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Executive Summary

Religion occupies an increasingly significant part of Malian public space. The advances of militant Islamic groups and sporadic application of Sharia criminal punishment practices in northern Mali, have evoked fear among Malians, as well as foreign actors, about whether the country is gradually turning into an "Islamic state". Notably, religious influences in public debate derive as much from populist "anti-Wahhabist" movements as from Salafist missionary activities. Based on interviews with religious leaders and politicians in southern Mali, this policy brief explores aspects of Islam as a political force in Mali, the different understandings among Malians of the concept of *laïcité* – the principle of the separation of religion and governance and the secularity of the state – and implications of these processes for the future of Malian polity.

Concerns over Mali shifting towards an "Islamist state" are misplaced. Rather, contemporary politico-religious processes in Mali entail a renegotiation of relations between the state and religious organizations and of the understanding of the secularity of the state. The result is that the separation between the state and religious institutions is maintained. However, the state is seeking to control religious processes and groupings, and as a result is being more involved in the religious domain. Also, several prominent Muslim leaders have developed explicit political agendas. Together, these processes challenge the understanding of "laïcité" and its colonial legacy, but not the foundations of Malian democracy.

Biographies

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Introduction

Religion occupies an increasingly significant part of Malian public space, a development facilitated by the transition to democratic rule in 1991 and with it freedom of association and of the press. The new visibility of religion in public space takes the form of the multiplication of religious schools, associations and new mosques, and the active participation of Muslim religious leaders in political debates. These dynamics, combined with the advances of militant Islamic groups and sporadic application of Sharia criminal penalties in 2012 in Northern Mali, evoke fear among Malians as well as foreign actors about the country moving away from the principle of "laïcité" enshrined in the Malian 1960 Constitution and reaffirmed in the 1992 Constitution.[1] The way that this principle has been understood in Mali, following its independence, is a direct reflection of the French conceptualization 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 conceptualization is based on a strict separation between private and public sphere, 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 organizations.[2] The Malian Constitution contains similar provisions.[3]

Several Malian politicians and religious leaders are critical about the French interpretation of the secularity principle, which they see as anti-religious, rather than as a guarantee of religious freedom. They emphasize that the principle of "laïcité" should entail respect of religious diversity, equal treatment by the state of different religious groups (different Muslim communities, animist groups and Christian congregations in particular) and the right of each individual to practice their religion – also in the public sphere.

Based on interviews with religious leaders and politicians in Mali, this report briefly explores aspects of Islam as a political force in Mali, the different understandings of the concept of "laïcité" among Malians, and the implications of these processes for the future of the Malian polity.[4] We argue that, rather than a shift from a "secular" to an "Islamist" state, the concept of "laïcité" is undergoing renegotiation. This entails, firstly, a renegotiation of the principle

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[1] Article 25 of the Constitution of the Republic of Mali states that: "Mali is an independent, sovereign, indivisible, democratic, secular, social republic." For an English translation of the Malian Constitution, see http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/Mali.pdf

[2] Fetzer and Soper state that "today, one might divide the various interpretations of laicite into two broad categories: 'strict' (also called 'militant' or 'closed') and 'soft ('pluralist' or 'open'). Each of these broad versions in turn contains numerous subcategories and is embraced by various sectors of French society" (2005: 73).

[3] Article 18 of the Constitution of the Republic of Mali states that public education is mandatory and non-religious. The same article specifies that political parties must respect the secularity of the state. A ban of political parties based on religious lines is elaborated in article 43 in the law on political parties (La Charte des partis, Ordonnance nr. 97-075/PCTSP du 10 octobre 1991), cf. http://www.un.int/wcm/webdav/site/mali/shared/documents/fr/codestextes/1164088846.pdf.

[4] The qualitative fieldwork took place in May and June 2014, in Bamako, Mopti, Segou, Koutiala and Sikasso. The methodology is described in Hatløy, Sommerfelt and Jesnes (2015). We want to thank Mr. Mamadou Konaté for facilitating fieldwork.

of religiously "neutral" governance. Many Malian Muslims in the urban elite emphasize that Islam is a democratic religion (see, e.g. Gakou 2013) and retain the right to express political arguments based on Muslim values. There is a variety of Muslim identities in Mali, and "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 religious pluralism, rather than an insistence upon the "absence" of religious affairs in governance. This reassertion of religious freedom is simultaneously a defense against "federalism" and an increased autonomy of the northern areas, and thus, the protection of the territorial integrity of Malian nationhood.

Moreover, the secularity of the state is defended in the sense that the separation between the state and religious institutions is maintained: State religion does not have strong defendants among politicians in Bamako, and religious organizations are not under direct state control. However, the tolerance for political standpoints based on religious values is rising, especially in debates over family law and gender politics. Several prominent Muslim leaders develop explicit political agendas and they debate, in public, where the religious sphere ends and the political sphere begins. Religious leaders, as well as politicians – also those who support the French military intervention in northern Mali – underline that the separation of the state from religious institutions should entail freedom *of* religion and freedom *to* religion as much as freedom *from* religion. In this sense, they challenge the strict, French version of secularism as "laïcité", and its colonial legacy.

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, for instance by establishing guidelines for religious leadership, preachers and education. This increased state participation in the religious domain further accentuates the visibility of religious issues in public debate.

It should be noted that religious influences in public debate derive as much from populist, "anti-Wahhabist" movements as from Salafist (or "Wahhabist") missionary activities. The advances of Islamist extremists in the north result in a widespread 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.

Islam increasingly present in the public sphere: The debate over the Family Code

The relevance of Islam in peoples' lives in Mali has changed during the last two decades (see for instance Schultz 2003, Soares 2005). The introduction of freedom of association in the 1990s facilitated the formation of diverse Muslim communities in Mali (Thurston 2013a). The changing importance of Islam is visible in the streets of Bamako, through the proliferation of mosques, religious schools and associations, and through private radio stations where popular Muslim leaders give religious and political speeches. 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 what it used to be.

In 2009, the public debate concerning the Family Code (*Code de la Famille*) that 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 2005: 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, recognized 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 strived to harmonize 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, approximately 90 percent of which is Muslim.

In contrast to reports in Western media, 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". Another respondent, a senior politician, emphasized that family law touches upon issues close to the household, which naturally evokes debate, both within the family and in society in general. He emphasized that reactions against the revised law were related to a widespread fear of fragmenting family and authority structures in Mali, and fear of unproductive generational conflict, youth crime and idleness.[5] He further stressed that since there was no room for discussion on the contents of the Family Code prior to its adoption in the parliament, the adoption of the law was bound to cause opposition. Through the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM) – a religious association established in 2000 and intended to serve as an intermediary between different Muslim communities and the

[5] Media debates over an alleged "youth crisis", especially in urban areas, have run high in other West African countries too. For an anthropological perspective on this fear in neighbouring Senegal, see e.g. Perry (2009).

state – religious leaders mobilized 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 2013a: 52).

The public dispute around the Family Code sparked discussions among Malians and international commentators about the HCIM's role in politics. Some observers interpreted the increasing visibility of HCIM as a sign that the division between religion and politics is becoming increasingly blurred, and that politicians are increasingly caving to the pressure of religious organizations and leaders (see for instance Sow 2014). Hence, the public debates concerning the Family Code reinforced discussions among Malians about the form of the principle of "laïcité" of the Malian state.

These discussions were further accentuated when the conflict in the North of Mali took a new turn in 2012, with the sporadic and casual application of criminal Sharia punishment practices by MUJAO, AQIM and Ansar Din. Some feared that the application of criminal Sharia penalties would spread to the south of Mali. However, Muslim religious leaders in the south emphasized that punishment practices seen in the north were not in accordance with proper Sharia legal processes. They demonstrated a clear stand against the radical Islamism that threatened Mali's territorial integrity, the secularism (laïcité) of the state and Malian Muslims' right to worship according to tradition (Sogoba 2014, Togola 2012). In January 2013, the French intervention stopped what it claimed to be the Islamist militants' push to the south (towards Mopti), but the crisis revealed the inability of politicians to deal with the issue of "the North".

It is important to note that debates on secularism and on Islam in Malian politics are not new. Rather, the post-1991 freedom of association and new media politics has had an impact on how issues of religious identity and organization are articulated and developed (cf. Soares 2005). In contrast to 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). This is still the case: In Fafo's survey carried out in southern Mali in June 2014, of the 96 percent of respondents who are Muslim, three out of five identified themselves as "Muslim only" and did not relate to distinctions of brotherhood or order (cf. Coulibaly and Hatløy, 2015).[6]

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[6] The survey was carried out between the 7th and 20th of June 2014, in urban and rural milieus in the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, Ségou, Mopti and Bamako. 1210 persons aged above 18 years participated in the survey of perceptions, that dealt with issues of religion, ethnicity and politics.

The public presence of religious leaders in politics

The inability of politicians to stop the advancements of Al-Qaida associated groups in northern Mali, and the increasing visibility of Muslim clergy in the debate on the Family Code, enabled Muslim religious leaders, both Sufi[7] and Wahhabist[8], to engage in political affairs in a new way (Thurston 2013a: 59). The distinction between Salafism, or Wahhabism, as referred to in Mali, and the Sufi communities is overly simplistic, but does reflect a distinction that Malians themselves use to tell apart what they see as "traditional" (Sufi) versus "newly imported" (Wahhabist/Salafist) versions of Islam.[9] The President of the HCIM, Mahmoud Dicko, adheres to Wahhabism, and is known for his active participation in domestic political affairs. In 2012, Dicko assisted in negotiating the release of Malian soldiers captured by extremists Salafists, and he tried, but did not succeed, in engaging in dialogue with the extremists in the North (Thurston 2013a: 59). Some local and foreign commentators have accused Dicko of contributing to a weakening of the separation between religion and politics because of his engagement in political affairs (e.g. Soares 2013). Also, Cherif Ousmane Madani Haïdara, the leader of the organization Ansar Dine[10] and Vice President of the HCIM is capable of gathering tens of thousands of followers for his public religious and somewhat political speeches. Both Haïdara and Dicko represent a new type of religious actors who merge their religious roles as "marabout"[11] and Imam respectively with outspoken political opinions. Along with other religious leaders, they emphasize their right to engage in value-based discussions, such as on the issue of the legal age for marriage and same-sex marriage, and their right to refer to personal moral convictions as reference points in these debates. Therefore, one emerging tendency is the presence of prominent religious leaders in public political debates in Mali. To a certain extent, this tendency also entails politicians' insistence on their right to refer to Islam as one of the foundations of their moral values. This position cuts across the political spectrum, and does not necessarily coincide with "anti-Western" sentiments.

In contrast to politicians, Muslim religious leaders have, in recent times, demonstrated great capacity to mobilize the masses 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.

Firstly, the Muslim religious leaders actively distribute their religious sermons, guidelines on how to behave as a good Muslim, as well as political opinions through various communication

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[7] Sufism refers to the most widespread version of Islam in West Africa. Devotees emphasize the art of prayer, and among many, Muslim Saints occupy a central position and are the subject of worship. In Mali, the most known communities of Sufism are Qaditiyya and Tijaniyya.

[8] Wahhabiyya is used synonymously with Salafist in Mali. 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. It has a range of connotations, but is generally seen as a purist, ultra-conservative version of Sunni Islam.

[9] However, it also reflects French colonial attempts to distinguish between "benign" Sufi practices, referred to as "African" Islam or "Islam noir" and "bad" Salafi / Wahhabis practices ("Arabic" Islam). See Soares (2013) and Janson (2014: 4).

[10] Not the same organization as Ansar Din led by Iyad Ag Ghali in the north of Mali.

[11] Leaders of Sufi orders and living Muslim saints (Soares 2005: 83)

channels, such as radio, audio and video cassettes, television and so on. The distribution of religious, as well as political messages, through these media allows them to reach out to more people, and also to people who cannot read (the rate of adult literacy, i.e. above 15 years, was as low as 33.4 percent in Mali in 2012, cf. UNICEF 2013).

Secondly, people's perception of bad governance seems to help legitimize religious leaders' engagement in political affairs. Malian Muslims, religious leaders and laymen, have diverging views on religious practice, doctrine and the role of religion in politics. However, most adults, across religious and political orientations, emphasize that a range of societal 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 to these social problems. Some of the political and religious leaders we spoke with underlined "the need of moral rearmament" in a time of "bad governance and failing policies". As President Dicko of the HCIM described when we talked with him: "The political system has failed. The people came out to demand democracy. What has democracy brought them? Corruption. The people revolt against the values of bad governance". Hence, religious leaders legitimize their engagement in political affairs partly with reference to a failure of politicians to govern. This has popular support: In our survey of perceptions, 63 percent of the respondents considered representatives of political parties as "corrupt" or "very corrupt". The figure for members of the national assembly was 45 percent. Only 15 percent of respondents considered the administration of religious groups as corrupt. Generally, the confidence in religious leaders is far higher than in political representatives (Coulibaly and Hatløy, 2015).

As noted, debates about the relationship between politics and religion are not new in Mali, but the "way in which certain Muslim religious leaders have been articulating their complaints and criticisms" is (Soares 2005: 78). The arrival of religious leaders on the political scene makes politics in Mali relatively unpredictable. Two recent examples of religious groupings moving into the political stage exemplify this. Firstly, in the wake of the crisis in the North, *Sabati 2012*, a political movement rooted in the HCIM emerged. The movement had the explicit aim of increasing voters' participation in the presidential elections of 2013 and of increasing political consciousness among Muslims in Mali. The movement developed a memorandum ahead of the elections encouraging the government to implement political reforms in several sectors (cf. Thurston 2013b). President of HCIM, Mahmoud Dicko, is known to support presidential candidate I. B. Keita, who won the election. Secondly, on August 25, Dicko and Haïdara, usually not on the best of terms, together mobilized a range of civil society organizations, members of the religious grouping of Ansar Dine and HCIM against federalism (Demain 2014), i.e. against increased regional self-determination in the north. In other words, religious leaders get together in new constellation in order to exert political influence, and they succeed in mobilizing masses of people in the process. Overall, these dynamics indicate a growing political relevance of Muslim organizations in Mali.

The Wahhabist paranoia in southern Mali

Opposing interests of some of the religious leaders, particularly Dicko and Haïdara, have received much attention in the media in the last few years (e.g. in news portals like Malijet and Maliweb). Haïdara has been an outspoken critic of Islamist extremists in the north, and has accused Dicko of not taking a sufficiently clear position against terrorist groupings. Wahhabists occupy many of the seats in the central body of the HCIM, and have been particularly visible in recent political debates. Many Sufi intellectuals perceive Wahhabists as dominating religious life and discourse, in spite of making up only a minority of the population.

Popular perceptions reinforce the distinctions between Wahhabists and non-Wahhabists: many members of the Wahhabist elite in Bamako are educated in Saudi Arabia, and are said to have strong business relations with Saudi Arabia, and receive substantial financial support from there, Pakistan and the Gulf states[12]. Wahhabist women veil in full and wear niqab/burqa, whereas many Wahhabist men grow beard, and wear distinct clothing (e.g. short pants). On the other hand, many Sufi intellectuals refer to African cultural values when articulating their version of religious practice. Many Muslims of the urban elite – who refer to Sufism as their folk heritage – are educated in France. Moreover, among Muslims who go to Sufi mosques or who do not particularly care to express their religious affiliation in terms of brotherhoods or the Wahhabi/Sufi distinction, cherish European and American educational ideals and political values.

In Bamako, it seems to be a generally held view among people that southern Mali has experienced a growth of Wahhabist or Salafist versions of Islam, and that the influence derives from Saudi Arabia. A rise in the number of Wahhabist mosques in Bamako seems credible. However, the claimed increase in the number of adherents in recent years is less substantiated. One Sufi leader held that the percentage of Malian Muslims who now adhere to Wahhabism has climbed to 20. According to the Fafo 2014 survey, about 4 percent indicate that they are wahhabiyya in southern Mali (cf. Coulibaly and Hatløy, 2015). Compared to earlier estimates, it is difficult to determine whether this represents a significant increase. Wahhabiyya emerged as a reformist movement against Sufism in Mali already in the 1940s, and called for a conservative reading of the Quran. There seems to be a tendency of exaggerating the growth of Wahhabism in southern Mali (Thurston 2013a: 53) and of denouncing some of the more conservative religious leaders of the direction Wahhabiyya, as Islamists or jihadists.

Importantly, the growth of various Salafist strands in Mali is accompanied by a discourse in which all Wahhabists – including women and children, and Wahhabists with an explicitly non-political agenda – are portrayed by some Sufi intellectuals and religious leaders as a security threat. Some Sufi religious leaders that have wide support in society use the term *Wahhabism* interchangeably with jihadism and Salafism (the latter term which in Mali is considered identical to the term "terrorism", with reference to the groups in the north). For instance, people we spoke with, in elitist circles, stressed that Wahhabists are "satanists" or

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[12] Prior to 1991, AMUPI (l'Association Malienne pour l'unité et le progress de l'islam) was the only officially recognized Islamic organization, and hence it coordinated all financial assistance from amongst others Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran and the Gulf states (Soares 2005: 82).

"jihadists", and that "they try to take over our country". Similar views were expressed in statements such as: "we must get them, before they get us" and "we are ready to go to war against them", "they have arms, we must arm ourselves". The latter statements resemble hate speech, and similar messages are regularly expressed in Malian radio stations, according to people we interviewed. These Sufi religious leaders use the examples of Boko Haram, AQIM and MUJAO to underline the danger of Wahhabists in general.

This discourse expresses a widespread fear against Wahhabists among people in the south of Mali. 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. In Mopti, a woman told us about an elderly man who had been surrounded by a group of people that had told him to leave the area – as they did not want his kind in Mopti. They knew that he was a Wahhabist, according to this woman, as he was wearing short pants. 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 Muslims of "foreign" denomination, describe themselves as defenders of "inter-religious communication". In alleged pursuits of preserving Mali as religiously moderate, they solicit economic support from European NGOs and state agencies.

Intensified social exclusion of religious minorities, in this case of Wahhabists, is an aspect of post-2012 political dynamic in the south of Mali. There have been episodes of reprisal attacks, arrests and extrajudicial killings of suspected extremists (Human Rights Watch 2014a). In 2013, for instance, the police arrested 18 people in a mosque in Bamako, following neighbours' worries about the Wahhabist looks of people who came for prayers there, and suspicion of the storage of weapons in the mosque. A video on France24 shows an angry mob surrounding the men who were arrested, crying "Execute them!" and "They are infidels!" The video also shows homemade weaponry among the mob.[13] No weapons were found in the mosque, and the men who were arrested by the police were later released. These incidences suggest that the rhetoric of the danger of Wahhabism and/or extremism and the security discourse that accompanies it is gaining strength among laymen, and carries a potential of violence with it.

The demonization of citizens on the basis of ill-ascribed labels of extremism is a broader regional issue. For instance, Human Rights Watch reports indiscriminate arrest, detention, torture, and extra-judicial killing by security forces engaged in the fight against Boko Haram in Nigeria (Human Rights Watch 2014b, see also Mark 2013). This demonization tendency inevitably affects the way reconciliation processes evolve, and the potential roles of foreign actors in them.

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[13] The video is no longer available, but the article is still available on France24, see reference in the literature list.

Attempts of state control of religious processes

Malian politicians and religious leaders we spoke with strongly defended the Malian principle of "laïcité" as open state secularism, meaning that the state should not have a religious character, but must protect religious liberty and foster religious expression. They further condemn the French conventional and strict understanding of "laïcité", which they perceive as anti-religious. In France, the banning of the use of hijab in the public space is considered by many Malians as a threat to the freedom to practice religion, and as such, as a breach of the concept of "laïcité" understood as open state secularism. Their understanding of "laïcité" is more in line with understandings of state-religion relations in many non-French European countries, in Scandinavia in particular, and in the US. The leader of the HCIM, Dicko, and the leader of the Sabati Movement, Boubacar Bah, explicitly defended the way US practices freedom of religious choice and expression in a conversation they had with us. Much Western criticism of the "threat" against the French version of the principle of "laïcité" in Mali is often portrayed as un-reflexive adoption of the views of Mali's former colonial rulers. In fact, most informants underlined that the religious leaders do not want to touch the principle of "laïcité" because it reflects national unity. In addition, the criticism of the employment in Mali of the French understanding of "laïcité" is not necessarily coupled with anti-French sentiments in general: many of the strongest critics of the French understanding of "laïcité" are also strong defenders of the French military operations in the north.

Many government representatives emphasize the need to reassert control and "ownership" of religious practice, and to prevent extremists from taking over the religious sphere. Several political initiatives are developed in direct response to the lack of control of religious processes. The establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2012, political considerations of the organization of religious schools in Mali, and the education of Malian Imams in Morocco, are part of these initiatives.

The establishment of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship in 2012 has been read by some observers as a sign of Mali turning into a more religious state (Daniel 2012, Diabate 2014). According to the Minister of Religious Affairs and Worship, Thierno Amadou Omar Hass Diallo, the mandate of the ministry, however, is to regulate the religious sphere, for instance through the control of preachers (following incidents of preachers that incite aggression), overseeing the educational contents in the plethora of Quranic schools in the country, and actively shaping the education of Imams in Mali, that is perceived as too biased towards Saudi and Wahhabist influences at present. The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Worship is in dialogue with the national body of the HCIM that instructs the HCIM at the regional and local level. Although the central body of the HCIM, located in Bamako, has increasingly debated issues that are directly relevant to national politics, this does not seem to be the case for the HCIM's assemblies at regional and local levels. In our conversations with the HCIM at the local level in two different regions, they explained how they focused on practical matters concerning the organization of prayer, regulation of prayer, timing of Ramadan, etc. On the local level, the HCIMs also gather in response to call for assistance

in family disputes, land disputes, inheritance issues and so on, cases raised by women as well as men. Cases that cannot be settled through mediation are forwarded to the state judiciary. HCIM at the local level might therefore be interpreted as executing the practices regulated by the state, rather than having a political agenda of its own, in contrast to what is suggested about the central HCIM body.

The same motivation, increased control of religious groupings, is seen in political arguments for incorporating *Quranic education in the formal school system*, a system that is dominated by non-state actors. The system of education in Mali is complex, with four parallel models of schooling. The formal education consists of the French language secular schools and the French Arabic schools. The informal models of schooling consist of private schools (*madrasas*), one type of which offers an education in Arabic and Islamic studies, the other where only Islamic religious education is offered. These two latter models of schooling are growing because many religious leaders return to Mali after having received religious education abroad in Arabic speaking countries, and with few possibilities of entering the French speaking school system. Hence, they establish their own religious schools (Soares 2005: 85). According to one respondent, parents that want their children to have religious education tend to send them to *madrasa*s instead of the formal education system where they do not get any religious education at all. Therefore, the HCIM (and Sabati 2012) argue in favour of incorporating religious education into the formal school system. The stated aim among the latter, however, is to strengthen religious education and the nation's moral stamina rather than strengthening the *control* of religious education. According to our data, as much as 29 percent of the population look at *madrasas* as an alternative to other schooling options (Coulibaly and Hatløy, 2015).

In addition, Mali signed a religious affairs accord with the Moroccan state in late 2013 whereby 500 *Malian imams will receive religious training in Morocco*. This might also be interpreted as a sign of Mali moving in the direction of a more religious state; however, the motivation of the state, according to Thierno Amadou Omar Hass Diallo (the Government's Minister of Religious Affairs and Worship), is to improve the control of religious groupings. Many informants we spoke with had heard about Imams who had encouraged youngsters to go to the north to participate in the fight there, as they considered the war to be a holy war (jihad). Religious training of imams is a good initiative in order to work against such beliefs, they held. By sending imams to Moroccan facilities that teach a moderate form of Islam, the state also sends a signal of balancing the influence coming from Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

The discussion around the nature of "laïcité" in Mali, as well as politicians' active attempts to play a role in the education of Imams and religious teachers aimed at containing radical Islamist elements, indicate that debates on religion and politics will continue, but these debates should not be understood as a one way process of "Islamification" of the Malian state. We argue that rather than a shift from a "secular" to an "Islamist" state, the meanings of the concept of state secularism is changing in Mali. The secularity of the state is defended in the sense that the formal separation of the state and religious institutions is maintained. In response to the advances of extremist Salafist groups in northern Mali, however, we may anticipate increased state control in religious affairs and with religious groupings, for instance by establishing guidelines for religious leadership, preachers and education. Also, several prominent Muslim leaders develop explicit political agendas and they debate, in public, where the religious sphere ends and the political sphere begins. Religious leaders as well as politicians that support the French military intervention in northern Mali underline that "laïcité" should entail the freedom *to* practice religion as much as freedom *from* religion. Hence, Mali is moving in the direction of open "laïcité" whereby the state does not have a religious base, but it protects religious liberty and fosters religious expression. In this sense, they challenge the French understanding of "laïcité". Notably, however, religious influences in public debate derive as much from populist, "anti-Wahhabist" movements as from Salafist missionary activities. With respect to the latter, intensified social exclusion of religious minorities is a potential danger in the current political dynamic in southern Mali.

Religious organizations will continue to play an important public role in Mali. Future assessments of political developments in Mali should therefore include information gathering about political opinions of religious leaders, of Sufi, Wahhabist and other orientations.

Assessments should also pay particular attention to the security discourse propagated by non-Wahhabist religious leaders who cultivate fear of Wahhabists, including those Wahhabists and Salafists with an explicitly non-political agenda. As noted, this discourse is often communicated in the name of "interreligious dialogue", a popular concept among Western donors. Moderate and non-violent leaders in the south must be distinguished from the rebels in the north. In spite of sharing theological labels, leaders in the south reject the methods and visions of the northern Salafists. Any monitoring of the development of militant groups in the south of Mali should keep this in mind.

The education system will continue to be a point of contention in Malian politics, and the debate on the inclusion of informal Quranic schools in the formal school sector is likely to intensify. More information is needed on the quality of education the informal sector.

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