African Studies Review (2024), 1–3

BOOK REVIEW

Sebastian Elischer. *Salafism and Political Order in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xv + 297. Tables. Bibliography. Index. $40.84. Paper. ISBN: 9781108739276.

Why do some states in sub-Saharan Africa manage to curb the emergence of local jihadi groups, a serious challenge to internal stability and political order, while others fail doing so? In this volume, Sebastian Elischer offers an elegant and relatively parsimonious answer. Certain states created, after formal independence from colonialism, a set of institutions to deal with the Islamic sphere; other states did not. This set of institutions, which the author calls "national Islamic associations," permitted bureaucratic control of Islamic movements and groups. This move guaranteed the state a constant dialogue with such formations, enabled the vetting of their leaders, allowed co-opting them into the state bureaucracy itself, and made targeted repression of violent dissidence easier. Contrariwise, states that did not create such institutions let Islamic movements themselves organize "Islamic Federations," which could become foci of contestation of state power. State inaction or concessions, in these cases, led to further radicalization and escalation of conflict: the state responded with indiscriminate repression, fueling in turn more resentment on the part of vast swaths of population affected by state violence.

Elischer builds his theory inductively from six cases. In Chad, Niger, and Uganda, postcolonial regimes created national Islamic associations. In Mauritania, Mali, and Kenya, we witness instead the emergence of Islamic federations. In the former, we observe jihadism only as a marginal phenomenon; or else as a foreign one, that enters the country from abroad. In the latter, homegrown jihadism is instead capable of mounting a sustained challenge to state authority. The author proceeds to test his theory against four other cases: Ghana and Senegal (where jihadism has not emerged); Nigeria and Burkina Faso (where jihadism has emerged).

Steeped in the tradition of historical institutionalism, Elischer presents detailed political histories of all the cases under examination to infer causality via careful process tracing of critical junctures—where decision makers at the state level adopted policies to shore up their rule. Relying on extensive field research over a span of eight years (from 2010 to 2018), and benefitting from hundreds of interviews with local leaders, officials, and experts, Elischer marshals his argument cogently and persuasively. Set-theory methods clarify causal paths and connections (the many tables do help in navigating such contentions, highlighting, within the rich narratives, key mechanisms and junctures). Of particular interest are the unintended consequences that may originate from

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2024.149 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a given decision (or, conversely, nondecision). None of the states that, at one point, established national Islamic associations meant to curb jihadism. Such a phenomenon did not exist yet. Bolstering their (usually authoritarian) rule via bureaucratic means was all they care about. But curbing jihadism they eventually did. Similarly, when the state apparatus opted for ignoring or abetting local Islamic movements, they did so with the same hope, that is, to prop up their rule. Yet, they met instead the emergence of local jihadism.

Elischer's argument is particularly effective as he considers, and controls for, other variables that are usually associated with the emergence of local jihadism: socioeconomic deprivation and inequality; low Human Development Index; political marginalization; ethnic and cultural fragmentation. Yet, all the countries analyzed are remarkably similar on these accounts. Even more interestingly, state capacity cannot explain the variation on the dependent variable: Chad does not fair better than Mali in that department, and it is indeed under strains fighting (Nigerian-born) *Boko Haram.* But Chad does not have a homegrown jihadi phenomenon, Mali does: how one utilizes state resources (however meager they may be) matters.

Elischer's remarkable work may be put under scrutiny on two accounts. First, the reader may ask why three cases of great importance are not dealt with, while they are presented as such by the author himself in the introduction. Only a scant (some five pages) overview of Nigeria for the purpose of theory testing (while the country saw indeed the emergence of *Boko Haram*, arguably the most important jihadi movement in sub-Saharan Africa). Algeria (with a most bloody civil war between the National Liberation Front regime and jihadi formations) and Somalia (with *Al-Shabab*, another prominent jihadi group) are mentioned only in passing. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the ideological aspect of Salafi-jihadism does not feature prominently in Elischer's theory. The author himself claims (17) that he will combine an institutional perspective with attention to religious ideology. But following a description and categorization of Salafism (with particular attention to Salafi-jihadism), Salafi ideology and practices remain rather in the background vis-à-vis institutional considerations. Relatedly, Elischer may have been more accurate in clarifying some foundational concepts in this domain: he does not seem to pay much attention in differentiating between, for example, Islamism, Wahhabism, and Salafism (including its jihadi variant). This issue does not affect much his fundamental contention, but failing to properly discriminate between these terms may paint any instance of violent Islamic-based movement as an instance of Salafi-jihadism, which is not the case.

Nevertheless, Elischer's book remains a truly noteworthy work. It manages to dispel the idea that African states are somewhat doomed to face violent, homegrown jihadism given structural conditions they cannot overcome. It is not true. What states do—or do not do—matters greatly. There is path dependency: but where the path begins has enormous importance, and agency at such junctures is crucial. This book contributes significantly to the literature on state-religion relations, state capacity, political mobilization, and political sociology, in particular radicalization and deradicalization. Scholars interested in the complex and multifaceted ways in which religion and politics

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interact in Africa and beyond will surely find it a compelling and most illuminating work.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2024.149