, the group's early leadership apprenticed with leading figures in the country's most influential activist (engaged in electoral politics and policy advocacy) Salafi community in the late 1990s and early 2000s, eventually splitting with them over a combination of personality, politics, and theology. And in Mali, the emergence of Salafi groups willing to endorse violence was a slow evolutionary process deeply connected with the central government's fifty-year conflict with Tuareg separatists, its lack of investment in security and development in the country's northern region, and AQIM's regional expansion out of Algeria in the early 2000s (Thurston and Lebovich 2013).

How big a threat to democracy do these groups actually pose? In Mali, the government's failure to recognize the risk posed by Salafi extremists and their connections to regional jihadist groups contributed directly to democracy's collapse. Yet Boko Haram's ongoing insurgency—and its explicit rejection of democracy—did not prevent Nigeria from holding its most credible election in a generation in 2015, nor has it displaced more ordinary concerns like governmental corruption and a dysfunctional political party system as among the most immediate worries among many citizens. And in response to mounting violence (and the political damage it does to their own positions), many Salafi leaders and scholars on the continent have taken on leading roles in criticizing jihadi ideology and offering public support for democracy and Muslims' participation in electoral politics (Olojo 2017).

It is also crucial to understand that while ideology tends to dominate many conversations about Salafi-jihadism's appeal, most empirical research finds political factors such as legacies of poor governance, poverty, inequality, and state-sponsored violence against vulnerable populations to be just as—if not more—important in determining where violent extremist groups emerge and are able to gain a measure of popular support (UNDP 2017). In this sense, it seems to be less the case that violent extremism is a danger to democracy than that a lack of substantive democracy puts countries at risk of violent extremism. Certainly, fear of growing "radicalization" among African Muslims has become a major policy issue both on the continent and in the West. In countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, and Nigeria, this fear has justified the "securitization" of state/Islam relations in ways that have clearly undermined these countries' claims to democracy, as well as encouraged Muslims to link their personal experiences of discrimination to wider perceived patterns of political marginalization (Anderson and McKnight 2015; Deacon et al. 2017). Meanwhile, survey data suggests that large numbers of non-Muslims across the continent have begun to conflate violent extremism with Islam itself. Indeed, nearly 40 percent of Christians in a 2010 survey reported considering Muslims to be especially violent, and Christians hold significantly worse attitudes towards Muslims than vice versa (Pew Research Center 2010).

If this trend continues, it is just as likely to pose a long-term risk to democracy as extremist groups themselves.

Conclusion

The question of Islam's "relationship" with democracy in sub-Saharan Africa is a misguided starting point for understanding the scope of how Muslims think about and participate in democratic politics. The diversity of Muslim experiences makes generalization difficult, but a handful of important trends emerge. The first is that demand for democracy among Muslims is both high and clearly grounded in longstanding experiences with poor governance, corruption, and political marginalization. Democracy is seen as an important tool for advancing the cause of a greater role for Islam in public life, but also as a good-in-itself, one that can play a role in solving many of the political problems they see first-hand. Muslims in the region are neither confused about why they support democracy nor easily misled by hybrid regimes or autocratic states that claim to be providing it. Future research in this area might productively focus on local understandings of democracy, the impact of these democratic "imaginings" on political participation, mobilization, and activism, and on the longer-term prospect of reconciling growing demands for Islamic values and mores in the public sphere with democratic governance in plural societies.

At the same time, the structure of Muslim engagement with democratic politics has shifted dramatically over the span of a generation, and the outcomes of this transformation are uncertain. Colonial policy legacies provided a longstanding template for Islam/state relations centered around quasi-official religious bodies and clientelist networks, and this template has only relatively recently begun to break down. Meanwhile, durable constitutional commitments to secularism and an absence of a clear path (even in Muslim-majority countries) have largely closed off the possibility of "Islamic" political parties, leaving Muslims to mobilize in democratic settings through an ever-growing range of civil society associations and religious movements. These groups vary widely in their goals and partisanship, but clearly play central roles in many contemporary policy debates around the role of Islam in public life and law. Particularly as the current generation of competitive authoritarian leaders age out of office and—as in countries like Cameroon and Burkina Faso—violent extremist groups move from the margins to become pressing security concerns, the potential role of Muslim civil society in advancing democracy, good governance, and security presents fertile ground for new research.

Finally, although the growing influence of Salafi Islam in the region has had an ambivalent impact on democratization, it is also not likely the source of danger many have made it out to be. Salafis are more likely to challenge the assumptions of an earlier generation that constitutional secularism is inviolate, but where their interests align with supporting democratic government and encouraging their followers to participate in it, they do so. Unfortunately, as the experiences of terror attacks in Burkina Faso beginning in 2016 suggest, improvements in the quality of democratic government do not necessarily inoculate states against the threat of rising violent extremism. Yet states are more likely to endanger democracy by relying on violent and discriminatory counter-extremism policies than extremist groups themselves, which depend on the perception of poor governance, corruption, and state-sponsored violence against Muslims to attract support. While such groups are not easily defeated, the danger they pose to new and uncertain African democracies speaks as much to the fragility of democracy as to the popularity of extremism.

A deeper and more empirically grounded understanding of the "drivers" of violent extremism in the region, and of the role of governance quality in either driving or combatting it, has become a pressing area in need of research attention.

Notes

- 1 Sufism is an Islamic spiritual discipline practiced by many Muslims around the world, and particularly popular and influential in sub-Saharan Africa. Often organized around “brotherhoods” led by charismatic spiritual “masters” or guides, Sufi Muslims engage in a wide range of spiritual practices and experiences intended to bring them to an elevated awareness of God’s presence in their lives.
- 2 Salafism is an Islamic religious orientation that emphasizes returning Islam and the Muslim community to the “pure” example of the Prophet and the “pious ancestors” (the *salaf*) who made up the earliest generations of the Muslim community.

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