

American Foreign Policy Council

SENEGAL

QUICK FACTS

Population: 13,300,410

Area: 196,722 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Wolof 43.3%, Pular 23.8%, Serer 14.7%, Jola 3.7%, Mandinka 3%, Soninke 1.1%, European and Lebanese 1%, other 9.4%

Religions: Muslim 94%, Christian 5% (mostly Roman Catholic), indigenous beliefs 1%

Government Type: Republic

GDP (official exchange rate):\$13.95 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated May 2013)



Although the country of Senegal borders Mali and Mauritania, which are plagued with violent Islamist activity, to date Senegal has shown no signs of jihadist terrorism. Senegal is a participant in USAFRICOM's Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, and has taken measures to counter terrorist financing and money laundering in the region. Geographically, however, Senegal presents a potential "backdoor" for radical, jihadist Islam, which already exhibits a major presence in rapidly-changing North Africa. About 25 percent of the world's Muslim population lives in Africa as a whole, under restrictive economic and political conditions that have elevated Islamist ideology as a plausible alternative for self-styled repressed out-groups.¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Some non-violent Islamism exists in Senegal, a nation where Sufi Muslim brotherhoods characterize cultural and political life, and where Islamism historically has not been revolutionary. Sufis believe that transforming society proceeds through purification of the personal soul. The emphasis instead is on pilgrimages, as well as the guidance of religious authorities (who outsiders called “saints”), ascending to the figure of “caliph.” The current presiding Senegalese Sufi caliph resides in Touba, north of Dakar. Moral integrity of the order is maintained by political authorities at a distance.²

This structure has not translated into a clear separation of religion and politics, however. Rather, “[t]he dynamics of religion and politics in Senegal have created relationships of dependence and cooperation between the government and the Sufi leaders and preserved peace and stability in the country... In the justice system there is a perfect (sic) harmony between secular and Islamic laws.”³ After September 11, 2001, Senegalese President Abdoulayeh Wade organized and hosted an anti-terrorism summit, calling upon African nations to sign a declaration denouncing terrorism as extremist and non-indigenous to Senegalese Muslim society.

However, Senegal’s weak security capabilities invite trouble on the *jihadi*-terrorist front. The Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Program of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) conducts exercises that aim to strengthen the ability of regional governments to counter terrorism.⁴ The capability of Senegal’s own security forces to detect and infiltrate militant Islamist groups, however, is low. Senegal’s borderlands are porous, and could be points of entry and operation for *jihadi* Islamists, now operating in Mauretania and southern Mali. This was demonstrated in the summer of 2012, when the Senegalese government arrested seven Mauritanian nationals suspected of being associated with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) near the border town of Dagona.⁵

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

About 94 percent of Senegal’s 13 million citizens are Muslim. The remaining population is Christian or animist. Currently, virtually all of Islam in Senegal is represented by two main Sufi orders: the Tijaniyyah and the Muridiyyah. Followers support specific *marabouts*, or “holy men,” a common phenomenon in West Africa. In Senegal, the *marabout* system is highly organized and hierarchical, more so than elsewhere in West Africa. Individuals become members through family inheritance and by continuing allegiance to a particular *marabout*. Sufis learn and recite a prayer litany, known as the *wird*, from their *marabout*. Knowledge of Islam, for many, is limited by what the

marabouts profess, so membership in a Sufi brotherhood requires only limited knowledge of Islam.⁶ The *marabout* system allows for regionally dominant groupings, but is not a major cause of friction in Senegal.⁷

The twenty indigenous ethnic groups in Senegal do not divide along religious lines. The Wolof group constitutes 43.3 percent of the population; the Serer and the Haalpulaaren groups each comprise 14.7 percent of the population.⁸ A smattering of small ethnic groups makes up the remainder of the population. Most people speak the Wolof language across the country. Ethnic conflict is minimal, largely confined today to the area known as the Casamance. Elements in that region south of Gambia (a territorial finger poked into the territorial belly of Senegal) have been fighting for autonomy or independence since the early 1980s.⁹

A debate about the Islamic nature of Senegal has waxed and waned since the country's independence in 1960. In the early 1990s, people worried that Islamic reformist beliefs, amid a possible presidential succession crisis and the emergence of the Iranian Revolution, posed a threat to the historic connection of organized Sufism and Senegalese politics.¹⁰ More recently, the religious overtures of the administration of President Abdoulaye Wade have allowed other, more activist groups to make religious advances. Two Islamist movements, the *Dahirat al-Mustarshidat* and the *Mouvement Mondial pour l'Unité de Dieu*, aim to disassociate from the traditional Sufi centers and to confront state power. These movements built upon earlier efforts in the 1970s of Islamist organizations, *Haraqat at Fallah* and *Jamaa Ibaadu Rahman*.¹¹

A few years ago these groups claimed 500,000 followers, about 8 percent of the population, while another source reports a quarter of a million Islamist followers within the population.¹² Both sets of figures are probably exaggerated, however. While still loosely tied to the traditional system of Sufi orders and their religious leaders, the newer Islamist leaders are innovative in their teachings. They preach almost exclusively to youth, whose environment they claim is not conducive to Islam as they are too much influenced by the West.

Veiling of women, a rare practice before the 1980s, "is now a common sight even among students."¹³ As the Senegalese state normally fails to provide adequate services, these movements are providing Islamic education and assistance for the poor. One innovation by these Islamist groups is the formation of "citizenship days," where people perform community service in the name of Islam.¹⁴

Further illustrating the partial blurring of ideological lines between Sufis

and Islamists, Sufism has been reinterpreted as a platform for dialogue and engagement with political authorities; maintenance of a separation between the secular and the sacred; and militant resistance to illegitimate authority. *The Comité Islamique pour la Reforme du Code de la Famille au Sénégal*, which emerged in 2001, re-launched a public campaign to push for reform of the country's 1972 family code to bring it more in line with Islamic law. President Wade rejected the demand, but it has not been withdrawn.

Although legislation in Senegal prohibits political parties from identifying with religion, the law does not specify if religious movements are allowed to form parties with no explicit religious reference.¹⁵ Two reformist groups—*Le Parti de la Verité pour le Développement* (PVD; Party for Truth and Development) and the *Parti de l'UNité et u Rassemblent* (PUR; Party of Unity and Togetherness)—have slipped through this loophole and formed political parties, distinguishing themselves from other political movements.¹⁶ Modou Kara, the founder of The Party for Truth and Development, claimed that he was asserting his rights as a citizen and not acting as a *marabout* in formulating the political party; his political platform rests upon the desire to alter state constitutions, although he has not been specific about what concrete changes he wishes to advance.¹⁷ In speeches, these reformists often refer to Arab religious leaders and groups, hinting at a connection to a wider network of Muslims. They view Islam as defining all aspects of life, although they stop short of calling for the abolishment of the secular state in favor of an Islamic Republic. They “excoriate both Marxism and liberalism, but the third way they want to impose is not Islamism properly speaking, but their own conception of a social and political Islam adapted to the order to which they belong.”¹⁸

A francophone education is no longer seen as necessary. “Ecoles franco-arabes” provide a religious education, along with French and other modern subjects. These schools are outside the state system and receive funding from Arab countries.¹⁹

Although there are a large number of Islamic non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Senegal, there is an acknowledgement of a widespread problem of corruption among them. Internationally-funded NGOs, such as the Saudi Organization Islamique de Secour and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), have increased their activities in the country since 2001.²⁰ There are also a small number of Shi'ite splinter groups that encourage political activity in the name of Islam, as well as former leftist secularists.²¹

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

While some authorities claim that Islamism is now in retreat, several forces have combined to renew the slide of Senegal in an Islamist direction.²² The *marabouts*, President Wade himself, a disaffected population (especially the youth), and finally, religious leaders and intellectuals who act to reinterpret and blur the connection between Sufism and Islamism, could in combination bring about what individually they have failed to do.

The *marabouts* maintain considerable influence over their followers, despite their lack of organization into a cohesive group. While still influential among their pious faithful, they are losing ground on secular matters (although they are still powerful enough that the government seeks their consultation). Though weakened and vulnerable, *marabouts* also retain entrenched economic positions, especially in certain food and livestock industries.

The Office of the President is another area where flirtations with the idea of an Islamic state might emerge. President Wade has made several ambiguous moves that suggest he is exploring connections to Islam, such as his visit to the “caliphate” center of Touba after his election; his version of the new constitution without reference to secularism; and his positive opinion of the law mandating religious education in schools, whether it be Christian or Muslim.²³

These actions could be an attempt to more fully co-opt religious leaders. Historically, there has been minimal hostility among the brotherhoods, as well as little animosity between Christians and Muslims. These moves can be seen as part of an effort by Wade to centralize powercover his lack of progress on matters of economy and society. In order to soothe grievances, the state busies itself with placating religious authorities instead of addressing actual social problems.²⁴

Religious instruction within the schools seems to pander to current trends and serves to insert the President into a controversy over control of Islamic education. Currently, parents may choose to send their children to a religious school to complement secular schooling, or in place of secular schooling altogether. By mandating religious education in schools, the government asserts more control over what type of religious doctrine is taught, potentially screening out religious teachers of an Islamist viewpoint. This system could also entice parents, who send their children to Islamic schools, to send them instead to the secular schools, where the government has more control over what they are taught.

Wade’s actions, which strongly suggest that he is steering Senegal in an Isla-

mist direction, may rather be attempts to further consolidate the state under his control.²⁵ At present, there is no mainstream support for an Islamist state. Intellectuals and other leaders, who collectively make up the current ruling class, overwhelmingly support secularism.²⁶ Nevertheless the population has become increasingly dissatisfied with the current political system, reflected in the decision of three-fourths of the population to abstain from voting in the 2007 parliamentary elections.²⁷ Since government controls the elections, people have little ability to affect change through balloting. Economic disaffection is also rampant; Senegal has one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, disproportionately affecting youth.²⁸ In April 2010, there were widespread protests in Dakar, calling for Wade to resign after demonstrating “monumental” indifference to public opinion by commissioning a multi-million dollar statue to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of independence.²⁹

The current secular-religious balance in Senegal will probably be more affected by the soundness of the economy and the viability of its political institutions, rather than a radical Islamist minority. Radical Islamist groups and militants have emerged, initially inspired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution and more recent anti-regime actions in North Africa, yet they remain in the minority. Although many Sufi brotherhoods and reform groups also share the Islamists’ opposition to U.S policies in the Middle East and the secularization of the family codes, they do not advocate the de-secularization of the state. Movements that do embrace reformist sentiments derived from the Arab world are mixed in their advocacy of the creation of an Islamic republic in Senegal.

ENDNOTES

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- [13] *Ibid*; Villalón, "Senegal: Shades of Islamism on a Sufi Landscape," 178.

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- [18] Samson, "Islam, Protest, and Citizen Mobilization," 267.
- [19] Marleen Renders, "An Ambiguous Adventure: Muslim Organisations and the Discourse of 'Development' in Senegal," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 32, no. 1 (February 2002), 64.
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