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# **Violent Extremism : WHY SHOULD THE GAMBIA LEARN FROM SAHEL MISTAKES ?**

TIMBUKTU INSTITUTE

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## INTRODUCTION

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Violent Extremism remains one of West Africa's most pressing security threats. Violent extremism is a phenomenon that threatens the peace and tranquility of different countries and has claimed the lives of millions of people around the world in recent years.

Radicalization has different forms and dimensions; religious, sectional and, sometimes, racial. Internationally and regionally, no country is left unchallenged about this phenomenon and the dangers it poses to society at large.

Religious radicalization has captured the attention of the international community and poses a major threat to global peace and security; it winds have believed to have blown from the Arabic world and spread like wildfires in countries around the world.

It should be remembered from the outset that the phenomenon of extremism is not unique to predominantly Muslim societies. It is a phenomenon that is experienced by all religions in different social contexts and geographical areas.

Since decades, West Africa and the sahel are at the forefront of radicalization thoughts and activities, primarily carried out by local actors and small theaters in the region.

Groups such as Jamâat Nusrat Al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel province (ISSP), which operates in Mali and Burkina Fasso, and Boko haram in Nigeria, among others, have been carryout terrorist activities in their respective countries and far beyond.

Unlike the countries of the central Sahel, some West African countries are still spared terrorist attacks, although they are gradually being marked by the rise of a certain radicalization.

This trend can be seen in the behaviors, modes of religiosity, and speeches of new preachers who are increasingly influential among young people.

As observed in the recent evolution of the countries of the region, the hardening of the increasingly contentious religious discourse is also linked to interactions between the political and religious spheres.

The specific case of the Gambia cannot be properly analyzed without taking into account the inconsistencies of Yahya Jammeh's regime as well as the influences coming from abroad, more specifically from the Middle East and the Gulf countries

## RADICALISM PERSPECTIVES IN THE GAMBIA

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One will, without a second thought, negate the question of The Gambia being completely immune from all elements of Islamic radicalization.

To begin with, Gambia is geographically located in a community of nations that share not only an open and porous border but also deeply ingrained values and religious brotherhoods.

The independence of nations within the Sahel and West African countries has increased the possibilities of radicalization.

As a Muslim-majority country that regained its democratic values following the highly controversial 2016 presidential elections which brought current president Adama Barrow to power.

However, the Gambia is a very welcoming country, its citizens also travel to different predominantly Islamic countries notably Iran, Iraq and Syria to pursue Islamic and Quranic studies.

There is still no concrete evidence as to what type of knowledge such Gambians receive when they reach to those countries. Also, the lack of adequate vetting process put the country into serious threats of radicalization etc.

The other important element is that there exist many Quranic educational centres that are run outside the umbrella of the government and its agencies.

One might find it difficult to ascertain the philosophy being inculcated in the minds of these knowledge seekers in these completely isolated Islamic and Quranic establishments.

A study of Government program revealed a well-organized structure in place to moderate and monitor what happens in conventional and Arabic (Madarasas) schools, but until now little is known of the locally run "daara" which are mainly run under the watch of learned community leader. This survey intends to pin details elements of Islamic radicalization in the Gambia and aims to find linkages with groups in Sub-Saharan Africa and globally recognized radicalized groups.

Through an analysis of the recent dynamics of the Gambian religious field, this article will first look at the prospects of radicalism in the Gambia. After an examination of the management of religion during the Yaya Jammeh era, the evolution of the relationship between Islamic actors and the regime will be discussed, as well as the process that has seen the development of Wahhabi movements and the evolution of religious discourse.

Finally, beyond a simple religious phenomenon, it will be discussed how the hardening of preaching could constitute early signals of radicalization in the Gambia and why this country should be able to learn from the mistakes of Sahelian states in the face of the rise of violent extremism.

## ISLAM AND GAMBIA EVOLUTION UNDER YAYA JAMMEH

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The Gambia spent 22 years under the authoritarian rule of Yahya Jammeh, who seized power in 1994 Coup and whose government has been accused of several human rights violations regarding the ruthless tactics it used to silent opponents.

Jammeh embraced Islamic fundamentalism during his rule of the Gambia, whose 1.9 million population is at least 90 percent Muslim.

In 2015, for political purpose, Jammeh declared the Gambia to be an Islamic republic, making the second Islamic republic in Africa after Mauritania.

Some months later, he pledged to introduce the rule of Sharia law into the country. Additionally, Jammeh invited Zakir Naik an Islamic preacher sponsored by Qatar but wanted in his home country India, for alleged terrorist acts.

According to recent preliminary survey, the Gambia is not yet an important threat for any kind Islamic extremism and radicalisation but added that government should be more vigilant on certain religious activities that could undermined the peace and stability in the country.

People interviewed including preachers, imams, scholars and even university students all said that if the current atmosphere is not properly checked, many youths especially those attending unregulated Islamic madrasas could be easily radicalized

It is an obvious fact that in recent years many Gambian Islamic and Arabic students obtained scholarship to study in largely predominant Islamic countries such as Iraq, Syria and Iran. Upon returning back home, many of these scholars end up setting up their own madrasas and used their own developed curriculum out of any State control or regulation. The fear that they can used these learning centres to start propagating extremism and radicalisation is still far-fetched.

However, many Islamic clerics or preachers in the Gambia use their Friday prayers sermon (khutba) to brainwash young people to the path of radicalization. Also, it is noticed some of these Kuranic teachers operate their madarasas or daara in completely isolated places where it is difficult to monitor what they teach their pupils. In many parts of the Gambia, some of these Kuranic and Daaras (traditional Islamic schools) have no effective monitoring system and they can teach the kids anything that would lead them to be radicalized easily. The Gambia therefore needs to transform these traditional Daara or Madarasas where an effective monitoring system will be put in place with regard to external religious influences.

Certainly, former President Yahya Jammeh, ruler of The Gambia until 2017, verbally condemned violent Islamic extremism in 201. Nonetheless, Jammeh promoted extremism in The Gambia through his use of Islamic fundamentalism as a political tool during his 22 years rule of the country. Jammeh

sought to extract political support from a generation of Gambian Muslims who were influenced by radical Wahhabi Islam at universities in the Middle East, as well as financial support from Middle Eastern donor nations, such as Qatar and to a lesser extent, Qatar Kuwait.

When Jammeh declared The Gambia to be an Islamic Republic in 2015, he cited a desire to break from the country's past and stating that "accepting Allah's religion as your own religion and as your way of life is not negotiable".

In a speech to The Gambia's parliament in 2016, Jammeh criticized the West's stance towards ISIS, stating that "it is hypocritical for the West to designate ISIS as a terrorist organization, when the KKK in the United State of America is treated differently", and pledged to introduce the rule of Sharia law into the country. In fact, he surfs, somewhere, on the inconsistencies of certain foreign powers to build a discourse that makes sense to young people and Islamic movements whose unconditional support he hoped as "defender of Islam".

## FROM WAHHABI MOVEMENTS TO EXTREMIST PREACHING

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Wahabism advocates the purification of Islam, rejects traditional Islamic trends which were until now, in Gambia, the bulwark against extremist movements in the Maghreb or the Middle East.

this rigorist current largely supported by humanitarian organizations in the framework

of the "da'wah" presents itself as revival of the fundamental doctrines Islam as set forth in the Quran and Sunna.

It has always imposed itself wherever the balance of power has been favorable to it as rejection of so called "heretical innovations" (bid'a) in Islamic practices.

## THE CASE OF GAMBIAN PHENOMENAL PREACHER BA KAWSU FOFANA

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Ba Kawsu is a renowned and prominent Gambian Islamic scholar, preacher, and cleric who is well known, according to testimonies, for his controversial Islamic philosophy. Through a scholarship, BA Kawsu studied the Quran and Islamic Law in Saudi Arabia in 1998 and returned to the Gambia in 2003.

Through direct involvement in community activities and ceremonies, Ba Kawsu won huge following and admiration among the youth and started to have disciples. He commands a large group of disciples who are mostly youths in their early twenties. Ba Kawsu is presented by some traditional Islamic actors' as "very controversial in thinking.

His teachings and sermons are mostly against the established teachings and general beliefs in Islam especially the traditional way of practicing the religion in the country.

Given his many moves and his rather "modern" use of social networks, it is established that Ba Kawsu's influence is beyond the borders of the Gambia, and his command disciples are found in both the Gambia, Senegal and Guinea Bissau.

It is challenging to correlate and specifically establish the sect and philosophy Mufti Fofana follows because of his controversial actions and continued to affront to the law. According to a Gambian journalist.

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*His sermons are infectious of hate speech, tribalism and divisions, with a misleading route that makes many question his beliefs. He preaches against the core establishment of Islam; as a case in point, he uses the current situation to justify his belief that a man can marry more than four wives, which contradicts the teaching of Islam on marriage rites etc.*

For the same source, Ba Kawsu has been under state surveillance ever since the second republic; on many occasions, he confronted the law, got arrested, and was charged. In 2012, the former government of Jammeh arrested Ba Kawsu for his philosophical beliefs and views against the government.

His dissention against certain principles of Islam continued unabated, and on many occasions, he was either arrested or charged with incitement to violence or related issues due to comments he made during his engagement with his disciple or during his weekly Friday sermons. As one of those imams who felt comfortable and superior among his disciples, he recognizes no other scholar in the Gambia, and this informs his unsound view on the country's only recognized Islamic body mandated by law to advise the government on religious issue and moderate Islamic events and celebrations (The Supreme Islamic Council). In line with the Salafist strategy of challenging the traditional structures of Islam in many countries, Ba Kawsu has an open opposition and a very critical view of the Supreme Islamic Council; he opposes most actions of the council and, for one of prominent Islamic leaders in The Gambia,

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*preaches hate against the body. Being an independent body, coupled with the government's continued support for and respect for religious freedom in law and practice, the body's decisions on Islamic matters are always supported by the government*

*In Ba Kawsu's communication strategy there is a combination of manipulation of religious symbols and stunts in order to better capture attention and to give himself the image of a puritanical figure in order to increase his social and religious legitimacy,*

analyzes Dr. Bakary Sambe, director of the Timbuktu Institute

For Dr. Sambe,

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*this strategy can lead to excesses that can sometimes be assimilated to a theatricalization of his role as a preacher*

For the same source, Ba Kawsu has been under state surveillance ever since the second republic; on many occasions, he confronted the law, got arrested, and was charged.

In 2012, the former government of Jammeh arrested Ba Kawsu for his philosophical beliefs and views against the government.

In the same logic, during the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission hearings, this hardline preacher stunned Gambians when he blatantly refused to drink a bottle of mineral water offered to him and instead, he drank from his kettle. The Kettle drinking later went viral on social media and most of his disciples adopted the slogan "BA Kawsu la Sataloo" literally meaning "Ba Kawsu and his Kettle

## BEYOND A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON: EARLY SIGNALS OF RADICALIZATION IN THE GAMBIA?

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Far from being a media phenomenon, this rise in power of the preacher is the sign of a major change in the evolution of Gambian Islam.

It is precisely on this aspect that the preacher plays by trying to convince a critical mass of individuals acquired to his cause and who would constitute the sociological base from which, the extremists create a social fracture favorable to various conflictualities then manipulable.

In the process of radicalization, it is often necessary to differentiate between mass radicalization and so-called individual radicalization.

In the latter form, the so-called pre-radicalization phase is often marked by the fact that the isolated activist or militant is involved in a search for social recognition, causing some admirers to convert by reaction and a religious or ideological reinterpretation as is the case of the young followers of Kawsu Fofana.

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*He is a very knowledgeable person but his teachings and sermons can easily lead young people especially his disciples to tribalism and even extremist thoughts. I think he needs to preach unity and tolerance*

a businessman in Serekunda opined to me.



By observing the evolution of the Kawsu Fofana phenomenon, one can perceive the signals of a form of radicalization by stages where his speech becomes the rallying point of individuals who no longer recognize themselves in institutionalized Islam.

These individuals, very often young people, see in him a reformer and are in a phase where they identify with him as a credible and mobilizing alternative.

They are individuals in search of a new religious model and who accept the preacher's advocacy.

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*The more these young activists adhere to his protest discourse, the more they isolate themselves from their previous lives and begin to appropriate a new social identity,*

analyses Dr. Bakary Sambe. In the analysis of radicalization processes, it is from this point that extremists penetrate society and isolate categories of their original communities in order to use them as a lever of contestation. The latter starts with the religious as a powerful lever of mobilization, but often the final objective is the political field.

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*In his "sermons" are infestations of hate and division with key misleading concepts making me sometimes perceived him as a graduate "scholar" pursuing relevance in order to assume the status of an Imam but always falls short of either the right words or the taste of the words he utters to the public*

states a student at the University of the Gambia.

For Dr. Sambe, the evolution of this phenomenon in the Gambia requires attention because, for the moment,

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*the radical discourse is producing a phenomenon of self-isolation and rupture of the radicalized elements from their own society, which leads them to conceive groups and individuals outside their sectarian political organization as "enemies"*

## WHY SHOULD IT BE CRUCIAL FOR THE GAMBIA TO LEARN FROM THE MISTAKES OF THE SAHEL?

As observed elsewhere in the Sahel and in some West African countries,

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*all the trends show that the young admirers of this new type of discourse will gradually become hostile to all those who have an attitude contrary to the one he has adopted and in which he is enclosed,*

analyses the coordinator of the Observatory on Religious radicalism and conflicts in Africa (ORCRA, Dakar).

The other aspect of the approach of preachers such as Kawsu Fofana, is this interweaving in his discourse of religious and political arguments in such a way as to blur his message among individuals who may become both fascinated by his charisma and not hesitate to see in him a potential political leader.

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*Over the years I have been following with keen interest the "words" of this man with endless struggle how to classify him, an imam or a politician*

(testimony from a young militant).

Such emblematic figures, like Kawsu Fofana, often enjoy both religious and socio-political prestige and are able to play on both levels.

Despite the contradictions sometimes

induced by an impression of having "prophetic" gifts or of being invested with a mission, especially in crucial political moments, such figures can interfere in various ways in the political game.

"We all know that Ba Kawsu is well educated but his political affiliations mislead him in uttering dangerous proposition on the government and other tribes in the country.

During the last presidential elections", says a famous Gambian politician.

This tendency to get involved in the political debate can go beyond the mere support of politicians and lead to a real usurpation of a regulatory function of the society as a whole.

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*Ba Kawsu said it was over for current President Adama Barrow because as he said the Al-Mighty Allah have already shown him the results that opposition leader Ousainou Darbo of the United Democratic Party(UDP) will win the polls*

revealed an angry member of the ruling National People's Party (NPP)

In other West African contexts, such as Nigeria, it is such an evolution that has led to a situation where subjects radicalized by charismatic preachers end up placing their ideology in opposition to the values of their own society, which is presented to them as "impious" and the antithesis of "truly authentic Islam".

It is, just after this phase that the notion of "violent extremism" becomes operative, analyzes Bakary Sambe. For him, this stage is significant of a

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*process of switching to the use of violence against one's own community or others judged different or in opposition*

The Timbuktu Institute's Regional Director, recalls that in the case of Boko Haram, following the radicalization of Muhammad Yusuf's discourse strongly inspired by Wahhabism through the teachings of Sheikh Al Goumi, it is during this phase that "a strong risk of switching to acts of violence takes place, except that in the current situation in the Gambia, only a favorable balance of power is lacking for the Wahhabi Salafist current.

But on the purely discursive level, we already find on the Gambian religious field all the elements proving verbal attacks to all those who are identified as "enemies" or "adversaries" because they think or act differently, as we notice it in the opposition of the Wahhabi current to the practice of traditional Islam in Gambia.

Of course, we should not fall into the trap of a simple religious prism to analyze the phenomenon of radicalization in all its complexity. But neither should we neglect the warning signs of an evolution which, in the long term, could start from a religious type of radicalization and turn it into the engine of a real political contestation

The inconsistencies in the management of religion under Jammeh and its extreme instrumentalization during the last years of his reign, as well as the lack of control over financial flows combined with the transnationality of religious actors and ideologies, make the Gambia a fertile ground for extremist discourse.

The socio-economic vulnerabilities of a youth in "search of meaning and means" should also be taken into account. A total of 45% of the population is under the age of 15 and over 65% are youth who need to be provided access to education and training services.

Based on the different experiences in the region, one could classify countries according to a moving typology of three categories. Category 1 is that of countries already largely affected by a phenomenon of mass violent extremism (Mali, Burkina Faso, etc.).

Category 2 concerns countries under security pressure and already requiring more sustained security interventions, such as Niger. The Gambia's situation falls into the typology of category 3 regarding countries that can still develop a preventive and forward-looking approach based on building community resilience.

This approach requires a combination of preventive solutions involving the population, such as community policing or resilience programs targeting youth and women like the initiatives supported by UNDP, UNICEF and other regional or international partners.

However, like many West African countries, The Gambia is at the crossroads of the criminal economy and has enormous efforts ahead of it, particularly in the finalization and implementation of Mutual Legal Assistance Agreements.

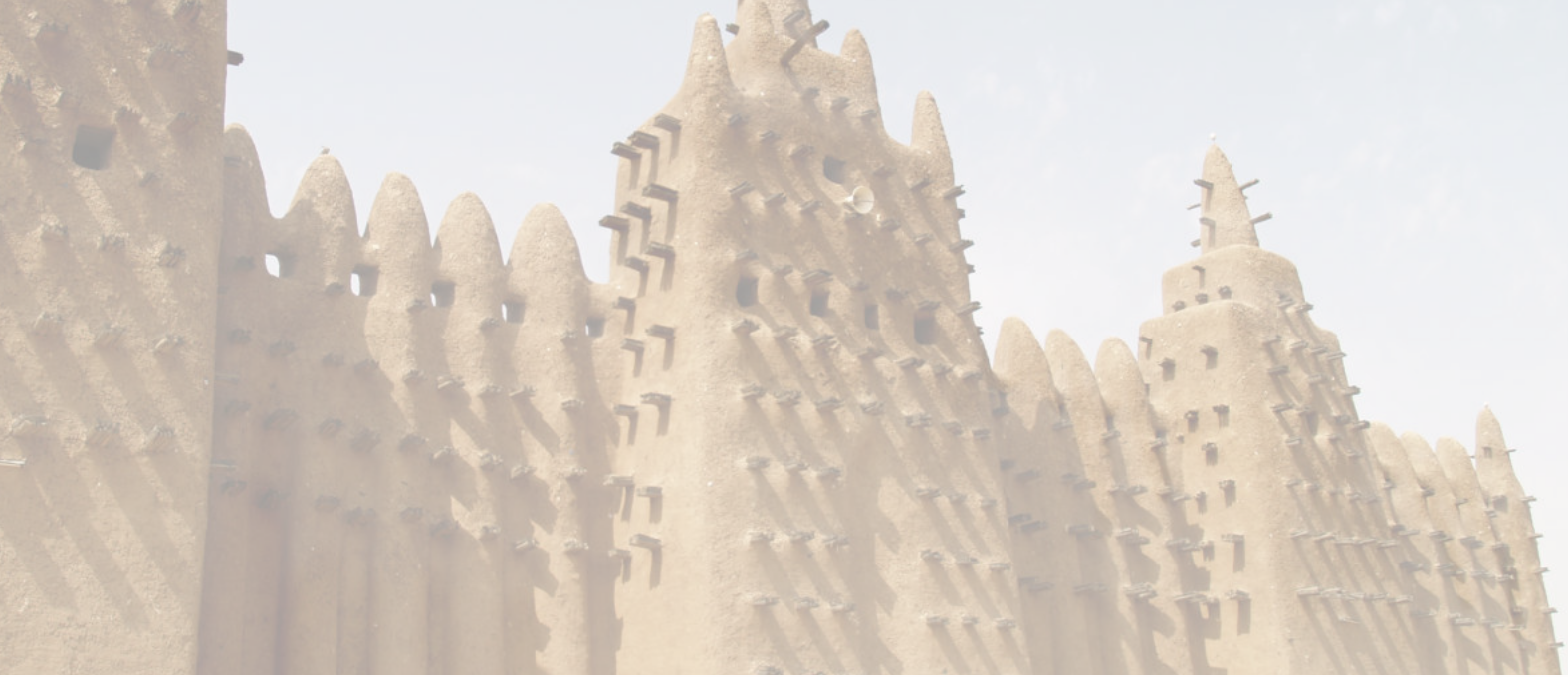
These agreements, which were promoted within the framework of the WACAP (West African Network of Central Authorities and Prosecutors against Organized Crime), are intended to create the necessary conditions for the successful and efficient prosecution and investigation of cross-border crimes.

However, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of some countries in the region that are simply focused on an approach based on security alone, it would be important to draw inspiration from the "Dakar Declaration" (March 2018, UNODC/WACAP), which emphasized the need for a holistic and collaborative approach between civil

society and actors in the criminal justice system.

In any case, while awaiting the possible trends and recommendations of the pilot study currently being prepared by the Timbuktu Institute, there is a need in The Gambia for an awareness of the need for prevention policies with a holistic and inclusive approach that includes as many actors as possible.

This includes addressing past human right abuses, and promoting national reconciliation, peace education involving religious leaders, measures to mitigate the socio-economic vulnerabilities of youth, as well as socio-political grievances and inequalities that produce frustrations that can be manipulated by the extremist discourse that seeks to take root in the Gambia.



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