



SOUTH AFRICA

Political Engagements of Islamic NGOs in the South African Public Sphere

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In South Africa, Islamic NGOs have experienced different transformations since the 1970s and more specifically since the democratic transition and liberalization (Sadouni, 2007). These changes not only affected

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the “religious field” (Bourdieu, 2000) but also the relationships between the religious actors and the state. It is in this context of economic and political reform and liberalization that the notion of “privatization of the state” (Hibou, 2004) — without meaning its disengagement — will be used in order to analyse these changes and to question the theory of religious and political differentiation. In fact, the religious sector plays a major role in the public sphere by becoming involved in the defense of “African causes” such as development, Black Economic Empowerment, poverty reduction and the fight against HIV-AIDS. The borders of the political sphere are, therefore, moving and need further analysis in order to understand the relationship between the public and the private spheres or more precisely, the mutual influences between

the political and the religious. Modes of government exercised together by the state and the NGOs in the fields of development and humanitarian aid show how the resolution of social issues and citizenship are not always

the monopoly of the state. I will focus my attention on two Islamic NGOs created and developed by South African Muslims in order to understand the changes that occurred in the religious field and the political role that they played in the field of humanitarian aid. Then I will study the nature of those two NGOs’ relationships with the state. Finally, I will discuss the importance of enacting a Muslim citizenship, through humanitarian activities, in the new democratic dispensation.

Development, Humanitarian aid and religious changes

In South Africa, the process of institutionalization of religious NGOs in the fields of development and humanitarian aid started long before the democratization of the country. However, since the

end of apartheid, a new discourse on development has been expressed by Islamic actors in both secular and nationalist terms. By taking the examples of the South African National Zakah Fund (SANZAF) and the Gift of the Givers, created in 1974 and 1990, respectively, I try to understand their modes of religious mobilisation and their different modes of politicization in the local context.

The social activities of these two NGOs are financed in the name of Islam and some of its traditional institutions, notably *zakat* (obligatory alms), *sadaqa* (voluntary charitable contributions), and above all *waqf* (pious endowments). These social activities deal mainly with redistribution, poverty alleviation, bursaries for students, and humanitarian aid for which Gift of Givers is known in the media and the national public sphere. Both NGOs' mottos indicate common shared values without explicitly mentioning a religious reference:

"Best among people are those who benefit mankind" (Gift of the Givers).

"Championing the cause of the poor and needy" (SANZAF).

Despite the common framework of their social engagement, since the democratization of the country, the mode of politicization of these two Islamic NGOs has been different. This is even though they both cooperate with government authorities in conducting their social and economic activities. Contrary to SANZAF, the Gift of the Givers entered the political field after its director, Imtiaz Sooliman, created a political party, the Africa Muslim Party, in the 1994 elections (Vahed, 2000). This different level of politicization offers a platform to analyse the nature of the relationships between Islamic NGOs and the State.

State and NGOs

Here, my objective is not to measure any weakening of the state's capacity to maintain its monopoly on social, political and economic activities. In South Africa, the call upon the state by civil society is still predominant as far as ensuring that basic needs are covered by governmental authorities; those basic needs include security, health, housing and diplomacy. Therefore, there is not a weak state on one side and, on the other, an open civil society representing progress and dynamism. As Fariba

Adelkhah suggests in her analysis of "modernities" in Iran: "we cannot imagine an essential dichotomy between the state and society as if they were identifiable objects.... The problem is not so much the real impossibility of tracing a clearly defined frontier between the two spheres as the difficulty of even conceiving them, even defining them as autonomous.... It is better to consider the overlapping space, the common ground between the two" (Adelkhah, 2000: 3-4).

Therefore, civil society and the state are not considered as opposed to each other. There is a need to bring out the points of interaction between Islamic NGOs and the state. First, these interactions with the political field are related to Black Economic Empowerment policies. The ANC's policies of affirmative action implemented by different governments since the democratic

transition became a priority for Islamic NGOs. The latter shifted from a "community" discourse to a universalist discourse. These NGOs and especially the one created by the South African Indian community during the apartheid period aimed in the past

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to help first the Muslims through the distribution of *zakat*. Since the end of the 1980s and especially since the advent of a democratic South Africa, South African Indian Muslims paid attention to the political stakes in the economic and social development of the Black African community. Islamic organizations in South Africa had to take into account the changing and democratization of society to set its own goals. International Islamic institutions like the Islamic Development Bank strongly encouraged, in the past, the Indian Muslim community to adopt a universal approach to *da'wa* (call to Islam) and to development which meant a greater focus on African townships.¹ However, attitudes of indifference and sometimes contempt, anchored in individual minds, weigh heavily on relations between Indians and Black Africans.

Because race is highly instrumentalised, we still need to know how South African Islamic NGOs deal with racial debates. Moreover, do they have a power to voice their concerns and their ideas or counteract any discourse made by the state? NGOs experienced a phenomenon similar to what Bourdieu (2000) has called "*la fermeture du champ*"

(the closing of the field), which means that they face difficulties in implementing ideas and discussions to penetrate the political field. For example, when I asked members of Islamic NGOs about the nature of their relationships with the state, I had different answers related to mere cooperation for poverty alleviation, awareness of HIV-AIDS in communities and at schools, distribution of aid outside the country and so on. One of my interviewees mentioned the “networking sessions” with governmental authorities that consist only of sharing information about development policies. Others consider that the state has “abandoned the grass root levels” and has mainly focused its attention on the wealthy Black elite. But this voice is not yet expressed openly and freely in the public space. This is perceived by some as the closing of the political field. The notion of the rich and the poor is substituted by the notion of patriotic — or “national proudly South — African” — and unpatriotic. Any critique against the state can be perceived as counter-revolutionary. The state still gains its legitimacy by using the rhetoric of the liberalization movement.

The NGOs’ close and working relationships with the state lead the writer to wonder about the political capacities of the civil sector. For example, do the funds received by NGOs from the government prevent them from speaking out? Close relationships with, and financial dependence on, the state, led political scientists to describe dependent NGOs as GONGOs (Governmental Non-Governmental Organization) in order to emphasize the nature of “patron-client” relationships between the State and NGOs. There is still need to conduct further analysis in this field of research and this exercise is beyond the scope of this paper.

Muslim citizenship

One can also explain modes of interaction between the religious organizations and the state by stressing the issue of citizenship. The tensions between universality and community that religious NGOs experience in society are overcome by the citizen identity (Walzer, 1992). National identity, as a South African, has often been stressed in my interviews rather than ethnic identity; for example being Indian. Giving is an act that Muslims can either

assert in religious terms or by focusing on their citizen’s duties: the necessity to share and open up to the “Other” and the necessity to “discharge their charities.” Their humanitarian activities express new forms of Muslim citizenship in a context of political and economic liberalization. Development has become a new terrain for action and this new generation of Islamic NGOs, who consider the universality of aid a norm, reconcile their religious and ethnic identity with their national citizenship.

However, this universality of action that Islamic NGOs have emphasized in the last two decades has its own limits due to race issues, as mentioned earlier. It can sometimes be difficult for Indians to penetrate and lead development projects in a Black township. The legitimacy given by the recipients of the aid

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to one specific organization and not to another one became a capital and a resource for the institutionalization of NGOs. This is a reality that some NGOs face today. Muslim citizenship is still in formation due to a transforming society that seeks to

build a common nation for all ethnic communities. However, this national citizenship is also challenged by the incorporation of new waves of migrants into South Africa.

Transnational resources have played a major role in this process of nationalization of Muslim organizations. In order to overcome the various conflicts between Indians and Black Africans for example, organizations have utilized means offered by transnationalism to fit themselves into this new paradigm of Islamic Humanitarianism and development. This political culture enables the reinforcement of the power of religion by increasing social activism in the field of development, but without challenging the state and its policies.² This is the situation with the Gift of the Givers that sent a convoy of aid and medical staff to the Gaza strip with help from government officials and South Africans.³ The Gift of the Givers is a good example of a Muslim NGO that developed its own vernacular idiom of humanitarianism intervention and support for foreign countries in cooperation with the South African government. Moreover, it is a South African organization that mainly collects South African funds. In the context of democracy, and in the field of humanitarian

assistance, transnationalism contributes to nationalization of Islamic movements and ideas in South Africa. Muslim NGOs' activists have achieved a compromise between pursuing Islamic goals, such as integration into the Ummah, and contributing to social justice in South Africa.

Conclusion

This preliminary effort to grapple with the politicization of Islamic NGOs and their relationships with the state in the new South Africa, was centered around the notion of privatization of the state. This methodological and analytical tool improved the writer's understanding of the changes in the field of development and humanitarian aid shaped by Islamic NGOs' discourses and practices. It also assisted in understanding the identity changes that transform the religious field through a Muslim citizenship. However, this analysis could be extended to other faiths such as Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism. The study of the interactions between the public and private spheres through religious NGOs can lead to a better understanding of the formation of the state and citizenship.

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Notes

- 1 This emphasis on the equality of opportunities for Muslims, regardless of their ethnic affiliation, masked another concern of International Islamic institutions. International actors from the Gulf nations, like the Islamic Development Bank, perceived the situation of Indian Muslims as precarious because of tensions with Black Africans inherited from the past. Since 1991, Indians have not been considered as powerful partners. They must, as a result, become the new agents of the Islamization and re-Islamization of Black African populations at both the national and regional levels. (Field research notes, Durban, 1999).
- 2 Jean Comaroff underlines the power of religion: "The force of faith goes well beyond the sacred. Under the sway of neo-liberal orthodoxy, states in many places have relinquished major responsibility for schooling, health, and welfare for the social reproduction of their citizens. Religious organizations have enthusiastically resumed this role – a role they themselves often never fully lost, even to the grand disciplinary institutions of the Keynesian state." (Comaroff, 2006: 6)
- 3 Tahir Sema, "SA relief reaches devastated Gazans," *Al-Qalam*, February 2009: 3.