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Sufism, Salafism and state policy towards religion in Algeria: a survey of Algerian youth

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During the summer of 2011, the University of Algiers and Binghamton University undertook a public opinion survey of youth in Algeria to assess their views of Sufism and Salafism and governmental policy towards religion in Algeria. In this survey that included more than 2000 respondents from all regions of the country, an analysis of the data obtained reveals mass disillusionment among youth with both political parties and religious institutions in the country. This widespread disenchantment may explain why we have not observed high levels of social mobilisation in Algeria in the wake of the 2011 revolutions and revolts known as the ‘Arab Spring’. Our survey reveals that Algerian youth see Sufi organisations as oriented towards peaceful change, yet they also see Sufis as practitioners of unacceptable religious practices (bidaa). The majority of respondents also believe that the government’s support of Sufi orders involves a political effort to increase the ruling party’s chances of electoral success while deflecting Salafist critiques of government.

Keywords: public opinion; youth; Sufism; Salafism; political parties; religious institutions

Introduction

Since his first election in 1999, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria has encouraged Sufism as an alternative to more militant forms of Islam and he has actively solicited the support of Sufi orders in his presidential campaigns (Roberts 2005). Sufi orders have supported his presidential efforts and he has returned the favour by sustaining Sufi orders. President Bouteflika believes that Sufi orders provide a pacifist alternative to the violent tactics employed by Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and its predecessor the Groupe Islamiste Armé or Armed Islamic Group (Daughton 2008). For the 12 years of his presidency, Bouteflika has consistently endorsed Sufism, hoping that it would establish itself a more moderate alternative within Algerian society. This study was designed to measure whether this policy has had its intended effect among Algerian youth. Our survey, the results of which are provided in greater detail below, reveal
that there is tepid support among youth for Sufism, almost nonexistent participation by youth in Sufi orders, and, more importantly, widespread youth disillusion with existing religious and political institutions. Discouragement and disillusion among youth are commonplace.

**Objectives and timing of the survey**

This survey was conducted during the second half of 2011 by the Sufi Discourse Laboratory, which is located within the University of Algiers. This survey was designed to measure youth beliefs and attitudes towards religion and also whether they were attracted to Sufism as a possibly more moderate form of political Islam.

**Algeria’s population**

During July 2011, Algeria had an estimated population of 30.99 million persons (CIA Factbook 2001). Youth (those within the age cohort of 15–30) comprise 70% of Algeria’s total population, which makes their views of religion and state policy towards religion highly relevant to political and social analysis (Layachi 2011) (Figure 1).

Regarding the gender distribution of Algeria’s population, we find that it is 49.4% female and 50.6% male.¹

For this study, we surveyed youth between 16 and 30 years old. We obtained a total of 2028 respondents of both sexes. Our surveys were conducted mostly in cities rather than rural areas and they took place in all provinces or *wilayas* of the country, from the capital of Algiers in the North to Tamanrasset in the deep South and from Oran in the West to Wed Souf in the East. The questionnaire focused upon eight topics:

(1) Personal data
(2) Self-definition of identity

![Algeria population pyramid](image_url)

Figure 1. Algeria population pyramid. Source: US census bureau, international programs.
(3) Political and religious or other affiliation
(4) Youth perception of themselves through these affiliations
(5) The meaning of Sufism for youth
(6) Youth perception of Sufism
(7) Youth visits to Sufi centres or zawiyas
(8) Examination of the reasons for governmental support of Sufism

The administrators of this survey encountered different reactions from respondents, ranging from suspicion, accusation, antagonism, mockery, and ignorance to more positive responses, including understanding and praise. The survey interviewers for the most part, however, encountered more negative than positive reactions from respondents. Some survey administrators reported that they especially encountered confrontation from Salafists in Algeria who expressed enmity towards Sufism and who believed that Sufism was heretical.

Algerian Sufism: the historical context

In the pre-colonial period, Sufi orders primarily had an educational mission in the Maghreb. During the late nineteenth century, as France first invaded and then consolidated its political control over Algeria, Sufi orders took on more of a political role to organise indigenous resistance to French colonial rule. For example, Emir Abdelkader, who is understood by Algerians as the founder of the modern Algerian state, was a leader of the Qadiriyya Sufi order who organised resistance to French colonialism. Other important uprisings in Algeria, especially in Zeyban and in the Kabylie, were led by the Rahmaniyya Sufi order. In eastern Algeria, a Sufi order known as the Sanussiyya emerged and became sufficiently powerful to establish a state in what is now known as Libya. Like the Qadiriyya and the Rahmaniyya in Algeria, the Sanussiyya formed the core of armed resistance to Italian colonialism in what would become Libya. As Abdelmounim Al-Kassemi has recounted: ‘French colonialism realised at an early stage the importance of Sufi orders in kindling revolutions, which led the colonialists to study Sufism and understand its ideas and this is what colonial generals and officers did’. The French government purposely studied Sufi orders so as to undermine them and to make colonialism successful. For example, the French government appointed General De Neveu to study Sufi orders (de Neveu 1846). Yet another scholar working for the colonial authorities, Octave Depont, was commissioned to study the Sufi orders, which resulted in his publication of *Les confréries religieuses musulmannes* with Xavier Coppolani (Depont and Coppolani 1897). Marcel Emiret commented: ‘The majority of the revolutions that took place during the nineteenth century in Algeria were prepared, organised, and implemented by Sufism. Emir Abdelkader was a chief of one of the Sufi orders, known as the Qadiriyya, and among the notorious movements that played a principal role in these revolutions are: Rahmaniyya, Sanussiyya, Darqawiyia, and Tayibiyya’.

During the twentieth century, Sufism declined in importance in Algeria first because the French colonial authorities systematically tried to weaken it as a basis of social organisation and second because Sufism came under attack from reformers within the Muslim community itself (including prominent leaders such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abdu, Rashid Rida, and Abdelhamid Ben Badis), who claimed that Sufis were into deviational and heretical practices or *bidaa* (Hourani 1983). These early twentieth century Muslim reformers argued on the one hand for an elevated role of Islam in politics and society, while on the other they criticised Sufism for its allegedly superstitious and obscurantist practices.
During the postcolonial period, criticism of Sufism and Sufi institutions continued within Algeria. President Ahmed Ben Bella and President Houari Boumedienne sought to establish both governance and their control of Algerian society by pursuing and punishing their opponents, including members and leaders of the Sufi orders. Sufi sheikhs were often subject to house arrest, and both presidents ordered the nationalisation of Sufi-owned property and endowments. In summation, these are the factors that contributed to the demise of Sufism in Algeria:

(1) French colonial leaders tried to dismantle Sufi orders using either enticements or punishments to weaken their influence in society.
(2) The Islamic reform movement attacked Sufism for bidaa (deviational and heretical religious practices) and also accused Sufi leaders for collaborating with colonial leaders.

(3) During the postcolonial period, Algeria’s new leaders sought to establish a new basis for their political legitimacy based upon their role as leaders of the revolution and their proposed ideological merger of socialism with Islam. In their effort to establish governance and social control, other actors in society, including Sufi orders, became marginalised and suppressed. The regime’s official ideology merged Islam and socialism and within that new ideology, they articulated their belief that Sufism was a deviational and illegitimate form of Islam.

After President Boumedienne’s death, the presidency of Algeria was assumed by Chadli Benjedid. Benjedid adopted a policy of very modest political social liberalisation and began returning properties and endowments to the Sufi orders. During his presidency, religious groups – including Sufis – began resuming their activities and attracting more followers. This liberalising tendency experienced a profound reversal when the Algerian military seised control of the state in January 1992 by annulling the results of an election that had been held during December 1991, in which an Islamist party called the Front Islamique du Salut or FIS seemed likely to obtain control of leadership in parliament. After the assumption of military control in 1992, a bloody Civil War in Algeria ensued that lasted until almost 2002. During that period, many religious groups – including both Sufis and Salafis – were limited in their activities.

When President Bouteflika assumed the presidency of Algeria in 1999, his administration tried to put the civil war behind it. President Bouteflika provided amnesty to Salafi and Wahhabi political opponents who promised to end their armed resistance to the state, and at the same time he began a policy of endorsing and supporting Sufism as a more moderate alternative to more radical Salafis and more conservative Wahhabis. An examination of whether that policy has been successful follows.

Interpretation of the survey results

Personal data: marital status, residence, education

In this survey, there were 2028 respondents between the ages 16 and 30. The distribution of males to females in this survey was 43.42% to 56.5%. The following are statistics regarding marital status:

Single: 85.46%
Married: 11.80%
Divorced: 1.54%
Widower: 1.19%
The very high incidence of single status among respondents in this survey is explicable by depressed income among youth in Algeria. Because youth earn substandard wages, they often postpone marriage until later years.

The respondents in this survey were mostly residents of cities (75.78%) rather than rural areas (24.22%). Also, most respondents had received education beyond elementary school. In total, 35% of respondents had attended lycée and 58% had attended university. In Algeria, education is free and compulsory. Consequently, there are rather high levels of societal participation in the educational system and there are high levels of literacy. In Algeria, 78% of all men and 59.6% of all women are literate and the statistics for those in the age cohort 15–24 are much higher (Freedom House, Algeria 2011). According to UNICEF, 94% of males and 89% of females in the 15–24 age cohort are literate (UNICEF Statistics 2011). These results contrast with our 2010 survey in Morocco, in which 65.7% of all men and 39.6% of all women are literate (United States Department of State, Background Note: Morocco 2011) (Table 1 and Figure 2).

**Definition of the self through Islam**

The poll revealed that 87% of respondents strongly identify with being Muslim and 12% somewhat identify with being Muslim. About 1% of respondents were not interested in answering the question. There were not any respondents in the ‘Not identifying with Islam’ and ‘Not identifying at all of Islam’ categories (Figure 3).
Youth views of participation in political parties and religious affiliation

The survey revealed that Algerian youth have drifted into a state of profound disillusionment with regard to political parties and religious institutions. Youth find little meaning from participation in political parties or affiliation with religious groups, including Sufi orders, because they do not believe that participation in such groups will significantly improve their lives. Only very small minorities among our respondents chose to participate in either political parties or Sufi organisations (Tables 2 and 3).

Youth loss of confidence in political parties is explicable because most youth do not believe that political parties will contribute to improving their livelihoods. Furthermore, the Algerian
state has effectively subdued the effectiveness of opposition parties in Algeria, making political and electoral competition illusory rather than real. At the same time that it has weakened political parties, the Algerian state has induced some Islamist parties to participate in national and local governmental councils. When these councils failed to deliver positive results, youth became further distanced from Islamist parties. In this process, Islamist parties have acquired the same level of disdain or scepticism that secularly oriented political parties have encountered. Our survey reveals mass disillusionment among youth with politics. While our separate 2010 survey in Morocco revealed a statistically significant shift among youth in Morocco towards affiliation with Sufism and while the 2011 Arab Spring Revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya have animated youth in Morocco to participate in politics, the same results do not apply in Algeria (Bekkaoui et al. 2011). Disillusion seems to reign among youth. Even though the Algeria survey revealed that youth were quite proud of identifying with being Muslim, the survey also revealed that youth in Algeria have lost confidence in religious institutions – whether they are of the Salafist or Sufi strains – and in the state’s ability to produce results. The present disillusion as documented by this survey arguably stands in contrast to the period of hopeful expectation during the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was on the verge of winning elections and bringing political change to Algeria. The generation born after the failed 1992 elections has shifted from hope to pessimism.

The survey also revealed that Algerian youth view Sufism positively but at the same time they are quite unlikely to participate in Sufi orders. In our opinion, this failure to participate in Sufi orders is at least partly attributable to high levels of attendance at lycée or university where youth may have been taught that Sufism was rife with sorcery, superstition, and intellectual backwardness. In Algeria – and in contrast with Morocco – Sufism does not fit with a ‘modern’ lifestyle. Second, in Algeria (and again in substantial contrast to Morocco) Sufism’s validity has undergone systematic attacks by Salafis, Wahhabis, and the Algerian state for longer periods of time. In Morocco, by contrast, the monarchy has supported Sufism much more consistently across centuries and it has endured as a social institution. These noticeable differences with Morocco that occurred both during the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial periods have weakened Sufism as a social institution in Algeria.

**Youth views of Sufism**

Returning to the survey, youth do not consider Sufism to be the only legitimate form of Islam, but they do associate it with positive attributes. According to the entire population of our respondents, Sufism encourages these positive attributes:

- Peace: 63.28% (Figure 4)
- Tolerance: 50.41%
- Baraka or blessings: 55.7%
- Asceticism: 66.21%
- Spirituality: 55.12%.

Yet a subset of the respondents viewed Sufism negatively for the following reasons. For them Sufism signifies:

- Fanaticism: 39.71%
- *Bidâa* or unacceptable religious innovation: 63.88%, (Figure 5)
- Obscurantism: 54.97%
Also, among all our respondents, Algerian youth are quite unlikely to visit a Sufi shrine or zawīya (Figure 6).

In summation, a review of the data reveals that a majority of Algerian youth view Sufism positively, believing that Sufism stands for peace, tolerance, Baraka, asceticism, and spirituality. Less than half of the respondents view Sufism negatively, believing that Sufism stands for
obscurantism, fanaticism, and bidaa or forbidden innovation of religious doctrine. Yet while the entire population of respondents views Sufism positively, at the same time most respondents do not associate Sufism with progress or modernity, which leads to very low levels of youth participation in Sufi orders. In Algeria, Sufism is simply viewed as an antiquated and anachronistic religious practice. This attitude among Algerian youth contrasts sharply with results that we obtained in our 2010 youth survey in Morocco, where we observed increased youth participation in Sufi orders. The perception in Algeria that Sufism was an antiquated religious practice became clearer when we elicited responses to the progress and modernity questions. The percentages of respondents who associate Sufism with progress or modernity are given as follows:

- Progress: 30.39%
- Modernity: 34.91%

Because Algerian youth associate Sufism with backwardness or traditionalism, Sufi orders will need to adjust to this perception (as they have in Morocco) and become more ‘modern’ if they are to survive. Otherwise, they risk extinction. The youth in our Morocco survey did not perceive Sufism as being retrograde. Some Sufi orders in Algeria have tried to modernise themselves to appeal to youth – notably the Tijaniyya zawiya in Tamassin and the Alawiyya in Mostaghanem – but most others have not, which means that they risk slipping into irrelevancy.

### The Kabylie and Sufism

In our study of youth views of Sufism in Algeria, the responses within the Kabylie region stood out as an outlier. Unlike the rest of the country where there was a widespread belief that Sufism was anachronistic, the responses with regard to Sufism in the Kabylie region were different and positive, with higher rates of affiliation by youth with Sufi orders. The reasons for this higher participation rate in Sufi orders in the Kabylie need to be addressed in a subsequent survey.
The following are the main results of the survey concerning Sufism in the Kabylie:

1. Sufi affiliation: 24%
2. 38% of the respondents believe that youth identify with Sufi orders
3. 46% of the respondents visit Zawiyas, either sometimes or several times
4. 60% of the respondents believe that the State supports Sufism because it educates people spiritually
5. 52% believe that Sufism is an important component of identity
6. 60% of the respondents believe that Sufism orders enhance spiritual education
7. 58% associate Sufism with peace

Attitudes regarding Algerian state support of Sufism

The results of the survey revealed tepid support regarding the Algerian state’s policy of supporting Sufism as an alternative to jihadist Salafism. Although Algerian youth do not participate in Sufi orders, they at the same time mildly agreed with state support for Sufism because:

1. It educates people spiritually: 53.47%
2. It helps resolve social problems: 52.75%
3. It deters crime: 52.71%
4. It encourage the values of tolerance: 58.33%
5. It serves society: 53.61%
6. It is an important component of identity: 55.65%

Interestingly, all these percentages exceed 50%. Furthermore, the following percentages of youth believed that Sufi orders were:

1. Not interested in politics: 46.26%
2. Supportive of the existing regime: 45.59%
3. Deterred extremism: 42.99%
4. Saved people from drug addiction: 40.98%

These data and accompanying interviews reveal that there is modest support among Algerian youth regarding the State’s policy of supporting Sufism as an alternative to jihadist oriented Salafism, while at the same time there is considerable public distrust of this sudden marriage between the State and Sufism. Many respondents believe that the State is supporting Sufism only in an instrumentalist attempt to legitimise its rule.

The results of this 2011 survey of Algerian youth contrasts markedly with a survey that we undertook with Moroccan youth during 2010. In the Moroccan study, we discerned a statistically significant shift among Moroccan youth towards Sufism who viewed it as an alternative to more militant forms of Islam. In Algeria, by contrast, we were able to observe profound disillusion with both the state and religious institutions, including Sufism.

The Algerian state’s policy of encouraging Sufism as an alternative to more militant forms of Islam provokes other questions. Even though the state touts Sufism as a pacifist alternative and even while it has appointed a Minister of Islamic Affairs who is a member of the Shadhiliyya Sufi order, that Minister has not questioned or criticised some of the more extreme positions that have been taken by the Imams of the Wahabbi movement in Algeria. This leads us to wonder whether a curious marriage of convenience may exist between the leaders of Sufism and Wahhabism in Algeria.
President Bouteflika’s support for Sufism has helped consolidate his base of political support with Sufi orders mobilising to support him during his presidential campaigns. In return for their support, Bouteflika has privileged and supported Sufi orders. Bouteflika has promoted a cultural strategy that presents Sufism as an example of tolerance, reconciliation, and harmony and he has pursued a political strategy that brings Sufis and their supporters into his political base. Bouteflika also appreciates the benefits that Sufi orders provide in his conduct of foreign policy, especially in the Muslim world. For example, the Tijaniyya order is organised on a transnational basis and has millions of members around the world.\(^2\) Having beneficial relations with the Tijaniyya helps Bouteflika in his conduct of foreign relations.

**Conclusion**

Our 2011 survey in Algeria has revealed that a majority of Algerian youth view Sufism positively, believing that it encourages peace, tolerance, and social cohesion. At the same time, unlike youth in Morocco, they are unlikely to join Sufi orders because they view Sufism as anachronistic and ‘unmodern’. In Morocco and other regions of the Muslim world – especially in West Africa, East Africa, Southeast Asia, and parts of South Asia – Sufism has not undergone the systematic critique to which it was subjected in colonial and postcolonial Algeria. Also, in Algeria, higher institutions of learning (lycée and university) have cast Sufism in a negative light, which discourages youth participation in Sufi orders.

The data in our survey reveal that while youth view Sufism positively, yet they are also quite sceptical about President Bouteflika’s endorsement and sponsorship of Sufism, which they as instrumentalist aimed at obtaining Sufi support for his electoral campaigns.

The most concerning outcome of this survey is the profound apathy and disillusion that we found among Algerian youth regarding their political and religious institutions. The data reveal that there is little hope among youth in Algeria, which raises the question of whether future participation in either politics or religion is possible.

**Notes**

1. While conducting the survey, it was reported that in some regions females willingly completed the questionnaires, while males were reluctant to do so, saying that the Algerian authorities were the mastermind behind it and that the objective was mainly to single out extremists and control them. Some of the respondents declared that the Algerian government supports Sufi orders for political and religious reasons.

2. Estimates of the Tariqa’s Center, the General Caliph Center, in Abi Al-Abbas Ahmed Al-Tijani’s birthplace, founder of the tariqa in Ain Madi in the state of Al-Aghwat, South of Algeria. The tariqa also has another important centre of influence in the area of Tamasin, South Algeria.

**References**


