Speaking for Islam: Ulama, *Laïcité*, and Democratization in Niger

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Abstract

Unexpectedly, one of the marking features of democratization in Niger has been the rise of a variety of Islamic discourses. They focus on the separation between religion and the state and, more precisely, the way it is manifested through the French model of *laïcité,* which democratization has adopted in Niger. For many Muslim actors, *laïcité* amounts to a marginalization of Islamic values and a negation of Islam.

This article present three voices: the Collaborators, the Moderates, and the Despisers. Each represents a trend that seeks to influence the state's political and ideological makeup. Although the ulama in general remain critical vis-à-vis the state's political and institutional transformation, not all of them reject the principle of the separation between religion and state. The Collaborators suggest cooperation between the religious authority and the politial one, the Moderates insist on the necessity for governance to accommodate the people's will and visions, and the Despisers reject the underpinning liberalism that voids religious authority and demand a total re-Islamization.

I argue that what is at stake here is less the separation between state and religion than the modality of this separation and its impact on religious authority. The targets, tones, and justifications of the discourses I explore are evidence of the limitations of a democratization project gounded in *laïcité*. Thus in place of a secular democatization, they propose a conservative democracy based on Islam and its demands for the realization of the common good.

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Introduction

In February 1990, after a series of demonstrations that resulted in the deaths of three students, the military regime of Ali Saibou, pressured by a variety of civil society organizations, had no choice but to accede to political pluralism and allow broader public participation in governance. This event marked the beginning of a democratization process that culminated in a national conference (1991) and free elections. At that time, not many would have guessed that Islamism would become one of the significant features of Niger's transition to democracy.

This paper explores how three contemporary Muslim actors in Niger have interpreted, criticized, and sought to participate in the nation's shift toward a liberal democratic political model. This process of political change has been heavily influenced by a radical secularism inherited from the French ideal of *laïcité*. Focusing on the views of three members of the ulama class, I identify three types of responses: "Collaborators," "Moderates," and "Despisers." "Reacting to a situation in which the role of Islam in society, as they see it, is constantly eroded," these political Islamists "project an alternative program to expand the scope of what Islam means and its role in society today."[1]

I argue that democratization in Niger represents a catalyst for a discourse of conservative democracy in which Islam becomes the concern as well as the source of inspiration. Therefore, Nigerien Islamism as a social and political critique finds its justification within the practices of liberal democracy itself.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to note that *laïcité* is not a mere separation of religion and state, but quintessentially a submission of the former to the latter's norms and centralized power. Though it may be regarded as a disposition to promote religious neutrality by supposedly preserving state institutions from religious influence, *laïcité* has proved to be a normative strategy used to control and dictate a specific political order. In practice, as Abdulaziz Sachedina notes,

> The secularist outlook, while preventing the dominance of one religion over others, can also marginalize communities of faith and thus push them toward militancy, aggression, and separatism.[2]

Along the same line of argument, Jean Baudérot and Mohamed Arkoun remind us[3] that in the French political system *laïcité* actually amounts to an aversion to religion and even irreligionism. Thus its roots are located in the modern nation-state project and represent one of the techniques imagined by

the Jacobin state to enforce its rule and reinforce the hegemony of its anti-clerical norms.

With such ideological baggage, making *laïcité* the main principle defining the relationship between the political authority and the religious sphere right at the beginning of the democratization process immediately became a point of contention. Activists gradually created more than forty Islamic associations. Subsequently, Islamism became a place for new forms of sociability, agency, and self-assertiveness and also proved to be a critical discourse in reconfiguring power relations. For many ulama, this appropriation of Islam created new modes of interaction in the public sphere designed to reaffirm their role as "formulators and the administrators of cosmological frameworks,"[4] to use Armando Salvatore's words. For them, the secularists' insistence on *laïcité* appeared not only as a political dodge about the true civility of religion in the public arena, but also as a preemptive strategy to prevent a religious elite from influencing social and political norms.[5]

The Collaborators

Hukuma da Aikinta, Malamai Suma da Nasu.[6]

In assessing the relationship between Islam (*adini*) and politics (*siasa*), those I call Collaborators seem to be the least critical of state secularism. The line of conduct they favor is participation and cooperation with the *hukuma* (political authorities, government) rather than confrontation. Among the ulama, they seem to be the most available to state officials' solicitation, privileging dialogue and negotiation while also recognizing the limits of their own prerogatives. Many of the individuals listed in this category were involved with the Association Islamique du Niger (AIN), the first Islamic association created in 1974 a few months after Seyni Kountché overthrew the civil regime of Diori Hamani, the first postcolonial head of state. Throughout the 1990s, AIN was elevated to a quasi-state institution and its leaders enjoyed a monopoly over the Islamic sphere and benefited from various state-granted privileges. In this position, AIN served simultaneously as a powerful means for the ulama to structure and regulate Islam and as an institution for the government to control the Islamic sphere. In fact, both Kountché (1974-87) and Saibou (1987-91) utilized these ulama's moral authority and social position to prevent opposition to their regimes.

In Niger's religious sphere, Cheick Ismael, the leader whose views I use to illustrate the Collaborators' positions, is probably the `alim who has garnered the most publicity over the past half century. His leadership of AIN for

over thirty years has placed him in the public arena, where he has frequently mediated between the executive power and the citizenry. He assumed the role of the official voice of Islam from the 1970s through the 1990s at the beginning of the democratization process. A theologian and jurist, his participation in the weekly Emission Islamique on Télé-Sahel (the national television channel) and La Voix du Sahel (the state radio station) were opportunities for AIN to reinforce its authority in the religious sphere and secure an official status for Cheick Ismael across the country.

Cheick Ismael enjoyed publicity even before the military regime took power in 1974. During the regime of Diori Hamani (1960-74), Cheick Ismael, at that time a new al-Azhar graduate, was appointed to a teaching position in the capital city of Niamey. He then moved on to become a justice advisor position at the court. Today, he still presides over AIN and the Conseil Islamique National, an institution created by the government in 2003 to better regulate the Islamic sphere. His collaborative attitudes have been criticized by many hard-line ulama; however, the way he distanced himself from violent demonstrations and conflict-oriented attitudes and his condemnation of the rioting that broke out on the eve of the Festival International de la Mode Africaine (a fashion show gathering held in 2000) earned him respect and consideration in the public sphere, especially among political leaders. His supporters justify his stances as being based on his knowledge of the Qur'an and sense of responsibility vis-à-vis society.

Formally, while the Collaborators agree on the separation of state and religion, they suggest collaboration between the two, not exclusion. *Adini* needs *hukuma* to maintain Islamic norms in the public domain, and *hukuma* is better legitimated with the ulama's support. The *hukuma* exercise *iko* (political power) and make decisions, whereas the ulama only advise on how to make the decisions conform to Islam. In that capacity, the *hukuma* contribute to the "rule" of Islam but can also hinder its preeminence.

The Collaborators' positive view of secularism originates from this clear differentiation of competencies and parcels of responsibility. They frequently stress the fact that the ulama are not to intrude in the *hukuma's* affairs, for their sole responsibility is "to remind of what is right" (*malamai waazi ne nasu*). Being mere moral authorities and guides on the lawful path means that temporal power is beyond their prerogatives. They must not be denied their role, however, especially when a decision of national interest has to be made.

He makes a sharp distinction between *siasa* and *adini* and criticizes how democratization has marginalized and excluded religious leaders:

In the early period of the transition [to democracy], they [political leaders] called us to a conference, and while we were discussing the new constitution, I suggested that the opening paragraph be: "*Bismilahi Rahman Rahim.*" The Prophet, I explained, recommends that Muslims begin always with this formula, in any situation they want to ensure success to their enterprise. Obviously, they didn't like my suggestion and after a long argument of course, they dropped it.[7]

The argument in itself and the eventual removal of the proposition testifies that times have changed for religion in general since the rise of constitutional secularism. While earlier regimes had no reservations in interacting openly with the ulama, the democratic regime tries to preserve itself from any religious influence. The comparison Cheick Ismael draws between the post-independence regimes of Hamani, Kountché, and Saibou and the democratization era (1991 to the present) illustrate his dissatisfaction with the "share" given to Islam in public affairs.

His most famous criticism focuses on *siasa* practices. In this context, *siasa* carries a pejorative meaning, especially when the country's ulama use it to refer to modes of competition incompatible with Islamic ethics. Since the essence of this type of *siasa* excludes *adini*, self-serving and self-centered political calculations and violence have become the distinguishing features of Niger's politics. He asserts:

Politicians are so captivated with their personal goals and the means to achieve them that they lose their minds and become incapable of any wisdom. They are prone to use guile, but not wise enough to avoid the path of shame. … guile helps you achieve a political goal, but won't be of any use to avoid shame. Only wisdom is helpful in such situation.[8]

Obviously, Cheick Ismael is concerned with the norms that shape political reform. That "politicians silence their wisdom and follow only their calculations" is symptomatic of a social anomaly that goes beyond politics. In effect, the rapid restructuring of the Islamic sphere has given rise to a religio-politician category that, by giving allegiance to *yan siasa* (politicians), has denatured Islam and deprived the *hukuma* of wise advice:

Today, they [political authorities] have too many advisors [ulama]. It is like a sickness: to help your physician, you must tell him everything you feel. You must tell him all the truth. But in return, the physician has to be able to differentiate between the diseases. If you have a physician who doesn't know more than you do, and you rely on him, your situation equates what I was describing a while ago: you follow guile and forget wisdom. If you rely only on guile, [you] can't avoid failure.[9]

Underneath this metaphor of the physician and his patient lies a distinction Cheick Ismael makes between the "knowledgeable advisors"[10] (i.e., those ulama who are qualified to advise politicians) and those who are only seeking favors. Upon closer look, his dissatisfaction illustrates the Collaborators' reaction to the increasing pluralism in the Islamic sphere. On the one hand he implicitly admits the new religious actors' growing influence and impact on a sphere that has so far been controlled and monopolized by AIN; on the other hand his frustration expresses itself in disenchantment with a new order in which, as he says, "we are no longer consulted."[11]

> From time to time, I hear about their [authorities] consultations, but no one approaches me. They rely only on politicians. I think that whenever it comes to decide for the interest of the society, one must not equate a single young boy's opinion[12] to the ones of community leaders (*maigari*, in Hausa) or established householders (*windi koni*, in Zarma). If you neglect the opinion of the community leader and follow the single young boy's opinion, it may be that the boy has no experience in what you are asking him to do. That's a major problem today. In the past, even when we were not associated in a decision-making process, we were asked our opinion afterwards. It is no longer the case.[13]

With a gerontocratic tone, this vision of governance suggests that a *siasa* that excludes consultation with the elders and the ulama is doomed to fail, for a *siasa* that properly fulfills its mission is based on both the guidance of *adini* and the participation of the elders, those who are expected to guide society based upon their life experience. In the Nigerien context, this point is a response to the egalitarian principle driving the democratization process. For Cheick Ismael, the ulama should be regularly consulted because of their status as moral custodians and their life experience. Democratization failed to recognize this dimension when it placed in power immature politicians and inexperienced social actors who have contributed a great deal to Niger's current sociopolitical tensions and conflicts.

To understand his point, however, one needs to read this argument in the light of the double marginalization he and other ulama face: AIN is no longer the privileged organization it used to be and the stricter separation of state and religion has caused Islam's influence, and therefore that of the ulama, to decrease in the political arena. To counteract this phenomenon, the Collaborators invoke *shawara* (the consultative basis for participative governance) to ensure their presence in the public sphere. In this perspective, *shawara* results from a strategic vision that is expected to requalify Islam and restore the ulama to a more important political locus.

Obviously, their dissatisfaction relates to the fact that they have lost primacy in the religious sphere. Looking to the past, they see in Kountché's authoritarian regime a political system that provided stability to the country and support to Islamic norms. Cheick Ismael as well as Malam Maizabura, another Collaborator, often refer to Kountché's order to submit inheritance matters to the jurisdiction of the religious courts rather than that of the local customary authorities.

Cheick Ismail's arguments of exclusion and moral authority, which appear in the context of the ongoing changing of places and roles held by the political actors, can be seen as tactics to help them recapture the social space and political value that they see slipping away. As his positions show, despite their criticisms of the political reform the Collaborators suggest compliance to the separation philosophy that defines *laïcité*. For them, historically and essentially, *adini* and *hukuma* were separated for the benefit of both institutions. They argue that the collaborative nature of the relationship between these institutions has also been a significant feature of Muslim politics. Unlike many ulama, Cheick Ismael does not believe in fully implementing the Shari`ah in today's political context. In fact, he goes so far as to equate the concept of an Islamic party in Niger to an aberration, for *siasa* is the true venue for non-religiosity and, therefore, is not suitable for the ulama.

The Moderates

Hukuma Bata Ganeba Ne, Adini Ay Anfaninta ne.[14]

The Moderates consist of ulama who are neither cooperative nor radical opponents of state initiatives and democratization. Although they have used strong and harsh rhetoric to voice their opposition to social policies, they now tend to distance themselves from violence and concentrate on peaceful social transformation. Hence they focus on education, the very fabric of Muslim identities and subjectivities. Like Malam Maniru, whose views are addressed in this section, most of the Moderates were affiliated with AIN. But since the beginning of the democratization process, however, they have distanced themselves from regimist attitudes and created their own Islamic associations.[15]

Malam Maniru gained fame among Niger's Muslim leaders in 1992: he was was charged with disturbing the public order after a violent demonstration in Zinder, the country's second largest city, ended up destroying the regional office of the Association des Femmes du Niger (AFN), a women's organization. This took place in the context of a popularization of the Family

Code draft, a legislative proposition expected to provide more rights to women and children. National and international media covered this event, for it represented the first time in the country that a group of people claimed religious motivations for a violent demonstration. Malam Maniru and his brother were tried and found guilty. But for many reasons, most probably to avoid the social unrest a harsh sentence would have unleashed, they were sentenced to only six months' probation. Critics, especially civil society organizations claiming reparation for AFN, interpreted this "light sentence" as the government's desire not to antagonize religious leaders.

As far as his social background is concerned, Malam Maniru belongs to a pious and well-respected Zinderi family. Several signs and pictures displayed in the vestibule of his house remind the visitor of his affiliation with the Ibrahima Niass Tidjaniyya Sufi brotherhood. A native of Zinder, Malam Maniru and his relatives pursue Qur'anic studies, continuing the work of his father, Cheick Yusuf, one of the famous scholars of his day. At the time of my second interview with him in August 2005, his family was directing a school network of more than 1,100 students – an enrollment rate that ranked their network among the country's top Islamic learning institutions. Their main teaching site is l'Institut Cheick Yusuf pour l'Enseignement et l'Education Islamique,[16] which seeks not only to teach the Qur'an but also to prepare its students for a pious life and social responsibilities.

In terms of political participation, Malam Maniru was one of his region's representatives in the political structure (viz., the Société de Développement) instituted by Kountché's military regime in an overall strategy to maintain its grip on the public sphere. In that context, Malam Maniru, like many other public figures of that time, was coopted to serve as *conseiller de développement*. In 1990, the Société de Développement was swept away with the demands for more pluralism and the emergence of a civil society shaped by a global neoliberal discourse. Since his conviction and sentence of probation, Malam Maniru has adopted a line of conduct that clearly differs from his former outgoing and confrontational militancy. Limiting himself to criticizing the *hukuma's* responsibility for the ineffective policies defined by the government, he now insists that "by definition Islam is peace, and violence will only be harmful to the prospect of the true Islamic society."[17]

In reality, Malam Maniru was not the most critical opponent of the Family Code, the state-sponsored initiative that led to the AFN office's destruction. But his position as religious leader did give his views more resonance, especially in the traditionally conservative city of Zinder. To be fair, the demonstrations in question were not the first ones to voice the ulama's dissatisfaction with state social policies. Since the mid-1980s tension had

been perceptible between the ulama and state officials due to the well-known family planning initiative funded by agencies such as UNICEF, the United Nations Development Program, and the United Nations Population Fund. This was intended to provide a quick fix to what many have seen as a fast-growing population problem.

But despite a sustained communicative campaign (e.g., television and radio ads, household visits, and informational sessions in clinics and dispensaries), many opponents portrayed the initiative as an attempt to pass a social policy contradictory to Islam.[18] Proponents justified the program's urgency on an argument of scarcity in the context of a growing population; most ulama reacted with the dismissive statement: "Allah takes care of His creation."[19] This attitude of resignation for some, and faith in Allah for others, proved to be a strong impediment toward completing this particular project. Opponents contended that the government should not intervene in such private and domestic realms, while accusations continued to stress the project's negative social, sanitary, and moral consequences. Mallam Maniru, for example, draws attention to the fact that "making condoms available to everyone equates authorizing fornication and misbelief."[20] Eventually, the program was withdrawn due to the increasing social tension and the imminence of social unrest.[21]

Not only does Malam Maniru decry the lack of faith in Allah underlying the initiative, but he also condemns the "intrusion of the government and foreign organizations"[22] into household matters in such a way that denies the people's religion. At this point, the Moderates emphasize the potential for disorder (*fitnah*) represented by these programs, as state officials fail to "preserve Niger's interest" by condoning the denigration of Niger Muslims' social and religious identities. Most importantly, Moderates invoke the principle of God's mercy (*rahmah*) and would like to see it taken into consideration when deciding upon social policy.

The second focus of Malam Maniru's argument relates to education. Responding to the secularist position that has kept religion out of the public education curriculum, he draws attention to the fact that, contrary to what is commonly assumed, introducing a Qur'anic education actually serves the government's interests. He draws on the notion of *tarbiyah* (education [as opposed to instruction] that seeks to inculcate morality [as opposed to teaching specific skills]) as a way to cultivate in young people the needed attitudes and behaviors in a citizen. He posits:

> Teaching *adini* in our public schools is a good thing for the state, provided leaders understand it. It is crucial that while being schooled, young people

have also the opportunity to be taught good discipline. Otherwise, an instruction without discipline is worthless. Islam in essence means discipline and peace. In education, the young men or women will learn to be truthful and trustful (*cika alkawali*), loyal (*kiyaye amana*), compassionate (*jin tausayi*) and respectful to elders and authorities. If he learns this, he will be a good citizen.[23]

The point he intends to emphasize here is the very absence of these qualities in both the current educational system and, at a higher level, the administration. According to Malam Maniru, the "biased policy orientation" toward which *laïcité* leads to, particularly in the public school system, must be abandoned because it puts international agencies and state policies first, denies Niger's people their rights (*hakki*), and dismisses their identities and needs. To translate this view into action, his main educational institution – literally, "The Institute for Qur'anic Instruction and Islamic Education" – insists on the necessity to achieve true Islamic education beyond the usual memorization of the Qur'an.

This distinction is important in the democratization context, especially when the negative effects of secularity and liberalism on social morality are major concerns for the ulama. Adapting educational institutions to the current context (*zamani*) then becomes not only a defensive strategy, but also a programmatic undertaking that is expected to provide future leaders with the virtues and attributes they will need to be successful. With the increasing number of *madrasas* in the country, those ulama who entrust themselves with the mission of preventing moral perversion expect a Qur'anic education to bring about the change needed in the public sphere. Thus, introducing Islamic subjects in public schools would both counter the negative effect of secularism and contribute to the democratization of Niger's educational system.

Arguing the claim of democracy and liberalism, he observes that the two initiatives violate "the democracy they are trying to sell." He laments:

What is democracy? Isn't it the rule of the majority of people? Everyone knows that the majority of people in Niger are Muslim. Why aren't we teaching the Qur'an in our [public] schools? If we do not implement the effective rule of the majority, then we fail to have a democratic system. Democracy means, in Niger, the introduction of Qur'anic education in our schools because people want it. … Clearly, in Niger we are not yet under a democratic regime.[24]

To conclude this section, one must note that beneath secularism and the demands for more consideration for Islam run some positioning politics among both the secularist and the religious actors. Thus the Islamization that

they advocate and secularism itself not only serve as political tools to influence the government, but also as means for very different groups to achieve or maintain social status. More specifically, the Moderates argue that social domains such as education may be framed by Islamic perspectives and still contribute to Niger's development (*cigaban kasa*). In this sense, democratization must be used to rearrange and redefine the relationship between *adini* and *hukuma*. But it is not enough to separate; the most important duty is to re-read this separation from the perspective of the "people" of Niger.

The Despisers

Maganamu: Abunda Allah ya Fadi.[25]

The Despisers, as I label them, are those who radically oppose *laïcité* and envisage no compromise with democratization as long as it is driven by a secularist ideology. In contrast to the first two categories, they reject collaborative politics, deny the Moderates' call for an arrangement between religion and state, and dismiss the separation between *hukuma* and *adini*. For this category, more so than for the others, no reasonable political organization is possible in Niger other the one commanded by the Shari`ah. In general, they tend to be younger and more familiar with the western-oriented educational system than the previous two categories. Their case illustrates the Muslims' frustration and contempt vis-à-vis *laïcité*, but also with some of the ideological paths Muslim activists in Niger have taken to fight for the restoration of their Islamic identity.

In this section, I focus on Cheick Falalu, a dropout from a *medersa*, the bilingual (French and Arabic) institutions that French colonial rule introduced into Afrique Occidentale Française[26] to control the religious sphere and reduce criticism of its policies in Francophone Africa. After independence, Niger's government continued to spread the model throughout the country in order to promote Qur'anic and Arabic instruction, as well as to train civil servants who could help the country develop its relations with Arab Muslim countries. To this end, many religious leaders benefited from scholarships provided principally by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Libya.[27]

Disillusion and disappointment soon followed, however, because the state administration could not employ the majority of *medersa* graduates. For a long time, their strong anti-state feelings were based upon the fact that the highest position they could obtain was that of a secondary school teacher.[28] In the end, many were forced to enter retraining programs and then seek alternative employment. Today, following the *medersa* debacle and the

realization of its social unsuitability, most programs to restructure education within Islamic circles now seek to combine the *medersa* and the public school system in order to engage with current social, political, and ethical realities.

Cheick Falalu is a product and one of the ideologues in the movement to transform the *medersa*. As a religious leader, he has developed a network of friends and colleagues beyond Maradi – his hometown – and Niger's borders. In August 2005, as he was busily preparing for a religious seminar to be held in Ghana, he hardly had the time for an interview. After several requests, he finally resolved to spend no more than an hour and half to "hear" my questions. Later on, we were able to have several conversations both over the phone and face-to-face. For him, Niger seems to be only a local base, for the real domain and scope of his action is international. His involvement in activities to promote Islam throughout the country, as well as in Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana, testifies to his effort to promote the universalistic vision of Islam and the ideal of the Muslim community (*ummah*).

In 2000, when riots broke in Maradi a few days before an international fashion show (Festival International de la Mode Africaine) was scheduled near Niamey, he was the leading figure taken into custody.[29] He was charged and imprisoned for several weeks. His violent rhetoric and radical criticism vis-à-vis democratic governance is symptomatic of his radical opposition to what he sees as un-Islamic governance in a Muslim country.

Islam essentially appears to this intellectual as a practical liberation theology, since his public preaching (*wa'azi*)[30] explicitly seeks to enlighten and awaken people to their rights in a context described as one of Muslim subordination to foreign forces. Not surprisingly for groups sharing this view, especially the Ahl al-Sunnah (a significant portion of the Despisers), *laïcité* appears as an abdication to colonial powers and a renunciation of Islam. As a result, these actors distance themselves from the state's ideology while envisaging the achievement of the country's common good with a conservative democracy founded not on anti-religionism, but on the recognition of Islam as the ideological and moral factor that shapes Niger's political identity. Under these circumstances the Despisers see the Qur'an as a comprehensive source of values, while Islam is defined as a complete and sufficient cosmological system.

Interestingly, the Despisers' views go beyond the conventional Islamist critique of the nation-state to seek their realization in a social moral order[31] that will restore meaning to governance, since it will be based on the people's religious identity. As Cheick Falalu emphasizes, attaining this new moral social order becomes the principal goal, especially in the school system:

Our point is that if we don't teach Islam in our [public] schools, some of our people will continue to believe that Islam is an impediment to the development of this country. [Public] school gives us some intellectual tools, but an accomplished life needs more than that.[32]

In stressing the mandatory character of Islamic education in public schools, most Despisers understand precisely that the constructed moral order is the result of power relations that have favored secularism. In the specific case of Cheick Falalu, he expects that including Islamic education in public schools will transform moral and social attitudes and therefore the *rapport de force* necessary to reinforce religious morality in public affairs. According to him, in its current form the state has more authority than it actually deserves. By dismissing Islam and the Muslims' religious identities, secularism has allowed the state to perpetuate an unacceptable moral order, for

Who does not pray in Niger? Tandja? Hama? Mamane Ousmane?[33] Separating religion from the state is contradictory insofar as in Niger the people as well as the leaders are all believers. There is no coherence in instituting this separation. Where does *laïcité* fit in Niger? Because people and their leaders believe, there is no ground for *laïcité*.[34]

Both the logical and identity perspectives laid out here are intended to demonstrate the impracticability of *laïcité* in Niger. It has no historical ground, and the constitution is full of contradictions:

Article 29, which relates to the rights and the duties of the individual, states clearly that parents are responsible for educating their children. If that is true, why do we need other norms and values besides those which the parents are demanding?[35]

This overall refutation of secularism is based on the Despisers' view of Islam as an ideology that goes beyond any specific historical context; it disputes the secularist reduction of Islam to a simple, relative, and differentiated religion that has to abide by secularist rule.

Even when the framers of the current constitution allowed the slight symbolic representation of religion in the secularist frame by requiring that the elected president and the appointed prime minister be sworn in according to their religious traditions, Cheick Falalu regarded such an act as "insufficient regard to Islam in a Muslim country" and unlawful instrumentalization of the Qur'an.[36] His response echoes a maximalist[37] view: "If we really care about Islam, why don't we just adopt the Qur'an in its entirety? Let the Qur'an rule! (*A bar Qur'ani yayi magana*!)."[38]

Not only does he see in this the reduction of the Qur'an to being an accessory to the constitution, but he also insists that the act in itself is contradictory: "They [the president and the prime minister] are sworn in to respect and follow the Constitution, not the Qur'an."[39] This use of the Qur'an to solemnize an oath with a secular constitution has no Islamic value; rather, it gives the Qur'an only an auxiliary and peripheral role. Consequently, this subordination of the Qur'an to another order in itself is a reprehensible act.

As Cheick Falalu observed in one of his public sermons, if secularism is to blame, all Nigeriens share in the responsibility:

> Our problem is that we are still under France's rule, if not actually, at least mentally. We act like as though these are still colonial times. We are too much influenced by France. This is a problem British ex-colonies do not have.[40] As a people, we need to stand up to have them [the authorities] consider our will. If Muslims were saying what they want, there would be no alternative for authorities. We need to speak up and tell them [authorities] what we want.[41]

According to this position, *laïcité* rules because Muslims have given in, distancing themselves from state policies and thus maintaining their ongoing political marginalization. In pointing this out, Cheick Falalu intends to incite more "true Muslims" to take responsibility and actively engage the public sphere. Active Muslim involvement in a new educational system seems to be, in his view, the way to defend a religious identity and therefore restore the pristine Islam, as well as to resolve the issue of Niger's unsuitable state ideological frame.

In conclusion, a final point on the Despisers' mode of operation is worth mentioning. As modernists, the Despisers confront *laïcité* from intellectual, nationalist, and ideological perspectives. They challenge the arguments put forward for its justification and legitimization and attempt to expose the contradiction between the constitution and its translation into political action. They despise *laïcité* not only because it hinders social mobility, but primarily because of its logical and historical unsuitability.

At the same time, they perceive democratization as an opportunity to forward the "progress of Islam" and reinstate Islamic command over governance. They resist *laïcité* and use democratization to articulate a political alternative based on Islam's transcendence over all matters and principles within a Muslim society. As it appears through their vision of this society, they provide an intellectual construction of Islam that is more aware of the political calculations at the foundations of social transformation. As a consequence, they dismiss Niger's pluralism by asserting instead a homogenous

religious identity.[42] Ironically, they employ democratization to combat the main principle on which it rests: secularism.

Conclusion

As the three categories have shown, under the regime of *laïcité* in Niger Muslim social actors have been put on the defensive and seem to have lost some of their influence in the political arena. Their positions show their concerns about their political participation and the future of their social status, as they suffer marginalization and even exclusion from public affairs. In many ways, the emergence of their Islamist claims and demands is the result of this displacement and the subsequent fragmentation of their authority.

The Collaborators resituate themselves in the changing political environment and hope that cooperating with the state will let them reverse the downward social mobility from which they suffer. Their claim to authority is based on what they see as crucial in the conduct of public affairs – their life experience and knowledge of Islam. The Moderates, for their part, stress the sovereignty that Islam must have and also the consideration that state policies must show to Muslim sensibilities. They now favor separation from existing regimist Islamic organizations in order to create their own institutions and envisage taking advantage of the freedom of association within the context of democratization to restructure Islam, especially in the field of education. For the Despisers, because of the inspiration they take from the French model, Niger's democratization is no more than a continuation of colonial politics. While the Collaborators and the Moderates concede some room to secularism, the Despisers, who claim to be Islam's true defenders, do not.

Obviously, these categories highlight the ulama's divergent views on Islam, democratization, and state/society relationships in Niger. The appropriation of Islam that each of them displays exemplifies how a neoliberalist outlook has introduced what Arkoun[43] termed "structural violence," referring to a situation in which the religious and the secularist groups each strive to replace the other and install their own exclusive order. Modern political organizations have not yet come up with the solution to this "structural violence," especially when liberalism is elevated to the status of the "end of ideologies."

Finally, although the perspectives I expose here suggest an opposition between the religious and the secular, this does not mean that democracy has no political value. In the same way that Olivier Roy[44] suggests that Islamists are not against modernity *per se*, I suggest that Niger's Islamists are seeking to implant a conservative democracy, one that restricts and even excludes

secularism, as the Despisers have argued. This Islamist democracy would maintain Islam's influence over public affairs and ultimately follow its guidance, if not its demands. In the case of Niger, the Islamist project is not just about democracy, but also public morality as a whole. The Islamists' perspective therefore suggests a positive image of religion and rejects the claim inherent in *laïcité*, that religion is an obstacle to the state. It is from this perspective that they suggest redefining the common good and reconceptualizing civility.

The viewpoints I have presented amount to a conception of civil society constructed on a religious basis. While liberal democracy claims to be the appropriate regime and political ideology *sine qua non* for social progress and economic development, the holders of the views remain to be convinced of that "fact," particularly when the political reform implied by democratization dismisses identities that are deeply rooted in religiosity. In short secular democratization, from the perspective of these ulama, must not become just another tyranny.[45]

Endnotes

1. Abdullah Saeed, "Trends in Contmporary Islam: A Preliminary Attempt at a Classification," *The Muslim World* 97 (July 2007): 399.
2. Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (New York: Oxford Press 2001), 3.
3. See Jean Baudérot, *La Morale laïque contre l'ordre moral* (Paris: editions du Seuil, 1997) and Mohamed Arkoun, "Locating Civil Society in Islamic Contexts," in *Civil Society in the Muslim World*, ed. Amyn B. Sajoo (London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002), 35-60.
4. Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1997), 11.
5. For a discussion on the conflict between elites, see Abdramane Idrissa, "Modèle islamique et modèle occidental: le conflit des élites au Niger," in *L'islam politique au sud du Sahara*, ed. Muriel Gomez-Perez (Paris: Karthala, 2005), 347-72.
6. "Political authorities have their responsibilities, ulama have their own," Malam Mai Zabura, interview by author, tape recording, Maradi, Niger, 8 Aug. 2004.
7. Cheick Umar Ismael, interview by author, tape recording, Niamey, Niger, 4 Aug. 2004.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.
12. An allusion to the young male leaders of Niger's new Islamic associations.
13. Ibid.
14. "Authorities do not get the point. *Adini* actually serves their interest." Mallam Maniru, interview by author, tape recording, Zinder, Niger, 13 Aug. 2004.
15. A few examples are the Association pour le Rayonnement de la Culture Islamique (ARCI), the Association Nigérienne pour l'Aide et la Solidarité Islamique (ANASI), and the Association Nigérienne pour l'Appel à l'Unité et la Solidarité Islamique (ANAUSI).
16. Insitute Cheick Yusuf for Quranic Instruction and Islamic Education.
17. Malam Maniru, interview by author, tape recording, Zinder, Niger, 13 Aug. 2004 [hereinafter "Interview 2].
18. Abdoulaye Sounaye, "Les Politiques de l'Islam au Niger dans l'Ere de la Démocratisation de 1991 à 2002, " in *L'Islam Politique au Sud du Sahara,* ed. Muriel Gomez-Perez (Paris: Karthala, 2005), 503-25.
19. Malam Maniru, Interview 2.
20. Ibid.
21. Sounaye, "Les Politiques de l'Islam au Niger," 2005.
22. Malam Maniru, interview by author, tape recording, Zinder, Niger, 22 Dec. 2002, [hereinafer "Interview 1"].
23. Malam Maniru, Interview 2.
24. Ibid.
25. "Our position is what Allah says." Cheick Falalu, interview by author, tape recording, Niamey, Niger, 23 Aug. 2004.
26. The West African territories under French colonial rule until independence in the 1960s. On the *medersa*, see Louis Brenner, *Controlling Knowledge: Religion, Power and Schooling in a West African Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Christopher Harrison, *France and Islam in West Africa: 1860-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Louis Brenner, "Al-Hajj Sa'ad Umar Touré and Islamic Educational Reform in Mali," in *Language and Education in Africa*, ed. Louis Brenner (Beirut: Breitinger & Sander, 1986), 5-23; and Louis Brenner, "*Médersas* au Mali: transformation d'une institution islamique," in *L'enseignement islamique au Mali,* ed. Bintou Sanankoua and Louis Brenner (Bamako, Mali: Jamana, 1991), 63-85.
27. Abdoulaye S. Niandou, "'les licenciés du Caire' et l'Etat du Niger," in *Le Radicalisme Islamique au Sud du Sahara: Dawa'a, Arabisation et Critique de l'Occident,* ed. René Otayek (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 213-52.
28. Cheick Musa Suleyman, interview, 30 Jun. 2001, Niamey, Niger, tape recording.
29. For more on this, see Sounaye, "Les Politiques de l'islam au Niger"; Barbara M. Cooper, "Anatomy of a Riot: The Social Imaginary, Single Women, and

Religious Violence in Niger," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 37, nos. 2-3 (2003): 467-512.

30. From the Arabic *waʿz* (public preaching).
31. Adeline Masquelier, "Debating Muslims, Disputed Practices: Struggles for the Realization of an Alternative Moral Order in Niger," in *Civil Society and the Political Imagination in Africa,* ed. J. L. Comaroff and J. Comaroff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 219-50.
32. Cheick Falalu, interview by author, tape recording, Niamey, Niger, 23 Aug. 2004.
33. President Tandja Mamadou (1999-), Prime Minister Hama Amadou (2000-07), and President of the Parliament Mamane Ousmane.
34. Cheick Falalu, interview by author, tape recording, Niamey, Niger, 23 Aug. 2004.
35. Ibid.
36. Abdoulaye Sounaye, "Instrumentalizing the Qur'an in Niger's Public Life," in *Journal for Islamic Studies* 27 (2007): 211-39.
37. Bruce Lincoln, in his *Holy Terror: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), introduces this term to characterize the strong demands for religion in the public sphere. It is interesting to note that he does not restrict maximalism to Islam, but perceives it also as a major feature of the dynamics of Christianity in the United States.
38. Cheick Falalu, interview by author, tape recording, Niamey, Niger, 23 Aug. 2004.
39. Ibid.
40. Obviously, northern Nigeria is seen as the model to follow.
41. Cheick Falalu, Waazi (cassette-sermon), tape recording, Niamey, Niger, 26 May 2004.
42. I give a more detailed account of the influence of this type of discourse in Sounaye. "Les Politiques de l'islam."
43. Mohamed Arkoun, "Locating Civil Society," 52.
44. Olivier Roy, *Généalogie de l'Islamisme* (Paris: Hachette, 1995).
45. Again, Arkoun warns: "Cultures linked to religions or ideologies tend to emancipate as well as to imprison; we need to be liberated from closed identities that deny plural ways of discovering and building 'truths.'" Arkoun, "Locating Civil Society," 59.