

STUDENT ACTIVISM AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN SAHELIAN UNIVERSITIES

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University student movements represent a particularly important aspect of the religious dynamism that characterizes the contemporary Sahel. Religiously-based movements, largely but not exclusively Muslim, are now central features of student life across the region. These have overshadowed what remained of the older leftist student movements of the first post-independence decades, as well as the corporatist student unions focused on demands for increased material benefits that proliferated in the years of structural adjustment programs. The striking boom in religious organization at universities is now widely recognized as an important social phenomenon marking the Sahel, and indeed elsewhere in Africa. As one local colleague bemoaned in the course of our research: “Our universities have come to be places of prayer more than places of learning!”

This project builds on and grows out of an earlier extensive research project on political reform, socio-religious change and stability in six Sahelian countries—Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad—carried out with the support of a Minerva Initiative grant from 2012-16. Over the course of that research, student movements on university campuses emerged as distinctly relevant, and meriting closer examination, for several key reasons: 1) they have come to largely dominate university student activism in the

region; 2) they are evolving and in rapid flux, with the trend accelerating in recent years given regional religious tensions and dynamics; 3) they serve as an indicator of new emerging social trends and tendencies in the region; and 4) they are potentially of very significant long-term impact for their influence in shaping the worldviews of a new generation of elites.

Universities in the region are historically highly politicized institutions, and in recent years religiously-based groups on university campuses in each of the six countries have not only increased in number, but simultaneously assumed more active and assertive social and political roles. There are important variations in different national contexts, however, with potentially significant implications. While omnipresent in the region, university-based religious groups are also highly diverse in terms of ideology and orientation, and indeed they are frequently at odds with each other. Conflict and even violence between student groups representing different religious tendencies has become one notable feature of universities across the Sahel. Importantly, while the vast majority of student religious groups and organizations are focused on social issues and religious activities, there are some disturbing indications that student organizations may be feeding some of the most radicalized religious groups in the Sahel. In some ways, student religious groups represent a

microcosm of the religious diversification occurring across Sahelian societies more broadly.

An additional Minerva grant for 2017-18 allowed us to assemble a collaborative research team including colleagues from all six countries to follow up further on this important issue. In addition to UF faculty members Leonardo Villalón (PI) and Benjamin Soares, the team includes: Mamadou Bodian, Université Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal); Abdoulaye Sounaye, Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey (Niger); Mamadou Lamine Dembélé, Université des Sciences Juridiques et Politiques de Bamako (Mali); Abakar Walar Modou, Université Roi Faïçal de N'Djamena (Chad); Magloire Somé, Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo de Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso); and Elemineould Mohammed Baba, Université de Nouakchott (Mauritania). An initial workshop at the West African Research Center (WARC) in Dakar brought the whole team together in October 2017 to begin to examine the contours of this phenomenon in comparative perspective. Following research in all six countries by the country specialists, the team will meet again in late Spring 2018 at the University of Florida at a conference on the topic.

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