

# Separate and compatible? Islam and democracy in five North African countries

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**Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 188 | Thomas Isbell**

## Summary

Islam and democracy have often been described as antipodes, or at least as an awkward match (Huntington, 1997; Kedourie, 2013). Fueled by terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and Boko Haram, intense public debate in the West has linked the relative scarcity of democracies in majority-Muslim countries (Fish, 2002) with the belief that authoritarian conditions are more likely to foster radicalization. Many writers have argued, however, that Islam itself is no impediment to democracy (Lewis, 1993; Stepan & Robertson, 2003; Diamond, 2010), and studies using survey data have found no clear pattern differentiating Muslims from non-Muslims in support for democracy (Tessler, 2002; Bratton, 2003; Ciftci, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2012).

To many, the popular uprisings during the “Arab Spring” of 2011 pointed to the viability of democratic governance in predominantly Muslim Arab countries. But to date, only Tunisia has experienced a political transition to a nascent regime of democracy. Other Arab states have reacted to popular dissent with authoritarian crackdowns or have become engulfed in conflict.

How do ordinary North Africans feel about the relationship between Islam and democracy? Using a set of questions asked by Afrobarometer in the majority-Muslim North African countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Sudan in 2015, this dispatch examines the political role that respondents want the Muslim faith and its leaders to play.

Overall, most see Islam and democracy as compatible and support equal political rights for non-Muslims, although these positions are considerably weaker in Algeria than in the other countries. The separation of religion and politics has more supporters than opponents, but a system governed by Islamic law without elections and political parties wins majority support in Sudan.

## Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across more than 30 countries in Africa. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples, which yield country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-2% (for a sample of 2,400) or +/-3% (for a sample of 1,200) at a 95% confidence level.

For its Round 6 survey, Afrobarometer teams interviewed samples of 1,200 adults in Algeria in May-June 2015, Egypt in June-July 2015, Morocco in November 2015, Sudan in June 2015, and Tunisia in April-May 2015.

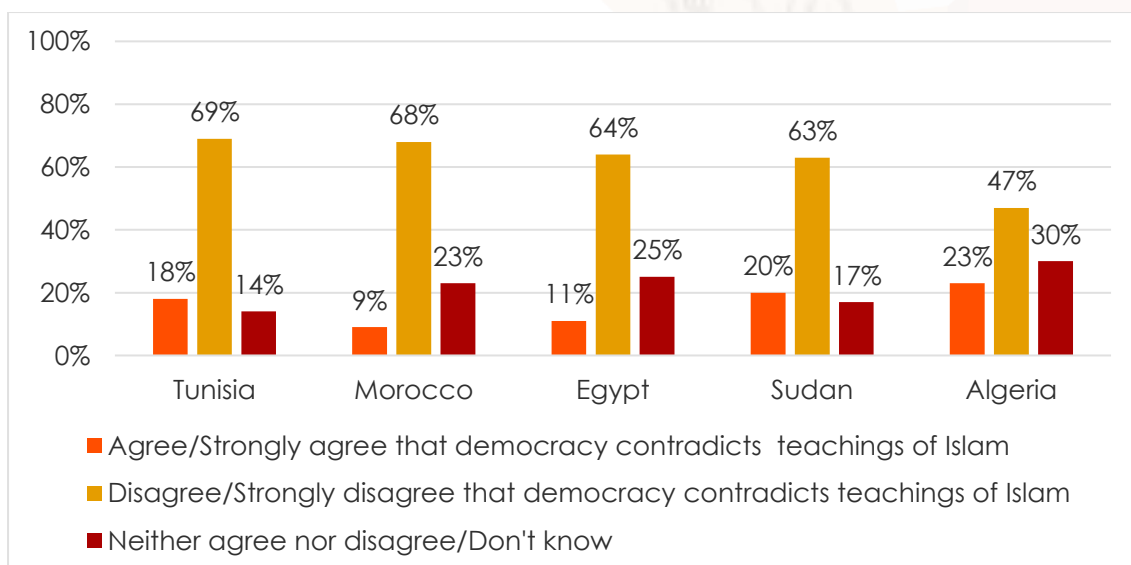
## Key findings

- About two-thirds of respondents in four of the five countries see no contradiction between democracy and Islam: Tunisia (69%), Morocco (68%), Egypt (64%), and Sudan (63%). Not quite half (47%) of Algerians agree.
- Similarly, the idea that non-Muslims should have fewer political rights than Muslims is rejected by majorities in Tunisia (73%), Morocco (72%), Egypt (58%), and Sudan (57%), and by a plurality (46%) in Algeria.
- Majorities in Tunisia (71%) and Sudan (56%) “agree” or “strongly agree” that religious leaders should not interfere in voters’ decisions. Only pluralities agree in Egypt (48%) and Morocco (44%), and in Algeria it’s a minority view (28%).
- Sudan is the only country where a majority (52%) believe they would be better off if “religious people hold public positions in the state.” Tunisians strongly reject the idea (66%).
- A majority (52%) of Sudanese would also welcome a political system governed by Islamic law without elections and political parties. Opposition outweighs support for such a system in the other four countries and is particularly strong in Tunisia (77%).

## Is democracy compatible with Islam?

Solid majorities in Tunisia (69%), Morocco (68%), Egypt (64%), and Sudan (63%) “disagree” or “strongly disagree” with the idea that democracy contradicts the teachings of Islam (Figure 1). In Algeria, only 47% share this view – though that’s twice the proportion who see democracy as antithetical to Islam (23%). Elsewhere no more than one in five citizens see the two as contradictory, ranging from 9% in Morocco to 20% in Sudan. In all five countries, substantial proportions of respondents – ranging up to 30% in Algeria – say they agree with neither side or “don’t know.”

**Figure 1: Does democracy contradict the teachings of Islam? | five North African countries | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: Democracy is a system that contradicts the teachings of Islam?*

Comparing responses across socio-demographic groups, we find above-average support for the statement that democracy contradicts Islam among young and poor<sup>1</sup> Algerians, poor Moroccans, less educated Sudanese, and young Tunisians (Table 1).

**Table 1: Democracy contradicts the teachings of Islam** | by socio-demographic factors | five North African countries | 2015

	Algeria	Egypt	Morocco	Sudan	Tunisia
Urban	23%	10%	8%	17%	18%
Rural	23%	12%	11%	22%	17%
Male	26%	12%	9%	21%	20%
Female	21%	10%	9%	20%	16%
18-25 years	<b>29%</b>	13%	5%	16%	<b>24%</b>
26-35 years	23%	8%	13%	23%	<b>23%</b>
36-45 years	23%	6%	13%	24%	17%
46-55 years	22%	16%	10%	16%	17%
Over 55 years	18%	4%	2%	22%	11%
No formal education	17%	9%	7%	<b>25%</b>	9%
Primary	28%	12%	8%	<b>25%</b>	21%
Secondary	23%	16%	17%	22%	21%
Post-secondary	22%	10%	6%	15%	16%
No lived poverty	20%	12%	3%	24%	15%
Low lived poverty	22%	13%	7%	18%	20%
Moderate lived poverty	<b>29%</b>	2%	<b>22%</b>	19%	20%
High lived poverty	<b>37%</b>	0%	<b>16%</b>	18%	20%

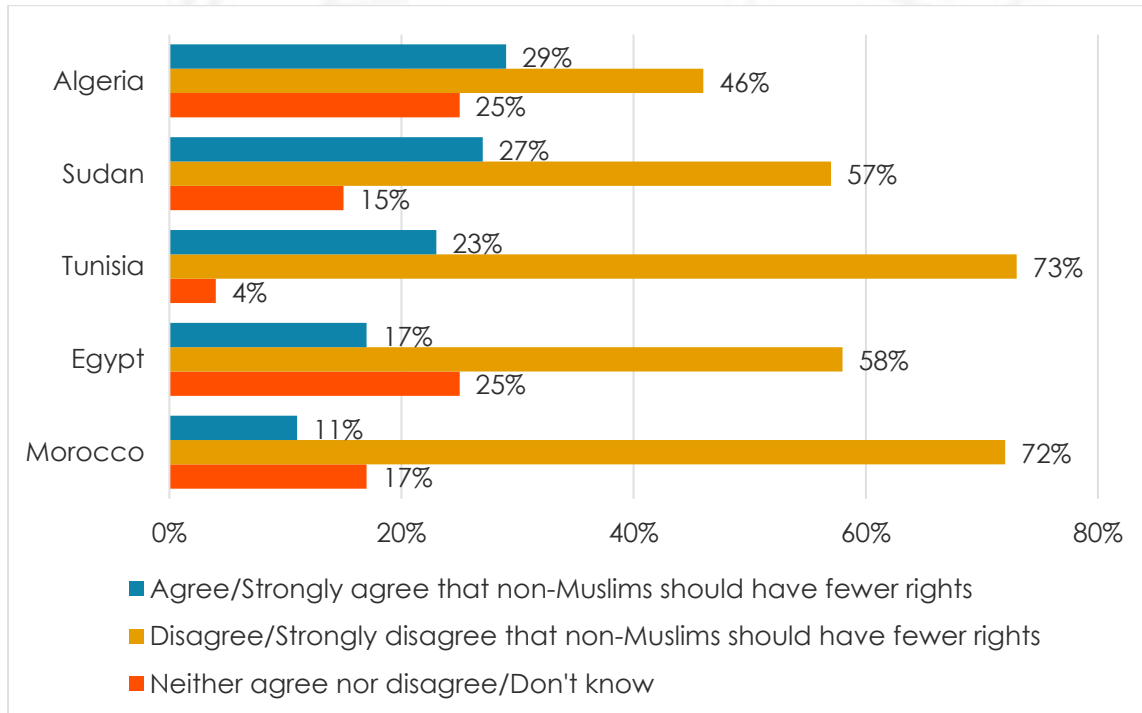
**Respondents were asked:** *The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: Democracy is a system that contradicts the teachings of Islam? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that democracy contradicts Islamic teachings)*

### Equal rights for Muslims and non-Muslims?

When asked whether non-Muslims in a Muslim country should enjoy fewer political rights than Muslims, strong majorities in Tunisia (73%) and Morocco (73%) "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with the idea (Figure 2). Smaller majorities reject unequal rights in Egypt (58%) and Sudan (57%). Fewer than half (46%) of Algerians share this view, while three in 10 (29%) endorse limiting political rights for non-Muslims. About one in four Sudanese (27%) and Tunisians (23%) also endorse unequal rights based on religion. Again, except in Tunisia, substantial proportions of respondents neither agree nor disagree or say they "don't know."

<sup>1</sup> Afrobarometer measures lived poverty with an index based on responses to the questions, "Over the past year, how often, if ever, have you or anyone in your family gone without: Enough food to eat? Enough clean water for home use? Medicines or medical treatment? Enough fuel to cook your food? A cash income?"

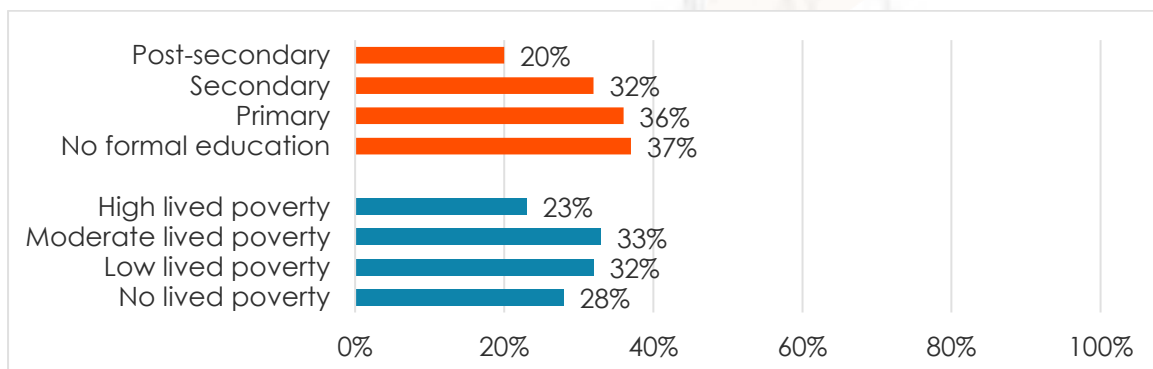
**Figure 2: Should non-Muslims have fewer political rights?** | five North African countries | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: In a Muslim country, non-Muslims should enjoy less political rights than Muslims?

Algeria has the highest proportion of citizens who say non-Muslims should have fewer rights. Less-educated Algerians are most likely to report such views (37% of those with no formal education and 36% of those with primary schooling, compared to 20% of those with post-secondary qualifications) (Figure 3). But, anomalously, the poorest Algerians are least likely to endorse limiting rights for non-Muslims (23%).

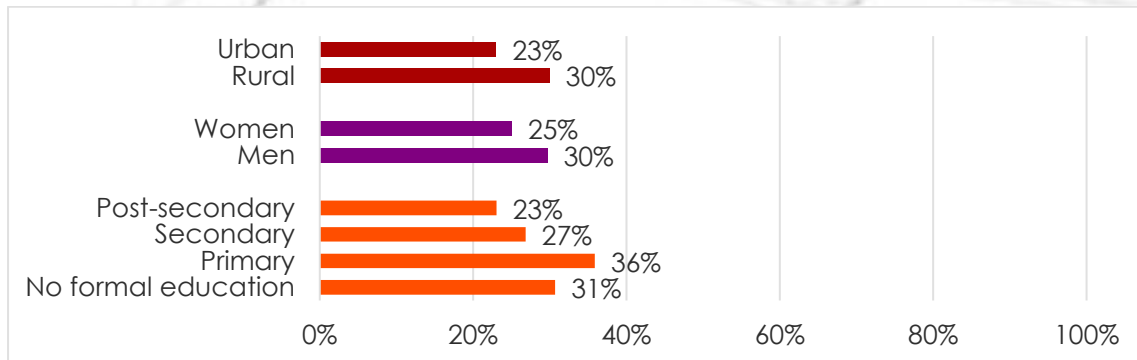
**Figure 3: Non-Muslims should have fewer political rights** | by education and lived poverty | Algeria | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: In a Muslim country, non-Muslims should enjoy less political rights than Muslims? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” that non-Muslims should have fewer rights)

In Sudan, the country with the second-highest percentage of respondents who favour limited rights for non-Muslims (27%), differences emerge between urbanites and rural dwellers (23% vs. 30%) as well as between women and men (25% vs. 30%) (Figure 4). As in Algeria, Sudanese respondents with primary (36%) or no formal education (31%) more commonly agree with the idea of limiting rights of non-Muslims than those with higher levels of education.

**Figure 4: Non-Muslims should have fewer political rights** | by location, gender, and education | Sudan | 2015

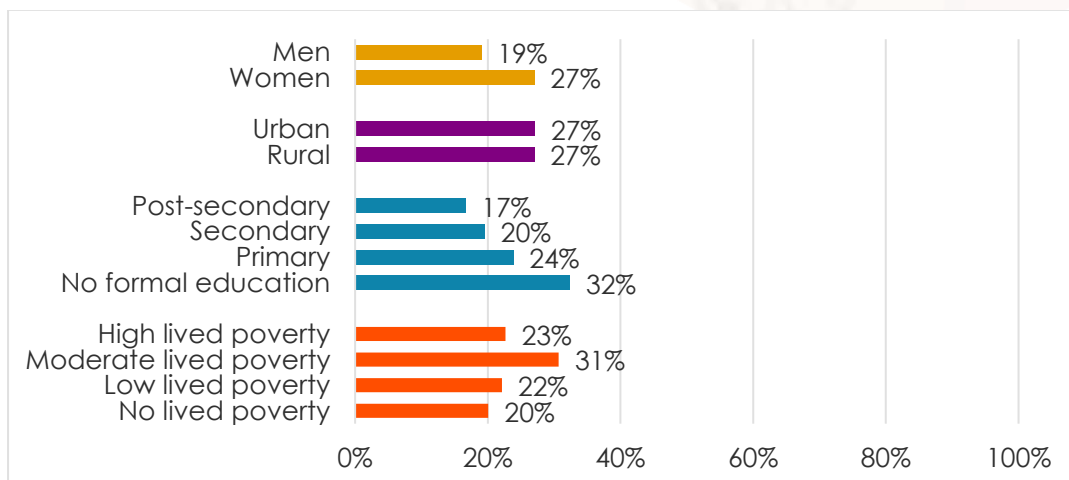


**Respondents were asked:** The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: In a Muslim country, non-Muslims should enjoy less political rights than Muslims? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” that non-Muslims should have fewer rights)

In Tunisia, where 23% of respondents endorse unequal rights, rural residents (27%) are more likely to agree than urbanites (20%), as are women (27%) compared to men (19%) (Figure 5). Less-educated respondents are more likely to agree (32% of those with no formal education vs. 17% of those with post-secondary qualifications).

Respondents with moderate lived poverty (31%) are considerably more supportive of unequal rights than those with higher or lower levels of poverty.

**Figure 5: Non-Muslims should have fewer political rights** | by location, gender, and education | Tunisia | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: In a Muslim country, non-Muslims should enjoy less political rights than Muslims? (% who “agree” or “strongly agree” that non-Muslims should have fewer rights)



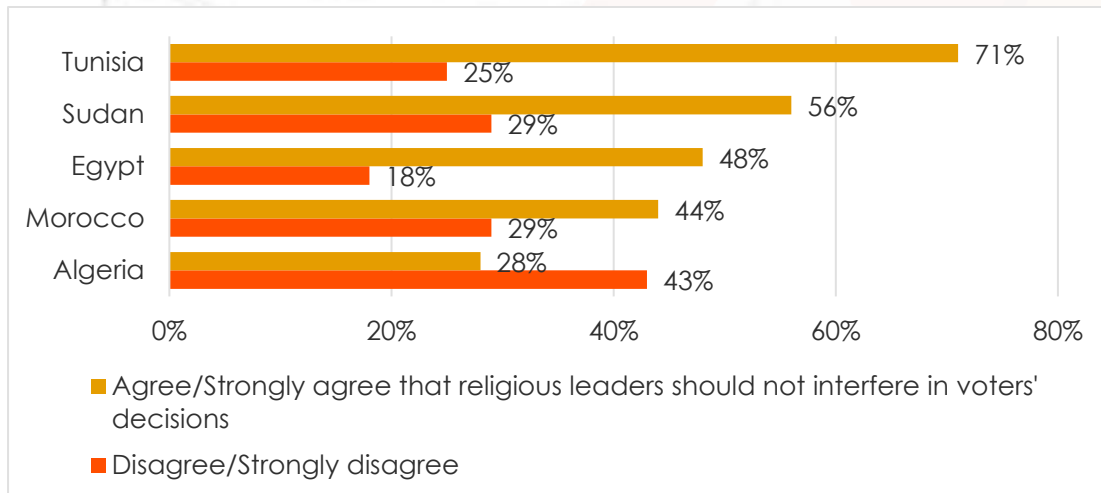
## Role of religion and religious leaders in politics and government

Views vary considerably across the region regarding the role of religion and religious leaders in electoral politics and government, explored in three Round 6 survey questions.

The first asks whether or not religious leaders such as imams, preachers, and priests should involve themselves in voters' electoral choices. Majorities in Tunisia (71%) and Sudan (56%) "agree" or "strongly agree" that religious leaders "should not interfere in voters' decisions" (Figure 6). Almost half of Egyptians (48%) and Moroccans (44%) hold the same view. Algeria is the only one of the five countries where a plurality (43%) disagree, i.e. endorse interference by religious leaders in voters' decisions. Around three in 10 respondents neither agree nor disagree or else say they "don't know" in Egypt (34%), Algeria (29%), and Morocco (27%).

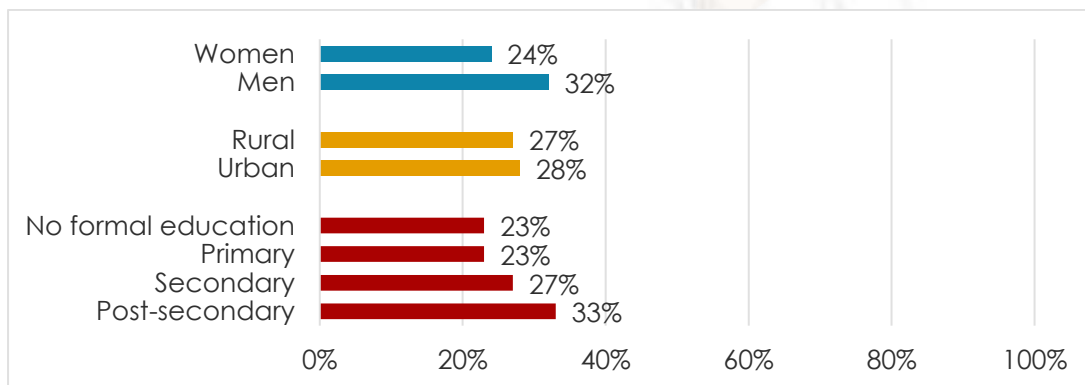
Men are more likely than women to agree that religious leaders should keep out of voters' decisions (32% vs. 24%) (Figure 7). The same goes for citizens with a post-secondary education (33%) compared to their less-educated counterparts (23%-27%).

**Figure 6: Should religious leaders interfere in voters' decisions in elections? | five North African countries | 2015**



**Respondents were asked:** *The opinion of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differs with regard to their interpretation of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: Religious leaders like imams, preachers, and priests should not interfere in voters' decisions in elections?*

**Figure 7: Religious leaders should not interfere in voters' decisions | by socio-demographic group | five North African countries | 2015**

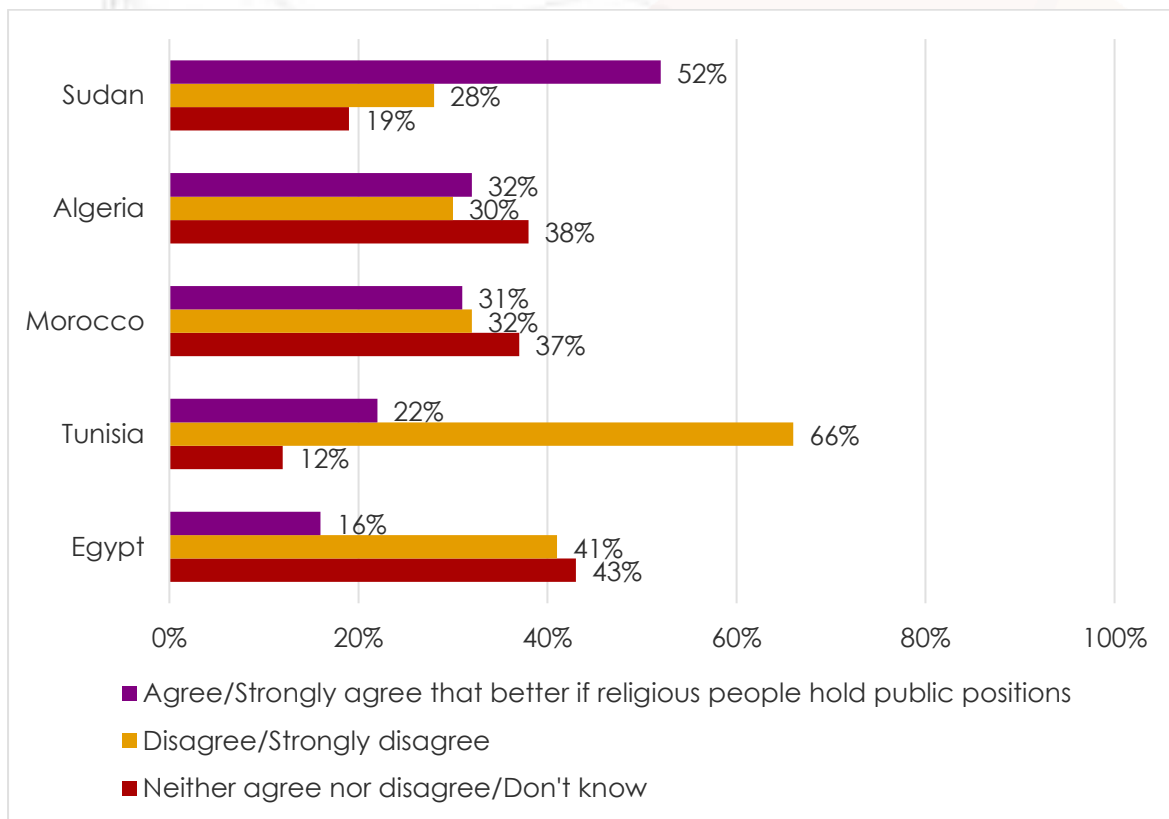


(% who "agree" or "strongly agree" that religious leaders should not interfere in voters' decisions)

A second question explores whether citizens think their country would be better off if “religious people hold public positions in the state.” Only in Sudan do a majority (52%) of respondents “agree” or “strongly agree” that the country would benefit from having religious people in public positions (Figure 8). About three in 10 Algerians (32%) and Moroccans (31%) agree – matching the proportions who disagree. Disagreement with the idea of religious people in public positions is considerably stronger in Tunisia (66% vs. 22% who agree) and Egypt (41% vs. 16%).

Non-committal responses are particularly frequent on this question: About four in 10 Egyptians (43%), Algerians (38%), and Moroccans (37%) say they neither agree nor disagree or else say they “don’t know.” This may reflect uncertainty as to what type of “religious people” might hold office, e.g. devout individuals vs. adherents of less mainstream (and in some cases banned) religious groups.

**Figure 8: Should religious people hold public positions in the state? | five North African countries | 2015**

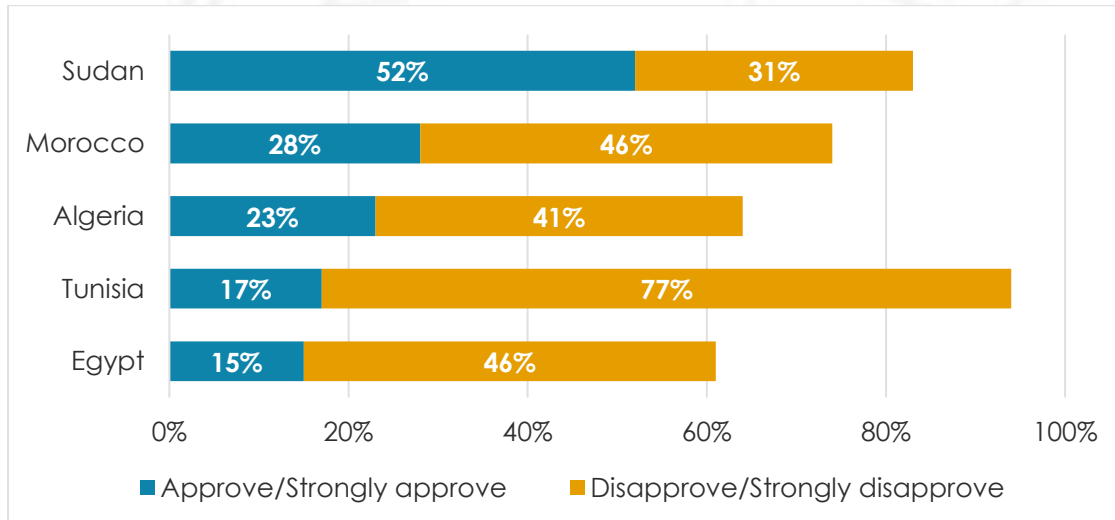


**Respondents were asked:** *The opinions of Islamic jurists and religious scholars differ with regard to their interpretations of certain issues in Islam. I want to ask to what extent you agree or disagree with each of the following statements: The country is better off if religious people hold public positions in the state?*

Finally, respondents were asked whether they would approve or disapprove of the introduction of a system governed by Islamic law without elections and political parties.

Sudan is the only country where a majority (52%) would approve of such a system (Figure 9). About one in four Moroccans (28%) and Algerians (23%) would welcome a government based on Islamic law without elections. By far the strongest opposition to such a system is seen in Tunisia, where 77% would disapprove, including 60% who would “strongly disapprove.”

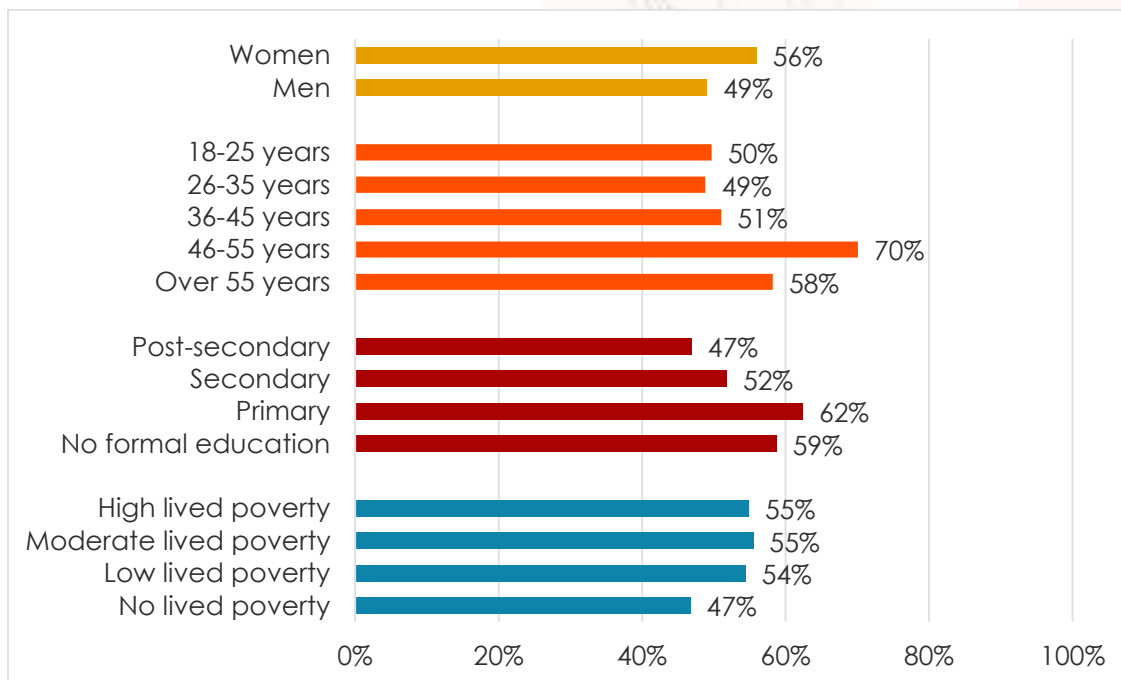
**Figure 9: Govern under Islamic law without elections?** | five North African countries | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative: A system governed by Islamic law without elections or political parties?*

Comparing socio-demographic groups within Sudan (Figure 10), support for being governed under Islamic law and abolishing elections is strongest among women (56%), older respondents (70% of those aged 46-55 and 58% of those over 55), and those with no formal education (59%) or primary education only (62%). Respondents with post-secondary education (47%) and no lived poverty (47%) are least likely to approve of such a system.

**Figure 10: Govern under Islamic law without elections?** | by socio-demographic group | Sudan | 2015



**Respondents were asked:** *There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternative: A system governed by Islamic law without elections or political parties?*



## Conclusion

Across five North African countries, most citizens say that democracy does not contradict the teachings of Islam and that non-Muslims should enjoy the same political rights as Muslims. These attitudes are strongest in Tunisia and weakest in Algeria. Other attitudes toward religion and politics are somewhat more contested, with significant support in Morocco and Algeria – and majority support in Sudan – for religious people to occupy state positions and a political system governed by Islamic law without elections or political parties.

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