**Female preachers and reshaping of Islamic authority in Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria: Lessons in institutional change and consolidation**

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Until the 1970s, in most Muslim societies formal teaching of Islamic religious texts has remained an exclusive preserve of ‘ulama (male scholars) trained in madrasas (Islamic schools). In the last three decades, however, the religious authority in Islam has undergone an important transformation whereby space has emerged for female preachers to speak in the name of Islam. These preachers are today visible across the Muslim world and so are their growing pools of followers. This paper maps the complex and diverse networks of female Islamic movements that have emerged in Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria since late 1970s and identifies the factors leading to their rise. The three-country comparison shows that the growing absorption of western values by states in Muslim societies has forced informal institutions, including religious institutions, to adapt in order to survive. Finding support in strategic theories of institutional change, the evidence from the three countries shows that the space for female preachers was created because of conscious calculations and strategic efforts on part of the ‘ulama. Conscious of the appeal of western-style modernity (promoted by the state) for young women, the ‘ulama preferred to share their authority with women from their households grooming them into leadership roles so that they could complement their efforts to promote religious piety within female segments of the society. The paper differentiates between the triggers for institutional change, and institutional consolidation.