6 The Becoming of Former Activists Beyond Campus: A New Religious Elite

A central theme explored in this book is the transformation of university campuses from predominantly academic spaces to arenas of moral activism and sociopolitical engagement. This shift highlights the university's role as a crucible for developing a diverse range of skills and experiences. These formative experiences, significantly shaped by the 'alternative degrees' offered by faith-based student associations, extend beyond formal education. Skills such as public speaking, organisation, and networking cultivated within these groups are crucial in shaping activists' professional achievements. This phenomenon highlights the influence of the 'social curriculum', encompassing the informal and experiential learning acquired alongside formal academic education.

This chapter examines the post-campus trajectories of former activists from Christian and Islamic student associations at the University of Lomé and the University of Abomey-Calavi. It aims to understand how the skills and experience gained during their time on campus are translated into broader social, political, and religious spheres, providing insights into the lasting impact of their university years. Key questions addressed include: How do non-academic campus experiences shape life trajectories? How does faith-based activism prepare former students for sociopolitical engagement? By examining the lives of some of these former activists, we can assess the extent to which their campus experiences have equipped them for leadership and influence in wider society. In doing so, we explore universities not only as sites of socialisation and personal development but also as incubators for a new religious elite.

Many alumni associations have been established by students after graduation, becoming pivotal in supporting current generations on campus. Beyond religious engagement, the involvement of these emerging elites in sociopolitical debates presents a mixed picture. Former *Jécistes* generally remain in the shadow of bishops, while former members of biblical groups are often reluctant to engage in politics, perceived as an immoral space. In contrast, Muslim alumni of AEEMT and ACEEMUB have assumed more significant leadership roles within their religious communities, focusing on reorganising their representative bodies to interface with the state, marking a distinct approach in their post-university trajectories.

The influence of former activists from faith-based student associations in Benin and Togo underscores the significance of religious networks as alternative spaces for civic engagement. In contexts in which formal political channels may be restricted or perceived as corrupt, these networks of former activists have served as training grounds for leadership and civic participation. The role of former activ-

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ists in shaping national discourses and community structures suggests that these networks function as key sites for cultivating the skills and social capital necessary for effective public engagement.

6.1 A Nostalgia for Activism: New Faith-Based Associations of Former Student Activists

In Benin and Togo, activism often extends beyond graduation. Many alumni of Catholic and Islamic student associations transition into roles within organisations such as the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* (RAJEC), the *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB), and the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT). Networks like RAJEC and the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique* (Network of Former *Jécistes* of Africa, RAJA) support Catholic activism on campus and promote student mentoring across borders. For Muslims, AIMB and ACMT unite Western-educated intellectuals and cadres. These organisations embody a shared aspiration among former student activists: to continue their faith-based engagement and address societal challenges post-graduation, highlighting a common trajectory of faith-based activism in both countries.

From the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* to a Transnational Network of Former *Jécistes*

The first network of former activists of faith-based student associations in Togo originated in October 1987. This initiative gathered former JEC members, now in professional life, to preserve their Catholic faith through the enduring JEC pedagogy of 'See-Judge-Act.' Called the *Association Catholique pour la Réflexion et l'Apostolat des Laïcs* (ACRAL), it initially began in Lomé and later expanded to cities such as Atakpamé, Sokodé, and Kpalimé. Formally established at a general assembly in 1994, ACRAL members have maintained an active link with the JEC movement, contributing to reflection days and conference debates. In the early 1990s, ACRAL members were frequently invited by current *Jécistes* to give lectures, demonstrating the continuity of their influence and commitment to the movement.

Initially restricted to former JEC members, ACRAL eventually expanded its membership to include individuals who shared its ideals but who had not been part of the JEC. This inclusivity led to internal tensions, with some members feeling

the association's original mission was being diverted.[1] In response to these divisions, the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes* (RAJEC) was founded in 1998. RAJEC's dynamic approach attracted many ACRAL members, somewhat eclipsing ACRAL. Nevertheless, the two associations continue to coexist, with RAJEC emerging as the main collaborator with JEC.[2]

The concept of alumni networks for former *Jécistes* transcended Togo's borders, leading to the establishment of similar groups in various African countries. Between 1991 and 1997, active correspondence between these groups culminated in the first general assembly of the *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique* (RAJA) in 1997 in Bingerville, Côte d'Ivoire. This meeting brought together around sixty participants from 13 African countries, including notable former Togolese *Jécistes* like Théophile Tonyeme, Pierre Radji, and Albert Akakpo, then president of ACRAL.[3] Georgette Ngabolo, former president of the Gabonese JEC (1987–89), was a pivotal figure in this movement. As a student in France, she initially envisioned creating the *Amicale des Anciens Jécistes du Conseil Panafricain* (Association of Former Jécistes of the Pan-African Council) in 1986. However, it was ultimately decided that the organisation should welcome all former *Jécistes*, not just those who had participated in that council.

RAJA emerged in response to the needs of former JEC members throughout West Africa who wished to continue their Catholic commitment within a recognisable structure.[4] The founders envisioned RAJA as a channel through which the experiences and skills cultivated in the JEC could be passed on to newer generations of *Jécistes*. As Akakpo put it, 'We couldn't just sit back and do nothing. Shouldn't we be mentoring young people, giving them some of our experience?'[5] RAJA's objectives, as articulated in the final report of the Lomé meeting, were comprehensive:

> The *Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique* (RAJA) aims to be a platform for reflection and exchange for former members of the Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique d'Afrique, addressing the realities of life on the continent. Its goal is to foster the emergence of an authentic African laity capable of discerning the challenges facing the Church and society at economic, cultural,

1 Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021; Komi F. Djeguema, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 26 August 2021.

2 Komi F. Djeguema, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 26 August 2021.

3 Pierre Radji, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 30 August 2021.

4 Djagnikpo, 'Cadre Stratégique de Développement du RAJA à l'horizon 2031,' accessed 28 December 2023; 'Rapport final de la rencontre à Lomé du Réseaux des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique,' accessed 27 June 2024.

5 Albert Akakpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 2 September 2021.

> social, and political levels, by encouraging them to speak out and helping them anticipate ways of responding to their people's needs.[6]

In Benin, the formation of a similar network for former *Jécistes* followed a different timeline. Although Beninese ex-*Jécistes* were invited to RAJA's inaugural meeting in 1997, efforts to create a local network only gained momentum in 2003. This initiative was led by Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, who, after years of continued involvement with the JEC after graduation, decided to establish an alumni network. The catalyst was a JEC celebration day, traditionally held on Easter Monday by the Zogbo cell group in the Diocese of Cotonou. During this meeting, attended by former activists from various JEC cells, a decisive discussion took place: 'We are no longer students, but what can we do to maintain this fervent Christian activism?'[7] This consensus spurred the creation of an alumni network. Between 2003 and 2005, former JEC members in Benin organised meetings, mobilised alumni, and compiled a comprehensive directory of all former JEC participants. Small group activities, including prayer sessions and meetings, were initiated. Members pooled funds to support one another during significant life events such as baptisms and births. They also made donations to orphanages and adult care centres and actively participated in their local parishes.[8] Finally, in August 2005, they established the first executive committee of the *Réseau des Anciens de la Jeunesse Étudiante Catholique du Bénin* (RAJEC).

According to Deguenon, who served as RAJEC president from 2015 to 2017, the association is driven by a threefold mission. First and foremost, RAJEC addresses the challenge of maintaining the Catholic faith among its members. Since JEC membership ends with university graduation, without a structure to reinforce these teachings, there is a risk that members will revert to secular lifestyles. RAJEC provides a framework that continually reminds former members of their responsibilities as Catholic Christians. Secondly, RAJEC is committed to promoting active solidarity within its network. United by their common faith, members support each other to ensure everyone has the basic necessities for a decent life. The deep faith connections developed during university years are too important to discard in adulthood, making it essential for members to remain connected and supportive. Thirdly, RAJEC aims to develop exemplary individuals who can positively impact society. Although many Catholic Christians play strategic roles in their societies, African countries continue to struggle with underdevelopment and other significant challenges, Deguenon said. Tragically, it is often members of their own faith

6 'Les commencements du Réseau des Anciens Jécistes d'Afrique (RAJA),' accessed 4 October 2022.
7 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.
8 Pacôme Sevoh, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

who contribute to these problems and hinder national progress, according to Deguenon. Consequently, RAJEC's primary social objective is to develop men and women who can serve as role models.[9]

According to Djedatin, fostering fraternity among members is another crucial component of RAJEC's mission. It has set up a unique initiative to spread the fraternity inherent in the JEC within the families of its members. An annual Christmas event dedicated to the children of RAJEC members exemplifies this effort. This event is more than a simple celebration; it symbolises a special moment of togetherness and sharing at the heart of their families. Through this activity, RAJEC members aspire to perpetuate the values and experiences of their religious activism, passing them on to their children.[10]

The creation of RAJEC in Benin mirrored the motivations seen in Togo, aiming to support young JEC activists. Recognising its fundamental link with the JEC, RAJEC established a special commission to provide comprehensive support, including spiritual, financial, moral, and technical assistance. This commission identifies areas in which RAJEC can effectively meet JEC's needs. A significant RAJEC initiative is the JEC-RAJEC Day, which facilitates interaction and the exchange of ideas between current and former activists. Additionally, RAJEC is committed to the training of young students. As active professionals with higher living standards, RAJEC members fund training courses for younger members and engage in social actions.[11] RAJEC Benin officially joined RAJA in 2007.[12] Since its creation, RAJA has held ten Pan-African General Assemblies, including one in Lomé in 2001, one in Ouidah (Benin) in 2016, and the most recent in Cotonou in 2022. Former *Jécistes* from Togo, Pierre Radji (2001–03) and Michel Oni Djagnikpo (2018–22), and from Benin, Auxence Vivien Hounkpe (2011–13), have served as RAJA Presidents.

Paralleling the development of RAJA, alumni of ACEEMUB and AEEMT established new Islamic associations to continue their activism after university, guide young students, and assert their presence as Western-educated Muslims in the public sphere.

9 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

10 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.

11 Emile Eteka, Elvis Vitoule and Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 9 March 2022.

12 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

Muslim Intellectuals and Cadres: The *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB) and the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT)

In Benin, the declining involvement of former CIUB members after graduation led to the creation of the *Amicale des Intellectuels Musulmans du Bénin* (AIMB) in 1999. AIMB's goals were not only to support the nascent ACEEMUB, but also to promote tolerance and the practice of Islam, particularly in a minority context. In addition, AIMB sought to contribute to better organisation within the Muslim community in Benin, including the UIB. This initiative, as we shall see, underlines the broader ambitions of these former activists in shaping religious and community structures.[13]

In its early years, AIMB held weekly meetings, a practice that gradually diminished as members' professional and family obligations increased. Its activities centre on educational initiatives, both religious and secular, designed to deepen the understanding of Islam and encourage active participation in national decision-making. The association also supports young Muslim students and organises public conferences on various topics.[14] One notable event was a symposium around 2009 on combating corruption. This symposium brought together priests, representatives of traditional religions, civil society members, and academics from the sub-region.[15] Another key event is the Day of Islamic Sciences, an annual gathering at which a central theme is chosen to stimulate discussion and generate recommendations. For instance, the 2012 event centred on the Benin Code of Personal and Family Law.[16]

Despite its modest size, AIMB prioritises the quality of its members over quantity.[17] Djibril Bossou, former Imam of CIUB (1994–99) and President of AIMB (2010– 14), elaborates on the association's development and composition:

> The association was established in response to the observation that, over time, students who had completed their master's degrees no longer had a platform to continue their activism in an Islamic association. Initially, the members of AIMB were mainly masters level students. Today, the association includes members who have completed their PhD and are working in administration. In this regard, we are fortunate to have doctors, lawyers, jurists, and others among us. […] It is open to all students, especially those at master's level and above. We believe that students who have not yet obtained a master's degree should join ACEEMUB first.[18]

13 Nassirou Bako-Arifari, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 26 May 2019.
14 Zakary Sofian Traoré, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 April 2019.
15 Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 April 2019.
16 Mohktar and Aboudou, 'Le talk du mois,' *ASSALAM*, December 2011, 7.
17 Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 April 2019.
18 Mohktar and Aboudou, 'Le talk du mois,' *ASSALAM*, December 2011, 7.

In Togo, similar motivations led to the establishment of the *Association des Cadres Musulmans au Togo* (ACMT), founded a few years after AIMB. A general assembly in Lomé in August 2006, organised by former AEEMT members and attended by people from across the country, marked the ACMT's launch. Conceived as a comprehensive national body, the ACMT addresses challenges related to the life and organisation of Islam in Togo. Its mission is to educate members on the fundamental principles and values of Islam and to dispel misconceptions about the religion through exemplary behaviour and practices.[19] The ACMT's initiatives aim to improve the education of young Muslims, promote women's participation in economic development, and tackle issues such as poverty and HIV/AIDS. The organisation is dedicated to deliberation and action on matters relevant to the understanding and practice of Islam. It unites Muslim cadres from the public and private sectors, promoting the development and well-being of the Togolese Muslim community in accordance with secular principles.[20]

The term 'cadre' was a central topic of discussion at the founding congress of the ACMT. Initially, the idea was to bring together 'Muslim intellectuals' to reflect on issues affecting the Muslim community and broader societal interests. However, the founders recognised the need to go beyond specific social categories or education levels. Consequently, they adopted a more inclusive interpretation of 'cadre' as referring to anyone with the 'capacity to make judgements on matters relating to the Muslim community and the general interest, both nationally and internationally.'[21] Another unifying aspect within the ACMT is the predominant use of French. The theme of ACMT's first statutory congress in 2008 was 'Rights and duties of the Muslim cadre in the city'.[22] More recently, in 2016, ACMT initiated the 'Ramadan for All' event in Lomé, aiming to promote interfaith dialogue, address social challenges such as corruption, early marriage, polygamy, and terrorism, and encourage responsible citizenship. The joint iftar, or breaking of the fast, served as a symbolic act of unity that transcended religious barriers.[23]

Although the ACMT is not officially an alumni association of AEEMT, its leadership is largely made up of people who were active in AEEMT during their university years.[24] A founding member of AEEMT emphasised that prior to its creation, there was no formal platform to unite Muslims after graduation. The AEEMT

19 Lagbai, 'Mieux connaitre les valeurs…,' *Togo-Presse*, 31 August 2006.

20 Pitassa, 'L'Association des Cadres Musulmans…,' *Togo-Presse*, 3 October 2006.

21 Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padnna Essoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

22 Kamazina, 'L'ACMT a tenu son premier…,' *Togo-Presse*, 26 December 2008.

23 'Deuxième édition du ramadan…,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 8 June 2017, 6.

24 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.

Council, formed in 2004, attempted to bridge this gap by bringing together former members to support AEEMT cells. However, this arrangement often led to tensions, as younger members felt overshadowed by their more experienced elders who wanted to impart their wisdom.[25] Despite these challenges, the link between the ACMT and AEEMT remains strong, albeit informal. Both associations collaborate frequently, and discussions are underway for a formal memorandum of understanding to streamline their joint activities.[26]

In addition to the ACMT, other former AEEMT activists have created new associations or NGOs to continue their work in various fields. For example, Ali Abdel-Halim Touré, who served as Amir of the AEEMT from 2000 to 2002, has engaged in humanitarian work. He is currently president of the *Association islamique de bienfaisance pour le développement HADIS* (Islamic Charity Association for Development HADIS), which has been active since 2007, particularly in assisting prisoners.[27] These initiatives illustrate the ongoing commitment of former AEEMT members to promoting Islamic values in their areas of expertise.

In conclusion, the emergence of new faith-based associations for former student activists in Benin and Togo highlights a shared nostalgia for the sense of purpose and community fostered by their involvement in campus-based religious organisations. These new organisations provide a platform for both Catholic and Muslim alumni to continue their faith-based engagement, support younger generations of activists, and address societal challenges in their respective countries. In doing so, they offer a means for former activists to pursue their vision of the good life – one that balances professional success with spiritual fulfilment and social responsibility. While the trajectories of these associations differ slightly between Benin and Togo, the overall pattern is one of continuity and commitment to the values and skills cultivated during their formative years as student activists. Despite some differences in their organisational structures and activities, these associations are united by a common vision of faith-based activism as a means of personal and societal transformation. By leveraging the skills, networks, and entrepreneurial spirit fostered through their participation in campus-based religious associations, former activists in both countries have positioned themselves as influential actors in the religious, social, and political landscapes of their respective societies, continuing to reimagine and construct their vision of a meaningful and impactful life beyond graduation.

25 Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padnna Essoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

26 Aziz Gountante, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 5 August 2021.

27 Ali Abdel-Halim Touré, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

However, the involvement of these former student activists in the political sphere varies between religious groups. While Catholic intellectuals from the JEC and RAJEC tend to align their socio-political activism with the positions of their respective Bishops' Conference, their Muslim counterparts from the AIMB and ACMT have demonstrated a more assertive stance in shaping the religious and political landscapes of their countries, as we will explore in the following section.

6.2 A Christian Elite in Socio-Political Debates: A Half-Hearted Involvement

Over the years, the JEC has trained many influential leaders in Benin and Togo. These individuals often base their socio-political activism on the guidance of their Bishops' Conference. This cautious approach is evident in RAJEC leaders' tendency to echo episcopal positions rather than make independent statements. In Togo, despite the significant role of the Catholic Church, the involvement of Christian intellectuals in socio-political issues is mixed, with some accused of using religion for political purposes. This intersection of religious activism and political engagement presents a morally complex terrain, particularly from the perspective of former Bible Group members in Benin. Despite the significant impact evangelical movements have had in the political sphere, GBEEB leaders struggle with a dichotomy: a general distrust of political institutions versus a trust in religious leadership.

Catholic Intellectuals in the Shadow of the Bishops' Conference

Since its inception, the Benin JEC has produced many leaders who now hold key societal roles. A former JEC member notes that their dedication to God's work has translated into significant professional success.[28] For example, Pacôme Elet currently leads the Charismatic Renewal in Benin, as mentioned earlier. Several ex-*Jécistes* have pursued academic careers, including Gustave Djedatin, who serves as Dean of the Faculty of Science and Technology at the Polytechnic University of Abomey in Dassa-Zoumé. Clotaire Deguenon has taken a position at the Supreme Court after serving as deputy head of cabinet at the Ministry of the Interior.[29] In the political realm, the JEC alumni network includes notable figures such as economist Albert Tévoédjrè (1929–2019), Dahomey's Minister of Information (1960–63),

28 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 11 March 2022.
29 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

and Colette Sénami Agossou Houéto, who briefly served as Minister of Primary and Secondary Education in 2006.[30] More recently, Gildas Agonkan (*Union Progressiste*) and Barthélemy Dahoga Kassa (*Bloc Républicain*) have been elected to the National Assembly. The JEC has also produced numerous priests and nuns, including Monsignor Éric Soviguidi, a priest from the diocese of Cotonou in Benin, who serves as the Holy See's permanent observer to UNESCO – the first African to hold this position.[31]

The Togolese JEC similarly boasts several leaders on the international stage. Edouard Koutsava, who led JEC Togo from 2002 to 2005, served as Secretary General of JEC International from 2007 to 2011.[32] Another notable figure is Father Achille d'Almeida, a priest from the diocese of Lomé and chaplain of the IYCS since 2020. His involvement with the JEC began in 1994 during his secondary education, and as a priest, he has supported JEC cells in various parishes in the diocese of Lomé. In 2014, the Togolese Bishops' Conference appointed him national chaplain of the JEC, a role in which he also served as sub-regional chaplain for francophone West Africa.[33]

While the JEC and RAJEC in both Benin and Togo celebrate the influential leaders they have produced, the involvement of Catholic intellectuals from these associations in political debates is more nuanced compared to that of the Bishops' Conferences. In Benin, for instance, the *Conférence Épiscopale du Bénin* (Episcopal Conference of Benin, CEB) has been vocal on political issues, issuing pastoral letters during critical moments such as the political turmoil of 1995[34] and the presidential elections of 1996.[35] As discussed in the previous chapter, during the 2013 constitutional crisis under President Boni Yayi, the CEB expressed concern about democratic shortcomings and opposed proposed constitutional changes.[36] More recently, it has commented on the authoritarian turn since Patrice Talon assumed power in 2016.[37] In December 2020, the *Observatoire chrétien catholique de la gouvernance* (Christian Catholic Observatory on Governance), an arm of the CEB, called for the abolition of the endorsement requirement to ensure 'an impartial, transparent, credible and peaceful presidential election.'[38]

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30 Gustave Djedatin, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi 11 March 2022.
31 Eblotié, 'Bénin: Mgr Éric Soviguidi…,' *La Croix Africa*, 1 December 2021.
32 Modeste Lemon, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 11 November 2022.
33 Ayetan, 'Père Achille d'Almeida…,' *La Croix Africa*, 24 February 2022.
34 Lanmafankpotin, 'Lettre pastorale des évêques…,' *La Nation*, 23 February 1995.
35 'Election présidentielle de mars…,' *La Nation*, 5 February 1996.
36 'Situation socio-politique: message…,' *La Nation*, 20 August 2013.
37 Gbaguidi, 'Présidentielle du 11 avril…,' *La Nation*, 24 February 2021.
38 Eblotié, 'Au Bénin, l'Observatoire chrétien…,' *La Croix Africa*, 8 December 2020.

Similarly, Togolese bishops have consistently articulated their position on key national issues through pastoral letters. Notable examples include the call for a general amnesty in December 1990,[39] Archbishop Kpodzro's critical commentary on the Eyadéma regime on Radio Maria in April 2003,[40] and perspectives on the 2010 presidential elections.[41] In recent years, the *Conférence des Évêques du Togo* (Togo Bishops' Conference, CET) has intensified its public engagement, with pastoral letters increasingly targeting the political class with pointed criticism. In September 2017, for example, the CET urged the government to implement 'reforms demanded by the people in accordance with the 1992 Constitution', implicitly advocating that the current president complete his term without seeking re-election in 2020, while denouncing ongoing repression.[42] More recently, in June 2023, the CET called for the release of political prisoners detained during the tumultuous demonstrations between 2017 and 2020.[43]

Although not officially representing the CET, Archbishop Kpodzro was a vocal advocate for the postponement of the 2018 legislative elections[44] and the suspension of the 2020 presidential elections to ensure a transparent electoral process.[45] He also launched the *Dynamique Monseigneur Kpodzro* (DMK), a 'campaign for the civic mobilisation of the Togolese people and the Diaspora for justice and peaceful change in 2020'.[46] The DMK advocated having a unified opposition candidate and supported the candidacy of Gabriel Agbéyomé Kodjo, nominated by *Les Forces Démocratiques*, a coalition of several opposition parties and civil society organisations. Archbishop Kpodzro died in January 2024 in Sweden, where he had been living in exile for the past three years because of his outspoken criticism of the ruling regime.

More recently, on 26 March 2024, the CET expressed its concern about the new constitution, adopted by the deputies. The bishops urged President Gnassingbé to postpone its promulgation. However, Gnassingbé sent the text back to parliament, which approved it unanimously on 19 April. The new constitution shifts Togo from a presidential to a parliamentary system and abolishes direct presidential elections, which were originally scheduled for 2025. Instead, deputies will elect the president

39 'Les évêques togolais se prononcent…,' *Courrier du Golfe*, 31 December 1990.
40 Amana, 'Les fidèles catholiques condamnent…,' *Togo-Presse*, 8 April 2003.
41 'Conférence des Evêques du Togo…,' *Présence Chrétienne*, 14 January 2010, 3.
42 'Prière et Déclaration de la Conférence des Evêques du Togo en faveur des réformes,' accessed 11 August 2023.
43 Eblotié, 'Togo: l'épiscopat demande…,' *La Croix Africa*, 19 June 2023.
44 'Togo: l'archevêque émérite de Lomé…,' *RFI*, 12 December 2018.
45 'Togo: l'archevêque de Lomé demande…,' *RFI*, 14 November 2019.
46 https://www.initiative-mgr-kpodzro.org.

for a four-year term, renewable once. Opposition leaders, under the '*Touche pas à ma Constitution*' (Hands off my Constitution) front, have condemned the revision as a 'constitutional coup', fearing that it paves the way for Gnassingbé's continued rule. Amidst these developments, the bishops have again appealed to the president, urging him to halt the promulgation of the new constitution and to initiate a broad political dialogue.[47]

In both Benin and Togo, the involvement of the JEC and RAJEC in political discourse aligns closely with their respective Bishops' Conference. This alignment is reflected in the reticence of JEC leaders on political issues, as they often mirror the positions of the episcopal authorities, rather than making independent statements. As organisations under the Bishops' Conference, JEC and RAJEC leaders usually refrain from commenting on significant issues already addressed by the bishops. The former head of the national JEC of Benin summed up this perspective: 'We are in a national context where everything is quickly politicised. […] As a result, the JEC in Benin avoids political issues as much as possible. […] We just follow the position of the bishops.'[48]

While the JEC and RAJEC in Benin often align their positions with their respective Bishops' Conferences, they also engage in their own initiatives to promote religious dialogue and democratic values. Over the years, RAJEC has utilised various media platforms to disseminate its messages. The Catholic *La Croix du Bénin* has been a valuable outlet for RAJEC to publish articles on religious dialogue initiatives. The former director of *La Croix du Bénin*, Father André Quenum, who passed away in 2014, was a strong supporter of JEC and RAJEC, facilitating their publications. However, since his death, their presence in the newspaper has diminished.[49] RAJEC has also leveraged television and radio to amplify its voice. During the contentious 2016 presidential election, RAJEC organised a debate on *Office de Radiodiffusion et Télévision du Bénin* (ORTB), Benin's public television channel, inviting religious leaders from various faiths to discuss religious dialogue and urge political actors to consider the nation's future. Additionally, they used the Catholic radio station *Immaculée Conception* to broadcast their messages.[50]

The rise of communication platforms like WhatsApp has intensified sociopolitical debates among RAJEC members in Benin. However, as Hounkpe observes,

47 Eblotié, 'Togo: les évêques exhortent…,' *La Croix*, 26 March 2024; 'Togo: l'opposition monte au…,' *Le Monde*, 28 March 2024.

48 Camille Agbeva and Jean Ezékiel Adigbe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 4 March 2022.

49 Alain Gnansounou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 27 February 2022.

50 Ibid.

these internal discussions often do not result in official communiqués expressing RAJEC's stance on critical issues.[51] This reticence is partly due to the association's deference to the Bishops' Conference. For example, when the 2021 bill to legalise abortion in Benin sparked controversy and opposition from the CEB,[52] RAJEC leaders engaged in intense internal discussions but refrained from issuing an official statement:

> As soon as the Bishops' Conference takes a stand or makes a statement, we're caught up in it, so maybe that's why the people in charge are dragging their feet and saying that the Bishops' Conference has taken our point of view into account. What more can we do? However, as a movement of this stature, it would still be important for us to have our own position on certain issues.[53]

A committee has been established to lead these advocacy efforts, but it is not yet fully operational. This has resulted in occasional engagement without consistent presence or proactive monitoring of broader societal issues.[54] Despite these challenges, RAJEC members remain dedicated to promoting justice, peace, and democratic values through various initiatives at both national and pan-African levels. They have organised awareness campaigns, conferences, and debates, particularly around the anniversary of Monseigneur Isidore de Souza's death. At the pan-African level, RAJEC leverages the Pan-African RAJA Day on 22 August to address issues such as removing visa requirements between African countries, advocating for seamless travel and brotherhood across the continent.[55]

The situation in Togo is similar for former JEC members. Although the Catholic Church generally enjoys a high profile, the role and influence of Christians in politics today is mixed. One former JEC member expressed scepticism about the involvement of Christian intellectuals in the country's major socio-political issues. In his view, while many people of faith are involved in politics, a significant number use their religious affiliation for political gain, exploiting the deep respect that religion enjoys in Togo. Lay Catholics who are genuinely committed to 'enlighten[ing] the political sphere from the height of religion' are rare and often contribute to the problem.[56]

51 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.
52 Sarr, 'Bénin: l'épiscopat fustige un…,' *La Croix Africa*, 21 October 2021.
53 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.
54 Clotaire Deguenon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.
55 Ibid.
56 Théophile Tonyeme, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 7 September 2021.

The legacy of Edem Kodjo (1938–2020), a former *Jéciste* known for his high intellectual and moral stature, is often cited among the *Jécistes*. Kodjo served as Prime Minister of Togo twice, from 1994 to 1996 and from 2005 to 2006. To this day, many Catholics criticise Kodjo for actions and decisions perceived as inconsistent with Christian and JEC values.[57] In the 1994 legislative elections, the opposition unexpectedly won 43 out of 78 seats. Yet, this victory was overturned by President Eyadéma, who, following an appeal by the RPT (which had won 35 seats), influenced the Supreme Court to annul the results in three constituencies, depriving the opposition of its majority. In a surprising move, Eyadéma appointed Kodjo, the leader of the minority opposition, as prime minister on 22 April. Kodjo's decision to include eight RPT ministers in his cabinet and govern with Eyadéma's support[58] fostered disillusionment and mistrust among many former *Jécistes*, who believe that Catholic intellectuals could have played a more significant role in promoting democratic change.

Another factor that may influence RAJEC's level of socio-political engagement in both Benin and Togo are the periods of waning commitment to RAJA at the pan-African level. Hounkpe, who served as president of RAJA from 2011 to 2013, noted that RAJA's General Assemblies had increasingly become 'moments of tourism' for its leaders rather than a genuine Christian commitment to the movement.[59] This sentiment is echoed by Sevoh, a former president of RAJEC Benin (2017–22), who provided further insight into the nature of these assemblies. According to him, their Pan-African General Assemblies typically include a statutory section for reviewing organisational texts and a spiritual component featuring study sessions and reflections on the network's goals. However, these assemblies often resemble holiday camps more than serious forums for discussing the network's development. Participants tend to focus more on exploring the host country than on meaningful reflection and progress. Although many proposals are put forward during the discussions, the implementation of these recommendations remains limited, highlighting a gap between the assemblies' intentions and their outcomes.[60] This lack of follow-through on crucial initiatives may hinder RAJEC's ability to effectively promote its values and engage in meaningful advocacy efforts.

57 Michel Oni Djagnikpo, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 23 August 2021.

58 Macé 2004, 869–70.

59 Auxence Vivien Hounkpe, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 7 March 2022.

60 Pacôme Sevoh, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 15 March 2022.

Former Bible Group Activists and Politics: Navigating an Immoral Space

Like the JEC, the Bible groups have produced influential regional leaders. A prime example is Augustin Ahoga of GBEEB, who served as regional secretary of GBUAF from 2007 to 2019.[61] GBEEB leaders often assert that their graduates have significantly impacted society, excelling in the job market and holding key positions in Benin's administrative spheres.[62] However, former activists generally feel that the association's socio-political engagement has been lukewarm.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the interplay between political power and evangelical movements, along with the role of Beninese and foreign pastors during the presidencies of Kérékou II and Boni Yayi, has been a source of persistent speculation.[63] This complex relationship between evangelicalism and politics in Benin extends beyond the realm of high-level political manoeuvring, influencing the political attitudes and behaviours of believers at the grassroots level. In this context, Mayrargue's analysis offers valuable insights into the political culture fostered by Pentecostal teachings. He suggests that the Pentecostal emphasis on personal divine connection and individual empowerment fosters a distinctive democratic sensibility among believers in Benin. This religiously informed democratic ethos manifests in their support for political pluralism, albeit with a critical attitude towards political institutions and parties perceived as corrupt.[64] Such a perspective helps explain the paradoxical nature of evangelical political engagement in Benin, characterised by a commitment to democratic principles alongside a deep-seated scepticism towards existing political structures.

In Benin, the advent of multi-party politics in 1990 coincided with an unprecedented rise in the influence of money, corruption, nepotism, and clientelism in political life, echoing the patronage-driven dynamics of the 1960s. This era was characterised by numerous regional leaders with extensive patronage networks vying for power in an ever-shifting landscape of alliances. The political 'transhumance', fuelled by extreme fragmentation of the party system, has become commonplace in the public sphere.[65] Despite a strong commitment to democratic principles among the population, pervasive scepticism towards the political sphere persists. This dichotomy is encapsulated in recent Afrobarometer survey results, where less than half of respondents expressed confidence in key political institu-

61 Augustin Ahoga, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 23 March 2022.
62 Yabi, 'Quarante ans d'impact du GBEEB,' accessed 10 August 2022.
63 Mayrargue 2014, 103–04.
64 Mayrargue 2004a.
65 Banégas 2003, 14–15.

tions: only 42% in the National Assembly, and merely 39% and 36% in the ruling and opposition parties, respectively. In stark contrast, religious leaders enjoy much higher public trust, with 74% of people expressing 'some' or 'considerable' trust in them.[66] Underscoring this disparity, a separate survey found that 50% of citizens perceive 'most' or 'all' members of the National Assembly as being corrupt, while only 21% felt the same way about religious leaders.[67]

Within both Christian and Muslim communities in Benin, there is profound disillusionment with the political sphere, often viewed with scepticism and associated with dishonesty and betrayal. This cynicism is reinforced by the belief that political involvement contradicts religious principles, branding politics as a domain fraught with deceit. However, the former general secretary of GBEEB, once involved in university politics, sees the lack of political engagement by active and former GBEEB members as a missed opportunity for the association and the wider Evangelical Church. He asserts, 'We need to train leaders who can express their views on social issues as good Christian intellectuals'.[68] Despite the benefits derived from activism for better living conditions, most Protestant university students exhibit a palpable reluctance to engage in student movements, often influenced by church teachings that discourage political involvement. The former GBEEB secretary emphasises the need to prioritise training students to become Christian leaders who can positively contribute to both church and society, including within the university environment.[69]

As Bertin underlines,[70] to fully grasp the relationship between evangelicalism and politics in Benin, it is necessary to look beyond official power structures and examine how evangelical influence permeates society through everyday interpersonal relationships. The evangelical moral model, which emphasises exemplary Christian behaviour, creates expectations and exerts power over social relations, including those with non-converts. This becomes a resource for political authority in a broader sense. Evangelical governmentality has a fundamental interrelational dimension: it is a moral endeavour aimed at influencing others and gaining their recognition.

66 'Les Béninois expriment plus de confiance envers les leaders religieux et traditionnels et l'armée que les leaders politiques et institutionnels, selon l'enquête d'Afrobarometer,' accessed 2 January 2024.

67 'Les Béninois estiment que le niveau de corruption a diminué; plus pensent qu'ils peuvent dénoncer les actes de corruption sans peur,' accessed 24 February 2024.

68 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

69 Ibid.

70 Bertin 2024.

This perspective sheds light on how evangelical moralisation manifests in Beninese society through moralistic divisions between good and evil in the public sphere, influencing social and political relationships. Religious leaders emphasise the embodiment of exemplary Christian values, which are essential for social recognition and political ascension. These concepts of public sphere moralisation and evangelical governmentality can help us understand how faith-based student associations strive to shape behaviours and social norms on university campuses.

In this context, the reluctance of Protestant university students to engage in political movements, as noted by the former GBEEB secretary, takes on new significance. It reflects not just a withdrawal from formal politics, but potentially a different form of engagement that prioritises moral influence and social transformation through personal conduct and interpersonal relationships. The discussions around Christian exemplarity and social recognition become particularly relevant in exploring how leaders of faith-based student associations seek to influence their peers and gain legitimacy on campuses, even as they distance themselves from traditional political activism.

The landscape of Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches in Benin is characterised by intense competition, driven by the different ambitions and strategies of religious leaders. This competitive environment hinders unity within the Evangelical community and limits its political influence, in contrast to the more cohesive Catholic community. As Mayrargue notes, these churches must constantly innovate and forge distinctive identities to increase their visibility, grow their congregations, and attract followers. Most of these churches belong to either the Council of Evangelical Protestant Churches of Benin (CEPEB) or the Federation of Evangelical Churches and Missions of Benin (FEMEB), although some opt for autonomy and avoid collective affiliation.[71] Additionally, the socio-political influence of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Benin has waned since the early 1990s, largely due to internal leadership conflicts following the tenure of Henry Harry, who led the church for nearly a quarter of a century.[72] It was not until July 2016, following the personal mediation of President Talon, that the warring factions of the Methodist Church managed to reconcile.[73]

This fragmented environment within the Evangelical community further contributes to the reluctance of Protestant university students to engage in student movements and political activism, as highlighted by the former GBEEB secretary. The lack of unity and cohesion among Evangelical churches, coupled with

71 Mayrargue 2002, 245–49.

72 Ibid., 154–55.

73 Godonou, 'Réconciliation des protestants…,' *24h au Bénin*, 3 July 2016.

the teachings that discourage political involvement, hinder the development of a strong, politically engaged Christian leadership. In this context, the former GBEEB secretary's current involvement in the *Initiative Chrétienne pour une Présence Persuasive* (Christian Initiative for Persuasive Presence, ICCP) reflects an effort to engage social issues from an evangelical Christian perspective and to encourage others to be more active in social and political debates.[74] This initiative aims to address the missed opportunity for the GBEEB and the wider Evangelical Church to train leaders who can positively contribute to both church and society, including within the university environment.

The trajectories of former activists from Christian student associations present a striking contrast to the historical pattern of traditional student unions serving as incubators for future political elites. While a few notable figures, such as Edem Kodjo in Togo and some former *Jécistes* in Benin, have pursued political careers, most former faith-based student activists have chosen to engage with societal issues through civil society rather than direct political involvement. This divergence can be largely attributed to the perceived incompatibility between the corrupted political sphere and the religious values these activists espouse. The political arena in Benin and Togo, as in many other African contexts, is often associated with patronage, clientelism, and a lack of transparency. For former members of faith-based student associations, shaped by a strong moral and ethical framework, navigating this murky terrain may be less appealing than effecting change through civil society initiatives. The emphasis on community service, social justice, and moral leadership characterising many of these groups translates more readily into advocacy work, public education campaigns, and grassroots mobilisation than into the cut-and-thrust of partisan politics.

However, this preference for civil society engagement over direct political involvement does not necessarily imply a lack of political influence. By shaping public discourse, mobilising communities, and holding those in power accountable, these former religious activists can play a significant role in the political life of their countries, even if they do not hold formal political office. By providing a moral compass and advocating for transparency, accountability, and the common good, these activists can contribute to the strengthening of democratic norms and practices, even as they remain outside the formal political arena. This approach represents a form of 'soft power' in the political landscape, in which influence is exerted through moral authority and grassroots mobilisation rather than direct participation in governmental structures. It allows these former faith-based student activists

74 Camille Yabi, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 19 March 2022.

to maintain their ethical integrity while still impacting societal change, potentially reshaping the political culture from the ground up.

Interestingly, while the trajectories of former Christian student activists in Benin and Togo have largely been characterised by this cautious approach to political engagement, the experiences of their Muslim counterparts present a more assertive stance. As explored in the following section, former Muslim student activists, particularly those associated with AIMB in Benin and ACMT in Togo, have played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the religious landscapes of their countries and have more actively sought to influence the political sphere.

6.3 Muslims Intellectuals and 'Francophone' Islam: Combining Secular and Islamic Knowledge

In recent decades, French has become an important language for expressing Islamic thought among the urban, educated elite in francophone West Africa, with Côte d'Ivoire at the forefront.[75] This linguistic shift has prompted new religious practices and organisational structures within Muslim communities, marked by modern management techniques. Francophone elites use French to communicate, disseminate knowledge, and conceptualise Islamic practices, resulting in significant changes in Muslim societies across West Africa,[76] including Niger,[77] and Burkina Faso.[78] Particularly in urban areas since the 1990s, this phenomenon has fostered a vibrant culture of Islamic literature in French, with an increasing reliance on texts translated into or written in French. In Benin and Togo, Muslims identifying as 'Muslim intellectuals' ('*intellectuels musulmans*') have emerged as recognised interpreters and representatives of Islam, blending secular and religious knowledge. Former activists from AEEMT and ACEEMUB have significantly contributed to developing an Islamic press and have played pivotal roles in promoting the organisation and unity of the national Muslim community.

75 Miran-Guyon and Oyewolé 2015; Madore and Binaté 2023.
76 Triaud 2010.
77 Sounaye 2015b.
78 Madore 2020a.

Conférence Internationale des Musulmans de l'Espace Francophone (CIMEF) and the Islamic Press

The rise of an 'Islamic Francophonie' among Muslim intellectuals in Benin, Togo, and other francophone West African countries has been profoundly influenced by Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss-born grandson of Hasan al-Banna. Ramadan's influence is evident through the organisation of several *Colloque International des Musulmans de l'Espace Francophone* (International Conference of Muslims of the Francophone Space, CIMEF). Since 1991, the *Communauté Musulmane de la Riviera* (Muslim Community of the Riviera, CMR) in Côte d'Ivoire had hosted the *Séminaire International de Formation des Responsables d'Associations Musulmanes* (International Training Seminar for Leaders of Muslim Associations, SIFRAM) in Abidjan.[79] This event originated from a perceived neglect of Muslim cadres, intellectuals, and association leaders in the country's *da'wa* efforts. During the 1990s, this annual meeting drew between 150 and 200 participants from Côte d'Ivoire and across West Africa, featuring prominent speakers from Africa, the Arab world, and Europe, including Olivier Carré (1994), Djibo Amani (1994), and Hani Ramadan (1998).[80]

Following the seventh edition of SIFRAM in Abidjan in 1999, which featured Tariq Ramadan,[81] the CMR, in collaboration with Ramadan, initiated the CIMEF in Grand-Bassam in 2000.[82] An article in *L'Appel*, an Islamic bulletin from Burkina Faso, summarised the rationale behind the creation of CIMEF:

> During SIFRAM 99 in Abidjan, the need to unite Francophone Muslims around their concerns became apparent. According to statistics, the number of Muslims living in francophone areas, where French is either the official language or one of the official languages, is close to 200 million. The similarity of religious, social, cultural, political, and economic challenges makes the existence of such a framework a necessity. The CIMEF was therefore created to give leaders and intellectuals of Muslim associations in the French-speaking world the opportunity to interact within a single platform for reflection, exchange, and debate. They can share their views in the light of their respective realities and on issues of paramount importance. The discussions at this first CIMEF focused on 'The Muslim in the French-speaking world.' More specifically, the reflections centred on three major themes: Islam and Muslims in the French-speaking world, the question of *laïcité*, and the development of Islamic discourse in French.[83]

79 Sidibé, 'Associations musulmanes…,' *Fraternité Matin*, 28 August 1991.
80 Miran 2006, 348–62.
81 Al Seni, '7e SIFRAM: la problématique…,' *Le Patriote*, 9 September 1999.
82 S., 'Grand Bassam: les musulmans…,' *Fraternité Matin*, 8 August 2000.
83 Souley, 'CIMEF–SIFRAM 2000…,' *L'Appel*, September 2000, 3.

The proceedings of the conference were published in 2001 under the title *Francophone Muslims: Reflections on Understanding, Terminology, and Discourse*.[84] The CIMEF has since been held biennially in various West African cities such as Cotonou (2002), Niamey (2004), Ouagadougou (2006), Lomé (2008), Bamako (2010), and Dakar (2013).[85] Chaired by Ramadan, these conferences have gathered representatives of Muslim organisations, intellectuals, and academics from Francophone countries in Europe and Africa. Discussions have revolved around contemporary understandings of Islam, the distinct position of Francophone Muslims within the global ummah, and their relationship with the West. Ramadan's emphasis on the importance of French as a key language in Islamic discourse, alongside Arabic and English, has profoundly influenced the Western-educated Muslim elite in francophone West Africa. This influence has fostered a unique Francophone Muslim identity, sparking discussions on modern Muslim identity, *laïcité*, and the adaptation of Islam to the current socio-political and economic environment.[86]

Benin's participation in the first CIMEF in Abidjan paved the way for further initiatives. Inspired by Ramadan's proposal, the *Réseau des Associations et ONG Islamiques du Bénin* (Network of Islamic Associations and NGOs of Benin, RAI-Bénin) was established in November 2000 to unify various Muslim associations. Founded by Imam El-Habib (see Chapter 5), RAI-Bénin aimed to be a synergy network rather than a centralised federation, encompassing around fifteen associations and NGOs, including ACEEMUB and AIMB. One of RAI-Bénin's significant achievements was organising the second CIMEF, held in Cotonou in 2002.[87] *La Nation* reported that the conference theme, 'The International Scene: Islamic Discourse and Adapted Educational Experiences', was selected to address the crisis of Islam post 9/11. The conference aimed to counter the frequent conflation of Islam with terrorism, dismantling such stereotypes and asserting the true nature of Islam. Delegates from Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Africa gathered to discuss these critical issues. Imam El-Habib emphasised the necessity for Muslims to speak out, stating, 'We cannot afford to remain silent.' He noted that Muslims are often misunderstood, and this event provided an opportunity to clarify misconceptions while fostering a sense of brotherhood among Francophone Muslims.[88]

84 CIMEF 2001.

85 The last and ninth edition took place in Abidjan in 2017.

86 Holder and Sow 2014a, 25–26.

87 Lauriano Kifouli, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 21 March 2019; Mahmoud Riadds Sidi, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 2 April 2019.

88 Azifan, 'Colloque international des musulmans…,' *La Nation*, 6 August 2002.

A few years later, the ACMT, in collaboration with the Muslim Union of Togo, organised the 5th CIMEF, held in Lomé in 2008. The event attracted over 400 delegates from 26 countries, including Tariq Ramadan, to discuss 'Islam and Development: Muslims and the Millennium Development Goals'. Inaugurated by the prime minister, the conference offered a platform for discussing the challenges of globalisation. Panel discussions focused on two key themes: 'Laïcité and the Muslim Community in the Francophone World' and 'Islam and Cultural Identity'. The first panel examined the experiences of Muslims living in secular environments such as Europe, as well as *laïcité* in countries with significant Muslim populations and those with Muslim minorities. The event received extensive media coverage in Togo.[89]

An Imam from the Lomé Campus Mosque and former AEEMT activist highlighted the influential role of Tariq Ramadan in shaping their understanding of being Muslim in a secular society. According to him, Ramadan's teachings, widely disseminated through his recordings, significantly transformed their initial views. While they once equated *laïcité* with the absence of religion, their engagement with Ramadan and the CIMEF conferences has led them to see *laïcité* as a method of integrating religion into public life rather than excluding it.[90] This new perspective on *laïcité* has become a defining characteristic of the ACMT and its members. Kolani, president of the association from 2010 to 2018, remarked that for many Muslims and non-Muslims in Togo, being a member of the ACMT signifies seriousness: 'It's true that we don't speak Arabic like the others, but the knowledge we have in terms of general culture really helps us to explain religion easily, whether to Muslims or non-Muslims.'[91]

In the early 1990s, Francophone, Western-educated Muslims associated with AEEMT, ACEEMUB, ACMT, and AIMB astutely addressed a media policy gap within the Muslim community. Recognising the opportunity, they spearheaded the creation of an Islamic press to provide a platform for alternative viewpoints. This initiative coincided with the 'press spring' of the early 1990s, a period marked by sociopolitical liberalisation in francophone West Africa, including Benin and Togo, which heralded a new era of press freedom. Amid the proliferation of new daily and weekly newspapers and other periodicals in these countries, these young francophone Muslims took the lead in developing an Islamic press, addressing a need previously overlooked by the older generation.

89 Tagba, 'Développement à travers l'islam…,' *Togo-Press*e, 21 July 2008; Boukari, 'Colloque international des musulmans…,' *Togo-Presse*, 7 August 2008; Pouh, '5e colloque du CIMEF…,' *Togo-Presse*, 11 August 2008; Pouh, 'Le 5e CIMEF a pris fin…,' *Togo-Presse*, 13 August 2008.

90 Yaya Hussein Touré, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 14 May 2019.

91 Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

In Benin during the 1990s, the magazine *La Lumière de l'Islam* (The Light of Islam), directed by Mohammed Bachir Soumanou and El Hadj Latoundji, aimed to promote interfaith dialogue and position Muslims as key participants in the democratisation process. According to Brégand, these figures, who belonged to the educated bourgeoisie, represented a vision of liberal Islam. They fully embraced the state's secular nature and saw themselves as the modernist successors to their predecessors.[92] Another significant publication, the *ASSALAM* newspaper,[93] launched by ACEEMUB in 2001, was created to highlight the achievements and aspirations of both the association and the wider Muslim community in Benin.[94] Initially, *ASSALAM* had a circulation of 2,000 to 3,000 copies, but by 2019, this had decreased to around 300–350 copies[95] and is now published online via Facebook.[96]

La Lumière de l'islam and *ASSALAM* have been instrumental in covering a wide range of issues, from religious dogma and national Islamic news to socio-political, cultural, and even sporting events, both local and international. These Islamic newspapers reflected the desire of a growing number of Western-educated Muslims to make their voices heard in the public arena and not be overshadowed by the current leadership of their community. Additionally, these media outlets became platforms for expressing underlying frustrations within the Muslim community, occasionally stirring up controversy. An insightful editorial in *ASSALAM* encapsulates these sentiments:

> The Muslim community in Benin has existed for more than five centuries. It has counted among its ranks brave and upright individuals. But the community's record is mixed. […] A community that has always mastered the verbs 'to give, to serve, to sacrifice, to love.' Yet its visibility is almost opaque. […] The answer to this question is clear. From time immemorial, Muslims, obsessed with acquiring knowledge related to Islam, have neglected, undervalued, and rejected all other forms of knowledge. Yet these forms of knowledge are inherently and widely part of Islamic education. Here we are, centuries later, with little visibility, no streets named after Muslims, no significant consideration from those who 'lead' us. A community without a voice. […] We must avoid hiding behind a set of mechanical rules and sanctify knowledge within the boundaries of halal and haram.[97]

92 Brégand 2014, 231–32.

93 https://islam.zmo.de/s/westafrica/item-set/2195.

94 Euloge Abd-Gafar Zohoungbogbo, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 March 2019.

95 Mohamed Bachirou Ogbon, in conversation with the author, Abomey-Calavi, 14 March 2019.

96 https://www.facebook.com/lejournalassalam.

97 Zohoungbogbo, 'Éditorial: le désert croît,' *ASSALAM*, September 2010, 2.

In Togo, the newspaper *Le Rendez-Vous*,[98] though not an official AEEMT publication, was largely run by active and former members of the association. An introspective article in the paper outlined its purpose since its launch in 2004:

> This newspaper was created with a specific target in mind: the Muslim world. A world suffering from a media void. [...] We created our newspaper to fill this gap while we wait for our [Muslim] union to be sufficiently organised. That's why we have covered all Islamic events since then, especially those organised by the UMT. But we do not limit ourselves to simple reporting because we believe that this world also needs to be corrected. Therefore, in trying to correct a world where people already confuse personal interests with worship, it is normal that some feel victimised by our pen. [...] Those who cannot bear our presence must understand that we are not here to tarnish the image of Islam. [...] But people who claim to be from Islam are so wrong that they need to be told certain truths.[99]

In a provocative article titled 'The UMT, the ruling government and the interests of the Muslim community in Togo', published in 2009, the newspaper boldly criticised the close relationship between the UMT and the government. It unflinchingly stated, 'the Union Musulmane du Togo has been and continues to be a victim of the influence of the ruling power in our country', describing a tactic devised by the late Eyadéma 'to tame our community and manipulate it for his purposes'.[100] Over the years, *Le Rendez-Vous*, known for its uninhibited political commentary and resolutely anti-regime stance, has consistently criticised the UMT, often in harsh terms. The same article lamented that 'the selection of the Union's leaders was more a matter between them and the government than a decision of the community. [...] And this choice was based more on political affiliation than on any other considerations. Elective congresses have often been a sham, poorly disguising predetermined choices.'[101]

The emergence of an Islamic press led by former Muslim student activists in Benin and Togo underscores the role of media in elite formation and activism. By creating platforms for alternative viewpoints and asserting their presence in the public sphere, these activists have positioned themselves as influential voices within their communities and beyond. Islamic newspapers not only disseminate knowledge and shape religious practices but also critique and challenge established power structures. Furthermore, the media activism of former Muslim student activists extends the skills and experiences gained during their university years. The ability to effectively communicate ideas, mobilise support, and engage

98 https://islam.zmo.de/s/westafrica/item-set/26319.

99 Abdou-Salam, 'La presse islamique mal vue...,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 11 November 2004, 2.

100 L'UMT, le pouvoir en place...,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 6 September 2009, 2, 5.

101 Ibid.

in critical discourse honed within faith-based student associations, translates into their media ventures. Through their newspapers, these activists demonstrate their capacity to analyse and interpret socio-political issues from an Islamic perspective, thereby asserting their legitimacy as Muslim intellectuals. By carving out a distinct space in the media landscape, former Muslim student activists in Benin and Togo have established themselves as a new generation of leaders, capable of shaping public opinion and setting the agenda for their communities. Their ability to combine religious knowledge with secular education and media savvy positions them as a force to be reckoned with.

In both Benin and Togo, former ACEEMUB and AEEMT members, now active in AIMB and ACMT, have made important efforts to address key socio-political issues and spearhead reforms in Muslim umbrella organisations. Their goal is to ensure that these bodies better represent and advocate for the community's interests. These initiatives reflect a growing awareness and proactive stance by these former student activists in shaping the direction and influence of their respective Muslim communities.

The Difficult Task of Reforming Muslim Umbrella Organisations

Benin's Muslim community has historically been fragmented along ethnic, regional, and generational lines, rendering it susceptible to political manipulation. This fragmentation was intensified by power struggles among prominent figures from a few influential families. Efforts to formally organise the community have achieved mixed results. Shortly after independence, several attempts to create a unified Muslim association in Dahomey were thwarted by internal disagreements. However, financial and logistical support from the Muslim World League facilitated the organisation of a national congress in Cotonou in 1966. This congress led to the establishment of the *Union Islamique du Dahomey* (Islamic Union of Dahomey, UID). Despite initial unity, leadership disputes soon caused divisions, culminating in the creation of a rival group, the *Association Dahoméenne pour la Défense des Intérêts de l'Islam* (Dahomean Association for the Defence of Islamic Interests, ADDIS), in Parakou in 1967. The Marxist regime's hostility to non-state organisations hastened the decline of ADDIS in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the regime's more tolerant stance towards religious groups enabled members of the UID to reorganise as such in 1983. The UIB quickly gained state recognition and became the official representative body of Islam in Benin.[102]

102 Abdoulaye 2007, 118–24.

The UIB, like its eponymous predecessor, eventually succumbed to inactivity, with only sporadic activity in Borgou.[103] This lacklustre record, coupled with the democratic renewal, spurred the creation of alternative national federations. In November 1992, the *Conférence Nationale des Associations Islamiques du Bénin* (National Conference of Islamic Associations of Benin, CONAIB-Shoura) was founded, initially bringing together some thirty associations. Under the leadership of Dr Yacouba Fassassi, a former IMF executive, Master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order[104] in Benin, and macroeconomic advisor to President Kérékou, CONAIB-Shoura aimed to unite the Muslim community and address the shortcomings of the UIB.[105] This new federation received considerable press coverage in the early 1990s, reflecting its initial significance.[106]

Despite its initial widespread appeal, CONAIB-Shoura soon became embroiled in controversy, particularly due to Dr Fassassi's leadership, which faced criticism for being politically motivated. In addition, CONAIB-Shoura was perceived by UIB supporters and leaders as a rival entity, especially in the organisation of pilgrimages to Mecca, causing further divisions within the Muslim community. By the mid-1990s, CONAIB-Shoura's influence had significantly waned, leading it into a period of inactivity, mirroring the fate of the UIB.[107] In response to this stagnation, Imam El-Habib founded RAI-Bénin in 2000, as mentioned above. This new initiative, along with organising the CIMEF, aimed to overcome the inertia of the UIB, increase the visibility and influence of the Muslim community in Benin, and improve coordination among various Islamic associations.[108]

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, the legitimacy of the UIB remained contentious among many Muslims. A notable pattern within the Islamic Union was the predominance of senior members from influential families in key positions. This was particularly evident in the appointment of imams from the central mosques of Porto-Novo, Cotonou, and Natitingou, who traditionally held the presidency. Although the UIB statutes stipulate a five-year term for executive members, leadership changes mainly occurred due to the death of an incumbent, resulting in effectively lifelong terms. For instance, Imam Liamidi Kélani's presidency lasted from 1983 until his death in 1998, with his successor not officially appointed until 2003,

103 Ibid., 124–26.

104 This Sufi order (or *Tariqa*) originated in Iran.

105 Yacouba Fassassi, in conversation with the author, Porto-Novo, 25 April 2019.

106 Fassassi, 'Tribune libre: les musulmans…,' *La Nation*, 14 January 1993; 'Le séminaire sur le Leadership…,' *La Nation*, 24 November 1994; Boni Seni, 'Comment promouvoir le…,' *La Nation*, 29 November 1994.

107 Abdoulaye 2007, 126–29.

108 Lauriano Kifouli, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 21 March 2019.

leading to almost two decades without a congress. His successor, Imam Mohamed Sanni of Natitingou, served until his death in 2016, delaying the third ordinary congress until 2017.[109] The 2017 congress proposed modernisation measures, including a rotating presidency among imams from Benin's main regions. However, sharp disagreements over these reforms led to a one-year transition period.[110]

This traditional approach to governance contrasts with the modern, administrative, and bureaucratic vision held by many Western-educated Muslims. A UIB leader noted that representatives of ACEEMUB and AIMB have actively participated in Islamic congresses across West Africa, including in Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire. These experiences have underscored the shortcomings of the UIB's founding documents and the need for comprehensive revision.[111] Leaders of ACEEMUB and AIMB advocate a well-structured UIB with explicit statutory governance, arguing that such an entity would more effectively represent the community's interests in dialogues with the government.

For example, in the pages of *ASSALAM* in 2011, following a poorly managed pilgrimage to Mecca, the president of AIMB criticised the UIB as a 'worrying institution' and 'a thing that serves no purpose at all'. He highlighted the lack of accountability within the UIB leadership as detrimental to the Muslim community in Benin, stating: 'There are some among them who head off to represent the Muslim community and never report back [...] Such positions are treated as an inheritance of sorts. Organisations that give people power for life are of no use to us.'[112] Another key challenge for AIMB is the urgent need to improve the capacity of UIB leaders, mostly imams, to analyse and understand societal issues. One member of the Amicale contrasted this situation with that of the Christian clergy, noting:

> If I take the clergy as an example, someone in a soutane is already an intellectual. He has the ability to analyse and appreciate things. On the other hand, here we have a religious leader of the Muslim community who doesn't understand much about societal issues. That goes some way to explaining the lack of participation of the community in these political debates. It's a question of understanding.[113]

Many AIMB Muslim cadres and ACEEMUB students have been keen for the UIB to wield more influence over public authorities. They want the UIB to be more effective in defending the interests of the community. According to a former member

109 Nagnonhou, 'Religion: l'Union islamique...,' *La Nation*, 22 May 2017.
110 Abdoul Jalili Yéssoufou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 26 March 2019.
111 Chouaïb Ahmed Chitou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 1 April 2019.
112 Mohktar and Aboudou, 'Le talk du mois,' *ASSALAM,* December 2011, 6–7.
113 Ibrahima Mama Sirou, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 8 May 2019.

of ACEEMUB who also worked at the UIB, the younger generation often criticises the UIB for its political stance. As one senior member noted, the Union is perceived as being too supportive of the ruling government. In the past, the Union's leadership has publicly supported the administrations of Presidents Kérékou and Boni Yayi during various socio-political events. This perceived partisanship has led to disapproval among younger members, who argue that the Union should remain neutral. The senior member explained that the UIB's position is rooted in Islamic principles, which advocate obedience to leaders as part of a broader religious duty to respect and honour those in authority. However, this interpretation is not universally accepted, highlighting a generational divide within the Union regarding the appropriate level of political involvement for religious organisations.[114]

This frustration was particularly evident in 2013 during the widespread protests sparked by rumours that President Boni Yayi intended to amend the constitution to remove the presidential term limit. In August, the CEB issued a pastoral letter opposing the proposed constitutional changes.[115] The UIB's subsequent public endorsement of the government's position and its sharp criticism of the Catholic Church's statement as 'an instrumentalisation of religion for hidden goals' caused controversy.[116] Prominent Muslim associations and leaders, notably under the *Commission de Réflexion pour l'Unité de la Communauté Musulmane du Bénin* (Reflection Commission for the Unity of the Muslim Community of Benin), openly disavowed the UIB's position in a letter published in several newspapers.[117] This action seriously undermined the credibility of the UIB among many Muslims, who suspected its leaders of being politically co-opted by Boni Yayi.

In March 2019, the UIB faced another major crisis due to the postponement of the 2018 Congress, escalating internal tensions, and the controversial political candidacy of Imam Ousmane. Ibrahim Ousmane, a well-known imam at the Central Mosque of Cotonou Jonquet, ran for office in the legislative elections, sparking considerable debate within the Muslim community. This move was particularly controversial given his role as First Vice-President of the UIB. Consequently, two different UIB presidents were rapidly elected within two days, resulting in a split within the UIB. On 30 March in Cotonou, a group of 'dissidents', including AIMB and ACEEMUB leaders, elected the Imam of the Central Mosque of Bohicon as the new leader. However, the following day in Porto-Novo, other Muslim leaders rein-

114 Al Rachid Bawa, in conversation with the author, Cotonou, 21 March 2019.
115 'Situation socio-politique: message…,' *La Nation*, 20 August 2013.
116 'Situation socioéconomique délétère…,' *Fraternité*, 23 August 2013.
117 'Supposée réponse au clergé…,' *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 25 August 2013.

stated Assifatou Mohamed Ali and Ousmane as president and vice-president.[118] The impasse was finally resolved at a high-level reconciliation meeting chaired by President Talon on 15 April,[119] with Mahmoud Riadds Sidi of the AIMB playing a key mediation role.[120] This reconciliation was formalised at the Fourth UIB Congress in June 2019.[121]

While the Muslim community in Benin has struggled to establish a unified representative body, the situation in Togo has been markedly different. As outlined in Chapter 2, Eyadéma effectively co-opted key Muslim leaders through the UMT, established in 1963 as the official representative of the Muslim community to this day. The UMT seeks to 'regroup all the Muslims of the territory in order to orient them towards a practice of Islam that is more in line with the development of the modern world' and to 'break with the old Islamic traditions that do not correspond to orthodox Islam.'[122]

However, much like in Benin, ACMT activists have encountered significant challenges in their efforts to reform the UMT and push for greater transparency and accountability to the needs of the Muslim community. The UMT's deep integration into the national power structure and its role as an extension of the ruling party have made it difficult for these reformers to effect change. Influential political figures, including former ministers and allies of the regime, have historically led the UMT, consolidating its political allegiance. For example, Mama Fousséni, a founding member of the UMT and its president from 1970 to 1972, and later honorary president, joined the RPT's political bureau and served as a minister under Eyadéma.[123] Kassim Mensah, a key founder and former president of the UMT,[124] maintained close ties with Eyadéma and, as mentioned above, was appointed Togo's first ambassador to Libya in 1976.[125] This alignment has transformed the UMT into an organisation that closely supports state interests, with the government intervening in its affairs to ensure loyalty and political compliance.

During the turbulent transition to democracy in 1990 and the subsequent return to authoritarian rule in 1991, the UMT remained notably silent, failing to

118 Kingbêwé, 'Bénin: crise à l'Union…,' *Banouto*, 1 April 2019.

119 SRTB, 'Patrice Talon initie une rencontre de réconciliation avec l'Union islamique du Bénin,' uploaded 16 April 2019.

120 Lawson, 'Talon désamorce la crise…,' *La Nouvelle Tribune*, 16 April 2019.

121 For a detailed analysis of this case, see Madore 2022a.

122 'Création de l'union musulmane du Togo (UMT),' accessed 9 January 2023. On the beginnings of the UMT, see Delval 1980, 208–24.

123 Apédo-Amah, 'Après son élévation à la dignité…,' *Togo-Presse*, 19 January 1978.

124 Ouro-Sama 2018.

125 'M. Kassim est parti pour Tripoli,' *Togo-Presse*, 15 January 1977.

offer substantial political or doctrinal guidance. This era of political instability coincided with internal discord at the UMT, exacerbated by the 1992 congress. In March of that year, former UMT leaders led by Mensah met with the Prime Minister to address the 'ongoing confusion' plaguing the organisation.[126] By May, over twenty imams backing the new UMT leadership had issued a statement in response to media reports of severe internal conflicts. They asserted, 'For some time now, as everyone knows, Islamic affairs have been managed by people who have neither the training nor the necessary competence in religious matters and who, in order to maintain their position against all odds, have done everything possible to politicise the Muslim Union, disregarding the injunctions of the Holy Qur'an.'[127] However, this internal turmoil did not prevent the UMT from maintaining its support for the regime. In 2002, during the celebrations of the 35th anniversary of national liberation, the UMT president declared: 'Unfortunately, since 5 October 1990 ['*tracts mensonges*' affair], those who are jealous of our achievements, under the false guise of democrats, have tried to disrupt our peaceful march of progress.' He assured Eyadéma of the unwavering support of the Muslim community and prayed to Allah to help him continue his mission.[128]

The UMT leadership faced another challenge following the well-regarded tenure of Ahmed Têtou (2004–07),[129] whose qualities were acknowledged even by the typically critical newspaper *Le Rendez-Vous*.[130] His sudden death in 2007 triggered a new leadership crisis. Vice-president Inoussa Bouraïma, also the mentor to the AEEMT (see Chapter 3), assumed the role of interim president. However, the prolonged nature of his interim leadership and the UMT's failure to convene a congress to elect new leaders caused significant unrest among Togolese Muslims. Many questioned whether the UMT, still the government's only official Muslim interlocutor, genuinely represented their interests. There was also growing discontent with the UMT's perceived alignment with the current political regime. As during Eyadéma's era, Faure Gnassingbé's regime continued to rely on UMT leaders, particularly the influential UMT Advisory Council. This council includes several prominent figures from Eyadéma's administration: Fambaré Ouattara Natchaba, former speaker of the National Assembly (2000–05); Barry Moussa Barqué, who held various ministerial posts between 1979 and 1999 and has been an adviser to the president since 1999; and Mohamed Atcha Titikpina, former commander of Eyadéma's Presiden-

126 Amouzou, 'Au palais de l'Entente…,' *Togo-Presse*, 17 March 1992.
127 'Lettre ouverte des imams aux anciens…,' *Courrier du Golfe*, 11 May 1992.
128 Blande, '35e anniversaire de la Libération…,' *Togo-Presse*, 13 January 2002.
129 Lemou, 'Congrès ordinaire de l'Union Musulmane…,' *Togo-Presse*, 11 October 2004.
130 'Le président de l'Union Musulmane…,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 12 July 2007, 2–4.

tial Guard Commando Regiment and Chief of Staff of the Togolese Armed Forces (2010–13).

To revitalise the UMT and strengthen the unity of the Muslim community, the ACMT organised a reflection session in 2013 at the mosque on the University of Lomé campus. Themed 'The Contribution of Muslims to the Relaunch of UMT Activities', the meeting convened delegates from around fifteen Islamic associations. Yaya Assadou Kolani, former AEEMT president and ACMT leader from 2010 to 2018, emphasised the need for new leadership and the urgency of holding the long-overdue UMT congress: 'This meeting is a long-awaited opportunity given the expectations of the members of our various associations regarding the role that our supreme institution [UMT] should play in coordinating and managing Islamic activities nationwide.' Discussions highlighted numerous obstacles facing Togo's Muslim associations, such as leadership conflicts, political and economic dependencies, a lack of coherent vision and organisation, and challenges in reconciling Islamic faith with contemporary societal issues. A special committee was established to advance these dialogues and work towards organising the delayed UMT Congress.[131]

In a follow-up meeting the next month, leaders of 25 Islamic associations collectively endorsed a petition criticising the current UMT leadership. They condemned the leadership for its inaction and demanded the congress be organised within three months. The president of the organising committee declared, 'Our community must not be left behind due to the carelessness or inaction of a few individuals.'[132] Despite the ACMT's efforts to engage in the restructuring of the UMT, its influence was significantly hindered by the entrenched power of the UMT's Consultative Council, which resisted the ACMT's proposed reforms. Confronted with these obstacles, the ACMT eventually withdrew from the process, recognising the futility of its attempts within a framework that appeared to prioritise government loyalty over genuine community representation.[133]

Amid the socio-political turmoil of 2017–18, the ACMT demonstrated leadership, contrasting sharply with the UMT. Unlike the Catholic bishops, who openly criticised the government's democratic shortcomings, the UMT's calls for peace and refusal to support the protesters' demands for reform, under the guise of political neutrality, led to a significant erosion of its credibility. This was particularly evident among the younger generation, who disapproved of the UMT's unwavering loyalty to the state. During this period, the ACMT's public statements were notably influential. In October, it issued a 'Statement on the Current Socio-Political Situa-

131 Dosseh, 'Redynamiser l'UMT pour la défense…,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 20 June 2013, 7.

132 'Les musulmans du Togo signent…,' *Le Rendez-Vous*, 11 July 2013, 4.

133 Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.

tion in Togo', reaffirming the right to peaceful protest as a fundamental democratic right and expressing concern about reported violence by security forces in several cities. The statement also called for essential political reforms to promote development, human rights, better living conditions, and social harmony.[134] Shortly afterwards, the ACMT demanded the immediate release of Imam Alfa Hassan Mollah (Mohamed Alassani Djobo) of Sokodé, known for his proximity to Atchadam, the main opposition figure at the time.[135] In December 2018, the ACMT joined the Togo Bishops' Conference, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Togo, and the Methodist Church of Togo in calling for the legislative elections to be postponed. This call for postponement and the resumption of dialogue to ensure fair and transparent elections[136] was even relayed by RFI.[137]

Kolani revealed that ACMT leaders had struggled with the decision to intervene publicly, having traditionally relied on the UMT to represent the community. However, the tense socio-political climate compelled them to voice their concerns. This newfound assertiveness caused tensions with the UMT but garnered substantial support within the Muslim community and strengthened their resolve. The ACMT joined *Espérance pour le Togo* (Hope for Togo), an interfaith civil society movement aimed at highlighting pressing national issues. In December 2018, ACMT members were among the delegates from *Espérance pour le Togo* who met with the President of Ghana, the facilitator of the Togolese political dialogue. The overall goal was to encourage the Muslim community to play a more active role in public discourse, prioritising ethical and civic responsibilities without exploiting religion for political ends.[138]

Aware of Togo's volatile political environment, the ACMT has adopted a cautious approach to political engagement, focusing on Islamic values and principles, as its membership spans the political spectrum. However, this stance has created internal tensions within the association. The ACMT's involvement, particularly its stance on the 2018 legislative elections and its participation in the mediation meeting in Ghana, has drawn the ire of the Togolese authorities. According to ACMT leaders, President Faure Gnassingbé, previously unaware of the ACMT, perceived it as a dissident organisation.[139] This perception led to a reduction in government

134 Kolani, 'Déclaration sur la situation socio politique actuelle du Togo,' accessed 27 June 2024.
135 'Les cadres musulmans exigent la libération immédiate de l'Imam arrêté,' accessed 2 November 2017.
136 'Voici la position de l'ACMT face à la situation qui prévaut dans notre pays,' accessed 27 June 2024.
137 Dogbé, 'Togo: les responsables musulmans…,' *RFI*, 8 December 2018.
138 Yaya Assadou Kolani and AEEMT leader, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 15 May 2019.
139 Latifou Assikpa, Ouro Padnna Essoh Izotou and Halourou Maman, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 19 May 2019.

support, including withdrawal of office space allocated to the ACMT in the Hajj House in Lomé. Additionally, relations with pro-government members of the ACMT became strained, and support for key projects, such as the construction of the association's headquarters, diminished.[140]

The response to the ACMT's initiatives underlines the complexity of Togo's political environment, in which open expression of political views, particularly critical ones, is fraught with risk. This is exemplified by the experience of Taofik Bonfoh, a prominent ACMT member. Bonfoh faced intense scrutiny and family tensions, precisely because of his connections to the political establishment – notably his grandfather Abass Bonfoh's role as Togo's acting president in 2005 after Eyadéma's death. Bonfoh's case, where he was perceived as opposing the ruling regime despite his family's political ties, illustrates the widespread reluctance to engage publicly in political matters. The ACMT is currently debating whether to continue commenting on political issues, given the associated risks. Bonfoh noted that the ACMT has received proposals from various opposition parties but has deliberately avoided any alliances, preferring to maintain its autonomy. This cautious approach is necessary in Togo's restrictive political climate, in which freedom of expression about political issues is severely limited.[141]

This chapter has highlighted the role of universities as incubators for new religious elites and innovative forms of faith-based engagement in Benin and Togo. By examining the post-university trajectories of former activists from Christian and Islamic student associations, we have uncovered the enduring impact of the 'social curriculum' offered by these groups, which extends far beyond formal education. For many of these former students, their activism does not end with graduation. Alumni of these associations often continue their faith-based activism by moving into roles within networks such as RAJEC, AIMB, and ACMT to pursue their religious commitments in the workplace.

The divergent paths taken by former Christian and Muslim student activists in their socio-political engagement reveal complex dynamics at the intersection of religion, civil society, and democratisation. Christian activists, particularly those from JEC backgrounds, have largely aligned themselves with established church hierarchies, often remaining in the shadow of their Bishops' Conference. Former Bible group members have generally eschewed direct political involvement, viewing the political arena as morally compromised. In contrast, Muslim activists, drawing on both secular and Islamic knowledge, have actively sought to reshape their communities' religious and organisational structures. Organisations like AIMB in Benin

140 Taofik Bonfoh, in conversation with the author, Lomé, 24 August 2021.
141 Ibid.

and ACMT in Togo have evolved from cautious beginnings into influential voices in national discourse, demonstrating a more assertive approach to civic engagement.

These contrasting trajectories highlight the challenges of fostering an inclusive and pluralistic civil society in contexts in which religious identities significantly shape access to power and influence. The entrepreneurial focus cultivated within faith-based student associations has given rise to a new type of religious elite, blending religious legitimacy with professional competence and business acumen. While this entrepreneurial turn in religious activism holds potential for innovative solutions to social problems, it also raises critical questions about social justice, inclusion, and the nature of democratic participation in these societies. The chapter underscores the importance of understanding universities not just as sites of academic learning, but as crucial spaces for the development of civic skills, social capital, and alternative forms of political imagination. The experiences of these former activists challenge simplistic narratives about the role of religion in public life.

As we look ahead to the final chapter, which examines recent developments on both campuses, including the perception of declining religious activism among current students, we are prompted to consider the evolving dynamics of campus activism and their implications for the future of civic engagement in Benin and Togo. The shifting landscape of student activism may signal broader changes in how young people conceptualise their roles as citizens and agents of social change, with potentially far-reaching consequences for the political and religious landscapes of both countries.