Towards an "Islamic Republic of Mali?"

Alex Thurston

On January 20, 2013, Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traoré explained to government soldiers why they, alongside French troops, were fighting rebels in Mali's northern regions. "Mali is at war," he said, "because Malian women and men are not inclined to renounce liberty, democracy, their territorial integrity, or the republican and secular form of their country."[1] By referring to Mali's "secular" form of government, Traoré implicitly rejected demands that Mali implement Islamic law, or Sharia, throughout its territory. Such demands came from the hard-line northern Islamist group Ansar al-Din, or Defenders of the Faith. Between the spring of 2012 when they commandeered what began as a separatist rebellion, and the winter of 2013 when French forces dislodged them, Ansar al-Din and its allies controlled much of northern Mali.[2] "Secularism," Ansar al-Din's leader Iyad Ag Ghali told Reuters in a June 2012 interview, "is disbelief."[3] Such statements suggest that Mali faces a stark choice between secularism and Islamism. Yet neither the political vision of Traoré, nor that of Ag Ghali, captures the range of Islamic political viewpoints that exist in Mali. This article argues that the future of Muslim politics in Mali will likely be more vibrant than either of these visions allows.

Mali has attracted worldwide attention for its descent into chaos. Like others before it, the rebellion that broke out in January 2012 was aimed at the government in Mali's capital, Bamako, and led by the Tuaregs, a pastoralist ethnic group.[4] The causes of these Tuareg-led rebellions are

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complex, including perceived marginalization and neglect by the state, particularly amid droughts and famines. With each rebellion, the state's responses sowed seeds of later conflict. President Modibo Keïta's harsh crackdown in the early 1960s left bitter memories among rebels and their sons. Peace accords, political decentralization efforts, and regional development programs in the 1990s and 2000s were never fully implemented.

The 2012 rebellion began with the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of the Awazad (MNLA) demanding that Mali's government grant independence to the northern regions of Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. Yet the situation quickly shifted. Junior army officers overthrew the national government in March 2012, and continued to influence politics even after Mali installed a transitional civilian regime the following month. In the north, meanwhile, Islamists sidelined the MNLA and solidified a de facto partition of the country. Despite some references to Islam by earlier rebel movements including the Arab Islamic Front of Azawad—active in the 1990s—the 2012 conflict marked the first time that Islamic themes dominated the rhetoric of a Tuareg-led rebellion in Mali.

During 2012, Islamist attempts to impose Sharia and enforce conformity with Salafi theology caused an international outcry, and West African governments readied a military intervention while attempting to negotiate peace. When Islamist fighters pushed south into the Mopti region in early January 2013—possibly hoping to hinder the West African intervention—France deployed forces to re-conquer northern Mali. By January 30, French and Malian soldiers recaptured Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal. At the time of writing, West African forces are deploying to replace the French and help Mali's interim government re-establish its rule in the north.

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Islamist rule at gunpoint seems unlikely to return in the short-term. The end of armed Islamist control, however, does not mean that Islam will recede as a political force in Mali. The public roles—plural—of Islam in Mali have expanded and diversified from the time of the French colonial conquest to the present. This expansion has been especially pronounced since 1991, when a military coup set the stage for two decades of multiparty elections and political liberalization. While Islamists hold few elected offices, liberalization facilitated the expression of diverse Muslim identi-

ties in Mali. Mass movements and mass media are two powerful channels through which Muslim activists shape values, influence politics, and contest the meaning of Islam. The 2012-2013 crisis occurred in the midst of this ongoing reevaluation of the role of Islam in public life in Mali. The crisis further expanded opportunities for Muslim leaders to expand their participation in politics and intensified debates over what it means to be Malian and Muslim.

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Post-war Mali will likely not be an "Islamic state" in the sense of a state where micro-policies are explicitly based on specific references to Islamic scriptures and traditions. But Islam already has a greater public role in Mali than before the war began. As Mali emerges from conflict and re-imagines its political system, Malian politicians and outside partners hoping to restore an idealized "status quo ante," in which Islam supposedly played no public role in a democratic and "secular" country, may have to acknowledge the increasingly powerful influences Muslim activists and movements wield in Malian society and politics.

HISTORIES OF SECULARISM AND ISLAM IN MALI

Commentators sometimes describe Mali as a "secular society."[5] The constitution Mali adopted at independence in 1960 and the constitution promulgated during the transition to democracy in 1992 both declared Mali a "secular" republic. Independent Mali inherited the notion of secularism ,or *laïcité,* from France, its former colonial ruler. The "Law Concerning the Separation of the Churches and the State," promulgated in France in 1905, established the secular character of the French state, banning state funding for religious activities and removing religious symbols from public buildings.[6] These changes and the attitudes they reflected coincided with the consolidation of French control over present-day Mali, then called Soudan Francais, derived from the Arabic *bilad al sudan* or "land of the blacks." French administrators sometimes disparaged local Muslim religious specialists, whom the French called "marabouts." Christopher Harrison writes:

> Implicit comparisons were drawn between the marabout in Africa and the village *curé* in France, and at a time of strong anti-clericalism in France, this was intended to be a critical rather than complimentary comparison. Like the village priest, the marabout was accused of obfuscation and of leading a lifestyle [that] was essentially exploitative of the mass of believers.[7]

Yet such disdain did not prevent the French from building strategic relationships with certain Muslim leaders. From the 1850s, when French colonialists began a wave of military expansion into West Africa from their base in present-day Senegal, they despised, feared, and targeted certain Muslims, but courted others. By the early twentieth century, there was an identifiable "Muslim policy" that involved the promotion of certain Muslim leaders and a "working relationship between this establishment and the French."[8] This policy also involved exile, detention, or other punishments for Muslims perceived as dissidents. Between favoritism and repression, French colonial rule in present-day Mali was never "secular" in the sense of removing religion from public life or structures of power.

Although this was not French policymakers' intention, colonial rule intensified Islamization in Mali. Under colonialism, more people moved from one place to another. They moved as refugees fleeing wars, freed slaves coming home, workers forced into labor, soldiers serving in the military, or traders operating in the colonial economy. The movement of people and ideas accelerated conversions to Islam.[9] Changes sparked by colonialism disrupted pre-existing hierarchies of power, reshaping the social roles of the core groups within pre-colonial Muslim networks: merchants, clerics, and warrior-rulers. Individuals' conversions to Islam disrupted certain ethnic groups' claims to define the faith. Models of Muslim identity changed. Pressures grew to standardize worship practices throughout the Muslim community. These changes, Robert Launay and Benjamin Soares have argued, helped create an "Islamic sphere" wherein West African Muslims debated, sometimes violently, what it meant to be Muslim.[10] This sphere was diverse and included niches even for Muslims the colonial regime sought to repress. For example, the branch of the Tijaniyya headed by Shaykh Ahmad Hamallah (c. 1886-1943) survived despite the deportation of its leader. By the waning years of colonial rule in the 1940s and 1950s, Muslims had a strong presence in Malian politics, economy, and society. As Mali transitioned to independence in 1960, it did so as a newly Muslim-majority country with increasing possibilities for the deployment of Muslim identities.

Trajectories of Muslim activism were uneven during the independence era. During the lead-up to independence in 1960, Muslim

reformist merchants formed an important constituency within the African Democratic Rally (RDA), of which Modibo Keïta's Sudanese Union-RDA (US-RDA) was an outgrowth.[11] The US-RDA's victories in local and parliamentary elections in the late 1950s meant that "representatives of leading religious families who had supported the [rival party] lost political terrain."[12] However, after independence—and the dissolution of a short-lived union with Senegal—Keïta's socialist regime made Islam "officially invisible," and banned reformist organizations such as the Muslim Cultural Union.[13] Although it would be unwise to make too close of a comparison between the regime's attitude toward Islam in this period and its repression of Tuaregs during the rebellion of 1963-1964, it is worth noting that the early postcolonial state and its homogenizing vision of nationhood suppressed some of the very identities that are the most deeply contested in Mali today.

Attitudes toward Islam under the regime of Moussa Traoré, who overthrew Keïta in a 1968 coup, were more favorable. At times, the Traoré regime attempted to instrumentalize Islam for political ends, "increasingly adopt[ing] the trappings of a Muslim identity in public and on a national level."[14] After the Traoré government shifted to a one-party civilian model in 1979, it took Islam and related matters into greater account in policy-making. In 1979, the government established a Center for the Promotion of the Arabic Language, housed within the Ministry of National Education.[15] In 1980, the government created the Malian Association for the Unity and Progress of Islam (AMUPI) "in an effort to both control and redirect the political energy generated by [increased Islamic activity]."[16] Such efforts partly responded to Islamization from below. Despite periodic efforts by the state to marginalize Islamic activists, mosques and Islamic schools proliferated in the first decades after independence. Between 1968 and 1983, for example, Bamako went from 77 mosques to 203.[17]

The 1980s saw the emergence not only of state-sponsored Islamic institutions, but also unofficial Islamic groups such as the reformist Islamic Association for Salvation (AISLAM).[18] Sometimes these unrecognized associations explicitly challenged the state's attempts to manage Islamic identities. One movement that emerged in the 1980s was Ancar Dine (not to be confused with Ag Ghali's Ansar al-Din) led by Cherif Ousmane Madani Haïdara. In one account, Haïdara's supporters established the organization in 1989 after Traoré and AMUPI attempted to block Haïdara, a critic of government corruption, from further public preaching.[19]

The growth of both official and underground Islamic organizations in the 1980s, along with the expansion of Muslim infrastructure like schools

and mosques, set the stage for the flowering of Islamic associational life after 1991. On March 26, 1991, soldiers led by General Amadou Toumani Touré deposed President Moussa Traoré. The Transition Committee for the Salvation of the People established by General Touré moved swiftly to rewrite the rules of political participation in Mali. The Committee's first official decree established freedom of association. Muslim activists took advantage of the new climate and established dozens of Islamic associations and media outlets. Yet the authorities managing Mali's transition made some moves to secularize politics. The Transition Committee's second decree banned political parties based on religion.[20] In the constitution Mali adopted in February 1992, the preamble stated that the Malian people "solemnly committed themselves to defend the republican form and the *laïcité* of the State."[21]

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Islamic associations created during the 1980s became critical players after 1991. AISLAM was the first Islamic association to legally register during the transition of 1991.[22] Haïdara, meanwhile, is the most popular Malian Muslim preacher today, able to fill soccer stadiums with followers.[23] Soares has argued that Haïdara represents a new kind of religious authority in postcolonial Mali. Haïdara openly opposes Salafism, the interpretive framework that opposes Sufi orders and rituals in the name of literal readings of scripture. Yet Haïdara does not present himself as a formal member of a Sufi order. Rather, his public persona fuses elements of Sufism, especially charismatic authority, with the mass popularity of a "Muslim media star" that reaches thousands of followers through recorded lectures.[24] Associational life offers Malians a variety of possible Muslim identities and powerful channels through which to criticize political authorities.

Mali had only two presidents during the period from 1992-2012. Alpha Oumar Konaré, a historian and former government minister, won the election of 1992. Despite an opposition boycott, Konaré was re-elected in 1997. Touré came out of retirement to win the elections of 2002 and 2007. Both presidents felt the political power of the country's array of Islamic associations, who acted as pressure groups that demanded a voice in policymaking. By the early 2000s, when the Konaré administration sponsored the creation of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM), the

country had some 150 Islamic associations.[25] The coexistence of a "secular" state with a vibrant Muslim civil society and media gave Muslim activists substantial opportunities to influence formal politics.

As Muslim activists engaged with politics in new ways, they called the meaning of secularism into question. As Mali moved toward presidential elections in 2002, for example, Muslim associations organized at least three mass rallies. One, in September 2001, brought together leaders of twenty Islamic associations from across the country. Attendees decried what they perceived as an anti-religious bent to state policymaking and urged constituents to vote for candidates who embodied Islamic values.[26] The political role of Islam, and especially that of the HCIM, was growing. In September 2011, Touré appointed the HCIM's Secretary General Dr. Mamadou Diamouténé as head of the Independent National Electoral Commission.[27]

The HCIM became a platform for Muslims to act as a pressure group in the political arena, especially around contested issues perceived to affect the country's moral character. This pressure was felt dramatically between 2009 and 2012. On August 3, 2009, Mali's National Assembly passed a new "Code of Persons and of the Family," the first major revision of the country's personal status laws since 1962. Throughout Francophone West Africa, such family codes regulate marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other matters pertaining to family life. Family codes often bore the stamp of French law and French laïcité. Efforts to reform codes in an even more secular direction sometimes drew objections from Muslim leaders concerned that these reforms would undermine Islamic values. Senegalese Muslim leaders resisted reforms to that country's family code in the 1970s. Mali's reform project began in the mid-1990s, supported by human rights organizations and international partners like U.S. Agency for International Development. At that time, the 2009 reform was the culmination of over a decade of debate—a debate that Muslim activists felt had only included a small spectrum of voices in Mali. Few elites expected the code to generate controversy. Only five legislators voted against the 2009 law, which a senior official in the Ministry of Justice called "a sensible amelioration of women's rights."[28]

Muslim activists organizing against the code appeared to catch elected politicians and secular human rights activists off guard. As early as 2008, some Malian Muslim leaders objected to certain provisions in the new code, such as one article's description of marriage as a secular institution.[29] After the law was passed, the HCIM organized a meeting on August 9, 2009 at which Muslim leaders spoke against the code at the central mosque in Bamako.[30] On August 22, the HCIM held a mass rally against the code,

reportedly drawing a crowd of 50,000.[31] Five days later, then-President Amadou Toumani Touré asked legislators to redraft the code.[32]

The struggle over the family code provoked public debate and reflection about the nature of *laïcité* in Mali and the role of Islam in politics. On August 12, the HCIM's president, Imam Mahmoud Dicko, told the Malian newspaper *Le Républicain* that he rejected a view of *laïcité* as "the negation of religion by the State." He favored instead an "intelligent *laïcité*" in which "the rights of each are respected." To support his position, Dicko invoked the 1992 constitution's guarantee of freedom of religious worship. Dicko suggested that religion was embedded in the cultural landscape of Mali in a way that made hard-line secularism untenable:

> They have spoken of marriage as being a secular act. We have said it is too much for a country like Mali where everyone is a believer. There are no non-believers in Mali. In one manner or another, people believe… To say in this country that marriage is a secular act and to make it a law, it is not a good thing, it truly insults Mali.[33]

Or as HCIM's Secretary-General Mohamed Kimbiri put it in 2010, "the [true] secular state integrates religions into the conduct of public affairs."[34]

Dicko and Kimbiri were no strangers to organizing Muslims to voice demands in the public arena. Dicko was born around 1954 in the Timbuktu region. He pursued Islamic studies in Boutilimit and Néma, Mauritania, as well as in Medina, Saudi Arabia. In the 1980s, he became imam of a reformist mosque in the Badalabougou quarter of Bamako.[35] Dicko served as an official within AMUPI and as director of AMUPI's *Radio Islamique* ("Islamic Radio").[36] Kimbiri, meanwhile, has been a leader within AISLAM since the 1980s. He directed AISLAM's Radio Dambe project.[37] In the 1990s and 2000s, Kimbiri helped organize Malian Muslims to protest against international events like the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 2006.[38] When these men came into senior leadership positions within the HCIM around 2008, they could draw on deep experience with Muslim organizing, especially through movements and media.[39]

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By the time a new version of the family code passed on December 2, 2011, it had been heavily modified to take Muslim leaders' concerns into account.[40] On January 14, 2012, the HCIM organized another mass rally to urge the promulgation of the

new code, again drawing a crowd estimated at 50,000.[41] Touré formally launched the new code several days later, around the time that the MNLA began attacking targets in the north.[42] On the eve of rebellion, Muslim leaders had already demonstrated an astonishing capacity to reorient policy priorities in the capital. As the northern rebellion unfolded, southern-based Muslim leaders would receive an even greater share of the spotlight. These leaders will likely remain some of the foremost representatives of public Islamic activism in post-conflict Mali.

TRAJECTORIES OF ISLAMIC REFORMISM AND SALAFISM IN MALI

It is not only the case that Islam in Mali enjoys increasing avenues for public expression and influence. It is also evident that new voices have emerged within the Muslim population of Mali, and that Malian Muslims hold widely divergent attitudes toward practice, doctrine, and the role of religion in politics. Notably, the colonial "Islamic sphere," described by Launay and Soares, and its postcolonial iterations have included the presence of Muslims variously labeled in policy and academic literature as "Wahhabis," "reformists," "fundamentalists," and "Salafis."

Reformists or Salafis constitute a minority among Malians. Other Muslims, whether they are affiliated with Sufi brotherhoods like the Tijaniyya, non-Salafi organizations like Haïdara's Ancar Dine, or no formal organization at all, outnumber Salafis. It is also important to note that the visibility of reformism—and the attention it receives from scholars, policymakers, and journalists—does not mean that Mali is following a path toward inevitable Salafization. Finally, non-violent Salafi leaders should be distinguished from the Salafis active in the northern Islamist coalition; even if Malian Salafis share broad theological orientations, their politics and activist styles differ tremendously. These caveats aside, reformist and Salafi organizations have played particularly strong roles in both the northern Islamist movement and in Islamic political mobilization at the national level. For this reason these actors merit special attention.

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Since at least the 1940s, numerous Muslim reformist movements have arisen in Mali. Reformists have sought to replace traditional practices and doctrines—including those of Sufis—with practices and doctrines that reformists believe derive directly from Islamic scriptures. Some of these reformists were simply local actors interested in promoting their own views of religious change. Others have been more closely linked to the global tendency called Salafism, which emphasizes literalist readings of scripture and follows an intellectual canon that includes figures like Imam Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328).

Reformism appeared in different locations in Mali at different times. By the 1930s, French colonial administrators were reporting on Muslim activists in Timbuktu and Gao who were challenging Sufi prayer styles. These men occupied different social roles—a tribal chief, a schoolteacher, or a religious scholar who had made a pilgrimage to Mecca. They attracted few followers, but they alarmed the authorities and antagonized their religious rivals.[43] Increased contact with the larger Muslim world played some role in the growth of reformism. After the 1930s, pilgrimage increased due to improvements in transportation and willingness by French authorities to permit certain Muslims to travel.[44] Some Muslims returning home from pilgrimage or study in Egypt strengthened the ranks of reformists in the 1940s and 1950s. Reformists found a receptive audience among Diaspora communities of Malian workers in the sub-region and among Malian merchants implicated in trade networks that extended through present-day Mali, Guinea, and Cote d'Ivoire. Bamako became "the intellectual capital" of the reformist movement in the late colonial era, but trade centers such as Bouaké—in present-day Côte d'Ivoire—were important to the movement as well.[45]

Muslim reformists created their own institutions, notably mosques, schools, and associations. For example, a group of West African Muslims returned home from Egypt's Al-Azhar University around 1945 and settled in Bamako. In the late 1940s, they offered evening lectures where they attempted to disseminate reformist doctrine. In 1949, they founded an association—Subbanu al Muslimin, or "The Young Muslims"—and a school.[46] Indeed, late colonial Mali saw the founding of numerous *médersas* (French for "Islamic school," from the Arabic *madrasa*) where Muslim activists taught Islamic scriptures and texts, as well as spoken Arabic, alongside subjects like French, arithmetic, and even singing.[47] Finally, reformists who denounced the practices and doctrines of other Muslims sometimes constructed their own mosques. In the 1950s, Bamako and Sikasso witnessed violent clashes between reformists, who refused to attend congregational prayers led by traditionalists, and the partisans of traditionalist leaders.[48] The issues that

divided reformists and traditionalists in this period—how to pray, how and when to celebrate, or how to define Islamic doctrines—remain contested in many Malian Muslim communities today.

Reformist activism continued after independence. Responding to their marginalization under Keïta's regime, some reformists joined the coalition that toppled him.[49] With the advent of Moussa Traoré's regime in 1968, reformists enjoyed greater, but not complete, freedom of expression: after reinstituting the Muslim Cultural Union in 1968, Traoré's regime banned it again in 1971.[50] Changes in state policy did not necessarily correlate with the success or failure of Islamic reform in specific localities. For example, in villages around Gao, Islamic reform gained ground during the 1970s through organizations like Jama'a Ansar al-Sunna, or "The Society of Defenders of the Prophetic Model," although conflict between reformists and other Muslims resulted in the imprisonment of some reformist leaders.[51] One scholar writing in 1992 observed that reformists were a small but significant minority in Sikasso: "Though they make up only about five percent of the total population, their many wealthy and powerful members give them an importance disproportional to their size." Reformist merchants had sizeable representation in the town's Muslim Commission, a body whose responsibilities included organizing religious celebrations.[52]

Postcolonial Mali has seen the rise of new generations of reformists and Salafis. Many leaders from the generation of West African reformists that rose to prominence in the post-World War II and early independence periods are now deceased. The second generation of Malian reformists came to maturity in the years after independence. The most prominent member of this generation is Mahmoud Dicko. A third generation has also begun to emerge, represented by young imams in Bamako such as Ibrahim Maiga (b. circa 1976). A 2011 *Jeune Afrique* article on "Wahhabi Bamako" suggested that younger Salafi activists and their followers, who have focused on Islamizing neighborhoods in the capital, were linked to attacks on nightclubs in 2005.[53] Reformists have political significance not only for their prominence in national-level Muslim organizations such as the HCIM, but also for their involvement in localized, block-by-block struggles over sacred and profane space. The HCIM, moreover, does not necessarily speak for all of these locally based reformist activists.

NORTHERN MALI: REBELLION AND ISLAM

What accounts for the dominance of Islamists in northern Mali's 2012-2013 rebellion? The reasons for this change are not entirely clear,

as the trajectories of Islamic activism that shaped Ansar al-Din, AQIM, and MUJWA are difficult to trace. But available evidence suggests that the period from 1991 to 2012 witnessed a shift in the religious landscape of northern Mali. This shift powerfully affected some rebel commanders and brought some northerners into regional and global jihadist networks. These interactions between the local and the global involve more than just the importation of "foreign" ideas and fighters. Rather, the 1990s and 2000s have seen moves toward localization by jihadist fighters, a trend that complicates the often facile divisions that the international media sometimes makes between "Malians" and "foreign Islamists."

David Gutelius has written that in northern Mali, as in the south, Islamic activism and debate flowered after 1991. Gutelius adds that the emerging Islamic sphere took on distinctive characteristics in the north, including open bitterness toward the Konaré government and southern Muslim leaders, whose religious credentials some northern Muslim leaders viewed as weak. Through radio and pamphlets, northern Muslims called for Islamic reform, criticized the national government, and criticized other Muslims over doctrine and practice.[54]

Transnational influences affected the religious convictions of northerners, particularly Tuaregs. These influences include transnational non-governmental organizations. According to Gutelius, the peace deal of 1996 isolated the northern regions of Timbuktu, Gao, and Kidal from the rest of the country, but also brought an influx of aid dollars from the wider Muslim world. In this context, Muslim politics in the north followed its own trajectory. New Muslim associations flowered there, some of local inspiration, others linked to outside actors like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. A few outside groups focused not on northern Mali's economic development, but on "spreading particular interpretations of Islam to counter what they saw as an African bastardization of religion."[55]

In this context, Muslim politics in the north followed its own trajectory. New Muslim associations flowered there, some of local inspiration, others linked to outside actors like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

One such outside group was the Tablighi Jamaat, or the "Society for Spreading Faith," that has cultivated a strong presence in northern Mali since at least the 1990s. Founded in India in 1926, the Jamaat is a transnational Islamic missionary organization that emerged from the Deobandi School. This Islamic tendency combines elements of Sufism with an

emphasis on hadith studies and opposition to certain Sufi practices.[56] A 2005 report by the International Crisis Group asserted that Tablighi missionaries, beginning in the 1990s, targeted the region of Kidal and sought to win over former Tuareg commanders from the rebellion of 1990-1996. The report stated: "The Ifoghas fraction [an elite Tuareg clan] that rules Kidal has almost entirely converted to the Tablighi 'way'…Kidal's Mayor is Tablighi, as is its traditional leader, Inta'la. The former head of the Tuareg rebellion, Iyad [Ag Ghali], has become the spiritual leader of Mali's Tablighis and spent six months in 2004 in Pakistan on a Tablighi retreat."[57] The allegiances of northern Islamists to the Tablighis remained active during the rebellion: when Malian government soldiers killed sixteen Tablighi preachers in the town of Diabaly in September 2012, MUJWA leaders called the event "a declaration of war."[58] Islamist fighters briefly seized Diabaly during the French intervention in January 2013—a move some residents believed was an act of revenge for the preachers' deaths.[59]

Northern Islamist leaders were influenced both by the climate in northern Mali during the last twenty years and by their encounters with Muslim activists outside Mali. Ag Ghali, born in the 1950s in the Kidal region, spent time in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere as a fighter for Libya's Colonel Muammar Qaddafi in the 1970s and 1980s before returning home to help lead the rebellion 1990. In the 2000s, when he spent time in Saudi Arabia as a diplomat, Ag Ghali converted to a more radical form of Islam.[60] Ag Ghali may have formed Ansar al-Din because he failed to secure leadership of the MNLA or to express his newfound religious convictions; the truth may include elements of both explanations. Meanwhile, Oumar Ould Hamaha, an Islamist commander frequently identified by the press as a leader within either Ansar al-Din or MUJWA, also followed a path that exposed him to influences from abroad. Hamaha was born in 1965 to an Arab family in Ber, in the Timbuktu region. After graduating from secondary school in Timbuktu in 1984, he studied the Qur'an in Mauritania before returning home in 1990. Local religious leaders denied him the right to preach, and he disappeared until resurfacing in the 2000s as an AQIM fighter,[61] possibly after a stay in Algeria.[62] The participation of figures like Ag Ghali and Hamaha in regional Islamist networks complicates the idea that "local"

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actors in northern Mali can be neatly divided from "foreign" ones. Better understanding of shifts in northern Muslim identities will be crucial to devising effective strategies for the political reintegration of that region into post-conflict Mali.

Just as Malian Islamist commanders were drawn into larger jihadist networks in the 1990s and 2000s, global jihadists were drawn into local northern Malian life. News reports and policy analyses have depicted the period from roughly 2004 to 2011 as a time when AQIM and its predecessor organizations gained footholds in northern Mauritania and northern Mali through various means. Building on smuggling networks that centered on cigarettes and weapons in the 1990s, AQIM became involved in cocaine smuggling in the 2000s. Smuggling, along with kidnapping operations, strengthened ties between AQIM and local criminal networks, militias, power brokers, and rebel commanders. Some collusion likely existed between government authorities and AQIM. Figures like Ag Ghali and a local mayor named Baba Ould Cheikh played shadowy roles as intermediaries in hostage negotiations and other dealings with AQIM.[63] AQIM leaders also developed social ties in northern communities; the jihadist commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar, for example, married a woman from Timbuktu. AQIM sought to tap into grievances connected with the 2006-2009 rebellion.[64] State weakness allowed AQIM a degree of freedom to operate openly in remote areas. By 2011, AQIM had developed bases in northern Mali's Wagadou Forest,[65] and preachers affiliated with the group were conducting tours in remote villages along the border area between Mauritania and Mali.[66] Despite the military defeat of Ansar al-Din, AQIM, and MUJWA in January 2013, many of the conditions that enabled AQIM's rise remain in place. AQIM and MUJWA's presence in northern Mali may continue through guerrilla attacks, as well as underground proselytizing and continued criminality.

ISLAM IN SOUTHERN MALI DURING THE 2012-2013 CRISIS

The 2012-2013 crisis has offered southern-based Malian Muslim leaders opportunities to address political issues and articulate visions of what Islamic law and Islamic politics should be. Many southern-based Muslim leaders have rejected the methods and stances of northern Islamists. Haïdara, for example, stated in October 2012, "[t]he [Sharia] applied by the jihadists in northern Mali is not the formula recommended by Islam. It is rather a [Sharia] carved out to fit their own interests."[67] Such opposition has caused rhetorical conflict between northern and southern leaders. In

December 2012, northern Islamists reportedly made death threats against Cherif Haïdara and other major southern-based Muslims.[68]

The 2012-2013 crisis has both elevated and tested the role of leaders like Dicko. Even before the coup, leaders like Dicko and Haïdara enjoyed enough popularity to fill stadiums and command national audiences through media. The coup highlighted broad disenchantment with the Malian political class.[69] Since the coup, political confusion and disappointment in the capital have created spaces for religious leaders, especially members of the HCIM, to occupy overtly political roles. One such role has been that of intermediaries between northern Islamists and southern authorities. In April 2012, Dicko helped negotiate the release of some 160 Malian soldiers held by rebel forces.[70] In July 2012, he visited Gao in an effort to meet with Islamist leaders, though he did not succeed in meeting with Ag Ghali.[71] Another political role has involved supporting certain politicians. On August 2012, as the reappointment of the heavily criticized interim Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra lay in doubt, Dicko invited Diarra to a mass rally in Bamako and stated, "[t]he imams of the Republic desire the reappointment of the Prime Minister." Within hours, the President announced that Diarra would be retained.[72] Endorsements of politicians, however, carry risks: in December, the former junta forced Diarra's resignation.

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Such acts have compelled Dicko to walk a fine line between his role as leader of a religious organization and the inherently political nature of his behavior. When a journalist pressed him on the implications of the HCIM's involvement in national affairs, Dicko responded, "[w]e are not positioning ourselves politically, but we are positioning ourselves with respect to the interests of our country. We are in a country where we are [ninety-five percent] Muslims. The structure that represents the totality of these Muslims is directed by us. You think that we can remain indifferent to what happens to these people?"[73]

However, Dicko's political engagement has generated controversy between him and other Muslims. The HCIM's President has at times displayed an ambivalent attitude toward the Islamist project in northern Mali. At the mass rally in August 2012, Dicko suggested that he and Ag Ghali shared

common values regarding Islamization, but disagreed on methods.[74] At a May 2012 meeting, Dicko declined to condemn Islamists' destructions of saints' tombs in Timbuktu. Haïdara, taking the floor after Dicko, strongly called the HCIM President to account:

> This non-condemnation is due simply to the fact that these rebels share the same religious conviction as certain members of the High Council. Even though it and other Muslims practice what these rebels condemn, namely: prayers in cemeteries, that is to say ziyaras [Arabic for "visit"], wearing talismans, etc., which form part of their tradition.[75]

To calm the ensuing quarrel, Dicko offered a condemnation of the Islamists' acts.[76] At year's end, Dicko and Haïdara still professed respect for one another, but Haïdara openly acknowledged that 2012 had revealed deep ideological divisions within the HCIM.[77] Dicko's efforts to act as a bridge between the government and the north, meanwhile, faltered. By October 2012, he rejected the idea of further negotiations with MUJWA.[78] The French military intervention complicated Dicko's position even further. When Dicko announced his support for the intervention in January 2013,[79] he risked political capital: if the intervention sours and the re-conquest of northern Mali yields rampant human rights abuses and ethnic clashes, Dicko may come under fire from other Muslims.

Regardless of whether Muslim leaders' political gambles ultimately fail, they have already won a greater place for Islam in Malian public life.

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Significantly, the transitional government created a Ministry of Religious Affairs in August 2012. The creation of the Ministry had long been a demand of the HCIM. The new Minister, Yacouba Traoré, is one of the Council's members.[80] The HCIM and the Ministry have so far been closely linked: in September, Dicko and Traoré jointly presided over a meeting of Muslim scholars to discuss "the conditions for applying [Sharia] in Mali." The HCIM aimed to produce a document that it could present to Ansar al-Din in the hopes of producing dialogue over the role of Sharia in the country.[81] Mali's next government is unlikely to base laws on Islamic scriptures, but such moves may foreshadow a scenario where the next Malian constitution will make broad symbolic references to Sharia—or even call Mali an "Islamic Republic."

CONCLUSION

The history of Mali has generated complex possibilities for expressions of Islam in public life. Despite the presence in northern Mali of hard-line Islamists, and despite the state's profession of secularism, many such expressions of Muslim politics do not fit neatly into the categories of "secularism" or "Islamism." Rather, various forms of public engagement coexist, from lobbying to conflict mediation to protest. Mass movements and mass media have been two particularly powerful channels through which religious leaders and their followers have influenced state and society.

Despite the presence in northern Mali of hard-line Islamists, and despite the state's profession of secularism, many such expressions of Muslim politics do not fit neatly into the categories of "secularism" or "Islamism."

The Islamist experiment in northern Mali has proven, at least at the time of writing, short-lived. Applying criminal Sharia penalties and enforcing Salafism through acts like destroying saints' tombs produced local resistance, domestic condemnation, and international outcry. When tested, Islamist military capacities proved no match for the power of a Western European military. Undoubtedly, northern Mali likely has not seen the last of Ansar al-Din, AQIM, and MUJWA. Attempted suicide bombings in Gao, Kidal, Timbuktu, and Khali and raids by Islamist fighters in February and March 2013 hinted at the possibility of a prolonged guerrilla conflict in the region—but the Islamist coalition appears unlikely to regain broad territorial control in the near term.

However, the defeat of hard-line Islamism does not mean that Muslim politics will recede in Mali. French-educated technocrats and career politicians may dominate elections and government bureaucracies, but Muslim preachers and leaders of mass-based religious organizations will continue to constitute powerful pressure groups in post-conflict Mali. These religious leaders and movements will have a major say in determining the character of the state. This influence will operate both in a formal sense, as evidenced by the role of the HCIM in creating and shaping the new Ministry of Religious Affairs, and in an informal sense, as Muslim constituencies phrase demands in explicitly religious vocabularies. Lawmakers will remember the lessons of Muslim resistance to the Family Code and politicians will seek the endorsements of Muslim leaders. Islamic scripture may not provide

the template for the next iteration of the Malian state, but the new Mali may incorporate broad references to Sharia and Islam into future constitutions. The Islam of Iyad Ag Ghali, in other words, may not gain much ground in Mali in the coming years. But neither will a secularism that seeks to confine Islam to the private sphere. Rather, the expansive secularism of Mahmoud Dicko—a secularism in dialogue with shifting Islamic identities in a Muslim-majority country—may play a profound role in shaping the character of post-conflict Mali.

The Islam of Iyad Ag Ghali, in other words, may not gain much ground in Mali in the coming years. But neither will a secularism that seeks to confine Islam to the private sphere.

Given the diverse and powerful history of Muslim politics in Mali, the country's international partners should exercise open-mindedness concerning the place of Islam in Malian government and society. As Mali holds elections, crafts a new constitution, and devises new political arrangements in northern localities, equating Islamization with radicalization and attempting to block or undo moves toward greater incorporation of Islamic elements in government and politics would be a mistake. Indeed, a greater acknowledgment of Islam's public influence may prove helpful to reestablishing national unity. To flourish, Mali may have to develop its own brand of Muslim politics—not necessarily the one that Washington or Paris would choose for it, but one with which these outsiders can live. ∎

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