



**ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND  
PUBLIC OPINION  
IN AFRICA**

**How do religious orientations, especially attachments to Islam, affect public support for democracy in sub-Saharan Africa?**

Some influential observers allege that Islam and democracy are incompatible. For example, Huntington argues that, because the Koran rejects the distinction between religious and political authority, Islamic civilization cannot easily coexist with democracy.<sup>1</sup> And Kedourie holds that mass suffrage, elections, and representation are “profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition.”<sup>2</sup>

Others disagree. Esposito and Voll stress the diverse spectrum of conservative and progressive tendencies within Islam, including new movements that seek to reconcile religious resurgence and democratization.<sup>3</sup> Filali-Ansary goes even further, claiming that democracy, normally identified as a Western concept, originated in the Islamic East.<sup>4</sup>

Recent research on public opinion has begun to test these competing visions against contemporary facts. Rose concludes from survey evidence in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that “being a Muslim does not lead a person to reject democracy or endorse dictatorship.”<sup>5</sup> Along similar lines, Tessler finds that the Islamic beliefs of “the Arab street” in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Palestine (Gaza and West Bank) discourage the emergence of a democratic political culture “only to a very limited extent.”<sup>6</sup>

Data are available from the Afrobarometer Round 1, conducted between mid-1999 and mid-2001, to extend this debate to sub-Saharan Africa. Religious identifications and attitudes to democracy were measured in four countries in East and West Africa: **Mali, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda**. The distributions of Muslims in these representative national samples, which correlate almost perfectly with a standard source<sup>7</sup>, are shown in Figure 1. Across these four countries, the

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London, Frank Cass, 1994)

<sup>3</sup> John Esposito and John Voll, *Islam and Democracy*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1996)

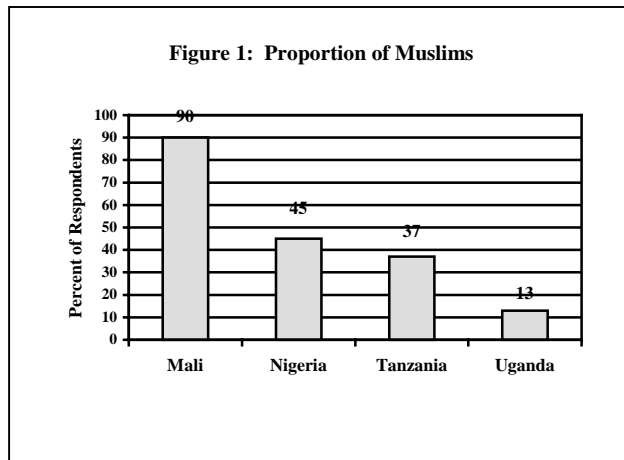
<sup>4</sup> Abdou Filali-Ansary, “Muslims and Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, 10, 3 (July) 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rose, “Does Islam Make People Anti-Democratic? A Central Asian Perspective,” *Journal of Democracy*, 13, 4 (October) 2002, p.8.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Tessler, “Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries,” *Comparative Politics*, 34, 3 (April) 2002, p.350.

<sup>7</sup> Pearson’s r correlation = .999 between Afrobarometer Round 1 data and the proportions of Muslims reported for each country in *The World Factbook*, see [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html)

survey population (n = 10,159) is almost evenly divided between Muslims (46 percent) and non-Muslims (54 percent), thus enabling comparisons across communities of belief.



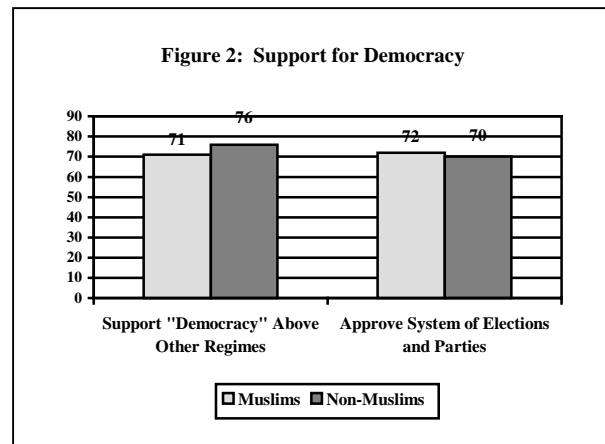
The results from Africa reinforce insights from Central Asia and the Middle East. Although **adherents of Islam** in Africa occasionally display distinctive political attitudes, they **do not differ much from non-Muslims on the subject of democracy** and their differences with others do not always run in an anti-democratic direction. Moreover, any hesitancy about supporting democracy among the African Muslims we interviewed is due more to deficits of formal education and other attributes of modernization than to the influence of religious attachments.

The survey findings are as follows:

**Muslims are as supportive of democracy as non-Muslims.** Regardless of religious orientation, an average of more than seven out of ten people in four African countries say they support democracy. Some 71 percent of Muslims and 76 percent of non-Muslims agree that, “democracy is preferable to any other form of government.”

This result is driven by the case of Nigeria, where commitments to democracy among African Muslims are weakest. Once broken down by country, the data reveal that Muslims in Uganda and Mali express *more* support for democracy than non-Muslims. And the two religious groupings are *equally* supportive of democracy in Tanzania. Especially on the Zanzibar islands, Tanzanian Muslims say they long for honest elections and for political representation by leaders of their choice.

Moreover, an alternate question asks about support for “our present system of government with free elections and many parties” (i.e. without using the word “democracy”). Its results show Muslims generally – now including Nigerians – to be just as positive as non-Muslims (see Figure 2).<sup>8</sup> On balance, therefore, Muslims and non-Muslims are hard to distinguish with regard to their support for a competitive multiparty electoral system, otherwise commonly known as democracy.



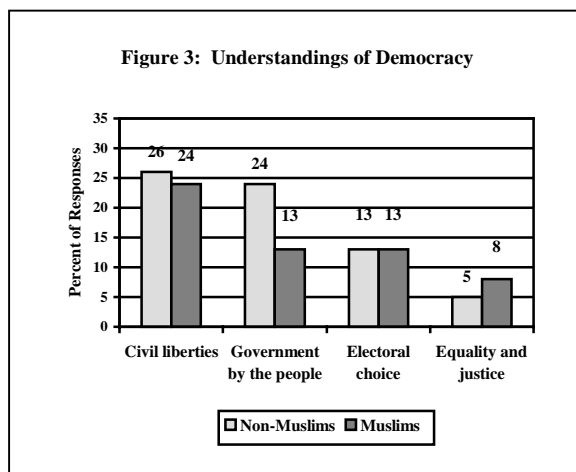
<sup>8</sup> On the “democracy” question, the figures represent the percentage of respondents supporting democracy. On the “system” question, the figures represent average scores on a scale of 0-100, where 0 = the “worst” system and 100 = the “best” system.

**In West Africa, a minority of Muslims would tolerate a return to authoritarian rule.**

Despite widespread expressions of support for democracy, Muslims are slightly more likely than non-Muslims to defer to interludes of non-democratic rule (12 versus 9 percent) and twice as likely to care little about forms of government (15 versus 8 percent). Moreover, more Muslims than non-Muslims approve of strong presidential rule (20 versus 10 percent) or endorse the (re)entry of the army into politics (16 percent versus 6 percent).

Again, however, these minority sentiments of authoritarian nostalgia are concentrated in certain countries, namely Nigeria and Mali, where former army generals were elected to the presidency in 1999 and 2002 respectively. In both West African countries, Muslims are significantly more likely than adherents of Christian or traditional religions to approve of rule by a military or civilian strongman. In Nigeria, of course, military rule has long been associated with dominance of the political system and control of national economic resources by Northern Muslim elites. East Africa provides a contrast. Tanzanian Muslims are just as likely as their non-Muslims compatriots to reject authoritarian alternatives, in part because they think they have derived little benefit from such arrangements in the past. And in Uganda, more Muslims than others, perhaps remembering the excesses of their own Idi Amin, want military dictators to stay permanently out of politics.

**Muslims and non-Muslims have similar understandings of democracy.** Whatever their religious leanings, the Africans we interviewed conceive of democracy in much the same ways. One out of four associates democratic rule primarily with civil liberties, especially free speech. And one out of eight cites voting rights and electoral choice (See Figure 3).



Despite these similarities, Muslims add an egalitarian and consensual spin to their interpretations of democracy. They are much more likely than non-Muslims to associate this form of government with political and economic equality, power-sharing, and social justice. By contrast, non-Muslims are twice as likely to express populist interpretations by seeing democracy in terms of direct participation, or “government by the people.” Notwithstanding the importance that Zanzibari Muslims attach to elections, the Islamic image of a democratic regime in Africa seems to hinge more on a just society than on a responsive government.

**Overall, religious affiliation does not affect popular appraisals of democracy’s performance.**

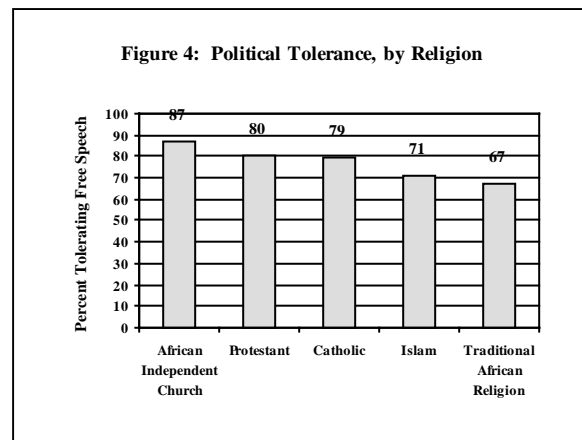
Across the four countries studied, Muslims and non-Muslims say they are equally satisfied with “the way democracy works” (68 percent). Similarly, the two communities are about equally prone to consider that democracy has been attained in their country, either fully or with only minor deviations (50 percent for Muslims, 48 percent for non-Muslims).

As such, religious affiliation (unlike, say, political party affiliation) does not color popular judgments about regime performance. Remarkably, even in Nigeria, where Muslims were stripped of much political power and influence in the democratic transition of 1999, followers of Islam are still more satisfied with democracy (and see Nigerian democracy as more complete)

than their non-Islamic counterparts. Perhaps because Muslims constitute almost half the Nigerian population, they calculate that majority rule will not always work to their disadvantage. In Tanzania, however, where the Islamic community is smaller and where Zanzibar has been politically marginalized longer than Northern Nigeria, Muslims are less likely to express satisfaction with democracy. The counterbalancing cases of Nigeria and Tanzania mean that, overall, religious affiliation does not affect popular appraisals of democracy's performance.

**Nevertheless, political tolerance is somewhat lower among Muslims than Christians.** For democracy to work well, citizens must be willing to tolerate the expression of a plurality of political opinions, including those different to their own. And Islam's critics often avow that it is an intolerant creed. To test this accusation, the Afrobarometer asked respondents to choose between the following: Either "It is dangerous and confusing to allow the expression of too many different points of view"; Or "If people have different views than I do, they should be allowed to express them."

As Figure 4 shows, expressed political tolerance is actually quite high in the African countries studied, since an average of 75 percent choose the liberal and charitable option. Nonetheless, fewer Muslims than Christians feel comfortable with free expression, although they show more forbearance of political speech than the adherents of traditional African religions. On balance, however, the fact that 71 percent of Muslims would allow – rather than control – free speech does not amount to evidence of intolerance.



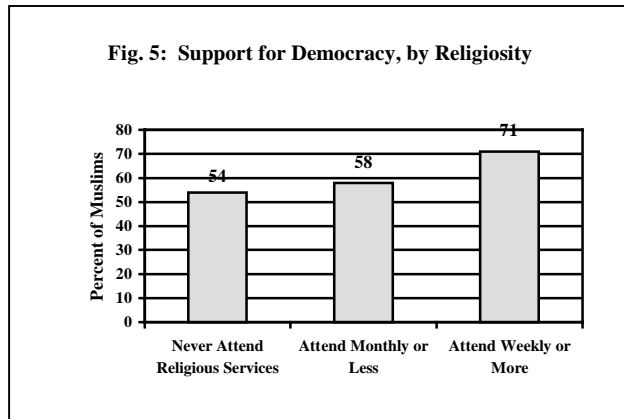
**Political participation lags among followers of Islam.** A functioning democracy also requires active citizens, whose principal duty is to vote. Among other roles, citizens in a democracy also enjoy opportunities to attend community meetings, get together with others to raise issues, go to election rallies, tell others about their preferred electoral candidates, and even to demonstrate in the streets if they feel their voices are not being heard. For purposes of analysis, we constructed an index of participation that measured how often individuals actually engaged in these five behaviors.

Generally, Muslims are hardly less likely than non-Muslims to say they voted in the last presidential and legislative elections in their country (73 versus 76 percent). But, across all four countries, Muslims are consistently less likely than non-Muslims to participate in other aspects of the democratic process. For example, almost one-half of Muslims (48 percent) have *never* engaged in *any* of the five acts in the participation index, compared to one third of non-Muslims (32 percent). This seems to bespeak a political detachment among followers of Islam from anything other than the most rudimentary aspects of citizenship.

Perhaps offsetting this apathy, Muslims are more likely than non-Muslims to identify themselves as being "close to a political party" (56 versus 42 percent). But, because the followers of Islam report taking relatively few political initiatives of their own, they may therefore be particularly susceptible to mass mobilization by organized political movements.

**Religious observance increases democratic commitments.** So far, we have treated Muslims as a homogenous group, as if all believers were equally observant of the Prophet’s faith. Yet, as with other broad “churches,” Islam accommodates a broad cross-section of adherents, from the very casual to the extremely fanatic. The intensity of religious commitment – otherwise known as religiosity – might actually be more important than nominal religion to the formation of political attitudes and the activation of political participation.

The Afrobarometer measured religiosity for the first time in Nigeria in 2001 by asking, “apart from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?” Among nominal Muslims, we detect a clear, strong, and positive relationship between religiosity and support for democracy (see Figure 5). In other words, the more often that Muslims attend prayer meetings at a mosque, the more likely they are to support democracy. This important finding clearly calls into question any effort to stereotype all mosques as hotbeds of anti-democratic rhetoric or to portray fervent Islamists as automatically opposed to democracy. Instead, at least among Nigerian Muslims, religious practice is likely to deepen rather than undermine commitments to a democratic form of government.



Importantly, religiosity also increases political participation. For example, Nigerians who routinely go to the mosque every Friday are twice as likely as non-practicing Muslims to also participate in local-level meetings where community development is planned (52 versus 26 percent). Given the centrality of the mosque to the daily welfare of Islamic communities, and the fusion between religious and secular affairs in Koranic doctrine, religious observance thus becomes a gateway to involvement in the political arena.

We also find hints that religiosity may increase political tolerance. For example, attending weekly prayer services makes Nigerian Muslims significantly more likely to concur that, “since we will never agree on everything, we must learn to accept differences of opinion within our community.” Similarly, religiosity *reduces* dogmatic commitments to *sharia* law. Some 63 percent of non-practicing Nigerian Muslims think that Northern states should be governed by their own religious legal system, a view that is shared by only 52 percent of weekly mosque-goers. Almost as many of this group of highly observant Muslims (45 percent) think that “Nigeria is a secular state: it should have one, non-religious legal system that applies to all people.”

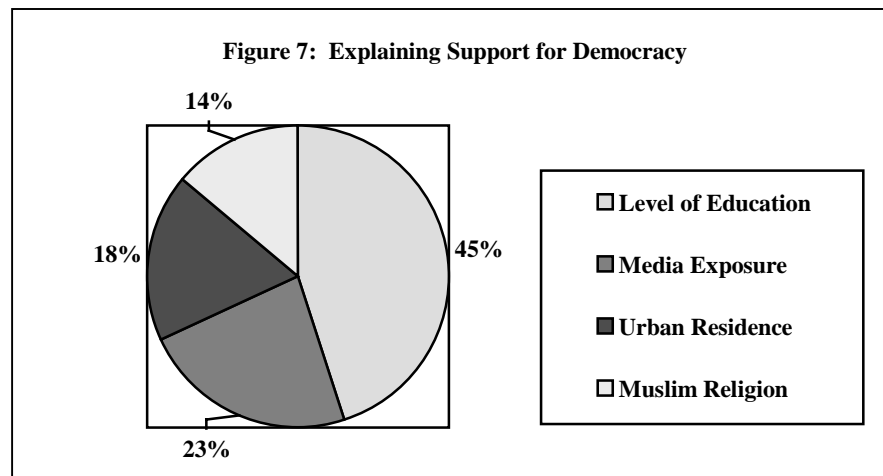
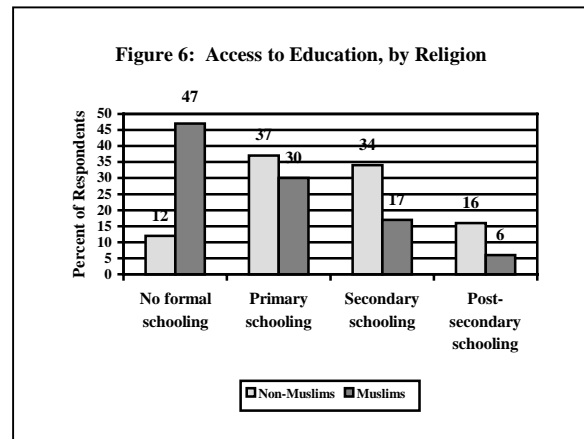
**More than religion, modernization affects support for democracy.** To recap, the difference in support for democracy between Muslims and non-Muslims is just 5 percentage points (See Figure 2). Yet the difference in support for democracy between the least educated and most educated Africans interviewed is a much larger 19 percentage points. If nothing else, this comparison suggests that considerations of religion may be less important to the fate of democracy than certain attributes of modernization.

Stated differently, we note that Muslims in Africa, especially females, have had limited opportunities to go to school. According to the Afrobarometer, Muslims are four times more likely than others to have no formal education and less than half as likely to possess a post-

secondary qualification (See Figure 6). This relationship is strongest in Nigeria and weakest in Tanzania, but it is statistically significant for all four countries studied.

Perhaps, therefore, the few small differences that we have observed between Muslims and non-Muslims are due to a lack of formal education – or a deficit of other modern attributes – rather than the influence of Islamic values.

To test this proposition, we ran a simple multivariate regression analysis that reveals the relative explanatory power of various predictors of support for democracy. Apart from religion, the model includes education, exposure to mass media (measured as an index of news consumption from radio, TV and newspapers) and urban residence. As Figure 7 shows, the three modernization factors all explain more variance in support for democracy than does religion.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, compared to professed faith, level of education alone explains three times as much variance in support for democracy.



**Taken together**, the Afrobarometer findings for four African countries with substantial Islamic populations call into question whether, among ordinary individuals, being Muslim constitutes much of an obstacle to becoming a democrat. Attitudes to democracy are similar across religious communities and deficits in political participation among Muslims are partly offset by tolerance and activism among Islam’s most observant followers. And, because education trumps religion, we are led to agree with Richard Rose’s insight that, “the civilization that matters is not Islam, but ‘modern’, that is, a civilization based on secular values.”<sup>10</sup>

[www.afrobarometer.org](http://www.afrobarometer.org)

<sup>9</sup> The regression model with one religious and three modernization variables explains 4 percent of the total variance in support for democracy. The figures in the chart indicate the proportional composition of that 4 percent.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, “Does Islam Make People Anti-Democratic?”, *ibid.*