

Abstract for Kasumba Yusuf

This study interrogates the rise of religious puritanism among the Salaf movement in Uganda and how Salafi activism impacted the political environment between 1980 and 2010. The Salaf movement, locally known as the Tabliq, is an offshoot of the Sunni sect that seeks to revert to pristine Islam. The study also sought to examine the roots of religious puritanism among the Salaf in Uganda, analyse its contemporary drivers, explore the link between religious puritanism and the political contestations in Uganda as well examine the strategies employed by the state in combating religious puritanism. Using a historical design, oral sources and documentary analysis, the study situates Salaf activism into the contemporary political contestations in Uganda and explores its impact on the wider public in the country. The study shows that although the Salaf as a protest movement gained prominence in the 1980s, religious puritanism has its roots in the Muslim predicament during the religio-political contestations of the late 1880s and early 1900s, which were key in framing grievance narratives that fomented this protest movement. Borrowing from postulates in the Relative Deprivation Theory and the Social Movement Theory, I posit that contemporary Salafi activism represents a continuum of Muslim struggles to reposition themselves in Uganda politics, amidst historical marginalisation and to recapture their past glory.

This study also reveals that contrary to popular thought, Salafism was not introduced here in the 1980s, nor was Islamic religious zealotry exclusively a phenomenon of post-independence Uganda. Rather, the movement morphed from creeping activism in the 1960s to a robust movement in the 1980s. The study also found out that the history of Salafism in Uganda has been a history of antagonism. In the quest to realign Islamic practice, the Salaf generated theological controversies within the Muslim publics and also antagonised the state. In exploring the nature of Salaf-State relations between 1980 and 2010, this research shows that the relations have been characterised by compromise and confrontation, with the state securitising the Salafi question, employing hard power and occasional soft power approaches. Such approaches have been less successful in combating religious puritanism amidst Salafi tenacity, which has kept sections of the Salaf at a collision course with the State. As one of the few works conducted on Salafism in Uganda, this research departs from normative scholarship which accentuates ideology in the discourses on extremism, by focusing on the reconceptualization and historicizing Salafi puritanism, and response to such activism.