

# SACRED STRUGGLES: HOW ISLAM SHAPES POLITICS IN MALI

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## SUMMARY

- Religious issues and leadership play an increasingly important role in the lives of many Malians, but international actors are ill-equipped to understand and analyse this.
- Mali's religious leaders are heterogeneous and defy easy characterisation, often collaborating with one another on important issues, such as public morality and religion's role in society, even when their practices diverge.
- European policymakers should not view religious activism in Mali purely through the lens of counter-terrorism, extremism, and radicalisation.
- Instead, they should perceive such activism as related to the demands Malians make of religious leaders, religious movements, and the government.
- Malian religious leaders are active on political issues and often interact with the government, but their most effective forms of engagement often come from their independence from the authorities.
- There is currently little chance of large-scale representation of Muslim leaders in elected office in Mali – although this could change in the future.

## Introduction

Mali's religious leaders draw crowds so large that they are the envy of its politicians and celebrities. When a stadium in Bamako – the country's capital and largest city – fills with tens of thousands of people, it is more likely than not to be for a religious rally or celebration rather than a campaign speech. Although Malian political leaders regularly refer to their country's secular nature – [enshrined](#) in Mali's 1992 constitution – religious actors play a defining role in Mali's society and, at times, its politics.

In recent years, the influence of religion on Malian society has gained the attention of European leaders and policymakers due to the rising threat from Salafist jihadist groups based in the Sahel – whose activities seem, at times, to [centre](#) on Mali. Some of these organisations began operating in northern Mali in the early 2000s, eventually occupying the area for much of 2012 in the wake of a largely Tuareg-led rebellion launched in January that year. As a result, Western leaders often view Malian Muslims – who comprise more than 90 percent of the country's population – through the lens of radicalisation or counter-terrorism. The violence that has continued to wrack northern and central Mali, and that has [spread](#) to neighbouring countries, since then has only reinforced this perception among many outsiders.

Preconceptions about radicalisation and counter-terrorism have, therefore, contributed to widespread misunderstandings about the relationship between religion and Malian society – a dangerously skewed focus. Many outside observers, and even some Malians, place Muslims in reductive and overly rigid categories – or create dichotomies of Muslim practice such as that between Sufism and Salafism – in an echo of Western attempts to [separate](#) “good” Muslims from “bad” ones. For European policymakers, this misguided approach risks grave policy mistakes.

If outside actors are to respond effectively to the changes under way in Malian society and politics, they will need to understand the religious dynamics that shape Malian society and governance. Religious leaders are key figures in popular mobilisation. They are crucial to pressure groups that oppose unpopular or controversial policy moves – such as the publication of a Dutch-funded sexual education programme that [drew the ire](#) of religious conservatives last year – and

to attempts at local conflict resolution in northern and central Mali. They are essential actors in daily life, education, and the enforcement of social norms.

This paper examines the history of Islam in Mali, as well as the influence of some of the most important Muslim leaders in the country. It focuses on three of these leaders: Mahmoud Dicko, former president of Mali's High Islamic Council (HCI); Chérif Ousmane Madani Haïdara, the current president of the HCI; and Mohamed Ould Cheikh Hamallah, the powerful head of a branch of the Tijaniyya Sufi order who is commonly known as "Chérif Bouyé" or "the Chérif of Nioro" (named for Nioro du Sahel, the town near the Mauritanian border that is his home and power base). Chérif and Haïdara are both titles indicating claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammed.

These are not by any means the only important Muslim leaders in Mali, but they represent several of the main currents of Malian Islam. A careful study of their actions and public image provides insights into Islam's place in Mali today.

## **Traditions of contestation and competition**

There have been Muslims in west Africa since the eleventh century, if not earlier. The area that is now Mali has been at the centre of several famous Islamic empires, including the Ghana Empire, the Songhay Empire, and states established through a succession of jihads led by Sufis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the cities and towns on the edge of the Sahara – including famous centres of worship and learning such as Djenné, Gao, and Timbuktu – Sunni Islam, often associated with the Qadiri Sufi brotherhood, was predominant. The jihads of the nineteenth century brought the Tijani Sufi brotherhood into Mali in force (although they were not all led by Tijanis), introducing a tradition marked by avowed attempts to reform and renew Islamic practice while helping create states that claimed to govern according to Islamic law, the *sharia*. However, because Mali was far from uniformly Muslim at this time, jihad states clashed with those orientated around traditional religious practices, as well as between themselves.

France began its gradual colonisation of the area that is now Mali in the mid-nineteenth century, largely completing the project in the early twentieth century. Although French officials initially worked with their preferred Muslim leaders,

especially in Senegal, France eventually adopted a policy designed to limit the spread of Islam. French military and administrative officials were constantly wary of potential uprisings by Muslim groups. Many such officials grew increasingly concerned about Muslim activists and Islam in general during the twentieth century.

Still, the popularity of Islam [grew rapidly](#) in Mali in this period – as did debates over the correct forms of religious practice and leadership. In the early twentieth century, a dissident strain of Tijaniyya emerged in an area that extended across modern-day Mauritania and Mali, led by a man known as [Cheikh Hamallah](#). He tried to settle in Nioro du Sahel (then a trading town), but French officials repeatedly deported him for allegedly opposing their authority. He died in France in 1943. One of his sons, today referred to as the Chérif of Nioro, now heads the branch of the Tijaniyya founded by his father, having helped expand the group's political and economic power in Mali.

The 1930s and 1940s saw the growth of another tradition of Islamic thought and practice, one partly influenced by developments in the Middle East and north Africa, as well as the broader Muslim world. This tradition was characterised by a strong urge to reform educational and religious practices, spread the teaching of Arabic, and return Islamic practice to its roots in the Koran and the Sunnah – the teachings and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, the Salaf al-Salih (pious ancestors). Various groups of Salafist or otherwise reformist Muslims in Mali adopted this tradition from the mid-1940s onwards. While followers of different traditions and the French authorities often called them “Wahhabists” (in reference to the religious practice that originated in what is today Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century), these Muslims most often describe themselves as “Sunnite” in French.

At the same time, other reformists emerged from within the Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Tijaniyya. One of these figures, Sa'ad Oumar Touré, established a modernised Islamic school in the city of Ségou in 1946. This school focused on Arabic and religious instruction without breaking with Sufism – a tradition that the Salafist community largely rejected.

Modibo Keita, who became Mali's first president after the country won

independence, heavily policed and surveilled Muslims, imposing a formal ban on Islamic organisations. After deposing Keita in 1968, General Moussa Traoré briefly relaxed the ban – before clamping down on such organisations in the early 1970s. Nonetheless, Traoré’s rule was marked by the spread of mosques and Islamic activism, while he (a practising Muslim) launched morality campaigns that led to the closure of bars and nightclubs during Ramadan. He also created Mali’s first state-sponsored Muslim organisation, the Association Malienne pour l’Unité et le Progrès de l’Islam (AMUPI), in 1981. The body was designed to manage Islamic affairs while also reconciling Mali’s major Islamic factions – particularly Sufis and Sunnites, between whom there had been tension and mutual distrust since the outbreak of violent anti-Sunite riots in the late 1950s.

Each of the three main Muslim leaders this paper focuses on became politically and socially active during the Traoré period. They emerged from, or have come to be associated with, the traditions discussed above.

Dicko was born in Tonka, near Timbuktu, around 1954. He is the son and grandson of well-known Muslim leaders: his grandfather served as an unofficial *qadi*, or Islamic judge, after independence.<sup>[1]</sup> Dicko studied in Mauritania and Saudi Arabia, where he increasingly adopted Salafist practice, before returning to Mali in the early 1980s. Dicko rose through the ranks of AMUPI, becoming widely known after 1991 – when Traoré’s regime fell and Mali rapidly democratised – for his erudition and outspokenness on not just religious issues but also governance and even international politics. He joined the HCI, the successor to AMUPI, shortly after its formation in 2002, and was elected as its president six years later.

[Haidara](#) took a somewhat different path. Born in 1955 near Ségou, he studied in local Koranic and French schools until 1964, when he enrolled in Sa’ad Oumar Touré’s school. Although his father was affiliated with the Tijaniyya, Haidara is not a Sufi – even if he has many traits often associated with Sufi leaders, such as strong charisma, an attitude of saintliness that has helped fuel his popularity, and a practice of preaching mostly in Bambara (a language that is much more widely spoken in southern Mali than French or Arabic). Haidara began preaching in Mali in the early 1980s, [clashing repeatedly](#) with the authorities – who disliked his calls for political reform and opposition to Sunnite influence. In 1991 he founded Ançar Dine (Supporters of the Religion), an organisation not to be confused with Ansar al-Din

– one of the jihadist groups that took over northern Mali in 2012. Ançar Dine now has hundreds of thousands of members in Mali, other parts of west Africa, and even Europe and the United States. The organisation operates local offices, schools, medical clinics, and other facilities. Haidara served as the vice-president of the HCI under Dicko, before becoming its president in April 2019.

## Strange bedfellows?

In 2009 Dicko and the Chérif of Nioro joined forces to [oppose](#) the Malian Family Code. Their objections to the code, which they saw as too liberal and contrary to their vision of Islam, helped [create](#) a groundswell of opposition that delayed its enactment. While this has often been cited as an example of the growing power of Salafist Islam in Mali, many other Muslim leaders also complained about the code. Some Sufi leaders (including those on the HCI) also protested against the code, seeing the effort as an extension of their struggle against perceived public immorality and un-Islamic behaviour that began under Traoré.<sup>[2]</sup> This is just one example of how, in Mali, public advocacy for Islamic practices and clerics' active engagement with politics extends far beyond the Sunnite community.

Although the Chérif of Nioro [described](#) that effort as a moment of political awakening, he was also [close to Traoré](#) and had maintained close connections to influential political figures in the decades since. Indeed, his wealth and influence, and that of his family, have been partly based on proximity to power and the government. Government concessions and tax exemptions have benefited his cross-border trading and other commercial enterprises.<sup>[3]</sup>

In the run-up to the 2013 presidential election, the Chérif of Nioro actively supported the election of prominent politician Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (widely known as IBK), mobilising voters and raising funds on his behalf. So did Sabati 2012, an organisation that was set up in advance of the 2013 election and that was initially close to Dicko.

However, the relationship between IBK and the Chérif of Nioro [sour](#)ed soon after the vote. This was partly due to an incident in 2014 in which police at a checkpoint near Nioro tried to extort and then beat one of the cleric's sons. Dicko also became more critical of IBK following the government's embarrassingly ineffective [attempt](#)

to retake control of the northern city of Kidal from separatist forces in 2014. The growing public concern about corruption and poor governance that followed the election also reportedly contributed to Dicko's wariness of IBK. The situation deteriorated further in 2015, when IBK decided not to appoint a close ally of the Chérif's as minister of finance.<sup>[4]</sup> Pressure from the Chérif and Dicko subsequently [appeared to help](#) bring down prosecutor-general Daniel Tessogue that year (although some observers have suggested that Tessogue was removed largely due to his anti-corruption efforts).<sup>[5]</sup>

In the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, IBK made a [significant attempt](#) to solicit the support of the Chérif of Nioro and, to a lesser extent, Dicko. This effort was ultimately unsuccessful, but it helped reveal the surprisingly close relationship between Dicko and the Chérif. Dicko, along with a parade of other Malian politicians and influential figures, [visited](#) the Chérif on several occasions around the time of the vote. The Chérif also [expressed his support](#) for Dicko via an intermediary in October 2019, following the latter's establishment of Coordination des Mouvements, Associations, et Sympathisants (CMAS) – the organisation that will be Dicko's public face now that he is no longer the president of the HCI.

To many outside analysts, this alliance would seem to be paradoxical given Chérif's and Dicko's differing practices of Islam, and the fact that they seem to represent two groupings many would see as irreconcilable. In an interview last year, the Chérif [addressed](#) this issue, saying “people have said to me that Dicko is Wahhabite and that I am Tijani, implying that we are different. In fact, there is no separation between us, no divergence of views between us ... It is Islam that rules over the Tijaniyya and Wahhabism.”

At first glance, the relationship could seem to be one of convenience. Although they follow different traditions of Islam, Dicko and the Chérif of Nioro both act as counterweights to Haidara, who has had his own following in Ançar Dine for decades. Haidara has also long [been an outspoken opponent](#) of leaders locally referred to as “Wahhabi”, having [formed](#) the Groupement des Leaders Spirituels Musulmans du Mali in 2011 to offset Sunni domination of the HCI under Dicko.

However, there is also a less functionalist explanation for the relationship between Dicko and the Chérif. Before the 2018 election, Dicko regularly expressed [deference](#)

towards the Chérif, repeating publicly and privately that he would follow his lead on whether to support a candidate. The Chérif **eventually endorsed** wealthy businessman and political newcomer Aliou Diallo in the first round, and experienced politician Soumaila Cissé in the second. Dicko **refrained** from supporting a candidate – although he made clear that he no longer supported IBK. Still, figures close to Dicko insist that he has sincere respect for the Chérif, describing this as based on both filial feeling and appreciation of the latter’s religious erudition. Some of these figures have even gone so far as to describe their relationship as something akin to that between a Sufi master and his disciple<sup>[6]</sup> – even if Dicko did not use these terms in interviews with the author of this paper.<sup>[7]</sup>

In fact, their relationship demonstrates the complexity of religious alignments in Mali, particularly on political and moral issues. For European policymakers, one of the most important things to remember about each of these principal figures – as well as other key religious actors in Mali – is that their public lives have often been marked by activism against the government’s policies, or efforts to reform it in ways that create greater public space for Islam in politics and society. Haidara’s popularity has grown since the 1980s partly due to his attacks on the state’s behaviour towards Muslim organisations. Similarly, Dicko was active in the 1991 democratic transition in Mali, helping shape the emergent world of associational life that included avowedly religious organisations such as the Islamic Association for Salvation. Muslim leaders in Mali, including those from both Sunnite and Sufi communities, often share very similar views on moral issues, the role of Islam in public life, and even some governmental policies. Religious views and alignments, therefore, do not always map neatly onto outside perceptions of religious practices and divisions.

## **Political Islam and Mali’s future governance**

Domestic and foreign analyses of Malian religious structures often feature two related points: a fear of the growth of Salafist Islam in the country, and Muslim actors’ growing involvement in politics. This has been particularly evident following the launch of the CMAS, as numerous Malian observers have **speculated** that Dicko is preparing to run for the presidency – perhaps in the 2023 election. (He has **denied** such claims.) This kind of analysis can create a false dichotomy



between religion and politics, especially by misrepresenting the ways in which most religious actors in Mali and across west Africa exert influence on political and other societal issues.

The history of Islamic organisations and activism in Mali since the colonial period is largely one of a pursuit of autonomy from the government, as well as indirect power through social influence and pressure rather than elections. One of the first of these organisations in Mali and several other west African countries, the Muslim Cultural Union (UCM), saw its mission as being primarily educational and cultural, appealing to the French colonial authorities and then the post-independence government for permission to open schools and increase the role of Islamic prayer and activism in public life.

AMUPI, which in many ways adopted the practices and goals of the UCM, is now widely seen as a failure because the state co-opted its efforts. Yet AMUPI has – as one-time members such as Dicko [argue](#) – helped resolve long-standing disputes between Sufi leaders and Sunnites. The organisation has also spread a normative version of Islam throughout Mali using its offices across the country and its official status, and has regularly mediated local religious and social conflicts.<sup>[8]</sup>

Nonetheless, the control that the state exerted on AMUPI dissatisfied many Muslim leaders, leading to the creation of the HCI. Shortly after he became president of the HCI, Dicko began to use the organisation to expand his personal influence, broaden his appeals for morality and Islamic values in public life, and, sometimes, make aggressive interventions in political affairs.

Despite the many rivalries between its leaders, the HCI can influence Malian society because these figures operate autonomously from the government – giving them a public voice and access to the state through official contacts and regular consultations on religious issues, without eroding their legitimacy in the eyes of their followers. Of course, this is a delicate balance, particularly when Muslim leaders intervene beyond the religious sphere or are seen to benefit from their positions too overtly. The need to maintain this balance helps explain why Haidara has been [circumspect](#) about campaign endorsements and other forms of direct involvement in politics.<sup>[9]</sup> However, even he has not entirely avoided controversy – as seen when he [gave up](#) a private jet [purchased](#) for him by his followers. He likely

realised that an image of luxury was at odds with that of a Muslim leader who had his political origins in denouncements of political malfeasance and improper religious practice.

Political involvement may have caused a series of subtle but important disturbances in Mali's religious structures, particularly in the months that followed the 2018 presidential election. Rumours swirled that IBK would retaliate against the Chérif of Nioro for his open opposition to him, while Dicko publicly revealed the details of his efforts to negotiate with jihadist leaders in northern and central Mali on behalf of the government.

At around this time, two unusual incidents that shook Mali's religious community, particularly the HCI. In September 2018, just a month after the second round of the presidential election, prominent Sunnite imam Ibrahim Kontao was kidnapped near one of his homes. Kontao, the director of outreach and foreign relations for the HCI, also runs Mali's largest Islamic NGO, the al-Farouk Foundation, as well as Bamako's largest Islamic institute, the Université du Sahel. A highly educated Arabist who studied in Saudi Arabia for nearly ten years, Kontao is widely respected for his religious knowledge and his ability to reach out beyond the Sunnite community. He was reportedly kidnapped by men who wore the uniforms of the Malian National Gendarmerie and drove one of the force's pickup trucks. Shortly after Malian security forces freed Kontao, they arrested several men, including one religious figure from a prominent family who allegedly orchestrated the kidnapping and a suspect who purportedly stencilled the gendarmerie's official insignia on the truck. There has been little public discussion of the kidnapping, despite lingering suspicions about the nature of the incident – including questions about the official account of it and whether Malian gendarmes were involved.

And, just a few months after Kontao was taken, tragedy struck another Sunnite member of the HCI. On 19 January 2019, just before the dawn prayer, a 26-year-old man brutally murdered Imam Abdelaziz Yattabary near the mosque the cleric oversaw in Bamako's Missira quarter. Yattabary also ran a prominent school, the Institut Yattabary. His father, Cheikhna, had been among Bamako's most important Sunnite leaders and educators. In the weeks before the murder, Yattabary, like several other imams, had become embroiled in the controversy over the Dutch-funded sexual education programme.

Due to HCI activism [led by Dicko](#), the Malian government withdrew the manual containing the programme in mid-December 2018.

Shortly after Yattabary's murder, the killer turned himself in to the police. According to the government statement released soon after, the man [told the police](#) that he believed the imam's sermons against homosexuality targeted him specifically (although he later claimed that the imam had hired someone to kill him). These explanations did not satisfy Yattabary's followers, who crowded into the local police station that day demanding to see the killer. Some Malians [speculated](#) that there was more to the story than the government had revealed, while others spoke of Dicko's and other religious leaders' concern that the killing was politically motivated, designed to create fear in the Sunnite community. In a recent [court appearance](#), the killer spoke of his wider assassination plans and put forward far-fetched conspiracy theories – suggesting that judicial proceedings are unlikely to clarify the matter.

It is possible that the kidnapping and the murder, though highly unusual for Bamako, were unrelated. Nonetheless, two prominent imams close to Dicko on the HCI were targeted at a time of more or less open government hostility towards him and the Chérif of Nioro.

In early 2019, there were several [devastating massacres](#) of civilians committed by armed groups in Mopti, a region in central Mali. For many Malians, the attacks drove home the fact that neither the government nor the international community seemed capable of protecting the country's citizens. On 10 February, Dicko and the Chérif organised a rally in Bamako that brought together an estimated 60,000 people. The [meeting](#) was, Dicko told *Jeune Afrique*, [intended](#) “to call on the government and a meeting for prayer for the country”. He added that “the problem of our country, it's a problem of governance.” In announcing the meeting, Dicko [adopted an](#) approach that had become common in his public remarks: a call for unity, divine assistance, and reconciliation between communities – combined with a demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Soumeylou Boubèye Maiga.

Importantly, Dicko continues to present himself both as a religious leader and a citizen – as he often has in interviews and public commentary dealing with political issues. When asked about his political ambitions, he [noted](#) “I am not a

politician, but I am a leader and I have opinions. If that is political, then I am political.” He has made similar comments in several interviews with the author of this paper since 2013, often being careful to frame his critiques of politics, corruption, and governance with the perspective of a Malian citizen rather than a religious leader or the president of the HCI.

Hostility between the government and religious leaders persisted in the two months following the February rally. There were more massacres of civilians in central Mali and a series of attacks on Malian, UN, and French forces – as well as several strikes – during this period. In early April, Dicko and the Chérif of Nioro [organised](#) against inter-communal violence in Bamako and Nioro du Sahel. The resulting rally in the capital drew one of the largest crowds of protesters seen on the city’s streets since those that helped usher in the end of dictatorship in 1991, totalling somewhere between the police estimate of 10,000 people and an unofficial estimate of [30,000](#). The protests clogged the streets around the Place de l’Indépendance, bearing placards and chanting anti-government slogans. Meanwhile, anti-government slogans and demands for the implementation of the *sharia* – which appeared on placards at the rally – circulated on Malian social media. This time, the protesters and organisers obtained the result they sought: after a meeting with IBK, Dicko [called off](#) another planned protest and, on 18 April, Maiga [resigned](#). Although Maiga officially stepped down because he had failed to halt the violence in central Mali, Dicko’s and others’ calls for his departure over several months more than likely influenced the decision.

In May 2019, Dicko’s term as the president of the HCI ended, and Haidara [replaced](#) him. Before the end of his tenure, Dicko had already begun a process of reflection and analysis to decide his next steps, including forming a movement of his own.<sup>[10]</sup> Those close to him insisted at the time that the movement would not be political but rather [focused](#) on “moralisation of public life”. This led to the launch of the CMAS, in September. Like similar organisations, the CMAS includes an array of representatives from various religious and civil society groups, as part of a big tent approach to public mobilisation. [In his remarks](#) on the project, Dicko [railed against](#) “open and endemic corruption” and “catastrophic governance”, but added: “I am neither a kingmaker nor a president, I want to make peace.”

Dicko’s subsequent denials about his political ambitions have done little to silence

the Malian commentariat or international observers who fear that a Salafist imam may soon sit in the presidential palace at Koulouba. But there are significant reasons to believe that their fears are based on a misunderstanding of Mali's most prominent Muslim leaders.

Although there is a rich academic literature on Islam in Africa, many journalists and analysts who write about Mali are overly influenced by events in the Middle East and north Africa – and the histories of Islamic mobilisation in countries there, where Islamic activism has created large-scale political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and, more recently, political parties such as Egypt's Hizb al-Nour. This sometimes generates expectations that are at odds with the [history and context of Muslim mobilisation](#) in Mali and the wider Sahel region. Despite the explosion of Islamic activism that followed the fall of Traoré's regime, Mali's Muslim leaders have rarely sought to directly participate in electoral politics (even if Malian politicians often have [links to](#) religious leaders).

There are several impediments to this kind of political mobilisation. Mali's constitution, like those of several other former French colonies, is [formally secular](#). Nonetheless, the French-inspired concept of *laïcité* remains widely misunderstood. Rather than a strict separation of church and state, this concept, as adopted into law in France in 1905, defines the state as strictly neutral on religious matters.

Modern-day Mali's "secular" reality, however, is one of strong religious influence on public life and government, as well as active government intervention – or attempts to intervene – in religious issues. Indeed, the Malian state has freely intervened in religious matters since its founding. As discussed above, politicians regularly court religious leaders to gain access to their mobilising power. Mali's government also funds religious activities under the guise of support for associational life – as Dicko demonstrated with a flourish when he displayed an offer of more than €75,000 he allegedly received from the authorities at his February 2019 rally (an offer he refused). The government also established the Ministry of Religion and Sects in 2012, in response to a long-standing demand from Muslim actors and in the shadow of the jihadist occupation of northern Mali. And the state continues to work with religious actors in other formal and informal ways.

Malian political parties are formally banned from having a specific religious or ethnic orientation, but this has simply meant that religious leaders run for office under the banner of another party – and that overtly religious parties do not register as such (in a similar fashion to their Islamist counterparts in Algeria).<sup>[11]</sup> Still, these parties have been largely unsuccessful in elections. Even religious candidates who run with other political parties have only had marginal success, as the International Crisis Group [observed](#) in 2017.

Sabati 2012, established to evaluate presidential candidates on their religious credentials, [endorsed](#) IBK in the election that year. However, since then, the group has not been as influential as some Malian observers thought it would be; it [fragmented](#) in the run-up to the 2018 election – as its members questioned its continued support for IBK and its relationship with Dicko, and as other influential Muslim leaders distanced themselves from the organisation (including Dicko).<sup>[12]</sup> In the 2016 legislative election, Sabati 2012 acted not as a Sunnite pressure group, as many expected it to, but [showed](#) flexibility in its partnerships and endorsements.

While the Muslim leaders discussed in this paper are directly involved in politics in various ways, few such leaders have benefited from running for office themselves (although there are a few [exceptions](#)). Nonetheless, Mali’s most important Muslim leaders have generally been at their most effective when they have worked to influence the government while maintaining some distance from it – because this both preserves their autonomy and helps preserve their credibility in critiquing what most Malians see as a deeply corrupt political system. Dicko’s movement is still forming; he and his close advisers are evaluating where it can have the greatest impact.<sup>[13]</sup> But, for now at least, he is likely to steer clear of formal politics, while still lending his voice to issues of religion and society in a way that politicians will be unable to ignore.

## **Militancy, negotiations, and Mali’s ambivalently “secular” future**

Mali’s religious leaders continue to play a role in local and national negotiations designed to curtail the country’s worsening violence. In 2012, during the separatist and subsequently jihadist occupation of northern Mali, Haidara and Dicko took

prominent public stances on the conflict. Haidara spoke about the rebellion led by the Mouvement National de l'Azawad in vociferously political and religious terms, even publicly [labelling](#) members of the group as “apostates”. He stridently denounced the jihadist groups active in the north and their imposition of a strict interpretation of the *sharia*. At times, he linked the threat they posed to his [larger critique](#) of the spread of Sunnite Islam, as well as to [foreign support](#) for Sunnite mosques and organisations.

As he has taken up new positions, Haidara’s public stance on negotiations with jihadist groups has gradually evolved. In early 2013, just weeks after the French-led [Operation Serval](#) began, Haidara [condemned](#) efforts to negotiate with these groups. But things may have changed since then. In September 2019, Houka-Houka Ag Alhousseini, the erstwhile *qadi* for the jihadist coalition in Timbuktu in 2012 and a [current target](#) of UN sanctions, was in Bamako to advocate dialogue between Mali’s religious leaders. He expressed hope that this would [help end](#) communal conflicts and attacks on soldiers and civilians in northern and central Mali. Having reportedly met with [several ministers](#) and [attended the launch](#) of Dicko’s CMAS, Ag Alhousseini was pictured next to a smiling Haidara, in the lavish sitting room of the latter’s home, in images and videos that circulated on social media.

Although it is only one example of this type of dialogue, Ag Alhousseini’s visit to Haidara suggests that the HCI’s new president may be more open to negotiations with jihadists than he once was – or, at least, open to the kind of increasing involvement of Muslim leaders tied to radical movements in public life that would make some leaders in southern Mali uncomfortable. Since his release from prison in 2015, Ag Alhousseini has openly practised as a *qadi* in the Timbuktu region – although the United Nations has accused him of helping facilitate jihadist attacks, [using](#) his reconciliation work with local government officials as a cover. According to local observers, he is close to the governor of Timbuktu and government officials consult him on matters of reconciliation, just as some local residents consult him on judicial opinions.

For Dicko, the issue of negotiations with jihadists is more complicated. In 2012 the government tasked him, as president of the HCI, with [attempting](#) to negotiate with the jihadist coalition led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a Malian Tuareg powerbroker who began adopting more rigorist beliefs in the 1990s.<sup>[14]</sup> Ag Ghali and Dicko know each other

from their time in northern Mali and Bamako – although this did not help Dicko come to a negotiated solution with Ag Ghali.<sup>[15]</sup> Dicko negotiated the release of approximately 160 Malian soldiers the jihadists had captured – an incident that he highlighted during the launch of the CMAS to attack the government for its mismanagement of the situation and indifference to the lives of soldiers.

Negotiations on a cessation of hostilities and a possible return of the state to the region subsequently broke down during one of his trips to the northern city of Gao, in late 2012.<sup>[16]</sup> Dicko's efforts earned him praise from some quarters. Yet others accused him of sharing much of the jihadists' ideology and of being too slow to condemn their harsh punishment of civilians under the *sharia*, or their destruction of the mausoleums of Sufi saints in Timbuktu. Nonetheless, in September 2012, a conference of Muslim leaders organised by the Dicko-led HCI argued that the jihad in northern Mali and the imposition of the *sharia* there contravened Islamic law.<sup>[17]</sup>

Dicko supported the French intervention in 2013, but has since been vocal in his criticism of the growing international presence in Mali, foreign forces' alleged interference in the country's affairs, and French and UN troops' failure to stop the worsening violence. As a result of his perceived religious legitimacy and despite his frequent criticism of the authorities, Dicko received a government request to lead an official "mission de bonne office" in late 2016. The aim of the mission was to open channels of communication with increasingly powerful jihadist groups in central Mali and their partners further north. While Dicko's was not the only such channel, Amadou Kouffa – leader of al-Qaeda affiliate *Katibat Macina* – reportedly expressed a willingness to speak with Dicko, along with two other Muslim scholars Kouffa deemed qualified. Dicko is thought to have made progress in contacting members of Kouffa's inner circle, but Maiga shut down the cleric's planned trip to central Mali after taking office, in 2017.

Even if Dicko or another prominent religious figure was to make another attempt at this kind of outreach, it is unclear whether open negotiations with jihadists in central Mali or their partners elsewhere in the country would curtail the violence in the short or medium term. Under the current prime minister, Boubou Cissé, trips to central Mali have reportedly been used to distribute money to fighters – including members of local militias, as well as jihadists – in an effort to buy at least



a temporary calm. Yet this approach does not ease civilians' immediate security concerns, nor resolve underlying political and religious disputes.

Many analyses of Katibat Macina have focused on issues such as Kouffa's religious prestige and knowledge, his [recruitment](#) of Peul herders from social classes who feel excluded in a highly stratified social and economic order, and his occasional efforts to characterise the fight in central Mali as being against the state or rival communities. Kouffa has also reportedly [instituted](#) not just his own, often harsh, version of the sharia but also appointed his own *qadis* – who many civilians see as being more fair-minded, or at least efficient, than state judges.<sup>[18]</sup> According to local observers, Kouffa has also recruited several young men from prominent religious families as his lieutenants, using their religious legitimacy to help bolster his own.<sup>[19]</sup> This is reminiscent of a strategy popular among jihadists during their occupation of northern Mali, in which Ansar al-Din often sought out men from such families to serve as their *qadis*.<sup>[20]</sup> The approach enables these groups to challenge established political and social orders while gaining legitimacy in local communities.

Civilians in northern and, increasingly, central Mali rely on *qadis* for conflict resolution and regular judicial functions. In some Arab, Tuareg, and other communities, *qadis* have long [engaged](#) in mediation and issued rulings on disputes. Figures such as Dicko's grandfather did so during the colonial and independence periods even when they had no official role or status. Indeed, the 2015 Algiers Accords [envision a role](#) for *qadis* in formal justice provision in northern Mali. These figures [play](#) an important part in local communities by maintaining small-scale peace accords. This role for *qadis* also features in the 2017 Anéfis II Accords. Having largely brought a halt to deadly fighting between two of northern Mali's main armed groups, the latter agreements are presided over by a commission of four *qadis*, all of them with widely respected religious pedigrees.<sup>[21]</sup> (There are some exceptions to this, in areas such as conflicts over trafficking.) While these cases have distinct contexts, they nonetheless demonstrate the enduring problems in the enforcement of justice, and the ways in which religious actors are already filling those gaps.

## Conclusion

No single assessment of Islam's place in Malian politics and public life can entirely capture the complexity of the relationships between various Muslim leaders and groups; how they interact with Mali's political structures; or how politicians and civilians alike deal with the influence and activism of these leaders. The diversity and richness of Islamic practice and life defy easy categorisation – as this paper shows. Malian Muslim leaders of various backgrounds and ideologies alternately compete and cooperate with one another, usually while maintaining some distance from the government. In the eyes of many citizens, declining faith in the Malian authorities has, in some cases, made Muslim leaders appear more legitimate – and more able to provide guidance and even services – than the state.

There are limits to this trend. For now, Muslim leaders such as Dicko, Haidara, and the Chérif of Nioro seek to shape the state, but not to run it directly.

Nonetheless, while widespread fears that Mali will become an Islamic republic are overblown, governmental failure and rising insecurity, coupled with a growing public interest in Islam, will ensure that Muslim leaders continue to play an important part in local, regional, and national affairs. European policymakers need to understand the histories and actions of these leaders if they are to address the stark security and governance challenges in Mali. Such an understanding would help them enact programmes that respond to the genuine needs and concerns of citizens across the country.

## About the author

Andrew Lebovich is a visiting fellow with ECFR's Middle East and North Africa Programme, and a doctoral candidate at Columbia University – where his dissertation focuses on the history of Muslim Reformist movements in Algeria, Mali, and Senegal. He is grateful for the comments on a draft of this paper from Alex Thurston and Bokar Sangaré. Any mistakes or omissions in the paper are the author's alone.

## Footnotes

- [1] Interview with Mahmoud Dicko, Bamako, March 2018.
- [2] Interview with a prominent Sufi imam and High Islamic Council member, Bamako, January 2018.
- [3] Interviews with an adviser to the High Islamic Council, Bamako, February–April 2018.
- [4] Interview with a Malian religious adviser, Bamako, March 2018.
- [5] Interviews with Malian religious actors, Bamako, February–March 2018.
- [6] Interviews with religious figures close to the High Islamic Council, Bamako, February–March 2018.
- [7] Interviews with Mahmoud Dicko, the most recent of them in March 2018.
- [8] Interviews with former senior AMUPI leaders, Bamako, February–April 2018.
- [9] Communications with an activist close to the High Islamic Council, August–September 2019.
- [10] Interview with an adviser to Mahmoud Dicko, Bamako, April 2019.
- [11] Interview with a senior Islamic Association for Salvation figure, Bamako, January 2018.
- [12] Interviews with High Islamic Council members and advisers to the High Islamic Council, Bamako, January–March 2018.
- [13] Communications with an adviser to Mahmoud Dicko, August–September 2019.
- [14] Interviews with Malian and Nigerien Tuareg who have long-standing personal relationships with Ag Ghali, France, Mali, and Niger, April 2012 and February–April 2013.
- [15] Interview with Mahmoud Dicko.
- [16] Interview with Mahmoud Dicko, Bamako, February 2013; interview with Gao businessman and intermediary, Bamako, February 2013.
- [17] High Islamic Council, “Prise des Armes pour l’Application de la Charia à Notre Epoque”, 23 September 2012 (unpublished document in the author’s possession).

[18] Communication with Corinne Dufka, Bamako, February 2018.

[19] Interview with a Peul researcher and activist, Bamako, April 2019.

[20] Interviews and communications with specialists and researchers from northern Mali, Bamako, and Niamey, 2017-2019.

[21] Interviews and communications with specialists and researchers from northern Mali, Bamako, and Niamey, 2017-2019.

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