

Religious leaders play key role in helping Africa's Sahel region deal with COVID-19

Exclusive interview with the director of Timbuktu Institute-African Center for Peace Studies

Lucie Sarr, Mali, *La Croix International*, 10 June 2020



Dr. Bakary Sambe.

The Timbuktu Institute-African Center for Peace Studies was set up in Dakar (Senegal) in 2016 as a research center that promotes trans-disciplinary approaches to issues related to religious radicalism.

That includes issues such as dealing with diseases and health crises, such as the coronavirus.

The institute recently joined with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for Interreligious Dialogue in Africa and published a study called: "**Responses of Religious Leaders to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Sahel**".

It was released on June 5.

And to find out more about it, *La Croix Africa's* Lucie Sarr spoke with the Timbuktu Institute's executive director, Dr. Bakary Sambe, who is also a professor-researcher at the Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis in Senegal.

La Croix: How have the different religious denominations dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic in the Sahel?

Bakary Sambe: With the COVID-19 pandemic, the different faiths have invested in prevention.

Religious communities became well-aware that prevention was the only phase that African states could win, in view of their shortcomings in terms of health.

In Burkina Faso, for example, a form of religious and interreligious synergy has been noted, in particular with the Federation of Islamic Associations of Burkina Faso, but also with the Catholic Church, which played a very important role.

In Senegal, religious health officials and other religious structures, such as the Cadre Unitaire de l'islam in Sénégal, have joined forces.

The Catholic Church, for its part, took firm decisions very early on by imposing the closure of its places of worship.

Similarly, the general khalife (a spiritual guide) of the Tijānī Order (an important brotherhood in Senegal) took measures to protect health and hygiene by closing the mosques in the holy city of Tivaouane as well as the other mosques that depend on this brotherhood.

He also decided to support the residents of the Quranic schools by ensuring their food, aided in this by religious figures such as Serigne Sheikh Tidiane Sy Al Amine and the think-tank Propec'Tiv near the Tijaniyya.

In the same vein, the general khalife of the Mouride brotherhood - another Senegalese brotherhood - has contributed 200 million CFA francs (more than €300,000) to the COVID-19 Resilience Fund set up by Senegalese Head of State, Macky Sall.

In the Goundam Circle in the Timbuktu region in Mali, religions have taken up the issue of prevention.

It can therefore be affirmed that religion has played a very important role in terms of prevention and awareness-raising, showing once again its inescapable role in Sahelian societies.

The clerics have contributed to resilience through the moral rearmament of loyal citizens in the States suffering from fragility and insufficient resources to cope effectively with such a pandemic.

Have religious leaders pushed for the reopening of places of worship?

It is striking to note how the States of the sub-region (in particular, Mali, Senegal and Niger) were able to be disarmed in the management of religious questions during this pandemic.

These religious issues have always been the subject of consensus or negotiations depending on the balance of power or socio-political stakes.

In reality, the particular context of the management of a pandemic only accentuated the contradictions that were already present in the complex interaction between political and religious actors.

Beyond the observation of the undiminished impact of the clerics and the practice of worship, one should note the social legitimacy of religious leaders who often seem to take the place of political leaders in some States.

As a result, we have witnessed a form of clash of legitimacies between these two types of players, which reveals that many other societal issues will be subject to this same competition, not to mention there being a fear of confrontation.

Some States have been pressured to open mosques, such as Senegal - although politicians deny it - and Niger, where, despite the ban, the faithful were in front of the mosques in close ranks, defying political authority.

In Mali, the State did not even dare to legislate on the matter, and put the ball back in the court of the Islamic High Council.

This kind of attitude leads to the phenomenon we see today, with religious actors imposing themselves as political actors [for example, Imam Mahmoud Dicko in Mali, editor's note].

They also benefit from the strategy of politicians who try to find, in the religious, the legitimacy they do not have in political life.

What can we learn from this crisis?

Despite the controversial debates raised in the note from the Centre d'analyse et prévision et de stratégie (CAPS) in Paris regarding the possible effects of COVID-19 in West Africa, we can see the relevance of the place it gives to religious leaders and their various roles, especially in times of crisis.

Our study has shown that our countries are suffering from insufficient investment and resources in the health sector after decades of strong privatization in the framework of structural adjustment policies.

In this context, the cleric plays the role of social integrator, which is accentuated in times of crisis.

Likewise, it can be noted that the solidarity system that worked during this pandemic and which brings to mind the collective dimension of religious sentiment still remains one of the reasons for the centrality of clerics in Sahelian societies.

This crisis was, in short, a test to see how our States could react in a health crisis situation.

It showed that they were not very well prepared with regard to the religious question because now there is a real paradox in the Sahelian sub-region: the States declare themselves to be secular, yet manage the religious leaders, which becomes a political and security issue.

Their management of the religious is in a trial and error form since they have always only partially dealt with religious questions in a contextual manner, whereas a real governance of the religious is increasingly necessary in view of the important stakes involved.