

Student Activism and the Repressive State: Reflections on the Political History of Senegal since Independence

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Over the last four decades the history of Senegal has been marked by an active participation of youths in socio-political movements. Representing more than half the population, the Senegalese youths been developing an increasing sense of awareness of their impact on the political life of the nation. Coveted but feared by the political establishment in a country where clientelism¹ is elevated to the status of a normal standard, youth involvement in the Senegalese political arena has been crucial in redefining the ways in which the state apparatus functions.

Concentrating on the university nucleus, this paper examines, through student activism, the role youths have played in the socio-political evolution of Senegal since the 1960s. The literature reviewed in this study will shed some light on different strategies used by the Senegalese government in order to cope with politicized student organizations that have traditionally remained hostile to its socio-political orientations. One of the important issues to be emphasized concerns the tendency for student activism to be more than just an expression of students' preoccupation with narrow academic matters; it rather expresses their self-appointed role as avant-garde activists in the struggle against the endemic malaise felt by the society.

If it is relatively easy to identify the category of people socially designated as students. It is less evident to define the limits of or criteria for youthfulness, even though the term "youth" is used indiscriminately here as if it were a given. I am quite aware of the difficulties of grappling with the crucial technicality of definition and delineation in the attempt to provide, if not some clear contours to the term "youth," at least, a sustainable theoretical rationale for its usage. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the group of people referred to as youths are mostly under the age of 30. But this is far from being a rigid and expert delineation, for as will be discussed later, what is attempted here is probing into the causes, meaning and effects of, say, social tensions like those following the contested results of the 1988 Presidential election, when a great segment of the "young" and not so young — students and non-students alike —

spontaneously expressed their discontent by pillaging and rampaging the symbols of the State. Another issue that deserves serious consideration concerns the "masculinization" of student activism due, on the one hand, to the low rate of single women attending college, and on the other hand, to dominant socio-cultural beliefs hindering the normal pursuit of college education by married females.²

Western education has, nonetheless, contributed to changing a great many of the cultural perceptions and attitudes regarding women, but the impact of these perceptions and attitudes is still far-reaching, even among women themselves. A certain standard of behavior, associated with the cultivation of poise, modesty, moderation and silence is expected of the "ideal" woman. More often women are expected to conform to the un-codified norms regulating gender-based social behavior rather than trespass those norms and run the risk of being labeled as "garçons manqués" ("failed boys"). To illustrate this pervasive attitude, the legendary Senegalese group, "Touré Kunda," sings in one of their best tracks — at least, rhythmically — the virtue of this "ideal" woman showcasing for the pleasures of her husband.³

With these incursions into the social role and status of women in Senegal, it is not surprising, as is arguably assumed, that female students generally choose to occupy the back rows when it comes to political engagement on campus. Generally speaking, our sisters are not as passive as our mothers. Nonetheless, a lot of what are perceived to be female virtues inculcated at home endure in the campus setting.

While considering student activism in Senegal, it is important to keep in mind that the latter has served as a channel through which confrontation with the government — colonial or neo-colonial — helped crystallize claims for new academic curricula which emphasized a revolutionary cultural agenda. Given the complex and eventful nature of student activism in Senegal during the postcolonial era (and even before independence), this study can only attempt to draw a sketchy analysis of this important segment of Senegalese history.

The tradition of student protest was initiated earlier during the colonial period, and it persevered throughout the history of Senegal in the post-colonial era. One of the student unions that have left an indelible imprint on the history of student unionism in Senegal, in particular, and in West Africa, in general, is the regional

UGEAO (Union Générale des Etudiants de l'Afrique de l'Ouest). Its existence was marked by interminable clashes with the Senegalese authorities. Since the university was seen as a key that gave access to the gates of social control, it became a major source of concern for the ruling socialist regime, that feared the establishment of solid collaborative networks between student organizations and the underground political opposition. In order to counteract political and social challenges to its hegemony, the government responded by using dissuasive methods that often fringed upon repression. After the dissolution of the UGEAO in 1964, the Dakar Students' Union (UED) and its Senegalese branch, the Democratic Union of Senegalese Students (UDES) were created in 1966 (Diop 1993:433).

One of the tactics employed by the regime to countervail student protest was to deport radical student leaders, if they came from other countries, or to prevent students from enrolling if they were Senegalese. But far from discouraging students, these repressive measures energized them even more and encouraged the politicization of the university. Consequently, students deemed it necessary to occupy the front line in "the emergence of groups with anti-assimilationist ideas, expressing them in struggles for the advancement of national languages, the reassertion of Senegalese cultural values, and the development of a more African or more Senegalese University" (Diop 1993a: 436). Versed in a nationalist struggle, students believed they were trying to salvage their country from a certain betrayal of the spirit of independence and the surrender of their national sovereignty by their leaders.

Interestingly, in terms of education, the persistent impact of French cultural assimilation kept the University of Dakar more French than truly Senegalese — at least during the first decade of independence. The Francophile penchant of the Senegalese President, Léopold Sédar Senghor, complicated the already turbulent relationships between the regime and student unions. Senghor rested his cultural politics on one of the pillars of what Aminata Diaw calls the "ideological triangle": Negritude, African Socialism, and Francophonie (Diaw 1993:298). Indeed, the first independent government of Senegal long held onto what came to be "ideologized" as the virtue of *dialogue*, thus promoting not only the retention of close ties between Senegal and France, but also drawing heavily on the French educational system. Clearly, the oft praised *dialogue* was a misnomer, because Senegal's relationship with France was

based less on reciprocity and more on institutional parasitism and dependence on the part of the former. Despite the institutionalization of *enracinement* (rootedness) and *ouverture* (openness) through the drafting of a National Cultural Charter, the transformation of the colonial structure was never an absolutely given reality in independent Senegal. So the end of the 1960s marked a continuity with the colonial system. As Diop argues, under Senghor's government, Senegal was still in a state of semi-bondage, as "the economy was dominated by foreign companies dating back to the colonial days; the educational system was ill-suited to national needs; the agricultural system was notoriously inefficient; and the political system was based on the purchase of allegiances" (1993a:7).

To many observers, the cultural orientations or projects of the government are strongly deficient in inspiration. Rationalizing about the production of cultural discourse, Souleymane Bachir Diagne writes:

At frequent intervals, society is invited to view with alarm the deterioration of so-called traditional values. Sometimes the problem is stated in terms of a failure to hand down said values correctly from generation to generation. In Senegal this issue recently stimulated a number of tentative policy proposals. Proponents of one such proposal, especially anxious to improve the upbringing of the younger generation, at one point suggested the drafting of a "list of values" which all Senegalese would be expected to live up to. They propose a corollary list — of negative values that good citizens should avoid. (Diagne, 1993:269)

The attempt to prescribe a list of cultural values for all Senegalese demonstrates the State's attempt to displace the site of cultural production from the social milieu to the level of the State apparatus. Rather than being generated from the base, culture is thus incongruously produced from the summit -- a procedure which is, perhaps, testimonial to the State's assigned role as a regulative and codifying body. But in this particular case, this role is usurped, because the production of a discourse on a given culture cannot substitute for the production of the culture itself, though the two systems of production are intrinsically linked to one another. The edification of a cultural value list by the State may sound all the more absurd as it reveals the efforts deployed by an uninspired regime to keep youths under control, while it has generally lost all credibility, at least, in the eyes of many of its young citizens, including — arguably — the majority of students. Indeed, one wonders how viable is the enact-

ment of cultural programs when the latter have very little to do with actual practice and everything with empty rhetoric. How is the discourse of power to be given any power and credence when the agents of this discourse are seen by many to whom the discourse itself should apply as sprawling in corruption, parading their dishonestly acquired wealth and not following the programs and policies they design for their citizens? It is this discrepancy between the politicians' profession of faith and their actual practices that radical student activism has often denounced by setting itself up against what is perceived as a sign of perfidy characteristic of the Senegalese political ethos.

Student activism in Senegal during the independent era could thus be explained partly in terms of confrontation with this state of mind characteristic of neo-colonial regimes that prosper on the misery of the population. Thus, in light of many other leftist circles around the world, Senegal was not spared by the revolutionary winds blowing in 1968. May 1968 entered the history books as a month of violent student demonstrations in Dakar, which disrupted the political order, and was partly motivated by an anti-French sentiment. The response to the demands of nationalist imperatives came to be recast not just in common political terms, but as "part of the struggle against 'Imperialism and its African puppets.'" The fathers of independence were trying to establish and consolidate a political order. The younger generations were shaking the foundations of that order" (Diop 1993:9). The students' anti-imperialist struggle aimed at the establishment of a "university at the service of Africa, not a sterilized factory for the production of culturally alienated individuals" (Diop 1993b:432). Such claims were all the more poignant as, since the creation of the University of Dakar in 1957, the standard instructional model remained basically French, just as French rule continued in other sectors in the form of what came to be euphemistically known as "technical cooperation."

Based on oppositional politics, the relationships between the Senegalese government and Student unions have always rested on a confrontational bedrock. The regime responded by adopting what Mamadou Diouf refers to as either "repressive tactics" or "cooptative tolerance" (Diouf 1993:247). As for student activists, given their affinity with the political left, they placed a great deal of effort on opposing many of the orientations put forth by the post-colonial regime, which they largely saw as a pawn in the service of the former, or, rather, *neo-colonial* master. The spirit of such mili-

tancy is exemplified by the UED (Union des Etudiants de Dakar) march on the American and British embassies to protest the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana in 1966 (Diop, 1993b:434).

The government repression of the student uprisings of the 1960s clearly set the tone for the deployment of violent means by the socialist regime to deal with students' discontent. Still consistent with its dissuasive methods and with the repressive state machine turned to full speed, the government dissolved the UDES and the UED in February 1971. Protest movements were forbidden on campus, and the implementation of these measures involved penalties ranging from two-year enrollment bans to complete dismissal.

The waves of repressive and violent strategies used by the State culminated in the death in prison of the charismatic student leader Omar Blondin Diop in May 1973. This threw more discredit on the Senegalese government, which used brutal methods in handling student protests. Mr. Diop's arrest followed a series of demonstrations by students involving setting fire to the French Embassy in Dakar. Despite criticisms from academics, the Senghor regime continued its iron grip on student political activism. The nominally independent Senegalese juridical system assumed its so-called independent role quite faithfully by levying harsh sentences on students suspected of distributing allegedly subversive tracts or accused of "torching school buildings"

But later, the regime had to come up with more thoughtful measures than overtly brutal repression, when the effects of the economic crisis, combined with social concerns voiced by new university graduates, came to graft themselves upon existing political problems. (Diop, 1993b: 445)

This new generation of intellectuals labeled themselves as "technocrats" whose ambition was to break away from "politics as usual," that is, the patron-client system characteristic of the Senegalese political culture. Reactions to this new mindset took the form of co-optation or ostracism, depending on whether or not one is willing to collaborate with the regime.

The politics of co-optation necessarily involves a patron-client relationship. Depending on the nature of the client's contribution to the patron/party, this relationship can be based on either "clan politics" or "ideological politics." The difference between the two orders of allegiance is explained by Sheldon Gellar.

Senegalese clan politics is highly personalized and revolves around the prestige of the clan leader and his ability to reward followers with favors, material resources, and reflected glory. In the context of Senegalese politics, clan leaders are not professional politicians. They can also be religious leaders, rural notables, heads of ethnic communities, business men, or trade unionists vying for power within their own community or organization. Unlike clan politics, which is based on patron-client relationships and a share of the spoils of office, ideological politics in Senegal is primarily concerned with winning the hearts and minds of the Western-educated intellectual elite. (1982: 28, 30)

Tested against the reality of Senegalese politics, however, Gellar's paradigm is confronted with limitations. What the paradigm does not indicate, for example, is that it may happen that the two orders of allegiance conflate. For instance, at different points, opposition parties — under the guidance of their leaders — such as the PIT (Independence and Labor Party), the LD/MPT (Democratic League/Labor Party Movement), the PAI (African Independence Party), and the PDS (Senegalese Democratic Party) have all, in recent history, supported the Socialist Party either for the election of its candidate or for the management of national affairs. When they worked with the ruling majority, the leaders of these parties did not just contribute intellectually, they also represented a source of popular support — either in the form of votes or by way of contributing to social stability.

The same general patterns of co-optation persisted even after the resignation of Senghor from office in December 1980. Although he arrived in power in favor of what many Senegalese refer to as a "constitutional coup d'état,"¹⁴ Abdou Diouf, formerly Prime Minister under Senghor, managed during the first few months of his presidency to play the trump card of a technocrat without any clientelist bent. He marked his entrance to the Presidential Palace of Avenue Roume, now Avenue Léopold Sédar Senghor, by a series of revolutionary measures which led many Senegalese to believe that a truly pacific revolution had just begun to take place in the political life of the nation. His influence on the Parliament resulted

in the passing of a dissuasive law on the embezzlement of public funds. Another radical move was the General Conference on Education and Training (Etats Généraux de l'Education et de la Formation), which challenged both the functioning and the design of the educational system in the post-independence era (Diop, 1993b: 462).

Yet many Senegalese soon discovered that either their new President was not totally genuine or that he simply did not have the means to carry out his ambitious projects: corruption within the Socialist Party — his own Party — being so ingrained that to execute such drastic measures as those passed by the Assembly regarding illicit enrichment was synonymous to levying a death sentence on the head of many of its corrupt leaders. It stood to reason that the latter were neither ready nor willing to let the apparent honesty of a fledgling President determine their political demise.

As with his predecessor, a good segment of the youth population soon became disaffected with Abdou Diouf. He inaugurated his reign with a speech encouraging the youth of the country to internalize certain cultural and socio-political values developed around the theme of "National Pride" (Sursaut National). The official ideology encouraging the youth to adhere to these so-called values is very reminiscent of the appeal to *enracinement* and *ouverture* which were in vogue earlier under Senghor:

The most serious threat to the future of the Senegalese school system, and therefore to the future prospects of Senegalese society as a whole, is the absence of moral and public spirit among our youth. The country's youth are capable of demonstrating positive determination in numerous fields of activity. But they have inherited ambivalent cultural attitudes; they are subject to the penchant for ideological confusion inevitable in all periods of crisis; they are tempted to initiate foreign lifestyles and mindsets. They are habitually under-supervised, and sometimes simply abandoned to their own devices. Psychologically, all this makes them extremely vulnerable. (*Sénégal d'Aujourd'hui*, 34, Septembre 1985: 4-11; quoted in Diop, 1993a: 21).

But the problem with such encouragement is that since the times of the Senghor regime, the Senegalese youth have been used to hearing nicely shaped rhetoric on what socio-political or cultural orientation the country needs to take. But what interests these differently minded youths is a language couched in real-life experience: they need jobs, and any measure that fails to tackle the structural problems geared toward resolving that one problem is of second order. The appeal to National Pride cannot effectively reach a young population confronted with the mounting precariousness of their educational system and the ever frightening bleakness of their future. These worries, expressive of a state of anxiety over the risks of social exclusion, find a vibrant echo in the words of Pierre Bourdieu, when he writes: "Formerly, their [the students'] status implied a guaranteed place as starters in the race toward the future. Now they have been reduced to non-starters. In reaction, they intend to challenge the validity of the race itself" (1984:225).

Challenging what Bourdieu has dubbed "the validity of the race" is an attempt to acquire "a place in the shade."⁵ This is done through an interrogation of established socio-political power structures. In this respect, students now resort more often to violence in their attempts to force the regime to pay attention to their demands. Unfortunately, however, they have very often met with a somehow strategic response on the part of the government. The latter's strategies include turning a deaf ear to students' claims until exhaustion and anxiety over the risks of an "Année Blanche"⁶ start seeping through their ranks.

In an atmosphere where the fulfillment of the austere conditions imposed by the IMF and the World Bank seems to take precedence over the satisfaction of a social and academic minimum, striking has now become more than an exception to the rule in the Senegalese University system. Additionally, although the government has remained their most staunch enemy, it is no longer the only one they have to confront. If the last two decades have been similar to the previous two in terms of the politicization of the university, the nature of the traditional coalitions has not remained unchallenged. Whereas the political left has traditionally harbored complicity between radical student movements and teachers' demands for better living and working conditions, the relationship between the two main bodies of the university life — students and professors — has at times gone sour in the last decade. Faced with

the precariousness of their training and the perfidy of the government, students have grown distrustful of official statements concerning the amelioration of their situation. They also challenge their teachers' qualifications by demanding that a university educational service be set up to monitor teachers. With these demands, the history of student protest has come full circle, in that these demands resemble those of previous generations who asked for a homology of their instructional curriculum with French standards. In sum, the old coalition patterns have largely been disrupted: in the past, students fought for the Africanization of faculty positions, but now they voice their concerns over the "mediocritization" of the training provided by a faculty more concerned about moonlighting than carrying out their jobs conscientiously.

This somber picture of the socio-political situation in Senegal does not seem to augur bright perspectives for the youth of this country, including the few who wallow their way through higher education. In the face of their predicament as the "sacrificed generation," many young people choose to openly challenge the social structures put into place by adults. Urban violence has now become a frighteningly endemic phenomenon. As the Office of Prevision and Statistics (Direction de la Prévision et de la Statistique) reports about the current economic and social situation of Senegal (November 1998), the crime rate has been following an alarmingly ascending pattern for the last three years.⁷

To many young Senegalese, the alleged or proven incompetence of the ruling elite has been invoked as the root cause of their surrender into a life of crime, where refuge into the illusory escape provided by drug addiction seems to be the only alternative. Such escapism into the underworld of sex, drugs, and dejection is powerfully represented by Amadou Saalum Seck in his film *Saaraba*. This film denotes a dreamworld where people will or *would* — depending on whether that dreamworld is a place left behind in the past or one that is to be reached in the future — live in happiness and comfort. Instead of the promise of happiness, however, all hopes are dashed and disillusionment sets in, partly because society is gangrened by corruption and dishonesty.

Convinced that the model of society devised by the elders has failed, because it has been unable to respond to their ideals, many young Senegalese, like those featured in Seck's film, prefer to find refuge elsewhere — i.e., by crossing established cultural boundaries, even if they cannot but remain within the territorial

bounds of Senegal. They call themselves "Génération Boul Falé" ("No Fear Generation") not because there is nothing for them to be fearful of, but because they cynically express anxiety, frustration and disillusionment by demonstrating, through a reinvention of Senegalese popular art, a set of attitudes and behaviors that indicate their declaration of separation from the world of their elders. Conversely, their cynicism is a symbolic demand to define the configurations of their own world, even if this means a divorce from the cultural traditions set up by elders. Purposefully, these youths venerate idols from other cultural horizons or simply create their own, thus finding an ironic rationale for what was earlier referred to as "the absence of moral and public spirit among our youth" (*Sénégal d'Aujourd'hui*, 34, Septembre 1985: 4-11; in Diop, 1993a: 21). But rather than indicative of any absence of a moral fiber among them, the challenges to the authority of the State and the elders launched by the country's youths — student activists in the forefront — are testimonies to the failure of the ineffective or uninspired social projects designed for them. To sanction this failure and express their repulsion for their status as social outcasts without opportunities, the Senegalese youths have left an indelible signature on the recent presidential elections by voting massively for change, as if to make it to known once for all that, henceforth, they will imperatively have to be considered as "starters," to use Bourdieu's term, in the race for their own future.

Notes

¹ I will expand on the significance of political clientelism later in my discussion of the strategies employed by the ruling party in securing the support of people who are capable of advancing its propagandistic agenda, thanks to their capacity to rally numerous votes. The phrase "political clientelism" is also used to denote the process of co-optation that characterizes the regime's attempt to phagocytize ideological adversaries. For a better understanding of our own use of the term "clientelism," it might be helpful to put it in correlation to Immanuel Wallerstein's use of it in broader political scientist terms. Following Wallerstein (1966: 208 and *passim*), Edward Schumacher writes: "political clientelism may be defined as 'a more or less personalized relationship between actors (i.e., patrons and clients), or sets of actors, commanding unequal wealth, status or influence, based on conditional loyalties and involving

mutually beneficial transactions.”” Wallerstein, “The Decline of the Party in African Single-Party State,” in Joseph LaPalombara and Myron Weiner, eds., *Political Parties and Political Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 208 and passim (Shumacher 1975:1).

² It is important to mention that this remark does not seek to downplay the growing patterns of late marriages which now tend to be more and more frequent among young Senegalese. For instance, the 1988 general census (the last to date) gives a percentage of 57.2% of single women aged 15-19, nearly a 1% increase compared to the results published two years earlier by another source (EDS), which gives (56.5%) concerning the same age group. Significantly, the 1988 figures represent almost a 7% increase in the number of single women, compared to what it was 10 years earlier, according to the ESF sources (in 1978, 40.9% of women aged 15-19 were single). But between the age of 20 and 24 — the average age at which many young people who pass their baccalaureat examination should be attending college — there is a noticeable decline in the percentage of single women: 30.2% (Recensement 1988); 22.6% (EDS 1986); 14.1% (ESF 1978). The increase pattern in the percentage of single women is also noticeable among women between the age of 25 and 29: 12.2% (Recensement 1988); 7.2% (EDS 1986); and 4.4% (ESF 78). Source *Recensement* 19. Based on the 1988 census, only 19.5% of women aged 15 or more — a segment which includes those who have attained the average age for college education — were single during the time of the census.

³ Despite the fact that the rhythm is just superb, this song is, in my opinion, extremely sexist and demeaning to both women and men: to the former because they are seen as being no more than *just* pretty objects, and to the latter because they are defined as epitomizing nothing but vanity. The lyrics are as follow: *Jongoma déél wax nijaay. Bu ngoon jotee, nanga sangu, solu, xeñal lu neex. Boo jegee sa jekër mu contaan* [Lady, say Darling. When the evening comes, take a thorough bath, dress up nicely and smell good. When you get near your husband, he will be delighted].

⁴ The political history of Senegal is quite rich in spectacular constitutional revisions. It is such revision as the one taken in April 1976

that permitted the Prime Minister, Abdou Diouf, to take over the duties of the President in case the latter should resign or die. He would then serve as President until the next presidential election. Such a measure was significant in so far as it enabled the dauphin, whom the President wanted to see instated as his successor, to become accustomed to and comfortable with his position as President before the presidential elections. He may, thus, later have an edge over his opponents, since he has the advantage of using all the clientelist resources necessary for securing his own election. Since the amendment of the constitution which allowed Abdou Diouf to become Prime Minister in 1970, so much trimming, shaping and reshaping of the Constitution has been made that one would be inclined to believe that in Senegal the dubious parliamentary majority detain the right to dispose of the constitutional rights of the citizens just as they please without any concern for weighing over the deep meaning and impact of their votes. One of the last revisions to date is the increase in the presidential term from 5 back to 7 years.

⁵ This is meant to be a metaphorical inversion of the phrase "to seek a place in the sun," commonly used for someone who tries to achieve material success. In the case of Africa — at least, for the most part — it simply wouldn't make any sense to use this expression, especially when people toil everyday *in the sun* so as to improve their condition. Rather than a "place in the sun," they would most definitely crave a "place in the shade."

⁶ The phrase "Année Blanche" denotes the invalidation of the academic year due to long periods of strikes. This phenomenon has now become endemic in the Senegalese school system to a point where one may be tempted to argue that striking is rather a rule than an exception.

⁷ See Abdoulaye Ann, "Violence urbaine: Les racines du mal," *Wal Fadji*, Saturday April 24, 1999.

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