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Negotiating Political Order: Religious Authority and Political Crises in Senegal

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Abstract

Religious authorities have long played an important role in shaping relations between political institutions and society in Senegal. Yet, their involvement in negotiating the norms governing political conduct during periods of crisis remains understudied. This article examines how Muslim and Christian religious authorities engage in political crises and negotiate expectations concerning social order, public responsibility, and political legitimacy. Drawing on Jean-Daniel Reynaud's theory of social regulation, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on 42 open-ended interviews and 22 religious documents collected across eight research sites in Senegal. The findings identify three interrelated forms of religious intervention: moral appeals for peace and social cohesion, initiatives promoting dialogue and political compromise, and demands for justice and government accountability. They also reveal how religious representatives negotiate the boundaries of secularism, interreligious cooperation, and participation in public affairs. These interventions exhibit a fundamental ambivalence: appeals for stability coexist with demands for political reform, while religious authorities neither consistently support state power nor invariably align with political opposition. Therefore, this article argues that religious interventions constitute attempts at negotiated social regulation, through which religious moral legitimacy interacts with formal political authority and competing political demands. By examining the normative content of these interventions, this article contributes to scholarship on religion–state relations and political contestation in Senegal, while acknowledging that the available evidence does not establish their causal effects on political outcomes.

Keywords: Religious Authority; Social Regulation; Political Order; Political Crises; Religion–State Relations; Senegal.

Introduction

The relationship between religious authority and political power remains central to debates on democratization, state legitimacy, and political conflict across Muslim-majority societies (Fazlhashemi, 2016; Feener, 2014; Schneier, 2016). Religious institutions may reinforce established political arrangements, mediate disputes between governments and politically mobilized citizens, or articulate moral claims that challenge the conduct of political authorities (Fox, 2016; Omelicheva & Ahmed, 2018). These roles are neither mutually exclusive nor politically uniform, particularly where religious leaders wield substantial social influence without holding formal political office. Political crises, therefore, involve more than disagreements over constitutional procedures or government

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decisions. They also bring divergent understandings of legitimate authority, collective responsibility, and acceptable political conduct into sharper focus. Scholarship on religion and politics in Muslim-majority societies increasingly emphasizes how religious institutions respond to changing political and institutional conditions rather than treating them as inherently stabilizing or oppositional forces (Diallo & Kelly, 2016; C. S. Lim, 2020). Yet, religious intervention cannot be understood solely through religious leaders' relationships with political elites or their perceived contributions to stability. Understanding these interventions also requires examining how religious authorities seek to shape expectations of political conduct, define the boundaries of legitimate contestation, and encourage negotiation among actors pursuing different political objectives.

Senegal provides a particularly relevant context for examining these dynamics. Despite its reputation for relative political stability and sustained electoral competition (Brossier, 2021, 2025), the country has experienced recurrent episodes of political confrontation, popular mobilization, and disputes over governmental authority. The protests of 1968, the controversy surrounding constitutional reform in 2011 (Bianchini, 2019, 2021), and the political unrest of 2021 illustrate enduring tensions between institutional continuity and demands for political change (Ngom & Ricart-Huguet, 2025). Religious authorities have participated in public debates surrounding these crises, particularly those concerning peace, political responsibility, and national cohesion. This involvement is evident in interventions associated with prominent Muslim religious centers—notably Touba, Tivaouane, Porokhane, and Ndiassane—as well as in statements and mediation initiatives involving Catholic representatives. These interventions range from appeals for restraint and dialogue to criticism of government decisions perceived as unjust (INF-16, Interview Notes, 2021). The varied moral and political expectations expressed by religious leaders complicate portrayals of religious authority as either an unconditional supporter of the state or an inherently oppositional force. Senegal thus offers a valuable context for examining how religious moral authority influences negotiations over political order during periods of heightened contestation.

Scholarship on religion and politics in Senegal has developed along four interrelated lines of inquiry. The first examines religion–state relations and political patronage, focusing on the historical integration of Sufi orders into political networks and the state's ongoing role in regulating religious activities (Gifford, 2016; Jourde et al., 2021). The second addresses religion and democratization, showing how religious actors adapt to electoral competition and institutional change while maintaining complex, often ambivalent relationships with democratic norms and political elites (Diallo & Kelly, 2016; Villalón, 2015). The third explores secularism and negotiated authority, challenging models based on a strict separation between religion and the state and documenting

practical accommodations among religious, governmental, and intermediary institutions (S. Lim, 2023; Mbengue, 2025). Bouland's (2022) ethnographic study of family disputes in Tivaouane is particularly relevant: it demonstrates how actors drawing on different sources of authority negotiate their respective roles through what she terms pragmatic pluralism. A fourth body of research situates Senegal's political development within histories of protest, opposition mobilization, contested political succession, and democratic resilience (Bianchini, 2019, 2021; Brossier, 2024; Ngom & Ricart-Huguet, 2025). Together, these studies show that religious authority in Senegal is historically embedded, responsive to political change, and situated within evolving institutional and social relationships. They also establish that negotiations between religious and state authorities, as well as the political ambivalence of religious actors, are well-recognized features of Senegalese political life.

Although this scholarship has examined religion–state relations, political clientelism, democratization, and the negotiated coexistence of religious and governmental authorities, the processes through which religious representatives articulate expectations of restraint, dialogue, and government accountability during political confrontations warrant further investigation. This article addresses that gap by specifically exploring how religious interventions during political crises seek to regulate political conduct. Bouland's (2022) analysis of negotiated authority in family disputes provides an important point of comparison but concerns a different arena of regulation. Similarly, Villalón's (2015) account of the ambivalent role of religious actors in democratization invites a closer examination of how competing normative expectations are expressed during political crises. Jean-Daniel Reynaud's (1988, 1997) theory of social regulation offers a useful framework for examining these processes in Senegal. For Reynaud, social regulation involves the formation, maintenance, and contestation of rules through interactions among actors with different interests and sources of authority. The distinction between control regulation and autonomous regulation, together with the possibility of joint regulation, helps explain how political institutions, religious authorities, and mobilized social actors advance different understandings of legitimate conduct. This perspective directs attention to religious interventions as attempts to influence the norms governing political confrontation and negotiation, without assuming that such efforts invariably secure compliance, produce consensus, or resolve conflict.

This article examines how religious authorities participate in regulating political crises and negotiating social order in Senegal, as well as the tensions that arise between appeals for stability and demands for accountability and political change. Drawing on fieldwork conducted at eight sites in Senegal, the study addresses three interconnected dimensions: religious intervention during political crises, the negotiation of religion–state relations, and the ambivalence of religious social control. Empirically, it explores how religious representatives

articulate expectations of restraint, dialogue, and government responsibility in contexts of political contestation. Theoretically, it employs Reynaud's framework to analyze interactions among religious moral legitimacy, formal political authority, and competing demands for institutional change. The article argues that religious authorities in Senegal engage in negotiated social regulation through moral appeals and mediation-oriented interventions aimed at shaping legitimate political conduct. However, these interventions remain politically ambivalent because efforts to preserve stability may coexist with demands for justice, representation, and institutional change without necessarily resolving the tensions among them. Rather than viewing religious institutions solely as guarantors of political stability or obstacles to democratic change, the study examines their involvement as part of an ongoing contest over the norms and conditions governing political order.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine how religious authorities participate in regulating political crises and negotiating social order in Senegal. Fieldwork was conducted over 22 months, from February 2020 to November 2021, at eight sites: Porokhane, Ndiassane, Tivaouane, Touba, Dakar, Cambérène, Medina Baye, and Léona Niassène. These locations were identified

Figure 1. Map of Research Sites in Senegal



Source: Compiled by the author using Google Maps (2023).

as significant religious centers where consultations and mediation initiatives occurred during periods of sociopolitical tension. The fieldwork also included visits to political party headquarters and engagement with political movements

and activists, enabling an examination of religious interventions from diverse institutional and social perspectives. Rather than assuming that religious mediation is inherently effective or politically neutral, the study investigates how religious representatives, state actors, and participants in political mobilization articulate differing expectations concerning peace, political responsibility, and legitimate public conduct. Reynaud's (1988, 1997) theory of social regulation provides the conceptual framework, particularly emphasizing how actors with varying interests and sources of authority establish and negotiate rules. This framework offers a basis for distinguishing formal political authority from religiously grounded moral expectations without presuming that either necessarily determines the outcome of political crises.

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Informants

Participant Category	Institutional Affiliation	Date Interview	Informant Code	Number of Informants
Muslim religious authorities	Religious institutions and communities in Porokhane, Ndiassane, Tivaouane, Touba, Medina Baye, Léona Niassène, and Cambérène	February 2020-November 2021	INF-01 to INF-12	12
Christian religious authorities	Catholic Archdiocese of Dakar and Senegalese Episcopal Conference representatives	March-October 2021	INF-13 to INF-18	6
Traditional religious authorities	Traditional Saltigué leadership, Lebou Chieftaincy, and local customary councils	June-December 2020	INF-19 to INF-22	4
Civil society organizations	Forum Civil, Forum des Justiciables, RADDHO, and CONGAD	January-May 2021	INF-23 to INF-29	7
Political actors	Ministry of the Interior, ruling coalition (BBY) representatives, and opposition party leaders	February-September 2021	INF-30 to INF-36	7
Political and social activists	Y'en a Marre, Frapp-France Dégage, and local youth/citizen movements	March-November 2021	INF-37 to INF-42	6
Total	Eight research sites	February 2020-November 2021	INF-01 to INF-42	42

Source: Author's elaboration, 2026.

The empirical material consists of 42 open-ended interviews and 22 documents collected during fieldwork. Interview participants included Muslim, Christian, and traditional religious authorities; representatives of civil society organizations, such as the Civil Forum and the Forum of Litigants; political figures affiliated with both government and opposition groups; and activists who had experienced or participated in sociopolitical crises (see Table 1). Their accounts offer diverse perspectives on religious intervention, political confrontation, and the responsibilities of religious and governmental authorities. The documents analyzed include speeches, communiqués, and public statements

issued by religious leaders and their representatives concerning peace, stability, social cohesion, and responses to political unrest. Examining these two sources of evidence together allows the study to identify points of convergence and divergence between participants' accounts and the normative expectations expressed in religious statements. However, accounts of past events are not treated as independent verification of those events. Similarly, public appeals for restraint or mediation are not considered evidence that political conflicts were successfully resolved.

The empirical material was analyzed through a qualitative interpretation of recurring issues in interview accounts and religious statements. The analysis focused on how religious authorities frame political crises, address governmental and nongovernmental actors, and articulate expectations concerning restraint, dialogue, justice, and accountability. The findings are organized around three interconnected dimensions: religious intervention in political crises, the negotiation of religion–state relations, and the ambivalence of religious social control. Reynaud's (1988, 1997) distinction between control regulation and autonomous regulation, together with the possibility of joint regulation, is used to interpret interactions among formal political institutions, religious representatives, and actors advancing competing political demands. These concepts serve as analytical distinctions rather than predetermined categories for classifying particular actors or interventions. The analysis also distinguishes attempts to influence political conduct from evidence of compliance, negotiated agreements, or demonstrable changes in political outcomes. Accordingly, the study seeks to explain the normative significance and political tensions of religious intervention rather than establish the causal effectiveness of religious mediation. Its conclusions are limited to patterns and interpretations supported by the available interview and documentary evidence.

Results

Religious Authority and the Regulation of Political Crises

The findings identify three interrelated forms of religious engagement during political crises in Senegal: moral appeals for peace and social cohesion, mediation initiatives promoting dialogue and consultation, and demands for justice and political accountability (see Table 2). Across the religious settings examined, Muslim and Christian representatives addressed political leaders, protesters, and the wider public, drawing on their religious standing to articulate expectations of political conduct. These forms of engagement are evident in the fieldwork findings and religious statements associated with Porokhane, Ndiassane, Tivaouane, Touba, and the Catholic Church in Dakar. Although these interventions shared a concern for political stability, they differed in emphasis. Some religious representatives framed national unity as a moral obligation, others encouraged dialogue between opposing political actors, and still others

combined appeals for restraint with criticism of government actions. Religious authorities thus did not constitute a politically uniform group; rather, their interventions reflected distinct, though sometimes overlapping, concerns.

Table 2. Forms of Religious Intervention

Form of Intervention	Description	Interpretation
Moral appeals for peace and social cohesion	Appeals for calm and restraint, stronger national solidarity, and the protection of a shared religious and historical heritage	Religious representatives frame peaceful coexistence as a collective moral obligation that transcends partisan interests
Mediation-oriented appeals for dialogue and consultation	Calls for dialogue and mutual concessions, together with expressions of willingness to facilitate political consultations	Religious leaders present dialogue and compromise as legitimate means of addressing political disputes
Appeals for justice and political accountability	Criticism of injustice, appeals for restraint, calls for the release of political prisoners, and demands for presidential accountability	Religious interventions extend beyond efforts to contain unrest to include criticism of political conduct and demands for corrective action

Source: Author's elaboration, 2026.

The first form of religious engagement during political crises in Senegal involves appeals grounded in religious and moral principles that frame national peace as a collective responsibility transcending political affiliations. The spokesperson for the Caliph of Porokhane described Senegal as a shared inheritance shaped by the sacrifices of earlier religious, political, and traditional leaders. Emphasizing the obligation to preserve this inheritance for future generations, the spokesperson stated that "*this country belongs to all of us; no one has the right to destroy it*" (INF-01, Interview Notes, 2020). A similar position emerged in a statement by the spokesperson for the Kounta family in Ndiassane, who called for "calm and restraint" and warned against allowing political confrontation to result in damage to public facilities or private property (INF-02, Interview Notes, 2020). Both representatives invoked religious values to establish expectations of political conduct while presenting the nation as a shared inheritance over which no political group could claim exclusive ownership. Their appeals therefore sought not only to prevent immediate violence but also to protect the social relationships and public resources considered essential to collective life. These statements illustrate how religious representatives articulate moral limits on political confrontation, although the available evidence does not establish whether members of the public or political organizations subsequently acted in accordance with their appeals.

Religious engagement also took the form of initiatives encouraging political actors to resolve disputes through dialogue, consultation, and mutual concessions. An account provided by the spokesperson for the Caliph of Tivaouane describes the involvement of religious representatives during the student and labor crisis of 1968, when they reportedly encouraged student

movements and President Léopold Sédar Senghor to moderate their respective positions (INF-03, Interview Notes, 2020). A similar orientation was evident in the Catholic Church's responses to electoral tensions. In 2008, INF-13 was asked to lead a group of religious figures tasked with facilitating dialogue between the government and the opposition. During the tensions preceding the February 2012 elections, INF-13 reaffirmed the Church's willingness to contribute to peace, stating that it was "fully prepared to provide all the services requested of it" within the scope of its responsibilities (INF-13, Interview Notes, 2021). INF-15 subsequently invoked Senegal's inherited "culture of encounter and dialogue," encouraging political actors to reconsider positions that intensified confrontation and to seek agreement in the national interest (INF-15, Interview Notes, 2021). Taken together, these accounts identify dialogue and compromise as recurring concerns in religious responses to political conflict.

A third form of religious engagement during political crises in Senegal involves interventions that combine appeals for political restraint with demands for greater justice and government accountability. The Secretary-General of the Senegalese Episcopate linked religious faith to civic responsibility, arguing that Christians have an obligation to denounce social, political, and economic injustice because peaceful coexistence depends on respect for justice (INF-18, Interview Notes, 2021). Similar concerns emerged in a different religious setting through an intervention by the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Touba. Referring to political violence that, according to his statement, had resulted in eleven deaths, the imam urged the public to avoid further confrontation while also addressing the President of Senegal directly. He called for the release of political prisoners and reminded the president that political leadership requires a willingness to forgive and accept criticism (INF-04, Interview Notes, 2021). These interventions linked political stability to obligations extending beyond the public's responsibility to refrain from violence. Government authorities were also called upon to address public grievances, exercise restraint, and uphold justice. Such statements therefore complicate interpretations that regard religious intervention solely as a conservative defense of the existing political order.

Religious engagement during political crises in Senegal thus illustrates how religious authorities participate in public responses to political conflict through moral appeals, calls for dialogue, and demands for political accountability. Representatives associated with Porokhane and Ndiassane emphasized national cohesion and collective responsibility; interventions linked to Tivaouane and the Catholic Church prioritized consultation and compromise; and statements by representatives of the Senegalese Episcopate and the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Touba connected peace with the responsibilities of political leadership. These patterns suggest that religious engagement cannot be reduced to unconditional support for the state. Historical scholarship has documented the influential position of religious institutions in Senegalese state–society relations and their

evolving relationships with competing political actors (Diallo & Kelly, 2016; Villalón, 1999). The present findings identify how such engagement is expressed during periods of political contestation. They do not, however, establish that religious authorities consistently determine political outcomes or that protesters and political leaders respond uniformly to their appeals.

Religion–State Relations and the Negotiation of Social Order

The findings indicate that relations between religious authorities and the Senegalese state involve ongoing negotiations over the meaning of secularism, the public responsibilities of religious institutions, and the legitimacy of political decisions. Rather than reflecting a strict institutional separation between religion and the state or direct religious control over government, the evidence reveals interactions in which religious representatives articulate expectations concerning national cohesion, political conduct, and public responsibility. Three patterns emerge. First, secularism is understood as a principle that can accommodate cooperation between religious institutions and state authorities, although the meaning and boundaries of such cooperation remain contested. Second, religious representatives associate interreligious solidarity with a shared responsibility to sustain peaceful coexistence among religious communities. Third, religious leaders engage in political controversies concerning constitutional arrangements, electoral procedures, and public order. These patterns reflect the historically significant yet evolving position of religious institutions in Senegalese state–society relations (see Table 3).

Table 3. Religion–State Relations and the Negotiation of Social Order

Dimension of Social Order	Description	Implications for Religion–State Relations
Understandings of secularism and negotiated institutional cooperation	Secularism is understood as compatible with religious values and institutional cooperation rather than requiring strict separation	Religion–state relations are understood through locally articulated expectations concerning the legitimate role of religion in public life
Interreligious solidarity and shared responsibility for peaceful national coexistence	Positive assessments of cooperation between Muslim and Christian leaders and of religious figures who promote unity	Interreligious cooperation is viewed as a means of sustaining peaceful coexistence across religious communities
Religious engagement with political authorities and contested public decisions	Appeals directed at political authorities, responses to institutional decisions, and demands for restraint or accountability	Religious representatives engage in political disputes without necessarily exercising formal governmental authority

Source: Author's elaboration, 2026.

Interview participants expressed differing interpretations of secularism and the place of religious institutions in Senegalese public life. In one interview, the head of a nongovernmental organization questioned an understanding of secularism premised on a strict separation between religion and politics. In the participant's view, such an understanding fails to adequately reflect Senegal's religious and cultural traditions. INF-23 stated, "*The concept of secularism as understood by politicians is neither Senegalese in origin nor religious in character. It does not correspond to our values, beliefs, traditions, and customs. It was imposed on us from outside*" (INF-23, Interview Notes, 2021). INF-25 contrasted this understanding with a conception of secularism that allows religion a place in public life, describing it as "not separation as in France, but union" (INF-25, Interview Notes, 2021). From this perspective, cooperation between religious institutions and the state is regarded as consistent with Senegalese secularism rather than contrary to it. This account, however, represents one participant's interpretation, not an uncontested national consensus or a definitive description of Senegal's constitutional arrangements. Its empirical significance lies in showing how religious, historical, and cultural understandings inform competing views about the legitimate boundaries of religious participation in public affairs.

Participants' accounts also highlight the importance of interreligious solidarity in understandings of religious authority and national cohesion. INF-14 described Muslim and Christian leaders as sharing responsibility for the country's well-being. He stated that "*the great caliphs and bishops in Senegal are genuinely there to help this country flourish*" (INF-14, Interview Notes, 2021). He connected this assessment to a rejection of religiously grounded confrontation, emphasizing that differences in religious affiliation should not undermine a shared sense of national belonging. INF-17 also identified Abdou Aziz Sy as an example of religious leadership committed to reconciliation: "*He always sought to bring people together; he never accepted anything that divided them*" (INF-17, Interview Notes, 2021). These statements illustrate how participants associate religious legitimacy with the capacity to foster solidarity across social and religious boundaries. Beyond expressing admiration for particular religious figures, their accounts convey an expectation that religious institutions should contribute to national cohesion despite their doctrinal and organizational differences.

The findings further identify the involvement of religious authorities in disputes extending beyond explicitly religious affairs. This involvement is situated within a longer history of political confrontation, from student and labor mobilization in 1968 to subsequent controversies over political institutions and public authority. Accounts of the 1968 crisis describe religious representatives encouraging dialogue between protesting groups and the administration of President Léopold Sédar Senghor (National Archives, accessed February 20,

2020). This episode places religious engagement within a confrontation involving state authorities, organized social movements, and demands originating outside formal governmental institutions. The findings also identify the constitutional controversy of June 2011 as a period when political disputes raised questions about the legitimacy of institutional decisions and appropriate responses to public opposition (National Archives, accessed February 20, 2020). These examples suggest that religious interventions are not confined to interpersonal disputes or tensions within religious communities. They also intersect with conflicts over political representation and government decision-making.

More recent controversies illustrate how religious representatives have continued to respond to political procedures and governmental responsibilities. The research identifies the April 2018 controversy over the electoral sponsorship law as a context in which religious representatives expressed concern about political disputes and the need for consultation (INF-10, Interview Notes, 2021). During the unrest associated with the Ousmane Sonko–Adji Sarr case in March 2021, Archbishop Benjamin Ndiaye called on Sonko and his supporters to demonstrate "common sense, wisdom, and civic responsibility" in the national interest, while the Senegalese Episcopal Conference appealed for calm and restraint (INF-16, Interview Notes, 2021). These interventions show that religious representatives responded to disputes concerning electoral procedures, opposition mobilization, and the conduct of political actors. Their emphases nevertheless differed: calls for consultation addressed how political decisions were made, whereas appeals for restraint concerned how political disagreements were expressed.

These findings indicate that religion–state relations in Senegal involve interconnected expectations concerning institutional cooperation, peaceful national coexistence, and political responsibility. The account provided by the head of a nongovernmental organization presents secularism as compatible with religious participation in public affairs, while Father J-S emphasizes the contributions of Muslim and Christian leaders to solidarity across communal boundaries. Historical accounts and religious statements also document religious engagement in controversies surrounding government decisions, opposition mobilization, and public order. These patterns are consistent with scholarship emphasizing the importance of religious institutions in Senegalese state–society relations and the changing political roles of Sufi organizations (Diallo & Kelly, 2016; Villalón, 1999). The evidence, however, does not support treating religious and state authorities as a single, politically uniform bloc. Cooperation in particular areas does not establish institutional subordination, just as the public articulation of religious expectations does not necessarily demonstrate government compliance. Instead, the findings reveal relationships in which religious actors assert what they understand to be their legitimate role in public affairs while engaging with state institutions and other political groups.

The Ambivalence of Religious Social Control: Between Stability and Political Contestation

The findings reveal tensions between religious appeals for social stability and demands for political and institutional change during periods of contestation in Senegal. Three main patterns emerge from the differing perspectives of political activists and religious representatives on how political crises should be addressed (see Table 4). First, an activist's account portrays political mobilization as a response to exclusion, prolonged political incumbency, and limited opportunities for leadership renewal. Second, a statement by the spokesperson for the Caliph of Touba presents the prevention of unrest as a religious responsibility while distinguishing that responsibility from direct involvement in partisan politics. Third, other religious interventions show that appeals for stability can coexist with criticism of government actions and demands for justice. Rather than establishing that religious mediation systematically obstructs political reform, these findings reveal competing expectations concerning legitimate political conduct, the maintenance of public order, and the pursuit of political accountability.

Table 4. The Ambivalence of Religious Social Control

Dimension of Social Control	Position	Description
Political contestation as a demand for representation and reform	Criticism of political exclusion, prolonged incumbency, unfulfilled government commitments, and limited opportunities for younger leaders	Political mobilization is viewed as a response to perceived shortcomings in political representation and accountability
Religious appeals for restraint as a moral response to political instability	Religious warnings against unrest, an emphasis on national peace, and a distinction between spiritual responsibilities and partisan politics	Religious authorities articulate moral expectations concerning political conduct without necessarily claiming formal governmental authority
Tensions among stability, justice, and political transformation	Demands for political reform coexist with religious appeals for restraint and demands for government accountability	Religious social regulation reflects competing political expectations, although the consequences of religious interventions for protests and reform cannot be established from statements alone

Source: Author's elaboration, 2026.

Political mobilization is presented as a response to perceived exclusion from decision-making and dissatisfaction with established patterns of political leadership. This perspective emerges in an interview with political activist F-B, who described developments in Senegal as part of a broader African trend toward increasingly exclusionary forms of government. The activist, INF-37, stated that "*new forms of autocracy are increasingly emerging across Africa, particularly in Senegal*," characterizing this trend as a set of practices that exclude citizens

from political life (INF-37, Interview Notes, 2021). INF-41 also criticized leaders who remain in office despite failing to fulfill their commitments and who, in the activist's view, prevent younger generations from assuming political responsibilities. These grievances underpin the activist's support for social and political reforms intended to challenge the incumbent regime (INF-41, Interview Notes, 2021). The account thus presents political mobilization as a means of pursuing representation, accountability, and opportunities for leadership renewal rather than simply as a rejection of public order. This perspective is consistent with Villalón's (1999) analysis of generational pressures and political stagnation in Senegal, particularly the frustrations of younger political actors confronting entrenched political structures.

By contrast, INF-06, the spokesperson for the Caliph of Touba, emphasized the preservation of national peace as a central responsibility of religious leadership. INF-06 stated, "*Allah warns of punishment for anyone who seeks to cause unrest in a country. The caliph does not involve himself in political affairs at all and leaves those matters to politicians. However, when it comes to securing peace in Senegal, he is deeply concerned*" (INF-06, Interview Notes, 2021). This statement distinguishes direct participation in partisan competition from religious concern about the consequences of political confrontation. By invoking the threat of divine punishment for actions that provoke unrest, the spokesperson presents peaceful conduct as a moral obligation rather than merely a requirement imposed by the state. The assertion that the caliph leaves political affairs to politicians also suggests an effort to distinguish his public intervention from any attempt to obtain political office or formal governmental authority. The statement therefore illustrates an attempt to influence political conduct through religious appeals and the articulation of moral expectations.

The contrast between INF-37's reform-oriented account and the spokesperson for the Caliph of Touba's emphasis on preventing political unrest reveals an underlying ambivalence. For the activists, the central concern is the persistence of a political order perceived as exclusionary, particularly the dominance of established leaders and the limited opportunities available to younger generations. For the religious spokesperson, the principal priority is preserving national peace and preventing actions that could aggravate political instability (INF-06, Interview Notes, 2021). These differing priorities suggest a potential tension between demands for political transformation and the perceived obligation to maintain social order. Yet the two positions are not necessarily incompatible. Political reform can be pursued through peaceful means, just as appeals for restraint need not imply unconditional acceptance of the existing political order. This distinction is important because the findings do not establish that religious mediation necessarily impedes activist-led reform.

Another dimension of this ambivalence emerges in religious statements that connect the preservation of peace with criticism of injustice and demands for

government accountability. The Secretary-General of the Senegalese Episcopate, INF-18, stated that religious commitment obliges believers to denounce social, political, and economic injustice, emphasizing that "living together requires respect for justice" (INF-18, Interview Notes, 2021). Similarly, following political violence that, according to his statement, had resulted in eleven deaths, the Imam of the Grand Mosque of Touba urged the public to avoid further confrontation while also addressing the President of Senegal. The imam called for the release of political prisoners and emphasized that political leadership requires a willingness to forgive and accept criticism (INF-04, Interview Notes, 2021). These interventions demonstrate that religious appeals for stability are not necessarily confined to demands for compliance or restraint among protesters. They may also articulate expectations concerning government conduct and the treatment of political opponents.

These findings indicate that religious social regulation during political crises in Senegal involves competing expectations concerning political legitimacy, acceptable forms of contestation, and the responsibilities of public authorities. Political activists seek broader representation, political accountability, and leadership renewal. Religious institutions, meanwhile, invoke their authority to discourage unrest and prioritize national stability. Other religious interventions show that appeals for peace may also include criticism of injustice and calls for corrective government action. This diversity is consistent with scholarship documenting how relationships between Senegalese religious institutions and political actors have evolved alongside changes in electoral competition, social movements, and generational expectations (Diallo & Kelly, 2016; Villalón, 1999). The empirical significance of these findings lies in the coexistence of reform-oriented political demands with religious expectations of restraint and accountability. By locating the ambivalence of religious intervention within competing expectations of political conduct, the findings provide a basis for examining the possibilities and limitations of negotiated social regulation in the Discussion section.

Discussion

The findings indicate that religious authorities in Senegal participate in managing political crises by seeking to shape the normative expectations governing political conduct. Rather than relying on formal coercive power, religious representatives invoke moral obligations concerning restraint, dialogue, public responsibility, and social cohesion. These interventions can be understood through Reynaud's (1988, 1997) theory of social regulation, which examines how social order is formed and negotiated through interactions among actors with different interests, rules, and sources of legitimacy. In Senegal, state institutions exercise formal political authority, while religious representatives articulate moral expectations that may reinforce, constrain, or challenge government conduct.

Political activists and opposition groups, in turn, advance demands for justice, representation, and institutional accountability. Political order is therefore shaped not only through state regulation but also through interactions among actors whose authority rests on different foundations. This interpretation complements Diallo and Kelly's (2016) analysis of the changing relationship between Sufi institutions and political competition in Senegal. The present study focuses more specifically on the normative content of religious interventions during political crises. From this perspective, religious mediation involves more than facilitating communication between opposing parties: it also represents an attempt to influence the norms and expectations through which political confrontation is understood and addressed.

The regulatory significance of religious intervention also depends on the institutional relationships linking religious authorities, political elites, and wider society. Jourde et al. (2021) show that the Senegalese state continues to regulate religious affairs through arrangements involving security, political legitimation, and clientelism. Their analysis cautions against treating religious institutions as detached from state power. Bouland's (2022) study of pragmatic pluralism in Tivaouane, meanwhile, demonstrates how religious and state authorities negotiate their respective roles despite drawing on different normative foundations. The present findings identify a related but distinct process during political crises: religious representatives seek to influence government conduct and public behavior through appeals grounded in moral legitimacy rather than formal administrative authority. Such interventions do not necessarily indicate either subordination to the state or opposition to it. Instead, they reflect relationships in which religious and political actors may acknowledge, contest, or accommodate one another's expectations. Reynaud's framework helps situate these interactions at the intersection of formal political regulation and socially grounded normative claims. However, the available evidence primarily documents attempts at mediation and normative intervention. It does not show that these interactions consistently produced mutually accepted rules or enduring forms of joint regulation.

The findings also reveal a tension between the stabilizing aims of religious intervention and the demands arising from political contestation. Appeals for restraint and peaceful dialogue may articulate shared expectations of nonviolence, but preserving public order does not necessarily resolve grievances concerning political exclusion, government accountability, or institutional reform. This tension resonates with Villalón's (2015) analysis of the ambivalent relationship between religious actors and democratization and Gifford's (2016) examination of religious authority and political patronage. Historical studies of Senegal's 1968 mobilizations likewise show that political contention can contribute to long-term social and institutional change rather than merely threaten established arrangements (Bianchini, 2019, 2021). Together, these

studies suggest that the political significance of religious intervention depends partly on how appeals for stability relate to demands for change. In the present study, some religious representatives emphasize the moral obligation to prevent violence, while others also criticize perceived injustices and call for greater government accountability. These positions need not be contradictory, nor do they establish that religious mediation obstructs political reform. Rather, they reveal a tension within efforts to regulate political conflict: appeals for restraint may coexist with unresolved disputes over the legitimacy of existing political arrangements.

These dynamics must also be situated within Senegal's distinctive configuration of secularism and religious pluralism. The findings indicate that some participants understand secularism not as the exclusion of religion from public affairs but as a framework permitting cooperation between religious communities and political institutions while preserving their distinct roles. This understanding resonates with S. Lim's (2023) critique of separation-based interpretations of Senegalese secularism and Mbengue's (2025) discussion of religious pluralism and nation-building. The two perspectives nevertheless require a distinction: questioning whether secularism adequately explains Senegal's political arrangements is not the same as emphasizing the coexistence of state neutrality and religious participation in public life. The involvement of Muslim and Christian representatives in appeals for peace and public responsibility also indicates that religious authority in Senegal cannot be understood solely through the political influence of Sufi institutions. From a social regulation perspective, religious pluralism provides multiple sources of moral authority through which expectations concerning political conduct can be articulated and contested. Interreligious cooperation, however, does not establish that religious communities exercise equal political influence or share a common understanding of the boundaries of religious participation in public affairs.

These findings clarify how religious authority becomes relevant to the regulation of political crises in Senegal. Whereas Bouland (2022) examines the negotiation of authority in family disputes, the present study considers how religious representatives seek to shape expectations governing political confrontation. Villalón (2015) highlights the ambivalent role of religious actors in democratization; this analysis identifies the tension between appeals for restraint and demands for government accountability as one expression of that ambivalence. The findings also complement Ngom and Ricart-Huguet's (2025) account of Senegalese democratic resilience by drawing attention to religious appeals for dialogue and political responsibility without attributing democratic stability primarily to religious intervention. The study's theoretical contribution lies in applying Reynaud's social regulation framework to interactions among formal political authority, religious moral legitimacy, and competing political demands during sociopolitical crises. Religious intervention is thus better

understood as an attempt to establish social regulation through negotiation than as an inherently effective means of conflict resolution or an automatic instrument of state control.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that religious authorities in Senegal actively participate in negotiating political order by articulating moral expectations related to restraint, dialogue, social cohesion, and government accountability during periods of sociopolitical crisis. Their interventions extend beyond conventional mediation between political actors, as they also seek to shape the norms governing how political confrontation is understood and addressed. The findings indicate that religious authorities neither consistently support state power nor invariably act as forces of political opposition. Instead, religious representatives engage with formal political institutions and competing social demands in ways that emphasize both public stability and the need to address political grievances. Viewed through Reynaud's theory of social regulation, these interventions illustrate how religious moral legitimacy interacts with formal political authority in efforts to shape legitimate political conduct. This study thus contributes to scholarship on religion and politics in Senegal by identifying the regulatory significance of religious interventions during political crises. Its central argument is that religious authorities participate in negotiated social regulation, but the political significance of their interventions remains ambivalent: efforts to preserve stability may coexist with demands for justice, representation, and institutional change without necessarily resolving the tensions among them.

These findings suggest that the role of religious authorities in political crises should be evaluated not only based on their appeals for peace or relationships with political elites but also through the normative expectations they articulate and their responses to competing demands for political accountability. This perspective has important implications for understanding the relationship among religious legitimacy, democratic contestation, and the negotiation of social order in societies where religious institutions continue to exert considerable influence in public life. However, the study has several limitations. The qualitative evidence, drawn from 42 open-ended interviews and 22 religious documents across eight research sites, provides insight into participants' interpretations and publicly expressed religious positions but does not independently establish whether mediation initiatives reduced violence, influenced government decisions, or produced lasting political agreements. Additionally, the available evidence does not permit a systematic comparison of the effectiveness of interventions across religious institutions or different political crises. Future research could address these limitations through longitudinal and comparative studies that combine interviews, documentary sources, and evidence of political outcomes. Such research would help clarify the

conditions under which norms articulated by religious authorities contribute to negotiated agreements, remain contested, or interact differently with demands for political accountability across institutional and historical contexts.

Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Ethics Statement

Formal approval from an institutional ethics review committee was not obtained for this study. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all interview participants prior to data collection. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, their identities were anonymized, and potentially identifying information was omitted from the presentation of the findings.

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