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By: Joan Baxter

'My Islamic brothers, you are the makers of kings! Don't let yourselves be robbed or kidnapped in the presidential elections in 2002! Make sure you're registered to vote and then wait for us to show you Islamic candidates to vote for.'

With this, Alhaji Ousmane Samake almost brought the roof down on the Palais de la Culture, a vast concrete edifice perched right on the edge of the Niger River in Bamako. More than 4000 devout Muslims had crammed into the hot interior for the first-ever national meeting of Mali's Islamic associations.

Even if the mood was electric, there was no hint of violence, fanaticism or hostility towards anyone — certainly nothing overt. But the strong rhetoric from that Muslim meeting, the third of its kind in just eight months, sent shock waves through Mali's political landscape and echoed all the way into the secure interiors of several western embassies in Bamako.

It was Sunday morning, 9 September, just two days before the attacks in New York and Washington, which would stir up a whole new kind of Islamic solidarity and fervour throughout the world. But in the Malian capital, Bamako, that fervour had already been making itself heard — or trying to make itself heard — for months.

In January 2001, at the first meeting called by the umbrella group of some 20 Malian Islamic associations, the message was there — for anyone who was listening. The Islamic leaders told their followers that the 95% Muslim majority in Mali had sat back passively for too long, allowing the government of President Alpha Oumar Konare to steer not just a 'secular course' but an 'anti-religious' one. It was time for Islam to enter the political arena.

In subsequent weeks the Imams complained that an international festival of traditional hunters, who flocked to Bamako with their fetishes and the occult, was an insult to Muslims. They also exerted pressure on the governor of Bamako to ban the provocative dance 'Sabar', which they said was sacrilegious.

In May, a second Muslim meeting attacked a new set of family laws the government was drawing up. The Islamic leaders, including Tahara Drave, head of the Islamic Women's Association, said 'foreign values' were being imposed with these laws that would give women equal inheritance rights and eliminate men's legal status as 'head of the family'. Once again, the meeting passed off largely unnoticed, with no coverage at all in the state media.

*[CUT? In the interim, however, President Konare and his wife, Adam Ba Konare, had voyaged to Mecca for the hajj. On their return, they began making what Malian political scientist, Cheibane Coulibaly, interpreted as 'concessions to Islamic extremists'. Suddenly President Konare was talking of building a special centre for those who had made the pilgrimage and the First Lady abandoned wigs and elaborate hairdos in favour of headscarves, deemed more acceptable for married Muslim women in Mali. **TO HERE?**]*

If the third Islamic meeting in September had not been a kind of déjà vu, coming just two days before the attacks in the United States, it is unlikely it would have attracted the kind of attention that it did, not just among Malian politicians who attended this time but also among western diplomats, who were falling all over themselves to find out why Islamic leaders in Mali were suddenly complaining about how Mali's secular state was run. For almost a decade, those same western diplomats had been holding up Mali's democracy, led by President Alpha Oumar Konare, as a 'model for Africa'.

According to political scientist Cheibane Coulibaly, western dipomats had been taking for granted the tolerant and moderate Islam in Mali. Islam goes back more than a thousand years and shaped empires that flourished here – Ghana, Mali and Songhrai. Already in the 1300s, Emperor Mansa Musa, made a pilgrimage to Mecca, and when he passed through Timbuktu ordered construction of the Djingareiber, the central mosque that is a sacred Islamic landmark in use even today.

In the fifteenth century, Timbuktu was a world capital of Islam and a main centre for the spread of the faith throughout West Africa, with a university at the Sankore Mosque that housed 25,000 scholars and students of Islam. For these reasons, Malians view their Islamic faith as highly developed and mature, unsusceptible to political manipulation and extremism that they point to in neighbouring Algeria and in northern Nigeria.

But in a BBC programme recorded before 11 September, Coulibaly had suggested that incipient Islamic extremism in Mali, which could lead to Sharia law, was a reality. He interpreted it as a reaction to the way the west has handled the regime of President Alpha Oumar Konare, heaping praise on a government that has failed to deliver on the economic and education fronts. He said that poverty, ignorance and despair are a recipe for religious extremism.

Since that programme was aired, Coulibaly has been approached by US diplomats seeking, perhaps a little belatedly, information about the changing face of Islam in Mali. And since September 11, Imam Mamoud Dicko, who heads the umbrella group of Islamic associations, says he too has been invited to meet with American diplomats.

Dicko echoes allegations that are rampant in Mali's vast desert north, that the United States is operating listening posts and spy centres there to keep tabs on Islamic activities. 'This takes the problem in Mali to places it has never been.'

He also repeats a common complaint of opposition leaders such as Mountaga Tall and Choguel Maiga, as well as people on the streets in Bamako, that Mali's democracy has been hi-jacked by the outside world. Malians bristle when visiting western dignitaries land in Bamako and within minutes, start telling the nation what a wonderful president they have and how well Mali is governed.

'When I hear them,' says Choguel Maiga, 'I want to strangle them.'

According to Mountaga Tall, the government of President Konare is 'out of touch with the social, cultural and religious reality' in Mali. 'Muslims feel particularly

threatened,' he says. 'Their frustration can lead to ruptures, civic unrest and even violence.'

Imam Dicko is equally unimpressed by the way the red carpet is rolled out constantly to host visiting dignitaries — US Secretary of State Colin Powell, World Bank President James Wolfensohn, IMF head Horst Koehler. 'I am horrified when I hear on the radio that they're fighting poverty. It's all lies. You could bring the IMF headquarters here, but if people don't have work, you'll never defeat poverty. If the donors were going to end poverty, we'd already be developed. Our governments have made begging their way of operating, so how can you expect the poor people on the bottom not to beg. It makes you weep.'

With this kind of cynicism about western intentions rampant even before the attacks on New York and Washington and the US-led reprisals, it is perhaps not surprising that the Islamic leaders in Mali have strongly condemned the attacks on Afghanistan.

An association of Islamic youth has been formed to support the people of Afghanistan, the Taliban, and implicitly, Osama Bin Laden. Imam Dicko says it was only the intervention of older Islamic leaders that kept them off the streets with warnings that such public demonstrations 'would just feed the enemies of Islam.'

The anti-western, pro-Islamic sentiments that were making themselves heard only within the confines of the Palais de la Culture before 11 September, have now moved into the open in Mali. On the streets of Bamako, or Timbuktu, or even in farming villages like Ouelessebougou, what was before understated antipathy towards the west is surfacing as widespread condemnation of American foreign policy.

Many Malians express doubts about the culpability of Osama Bin Laden. If they were before, Malians are no longer discounting the Islamic factor in the upcoming presidential elections in April 2002, even if it is still something that few Malians, intensely proud of their faith and fiercely protective of their privacy on all matters religious, like to talk about.