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## Changes In Gambia Threaten Its Traditions Of Pacifist Islam

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Gambia in West Africa seldom attracts much attention in the outside world. It is a small country, winding along the banks of the Gambia river and completely surrounded by Senegal. Yet it has considerable virtues. It is about 96% Muslim and, like Senegal and its near neighbor Mali, has historically [had comparatively high religious freedom](#), more so than many Western countries.

This reflects the historically dominant forms of Islam in the country. This has been [documented](#) by the late, great Christian scholar from Gambia at Yale, Lamin Sanneh. He explored Western African Islam in many books, including exploring how Christian missionaries, by translating their message into local languages, helped preserve traditional cultures. His final, and perhaps his greatest work, was [Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam](#).

Note that title: not only a non-warlike religion, but a *pacifist* one. In our religiously fractured age, it is important to note the existence of a major pacifist tradition within Islam that has continued to the present time.

But this is now under threat. Terrorists, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria, the deadliest jihad group on the planet, have now spread through sub-Saharan Africa and now into West Africa. After Western powers shattered Libya in 2011, terrorists and arms flowed south and west, potentially destabilizing the whole area. A dozen militant groups aligned with both Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and ISIS have been growing more lethal and are starting to establish [de-facto control](#) over a large swath of the region.

This growing threat has led local political leaders to [seek accommodation with terrorists](#). It has also strengthened the hand of more reactionary elements in the area.

Gambia is in the process of revising its Constitution. The beginnings of the process looked hopeful, with a Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) set up by an [Act of the legislature in 2017](#). [Section 6 \(2\)](#) of this Act requires the Commission to:

*“Safeguard and promote the existence of The Gambia as a sovereign independent State, the country’s republican system of governance, including its democratic values and respect for human rights... and The Gambia’s continued existence as a secular State in which all faiths are treated equally and encouraged to foster national cohesion and unity.”*

The draft Constitution has a Preamble which revised the Preamble of the current Constitution in order to strengthen [“elements considered fundamental to the Constitution, including placing emphasis on respect for the rule of law and fundamental rights and freedoms.”](#)

In particular, the Article on “Freedom of Conscience, 47. (1), models itself on the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and states that:

*“Every person has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion. (2) Every person has the right, either individually or in community with others, in public or in private, to manifest and practice any religion or belief. (3) A person may not be denied access to any institution, employment or facility, or the enjoyment of any right, because of the person's belief or religion. (4) A person shall not be compelled to act, or engage in any act, that is contrary to the person's belief or religion.”*

Also, Section 151(2) (b) forbids the National Assembly from establishing any religion as a state religion.

These draft provisions look very hopeful. However, very similar provisions are in fact present in the current constitution and they have not stopped violations of religious freedom. As the Gambia Christian Council notes, under the present [Constitution](#):

“Gambia was in 2015 declared an Islamic Republic by the former President to the dismay and detriment of Christians and non-Muslims. Shortly thereafter, non-Muslim females working in the civil service were forced to wear veils in accordance with the dictates of Sharia law.... The National Assembly did not oppose the move, which was supported by the Supreme Islamic Council and the Banjul Muslim of Elders.”

And now, under pressure from more reactionary elements, the CRC has dropped the word “secular” from its drafts and the constitutional proposal now contains dozens of references to the role of Islamic law, sharia, in the country. Hence the draft constitution now reflects a drift toward a religiously discriminatory state.

Gambia is not large on the world stage, but its current struggles are important not only to Gambians but to others. These constitutional proposals may lead to strife in the country, which can further open the door to expanding al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates leading to conflict in West Africa similar to Somalia, Sudan, and the Middle East. It also threatens the long history of a type of Islam whose influence in the world desperately needed.

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