

Accommodating Religion in Secular States: The Politics of Educational Reform in the Francophone Sahel

Leonardo A Villalon¹

¹University of Florida, Center for African Studies, Gainesville, Florida, USA

villalon@africa.ufl.edu

The paper comparatively examines the religious bases of recent educational reform initiatives in Senegal, Mali and Niger, three officially secular Francophone countries. Perhaps even more than elsewhere in Africa, the institutional structures of educational systems inherited from colonialism in the Muslim countries of Francophone West Africa proved to be a very poor “fit” with societal demands and cultural realities, at least part of the reason for what is commonly described as the widespread failure of educational policies after independence.

Across the Muslim majority countries of the Sahel, one response in the post-colonial period to the reality of the bad fit between the provision of public education and social expectations was the development of a vast parallel system of informal religiously-based education, outside the official system, and created largely in explicit response to the limitations of the state system. These unofficial, “informal”, or “parallel” schools are of widely varied form and levels, ranging from basic Qur’anic schools to quite sophisticated “Franco-Arabic schools.”

Interestingly, a number of factors in recent years have prompted a number of countries in the region to embark on significant experiments in reforming education, both by attempting to bring the informal and semi-formal systems more squarely into the formal state system and at times by reforming the formal system to borrow characteristics from the informal, such as the introduction of religious education in state schools. The paper will examine the political motivations as well as the processes in these three countries, all of which are well advanced in the implementation of reforms. These reform processes are largely driven by the argument that incorporating religion into state educational institutions will help to improve things by creating systems that can work *with* social and cultural realities rather than *against* them. In these three countries, then, states have embarked on projects to recognize the parallel educational systems, while also trying to impose some degree of formalization, resulting in the creation of what are in effect new “hybrid” systems. These initiatives have received strong support from some actors, and substantial resistance from others. They also bear the potential for significant transformations in the fundamental understanding of the secular state in the region.

The paper is based on extensive research in all three countries made possible by a collaborative research project, as part of the “African Power and Politics Programme” under a grant from DfID.