Research Projects on Islam in Africa

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Three new academic projects on Islamic issues were established in South Africa and started their research recently. All three projects address areas formerly neglected by research. The areas covered are: Muslim participation during the South African transition process, Islamic Identity and Culture in a Democratic South Africa, and Islamic Law in Africa.

The projects represent an insider and outsider approach. The researchers of the project on Religion and Politics are from Germany, while the researchers of the project on Religion, Culture and Identity are mainly from South Africa. The scholars of the project on Islamic Law are from various African countries. This mixed interaction will hopefully lead to an enriching exchange of perspectives.

Religion and Politics in the Transition-process of South Africa – the role of the Muslim community:

This project is part of a large-scale research programme based in Germany at the University of Hamburg. The project is entitled "Transitions in African societies and how they are dealt with" and started in 1999. Eleven individual projects explore the question of how African societies deal with transition processes.

One of the individual projects deals with the specific role of Islam and Muslim organisations during the South African transition process. The different political, social and religious structures, the scope of action and the influence on society of different Muslim groups and organisations are at the centre of analysis. This project is intended to be a long term one (up to 9 years). The initial three years of research will focus on the end-period of the Apartheid-regime, 1976-1989. The second research period will focus on Muslim participation during the period of democratisation and institutional change, 1990-1994.

The South African Muslim community does not form a homogeneous entity, but is divided by religious orientation (orthodox, reformed, Islamist), cultural and ethnic background, socio-economic status, and political conviction. The project will analyse the relationship between these different Muslim groupings as well as their relationship to other social groupings. Of

special interest is the attitude of Muslim organisations towards the state. Questions raised deal with:

- how Muslim organisations where structured under the Apartheid-regime
- if and in which way they articulated resistance against the government
- which Muslim groups collaborated with the Apartheid-regime and which associated with Anti-Apartheid organisations
- how this orientation was politically or religiously legitimised.

The intended outcome is an analysis and presentation of a differentiated picture of the relevance of Muslim groups in the transition process of South Africa. The analysis will be embedded in the historical, socio-economic and political contexts. This is necessary in order to reach a comprehensive evaluation of the relevance of Muslim groups. It also allows for the development of strategies for other countries where Muslims are in a majority or minority position.

The approach of the project is two-fold and combines the theory and methodology of both Islamic Studies and Political Science. An inner and outer perspective will be adopted to portray Muslim groups and organisations. The inner perspective will focus on the self-perceptions and forms of expression of Muslims as well as the tensions and conflicts within different groups.

On the outer level of institutions and organisations, the following questions will be investigated:

- forms of organisation and aims
- ideological orientation
- social constitution
- Muslim participation in Anti-Apartheid organisations (e.g. ANC, UDF, PAC) and governmental structures (e.g. tri-cameral parliament, local administration).

The methodological tools will include, amongst other things, a critical analysis of literature. This incorporates publications or newspapers of Muslim organisations as well as mainstream and alternative press. Interviews with experts and members of various organisations will also be undertaken. Theoretical discourses on various issues like civil society and political participation, minorities and multicultural societies, pan-Islamist politics, and Islamic identity

are also considered. So far, the available literature and material in the field has been surveyed and a select bibliography has been compiled. A number of interviews have also been recorded and transcribed.

Religion, Culture and Identity in Democratic South Africa

Initiated and guided by Professor Abdulkader Tayob from UCT, this project aims to develop a framework for appropriating religious culture and identity for a democratic society. Research will be conducted at a local level with community involvement. The project aims to locate Islamic culture and identity in South African society. In this context Islamic responses to democracy will be investigated and analysed. Furthermore, research findings will be disseminated and shared nationally and internationally through a variety of media productions. The project intends to identify the challenges and opportunities facing religious culture in a pluralist society like South Africa. It investigates religion in terms of the psychological, philosophical, social and historical components of human thinking and action.

The perspective taken on Islam hopes to contribute to the broader question of the relationship between religious culture and democracy. The theoretical areas which will be taken into account for this research project are studies in culture and identity on the one hand, and studies in contemporary Islamic discourse on the other. Therefore questions of constructing religious identities and redefining Islam and its role in modern democratic societies are of importance. Besides placing the research within debates around culture and identity, an insider perspective will be adopted to analyse discourses among Muslim intellectuals and processes of self-construction of identities. Special emphasis is placed on the inter-disciplinary character of the project.

The project aims to examine the construction of Islamic culture in the context of the democratic culture being promoted by the state. It also hopes to examine the possibility of a multicultural identity and the specific Islamic discourses around these issues. Considering the diverse role religion and culture can play in either promoting or destabilising a democratic society, the project intends to contribute positively to the development of a multicultural society and democratic values.

The overall project is split up into seven sub-projects dealing with different aspects and regions of Muslim life and Muslim discourse. It utilises a variety of theories and

methodologies. Fieldwork for the study will focus on religious orientation and practises in various Muslim communities.

Four of the sub-projects (based at UCT) are under the supervision of Professor Abdulkader Tayob. They deal predominantly with the attitudes of Muslims and Muslim leaders in South Africa as well as the national and international Muslim discourses on Islam and democracy.

The fifth sub-project, under the leadership of Drs. Haroon (University of the Western Cape), focuses on the Eastern Cape, an area formerly neglected in research. A historical study using in-depth interviews will portray the oral traditions of the communities within parameters relating to identity, culture and democracy. A similar approach will be followed by sub-project six, led by Mr. Tahir Sitoto (University of Natal). He intends to initiate an in-depth study of Islam in an African Township.

- The last sub-project has a different outlook and approach. Professor Beck from the Tilburg University in the Netherlands intends to relate the results of the projects on Islam in South Africa to the situation in the Netherlands.

For dissemination the overall-project will convene workshops and symposiums, and produce journal articles, reports, and video productions for the public.

Islamic Law in Africa

This project is designed and supervised by Associate Professor Ebrahim Moosa, who is presently based at Stanford University in the United States. It aims to establish a comprehensive study on Islamic Law in Africa. Many studies on Islamic law in Africa are from the period of de-colonisation, and focus mainly on anglophone countries. Therefore, a survey on the state of Islamic law in post-colonial states has to take place in the light of changing political and economic orders.

The second objective of the project is to examine the politics around Islamic law and its impact on the post-colonial nation-state. Constitutional conflicts relating to the application of Islamic law in secular states and the possibilities and forms of political mobilisation as a result of the discourse on Islamic law shall be analysed.

Thirdly, the project intends to explore the inter-relationship of law and the politics of religious identity. Islamic law is, above all, a question of religious identity. Muslims demand the replacement of the Western colonial law system by a sophisticated Islamic system suiting their tradition and cultural identity. The implementation and strengthening of Islamic law could, according to the research proposal, redress the oppressive legacy of colonialism. The project intends to examine the nature of identity politics relating to Islamic law.

In many African states Islamic law – mainly in the sphere of family law - has been implemented either in a minority or majority context and coexists alongside secular and a variety of customary law systems. In most cases, the post-colonial state in Africa took the shape of a nation-state promoting a unitary political and legal system. Yet, many African states retained aspects of Islamic law and customary law. This had a strong influence on the state and society. Through the implementation of Islamic law, Islamic thinking entered the public and normative sphere of discourses on morality. It thereby challenged the concept of Western secularisation, which excludes religion from the public domain. On the other hand new forms of secularisation emanating in non-western religious traditions occurred and found expression. One of the main questions this project intends to analyse is whether new non-western patterns of secularisation based on religious attitudes are visible in modern or post-modern Africa. Research findings will be presented at three regional workshops, in East, West and South Africa.

Criticisms and Analysis:

The first project (religion and politics in South Africa) deals with a particular period of transition, namely, the phase of liberalisation. This is the strength and weakness of the project. While investigating a very decisive period of democratisation, where the politicisation and mobilisation of the Muslim community took place, it leaves present developments and discourses among the Muslim community untouched. There could be a reluctance or lack of interest among Muslims to disclose information of their 'political past', taking into account the challenges and changes facing the community during the institutionalisation of democracy after the 94-elections.

However, the project directs its research to the main area of interest, the theory of democratisation at an institutional level. This, on the other hand, could supplement the approach and findings of project two (religion, culture and identity) which applies more to

micro-level studies on Muslim identity and democratic attitudes. Muslim leaders and role players will be interviewed in both projects using different methodologies, e.g. biographical life-story interviews on the one hand and expert or guide-line interviews on the other hand. An exchange in this field could be enriching for the projects.

On questions of institutionalising Muslim participation the first project could furthermore co-operate with the project on Islamic law in Africa. The first project complements the question of how Islamic law is institutionalised within democratic secular state structures. Furthermore, the implementation of Islamic law is an expression of religious identity, which could be the link to the project on religion, culture and identity.

The project on Islamic law is the only one working in a comparative perspective and not restricting its research to the South African context only. This enables the project to compare different models of legalising Islamic law in the specific setting of African national states.

It seems to be difficult to connect scholars and researchers from different countries with each other. Regional workshops of three days each allow experts little time and space to establish a continuing exchange and engagement in ongoing discussions. The question of how to pose common questions and structure an exchange of results can also be posed to the project on religion, culture and identity. Being split up into seven sub-projects, each focusing on different South African regions and groups within the Muslim community, the task of comparing findings, and coming to shared hypotheses, seems to be a challenging one. The objectives on the other hand address very important questions within the South African context. Issues of religious identity and democratic attitudes are widely debated, but little research has been done so far. The findings will hopefully challenge and refute widely perceived notions and claims surrounding the incompatibility of Islamic practices and democracy.

As different and diverse as the outlooks of these three research projects are, they coalesce on certain aspects. The question of religious identity, Islamic identity for that matter, and how it affects the roles and attitudes of Muslims in a multicultural society is very important. Another aspect the projects have in common is their focus on the role of Muslims in a changing society. Building on an interdisciplinary approach within the single projects, co-operation should be encouraged.