Malians split on role of Islam in country, but majority feel politicians use religion to rule

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 211 | Thomas Isbell and Fadimata Haïdara

Summary

Islam's roots in Mali reach back centuries, and at times have nurtured social and political as well as religious hopes. During the colonial period, Islam became an instrument of resistance; the French responded by trying to play a moderate "black Islam" off against a more threatening "Arab Islam." Islam played no major role in post-independence politics, but after democratization in 1991, during a phase of weak state authority, Islam helped fill a void in socioeconomic and political leadership (International Crisis Group, 2017).

In 2012, following a coup ousting President Amadou Toumani Touré and a Tuareg rebellion, various armed groups took control of northern and more recently central Mali. Among other things, these groups call for an Islamic state and the implementation of Sharia law (Laub & Masters, 2015; George, 2012). Recent developments have highlighted a new Islamic dynamic in Malian politics, which is being exploited by political elites as Muslim leaders become valuable political partners, especially during election periods (Haidara, 2015). Despite intense regional and international attention, Mali's internal conflicts remain unresolved, and their long-term outcomes uncertain (BBC, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2017; Lacher, 2013).

How do ordinary Malians view the role of Islam in their country? Data from the latest Afrobarometer survey show sharp divisions. A modest majority of Malians think Islam should be the country's official religion, and almost half support the introduction of Sharia law. At the same time, a majority agree that Islam restricts personal freedom and is being used by politicians.

But Malians soundly reject claims that Islam promotes violence and is incompatible with social and economic progress.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitudes surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues in African countries. Six rounds of surveys were conducted in up to 37 countries between 1999 and 2015, and Round 7 surveys are being conducted in 2016/2018. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

The Afrobarometer team in Mali, led by Groupe de Recherche en Economie Appliquée et Théorique (GREAT), interviewed 1,200 adult Malians in February 2017. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of error of +/-3 at a 95% confidence level.

Reflecting their share of Mali's total population, small sample sizes in sparsely-populated Kidal, Gao, and Tombouctou produce results with very large margins of error. Particularly in Kidal, results should be considered purely suggestive.

Previous surveys were conducted in Mali in 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2012, 2013, and 2014.

Key findings

- A majority (55%) of Malians say Islam should be their country's official religion, and nearly half (46%) think Mali should apply Sharia law. Young and uneducated respondents are more supportive of imposing Sharia law than their older and more educated counterparts.

- More than half (55%) of Malians dispute the idea that recent violence in the North of the country has shown that Islam can lead to excesses, and only 24% think that Islam preaches violence against non-Muslims.

- Almost three-fourths (72%) of Malians assert that politicians use Islam to rule.

- A majority of Malians believe that Islam restricts personal freedom (60%) and is incompatible with freedom of speech (55%). But only three in 10 (29%) think Islam is incompatible with economic and social progress.

Role and impact of Islam in Malian society

As shown in Figure 1, Mali encompasses a rich mix of views on the impact and appropriate role of Islam in society. More than half (55%) of respondents would like to see Islam become the country's official religion, including 33% who "strongly" support such a change. But a solid 43% are opposed to the idea. And the many Malians who would like the country to institute Sharia law (46%) are outnumbered by their compatriots who oppose such a proposal (50%).

Figure 1: Views on role and impact of Islam | Mali | 2017
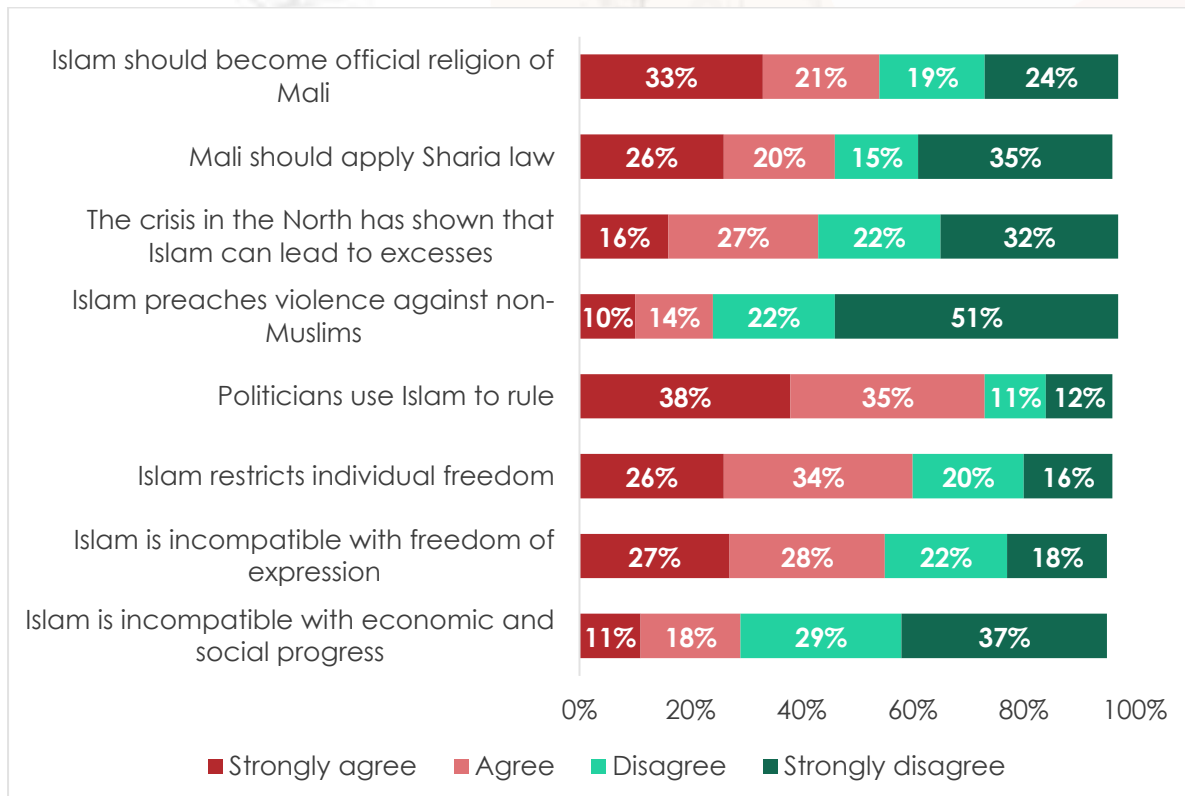
Respondents were asked: For each of the following statements, please tell me whether you agree or disagree. (Note: Due to rounding, the percentage reported for combined categories, such as "agree/strongly agree," may differ by 1 percentage point from the sum of the subcategories.)

A majority (55%) do not see the crisis in the North as evidence that Islam can lead to excesses, and almost three-fourths (73%) reject the idea that Islam preaches violence against non-Muslims, including fully 51% who "strongly disagree."

On the other hand, a similarly strong majority (72%) believe that politicians use Islam to rule, and smaller majorities agree that Islam restricts individual freedom (60%) and is incompatible with freedom of expression (55%). Fewer than one in three (29%), however, see Islam as incompatible with economic and social progress.

Views on Islam as official religion

A number of factors may contribute to the majority preference for making Islam Mali's official religion, including the fact that the country is 94% Muslim and that citizens express greater trust in Islamic leaders (79% say they trust them "somewhat" or "a lot") than in the president (56%), the National Assembly (49%), or other formal institutions. Moreover, 63% of Malians describe their living conditions as "fairly bad" or "very bad," and 75% say the current government is performing "fairly badly" or "very badly" in improving the living conditions of the poor (GREAT, 2017).

Looking at support for an official religion among key socio-demographic groups (Figure 2), we see that rural respondents (57%) and women (59%) are more likely to endorse the idea than urbanites (47%) and men (50%). But the clearest differences are by respondents' educational attainment: Those with post-secondary qualifications (27%) are far less likely to favour an official religion than their counterparts with secondary (43%), primary (54%), or no formal education (59%). Respondents with full-time jobs (38%) are considerably less likely to want an official religion than those who are working part-time or unemployed.

Figure 2: Support for making Islam the official religion of Mali
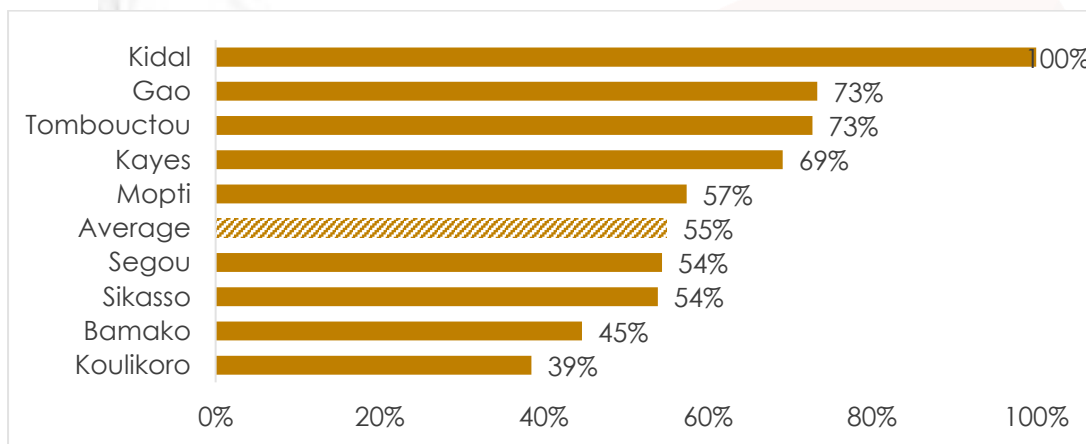| by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017
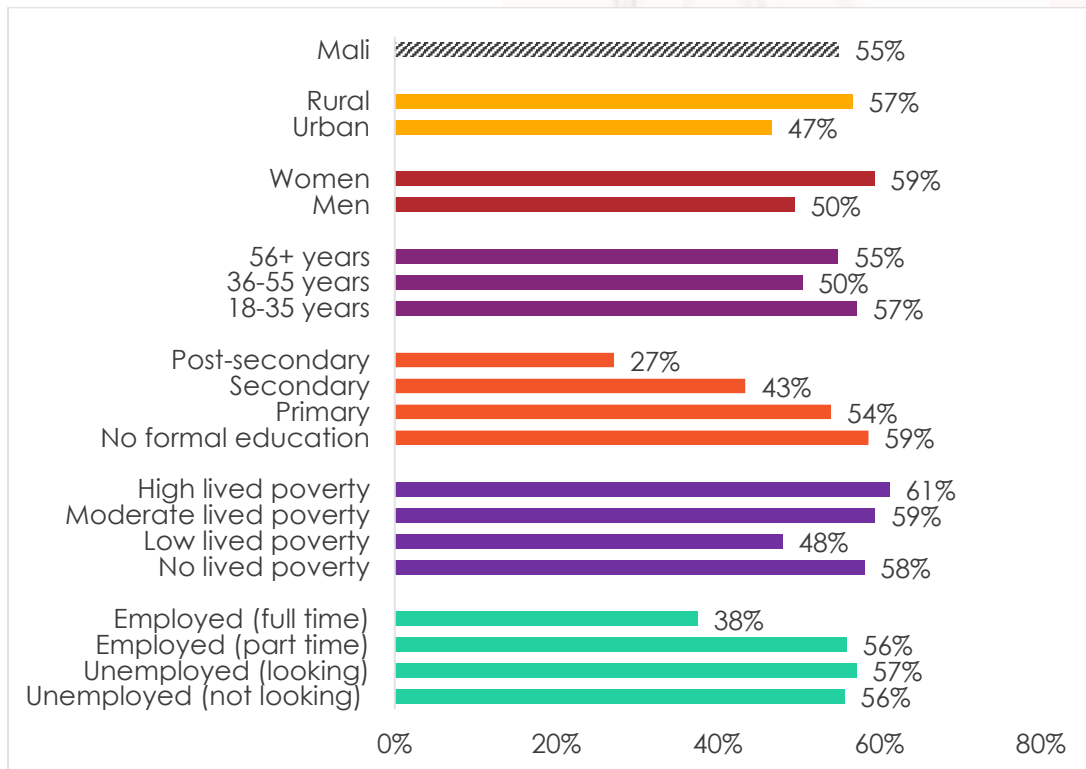
Respondents were asked: *Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Because Islam is the dominant religion, it should be established as the state religion? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")*

Support for making Islam the official religion is weaker among middle-aged respondents (50%) and those with low lived poverty[1] (48%), but the patterns are less clear.

Support for Islam as the official religion is overwhelming in the northern regions of Kidal (100%), Gao (73%), and Tombouctou (73%) (Figure 3), perhaps because these regions have centuries-long traditions of Islam and because the recent crisis highlighted a desire to preserve a moderate version of Islam, as well as the need for a competent state that takes care of the population.

By contrast, only minorities in Bamako (45%) and Koulikoro (39%) regions support the institution of an official religion.

Figure 3: Support for making Islam the official religion of Mali | by region | Mali | 2017

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Because Islam is the dominant religion, it should be established as the state religion? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

## Attitudes toward applying Sharia law in Mali

As shown above (Figure 1), Malians are almost evenly divided on the question of whether the country should apply Sharia law, 46% for vs. 50% against. Patterns of support for Sharia law are almost identical to those of support for making Islam the country's official religion, though at a somewhat lower (less-than-majority) level (Figure 4). Again rural residents (48%), women (52%), and less-educated respondents are most likely to favour the idea. Curiously, the wealthiest respondents (i.e. those with "no lived poverty") are more likely to endorse Sharia law (55%) than their poorer counterparts, even though support for the idea is exceptionally weak among the best-educated and fully employed respondents. This paradox may reflect the fact that the wealthiest class includes many traders who received Koranic instruction in Arabic or Franco-Arabic schools and are thus familiar with, and perhaps inclined to support, Sharia law.

Almost two-thirds of respondents in Kayes (64%) and Tombouctou (63%) provinces support applying Sharia law, while only about one-third in Segou (35%) and Kidal (33%) agree (Figure 5). Perceptions of Sharia law differ across regions for many potential reasons. Note that Kidal, which is most supportive of Islam as an official religion, is least supportive of Sharia law. This

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[1] Afrobarometer assesses lived poverty based on responses to the following 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?*

apparent paradox may reflect Kidal's traumatic experience during the crisis, when some armed groups set up Islamic courts managed by improvised judges who arbitrarily applied Sharia law (International Crisis Group, 2017). The region of Segou, where only 35% favour applying Sharia law, also experienced attacks and received many displaced people from the conflict zones; in addition, many Segou residents may see Sharia as an encroachment on its proud culture and traditions.

Figure 4: Support for applying Sharia law | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017
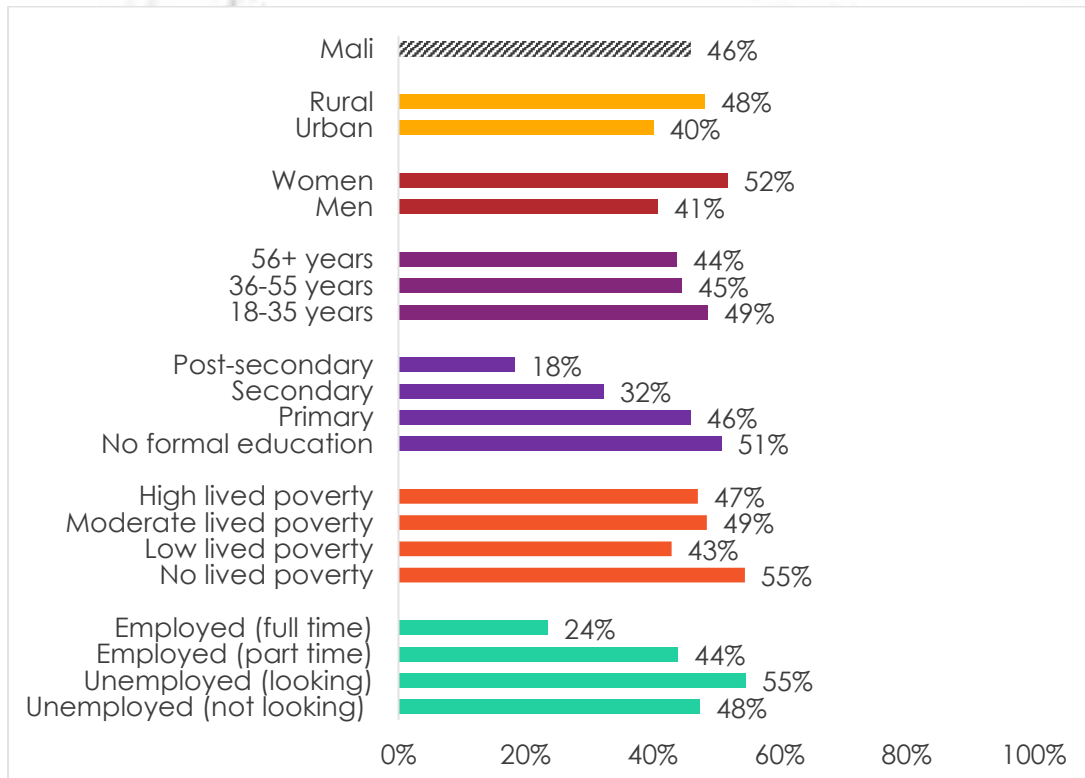
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Mali should apply Sharia law? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 5: Support for applying Sharia law | by region | Mali | 2017
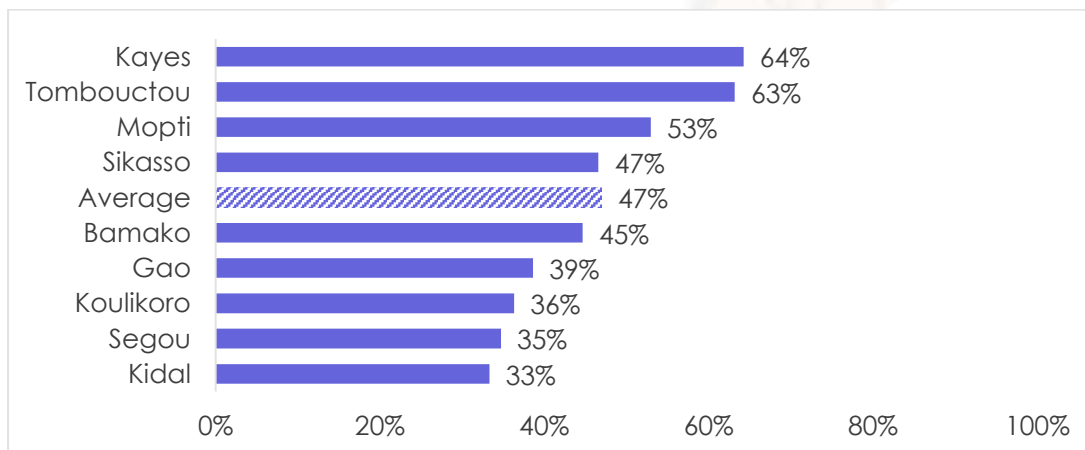
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Mali should apply Sharia law? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")
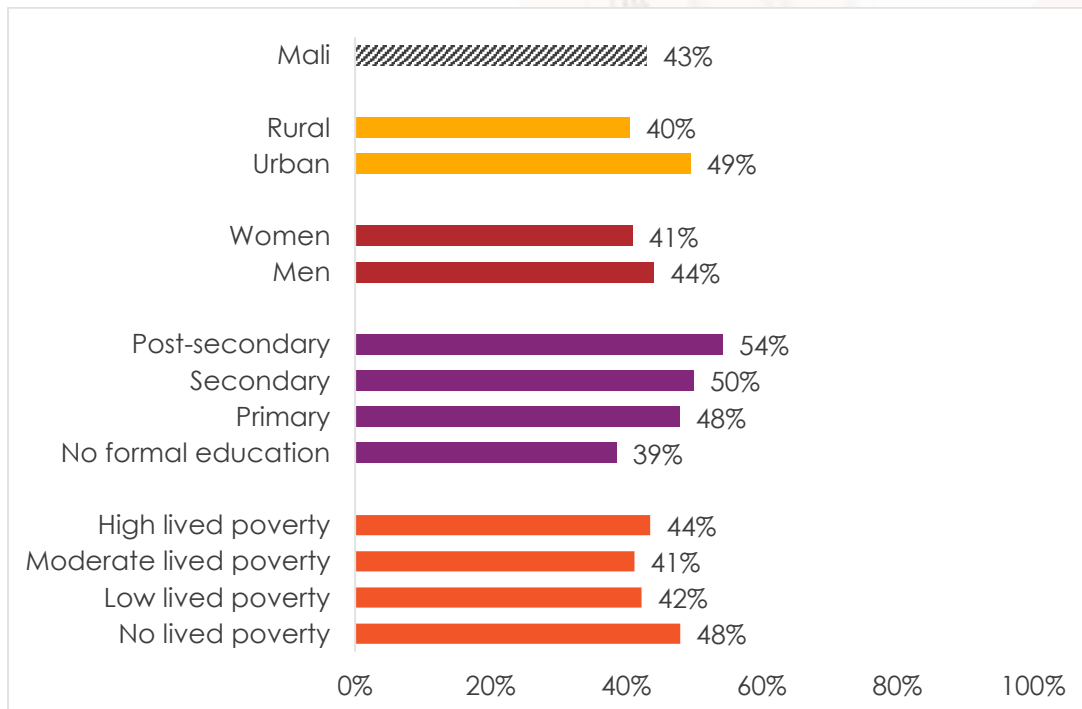
Can Islam lead to excesses?

Despite their shattering experiences during the crisis in the North (Coulibaly & Coulibaly, 2018), a majority (55%) of Malians reject the idea that the crisis has demonstrated that "Islam can lead to excesses." Among the 43% who assert that the crisis has indeed shown that Islam can lead to excesses, urban residents (49%), respondents with post-secondary education (54%), and wealthy respondents (48%) are represented with above-average frequency (Figure 6).

Respondents in Kidal (67%) and Gao (61%) – two regions heavily affected by the violence of armed groups – most frequently see excesses of Islam in the crisis in the North (Figure 7). Conversely, far fewer respondents in Tombouctou (30%) and Mopti (17%) express this perception. Although these regions also suffered extensive trauma during the crisis, Tombouctou and Mopti are regions where the Koran has been taught for centuries in universities and "*grandes écoles*," in a culture of moderate Islam where people may be less likely to blame the religion as the source of the excesses of armed extremist groups.

The idea that Islam preaches violence against non-Muslims has even fewer proponents in Mali: Only one in four (24%) agree, while about three-fourths (73%) disagree, including a majority (51%) who "strongly disagree."

These views are consistent across key socio-demographic groups but vary considerably by region (Figure 8). Most likely to agree/strongly agree with this view of Islam as promoting violence are residents of Kidal (50%) and Segou (37%), where armed groups promoting jihad have been particularly strong and preaching in support of political and religious ambitions has increased since the beginning of the 2012 crisis. At the other extreme, this view is shared by very few residents of Tombouctou (2%) and Mopti (18%), regions with a long history of moderate Islam.
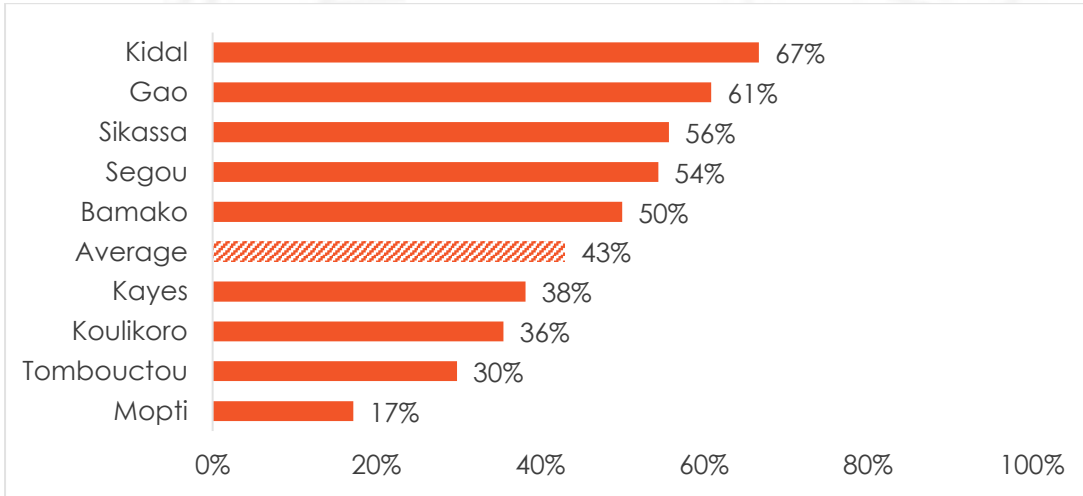
Figure 6: 'The crisis in the North has shown that Islam can lead to excesses'
| by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The crisis in the North has shown that Islam can lead to excesses? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")
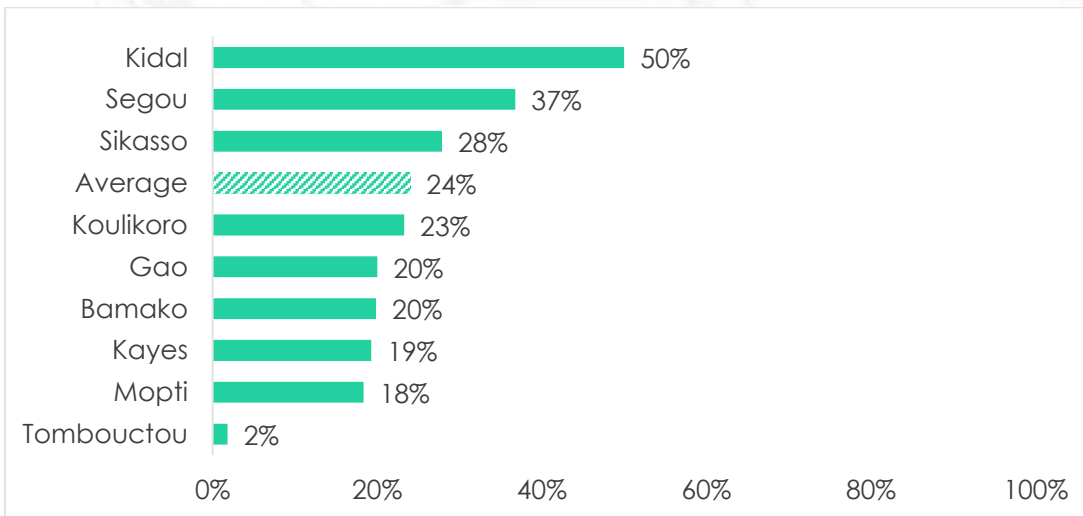

Figure 7: 'The crisis in the North has shown that Islam can lead to excesses'
| by region | Mali | 2017

Region	Value
Kidal	67%
Gao	61%
Sikassa	56%
Segou	54%
Bamako	50%
Average	43%
Kayes	38%
Koulikoro	36%
Tombouctou	30%
Mopti	17%

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: The crisis in the North has shown that Islam can lead to excesses? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Figure 8: 'Islam preaches violence against non-Muslims' | by region | Mali | 2017

Region	Value
Kidal	50%
Segou	37%
Sikasso	28%
Average	24%
Koulikoro	23%
Gao	20%
Bamako	20%
Kayes	19%
Mopti	18%
Tombouctou	2%

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Islam preaches violence against non-Muslims? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

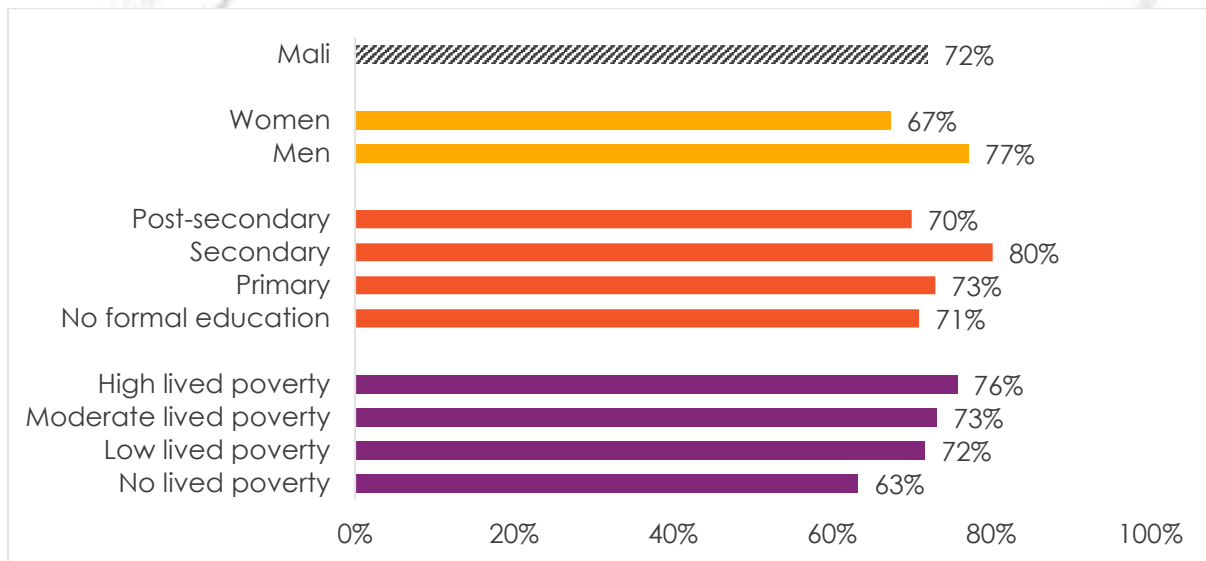## Politicians use Islam to rule

While most Malians reject the idea that Islam promotes violence, more than seven in 10 (72%) agree that politicians use Islam to serve their political objectives, including 38% who "strongly agree" with this assertion.

One way in which politicians may be perceived as using Islam to rule is by seeking support from Islamic leaders, who see themselves as guarantors of Malian values and may influence voters during elections. This appears especially in the southern part of the country, where Islamic leaders are gaining in importance in the public sphere. In central and northern Mali, some local political leaders have also been wooing Muslim supporters by talking about Islamist goals such as creating an Islamic state and applying Sharia law in Mali.

Some observers have warned that the temptation to politicize Islam could strengthen in the future, especially if current elites continue to demonstrate their inability to get Mali out of the crisis (International Crisis Group, 2017; Haidara, 2015), potentially facilitating links between armed groups claiming an Islamic state in northern Mali and a growing influence of Islam in the national political sphere.

The perception that politicians use Islam to rule is especially common among men (77%) and among the poorest respondents (76%) (Figure 9).
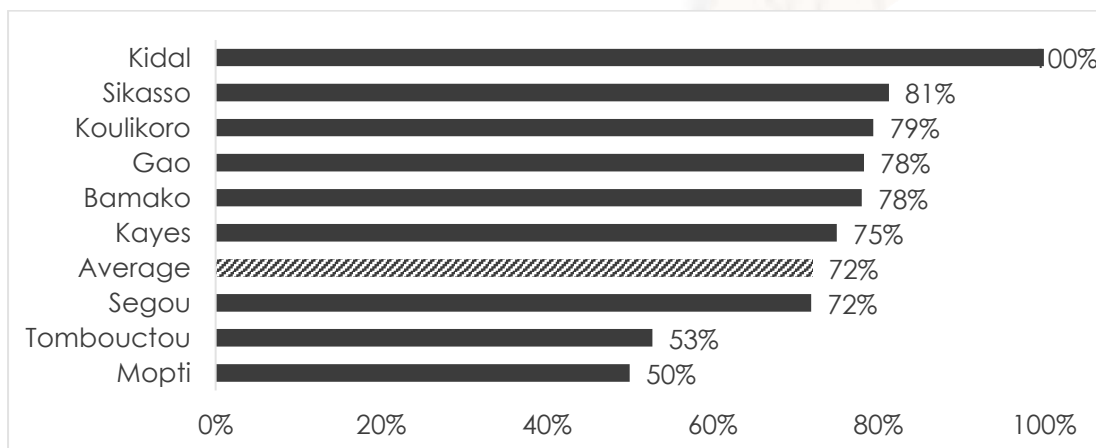
Figure 9: 'Politicians use Islam to rule' | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Politicians use Islam to rule? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

The view that politicians use Islam is widely shared across most regions (Figure 10), reflecting the increasing influence of Islam in the political sphere. The exceptions are the regions of Tombouctou (53%) and Mopti (50%), where a great culture of Islamic teaching – long a center of learning for students from throughout Mali and abroad – remains largely separate from politics.

**Figure 10: 'Politicians use Islam to rule'** | by region | Mali | 2017

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Politicians use Islam to rule? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Impact of Islam on rights and progress

While a majority of Malians endorse making Islam their official religion, at least some of these same respondents also say that Islam restricts individual freedom. But they do not see Islam as incompatible with social and economic development.

Six in 10 Malians (60%) assert that "Islam restricts individual freedom," and a slightly smaller majority (55%) agree that "Islam is incompatible with freedom of expression." These ideas find the least support among respondents who have a post-secondary education, those holding full-time jobs, and the poorest respondents (Figure 11 and Figure 12) – paradoxical results that may require deeper analysis to untangle what these statements mean to various groups.

Figure 11: 'Islam restricts individual freedom' | by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017
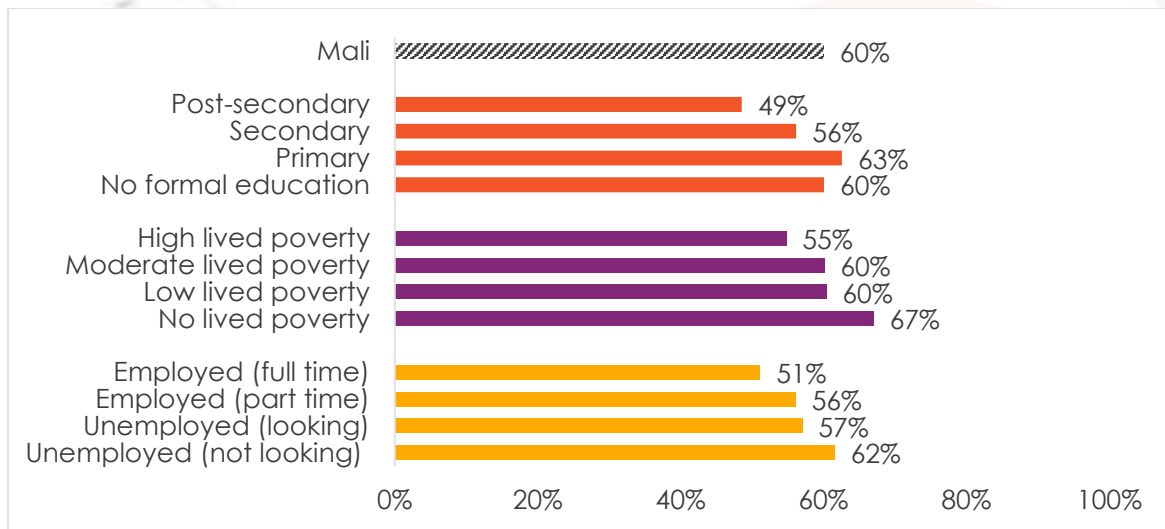
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Islam restricts individual freedom? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")
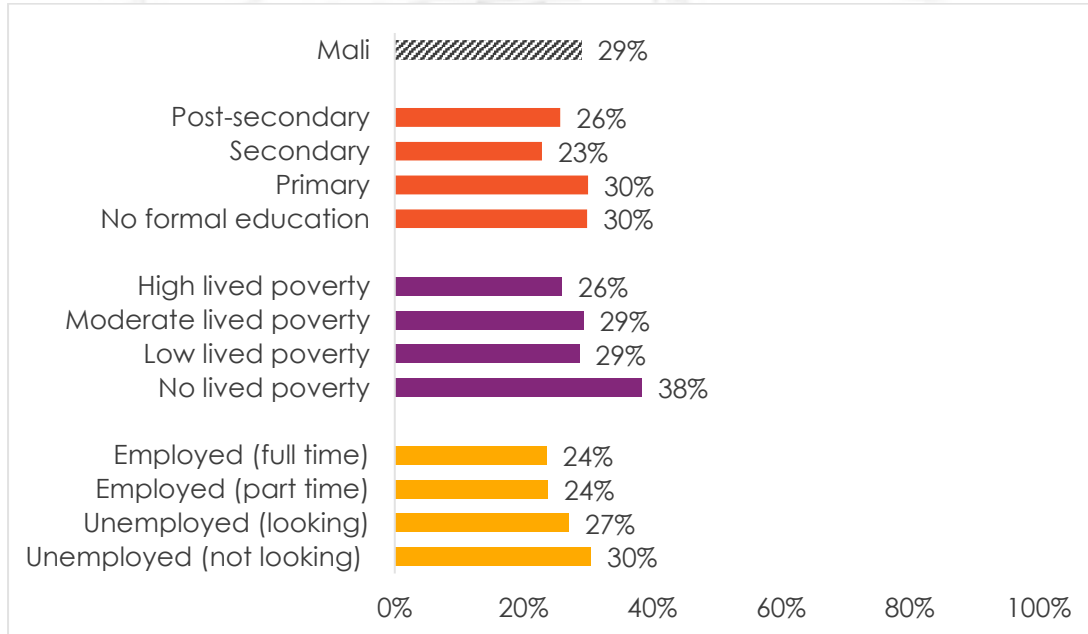
Figure 12: 'Islam is incompatible with freedom of expression'
| by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017
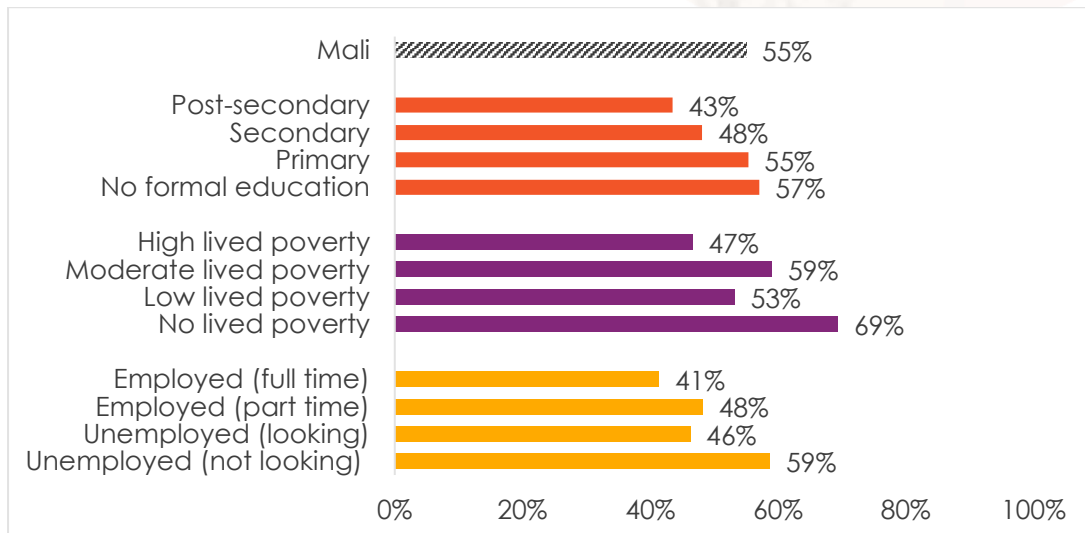
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Islam is incompatible with freedom of expression? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

But only three in 10 (29%) agree that "Islam is incompatible with economic and social progress." The wealthiest respondents (38%) are most likely to hold this view (Figure 13).

Figure 13: 'Islam is incompatible with economic and social progress'
| by socio-demographic group | Mali | 2017

Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you disagree or agree: Islam is incompatible with economic and social progress? (% who "agree" or "strongly agree")

Conclusion

The recent conflict in northern and central Mali and the growing importance of Islam in Malian politics have ignited public debate about the place of Islam in society and political life. Survey data show strongly held positions on both sides of many issues. Even on the proposal to make Islam the official religion of Mali, which draws majority support, more than four in 10 citizens are opposed. Views are closest to consensus on rejection of the idea that Islam preaches violence and agreement that politicians are using Islam for their own ends. Creating a dedicated think tank may be one way to support the government, civil society, and religious leaders facing the challenge of guiding this debate toward a unifying accommodation of Islam and democracy.

Do your own analysis of Afrobarometer data – on any question, for any country and survey round. It's easy and free at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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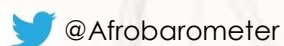
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