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**Islamic Fundamentalism
Gaining Ground in Africa**

A Somali man holds an image of Osama bin Laden with a legend calling him "The brave man of Islam," during a protest Sunday Sept. 23, 2001 in the Somali capital, Mogadishu.AP Photo/Osman Hassan

Email   Letter to the Editor

The list of 22 most wanted terrorists released two weeks ago by the US State Department included twelve Africans — seven Egyptians, two Kenyans, one Tanzanian, one Libyan and one Comorian, testimony to the fact that Islamic fundamentalism is no longer the sole purview of Middle Eastern or North African states, but exists in much of sub-Saharan Africa as well.

Although no African state — except perhaps Sudan — risks attack by the US in the war on terrorism, leaders of African states, particularly those with large Muslim populations, are bracing for the political repercussions of the American strikes on Afghanistan. More Muslims live in Africa than in the Middle East — 380 million to about 200 million — and 22 nations are members of the Organization of Islamic Conference. Governments on the continent are keenly aware of the religious tensions in their societies and are putting in place diplomatic, economic and military measures to contain a possible backlash from the continent's myriad fundamentalist movements.

As religious tensions spill over in Algeria, Nigeria, Somalia and South Africa, many wonder how the Islamist movements can be integrated into African states' fledgling and precarious political systems. In some countries it has become a valid question whether Christians, Muslims and those practicing traditional African religions can live together peacefully.

One case in point is Nigeria. Since the country's return to civilian rule in May 1999, more than 7,000 people have died in violence related to efforts to impose sharia (fundamentalist Islamic law) in the country's northern states. More than 500 people have died in the northern town of Jos, a center of the conflict, since September 11.

Beyond exacerbating existing conflicts over religious versus secular freedoms, the events of September 11 and their aftermath have exposed deep divisions between some country's official representatives and opposition parties fueled or influenced by Islamic fundamentalism.

Most African leaders — including heads of so-called pariah states — strongly condemned the attacks on the United States (in which at least 53 Africans died) and expressed support for air assaults on Afghanistan. Nigeria, South Africa and Egypt, the continent's heavyweights, have expressed support for the war on terrorism. For leaders who had fallen out of favor with the West and international financial institutions, current events have presented an opportunity to ingratiate themselves. Sudan saw a five-year UN-imposed travel ban lifted as the Bashir government arrested 30 people believed to be associated with bin Laden's al-Qaeda. Colonel Qaddafi of Libya offered to send aid to the American people, while Liberia's President Charles Taylor — leader of another state under UN sanctions — saw this as a chance to sidle up to America, offering the superpower use of Liberian airport facilities, airspace and troops.

Many Africans say they feel a sense of kinship with what Americans now feel as victims of the September 11 attacks. "We have been through what the Americans are experiencing, so we can understand how painful it is," says Jerome Ngitu, a journalism lecturer in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where the US embassy was destroyed in a 1998 blast attributed to Osama bin Laden's organization.

And most Islamic leaders in Africa condemn terrorism. "Killing innocent people is against the Koran," says Sheikh Muhammad Kakeeto, leader of the radical Islamic Tabliq faith in Kampala, Uganda. "So the Americans should not make a mistake of attacking anyone without getting proper information. It should not be an-eye-for-an-eye approach."

But Islamic organizations and Muslim leaders in a number of African countries have issued statements in a different vein. In South Africa, the Cape Times recently quoted the Secretary General of the South African Judicial Council as he offered support to Muslims who want to defend Afghanistan "by force if necessary," and encouraged volunteers to join the fight: "We have, since the start of the war against Afghanistan, made it clear that we reject the US-led military onslaught on what we believe is an Islamic country and support the right of Muslims all over the world to align themselves with the jihad."

How should state officials react to such statements? Nigerian political commentator Chido Nwangwu, founder of USAfrica-Online, believes African leaders should deal with Islamic militants forcefully, even shutting down their religious schools throughout the continent. "African leaders and Africans abroad ought to unmask and halt those unperturbed villages of radical religio-political zealotry and hate academies for terror training and funding. In so doing, we are acting not only in America's current best interest but in our continent's strategic and developmental interests."

But others are concerned that force and exclusion may only further radicalize Islamic movements. Many human rights activists fear that this

war on terrorism will provide African leaders a pretext to crush all Muslim and Muslim-backed opposition movements. In the past decade, political Islam has enjoyed a resurgence in Africa. In Tanzania, an Islamic fundamentalist party, the CUF, has found strong support in the majority-Muslim coastal islands of Zanzibar and Pemba to pose a formidable challenge to President Benjamin Mkapa, an ally of the US. In Mali, one of the few democracies in the Muslim world, a recent conference saw prominent political leaders insisting that only candidates who "espouse Islamic values" could run for the presidency. Mali's Defense Minister, Boubeye Maiga, even praised the attacks of September 11 as "well-targeted and timely."

President Mkapa of Tanzania has been widely accused of portraying the CUF party simply as Islamic extremists and brutally suppressing opposition activities, killing dozens and sending hundreds fleeing from Zanzibar and Pemba into Kenya. In Uganda, opposition leaders are fearful that a law recently passed calling for the death penalty for anyone involved in or supporting terrorism will be used to neutralize all of the regime's opponents and critics.

"Force is not the answer," says Moustafa Bayoumi, professor of Islamic politics at Brooklyn College, who says that Islam itself it not the main issue in many of these conflicts. "The history of Islam in West Africa is based on trade, not violence. Like other parts of the Third World, tensions based on contemporary politics are exploited by regimes. Islam is used as a political instrument, a safety valve by politicians to draw attention away from local conflicts that have nothing to do with a clash of civilizations and all to do with the allocation of resources. Politicians play the religious and ethnic card to rally support and divide and conquer."

In addition, says Bayoumi, such tactics flourish in situations of great need. "The Muslim world is part of the Third World, which is a bloody world because of the legacy of colonialism, the history of globalization and the challenges of modernization. In Nigeria, for example, the federal state is cash-strapped, and so the northern states have sought aid from Libya and Saudi Arabia, and that aid often comes with strings attached - the acceptance of a puritan Islamic ideology and implementation of sharia."

In Somalia, sharia law has been in place since 1993 following the collapse of the state in 1991. In the wake of a long and devastating civil war, Islamic courts, schools and mosques are the only institutions still functioning. "Now, virtually no woman goes bare-headed," noted a recent report in *The Economist*, "and even young girls wear the Arab chador (many of them obtained in relief packages from Arab NGOs).... In Mogadishu 50 of the 70 girls' schools are run by Arab NGOs."

The US has reason to be concerned about terrorist activity in Africa. Osama bin Laden is suspected not only in the bombings of American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in August 1998, but also in the killing and dragging of American soldiers in Somalia. His associates operated openly in Sudan until 1996. Governments from Egypt and Algeria to South Africa and Uganda have battled violent, often terroristic, Islamic fundamentalist organizations. In Kenya, religious leaders called on President Daniel arap Moi to quiet his support for the war on Afghanistan and issued a warning to law enforcement officials: "We will never allow FBI investigators to harass and intimidate our people the way they did after the 1998 bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, and Muslims will hold countrywide demonstrations to stress this point."

But there are regions where moderation holds sway. Senegal is considered an example of an African country that has peacefully and democratically incorporated ethnic, political and religious interests, including Islamists. Currently law enforcement is on high alert in Senegal as well, despite that country's much vaunted ethnic, religious and political tranquility. But the country has seen no violence, and President Abdoulaye Wade has proposed an "African pact against terrorism," and announced that he will convene a conference to discuss his initiative.

Nwangwu praises Senegal's peaceful inclusion of Islamists. "I must commend Senegal's democratically-elected Abdoulaye Wade, a member of the Mouride Islamic sect whose wife is a French Christian, as an excellent reflection that the issue in Africa cannot be that all Muslims seek conflict or are terrorists," he says. "Such reductionism is not only foolish but untenable."

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