Session 5: Role of Islam in Shaping the Strategic Environment

Dr. Amy Pate

Overview

- A brief history of Islam in East Africa
- Religious demographics of East Africa
- Islam as identity politics
- Islamization and critiques
- Use of Islam by militant movements

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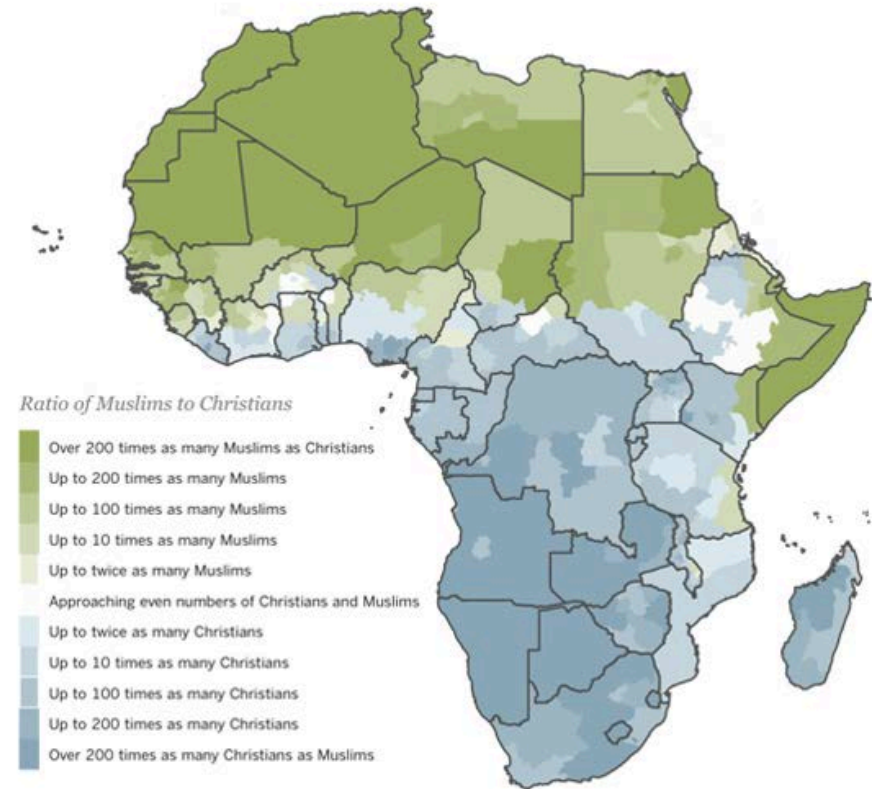
Islam in East Africa

- Islam moved into the region both from the North (emanating from Egypt) and the east (from Indian Ocean trade, particularly Yemen)

- Evidence of Muslim settlements as early as the 8th century on the East African coast
  - Expansion in the 12th centuries-onward gave rise to multiple Swahili city-states
  - By the 13th century, multiple areas of the coast were Muslim-majority
  - Islam was heavily "Africanized" during this period, including absorption of traditional African religious practices

- Islam did not spread to the interior of East Africa until the 18th century, along coast-to-interior trade routes opened by colonial powers
  - The spread of Islam during this period was largely constrained to these trade routes and concentrated over time in more urban areas
  - Conversion to Islam was actively countered by Western Christian missionary activity.

Religious Demography in East Africa

- Islam in the Horn of Africa/ East Africa is concentrated along coasts

- Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia have Muslim majorities

- Majority are Sunni, with the Shafi'i school predominant. (Hanafi school also present, but most adherents are of South Asian descent)

- Most Shi'a in the region are of South Asian descent

Muslims and Christians in Africa

This map shows the ratio of Muslims to Christians in each country and province. The north is heavily Muslim, and the south is heavily Christian.

Ratio of Muslims to Christians

- Over 200 times as many Muslims as Christians
- Up to 200 times as many Muslims
- Up to 100 times as many Muslims
- Up to 10 times as many Muslims
- Up to twice as many Muslims
- Approaching even numbers of Christians and Muslims
- Up to twice as many Christians
- Up to 10 times as many Christians
- Up to 100 times as many Christians
- Up to 200 times as many Christians
- Over 200 times as many Christians as Muslims

Sources: censuses, demographic and health surveys, and the World Religion Database

Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, April 2010

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Islam as Identity Politics

- In Muslim-majority countries (e.g., Somalia)
  - Islam integrated as essential component of national identity
  - Muslim identity deployed to garner internal, domestic support in addition to support from external actors

Islam as Identity Politics

- In Muslim-minority countries (e.g., Kenya)
  - Islam used as a mobilization frame to link diverse ethnic constituencies for collective action
  - Often utilized in response to discriminatory actions by governments dominated by Christians
  - Muslim identity may be deployed to solicit external support (for political mobilization, development purposes, and/or humanitarian assistance)

Islam as identity politics does not equate to support for Islamization or support for militancy

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Discourse around Islamization

- In Muslim-majority countries
  - As reaction to failure of secularizing governments
  - Intra-religious debate
- In Muslim-minority countries
  - As reaction to "Christianization" of political discourse (for example, in Kenya and Uganda)
  - As outgrowth of democratic movements and support for federalisms
  - Includes both inter-religious and intra-religious debates

Discourse around Islamization

- External forces play role in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority societies
  - Influx of resources from conservative Middle Eastern states for the building of mosques and religious schools
  - Increase in numbers of East Africans traveling for religious education
  - Growth in communication technologies links populations in East Africa to debates within the wider Islamic world

Connecting Identity Politics with Islamization Discourses

- Meaning of Muslim identity in African contexts
  - Does Muslim identity necessitate embrace of political Islam?
  - Or does embrace of political Islam mark a departure from traditional expression of Muslim identity in Africa?

Militancy in East Africa

- Militant groups use BOTH identity politics and Islamization discourses to
    - Legitimate their existence and activities
    - Recruit members
    - Solicit external support

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Discussion

- How does Muslim identity work differently in those countries where Islam is the majority religion versus where it is the minority religion?

- How do external actors influence/shape Muslim religious practice and Islamic discourse in East Africa?

- What are ways for Western governments, actors, NGOs, etc. to more constructively engage with Muslim identity politics and discourses around Islamization?

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