



Muslims Talking Politics: Islam and Democracy in Practice in Northern Nigeria

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Arguably, one of the most important developments across the Muslim world during the past 25 years is the growing evidence of popular support for both democratic government *and* a wide range of state-sponsored projects of Islamic revivalism, including the enshrinement and implementation of sharia (Islamic law). For many Western scholars (and a vocal minority of Muslim intellectuals), these dual demands seem contradictory, incompatible with both Islamic theology and history and the seeming absence of a “civic culture” in contemporary Muslim societies. And for many Western policymakers concerned with the rise of global jihadi terrorism and violent extremism, global public opinion data suggesting broad Muslim support for sharia looks suspiciously like evidence of mass radicalism. Combined with the fact that even in the post-Arab Spring world, popular support for democracy has often done little to transform the illiberal and authoritarian circumstances in which many Muslims live, it’s easy to conclude that this trend doesn’t mean much for the future of Islam’s relationship with democracy.

In my book, *Muslims Talking Politics: Framing Islam, Democracy, and Law in Northern Nigeria*, I use Nigeria’s experience in the late 1990s and early 2000s with both a

democratic transition *and* a mass movement to enshrine sharia in state law to propose a new way of thinking about what it means to say that Islam is or isn't "compatible" with democracy. Specifically, I re-frame the question, away from questions of theology and history and towards understanding how "ordinary" (Peletz 1998) working class Muslims make sense of the relationship between Islam and democratic government in *practice*—in the daily interactions, conversations, and conflicts that make up political life. I offer two important findings. The first is that broadly, popular support for sharia implementation across northern Nigeria was driven by efforts to articulate the challenges most new democracies face—corruption, inequality, distrust of government—as moral problems, best addressed by the development of a morally interventionist public policy. Rather than seeing sharia and democracy as competing visions of the good society, Nigerian Muslims seem to regard them as complementary. The second, and arguably more important, is that Muslims in northern Nigeria reason about the relationship between their personal values and beliefs and the big political questions of the day in much the same way as people everywhere—by drawing on public discourse and personal experience. In this sense, the real "relationship" between Islam and democracy is less a matter of doctrine, and more a matter of context and negotiation—of *politics*.

Sharia and Democracy in Nigeria: An Unfinished Story

In some respects, Nigeria seems like an odd choice for a project hoping to generalize across the Muslim world. For one, it's not exactly a "Muslim-majority" country. Its 170 million citizens are divided roughly evenly between Muslims and Christians, and that division has often been a significant source of political tension and even violence. But in other ways, the Nigerian experience is a key case for imagining what a healthy relationship between Islam and democracy might look like. Religious activism and activists have played a crucial role in the country's 50 year struggle to craft a stable democratic system, and with more than 90% of its citizens (Muslim and Christian alike) identifying their religion as "very important" to their personal and public lives, religious belief is central to politics across the country. Indeed, the 12 Nigerian federal states that adopted some form of sharia between 1999 and 2003 did so explicitly through the democratic process, part of a national renegotiation over the terms of democratic politics following a generation of military rule. Although in recent years the brutal Boko Haram insurgency in the country's northeastern region has dominated national and international attention, in the long run Nigeria's democratic future likely depends on the country's ability to reconcile popular demands for Islamic values in the public sphere with freedom for all religious communities.

What did sharia implementation in Nigeria look like, and how did its efforts compare to similar projects across the globe? Much as Michael Buehler and Dani Muhtada (2016) have argued in the context of Indonesia—uncertain, sometimes illiberal democracy where there's been significant support for implementing aspects of sharia—local conditions and circumstances played a significant role in the proposal and implementation of Islamic law in northern Nigeria. Yet while Buehler and Muhtada

identify Islamist activists and networks as key players in the passage of sharia regulations in Indonesia, Nigeria's experience was far more driven by political elites.

As I describe in *Muslim Talking Politics*, northern Nigeria has a long and influential legacy of Islamist activism, including a vibrant and growing Salafi community that has sought to influence politics since at least the mid-1970s. Yet a careful analysis of 1998/1999 transition to civilian rule provides remarkably little evidence that this community was mobilized to—or even particularly interested in—promoting sharia in law. Historically, Nigeria's constitutional structure has prohibited “sectarian” political parties (religious or ethnic), but promoted formal and informal power-sharing schemes. The result has been that Islamic civil society activists have long sought to influence politics via demanding recognition in the distribution of federal budgetary resources, rather than by organizing independent political movements or even attempting to shape the agendas of political parties. Indeed, while members of Nigeria's growing Salafi community have been perfectly happy to claim credit after the fact for the sharia implementation “wave” that began in 1999, there's strong evidence that the original proposals actually took much of this group by surprise. Rather, from the beginning sharia implementation has been a project advanced and organized by Muslim politicians and legislators, many of whom had only very recently received an electoral mandate.

What did these politicians propose? The swiftest and most heavily-publicized changes took place in the legal sphere, where most states legislated new criminal law and procedure codes and empowered existing “area” (sharia-based civil and family law) courts to begin hearing criminal cases. In some states, these reforms were carefully planned and crafted. In others, they were far more slap-dash. In all instances, they ran into significant problems, including the challenge of finding qualified judges and ensuring popular awareness of the changes. In several instances, cases based on crimes that occurred prior to the passage of the new laws here incorrectly prosecuted under the sharia codes, resulting in embarrassing reversals on appeal.

In terms of popular impact, the legal changes were dwarfed by the social and administrative policies. Some, like mandates for “Islamic dress”—particularly targeted as women and girls—and required prayer by public officials, and reflected global discourses of Islamicization, while others—bans on alcohol sales and gambling in religiously “mixed” neighborhoods, censorship of the burgeoning local film industry, and the use of public monies to facilitate weddings for unmarried young men and women—were the products of more local concerns. Still others, like Kano State's *A Daidaita Sahu* initiative, were modeled on military rule-era “social reorientation” programs designed to force Nigerians into “good” public behaviors.

The enthusiasm and popular support for these programs was, by all systematic and anecdotal accounts, remarkably high for the first several years. But by the middle of the 2000s, popular opinion began to turn on sharia implementation *in practice*. In large part, this turn seems to have been driven by a growing sense that, given its “political” origins, the entire project had done little to address the more systematic problems of Nigerian society, including corruption, mismanagement of public resources, and security. Indeed,

outside Kano, the region's largest city, many of the initial proposals and programs have endured in name, having withered on the vine due to a lack of resources and growing popular distrust. Moreover, a marked uptick in social violence across the region, much of it inspired by protests and counter-protests around the sharia issue, has significantly undermined relations between northern Nigeria's Muslim community and its minority Christian population, further polarizing national religious relations, as well.

Since 2009, debates about sharia have been significantly colored by the rise of Boko Haram, a violent extremist group based in the northeastern part of the country. In 2015, the group was ranked by the Global Terrorism Index as the world's deadliest, and as of today several million Nigerians face some combination of displacement, food insecurity, or major health risks as a result of the conflict. Boko Haram's rise was driven at least in part by the group's early leadership's participation in and dissatisfaction with sharia implementation, but there's little evidence that their roughly 5,000 fighters represent a broader shift toward support for more violent measures to ensure the Islamicization of social spaces in northern Nigeria. What the conflict has meant, however, is a marked shift in national discourse away from finding workable strategies that can accommodate Muslim and Christian interests in a democratic Nigeria, and towards a blame game that's done little to end the conflict or alleviate the suffering of ordinary Nigerians.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Islam and Democracy

Skepticism—mine and many Nigerian Muslims'—about the accrued benefits of sharia implementation aside, the broader argument in *Muslims Talking Politics* focuses on how Muslims imagine democracy in the context of ordinary political experiences. This is, sadly, an unconventional way of approaching the relationship between Islam and democracy. For a long time, the most influential intellectual framework for approaching the study of Islam and politics has been “Islamic exceptionalism,” a diverse set of claims and arguments all revolving around the idea that, at its essence, Islam's founding legacy, history, and theological framework pose challenges to its integration into a modern, liberal, secular world. In this light, fundamentalism, Islamism, and other contemporary Islamic movements that advocate a literal reading of the Qur'an and Sunnah and reject Western values are atavistic attempts to re-cast their societies in the model of the first Muslim communities. Although there are versions of this argument that are more or less essentialist, the general result is to treat political reasoning among Muslims as (to use Olivier Roy's memorable phrase) “governed by some unchanging Koranic software implanted in their brains” (Roy 2013: 18).

My work challenges the idea of Islamic exceptionalism in two specific ways. The first is to situate the rise of “sharia politics” (Hefner 2011)—popular demands for sharia, particularly in new and uncertain Muslim-majority democracies—as part of the broader historical process Eickelman and Piscatori (1996) refer to as the “objectification” of the Islamic tradition. As they describe it, “objectification” is the “process by which basic questions come to the fore in the consciousness of a large number of believers: ‘What is my religion?’ ‘Why is it important in my life?’ and ‘How do my beliefs guide my conduct?’”

(Eickelman and Piscatori 1996: 38). In other words, it is the transformation of a complex, multivalent religious tradition into a fixed set of rules, guidelines, and doctrines—an “object,” if you will—and the growth in self-consciousness about being a participant in that tradition. This process is largely a product of the colonial and early post-colonial eras, as the imposition of new forms of social organization (mass education, military conscription), government, and technology undermined older forms of knowledge authority, including the traditional Islamic scholarly community. The result was the emergence of what I and others have called “Muslim public spheres”—increasingly inclusive spaces of debate, contention, and conversation about what it means to be a “good Muslim” in changing societies.

In some ways, it stands to reason that the broader popular engagement and participation in these conversations become, the greater the diversity of positions and views will emerge. Yet what’s actually emerged is what I refer to as the “sharia paradox.” As more and more Muslims have entered confidently and assertively into these conversations about how to be a good Muslim, the less overall acknowledgement there has been within the community of Islam’s historical accommodation of legal pluralism and flexibility. In other words, more and more different Muslims, each couching their demands in different terms, all insist that there is only one correct interpretation of the sharia, and that that version must be codified and enforced by the state.

As critical scholars of Islamic law have long noted, these demands look remarkably little like what pertained prior to colonization. In Nigeria as elsewhere, colonial administrators pushed to leave “Islamic law” in place as a stabilizing force, even as they dramatically reconfigured the political and social arrangements that had sustained it. These efforts eroded traditional sources of religious and political authorities while maintaining the outward appearance of continuity, and an institutional veneer of “Islamic courts” that left the impression of continued power and prestige for Islamic legal norms and values. In Nigeria, these rump sharia courts were heavily politicized, both by British authorities who used them to manage “native” affairs in religiously plural communities, and by Muslim leaders who depended on them as a visible source of their own legitimacy. Used by political elites to silence dissent from their opponents during the regions first wave of colonial and post-colonial elections in the 1950s and 60s, these courts lost much of their credibility and informal authority, eventually ending with a series of reforms that stripped their control of criminal law, restricting their purview to family and civil cases for Muslims.

As I chronicle, however, the declining legitimacy of these “traditional” Islamic legal institutions did not spell the end of popular interest in or support for sharia. Rather, beginning in the 1970s with a contentious constitutional debate about including a Federal Sharia Court of Appeals (for civil/family law cases) in the national legal system, there was a revival of interest in promoting sharia institutions not as a bulwark against political overreach, but as a means of ensuring the visible “recognition” of Muslim interests in a multi-religious Nigerian state. These demands, which expanded slowly but markedly under a series of military governments in the 1980s, also included calls (some

eventually met) for additional state funding for Muslim pilgrims on *hajj*, for religious training and education, and “Islamicizing” banking, finance, and a wide range of social services. What emerged, in effect, was a “statist” vision of Islamic law and values in public life, in which government, rather than religious authorities, would be their primary promoters. This outlook has deeply informed the contemporary sharia implementation project, as well as the popular backlash against it.

Put another way, what has looked to many observers as atavism or calls for the re-establishment of “tradition” among sharia supporters in uncertain democracies like Nigeria is far better understood as something new, even modern. The expectation that state action to impose religious values and morality is an effective strategy for addressing issues like corruption and poor governance—a position widely adopted by many Nigerian Muslim commentators, political leaders, and religious elites during the sharia implementation debate—is less a return to tradition than it is an effort to innovate a uniquely modern (even secular, if we consider the importance of state power and authority in carrying these policies out) solution to perennial problems in uncertain democracies. This approach absolutely has its drawbacks, but it also seems to play an important role in the political reasoning of ordinary Muslim citizens when they imagine the possibility of democracy and sharia existing side by side.

Muslims Talking Politics

The second way in which the book challenges the idea of Islamic exceptionalism is to examine public reasoning in one Muslim community as a *political* process. Here, my work draws specifically on research from long-term democracies like the United States, where longstanding evidence suggests that most citizens aren’t particularly well-informed about politics or possessed of ideologically consistent views across issues. Studies on the political reasoning process find that citizens under these circumstances enter the public sphere looking for reasoning “shortcuts,” or ready-made frameworks to help them synthesize new information on unfamiliar issues into their existing beliefs and opinions. The frameworks, or “frames,” appear most readily in the mass media and other forms of elite-driven public discourse, where they are often (but not always) sponsored by “discourse leaders” attempting to shape public opinion in favorable ways. As William Gamson (1992), arguably the most influential scholar of media “framing” in American society describes it, “frames” function as “implicit organizing ideas” that help citizens to connect their personal attitudes and cultural beliefs to political issues by helping to identify social problems and their causes, assigning blame for them, and suggesting plausible solutions. In contrast to approaches that see “Muslim” ways of conceptualizing the political realm as somehow fundamentally different—either for historical or theological reasons—than those of other faith communities, adopting these familiar opinion formation frameworks as a working hypothesis offers the chance to treat exceptionalism as an empirical question not just in outcome, but in process.

Indeed, given the growth of literacy, mass media, and access to new forms of political communication globally, it seems at least plausible to imagine that in a place like

Nigeria, Muslim attitudes towards sharia, democracy, and the role of Islam in public life might also be shaped by “framing” and other familiar media effects. The first step in finding out involved collecting more than 1,000 newspaper stories, op-eds, and letters to the editor that touched on the issues of sharia implementation and democracy published in a leading northern Nigerian newspaper during the height of the debate. Working inductively, I identified nine recognizable “frames” that connected the sharia issue to Nigeria’s recent democratization, and then coded the entire sample.

The patterns that emerged told a surprising initial story about Islam and democracy. In the international debate over northern Nigeria’s sharia implementation, much attention was paid to questions of human rights, religious conflicts, and gender, framing the actions of these 12 states as broadly outside the norms of liberal democracy. By contrast, the local coverage converged on a subset of basic frames that articulated a vision of sharia broadly consistent with Nigerian constitutional norms and popular support for democracy. In the table below, I describe the three most-used frames (61% of the total stories coded uses one of the three) in coverage of sharia. Note that following Gamson’s (1992) conventions, the language used to describe each frame is my own, constructed out of a synthesis of that used across the media sample.

Frames and their Key Concepts

<i>Frame</i>	<i>Key Claims and Symbols</i>
<i>Rights</i>	Sharia is necessary for Muslims to enjoy freedom of religion; In a democracy, majority rules—and where Muslims are the majority, they have a right (constitutional and natural) to sharia.
<i>Social Justice & Economic Development</i>	Sharia promises a new concern with the welfare of ordinary Muslims; Sharia will pave the way for "Islamic development"—human development in accordance with Islamic principles of justice.
<i>Holding Elites Accountable</i>	Sharia applies equally to all; Leaders who drink, "spray" money, engage in corruption, and are otherwise un-Islamic will be made to account for their actions through sharia.

From Kendhammer (2013: 298)

Several things emerge immediately from these frames. One is that in each case, the vision of Islamic law is fundamentally statist—it is a “right” for Muslims, it will ensure

positive state action to improve the lives and livelihoods of Muslims, and it will result in real accountability for elites who violate Islamic values when holding the public trust. Another is that they seem carefully constructed to address—or at least not exacerbate—religious tensions or conflicts with Christians, who strongly opposed sharia at all levels. As I argue based on a close reading of the media coverage and other sources, key political and media actors seem to have carefully worked to exclude more radical voices—which conceptualized sharia implementation as the first step towards a Nigerian “Islamic state”—from the press, dampening potential claims that the proposals were un-constitutional or likely to adversely impact religious relations.

How (and how much) did these elite frames shape the conversations and political reasoning of “ordinary” Muslims? In *Muslims Talking Politics*, I again adopted a page from research in American public opinion. Working in Sokoto, one of northern Nigeria’s largest Muslim-majority communities and the site of the historic Sokoto Caliphate, I conducted (with local facilitators) 14 peer group interviews, each with 5-7 participants drawn from the local Muslim community. Some groups involved students and teachers from the local university, but most involved working-class Muslims, employed as motorcycle taxi drivers, health care workers, and in a wide range of other occupations. Participants were asked a series of questions about sharia, democracy, and Muslims’ roles in the political system, and asked to discuss as a group. The resulting conversations served as the raw “data” for analyzing the role of media frames in shaping political reasoning, by coding for how (and how often) participants made use of these frames in answering our questions.

What I found was, again, striking. In broad terms, group participants did indeed draw heavily on the most common elite frames— *Social Justice & Economic Development* and *Holding Elites Accountable*, in particular—in thinking through and talking about the relationship between sharia and democratic government. But where these elite-crafted themes were often thin on specifics with regards to how they might actually impact or improve the lives of working people, my respondents were far more assertive. Half the groups specifically praised “Islamic” social policies targeted at the very poor, including financial incentives for marriage (or making the actual ceremonies cheaper—traditional northern Nigerian weddings often include expensive festivities and payments from the groom to the bride’s family), which they saw as freeing up needed resources for young people to be able to do things like start businesses. They also specifically highlighted the idea that *both* democratic institutions and Islamic values in law were useful in combination for holding political elites accountable to standards of good governance.

On the question of democracy itself, my respondents were not universally positive. In particular, few evidenced tolerant attitudes towards Christians, suggesting (in an invocation of “Rights” frame-style language) that government activity to assist religious minorities in Muslim-majority communities ought to be scrupulously limited to a bare percentage based on their total population. What they were more certain of was that, in a governmental system that blended religious values with democratic institutions, their voices were more likely to be heard. As one group of women described it:

Maryam (a teacher, in her twenties): In a military regime, you have no right to talk. You don't even see the [leader's] room, to say less of telling the leader that he is not doing well, or that he should act better. Therefore, democratic government is better for the Muslims than military government.

Asabe (a teacher, in her mid-forties): Not only Muslims. Even the Christians know that democratic government is better than the military.

Talatu (a teacher, in her late twenties): Because you can say your views, you can give advice, but in a military regime you cannot give any advice to the leaders. But now even the religious malams [teachers] can preach to the leaders, and they [the leaders] understand them. The reason why you cannot give your advice in military regime is because he [the local governor] is from another part of the country. But in a democracy, you elect him, you know him, he is your brother. Therefore you have every right to tell him to be a better leader, and he will hear you (Kendhammer 2016: 205-6)

In all, I find significant evidence that, just like populations in Western democracies, the political reasoning of Nigerian Muslims is shaped by their political surroundings. Muslims draw on their personal understanding of their faith and its requirements, but also on discourse circulating in the public square and daily conversations and encounters with their friends, family, and neighbors. Although it's fair to say that the particular ideas Nigerian Muslims hold about the relationship between Islam and democracy are not entirely consistent with the norms of liberal democracy, the process by which they're arriving at them is hardly exceptional at all.

All Sharia is Local

Taken as a whole, *Muslims Talking Politics* suggests that for all the attention paid to the transnational aspects of Islamic revivalism and ideology in the spread of "sharia politics," there is much to the politics of Islam, democracy, and law that is fundamentally local, as well. Although Muslims today largely share and participate in a globalized discursive tradition, the answers they arrive at—about whether or not they see democracy as a useful political model, how they imagine sharia's compatibility with the needs of governing a modern state, their political relationships with non-Muslims—are the products of a political reasoning process that is not "exceptional" at all. Just like the citizens around the world, Nigerian Muslims form their political attitudes and opinions from a combination of their underlying values (religious or otherwise), the popular discourse that surrounds them, and their personal and communal experiences.

What does this mean for the future of Islam and democracy in Nigeria? Much as with sharia implementation itself, this is an unfinished story. For nearly all Nigerians—Muslims and Christians alike—any legitimate democracy must facilitate a vibrant role for religion in public life, informing the morality of governmental officials and shaping policy

choices. Yet Nigeria's existing institutions too often turn these aspirations into zero-sum conflicts, in which recognition for the demands of Muslim communities inevitably mean limiting those of Christians (and vice versa). Despite the relative "moderation" of elite and mass discourse on the sharia issue among Muslims, there was a significant increase in sectarian violence following the initial sharia announcements, particularly in states where Muslim and Christian populations are close to equal. Since the mid-2000s, this violence has metastasized, playing a role in driving post-election conflicts in religiously divided communities, confrontations between (mostly Christian) settled farmers and (mostly Muslim) pastoralists, and clearly inspired Boko Haram's periodic strategy of targeting Christian churches and Christian-majority communities in northeastern Nigeria. To say that this attempted moderation has worked to fully dampen religious tensions would be deeply misleading.

Meanwhile, most theoretical frameworks for workable multi-religious democracy—Alfred Stepan's (2012) notion of "Respect, Policy Cooperation, and Principled Distance," for example—seem to require a baseline of tolerance and mutual understanding that has been hard to build under such circumstances. And while others like John Paden (2006) argue for the possibility of concerted political action to improve tolerance, it's not entirely clear that the broader political climate of corruption and political distrust is compatible with such efforts. Although I find clear evidence that it's possible for Nigerian Muslims to do the hard work of finding common ground between sharia and democracy through political reasoning, it's far from certain that this will be enough to realize *deepening* democracy in the long run.

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