Session 5: Role of Islam in Shaping the Strategic Environment

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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
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

Sources: censuses, demographic and health surveys, and the World Religion Database
Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, April 2010
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
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
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?