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Abstract Only – Work in Progress

“Shari’ah and the Secular State in Senegal:
Understanding Citizen Preferences for Islamic Family Law”

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In 1972, Senegal implemented a controversial Family Code in an attempt to unify the legal system and guarantee the equality of all citizens. Although it allows and codifies “Muslim options” for inheritance, for example, it is often seen as a secular Family Code. Religious leaders have opposed this Family Code since independence, and as recently as 2003 a coalition of Muslim leaders, the Islamic Committee for the Reform of Family Law in Senegal (Comité islamique pour la réforme du code de la famille au Sénégal, or CIRCOFS), drafted a Muslim personal status law that would recognize *Shari’ah* as the main source of family law for Muslims. Separately, the President of the Republic and a group of civil society organizations called the Collective for the Defense of Secularism and National Unity (Collectif pour la défense de la laïcité et de l’unité nationale au Sénégal) openly denounced CIRCOFS’ proposed personal status law and claimed that it challenged Senegal’s constitutionally protected secularism, the equality of all citizens, and national unity. This paper explores the sources of popular support and opposition in urban Dakar for a personal status law that would apply exclusively to Muslim citizens. The data for this essay comes from my dissertation fieldwork carried out in Dakar, including a public opinion survey and narrative short-answer questions carried out with 800 men and women. I offer an analysis of the political and religious values underlying citizens’ preferences and an analysis of the media frames that shaped public opinion.