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Interview with Rahmane Idrissa: "The collusion between Salafist opinion and Western apprehension defines the way Islam is perceived today"

INTERVIEW BY NDONGO SAMBA SYLLA

Who is Rahmane Idrissa? Can you briefly introduce yourself?

I am a politician, Nigerian by nationality and currently based at Leiden University in the Netherlands. I did a Master's Degree in Philosophy in Dakar in 1998, and it was also there that I started to move towards political science, even though I finally did my doctorate in this field in the USA.

You recently published "Islam and Politics in the Sahel. Between persuasion and violence". What motivated you to write on this subject?

I worked on the political issues of Islam, first in Niger in the early 2000s, to understand why they created so much tension between a segment of society and the state. But, as you know, what I first perceived as a Nigerian problem turned out to be, particularly after the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States, a truly international issue. One that was also present in a large number of African countries, Europe and Asia. I was specifically

troubled by the fact that the main entry point for this issue was violence, terrorism and jihadism. It may be natural to initially focus on violence but I think it obscures the importance, if not the seriousness, of the issue. The tension I first detected in Niger was not expressed primarily through violence. It is a sign of political ideological activity based on Islam that manifests more through what I have called "persuasion" than through violence. Persuasion has transformed the socio-cultural and political atmosphere of the Sahelian countries in a direction that is, I would say, increasingly salafist, and violence is only an epiphenomenon of this development. I wrote this book to understand the origin and essence of this evolution, as well as the nature of the crises it causes across the Sahel countries.

You make the distinction between "presence of Islam" and "mass Islamisation". Did colonisation contribute to mass Islamisation in the Sudano-Sahelian region?

I explain in the book that, while Islam was present in the Sahel from the 1st century AD, the Sahel only really became Islamic in the 19th and 20th centuries of the Christian era, defining Islamisation as a mass phenomenon and not a simple presence of faith in a particular place. Colonisation represented a revolution for old Sahelian societies, what I call the former Sahelian regime. This ancient regime was based, at a religious level, on community religions not on Islam; at the legal level on customs not on Sharia law; and at the memorial level on a history specific to each community and not on the history of Islam.



RAHMANE IDRISSE

Almost all these societies were organised into a system of statutory caste-like groups, the structure of which was legitimised by community religion, customs and community history preserved by traditional griots. These societies were not hostile to Islam so they allowed it to carve out a place for itself through the creation of maraboutic subgroups. But they were still subgroups, therefore minorities, and Islam has not transformed the organisation of Sahelian societies nor replaced their sources of legitimacy with its own. This explains the Fulani jihads of the 18th and 19th centuries. These jihads tried to transform Sahelian societies through violence, to Islamize them by force. Ultimately, the effect was rather limited, as I explain in the book. Colonisation had a more radical effect. Contrary to what many people think, colonisation was not a religious crusade or a form of Christian jihad

but rather an authoritarian expansion of capitalism. To establish the political conditions for economic exploitation, it dismantled, not always voluntarily, the traditional social organisation, weakened customs, and placed the former authorities at its disposal. As a result, the structures that opposed the expansion of Islam collapsed, and it was finally able to spread throughout society. Obviously, I am speaking here in a rather schematic way, the book goes into greater detail about the modalities of this expansion for each case, because there are interesting differences from country to country. I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the same story has been told in favour of Christianity in the Gulf of Guinea.

In your opinion, Islam should be separated from the political ideals it professes. Is that why you refrain from using the concept of "political Islam"?

Not quite. This term bothers me because it is vague and imprecise. In a sense, it means that Islam generates political ideals. It does, but all religions do! What do I learn when people talk to me about political Islam? Nothing very specific. What I would be more interested in is the nature of these political ideals. And this nature is very diverse, depending on whether these ideals derive from Shi'ite, Sunni, Kharédjite, etc. theology, as well as the time and context. The object, the phenomenon studied in the book is not political Islam, but Salafist radicalism, Salafism being a Sunni theological approach.

In your book you defend the view that Salafism is an ideology and that violence is not its main characteristic, which is contrary to the impression generally conveyed by the media about Salafism. Can you elaborate on this?

In fact to be precise, Salafism is not an ideology but a theology. From this theology a radical political ideology emerged. It is normal for the media to identify Salafism with violence because it is only interested in what makes noise, and since Salafism is quiet, it is of no interest. But being silent, at least in the media, does not mean that it is dormant. In the book, I analyse Salafism activity in the Sahel since the 1940s, with its different phases and its revival, known thanks to political liberalisation in the 1990s. Overall, this activity has been non-violent and in the order of persuasion, through preaching, medersas instruction, lobbying and demonstrations that sometimes overflow into riots and public clashes, and in these instances media attention is vaguely awakened. The result has been a silent, but continuous, salafisation of Sahelian societies, where the practice of Islam is nowadays closer to what Salafist theology says than only fifteen to twenty years ago. However, it is important to take an interest in this even if there is no open violence. Salafism is by nature opposed to the type of state that currently governs Sahelian societies, and which I call "civil status" in the book, a secular state in which citizens are free and equal under the law. Furthermore, there is also symbolic violence that, although less visible, does not compromise any less the balance of such a state, particularly discrimination

against religious minorities or the stigmatisation of certain groups and practices considered intolerable in the Salafist vision of things.

Is it appropriate to draw parallels between the decline of progressive African ideologies (African nationalism, pan-Africanism, socialist internationalism, etc.) and the apparent resurgence of radical Salafism in the Sudano-Sahelian region, particularly in northern Nigeria?

I imagine you're referring to a passage in the book in which I attempt to explain what a political ideology is. It's not really a parallel, it's a fact. African nationalist ideologies, both progressive and conservative have declined, while Salafist radicalism is enjoying a renewed vigour. In the 1960s, the ideology that has now become Salafist radicalism was losing momentum across the Sahel, and at the time, it could rightly be considered dead and buried. This was the consensus across all Muslim countries. Do you realise that in the early 1960s, Walter Laqueur, a recently deceased American historian and political commentator who, in his later years was an analyst obsessed with "political Islam", wrote at that time, that Arab countries were currently more predisposed than most to provide favourable ground for the development of communism?

Islam has gradually ceased to be a serious competitor of communism in the struggle for the consciousness of the present and potential elites in the Middle East countries. Of course, at the time, it was rather "communism" that concerned people like

Laqueur, but in any case, he noted that Islam no longer nourished political ideals around 1960. This decline and revival of the ideology of political Salafism indicates that it is possible that the ideology of African nationalism may also one day recover. This depends on the evolution of the context.

Faced with the "Jihad vs McWorld" vision that depicts "jihadism" as an obscurantist reaction to the modernist ideals of capitalist globalization, politician Timothy Mitchell instead advanced the McJihad thesis: whenever capitalist powers have been able to impose themselves - for example, the oil majors in the Middle East - they have often relied on conservative religious forces/the most opposed to democracy. How does this last thesis inspire you in the Sudano-Sahelian context?

Exploitative capitalism naturally rests on conservative forces, there is no particular friendship between capitalism and democracy, I would say, on the contrary. I will not comment on the situation in the Middle East, which indeed corroborates Mitchell's statement, unless I add that this orientation of capitalism is pragmatic, not doctrinaire. The case of the Sahel-Sudan illustrates this. Historically, colonization, which was exploitative capitalism, relied heavily on religious/conservative forces, such as the emirates of northern Nigeria or the brotherhoods of Senegal, and I show through which mechanisms in the book. But nowadays, it does not need these forces in our countries and must therefore work with the prevailing regime, which is more pro-

democracy. I believe that if a Salafist regime were to prevail in our countries, the capitalists would find ways to work with it, and it is quite possible that they would benefit from it!

Ironically both Salafists and a certain segment of Western public opinion share the view that Islam is incompatible with democracy. What is your take on this?

Simply a misunderstanding of what Islam is. Islam is not only a profession of faith, it is a civilization, without which it would only be a sect. A civilisation is a very complex thing. Of course, there are aspects of this civilisation that are incompatible with democracy or civil status, but there are also aspects that are compatible, even necessary for democracy. I always said that I will vote for a presidential candidate who cultivates the virtues of the Muslim ruler such as integrity and clemency, patience and concern for maslaha, the common good. Apart from Sharia law, which obstructs Salafists, there is hikma in Islam, wisdom, which is more difficult to acquire because it requires us to distrust ourselves and to be attentive to others. This hikma, a mixture of gentleness and sagacity, seems to me to define the essence of Islam more than what Salafists say. But the collusion between Salafist opinion and Western apprehension today defines the way Islam is generally perceived, whether we like it or not. And that's a shame.

In what way is the "paradoxical legacy of colonialism" of which you speak specific to the Sudano-Sahelian space compared to, for example, North Africa and other countries where the Islamic religion is a minority or even absent?

This paradoxical legacy is that of a civil state, and therefore necessarily a secular state, and an Islamized society. This raises what I would call a "question of Islam", i.e. the tension between the state and society because of the real incompatibilities between the civil project and certain aspects of religion, such as Salafist theology. Obviously this is not a legacy found in North Africa, where society was Islamized before colonization, and where civil status remains a rather problematic vision. Already in Morocco it must coexist with an old monarchy that still holds most of the political power on the basis of the command of the believers and the Cherifian ancestry, with all that this implies in terms of the weight of religion in public life. And if Tunisia is trying to democratize, the same cannot be said of Algeria or Egypt. As for Libya, it is better not to talk about it. But you are doing well to mention the countries where Islam has a lesser or no presence, because it is clear from this that the question of Islam is really a statistical issue.

In the book, this can be illustrated by the case of Nigeria, where this question of Islam is posed in a very different way in the massively Islamized Sudano-Sahelian north and in the southwest (Gulf of Guinea) where Islam is only the largest religious minority. In the north, the issue has led to a kind of sharianization and violence in Boko Haram,

but not in the southwest. And as for the Christian south-east, the question of Islam does not even arise there! This is really a Sudano-Sahelian issue inherited from colonialism.

In contrast to the widespread view of colonialist rationality against the arbitrary delineation of national borders in Africa, you argue that the colonial delineation had to take into account the political and geocultural realities already in place. What is your view on the need to abolish borders in Africa?

This is the issue of African unity but I don't see any problem there. We only unite what is divided and we only standardise what is heterogeneous. And, before venturing into such a process, it is obviously necessary to know the potential geopolitical obstacles to better transcend them. In short, by creating the AOF (Afrique Occidentale Française, or the Federation of French West Africa created in 1895, which included eight colonies), the French knew better than to transcend these obstacles. In the end we were the ones who destroyed the AOF, even if the French helped us do so.

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