

# **A Beninese Imam's Controversial 2019 Election Campaign: Muslim Leadership and Political Engagement in a Minority Context**

Frédéric Madore

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Contested Religion Unit, Berlin, Germany,  
[frederick.madore@zmo.de](mailto:frederick.madore@zmo.de)

## **Abstract**

In Benin, the general furor surrounding the 2019 legislative elections held without opposition parties caused many to overlook the fact that Ibrahim Ousmane, a well-known imam from Cotonou, was ultimately elected to the National Assembly. His decision to run in the elections had sparked intense debates over political participation, the criteria used to select the community's "legitimate" representatives, and, more broadly, the nature of Islamic religious authority in a minority context. In this article, I use the controversy that erupted in 2019 as a starting point for exploring disputes within Benin's Muslim community and the dilemmas of Muslim minority politics. These disputes center on how its members can engage with national politics to promote their collective interests and maintain their political autonomy from the state. The crisis can also be understood in terms of a "generational" struggle for religious authority, in a context where there are competing sources of legitimacy.

## **Keywords**

Benin, Cotonou, Islam, Muslim, Imam, Youth, Politics, Secularism, *laïcité*, Muslim minorities, Religious minority, Identity

## Introduction

When I visited Cotonou in spring 2019, the legislative elections were all anyone was talking about. President Patrice Talon, who had been elected in 2016, was being accused of embracing authoritarianism in a country normally hailed for its dynamic and stable democracy. Indeed, Benin had experienced three peaceful transfers of power since the Sovereign National Conference of 1990, which has served as a model for democratic transition elsewhere in Francophone Africa.<sup>1</sup> In an attempt to bring order to a fragmented political landscape (the country boasted more than 250 parties) and spur renewal (political life was dominated by an older generation), Talon had introduced a new electoral code and a new charter for political parties. But in March 2019, the country's electoral commission – the *Commission Électorale Nationale Autonome* (CENA) – announced that just two of the seven parties that had applied to participate in the legislative elections scheduled for April 28 had met the newly established criteria. Nicknamed “the Siamese twins,” both the *Bloc Républicain* (BR) and the *Union Progressiste* (UP) were in the president's camp. Applications submitted by other parties were declared “incomplete” for various reasons, meaning that, for the first time in decades, no opposition candidates would be taking part in the legislative elections. On election day, access to the Internet, including social media, was cut off throughout the country. Amid a boycott, voter turnout was barely 25%, a level not seen since the “Democratic renewal” of 1990. In the days and weeks that followed, violence broke out in various parts of the country, resulting in several deaths. Western media were quick to announce “the fall of a model democracy” in West Africa.<sup>2</sup>

The general furor surrounding the elections caused many analysts to overlook the fact that Ibrahim Ousmane, the well-known imam of the Central Mosque of Cotonou Jonquet, one of the city's two main mosques, was running under the BR banner. While he was not the first imam to be elected deputy in West Africa,<sup>3</sup> Ousmane's decision to run in the elections proved hugely controversial

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Heilbrunn, “Social Origins of National Conferences in Benin and Togo”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 31/2 (1993), p. 277-299; Kathryn Nwajiaku, “The National Conferences in Benin and Togo Revisited”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 32/3 (1994), p. 429-447.

<sup>2</sup> “How Benin's Democratic Crown Has Slipped”, *BBC News*, 6 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-48150006>; Stephen Paduano, “The Fall of a Model Democracy”, *The Atlantic*, 29 May 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/05/benin-west-africa-model-democracy-fall/590377/>.

<sup>3</sup> Take, for example, the case of Mbaye Niang. This Senegalese imam was elected to the National Assembly as a member of the Mouvement de la Réforme pour le Développement Social, a party he had founded. See Leonardo A. Villalón, “From Argument to Negotiation: Constructing Democracy in African Muslim Contexts”, *Comparative Politics*, 42/4 (2010), p. 383.

within the country's Muslim community and triggered significant upheaval within the *Union Islamique du Bénin* (UIB), where he served as first vice president. In a period of just two days during March 2019, two different presidents were appointed to head this Muslim umbrella organization, which claims to represent the interests of all Beninese Muslims. Although the crisis was diffused two weeks later when Talon himself brokered a settlement, the underlying conflict has deep roots in the Muslim community. In fact, the situation reflected latent tensions over political participation, the criteria used to select the community's "legitimate" representatives, and, more broadly, the nature of Islamic religious authority in a minority context.

In this article, I use the controversy that erupted in 2019 as a starting point for exploring disputes within Benin's Muslim community and the dilemmas of Muslim minority politics. These disputes center on how its members can engage with national politics to promote their collective interests while maintaining their political autonomy from the state. Muslims' ambivalences towards affiliating themselves with the formal political system comes from the double bind of being co-opted and manipulated by political authorities while being able to profit from access to the state. This study puts forward two main arguments. First, beyond doctrinal differences on questions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, Benin's Muslim community has, since the colonial period, found itself divided along ethnic, regional, and generational lines. Their minority status would require them to unite for common goals, but it is precisely this weaker position that prompts them to compete with each other over influence and wealth. Persistent leadership struggles involving prominent figures from a handful of powerful families have left the Muslim minority vulnerable to political manipulation, with the events surrounding the election of Imam Ousmane serving as just the latest example.

Second, as a growing number of Beninese Muslims seek to enter the political arena – which nevertheless remains largely associated with corruption – there is a lack of consensus on what makes an individual a legitimate representative of the community. Although Muslims of various ages line up on different sides of the issue, many of those I spoke with referenced a generational divide when arguing why their faction should assume leadership of the UIB. As Durham points out, African age categories are relational concepts; youth is therefore constantly being redefined in

social terms, and individuals from various age groups claim to represent youth.<sup>4</sup> Masquelier and Soares argue that “[u]nderstanding how youth is negotiated within the generational order of things thus requires attending to questions of power, knowledge, morality, and authority.”<sup>5</sup> For the “young” UIB dissidents, standing with “youth” or belonging to the “younger generation” has less to do with a person’s actual biological age than claiming superior secular knowledge and asserting their religious authority, in contrast to the older generation that stands accused of colluding with the state and contributing to the political marginalization of Muslims in Benin. Meanwhile, the “old guard” accused its younger opponents of displaying a lack of wisdom, being prone to manipulation, and pursuing ill-advised reforms within the UIB.

This article is based on field research conducted in southern Benin – mostly Cotonou and Porto-Novo – during 2019. In addition to informal discussions, I held upwards of 50 interviews with imams, including Ibrahim Ousmane, as well as with leaders and activists in the country’s main Islamic associations. Furthermore, I draw on items published in the mainstream media and in *ASSALAM*, a monthly Islamic newspaper published by the *Association Culturelle des Étudiants et Élèves Musulmans du Bénin* (ACEEMUB), the most prominent Muslim youth association in the country<sup>6</sup>. The article begins with a historical overview of the divisions within the Beninese Muslim community. These fault lines highlight the importance of elderliness and lineage as sources of religious leadership, as reflected in the role played by the community’s “High Dignitaries.” The second section places Imam Ousmane’s run for office in the broader context of growing interest in national politics – a recent phenomenon that follows decades of disengagement – among Beninese Muslims. The third and fourth sections each explore one of the two main visions of Muslim political and civic engagement. They also address the corresponding generational divide to understand the stakes behind the schism within the UIB in 2019. Finally, the closing section briefly looks at the role of Muslim elites in the presidential election of April 2021.

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah Durham, “Youth and the Social Imagination in Africa: Introduction to Parts 1 and 2”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 73/3 (2000), p. 116-117.

<sup>5</sup> Adeline Masquelier and Benjamin F. Soares, “Introduction”, in *Muslim Youth and the 9/11 Generation*, eds, Adeline Masquelier and Benjamin F. Soares, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2016, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Formerly known as the *Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin* (CIUB) from 1975 to 2001, the ACEEMUB aims to promote Islam in schools and universities.

## Islam in Benin: A Muslim Minority with Deep-Rooted Internal Divisions

Toward the end of the fourteenth century, amid the expansion of the gold and kola trade, Dendi itinerant traders<sup>7</sup> from Mali and Niger introduced Islam to the northern part of present-day Benin. The Dendi were soon joined by Hausa traders from Sokoto, Katsina, and Kano. Further south, Yoruba from the Oyo Empire and, to a lesser extent, Hausa from Nigeria brought Islam to Porto-Novo starting in the eighteenth century. Following the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, the Islamic presence in the city grew further with the return of Aguda (Afro-Brazilian) Muslims, including the prominent Paraiso family.<sup>8</sup> Benin's Muslim population also grew significantly during the colonial period and especially after independence. A 1961 demographic survey found the population of Dahomey to be just 13% Muslim, compared to 65% Animist and 12% Catholic.<sup>9</sup> But the Muslim share of the country's population had increased to 20.6% by 1992<sup>10</sup> and to 27.7% by 2013.<sup>11</sup> Islam has become the majority religion in three departments in northern Benin: Alibori, Borgou, and Donga. However, Muslims remain a minority in the Ouémé (home to Porto-Novo), with 12.1% of the population, and in the Littoral (home to Cotonou), with 16.9% of the population.

Starting in 1936 and continuing through the 1940s and 1950s, the first regional Islamic associations were established in Porto-Novo and Cotonou by Francophone students and intellectuals who had attended French-language schools. For instance, this was when organizations such as *Ançarou-Dine*, the *Jeunesse Musulmane Franco-Dahoméenne*, the *Élite Musulmane du Dahomey*, and the *Jeunesse Estudiantine Musulmane du Dahomey* (JEMD) came into being.<sup>12</sup> After independence,

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<sup>7</sup> Nassirou Bako-Arifari, "Construction et dynamiques identitaires chez les Dendi des anciens caravansérails du Borgou (Nord-Bénin)", in *Regards sur le Borgou : pouvoir et altérité dans une région ouest-africaine*, eds. Elisabeth Boesen, Christine Hardung and Richard Kuba, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998, p. 265-285.

<sup>8</sup> On the islamisation of Benin, see Galilou Abdoulaye, *L'islam béninois à la croisée des chemins : histoire, politique et développement*, Köln, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2007, p. 45-61.

<sup>9</sup> "Enquête démographique au Dahomey, 1961. Résultats définitifs", Paris, République du Dahomey/République française, 1964, [https://www.odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/sites/odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/files/fonds\\_gp/c-doc\\_113\\_odsef.pdf](https://www.odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/sites/odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/files/fonds_gp/c-doc_113_odsef.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> "Deuxième recensement général de la population et de l'habitation, février 1992. Volume II : Analyse des résultats. Tome 3 : Caractéristiques socio-culturelles et économiques", Cotonou, Institut National de la Statistique et de l'Analyse Économique, 1994, [https://www.odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/sites/odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/files/fonds\\_gp/c-doc\\_123\\_odsef.pdf](https://www.odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/sites/odsef.fss.ulaval.ca/files/fonds_gp/c-doc_123_odsef.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> "Principaux indicateurs socio démographiques et économiques (RGPH-4, 2013)", Cotonou, Institut National de la Statistique et de l'Analyse Economique (INSAE), 2016, <https://insae.bj/statistiques/statistiques-demographiques>.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Machioudi Dissou, first president of the JEMD and former leader of the UIB, 11 March 2019. See also Marie Miran, "D'Abidjan à Porto Novo : associations islamiques, culture religieuse réformiste et transnationalisme sur la côte de Guinée", in *Entreprises religieuses transnationales en Afrique de l'Ouest*, eds. Laurent Fourchard, André Mary and René Otayek, Paris, Karthala, 2005, p. 49-50.

various attempts to create a national Islamic organization ultimately led to the founding of the *Union Islamique du Dahomey* (UID) in 1966. But no sooner had the UID been created than a splinter group known as the *Association Dahoméenne pour la Défense des Intérêts de l'Islam* (ADDIS) was established the following year due to a disagreement between imams and Muslim executives.<sup>13</sup>

Such internal divisions proved a source of concern for the military regime of Mathieu Kérékou (r. 1972-1991). In 1973, his cultural affairs advisor stressed the need “to put an end to the anarchy stemming from the profusion of these [Islamic] organizations, first by ensuring their dissolution and then by creating, at the national level, a widespread revolutionary Islamic movement that truly addresses the real interests of all Muslims, without exception.”<sup>14</sup> Following the proclamation of Marxism-Leninism as the state ideology in 1974, the regime encouraged the followers of each religion to organize separate associations.<sup>15</sup> Although the title of a 1975 article in the *Daho-Express* newspaper suggested that Muslims had already achieved “Order and Unity,”<sup>16</sup> the “mass faith-based organization” known as the *Union Islamique du Bénin* (UIB) was only officially established in 1984.<sup>17</sup>

However, like the UID, the UIB had not accomplished any notable achievements by the end of the 1990s. Its stagnation, combined with the democratic renewal process, therefore inspired attempts to establish competing national federations. In 1992, Dr. Yacouba Fassassi – a former official with the International Monetary Fund, Sheikh of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order in Benin and special macro-economic advisor to President Nicéphore Soglo (r. 1991-1996) – launched the *Conférence Nationale des Associations Islamiques du Bénin* (CONAIB-Shoura). In 2000, Imam Mohamed al-Habib Ibrahim (b. 1958) of the Zongo Central Mosque of Cotonou – a hub of reformist Islam in southern Benin<sup>18</sup> – created the *Réseau des Associations et ONG Islamiques du Bénin* (RAI-Bénin).

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Karim Urbain da Silva, first high dignitary of the UIB, 29 May 2019.

<sup>14</sup> “Vers l’union de la Communauté islamique du Dahomey”, *Daho-Express*, 14 August 1973.

<sup>15</sup> “Le chef de l’État aux communautés religieuses : ‘Notre idéologie sera l’affaire de toutes les forces vives de la Nation’”, *Daho-Express*, 18 November 1974.

<sup>16</sup> El-Hadj Abdoul-Wahab Assouma, “Tribune libre : l’ordre et l’unité retrouvés chez les musulmans”, *Daho-Express*, 17 July 1975.

<sup>17</sup> “L’Union islamique ou l’expression d’une prise de conscience”, *Ehuzu*, 31 January 1984.

<sup>18</sup> Denise Brégand, “Du soufisme au réformisme : la trajectoire de Mohamed Habib, imam à Cotonou”, *Politique africaine*, 116 (2009), p. 121-142.

As NGOs and transnational Islamic movements have emerged in the wake of political and social liberalization, Islam in Benin, dominated mainly by the Tijāniyya order (especially the branch founded by Ibrahim Niass) and the Qādiriyya order, has become increasingly diverse in its beliefs and practices.<sup>19</sup> Above all, since the 1980s, the return of graduates of Arab universities has spurred the growth of reformist movements, including Salafism.<sup>20</sup> In the ensuing decades, this Arab-centric elite has regularly played a role in disputes surrounding the appointment of imams. Alongside a desire to purify religious practice, its demands also reflect their willingness to challenge the traditional religious power of the gerontocracy and to replace lineage with knowledge as the foundation of legitimacy.<sup>21</sup> In Benin, the head imam who leads Friday prayers at the mosque is called *imam jamiou* – from the Arabic *yawm al-jumu'a*, meaning “the day of the gathering.” In both the northern and southern regions of the country, the position of *imam jamiou* in leading mosques is a lifetime appointment often modeled on traditional chiefdoms. It is generally passed down within a small number of clans or families that trace their lineage to a founding imam, often regardless of an individual’s religious qualifications.<sup>22</sup> For example, at the Central Mosque of Porto-Novo, descendants of Séidou Akambi Olugbadé (1850-1860) and El Hadj Mocktar (1899-1909) have largely monopolized the position of head imam.<sup>23</sup>

This imamate has consistently proven the main source of discord among Beninese Muslims.<sup>24</sup> For instance, in his 1926 study of Islam in Dahomey, French Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Marty described how conflicts surrounding the appointment of imams in Porto-Novo had been dividing the city’s Muslim community for decades.<sup>25</sup> In more recent years, UIB officials have had to intervene in such

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<sup>19</sup> Miran, “D’Abidjan à Porto Novo”; Denise Brégand, “La Ahmadiyya au Bénin”, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 135 (2006), p. 73-90; Denise Brégand, “Circulation dans les ‘communautés’ musulmanes plurielles du Bénin : catégorisations, auto-identifications”, *Cahiers d’études africaines* 206-207 (2012), p. 471-491; Abdoulaye, *L’islam béninois*, p. 139-171.

<sup>20</sup> Denise Brégand, “Les Wangara du Nord-Bénin face à l’avancée du fondamentalisme : étude comparative à Parakou et Djougou”, *Islam et société au sud du Sahara*, 13 (1999), p. 91-102; Galilou Abdoulaye, “The Graduates of Islamic Universities in Benin: A Modern Elite Seeking Social, Religious and Political Recognition”, in *Islam in Africa*, eds. Thomas Bierschenk and Georg Stauth, Münster, Lit, 2002, p. 129-146.

<sup>21</sup> Denise Brégand, “Muslim Reformists and the State in Benin”, in *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa*, eds. Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 128; Abdoulaye, “The Graduates”, p. 144-145.

<sup>22</sup> Abdoulaye, *L’islam béninois*, p. 63-83.

<sup>23</sup> “Les imams de la communauté musulmane de Porto-Novo”, personal archives of Osséni Nourou.

<sup>24</sup> Abdoulaye, *L’islam béninois*, p. 195-231.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Marty, *Études sur l’Islam au Dahomey*, Paris, Éditions Ernest Leroux, 1926, p. 56-83.

conflicts on numerous occasions and in various parts of the country. In some cases, disputes have turned violent and the affected mosques have been closed by the authorities.<sup>26</sup>

Strategic positions within the UID/UIB have also been monopolized by a small number of elders belonging to the same prominent families. For instance, *imams jamiou* from the central mosques of Porto-Novo, Cotonou and Natitingou have traditionally been appointed president. The so-called High Dignitaries of the Muslim Community who sit on the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Islam au Bénin* (CSIB) – the UIB’s “supreme body” – also exercise considerable influence over the association’s activities.<sup>27</sup> This is certainly true of Yacoubou Malèhossou (b. 1950), who represented the *Renaissance du Bénin* (RB) party in the National Assembly between 2007 and 2015, and especially of Karim Urbain da Silva (b. 1930), the first High Dignitary of the UIB and chair of the *Conseil des sages et notables de la ville de Porto-Novo*. A well-known personality and one of the richest men in the country, da Silva is an Aguda descended from the Paraiso family on his mother’s side. Owner of the *Grande Imprimerie du Bénin* (a printing company), he ran in the 1968 presidential election and once headed the *Syndicat national des commerçants et industriels du Dahomey* (an association of merchants and manufacturers). For more than 60 years, he has been at the center of leadership crises and negotiations within the Muslim community, whether in his role as organizer of the UID’s inaugural congress, as founder of the competing organization ADDIS<sup>28</sup> or, more recently, as a key figure behind the contested appointment of Assifatou Mohamed Ali – the UIB’s current president – as imam of the Central Mosque of Porto-Novo following the death of Moudjadid Lawal Damala (1922-2011).<sup>29</sup> These various crises have been at least partly tied to the political subordination of the Muslim community. However, things seem to have been changing in recent years with the concerns raised about *laïcité* (secularism) and its application by the state, as well as the election of Imam Ousmane to the National Assembly.

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<sup>26</sup> For example, see “Borgou : la mosquée centrale de Pèrèrè fermée jusqu’à nouvel ordre”, *La Nation*, 1 July 1994; “Mosquée centrale de Joncquet : vers un dénouement de la crise de succession de l’Imam ?”, *La Nation*, 26 June 1998; “Pobè : la mosquée centrale Fao militarisée”, *La Nation*, 6 November 2012; Kokouvi Eklou, “Désignation de l’imam de la mosquée centrale de Natitingou : du rifié au sein de la communauté islamique”, *La Nation*, 17 May 2016; Thibaud C. Nagnonhou, “Pour risque de trouble à l’ordre public à Porto-Novo : la mosquée centrale Sofwa de Sédjèko fermée”, *La Nation*, 21 October 2016; Aziz Badarou, “Désignation d’Imam et affrontements meurtriers à Sèmèrè : l’Union islamique déplore, propose et interpelle”, *Matin Libre*, 27 October 2016.

<sup>27</sup> “Congrès National de l’Union Islamique du Bénin (UIB Shura) : Documents Fondamentaux”, 28 December 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with da Silva.

<sup>29</sup> Kola Paqui, “Après la mort de Moujaïdou Damala : guerre de succession au trône de l’Imam central de Porto-Novo”, *L’Autre Fraternité*, 18 February 2011.



## A New Era of Muslim Political Engagement in Benin? Debating *Laïcité* and Partisan Politics

Although Muslims have headed ministries in the country's various post-independence governments, their religious affiliation was not a defining factor. The community has historically played a very limited role in national politics.<sup>30</sup> It was poorly represented at the National Conference, chaired by the Archbishop of Cotonou, Isidore de Souza (1934-1999). Under Kérékou's regime and the presidency of Nicéphore Soglo, there were frequent symbolic references to *vodun* and the occult.<sup>31</sup> More recently, the presidencies of "Kérékou II" (r. 1996-2006) and Thomas Boni Yayi (r. 2006-2016) highlighted the growing influence of Evangelical and neo-Pentecostal movements in government.<sup>32</sup>

Over the past decade, Beninese Muslims have increasingly expressed their concerns about religious discrimination and state favoritism of Christianity. The expulsion of Congolese preachers for sectarian discourses after an appearance on a private television channel in January 2013 exacerbated these frustrations among Muslims, especially as foreign pastors regularly come to Benin. Representatives of the newly created *Comité de Défense des Droits des Musulmans du Bénin* (CDDMB) organized shortly after a press conference to denounce an attack on secularism.<sup>33</sup> In the wake of these events, Imam Mohamed al-Habib Ibrahim led a delegation of the CDDMB – which became the *Commission de Réflexion pour l'Unité de la Communauté Musulmane du Bénin* – that met with President Boni Yayi to stress, among other things, "the urgency of organizing a conference to critically assess the practice of secularism in Benin."<sup>34</sup> This proved to be the catalyst for the September 2013 National Seminar on Interreligious and Ecumenical Dialogue, whose agenda included a discussion on secularism and the management of religious diversity. In 2014, a

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<sup>30</sup> Brégand, "Muslim Reformists"; Denise Brégand, "Réislamisation, laïcité et sécularisation au Bénin", in *L'Afrique des laïcités : État, religion et pouvoirs au sud du Sahara*, eds. Gilles Holder and Moussa Sow, Alger, IRD/Éditions Tombouctou, 2014, p. 229-240.

<sup>31</sup> Emmanuelle Kadya Tall, "De la démocratie et des cultes voduns au Bénin", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 137 (1995), p. 195-208; Cédric Mayrargue, "Démocratisation politique et revitalisation religieuse : l'exemple du culte vodun au Bénin", in *Religion et transition démocratique en Afrique*, eds. François Constantin and Christian Coulon, Paris, Karthala, 1997, p. 135-161; Camilla Strandsbjerg, *Religion et transformations politiques au Bénin : les spectres du pouvoir*, Paris, Karthala, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Cédric Mayrargue, "Les christianismes contemporains au Bénin au défi de la pluralisation : dynamiques d'expansion et porosité religieuse", *Afrique contemporaine*, 252 (2014), p. 91-108; Camilla Strandsbjerg, "Continuité et rupture dans les représentations du pouvoir politique au Bénin entre 1972 et 2001. Le président Mathieu Kérékou : du militaire-marxiste au démocrate-pasteur", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 177 (2005), p. 95-129.

<sup>33</sup> Hospice Alladayè, "Expulsion du Docteur Abdul Madjid Kasogbia du Bénin : la communauté musulmane s'insurge et brandit la laïcité", *Le Matinal*, 23 January 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Habib Ibrahim, "A/s de l'organisation d'un séminaire", 12 March 2013, personal archives of Ali Houdou.

committee composed of government ministers and Muslim leaders organized a working session on “Islam and the practice of secularism in Benin.”<sup>35</sup> Muslim representatives demanded a more even-handed treatment of religion by the state.

A few years later, in early 2017, Muslims found themselves thrust into the national spotlight. In an effort to clean up public spaces in the city of Cotonou, the government decided to prohibit the use of public roads for religious events in the name of secularism (*laïcité*). In a show of force on 20 January, the local prefect ordered the removal of temporary shelters set up for Friday prayers along the street adjacent to the Central Mosque of Cadjèhoun. The Muslim community responded with indignation. Indeed, a lack of capacity at Cotonou area mosques means that many Muslims are forced to pray outside their places of worship on Fridays. At a press conference held on 30 January with the city’s leading imams and several Muslim elected officials, UIB representatives warned political authorities against any provocations likely to weaken social cohesion by preventing Muslims from praying. One speaker noted how “prohibiting public expressions of faith on public roads” reflected a rather “narrow understanding of secularism.”<sup>36</sup> On 4 February, at a highly publicized event attended by several government ministers, President Talon met with some 50 Muslim leaders at the Presidential Palace. He not only suspended the offending measures<sup>37</sup> but also promised to help with the construction of new mosques and the expansion of existing ones – including improvements to the Central Mosque of Cadjèhoun.<sup>38</sup> During this crisis, Imam Ibrahim Ousmane played a key role in mediating between the government and the Muslim community.

Born in Benin, Ibrahim Ousmane is fluent in both French and Arabic. He attended French-language schools until about the age of 16, earning his BEPC (middle school diploma). He then enrolled at an Islamic center in Sakété in 1986. Four years later, he won a scholarship to study at the Islamic University of Madīna in Saudi Arabia. He returned to Benin in 1999, having earned a master’s degree in theology and sociology. In 2007, Ousmane succeeded his aging father, Ousmane Aboubakar, as imam at the Central Mosque of Cotonou Jonquet and as second vice president at the

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<sup>35</sup> “Procès-verbal de réunion du comité mixte gouvernement-communauté musulmane d’organisation du séminaire bilan sur ‘l’islam et la pratique de la laïcité au Bénin’”, 23 May 2014, personal archives of Ali Houdou.

<sup>36</sup> “Conférence de presse de la communauté musulmane du Bénin dans le cadre de l’opération déguerpissement”, *OMP TV*, 31 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLNi2DeRU8Y>.

<sup>37</sup> The ban on occupying public streets for prayers was reintroduced in August 2021.

<sup>38</sup> “Intégralité de la rencontre de S.E.M. Patrice Talon avec la communauté musulmane du Bénin”, *Présidence Bénin*, 5 February 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ecBDH35Dv8M>.

UIB. In 2011, he created the *Collège des imams des départements de l'Atlantique et du Littoral*, over which he presided. In 2017, the UIB promoted him to the position of first vice president.<sup>39</sup> He therefore already held multiple positions of authority within the Muslim community when he decided to run for the BR in the legislative elections of March 2019. A few days before the vote, Imam Ousmane organized a political rally at his mosque, alongside other party candidates and some UIB officials. The national broadcaster ORTB was also on hand to film the event.



Figure 1. “Législatives 2019 : des musulmans de la 16è circonscription adhèrent au Bloc Républicain”, *ORTB*, 24 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQ6h1HEDMyE>

Within the Muslim community and especially the UIB, there were mixed feelings regarding Ousmane’s decision to throw his hat into the political ring. In fact, the UIB’s second vice president issued a “very urgent” press release on March 14, stating that the organization “welcomes this imam’s decision and hopes that he will emerge victorious in these elections so as to be able to promote ethics and good government in the National Assembly of Benin.” However, the document also made clear that the decision to take part in the election was “a **personal initiative**<sup>40</sup> of Imam Ibourahima Ousmane that in no way binds the UIB, which remains a **non-partisan** religious

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Ousmane, imam of the Central Mosque of Cotonou Jonquet, 14 March 2019.

<sup>40</sup> In bold in the press release.

institution,” one that pledged to maintain “its neutrality in the electoral process.”<sup>41</sup> The controversy caused a schism within the UIB, with two competing congresses held in a span of just two days. On March 30, a group of “dissidents” gathered in Cotonou to elect a new national executive chaired by Idrissou Aboubakar Lemanou, the imam at the Central Mosque of Bohicon, and to dissolve the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Islam au Bénin*. The following day, the UIB’s “High Dignitaries” held their own congress in Porto-Novo at which Assifatou Mohamed Ali, the imam of Porto-Novo, and Ousmane were reappointed as the organization’s president and first vice president.<sup>42</sup>

However, the two sides soon patched up their differences. On 15 April, President Talon held a highly publicized reconciliation session with key stakeholders.<sup>43</sup> The settlement was made official at the UIB’s fourth ordinary congress, held in Parakou in June 2019. But whereas Assifatou Mohamed Ali was given a three-year mandate at the head of a new national executive,<sup>44</sup> Ousmane was replaced by Lemanou as first vice president. Beyond leadership disputes and personal rivalries, the imam’s decision to run in the legislative elections had sparked intense debates on how the Muslim minority and its leaders should engage with the political sphere, which lay at the center of the dissent at the UIB.

### **Islam, Religious Leadership, and Politics in a Minority Context**

For Ousmane’s supporters and the organizers of the UIB conference in Porto-Novo, the possibility of having an imam sit in the National Assembly represented a unique opportunity to defend the interests of the Muslim community – such as the integration of Islamic education into the state educational sector – which are often disregarded in Benin. In the words of one UIB official, “Everyone talks in terms of themselves, about their own politics, in a personal capacity, about their own problems. But there is no one to talk on behalf of the community in the Assembly, whereas we are all supposed to benefit from society. If the people concerned are not represented, how long

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<sup>41</sup> Is-Deen O. Tidjani, “Bénin/Législatives 2019 : l’UIB clarifie sur la candidature d’un de ses membres”, *Boulevard des Infos*, 27 March 2019, <https://boulevard-des-infos.com/2019/03/27/benin-legislatives-2019-luib-clarifie-sur-la-candidature-dun-de-ses-membres/>.

<sup>42</sup> Yao Hervé Kingbêwé, “Bénin : crise à l’Union islamique avec l’élection de deux présidents”, *Banouto*, 1 April 2019.

<sup>43</sup> “Patrice Talon initie une rencontre de réconciliation avec l’Union islamique du Bénin”, *ORTB*, 16 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rilsFPu1p5c>.

<sup>44</sup> “4è congrès ordinaire de l’Union islamique du Bénin : l’unité et la réconciliation retrouvées”, *ORTB*, 26 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-Ox6FONYI>.

must we wait for someone to defend our interests?”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, various community members lamented the fact that “many Muslims lack the courage to enter politics”<sup>46</sup> and remain “ignorant” of how to interpret certain verses of the Qur’an. As a result, Beninese Muslims have failed to recognize that “politics goes hand-in-hand with religion.”<sup>47</sup> Finally, some observers interpreted Ousmane’s nomination as an effort on the part of President Talon and his camp to address the under-representation of Muslims in the National Assembly.

For Ousmane, it was inconceivable that he should pass up an opportunity to “serve either the nation as a whole or [his] community in particular.” In his opinion, those who did not want him to run were simply jealous, since there is nothing in the sacred texts to suggest that religion and politics are incompatible. Alongside the scriptural examples of Solomon and David, he cited that of Archbishop de Souza – “If it had not been for him, the National Conference would have taken a different path” – and those of Senegalese imams who had been elected to their country’s National Assembly.<sup>48</sup>

Other Muslims echoed his opinion, pointing out that the Prophet Muhammad himself was both a religious and a political leader,<sup>49</sup> and that imams regularly hold political office in Arab countries.<sup>50</sup> Some, like Chakirou Amoussou, argued that Ousmane, in addition to being an imam and a Muslim, was also a full citizen. Amoussou was a fellow imam who had been appointed secretary general of the UIB at the 2019 congress held in Porto-Novo. During a television appearance, he denounced the double standard applied to Ousmane and Muslims in general: “Why should we not have an imam in the next government?” he asked while pointing out, with a touch of irony, that “plenty of pastors have served as ministers<sup>51</sup> in this country.”<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, those on the other side of the issue and UIB dissidents gathered at the Cotonou congress agreed that Beninese Muslims should participate in politics, an area of public life that the

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<sup>45</sup> Interview with Faïssou Adegbola, member of the CSIB and former UIB secretary general, 1 April 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Osséni Nourou, former secretary for external relations of the UIB, 4 April 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Lawani Fadil, imam of the Vossa Kpodji central mosque and UIB youth secretary, 11 April 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Ousmane.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Al Rachid Bawa, former UIB youth secretary, 21 March 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Adegbola.

<sup>51</sup> Under Kérékou II and Boni Yayi, the political influence of Evangelical movements and the role played by certain Beninese and foreign pastors regularly gave rise to rumors. See Mayrargue, “Les christianismes”, p. 103-104.

<sup>52</sup> “Supposée crise au sein de l’UIB”, *Canal3 Bénin*, 5 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MUnImIFLGA4>.

community had long neglected. But while they were not against Ousmane's political ambitions in principle, these critics believed that the imam should have resigned from his position as vice president of the UIB before running for public office. Indeed, many in the community were concerned about damage to the supposedly non-partisan<sup>53</sup> organization's reputation. Would it be able to retain its moral authority, to continue playing the role of neutral arbiter in social and political disputes,<sup>54</sup> and to effectively hold the government to account?<sup>55</sup> As one prominent Muslim intellectual explained, "By running in the elections, this imam has led many to believe that the UIB is in the pay of the government."<sup>56</sup> There was also a fear that such perceptions would have a negative impact on how the country's other faith communities viewed Muslims.

Others saw the role of imam as being incompatible with that of politician. They feared that mosques would be transformed into political platforms. This was the view of Imam Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou, a leading figure among those objecting to Ousmane's run for office and a key participant of the UIB congress in Cotonou: "As religious leaders, we are part of civil society. The moment a guardian of the temple decides to leave his post, he is best to relinquish his responsibilities altogether."<sup>57</sup> Moutawakil Boukari Malik, the imam at the Central Mosque of Medina II in Abomey-Calavi and a figure known for his outspokenness, was inclined to agree:

A man of religion should occupy the middle ground. As a result, when an imam or a priest decides to enter politics, he should resign from his duties because he has joined a new clan. When the country faces a problem, we look to men of religion, to civil society, to wise men for solutions. But if you have already taken sides, can you serve as an impartial judge? You cannot!<sup>58</sup>

The amoral dimension of political life also figured prominently in debates involving members of the Muslim community. While most Beninese are very attached to their democracy and take great

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<sup>53</sup> According to the organization's bylaws, "The Union Islamique du Bénin shall remain non-partisan [...] However, the Union Islamique du Bénin may, when it deems necessary, express concerns on political or philosophical issues affecting its moral and material interests."

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Bawa; Interview with Nassirou Bako-Arifari, former president of the CIUB, 26 May 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Interview with Chouaïb Ahmed Chitou, imam of the Toviklin central mosque and president of the Departmental Islamic Union of Couffo, 1 April 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with a Muslim intellectual, 8 March 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou, imam of the Aïdjèdo central mosque and UIB secretary general, 26 March 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Moutawakil Boukari Malik, imam of the Médine II central mosque of Agori Plateau and UIB general treasurer, 18 March 2019.

pride in it, many of them have a very negative view of politics, which they associate with corruption, nepotism, and cronyism. According to the results of a recent survey conducted by Afrobarometer, less than half of the Beninese population has trust in the National Assembly (42%), or in either the country's ruling (39%) or opposition (36%) parties. By contrast, 74% of respondents reported having "some" or "significant" trust in religious leaders.<sup>59</sup> Another poll revealed that 50% of citizens believed that "most" or "all" members of the National Assembly were corrupt. The corresponding figure for religious leaders was only 21%.<sup>60</sup> As Imam Ousmane himself acknowledged, "The Muslim community remains reluctant to discuss political matters. It sees politics as a diabolical business. A man of religion must not get involved in politics. It is the stuff of lies. It is the stuff of betrayal."<sup>61</sup>

Some Muslims therefore see it as impossible for an imam to uphold the precepts of Islam in such a corrupt environment, where vice and falsehoods prevail. The fear of being co-opted by the state is widespread. For example, one imam I spoke with categorically refused to get involved in politics: "You know, political life in our African countries is often strewn with lies and deception. Things are never as they appear. And such business is forbidden by Islam."<sup>62</sup> Many others pointed out that Imam Ousmane should have encouraged Muslim "executives" and "intellectuals" to run for office and advocate for the community, since "imams are not trained in politics."<sup>63</sup>

In response, supporters of Imam Ousmane argued that, as a moral figure whose politics were informed by Islam, he would help clean up the National Assembly. For instance, one former UIB official recognized that the political system was "rotten to the core." But he also argued that, "at some point, you have to actually enter such an environment in order to clean it up [...] Because the mere presence of an imam constitutes a kind of wisdom. When he is nearby, certain things will simply not be spoken."<sup>64</sup> But beyond debates on the participation of Beninese Muslims and their

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<sup>59</sup> "Les Béninois expriment plus de confiance envers les leaders religieux et traditionnels et l'armée que les leaders politiques et institutionnels, selon l'enquête d'Afrobarometer", *Afrobarometer*, 16 February 2021, <https://afrobarometer.org/fr/press/les-beninois-expriment-plus-de-confiance-envers-les-leaders-religieux-et-traditionnels-et-0>.

<sup>60</sup> "Les Béninois estiment que le niveau de corruption a diminué; plus pensent qu'ils peuvent dénoncer les actes de corruption sans peur", *Afrobarometer*, 10 March 2021, <https://afrobarometer.org/fr/press/les-beninois-estiment-que-le-niveau-de-corruption-diminue-plus-pensent-qu'ils-peuvent-denoncer>.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Ousmane.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Chitou.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with a Muslim intellectual.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Adegbola.

leaders in national politics, the crisis within the UIB and the community also expressed “generational” differences in how issues of Islamic knowledge, “modern” intellectual knowledge, wisdom, and experience were understood.

### **Islamic Knowledge, Secular Knowledge, and Experience: A Difficult Balance**

At a broader level, the controversy surrounding Imam Ousmane’s political ambitions also reflected struggles pitting a younger generation against the gerontocracy that has controlled the UIB and claimed the right to speak on behalf of the entire Beninese Muslim community. Many Muslims partially blamed mismanagement by those at the helm of the UIB – the older generation – for the discrimination faced by their community. In the words of Imam Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou, a prominent leader of those standing with the Muslim youth, “More and more, we see that the different religious faiths are not treated the same. At one point, we blamed the [political] authorities. But we eventually realized that the fault actually lies with us, because no one will take a disorganized community seriously.”<sup>65</sup>

According to the UIB’s bylaws, members of the executive should be replaced every five years. But in practice, only the death of a senior leader and the ensuing conference brings any sort of renewal. The organization’s presidents are essentially appointed for life. Imam Liamidi Kélani therefore headed the UIB from 1983 until his death in 1998. In fact, his successor was not officially named until 2003 – leaving a two-decade gap between congresses. Imam Mohamed Sanni (c.1936-2016) from Natitingou, who replaced Kélani, also remained in office until his death, meaning that a third ordinary conference was not held until 2017. At that time, various measures were proposed to modernize the association, such as having the presidency rotate among imams from the main regions of Benin. However, because of sharp differences of opinion on the reforms being considered, conference participants opted for a one-year transition period, during which Imam Assifatou Mohamed Ali would preside over the organization.<sup>66</sup> When no congress was held in 2018, simmering tensions, combined with Imam Ousmane’s campaign for election to the National Assembly, sparked the crisis at the UIB in late March 2019.

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou.

<sup>66</sup> Thibaud C. Nagnonhou, “Religion : l’Union islamique du Bénin tient enfin son congrès ordinaire”, *La Nation*, 22 May 2017.



The impossibility of removing a religious leader from office was put forward as a reason for not holding regular conferences: “When an imam is appointed, he serves for life. He is not appointed for five years, ten years [...] Such positions are permanent.”<sup>67</sup> Likewise, elders and other “High Dignitaries” at the UIB argued that, “[w]hen you are a leader, you remain a leader until death.” Put another way, “[t]he father remains the father.” Some even explained the situation in terms of what they considered “African” realities: “Perhaps the fact we are Africans is what makes us think like this, [...] when someone manages to become an imam, we should not arrive with a child to dethrone him.”<sup>68</sup> Another former official stressed that, “[i]n Africa, after becoming king, one does not become a subject again. One remains king until death. Titles are held for life.”<sup>69</sup>

This “traditional” view of power and governance, defended by the UIB’s “old guard” behind the organization of the 2019 congress in Porto-Novo, clashed with a more administrative and bureaucratic vision of a “modern” and duly registered association, whose operations would be governed by a constitution and bylaws. Many younger Muslims who attended secular French-language schools and who are pursuing careers in the civil service or the official economic sector argued that such an organization would be better able to defend community interests when dealing with government. In 2011, following a disastrously organized pilgrimage to Mecca, the president of the *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB) was moved to describe the UIB as a “worrying institution” and “a thing that serves no purpose at all.” In his opinion, its leader’s general lack of accountability was detrimental to the interests of Muslims in Benin: “There are some among them who head off to represent the Muslim community and never report back [...] Such positions are treated as an inheritance of sorts. Organizations that give people power for life are of no use to us.”<sup>70</sup> More recently, amid the 2019 crisis, Imam Moutawakil Boukari Malik lamented the fact that people “who call themselves High Dignitaries” of Islam had “been taking advantage of this association for decades.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Bawa.

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Issa N. B. Yéssoufou, former UIB general treasurer, 9 April 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Éric Mounirou Deen, UIB founding member, 7 March 2019.

<sup>70</sup> “Interview : le Talk du mois”, *ASSALAM*, December 2011, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Is-Deen O. Tidjani, “Imam Moutawakil BOUKARI MALICK : ‘Il n’y a aucune crise au sein de l’Union Islamique... les gens s’agitent’”, *Boulevard des Infos*, 10 April 2019, <https://boulevard-des-infos.com/2019/04/10/benin-imam-moutawakil-boukari-malick-il-ny-a-aucune-crise-au-sein-de-lunion-islamique-les-gens-sagitent/>.

Many in the younger generation see never-ending mandates as a form of theft, and accuse leaders of “deliberately delaying conferences” in order to take advantage of the material benefits that “arise from time to time.”<sup>72</sup> For example, in recognition of the contributions made by traditional chiefs and faith communities to Benin’s development, President Boni Yayi provided annual funding of 125 million CFA francs between 2008 and 2015.<sup>73</sup> With this money, the UIB purchased various foodstuffs for Ramadan to be distributed in municipalities throughout the country – but not before they had helped themselves generously, according to one imam with whom I spoke. He believed that the leaders of the UIB clung to their positions in order to maintain such privileges and their role as power brokers:

When the [UIB] executive meets with the head of state [...] they don’t come back empty-handed. I’ve never been, but every time they head off to those meetings, they return with gifts. They share the bounty among themselves. [...] If you were receiving such perks, would you give up easily?<sup>74</sup>

According to *La Lettre du Continent*, President Talon gave 5 million CFA francs to all the Muslim leaders who visited the Presidential Palace in February 2017, amid the controversy regarding the ban on prayers in public spaces. In addition, Talon supposedly gave the imam of the Cadjèhoun Mosque 150 million CFA francs.<sup>75</sup> Although UIB officials denied these allegations,<sup>76</sup> the fact remains that, for many Muslims, any form of state funding, including that provided under Boni Yayi, simply undermines the aspirations of a community seeking to redefine its status. As one person I spoke with explained, “an association that wants to be independent should not be funded,” because when “the government supports you, the government controls you.”<sup>77</sup>

The desire for greater autonomy of the UIB vis-à-vis the state is not new. In 2013, President Boni Yayi was suspected of seeking to amend the constitution to remove the two-term limit. As the protest movement grew, the *Conférence Épiscopale du Bénin* (CEB) released a pastoral letter in August pointing out democratic shortcomings and its opposition to the proposed constitutional

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<sup>72</sup> Interview with Chitou.

<sup>73</sup> Désiré Gbodougbe, “Remise de chèques aux chefs traditionnels et confessions religieuses : reconnaître leur contribution au développement”, *La Nation*, 28 August 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Chitou.

<sup>75</sup> “Bénin : Patrice Talon joue la carte de l’apaisement avec les imams”, *La Lettre du Continent*, 15 March 2017.

<sup>76</sup> “150 millions pour les imams au Palais : ce qui s’est réellement passé”, *Les Pharaons*, 15 March 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou.

reforms.<sup>78</sup> A few days later, the UIB made its own written declaration – Karim Urbain da Silva and Assifatou Mohamed Ali were among the four signatories – supporting the government and strongly denouncing the Catholic Church’s statement as “an instrumentalization of religion for hidden goals.”<sup>79</sup> A few days later, Muslim associations and leaders from the *Commission de Réflexion pour l’Unité de la Communauté Musulmane du Bénin* distanced themselves very clearly from the UIB’s stance in a letter published in newspapers.<sup>80</sup> This has seriously undermined the UIB credibility with many Muslims, who accused its leaders of being co-opted by Boni Yayi to secure their political support.<sup>81</sup>

Disagreement on the relative importance of religious and “secular” knowledge has been central to these debates about how the UIB operates. While recognizing that Islamic knowledge remains fundamental, many young Muslim “intellectuals” have pointed out that familiarity with “administrative and financial management tools”<sup>82</sup> is key to ensuring the UIB is properly run and implements the necessary reforms. They have often stressed the need to separate the religious work done by imams and Islamic scholars from administrative work, which should be overseen by “competent” Muslim executives.<sup>83</sup> Above all, many Muslim executives and students from the AIMB and the ACEEMUB have hoped to see the UIB put more pressure on public authorities to defend the interests of the community, whether by enforcing state secularism in a more equitable manner or by recognizing credentials earned from Arab universities.<sup>84</sup> However, the UIB’s participation in public debates tends to be limited to calls for more dialogue because, according to a former member of the *Communauté Islamique Universitaire du Bénin*, “unlike the [Catholic] clergy, the Union Islamique does not have, so to speak, leading intellectual figures running the

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<sup>78</sup> “Situation socio-politique : message de la Conférence épiscopale du Bénin”, *La Nation*, 20 August 2013.

<sup>79</sup> “Situation socioéconomique délétère et polémique autour de la révision de la constitution : l’Union islamique critique le clergé”, *Fraternité*, 23 August 2013.

<sup>80</sup> “Supposée réponse au clergé : le démenti de l’Union islamique du Bénin”, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 25 August 2013, <https://lanouvelletribune.info/archives/benin/15551-supposee-reponse-au-clerge-le-dementi-de-l-union-islamique-du-benin>.

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, AIMB member, 2 April 2019.

<sup>82</sup> “Imam Cheikh I. ABOUBAKAR LEMANOU nouveau président de l’Union islamique du Bénin (UIB)”, *ActuMonde TV*, 1 April 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8wU5FpSw\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8wU5FpSw_g).

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Zakary Sofian Traoré, president of the AIMB, 23 April 2019.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Bawa.

organization. This also explains why, when faced with highly political or overly intellectual issues, the Union Islamique du Bénin takes care not to get involved.”<sup>85</sup>

In response to the emphasis placed on intellectual abilities and breadth of knowledge by the younger generation, the community’s elders have asserted their wisdom and experience. At the time of my field research, the UIB official responsible for youth was Imam Lawani Fadil, who returned from Egypt in 1984 after completing a master’s degree at al-Azhar University. This is how he explained his role: “I was not appointed as secretary for youth because I am young, but because I have a lot of experience with youth. They require guidance.”<sup>86</sup> Imam Ousmane, who could himself be considered a “young person,” but who enjoys the support of “High Dignitaries” who are his elders, also mentioned how a lack of maturity leaves youth vulnerable to manipulation:

Their intellect has yet to mature [...] They are in a hurry. [...] They lack experience. They are like tools, instruments in the hands of certain elders, who have a particular outlook and guide them toward this outlook [...] There must always be elders, dignitaries, wise men, prominent figures. I distinguish between wisdom and knowledge. Not everyone with knowledge is wise [...] there are many people who have studied extensively, who have mastered Islamic knowledge, but who still lack wisdom. If you were to entrust public affairs to these people, things could easily get out of hand.<sup>87</sup>

I frequently encountered this type of discourse in my interviews with elders and other “traditional” Islamic leaders. I was told not only that young people educated in Arab countries lacked an “understanding of the Beninese context” – that of a secular, multi-faith society where Muslims are in the minority – but that this made them susceptible to manipulation by “Salafi,” “radical,” and “sectarian” preachers from Nigeria and Niger, who pose a threat to religious coexistence in Benin.<sup>88</sup> Incidentally, a session at the UIB conference held in June 2019 focused on the threat of terrorism and Boko Haram in particular. In the same vein, a former secretary general of the association and

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<sup>85</sup> Interview with Bako-Arifari. A similar point has been made by Ibrahima Mama Sirou, an AIMB member. Interview, 8 May 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Fadil.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Ousmane.

<sup>88</sup> Abdoulaye Sounaye, “Cross-border preaching between northern Nigeria and Niger: practices, actors, and implications of *wa’azi*”, in *Transnational Islam: Circulation of Religious Ideas, Actors and Practices between Niger and Nigeria*, ed. Élodie Aparad, Leiden, IFRA Nigeria / African Studies Centre Leiden, 2021, p. 73-94.

member of the CSIB spoke to me of his “concern” regarding the popularity of Salafism among those “young people” who want to “modernize” the UIB:

There are people who remain hidden in the shadows, who manipulate these young people with the aim of snatching the Union Islamique du Bénin from the hands of those elders who are trying to maintain a balance [between the different branches of Islam] [...] As for these Salafis, if they were to take control of the Union Islamique du Bénin, they would impose things that will be hard to handle. These people are too violent [...] young people are being manipulated. They don't know they're being manipulated, but we all see it.<sup>89</sup>

It remains to be seen whether the June 2019 conference that was supposed to heal the divisions within the UIB will resolve this ongoing dispute. At the same time, it is important to note how the crisis has drawn several members of the Muslim elite closer to the current regime.

### **Is the Talon Regime co-opting Muslim elites?**

Although no longer a UIB official, Ousmane has nevertheless continued to serve as an imam alongside his role as a member of the National Assembly. On his Facebook page, he has posted several messages supporting Talon in the April 2021 presidential election.<sup>90</sup> Meanwhile, the country's political climate remains very tense. As occurred during the 2019 legislative elections, CENA has rejected the main opposition candidates, who failed to collect the requisite number of endorsements from parliamentarians and mayors under the election law of November 2019.<sup>91</sup> This has left just two relatively obscure contenders to face off against Talon, who has been re-elected for a second term in a landslide victory (86.3% of votes in first round). Furthermore, the Court for the repression of economic offenses and terrorism (CRIET) has ordered the detention of opposition figures including Reckya Madougou, who had been the presidential nominee of *Les Démocrates*. She has been charged with “terrorism” for allegedly seeking to sabotage the electoral process.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with Adegbola.

<sup>90</sup> “Les raisons du choix de Patrice Talon par le Bloc Républicain (BR)”, 28 October 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=356377508780650>; “Les grandes réalisations d'un dirigeant qui impacteront à jamais une communauté”, 20 November 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/He-Ibourahima-Ousmane-112687827182191/photos/pcb.177652944019012/17765297352360>.

<sup>91</sup> All members of the National Assembly are in the presidential camp and the main opposition parties boycotted the 2020 local elections.

<sup>92</sup> “Bénin. Opposants et voix critiques en détention à l'approche de l'élection présidentielle”, *Amnesty International*, 31 March 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/press-release/2021/03/benin-opposants-et-voix-critiques-en-detention-election-presidentielle/>.

In December 2020, the *Observatoire chrétien catholique de la gouvernance*, an agency of the CEB, called for doing away with the need for endorsements in the interest of ensuring “an impartial, transparent, credible and peaceful presidential election.”<sup>93</sup> By contrast, apart from Imam Moutawakil Boukari Malik, who criticized the entire political class,<sup>94</sup> the UIB leadership remained largely silent. The organization simply expressed its hope that the election would run smoothly. Regardless of whether President Talon has deliberately sought to co-opt the country’s Muslim elites in order to improve his chances of re-election, the fact remains that he has been able to rely on their explicit support. In addition to promising assistance for improvements to the Central Mosque of Cadjèhoun and mediating internal UIB disputes, the regime announced, in February 2019, the construction of a reception center in Cotonou with accommodations for Muslim pilgrims arriving from the country’s interior.<sup>95</sup> These measures were among the seven reasons listed by the High Council of Imams of Parakou when expressing its gratitude to President Talon at a media event in January 2020.<sup>96</sup> In August 2020, during a press conference at the Central Mosque of Cotonou Jonquet attended by Imam Ousmane, UIB officials expressed their satisfaction with the ratification of the amended Charter of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which had been adopted in Dakar in 2008.<sup>97</sup>

A number of Muslim leaders have taken the gamble of firmly aligning themselves with the Talon administration as a means of ensuring that the concerns of their community will be addressed. Heavyweights such as Karim Urbain da Silva and Yacoubou Malèhossou have therefore openly supported the president’s re-election bid.<sup>98</sup> In fact, Malèhossou is the founder and honorary president of Afimata, the *Association des fidèles musulmans amis de Patrice Talon* (Association

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<sup>93</sup> “Gouvernance : l’observatoire chrétien catholique de la gouvernance appelle à la suppression du parrainage”, *Agence Bénin Presse*, 4 December 2020.

<sup>94</sup> « Présidentielle 2021 : l’imam Malik Moutawakil », *Reporter Bénin Monde*, 10 March 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQIByhlgKyE>.

<sup>95</sup> Gildas Salomon, “Bénin-Hadj 2019 : construction à Cotonou d’un site d’hébergement des pèlerins”, *Banouto*, 6 February 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Prince Amassiko, “Bénin : les sept raisons de la reconnaissance des imams de Parakou à Talon”, *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 28 January 2020, <https://lanouvelletribune.info/2020/01/benin-les-sept-raisons-de-la-reconnaissance-des-imams-de-parakou-a-talon/>.

<sup>97</sup> Christian Tchanou, “Ratification de la Charte amendée de l’OCI : imams, cadres et personnalités musulmanes saluent l’acte des députés béninois”, *L’Événement Précis*, 12 August 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Affissou Anorin, “Karim Da Silva au sujet des réalisations du gouvernement à Porto-Novo : ‘Patrice Talon accomplit une mission qu’il n’a pas le droit de trahir’”, *Mon Patrimoine Infos*, 15 November 2020, <https://www.patrimoine-media.info/karim-da-silva-au-sujet-des-realizations-du-gouvernement-a-porto-novo-patrice-talon-accomplit-une-mission-quil-na-pas-le-droit-de-trahir/>.

of Muslim Faithful Supporting Patrice Talon). During the election campaign, this organization has been producing brochures, distributed outside mosques, hailing measures implemented by the government in support of the Muslim community and warning youth against joining any attempted uprising launched by the opposition.<sup>99</sup>

During an interview with a local radio station in September 2020, which received widespread coverage in the press, Yacoubou Malèhossou roundly criticized the actions of Mahmoud Dicko in Mali,<sup>100</sup> casting them as a betrayal of the precepts of Islam: “What the imam [Dicko] did – causing the people to rise up against the president – an imam from our country must never do. The Qur’an forbids uprisings [...] He is a politician. He enjoys playing politics and that is forbidden for an imam.”<sup>101</sup> When asked about the topic a short time later, the UIB president gave a similar response: “If you look at what happened in Mali, the Qur’an forbids any action that involves using or mobilizing the population against established authority. All authority comes from God and it is God who elects the president. Therefore, any action that goes against this principle constitutes an affront and disobedience to God.<sup>102</sup> Indeed, according to these two Muslim leaders who had supported Ousmane’s candidacy, an imam can engage in politics so long as he refrains from joining the opposition. This argument was not surprising coming from prominent UIB leaders that benefit from its close association with the state.

Imam Chakirou Amoussou, a young leader who has been appointed first secretary for projects and investment at the UIB in June 2019, provides another such example. In September 2020, he launched the Fan Club de l’Imam Chakirou Amoussou (FACICA) with the aim of mobilizing the country’s youth in support of a first-round victory for President Talon in the latter’s re-election bid. The organization’s activities have received significant media coverage. During a television appearance in February 2021, Amoussou railed against the attitude of the opposition parties. He accused them of insulting the head of state, thereby committing “defamation” and abusing the right to free speech. He also took the opportunity to float the idea of transforming his movement into a

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<sup>99</sup> A. H., “Reconnaissance des efforts du gouvernement aux musulmans : l’He Malèhossou installe le bureau Littoral de l’AFIATA”, *Les 4 Vérités*, 22 February 2021.

<sup>100</sup> The Malian imam who played a key role in the downfall of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Virgile Ahouansè, “Yacoubou Malèhossou : ‘Ce que l’iman Dicko a fait ne peut jamais se produire au Bénin’”, *Crystal News*, 15 September 2020, <https://www.crystal-news.net/yacoubou-malehossou-ce-que-liman-dicko-a-fait-ne-peut-jamais-se-produire-au-benin/>.

<sup>102</sup> Fréjus Massihounton, “Entretien avec le président de l’Union Islamique du Bénin (UIB) : ‘Le Coran est contre tout acte visant le soulèvement de la population contre un pouvoir établi...’”, *Les 4 Vérités*, 23 September 2020.

political party, if such a move could better serve the cause of Talon.<sup>103</sup> Muslim leaders have never been so openly supportive of a politician as they have been in recent years. As evidenced by the cases of Ousmane and Amoussou, a growing number of them are no longer reluctant to become more involved in partisan politics.

## **Conclusion**

Imam Ousmane's election to the National Assembly as a presidential ally in 2019 and the open support of several Muslim leaders for Talon's re-election bid in 2021 provide clear examples of how Benin's Muslim minority, traditionally known for shunning the political spotlight, has come to embrace its newfound role in national politics. Meanwhile, the controversy surrounding Ousmane's decision to pursue public office while remaining both a prominent imam and a UIB official provides a good illustration of the kinds of debates that can occur among members of a religious minority regarding the best strategy for addressing their lack of political representation.

As in other West African countries, where Islam has deeper roots and Muslims make up a greater share of the population, the community in Benin is not only divided between different branches of Islam, but also along ethnic, regional, and generational lines. As recent developments have shown, most Muslims share a desire for their community to be more engaged in the political arena, which has been dominated by Catholics and members of Evangelical movements since the 1990s. Nevertheless, there have been fierce debates over whether it is appropriate for an imam to enter politics and over what role the UIB should play as the official representative of Beninese Muslims and a civil society organization. More broadly, the most recent crisis to erupt within the Muslim community can also be understood in terms of a "generational" struggle for religious authority, in a context where there are competing sources of legitimacy. The resulting uncertainty has undermined the ability of Beninese Muslims to emerge as an influential religious minority capable of asserting its interests on the national scene. It has also provided an opportunity for the existing regime, while acting in the guise of mediator, to bend Islam to its own ends.

Because of their minority status, Muslim elites in Benin face a dilemma. In order to defend the interests of their community and secure a voice in government decision-making, they must enter a political arena widely perceived as un-Islamic, dangerous, and corrupt. Or else they can rely on

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<sup>103</sup> "Présidentielle 2021 au Bénin. Le Compte à rebours lancé. L'Imam Chakirou Amoussou sur DIAGONALE", *Bi News*, 13 February 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRsFtW7zCZQ>.



officially recognized organizations like the UIB, thereby leaving themselves vulnerable to being co-opted by the state. Meanwhile, by working more closely with the Talon regime, many Muslim figures risk losing credibility in the eyes of “ordinary” Muslims. The latter feel that the government is not applying the principle of religious pluralism equitably and that this situation is further marginalizing the Beninese Muslim community.

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