



An Emerging Post-Salafi Current in West Africa and Beyond

BY ALEXANDER THURSTON // OCTOBER 15, 2018



In January 2018, I sat down for an interview with Mahmoud Dicko, president of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM). As I asked Dicko what I thought were relatively innocuous questions about his positions on theology and Islamic jurisprudence, the conversation grew tense. “You’re going to write that I’m a Wahhabi,” Dicko said, short-circuiting what I had hoped would be a more three-dimensional discussion. “Just go ahead and write that I’m a Wahhabi, if that’s what you want.”

Actually, I’m increasingly unsure that it makes sense to categorize figures such as Dicko as “Wahhabis” or, to use a term more in vogue now, “Salafis.” In terms of Dicko’s own views, I think he still fits what I (in the [Nigerian context](#)) and others have identified as core markers of Salafism. These markers include theological literalism and an insistence on deriving legal opinions directly from the Qur’an and the Sunna rather than through the framework of major Sunni jurisprudential schools. But in terms of his political behavior, Dicko may be better categorized as “post-Salafi” – an emerging, amorphous category of Muslim scholars who seem to find Salafi theology and activism too narrow when it comes to confronting complex social and political arenas, and especially in terms of interacting with Sufis. If a core part of Salafism is, as Bernard Haykel has [written](#), a “muscular discourse that is directed at reforming other non-Salafi Muslims,” then post-Salafism downplays this element in favor of postures that facilitate political and social coalitions with other Muslims. Other variants of post-Salafism, finally, are working to pair Salafi theology with a more wide-ranging view of Muslim spirituality.

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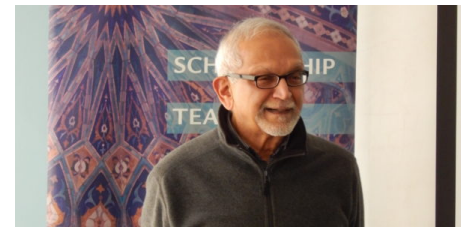
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To understand post-Salafism, it is worth summarizing Asef Bayat's well-known observations on what he calls "post-Islamism." According to [Bayat](#), "internal contradictions" and "societal pressure" generated soul-searching within Islamist circles by the 1990s. "Following a phase of experimentation," he writes, "the appeal, energy, and sources of legitimacy of Islamism get exhausted even among its once-ardent supporters."

This phrasing evokes Thomas Kuhn's well-known understanding of scientific revolutions. In Kuhn's model, science does not change so much through the gradual accumulation of new data as through periodic revolutions. Such revolutions occur when growing anomalies within existing paradigms lead to the emergence of new paradigms that reflect fundamental new assumptions about the nature of reality. In very different ways, then, Bayat and Kuhn both point to a fundamental pattern where worldviews shift in response to internal crises.



Mahmoud Dicko, President of the High Islamic Council of Mali (HCIM).

Post-Salafism represents another such instance of a paradigm shift. In this case, the anomalies have to do, above all, with politics. As scholars such as Haykel and [Quintan Wiktorowicz](#) have noted, the Salafi movement is far more unified on questions of theology than it is on politics. Not only is the movement divided on politics, with stances running the gamut from quietism to jihadism, each of these positions also carries internal tensions, as [Jacob Olidort](#) has pointed out in his paper "The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism." Even the foremost jihadist thinker, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, has been called a "quietist jihadi." Salafi theology does not map neatly onto politics, whether one is a regime loyalist, a non-violent dissident, or a violent jihadist.

In thinking about whether post-Salafism is emerging and where it may be headed, it is useful to keep in mind some of the responses to Bayat's "post-Islamism." Comparing Bayat's framework with [Olivier Roy](#)'s notion of the "failure of political Islam" – and what Roy sees as a turn toward "privatized and individualized" Islam – [Peter Mandaville](#) offers important observations. Mandaville writes, "A desire on the part of Muslims to engage in collective action in order to change society toward some conception of an Islamic ideal is still very present. Rather it is the nature and modalities of that collective action

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that seem to be changing.” [Michaëlle Browsers](#), also rejecting the idea of Islamists’ “failure,” points out that movements such as Hezbollah are still experimenting within an Islamist, rather than a post-Islamist, paradigm. She writes, “[P]erhaps what one should expect in this ‘post-Islamist period’ is not the failure of Islamist groups or the exhaustion of the Islamic frame of reference for political projects, but the increasing proliferation of ways to do and articulate Islamist politics.” In thinking about post-Salafism, one would do well to keep such cautions in mind: it will not always be easy to differentiate between Salafi experimentation and post-Salafi models, nor will post-Salafism represent a retreat of belief to the private sphere.

Modalities of Post-Salafism

In thinking through the case of Mahmoud Dicko I recounted in the beginning of this essay, two themes stand out: Bayat’s emphasis on “exhaustion,” and the above-mentioned dilemmas that Salafism faces in the political arena. Dicko himself alluded to exhaustion when he told me that Malian Muslims of various stripes had grown tired of debates that raged most fiercely in the 1980s – debates, for example, over the positions of the hands in prayer. At the high point of such debates, one could find Muslims refusing to pray with one another over the issue, but by the 2010s the acrimony had lessened.

Notably, Dicko framed the issue in terms that traditionalist Malian Muslims might accept – praying qabd (hands clasped across the chest), he said, was an opinion found in Malik bin Anas’ Muwatta. The most widespread position in the Maliki school (named for Malik) is to pray sadl (arms at one’s side) – but by referencing the Muwatta, rather than basing his position solely on Qur’an and hadith, Dicko offered something of an olive branch to traditionalists. I respect the traditionalists’ understanding of authority, he implied, even if I don’t adopt their opinions. In any case, even (or especially) in an interview with an outsider, Dicko was reluctant to rehash the issue.

A Muslim leader interested in forging nation-wide religious or political coalitions, then, must work with peers from other theological camps. Dicko needed non-Salafi allies to become president of the HCIM in 2008, and he has needed allies to maintain his position there. In 2009, when various Muslim leaders organized mass demonstrations against [proposed revisions to Mali’s family code](#), Dicko again had to work with different constituencies, including Sufis.

In January 2018, Dicko publicly broke with Mali’s President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, accusing him of broken promises. More than spelling out what Keïta had done wrong, however, Dicko emphasized that he was explicitly [subordinating himself](#) to the religio-political direction of the

In the political arena, meanwhile, Dicko has increasingly built ties with non-Salafis. In majority-Muslim Mali, the Muslim community is internally diverse. Salafi activism dating to the late colonial period has only dented, but not overturned, the influence of Sufis, traditionalists, and other constituencies.

country's most prominent Sufi leader, the Cherif of Niuro du Sahel. The Cherif's break with Keïta had begun even earlier. The two men's complex relationship began to fray in 2017, with the Cherif's public refusal of the president's gifts amid talk that the president was failing to move Mali forward.

Dicko's critics understand his political maneuvers as evidence of a duplicitous personality. Within Mali and internationally, Dicko has been routinely accused of saying one thing and doing another, particularly when it comes to the country's jihadists. Dicko has periodically put himself forth as a mediator between the state and the jihadists, but detractors allege that he has veiled sympathies for the jihadist project. His alliances with Sufis, then, are viewed skeptically in some quarters. It is worth acknowledging, then, that what I see as post-Salafism – in the sense of downplaying Salafi theology in order to forge cross-cutting religio-political alliances – others see as cynicism and [hunger for power](#).

To speak of post-Salafism, however, is not to argue that individual actors have uncomplicated intentions or have abandoned their previous theological commitments; after all, we can never know what is in other people's hearts. Rather, the argument is that some Salafis are frankly and openly re-prioritizing their approach to issues where theological and political imperatives conflict.

Figures such as Dicko are not shy about demonstrating that they now value political leverage in the service of religio-political goals (blocking a new law, or opposing a president) over theological purism. It would be going too far to say that post-Salafism represents a privatization of Salafi theology, but post-Salafism can mean abandoning, or at least de-prioritizing, the goal of discrediting Sufism. If Salafi politics are predicated on the image of purism, then post-Salafi politics endorse pragmatism and coalition-building.

In this vein, another candidate for the label "post-Salafi" would be Mauritania's Muhammad al-Hasan Ould al-Dedew. Reading al-Dedew's [official biography](#) or listening to him preach, one could easily conclude (as I did in [earlier work](#)) that al-Dedew was a typical Salafi. After all, he is a figure trained and later employed in Saudi Arabia, mentored by prominent Salafis such as 'Abd al-'Aziz bin Baz, and steeped in Salafi vocabularies such as the [Sermon of Necessity](#). Yet al-Dedew's political and religious behaviors indicate a much more flexible approach – an affinity for the Muslim Brotherhood, both within Mauritania (in the form of the Tewassoul Party) and globally, as well as a willingness to show public fondness for Sufi shaykhs.

In part, al-Dedew exemplifies the "[Salafization of the Brotherhood](#)," but he also exemplifies a form of post-Salafism. In Mauritania, he seems to aspire (quite successfully) to be the pre-eminent national religious figure of his generation, even as his relations with authorities are uneven and currently tense. Globally, he is willing to break with Salafi purism even on Gulf satellite television. He has voiced acceptance for Muslim groups that most Salafis consider errant – Ash'aris, Sufis, and even lay Shi'a – and he has broadly redefined the term "[Ahl](#)

al-Sunna (People of the Prophetic Model),” a label that Salafis commonly use to exclusively refer to themselves.

Here we would do well to recall that any “post-Salafi” trend is only emergent and experimental. Figures such as Dicko and al-Dedew can be forces for Salafization of the public even as they grapple with the internal contradictions of Salafism’s approach to politics. But at the very least, these scholars are finding that purism is inherently in tension with the goal of religious reform and Islamization. In response, they are crafting and maintaining national platforms where they do not, or no longer, present Salafi theology as a non-negotiable element of coalitions for change.

In conclusion, it’s worth casting our gaze elsewhere in the world for signs of a post-Salafi trend. One notable case would be the United States, where the prominent Muslim scholar Yasir Qadhi, an Islamic University of Medina graduate who later earned a PhD in Religious Studies from Yale. In 2014, Qadhi authored a thoughtful essay called “On Salafi Islam.” Qadhi praised the contributions of the Salafi movement at length before highlighting exactly the kind of internal contradictions that have propelled other intellectual changes, from Bayat’s post-Islamism to Kuhn’s scientific revolutions. Qadhi wrote (12),

The understanding of the Salaf includes many fundamental issues that are completely neglected or even contradicted by contemporary Salafī groups. Additionally, there is a methodological flaw in attempting to extrapolate a salafī position (meaning: a position that the salaf would hold) about a modern issue that the salaf never encountered. The ‘Salafī position’ (meaning one that is held by some scholars of the modern Salafī movement) with respect to questions on citizenship in nation-states, democracy, the role of women in today’s society, the permissibility of voting, and the issue of jihād in the modern world, etc., are merely personal opinions (fatāwā) of the scholars who pronounce them and cannot be representative of the views of the first three generations of Islam.

Qadhi went on to list problems that he saw in terms of what he called Salafis’ prioritization of abstract theology over concrete piety, their disinterest in spirituality, their “harshness” (14) toward other Muslims, their attitudes toward women, and other issues. Qadhi concluded (19):

I no longer view myself as being a part of any of these Salafī trends... I do subscribe to the Atharī creed, and view it to be the safest and most authentic creed, Islam is more than just a bullet-point of beliefs, and my ultimate loyalty will not be to a humanly-derived creed, but to Allah and His Messenger, and then to people of genuine īmān and taqwa. Hence, I feel more of an affinity and brotherhood with a moderate Deobandi Tablighi Maturidi, who might differ with me on some issues of fiqh and theology and methodology, but whose religiosity and concern for the Ummah I can relate to, than I do with a hard-core Salafī whose only concern is the length of my pants and my lack of quoting from the ‘Kibār’ that he looks up to.

Any emerging post-Salafi trend, then, is not a coordinated global movement. Rather, it is a set of disparate, parallel responses to the same internal contradictions and limitations of Salafism. As these responses grow, the sense of a shared or parallel process of historical evolution stands out – somehow it was simpler for these figures to commit to full-scale Salafi activist postures in the 1980s and the 1980s than it has been since the late 2000s. Post-Salafism, then, is on one level an argument that the intra-Muslim theological debates of the late twentieth century have partly run their course. The changing atmosphere is giving rise to new conversations and new postures, as the twenty-first century brings surprising rapprochements between post-Salafis and Sufis.

TAGS

. MAHMOUD DICKO, HIGH ISLAMIC COUNCIL OF MALI, ISLAMISM, MALI, POST-ISLAMISM, POST-SALAFISM, SALAFISM, WEST AFRICA

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