Islam and democracy in East Africa

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This study examines the relative political significance of domestic and transnational Islamic militancy in three East African countries: Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. It seeks to identify, describe and account for the sources and significance of such militancy and to relate how it impacts upon democratization outcomes. The analysis reaches three conclusions: first, encouraged by the post-9/11 international fall-out, regional Islamic networks are working towards improving the perceived low political and economic status of Muslims in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda; second, the political significance of Islamic militancy in the three countries is relatively low; and third, various Islamic initiatives are important in the pursuit of more democratic polities.

Key words: Islam; politics; militancy; democratization

Introduction: Islam and Politics in Africa

Four issues contextualize discussions of the political role of Islam in Africa, which for the purpose of this study means sub-Saharan Africa. The initial one is that there are a number of versions of Islam extant in the region. Many Africans belong to Sufi brotherhoods; in addition, many ethnic groups, especially in West and East Africa, converted historically to Islam en masse; some of them are also be members of various Sufi brotherhoods – so the latter may also have an ethnic dimension. However, orthodox conceptions of Islam – nearly always Sunni in Africa – are the province of the Muslim religio-legal scholars, the ulama. This suggests that in Africa, ‘Islam’ is a multifaceted term covering various interpretations of the Muslim faith.

Overall, Muslim Africa can be divided into three distinct categories, corresponding to extant social, cultural and historical divisions. First, there is the dominant socio-political and cultural position of certain Muslim figures found in the emirates of northern Nigeria, the lamidates of northern Cameroon and the sheikdoms of northern Chad. In these places, not only is both religious and political power fused typically in the hands of a few individuals but there is also a parallel – and reinforcing – class structure. Second, there are areas where Sufi brotherhoods predominate – generally in West and East Africa, specifically in, inter alia, The Gambia, Guinea, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Tanzania. Third, in various African countries not only are Muslims fragmented by ethnic and/or regional divisions but also politically

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marginalized as a minority bloc. This is the situation in, inter alia, Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Togo and Uganda.

The second factor is that ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ are relatively rare in Africa, although not unknown. This is because Sufi Islam, the faith of many African Muslims, is often a target for the wrath of the fundamentalists – because they regard Sufism as a ‘primitive’, degraded form of Islam, it must be reformed and ‘purified’. ‘Fundamentalist’ interpretations of Islam are of political importance in, for example, Sudan (where it is the ruling ideology and an issue fuelling the recently ended 30-year-long civil war) and in parts of northern Nigeria, where inter-religious conflict – leading to hundreds of deaths of Muslims and Christians in the country since the early 2000s – has its roots in fundamentalist interpretations of the scriptures.

Third, there is ambivalence in the way that many African Muslims (are said to) regard the principles and practice of (Western-style) liberal democracy. Many Muslims are said to oppose liberal democracy because sovereignty resides with the people, not with God. In addition, and partly as a result, many (Western) analysts believe that Islam is a highly authoritarian or totalitarian religion, with a belief system fundamentally incompatible with Western, liberal democratic ideas and values. The problem, they believe, is that ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ (or ‘Islamists’) seek to impose religious visions on society, to put into effect sharia law and, hence, reduce popular freedoms.

Fourth, in recent years several African countries, including those focused upon here – Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – have been noted as significant bases for al Qaeda and other militant Islamist networks. Thus, when thinking about the political effects of Islam in Africa we need to bear in mind not only domestic indigenous sources of Islamic political engagement but also transnational, often extra-regional, forms. In Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania Islam is an important minority religion, with specific impacts upon political outcomes. The background to the current political role of Islam is that all three have a long history of undemocratic – one-party or military – rule that evolved recently into (somewhat) more democratic forms of government. During authoritarian rule, for long periods senior Muslim figures were often in partnership with secular governments of various political hue – with the aim of creating and perpetuating an ideology of domination. This ideology was based typically on a stated desire to reform traditional, ‘primitive’, ‘degraded’, often Sufi, modes of Islam. As Bromley notes, what he calls ‘folk’ (or ‘popular’) Islam, that is, Sufi Islam, is often the religion of the majority of Muslims in an African country; a form of Islam more or less independent of the state. For this reason, Islamic reformers located in the state – typically with leadership roles in national Muslim organizations (NMOs) – sought to ‘repress Sufi orders, seeing them as a threat to (their) own position’. In other words, Muslim reformers tried to bolster their own dominant positions by systematizing their group values, seeking to impose a hegemonic ideology.

NMOs also aimed to fill the role of intermediary and interlocutor between state and umma. Senior Muslim figures claimed to carry out a dual role: to channel the state’s orders and wishes downwards, while officially passing social concerns the other way. Note, however, that such NMOs were found not only in African countries
where a majority of the people were Muslims – such as Niger, Mali and Guinea – but also in others, where Muslims comprised substantial (Tanzania) or less substantial (Kenya and Uganda) minorities. Government, via the NMOs, sought to achieve political and religious control of ‘their’ Muslims, regarded routinely as potentially subversive. Thus, NMOs functioned primarily as control and surveillance bodies, ‘a means of protection against the . . . development of a militant Islam, uncontrolled and subversive’.3

In sum, many African states, in partnership with senior Muslim figures, sought to create hegemonic rule by exploiting the latter’s religious and moral prestige, cultural leadership and ideological persuasiveness. The idea of hegemony relates to the cultural leadership of a class in relation to society; in religious terms, it refers to the significance of leading Muslims in relation to their desire to dominate what ‘ordinary’ believers think and say about religious and political issues. NMOs were often not under the control of members of the ulama, especially where a state contained a minority of Muslims. Instead, NMOs were dominated typically by powerful – sometimes rather secular – Muslims who enjoyed formal positions – and salaries – in the state. Their objective matched that of the government: to control local Muslims and to ensure their loyalty to the state and nation, not primarily to seek to reform Muslims’ spiritual behaviour. For example, Uganda’s NMO, the Muslim Supreme Council was created by Idi Amin Dada in the early 1970s; and five of its 13 members (38 per cent) were senior figures from the police or armed forces.4 In Tanzania the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, recognized that the traditional power structure was too strongly entrenched to be preempted by its secular, quasi-socialist ideology. As a result, traditional leaders, including where appropriate Islamic authorities, were coopted into its official Muslim organization and state leadership structure. A National Muslim Council of Tanzania was formed to supervise Islamic affairs on the mainland. The Mosque Council of Zanzibar, founded in 1981 and led by Shaikh Ameir Tajo Ameir, fulfilled a similar role on the island of Zanzibar. In Kenya, the Supreme Council of Kenya Muslims (SUPKEM) was founded in 1973 as an umbrella body of all Muslim organizations, societies, mosque committees, community based organizations, imams and preachers’ associations and other Muslim interest groups in the country. The raison d’être of SUPKEM, according to the government, was to articulate and advocate the rights, aspirations and concerns of Kenya’s Muslims. At this time, however, Kenya was under the one-party rule of KANU (Kenya African National Union), and the principal role of SUPKEM was, de facto, to function as an organ of the state. In sum, NMOs in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya comprised Muslims whose common characteristic was that they were allies of the ruling regime, seeking to perpetuate and disseminate non-democratic forms of rule.

During the period of authoritarian rule in Africa – roughly the 1970s to the 1990s – Islam underwent a variety of reformist initiatives, including those associated with ‘puritanical’ movements, such as Wahhabiya – which aimed to give a new impulse to Islam by defining new modalities of both social organization and education, and to reform the Sufi brotherhoods. This also involved the renovation of Arabic as a religious language, of Islamic education, and of the development of modern Islamic
scientific knowledge and technology in order not to be dependent on the West. In the
1950s and 1960s, schools, with curricula based on such ideas, were founded by
members of the Salafiyya in various African countries, including Guinea, Chad and
Senegal.\(^5\) Looking to Saudi Arabia or Egypt for their religious-ideological inspiration, Wahhabists and other groups – often linked to the Muslim Brotherhood – sought to spread their ideas in Africa, deriving inspiration from the works of, inter alia, Jamal Ad Din Al Afghani (1838–97), Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), and Rashid Ridha (1865–35).\(^6\) However, African governments were
suspicious of what they saw as an Arab initiative to turn the heads of ‘their’
Muslims, an ‘Arab plot’ to win control of Africa below the Sahara. Europeans had
decolonized; Arabs, it was feared, sought to step into the vacuum. Consequently,
African governments were determined to ensure that Arabic roots of contemporary
Muslim renewal were not utilized by Arab states as a means to gain undue influence
with African Muslims.

In sum, the foregoing underlines that many African governments are wary about
the political role of Islam, especially when it is not the religion of the majority, as in
Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. While Islam’s value as a ‘social cement’ is often
welcomed, historical ties between, on one hand, Muslims in the Middle East and
north Africa and, on the other hand, Muslims in East and West Africa predate the
drawing of modern state boundaries and as a result are seen as a threat to African
governments’ hold on power. Consequently, African governments seek to utilize
Islam as a facet of national identity and state power, and to increase their influence
in the international Muslim community. The state aims to dominate all international
Muslim transactions; it strives to be the interlocutor, the negotiator and the benefici ary
of all relations and communications that its Muslim community maintains
with the wider Islamic world; in other words, the state seeks to make use of Islam
as an ideology of national unity. NMOs aim to channel the faith of the Prophet
into specific organizations, sometimes offering material rewards in order to integrate
any putative Islamic counter-elite into the state-controlled framework.\(^7\) While often
successful, in recent times a number of opposition Muslim groups have emerged,
either because of state attacks against Muslim minorities – as in Tanzania and
Kenya – or because of self-proclaimed revolutionary regimes’ apparent intention
of diminishing Islam’s cultural role, as in Uganda.

Islam and Politics in East Africa

Along the East African littoral, Islam is typically the religion of discrete ethnic
groups – people long excluded from the exercise of state power. In two of our
three countries in focus – Kenya and Uganda – Islam is a minority religion, as
shown in Table 1, while in Tanzania Islam is probably the largest religion. In each
country, Muslims have faced attempts by state authorities either to marginalize
them politically or to coerce them into the nexus of power at the state level. Such
pressures have served to produce various forms of Muslim opposition – which are
both defensive and related typically to ethnicity.
Islam and Politics in Tanzania

Tanzania: The Domestic Picture

One cannot dismiss the possibility of Tanzania being brought into the frontline of anti-Western terrorism, something that was underscored graphically by the August 1998 US Embassy bombing in Dar es Salaam. However, the notion that the country has begun to degenerate into a new territorial beachhead for transnational Islamic extremism is misplaced, reflecting a poor understanding of the specific socio-political and religious makeup that is characteristic of this part of East Africa. Islam is often regarded as Tanzania’s main religion, marginally more demographically important than Christianity, as Table 1 suggests. As a result, a focus on the political role of Islam in Tanzania in the context of democratization in the Muslim world is an important case study more generally.

As in Kenya, the general context of the emergence of Islamic-based political opposition in the early 1990s should be seen in the context of the fracturing of the...
country’s post-colonial one-party system and the tentative beginnings of political pluralism. Also like Kenya, many among Tanzania’s Muslims claimed that they were economically discriminated against. Until recently, however, there appeared to be little tension between Tanzania’s Muslim communities and the government, no doubt in part because Muslims enjoyed senior political positions, or between Muslims and Christians, a reflection of the high degree of social consensus achieved under the rule of President Julius Nyerere (1964–85).

On the other hand, Tanzania is one of the poorest countries in the world. Any benefits of economic liberalization from the early 1990s benefited few Tanzanians, while most felt themselves worse off. Moreover, expected political benefits from democratization were also slow to arrive. Together, economic and political disappointments coalesced, placing strains on Tanzania’s hitherto impressive social cohesion. These disappointments and frustrations were channelled into religious competition and conflict between Christians and Muslims, although so far religion has not served as a primary fault-line for sustained political violence and conflict in the country. On the other hand, since the 1980s political concerns are interpreted increasingly from religious perspectives. As a result, the political importance of both Christian and Muslim identities in Tanzania is increasing – at the expense of the otherwise celebrated collective sense of Tanzanian nationhood.

We can note the emergence of indigenous Islamic militancy in Tanzania from the early 1990s, a development encouraged by a government announcement in early 1992 that, in order to reduce public spending, it would henceforward transfer the country’s health and education system to the control of the country’s powerful Catholic Church. This fuelled an outburst of resentment from the Council for the Propagation of the Quran in Tanzania (CPQT, known as Balukta), which earlier rose to prominence with fierce criticism of Tanzania’s NMO, Baraza Kuu ya Waislamu wa Tanzania (Bakwata). Balukta radicals accused Bakwata representatives of self-serving, corrupt practices, denigrating their attempts to promote Islam in the country. Attempting to take over Bakwata, Balukta militants occupied its headquarters until ousted by order of President Mwinyi. Bakwata’s wider resentment against Christians was made plain in a series of inflammatory sermons broadcast from Dar’s central mosque in March 1992; this action triggered street battles in the capital between Christian and Muslim youths. In April 1993, following further religious-based violence, Balakta was banned. In the mid-1990s, a Muslim-based political party emerged, the Civic United Front (CUF), whose main support base was on the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba. In a move that was condemned by the ruling Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) government, the CUF publicly raised the issue of separation from the mainland in a move that reflected deep-seated resentment of the Muslims of the islands to what they perceived as mainland domination of the union (between Tanganyika and Zanzibar).

Several years later, in late 2001, some Muslims in Dar es Salaam protested at the US bombing of Afghanistan, while expressing support for Osama bin Laden. As Bakari and Ndumbaro note, the ‘domestic conflict between the ruling CCM and CUF took place in a global context where the USA and many of its Western allies are quick to interpret organised political activity by Muslims as a terrorist security threat. In contrast, in Tanzania some Muslims view the USA, Western capitalism
and Christianity as a challenge to Islam’. After 9/11, in common with their counterparts in Kenya and Uganda, the Tanzanian government sought the West’s cooperation in fighting terrorism and took part in the East African counter-terrorism initiative (EACTI). On the other hand, the Tanzanian government, with a much larger Muslim minority than that of Kenya, was reserved in its support for post 9/11 US policy in Afghanistan. Part of its reluctance can be linked to the problem of longstanding tension between the mainland and the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, more than 95 per cent Muslim. According to Shinn, the government did not want ‘to stir up this potential hornet’s nest and will probably focus the debate on the need to alleviate poverty and other ills’. In Zanzibar, two groups openly challenge the authority of traditional elders: Imam Majelis (Imam Society) and Daawa Islamiya (Islamic Call). Both organizations have gained some popular following in Pemba (the smaller of the two main islands that make up the Zanzibar chain).

In 2002, prior to the announcement of EACTI, there was a spate of violent incidents, including armed takeovers of moderate mosques in Dar es Salaam and a firebombing of a tourist bar in Stone Town that left several people injured. A militant Islamic movement, Simba wa Mungu (God’s Lion), was singled out specifically for fomenting much of this unrest. A covert organization, Simba wa Mungu, was alleged to take its lead from a radical cleric, Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, who was accused of actively inciting attacks against foreigners and ‘morally corrupt’ Muslims who failed to adhere to a purist Islamic line.

**Tanzania: Transnational Islamic Political Militancy**

In May 2003, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office warned that an ‘international terrorist group could be planning an attack on the island of Zanzibar’. At this time, in addition, the US government advised its nationals to avoid all non-essential travel to Tanzania as long as the current poor security situation prevailed. Both London and Washington appeared to be worried that an imported radical Wahhabist movement was making progress in Tanzania – and that it was a focal point for al Qaeda indoctrination, recruitment and training. In short, in recent years the US and British governments expressed concern that external extremist influences – from, inter alia, Sudan and Saudi Arabia – had infiltrated Tanzania, serving to radicalize indigenous Muslim beliefs and undermining Tanzanians’ tolerance and political moderation.

Most attention was focused on Zanzibar for two main reasons. First, it has an overwhelmingly Muslim population, and second, it has not enjoyed the same rate of economic growth and social development as the mainland. Two al Qaeda operatives are identified as coming from the island: Khalfan Khamis Muhammad, one of those convicted in connection with the 1998 US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam; and Qaed Sanyan al-Harithi, a suspected East African al Qaeda cadre killed in Yemen in 2002 by a CIA operative.

The preaching of a radical cleric, Sheikh Ponda Issa Ponda, evoked particular interest. The sheikh is an outspoken individual, linked to the storming of the Mwembechai Mosque in Dar es Salaam in 1999 (during the liberation of which four Muslims were killed); he has been detained frequently as a threat to Tanzanian
national security. Sheikh Ponda is, in the words of one Western diplomat, ‘the public face of radicalism in Zanzibar’, an important theological instigator for contemporary militant activism in both Tanzania and, more generally, East Africa. In February 2002 riot police used live ammunition and tear gas to disperse a banned demonstration by a Muslim group at Mwembechai Mosque. Many demonstrators were beaten and 53 people were arrested. Most were released after some weeks, but eight were charged with the killing of a police officer at the demonstration. The eight, who included Sheikhs Ponda Issa Ponda and Mussa Kanducha, were released in August 2002 and the murder charges dropped. In 2003 Ponda was on bail pending charges that he had sought to forge pan-regional Islamic ties with extremists in Kenya and Burundi.

In addition, the influence of Saudi Arabia – the effective ideological source of much of today’s radical Wahhabism – is said to be growing in Tanzania. On one hand, this appears to reflect the curtailment of available scholarships from states such as Yemen, Egypt and Algeria. On the other hand, it is indicative of the lucrative financial incentives that continue to be offered by Saudi educational and non-governmental charities. Saudi Arabia spends $1 million a year building new mosques, madrassas and Islamic centres in Tanzania. This is said to deflect Tanzanian Muslims away from states that the West considers to be relatively ‘acceptable’, such as Egypt, and towards Saudi Arabia – a country with numerous influential individuals and groups with extremist religious outlooks and interpretations.

In sum, there appear to be signs of a gradual hardening of indigenous Muslim identity in Tanzania, a development with political connotations. Armed takeovers of moderate mosques are a recurrent problem in Dar es Salaam while some radicalized students returning from overseas religious study trips seek to promulgate militant Islamic beliefs among the country’s Muslims. There appear to be growing links between militant Muslim indigenes and foreign radicals, including some with probable al Qaeda connections.

**Islam and Politics in Kenya**

**Kenya: The Domestic Picture**

Muslims amount to between 6–10 per cent of the total population of Kenya, concentrated in the coastal, north-east and eastern provinces. Following independence in 1963, Muslim opposition to Kenya African National Union (KANU) single-party rule was linked to the perception that primarily Christian ethnic groups – such as the Luhya, Kamba and Kalenjin – benefited disproportionately from KANU rule. Kenya’s Muslims, on the other hand, believed they were politically and economically marginalized. After nearly three decades of single party rule, legalization of pluralistic political activity in December 1991 was the catalyst for the emergence of Islamic political groups with strong ethnic connections. In February 1992, a senior KANU official warned mosque guardians not to allow their premises to be used for political meetings, as this would be illegal. Religious parties were not allowed to register for the 1992 elections, preventing the newly formed Islamic
Party of Kenya (IPK), led by Khalid Salim Ahmed Balala, from competing in the polls. The IPK had its power base in Mombasa and in Lamu, a centre of the Yemeni Alawiyya brotherhood.

The IPK was founded by a group of Asian intellectuals and businessmen to tap popular Muslim discontent on two main issues. The first was the question of the introduction of sharia law for the country’s Muslim population, many of whom felt discriminated against by the wholesale application of perceived ‘Christian’ (that is, European-derived) law. The second was a sense of economic resentment on the part of many coastal Muslims, especially over land issues. Many Mombasans saw that outsiders, including white-skinned foreigners and Kikuyus, were buying up quantities of local land at this time. This issue helped to focus pre-existing economic resentment based on a perception that Kenya’s Muslims were discriminated against. As a response, the government sponsored a rival Muslim movement, the United Muslims of Africa (UMA), with the aim of countering the appeal of the IPK, whose political muscle was evidenced by a series of riots in Mombasa, Voi and several other coastal cities at this time. In short, the aim of UMA was to split the Muslim constituency along ethnic lines in order to diminish its potential collective political impact. Abdullahi Kiptonui, a Muslim and prominent KANU figure, encouraged young Kenyan Muslims to fight for their ethnic and religious grievances by targeting Asians.

Kenya: Transnational Islamic Political Militancy

During the early 1990s, domestic political disquiet among Kenya’s Muslims was augmented by transnational activities. In 1994, several al Qaeda cadres left Somalia for Kenya and within months several had married local Kenyan women, settled into society and begun to form sleeper cells. Four years later, in 1998, after lying low and plotting attacks, most al Qaeda cell members left Kenya for Pakistan, days before two US embassies were bombed. Addressing the mourners in Nairobi after the bombing the then Kenyan president, Daniel arap Moi, stated that those behind the bombing ‘could not have been Christians’. These remarks were publicized widely and drew criticism from Kenya’s Muslim leaders, who claimed that their religion was being wrongly associated with violence. Sheikh Ahmad Khalif, head of the SUPKEM, commented that ‘Islam like any other religion does not support the killing of innocent people for whatever reason’.

The day following the bombing, the Islamic Liberation Army of the People of Kenya (ILAPK), an al Qaeda cover organization, issued a communique that included the following:

the Americans humiliate our people, they occupy the Arabian peninsula, they extract our riches, they impose a blockade and, besides, they support the Jews of Israel, our worse enemies, who occupy the Al-Aqsa mosque . . . . The attack was justified because the government of Kenya recognized that the Americans had used the country’s territory to fight against its Moslem neighbors, in particular Somalia. Besides, Kenya cooperated with Israel. In this country one finds the most anti-Islamic Jewish centers in all East Africa. It is from Kenya that the
Americans supported the separatist war in Southern Sudan, pursued by John Garang’s fighters.26

Despite the inflammatory rhetoric of the ILAPK, al Qaeda’s ‘brand’ of Islamic militancy is thought unlikely to appeal to many Kenyan Muslims. This is mainly because of the indiscriminate use of extreme violence in pursuit of claimed religious and political goals.27 Such a view is underpinned by the claim that for centuries, a relatively liberal and mystical brand of Islam developed on the East African coast; that is, a perception of Islam quite different from the rigid interpretation of the Koran promoted by al Qaeda and other such militant organizations. As a result, it comes as a surprise that there are indications that such Islamic militancy has made some progress, particularly among young and poor Muslim constituencies in Kenya and especially in certain urban areas, including Nairobi and Mombasa. According to Professor Moustapha Hassouna, a professor of security studies at the University of Nairobi:

Kenyans do not have the wherewithal, nor the character, to start up their own homegrown international terror organization . . . But Muslims here are becoming more ‘radical’ or political in their outlook – and I can see their sympathies being used by outside terror interests.28

Supporting this view, Sheikh Ali Shee, chairman of the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya and a prominent religious leader in the Indian Ocean port of Mombasa, contends that al Qaeda has ‘corrupted some of our young people . . . We were not always like this . . . we have a history of openness’.29

The East African coast’s distinctive Arab flavour – it has absorbed waves of immigrants from Yemen and Oman over the centuries – is said to make it relatively easy for Arabs to fit in among the local population. Moreover, Kenya’s notoriously weak security forces, coupled with the historically poor relations between the police and coastal Muslims, has apparently allowed al Qaeda operatives and local allies to work undetected.30 In sum, it is clear that some Muslims in Kenya are resentful, not just over calamities across the larger Islamic world, such as the Israel/Palestinians situation, but also over discrimination – real and perceived – at home. Seeking to recruit, al Qaeda has tried to exploit the resentment many Kenyan Muslims feel toward their government. This is not only because of the perception that they are discriminated against compared to Christians, but is also fuelled by the fact that since independence in 1963 successive governments have enjoyed strong ties both to the United States and Israel.

According to Harman,31 some of the same outside influences that have spread radical Islam to other parts of the world – ‘the Internet, a rallying to the Palestinian cause, and outsiders fomenting anti-Western sentiment’ – have encouraged some among Kenya’s hitherto moderate Muslim community to be drawn to radical acts in pursuit of fundamental political and religious changes. Second, Kenya has been targeted by Saudi Arabian money, with numbers of Wahhabi Islamic schools and mosques growing. As a result, Islam has come back to intellectual life in Kenya, thanks to Arab and Iranian oil money. In some cases, this can encourage Wahhabi
extremism. Some madrassas in Kenya – although intended to spread literacy among underprivileged youth through study of the Quran – have evolved into Wahhabi schools, using the Quran to justify waging war against non-believers. This encourages a militant transformation among some of Kenya’s traditionally tolerant Muslim communities, not least because some of their imams are now preaching anti-Western rhetoric in the context of references to extra-regional conflicts. These include: the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, the Chechen war and the American-led campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. This focus enables them to present a picture of a beleagured Islam under sustained assault by the West. Such concerns no doubt encouraged an impoverished boy from the Comoros Islands, Haroun Fazul, in receipt of a scholarship to study at a Wahhabi madrassa in Pakistan, to join Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. In 1998, he bombed the US embassy in Nairobi.

A third factor encouraging growth of Islamic radicalism in Kenya is the country’s close proximity to Somalia – a country that lacks a viable government and law and is the home of both numerous weapons and al Qaeda training camps. A Somalia-based militant Islamic organization, al-Ittihad al-Islamiya (the Islamic Union) spreads its influence actively in Kenya. The ease of penetration of such militant groups from Somalia is almost certainly facilitated by a further factor: Somalis, with their vast regional diaspora, have good communications and transport routes, and are said to be East Africa’s best black-market merchants, not only in cars and spare parts, but also in drugs, ivory and arms. Kenya has a large Somali population, including more than 250,000 Somali refugees, many in refugee camps along the border. According to Professor Hassouna, ‘Somalis are everywhere . . . . If they wanted to set up a network, they could’. Difficulties experienced by Kenyan authorities in guarding the coasts and borders in the Northeast region may well also encourage the activity of Islamic militants from Somalia.

With such concerns in mind, the Kenyan government engaged enthusiastically with the US-sponsored East African counter-terrorism initiative (EACTI). The US backed strongly the anti-terrorism legislation proposed by the government of Kenya in 2004. However, Kenyan democracy advocates and civil society groups, having only recently got rid of one-party rule, were opposed to the initiative, seeing in the legislation the seeds of new political oppression. In addition, some Kenyan Muslims argued not only that EACTI was part of a generalized anti-Muslim initiative but also that the proposed new legislation was basically ‘anti-Muslim’. It would aggravate, they feared, ‘the alienation in that community that opened the door to terrorist infiltration in the first place’. As a result of pressure from civil society, the Kenyan government eventually agreed to redraft the legislation.

In conclusion, the political and economic circumstances of Kenya’s post-colonial history have served to make many of the country’s Muslim minority believe that they are second-class citizens. The proximity of Kenya to regional hubs of Islamic militancy – notably Somalia – have facilitated the growth of transnational Islamic militant networks, including some linked to al Qaeda. It is difficult, however, to estimate the appeal of an Islamic militancy that appears to regard use of indiscriminate bombs as a legitimate political and religious tool. Partly as a result, the likelihood is...
that the appeal of such Islamic militancy in Kenya will be restricted to a relatively small stratum of Kenya’s Muslim minority. In other words, Kenya is most unlikely to develop into a hotbed of Islamic militancy for two main reasons. First, while there are undoubtedly radical elements in the country, overall their influence is marginal, unlikely to amount to more than a few hundred people. Second, proselytizing influence of such activists is significantly undermined by a broader Islamic context characterized by moderation and tolerance.

Islam and Democracy in Uganda

Uganda: The Domestic Picture

Along the East African littoral, Islam is by and large the religion of discrete ethnic groups, communities often excluded from the exercise of state power. As a result, Islam has periodically assumed the mantle of mobilizing ideology of resistance to central rule, as some Muslims judged power to be exercised primarily in the interests of certain (Christian) groups. In extreme circumstances various sectarian forms of Islam, such as Asian Ismailis, have found themselves the focal point of what can only be described as ‘ethnic cleansing’. This occurred in 1972 in Uganda when the late president, Idi Amin Dada, himself a Muslim, expelled the Asian Ismailis at very short notice, and without compensation for their assets which they were forced to leave behind. As a result, Amin and his cronies were able to enjoy their confiscated land and property at no cost, in a move that was, however, politically popular with some non-Muslim Ugandans.

Whereas in some other Muslim minority African countries, such as Ghana, Islamic leaders have managed intermittently to enter the framework of state power, their counterparts’ experience in Uganda was different, an outcome reflective of deep-seated religious and ethnic tensions that endured over time. Religious rivalries between Catholics (around half the population), Anglicans (a quarter to a third) and Muslims (under 10 per cent) were both contextualized and exacerbated by wider regional divisions between north and south.

Over time religious establishments, both Christian and Muslim, were manoeuvred and controlled by those in power to ensure their firm grasp on authority. The National Association for the Advancement of Muslims (NAAM), Uganda’s NMO, was founded in 1964, a year after independence from colonial rule. Adoko Nekyon, a cousin and close confidante of Milton Obote, then Uganda’s prime minister, initially led the NAAM. Later, however, the allegiance of Uganda’s Muslims divided between two competing national bodies. Kakungulu, an uncle of the Kabaka (king) of Buganda, led the rival Uganda Muslim Community, while the NAAM was closely associated with the interests of non-Bugandan Muslims. The government regarded non-Bugandan Muslims that by and large did not belong to the NAAM as ‘disloyal to the state’. Nevertheless, the state found it impossible to control ‘dissident’ Bugandan Muslims, just as they were unable significantly to influence state policies. UMC leaders were used as intermediaries between the state and the Bugandan Muslims, although without leading to a rapprochement between the two groups.
Under Amin’s rule (1971–78), prominent Muslims, both Bugandan and non-Bugandan, found themselves targeted as putative recipients of Arab financial largesse. Rich Arab states — especially Libya and Saudi Arabia — believed that it was incumbent upon them to proselytize Islam in black Africa, and especially in a country such as Uganda, so centrally placed in the region. Libya’s leader Colonel Qaddafi, who appeared erroneously to believe that as many as 70 per cent of Ugandans were Muslims, condemned Christianity as an agent of imperialism in a speech at Makerere University in March 1974.38 Pirouet alleges that Qaddafi’s visit to Uganda led directly to the murder of two prominent Christian politicians; Michael Ondoga, the Foreign Minister, and Charles Arube, a prominent Kakwa.39 Following Amin’s political demise and exile in 1979, Uganda’s Muslims were politically marginalized in the 1980s and 1990s, not least because many non-Muslim Ugandans regarded Islam in the country to be intimately associated with Amin’s excesses.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Chande reports, ‘several hundred Ugandan Muslim students studied at the Islamic University of Medina’. Returning home, some preached a ‘strict’ or ‘puritanical’ form of Islam — influenced by Wahhabist ideas encountered in Saudi Arabia — that until then had been virtually unknown in Uganda. The growth in influence of this reformist trend was influential in strengthening an international network that for the first time linked Ugandan Muslims to the major centres of Islam in the Middle East. Pan-Islamic activism in Uganda, associated with the Wahhabist and/or Salafi movements, coincided with growing Islamic awareness both in East Africa and more generally. This activism was eventually to turn in a political direction, a development not new to Uganda, where religion and politics have often interacted, notably with state attempts to control the institutions of civil society. By the mid-1980s, according to Chande, the emerging divisions between the young Salafis and the traditional ulama of popular Islam had begun to harden.40

This period also saw ‘growing activism by the international Jama’at Tabligh, a movement that originated on the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent’.41 From the early 1990s, various indigenous but numerically small groups — including, the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Uganda Liberation Tigers, Sheikh Abdul Kyesa’s ‘Saved’ and deserters from the Uganda Muslims Salvation Front — were influenced by the ideas of Jama’at Tabligh, calling themselves Tabligh, meaning ‘militant faith’.42 Kayunga claims that Tabligh was a serious threat to Uganda’s domestic security, benefiting from networks of sympathizers scattered in the country’s largest urban areas.43 From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s Tabligh was associated with a number of minor terrorist attacks on southern and central towns and cities, including ‘a wave of grenade attacks carried out from 1995 to 1997. Although Tabligh was seriously undermined by governmental reprisals since 1998, it managed to carry out ‘three new bomb attacks in the Ugandan capital on June 4, 2001’. Partly as a result, Marchesin claims that Uganda is ‘the country in East Africa where Islamic fundamentalism seems to be most deep-rooted’.44

Uganda: Transnational Islamic Political Militancy

Regarding external ties to domestic Muslim militants, from the 1990s the Islamist movement in Uganda built ties with foreign Islamic radicals, notably among
Sudanese and Afghan extremist groups. Both the Sudanese National Islamic Front and al Qaeda (then based in Sudan) played an important role in providing support to Ugandan Islamic militants. Al Qaeda helped to set up camps for training the fighters of the ADF.\textsuperscript{45} When Usama bin Laden’s organization settled in Afghanistan in 1996, members of the ADF went there to undergo training as explosives experts. Following bin Laden’s departure, Sudan continued to support Ugandan Islamists, including the ADF. However, this support is said to have stopped after Sudan and Uganda signed a peace agreement in December 1999. Meanwhile, al Qaeda planned to assassinate Uganda’s president, Yoweri Museveni in Kampala in 1999.\textsuperscript{46}

After 9/11, Museveni was strongly supportive of the US-led ‘war against terrorism’ to the extent that Uganda emerged as the main ally of the United States in East Africa. In addition, the leader of the Muslim minority, the mufti of Uganda, stated publicly his support for US attacks against bin Laden and the al Qaeda network in Afghanistan. President Museveni, drawing on documents captured by the US armed forces, stated publicly at the end of 2001 that bin Laden and al Qaeda had targeted Uganda for attack. According to Museveni, bin Laden’s goal was to extend the militant Islamic network to the Great Lakes region, adding that bin Laden condemned Uganda for working with the US government on behalf of southern Sudanese rebels opposed to the government in Khartoum.\textsuperscript{47} In May 2003, the Ugandan authorities arrested a Somali and a Pakistani suspected of planning an attack in Kampala. Following the arrests, Ugandan security services arrested about 200 foreigners, mainly from Somalia, Arab countries and Asia.

As in Kenya, then, the political and economic circumstances of Uganda’s post-colonial history encouraged some among the country’s Muslim minority to believe that they were second-class citizens, muscled out of political and economic favour by Christian groups. Also like Kenya, Uganda’s proximity to regional hubs of Islamic militancy – notably Sudan – appears to have encouraged development of a network involving local and foreign Islamists. While it is difficult to estimate the overall appeal of Islamic militancy in Uganda, it seems likely that few local Muslims would be tempted join Islamic militant groups, for two main reasons. First, the brand of Islamic militancy – sometimes involving the use of extreme political violence – is unlikely to appeal to the mass of ordinary Ugandan Muslims. Part of the reason is that in 1989 President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni appealed to Uganda’s Muslim community to contribute to national reconstruction, and he warned other Ugandans not to discriminate against Muslims. But at the same time, Museveni admonished Ugandans to avoid ‘sectarian’ allegiances, and this warning was directed at the Islamic community as well as other ethnic and religious groups. Second, such a perception may well be linked to the fact that much of Uganda’s post-colonial history has been characterized by conflict between ethnic and/or religious groups. It may well be the case that as Uganda is finally enjoying a prolonged period of – relative – political stability and economic growth, then decreasing numbers of people, including Muslims, would be willing to join political campaigns rooted in violence. Third, Uganda’s Muslims constitute no more than 10 per cent of the overall population of the country, divided into various ethnic groups. There is little likelihood that a sense of Islamic militancy would unite them, given
other factors to disunite them, especially ethnicity. Consequently, the likelihood is that in the short- and medium term the appeal of Islamic militancy in Uganda will be restricted to a relatively small stratum.

**Conclusion**

Islamists in Kenya are pushing to expand Islamic law, or *sharia*, to include sentences of amputation in certain crimes, as well as stoning in cases of adultery, practices already in place in Nigeria. The chairman of Kenya’s Council of Imams and Preachers, Ali Shee, has warned that Muslims in the coastal and northeastern provinces will break away if sharia is not expanded. Tanzania is experiencing a similar push for Islamic law. Saudi Arabia is funding new mosques there, and fundamentalists have bombed bars and beaten women they thought inadequately covered. Mohammed Madi, a fundamentalist activist, told Time magazine [in September 2003], ‘We get our funds from Yemen and Saudi Arabia . . . Officially the money is used to buy medicine, but in reality the money is given to us to support our work and buy guns’.49

The quotation implies that militant Islam is making major progress in East Africa. Such a perception might be reinforced by the fact that militant Islamic individuals and groups associated with al Qaeda, such as Somalia-based Al-Ittihad al-Islami, have been active in recent years in Kenya, a development that has alarmed Kenya’s government. We have also seen that both Uganda and Tanzania have experienced Islamic militancy with political goals. On the other hand, the prospect of any of the East African countries we have examined degenerating into bastions of radical Islam is at present a relatively remote possibility. This is for three main reasons. First, although there are radical elements in all three countries, their influence is currently marginal. None is likely to emerge as a major recruiting pool for al Qaeda’s transnational terrorism. In addition, the proselytizing influence of Islamic militants is inherently constrained by the broader Islamic context in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda: many Muslims are relatively apolitical (when it comes to religious issues), moderate and tolerant in orientation. Even in Zanzibar, with a majority Muslim population with political and economic grievances, there is no indication that at present there are serious moves to Islamicize society, including a fully fledged Islamic *sharia* criminal system.

Second, most groups that seek a more Islamic agenda pursue their objectives through discussion and negotiation. For example, in Tanzania both Imam Majelis and Daawa Islamiya are legitimate registered entities. Neither encourages the type of revolutionary civic action that characterizes the radical theorizing of some Islamic militant organizations in, inter alia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Third, there is no evidence that many Muslims in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda are interested in taking up arms against the ‘infidel’ West. Many may be unhappy about US or UK policies in relation to Afghanistan, Iraq and the Palestinians, but this does not imply that any more than a tiny minority seek actively to attack Western societies.
Fourth, with the exception of a few militants – some of whom are noted in this essay, such as Khalfan Khamis Muhammad and Qaed Sanyan al-Harithi – there have been remarkably few examples of individual Islamic militants committing themselves to the wider cause of transnational Islamic militancy. This is not to suggest that there will be no future acts of terrorism carried out in East Africa. On the contrary, it is to propose that the likelihood of such an event is linked more to considerations linked to the region’s porous borders and sometimes less than efficient police and security services than to any concerted indigenous support for transnational Islamic extremism.

Finally, it is important more generally to underline the relevance of international factors, particularly but not restricted to transnational Islamic links, in the context of East Africa. As Volpi and Cavatorta note elsewhere (the opening pages of this issue), this is a notable trend in many countries located at the periphery of the Muslim world – that is, where Muslims are likely to be in a minority. The account of the role of Muslim communities in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda given here highlights how in each country Islamic movements are seeking to inform new national political landscapes that are gradually appearing, following various attempts at democratization and liberalization from the 1980s. In each of the three cases analysed, new political relationships that are currently being forged have been informed by Islamic agendas predominantly pursued through discussion and negotiation. It is important to note that this agenda underlines the increasing role that various forms of Islamic political thought and action now play, serving both to activate and frame grievances and demands in pursuit of new or reformed institutional and legal orders that necessarily influence all citizens, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

NOTES

1. It is worth noting, however, that two of seven African countries that held national democratization conferences in the early 1990s, Mali and Niger, are Muslim-majority nations.
10. Ibid., pp. 697–8.
17. Jamestown Foundation (note 8) pp. (1–3)
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 4.
32. Al-Ittihad is on the US list of terror groups, and has been watched closely since 9/11. In 1993, members of al-Ittihad killed 18 American soldiers in Somalia, speeding up the withdrawal of the United States from that country. According to Marchesin (note 26), al-Itahaad provided logistical support to those who committed the 1998 attack in Nairobi. The organization is also suspected of having cooperated with al Qaeda during the dual attack in Mombasa in 2002.
33. Quoted in Harman (note 28).
34. Concerned with the influence of Somali Islamic radicals in Kenya, the then president, Daniel arap Moi, engaged actively in peace efforts in Somalia from the early 1990s. During the 1990s Kenya organized numerous peace conferences, as the government was concerned that continuing instability in Somalia could lead to regionwide instability. In July 2001, Kenyan officials closed the border with Somalia because of illegal arms smuggling into Kenya.
38. Ibid., pp. 109–10.
40. According to A. Chande, ‘Radicalism and Reform in East Africa’, in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwels (eds), The History of Islam in Africa (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press), p. 355, ‘The Salafi reputation rests on their scholarly activities and the challenge they pose (given their skills in the Arabic language) to the monopoly on religious education held by traditional scholars. Their efforts have made Islamic education more accessible.’

41. Ibid.

42. Marchesin (note 26).

43. Sallie Simba Kayunga, Islamic Fundamentalism in Uganda: A Case of the Tabliq Youth Movement (Kampala: Centre for Basic Research, 1993).

44. Marchesin (note 26), p. 4.


47. Shinn (note 14).

48. Although, note the continued conflict between the government and the Lord’s Resistance Army that has seriously affected parts of the Acholi-dominated north.


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