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Arabists and Islamism

After the colonial conquest, colonial administrations transformed the juridical system in Muslim countries with a view to modernizing it. Much of Islamic penal law, and harsh bodily punishments in particular (such as the amputation of thieves' hands, the stoning of adulterers), were abolished everywhere in Africa. However, the law concerning so-called personal status (*al-akhwal al-shakhsiyya*), which governed marriage, succession, child custody and so on was maintained. The post-colonial African state also adopted secularism as a principle of government.

After decolonization, Third World leaders were inspired by various ideologies in the quest for modernization. For many, it was to be a version of socialism, sometimes liberalism or nationalism. Sub-Saharan Africa, where the great majority of countries are secular, was no exception to the rule. However, independence did not improve the living conditions of African populations. Two decades after the independence of most African countries, not only were the promises for a better future not fulfilled, it was also evident that these countries were undergoing economic decline and social malaise. There were vigorous debates about the origins of the crisis and possible solutions. First, the causes of the decline were identified in the economic policies adopted at independence. Generally speaking, it was assumed that agriculture could not be the engine for development and industrialization should be pursued.

Thus, inspired by development economists, African leaders adopted import-substitution models of industrialisation, with all their panoply of protectionist measures, fixed rates of exchange and appreciation of the value of their currency, rationing foreign exchange through a system of allocation controlled by the state, priority to certain sectors in the allocation of domestic credit, industrialization led by state-owned enterprises, and heavy taxation of agriculture through state-controlled-marketing boards (Lofchie 1994:147-154). Agriculture was so heavily taxed that policies became counter-productive. Industry, which greatly depended on transfers from agriculture, was not long in following suit (Lofchie 1994:147-154).

Incapable of servicing their debt, African countries were forced to accept the humiliating terms of the international financing agencies, the IMF and the World Bank especially, and to implement structural adjustment programmes to obtain the rescheduling of their debts. These programmes meant the dismantling of import substitution industrialization in favour of economic liberalization. At the end of the 1980s, the limited success of the structural adjustment programmes somewhat modified the terms of the debate. Then the donor countries and the Bretton Woods institutions became convinced that the origin of the economic malaise of Africa was political. Consequently, it was necessary to establish systems of 'good governance': to impose accountability of the government to the people, guarantee freedom of expression and of the press, as well as political pluralism. Thus, almost all sub-Saharan countries were obliged to undergo some form of political and economic liberalization.

At the same time as such debates initiated by the donor agencies were going on, there were other ways, far less rational, of assessing the crisis confronting these countries. For example, certain Muslim militant intellectuals (Kepel and Richard 1990) argued that the secularism adopted by Muslim countries in Africa was at the root of the crisis, and was therefore a divine punishment. Consequently, as the Koran stated (11-13), 'God does not change what is in a people before the people change what is in themselves'. What was rather required was a struggle to set up an Islamic state to replace the secular state of Western inspiration. This debate was not confined to a few *ulemas* trained in strictly Islamic universities: individuals from all social categories, including Europhone intellectuals and even one-time Marxists and modernists, accepted this diagnosis. They also accepted the notion that the establishment of an Islamic state was the panacea. The overturning of the Pahlavi monarchy in Iran in 1979, and the creation of an Islamic state in that country, strengthened the conviction of the Islamist intellectuals that their diagnosis was correct.

The first revolution in the Third World that was not subservient to either of the two blocs that dominated the post-World War II period, the upheaval in Iran, had raised hope among many Muslims that Islam could constitute an alternative. In sub-Saharan Africa, at the beginning of the 1980s, belief was rife among the Arabists and, to a lesser extent, the Europhone intellectuals, that the secular state should be dismantled and replaced by political systems based on values prioritizing Islam. Books and journals in Arabic, European and African languages questioned the idea of the secular state and were widely discussed, especially on university campuses. However, at the beginning of the 1990s, the fascination for the Iranian model had much diminished in Africa (Kane and Triaud 1998).