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Social Contract:  
Religious Leaders in Politics**

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## **The Evolution of the Senegalese Social Contract: Religious Leaders in Politics**

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### **Abstract**

Senegal is a secular republic where the vast majority of the population is Muslim (94%). Islam in Senegal has been built with the religious current known as “Sufism” (Kung, 2010: 450-470). In this branch of Islam the spiritual leader, called a “marabout”, has an appreciable and important impact on his disciples. Thanks to the trust and admiration of the population, these marabouts have built a strong patronage network (Beck, 2002:532). During the colonial experience, the French administration agreed to negotiate with the Muslim elite to capture this popular support. This informal agreement allowed a peaceful coexistence: the French colonial power received popular support while religious leaders gained several benefits including some recognition of Islam as a state religion (O'Brien, 2002:27). This compromise, described as the Senegalese social contract by O'Brien (O'Brien, 1981), was renewed by the new political leaders in the 60s. For over 25 years presidents Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906-2001) and Abdou Diouf had received unconditional support from the spiritual leaders in exchange for some presents and advantages. However, for more than 15 years the Senegalese social contract was questioned by the people. Thus, some disciples seem to challenge the closeness between spiritual and political leaders (Samson, 2006:5). Despite this contestation, the candidates in the Senegalese presidential elections still try to get closer to the spiritual leaders to demand their support.

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## Introduction

Described in the 1980s, the concept of the Senegalese social contract reflects the political organization established in Senegal from the second half of the 19th century. Thanks to their popular legitimacy, the marabouts and other great religious leaders became privileged intermediaries between the colonial power and the people. After a path of accommodation (Robinson, 2004) which extended until the 20th century, an informal alliance formed between the colonial rule and the religious elite in Senegal. On the eve of independence, the influence of marabouts on Senegalese society was so important that the new political class renewed this alliance. Until the end of the 1980s, presidents Léopold Sédar Senghor and Abdou Diouf received clear support from several great marabouts during the exercising of their function, especially during each election period. In return for voting instructions issued by marabouts, leaders of the Socialist Party expressed their gratitude in various forms: land, financial donations, etc. Nonetheless, the situation changed when, during the 1988 election, followers refused to watch their religious leaders intervene in politics. Since then, no significant religious leader has given voting instructions for a presidential candidate. Aware of the change in the marabouts' attitude, President Abdoulaye Wade did not however hesitate to honour religious leaders during his term. Through historical analysis, this article looks back on the evolution of the Senegalese social contract. Based on our research carried out during the presidential campaign of 2012, this document shows why the question of the religious leaders in Senegal cannot be avoided by the political leadership even if the effective support of the marabouts seems now to have gone.

## Islam in Senegal

### *Process of Islamization of the Senegambia*

In Senegal, Islamization occurred at different times in different regions. The region of Futa-Toro should be dissociated from the former Empire of Jolof (Diouf, 1990:31-41). In Futa-Toro, the first traces of the conversion of the *Toucouleurs* date back to the 11th century (Monteil, 1964:124). However, until the 18th century and the *Torodo* revolution, Islam was not hegemonic in these lands and, on the contrary, some dynasties attached to traditional beliefs tended to limit its spread. For the Jolof Empire, Islamization is probably recent. Although traces of Islam were found in the 13th century, it is nevertheless clear that it remained confined to the aristocracy. It was a religious elite composed of scholars. This is why, in general, literature (Gouilly, 1952; Monteil, 1964; O'Brien, 1981 etc.) considers that Islamization refers rather to the first mass conversions that took place in the 18th century following the jihad of the Futa-Toro which will be spreading throughout the region.

*Sufism and the brotherhood organization in Senegal*

The first Sufi communities appeared from the 10th century but the mystique of Islam became really popular from the the 14th century. Although today the Sufi orders are generally recognized as “an expression of popular Islam parallel and complementary to official Islam” (Piga, 2002:36), Sufism is subject to religious criticism. Some spiritual leaders are regarded as true saints and are revered by their disciples. Their tombs become places of worship and pilgrimage (O’Brien, 1981:12). Some illiterate *sheikhs* convey an anti-intellectual image of Sufism and lead a number of scholars to dismiss these practices of Islam as being too populist. Besides these religious critics, Sufism is also treated with some wariness in the political arena. While the movement has experienced ambivalent relationships with political authorities, the mystical orders were also to be places of critics of political power. However, the religious message remains at the heart of the Sufi ideology. Contrary to what Piga advanced (2002:53), joining a *tariqa* cannot be reduced to a political commitment “cleverly camouflaged under the guise of the more benign religious language”. The success of Sufism is likely explained by the brotherhood organization. For each of its brotherhoods, there is a famous founder, a caliph. He is the founder of the mystical order and his disciples follow his teaching. He is the intermediary between God and men, the spiritual guide whom each disciple needs throughout his initiatory path through the mystical way. The disciple must surrender into the hands of his sheikh if he wants to reach the inner experience of divine reality. The brotherhood extends gradually as the caliph delegates some of his authority to other marabouts. These ramifications and fragmentations of brotherhood authority have increased the number of followers of the mystical orders. There are many brotherhoods across the Muslim world. Some have a global reach while others appear only locally. The most important brotherhoods in Senegal are the *Qadiriya*, the *Tijaniya* and the *Mouridiya*.

**Relations between the political and religious authority**

*The colonial era: the construction of the Senegalese social contract*

The first contacts between the Atlantic coast and Europeans date back to 1444 with the arrival of the Portuguese. The trade routes of West Africa attracted the interest of European chambers of commerce (Diouf, 1990:35). However, until the early 19th century, the European presence in the Senegambia remained confined to a small number of trading posts and a few military forts, often in poor condition, along the rivers. It was only in 1850 that the French colonial plans for the Senegambia region were drawn up. Under the authority of the Minister of Colonies and under the influence of the chambers of commerce of Bordeaux and Marseille (*Id.*:171), Governor Louis Faidherbe (1818-1889) laid the foundations for French colonial rule in Senegal. In the early years of his term, Governor Faidherbe was mainly responsible for consolidating and defending the French possessions in the region of Futa Toro. The networks

promoted by the French governor were active primarily around the trade in Arabic gum. However, the different taxes collected along the trading routes and the problem of foreign competition would quickly reduce the profitability of the product. To overcome the collapse of the market, the French chambers of commerce turned to an alternative product: peanuts (Saint-Martin, 1989:155). Marketing of peanuts required, however, that the French presence turned away from the north of the country to focus on inland regions. It was in 1861 that the first military operations were carried out in the region. Until the late 19th century, economic interests were the main factor influencing the colonial policy of France. Military conquest, peace treaties, alliances, the withdrawal of troops and the return of some territories were often explained by commercial interests.

On the image of Louis Faidherbe, the attitude of the governors with religious leaders remained ambivalent until the end of the 19th century. In keeping with the objectives of the colonial project and the different local contexts, the French supported some marabouts in their struggles against traditional aristocracy but finally abandoned them to their fate: "This protection was not without obligations or eclipses: Diambour people had a painful experience when their uprising against the damel, deemed undesired by the Governor, received no support from him" (Id.:277). However, the French authorities did not want to weaken Islamization in Senegal. They just strengthened the most compliant Muslim leaders and reduced the influence of the marabouts, considered as fanatics (Robinson, 2004:130). Some of them were imprisoned or deported while others were killed. For instance, Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of the Mouridiya, had been exiled for seven years in Gabon and four years in Mauritania because of a distant and mistrusting attitude towards the French. Because of the Islamic revolution and the establishment of a theocracy in the Futa Toro region during the 18th century, the marabouts of the Tijaniya from this area were considered by France as preachers calling for a holy war: "France was opposed to the Islamic states and reform movements, especially when management was Tijani and Tokolor and central interests were at stake, such as the river valley and the peanut basin" (Id.:146). This stereotype promoted the expansion of another brotherhood, the Qadiriya. Mainly Moors, the marabouts of the Qadiriya were perceived by France as more tolerant than their neighbours, the *Toucouleur*. It was with these Qadiri dignitaries that French Governors established the first lasting exchanges. They were involved in various military campaigns and engaged in diplomatic missions on behalf of France. Moreover, the combination with these marabouts allowed the French to enjoy their commercial networks in both the Arabic gum and peanut sectors (Id.:56). When, in the late 19th century, French troops completed colonization, colonial rule approached the influential inland marabouts, especially in the peanut basin.

In the early 20th century, Senegal was a conquered territory, but the lack of legitimacy of the French authorities led them to revise the political organization of the area. The French adopted the indirect rule of the British colonial administration: "[...] the colonial administration had to find ways other than whips and sticks to impose



its authority. It had to convince the force behind, it is true, but give the evidence to the subjects that it was possible not only to accept the colonial Government but to enjoy it” (O’Brien, 2002:18). Destruction of indigenous forms of authority by the French led to a reorganization of the political clan whose marabouts became the elite. Aware of this power of influence on Senegalese society, the colonial administration recognized that the marabouts offered interesting possibilities for cooperation (O’Brien, 1981:7-30). According to a tacit agreement, the leaders of the Muslim brotherhoods accepted the role of intermediary. It was the colonial administrator Paul Marty (1882-1938) who, through his research, influenced the French policy on the Muslim question. In 1912 he argued that it was useful or even necessary for France to support the religious brotherhoods. Ultimately, an indescribable alliance developed between the colonial power and the marabouts. Islamic leaders helped to maintain social order, bringing the loyalty of their followers to the colonial power. In return, the colonial administration was committed to limiting its intervention in the religious field and offered many benefits, particularly material benefits, to cooperative marabouts (*Id.* :24). This policy of rapprochement enabled France to head off a pan-Islamic revolt driven on the eve of WWI by the Ottoman sultan (Diallo, 1997:408-420). Following this logic of reconciliation, most great marabouts took position to the France and helped to prevent this attempted uprising of Muslim populations (ANS 19G1&19G2).

#### *Independence and hegemony of the Socialist Party*

This alliance between the brotherhood and the colonial authority that Cruise O’Brien called the Senegalese social contract (O’Brien, 1981) was reused by politicians at the time of independence. The new political elite in Senegal had to get along with the marabouts to receive electoral support, but also to benefit from a minimum of popular legitimacy which the modern state, a Westernized political model, could not acquire for itself. By the 1940s Léopold Sédar Senghor and the new Senegalese ruling class occupied the religious space of the country. Elected a member of parliament in 1948, the politician attached to defend a series of measures favourable to the Muslim electorate of Senegal: the creation of Arab chairs in schools and colleges, scholarships for the study of Arabic in the states of North Africa, an increase in the quota of pilgrims to Mecca, etc (Magassouba, 1985:86-87). Unlike his competitors, Senghor did not hesitate to turn to the rural population “Before the peasants everywhere, he shows in his hand a 5,000 CFA-franc note[...], promises to peanut producers that, if elected, the price per kilo of peanuts will increase to 50 CFA francs ([...]. This promise does not leave unaffected the rural notables who are concerned by the problems of peanuts » (Traoré, 1966:49). It was through these political tours that the future president of Senegal found a strong friendship with the general caliph of the Mouridiya, El Hadj Faliou Mbacké, who gave him his support until his death in 1968 (Magassouba, 1985:84). In the aftermath of independence, the Senegalese state was oriented in a policy of integration of the peasant masses. As noted by Diop, Diouf (2002:29): “The

cooperative movement must mobilize the rural population, carry out national agricultural development and African socialism. Such an orientation specifies the role of the peasantry in the construction of the national State [...]”. Then, several national societies were created to oversee the development of the rural world. If ultimately the results of this agricultural policy did not achieve the economic objectives expected, this allowed the State to create relays of power throughout the territory (ID: 30). Like his predecessor, Abdou Diouf renewed this alliance between the State and the brotherhoods. He received the support of the great marabouts in all elections. However, things changed after the presidential elections of 1988. The victory of President Diouf with 83% of the vote caused serious riots in urban areas where the people denounced the results as fraudulent. The Senegalese refused to vote for Abdou Diouf and therefore refused to respond to the appeal made by the marabouts to support the outgoing president: “The doubt is concentrated in the Holy City of Touba, where the leader of the mourides, Khalife General Abdou Lahat Mbacké, received an e-mail of protest thrown in his residence challenging the validity of the 1988 election ndigel<sup>1</sup>” (O’Brien, 2002:92).

*Presidential election of 2000: “sopi” or the political change of Abdoulaye Wade?*

On the evening of March 19, 2000, the first results of the second round of the presidential election left no more hope for the Socialist Party. The official announcement of the results by the National Commission gave 58% of the vote to Abdoulaye Wade against 42% for Abdou Diouf. Despite two terms as Minister of State, the politics of Abdoulaye Wade were always characterized by their affiliation to the opposition camp. Following his accession in March 2000, Abdoulaye Wade built his presidency around a simple and evasive project which allowed him to federate and to organize the Senegalese opposition forces. Through his oratorical talents he persuaded the Senegalese that these presidential elections were elections of change. In each of his speeches and meetings, Abdoulaye Wade repeated that he was the candidate of the *sopi* (change). The core of his presidential campaign was a promise to the Senegalese people a promise that marked the end of the century of Senghor, “partisan politics”, corruption and the clientelistic system. Once elected, President Wade reiterated his commitment in his speech of April 03, 2000: “I want that the Government of the new regime is different from that of the former regime, which was one of the improvisations and approximations. I told them [the new ministers] I want a Government of righteous ministers” (Niang, 2006:201). And yet, very quickly the political practices of the Wade system broke the election promises. The Senegalese soon realized that political patronage would remain a component of the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade. The real *sopi* proposed by Wade probably resided in the question of the relationship between politics and religion. Not since the end of the colonial period had the relationship between the political and religious leaders shown such ostentation. With the presidency of Abdoulaye Wade the religious

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<sup>1</sup> Ndigel (Wolof): A religious order used as a voting advice.

convictions of politicians and ministers could no longer be hidden. President Wade appeared as a disciple of the Mouridiya. What about the patronage system? Some of the acts of Abdoulaye Wade suggested a deep questioning of this model. Thus, one of the first measures of the new president was to cancel the diplomatic passports distributed by Abdou Diouf on the eve of the presidential elections. However, this action very quickly proved to be a simple manipulation: "It's just political strategy. The new power wants to take control of state resources used by the PS clientelistic networks" (*Id.*:541). Despite no support from marabouts during election campaigns, President Wade continued to maintain good relations with the religious authorities because he knew that their words were welcomed with more respect and interest by the ordinary people than those which were uttered by politicians. However, good intentions towards religious elites were not the prerogative of the president. Nevertheless, Abdoulaye Wade was distinguished from the other candidates by the importance of his offerings to religious leaders:

*Diplomatic passports, cars, land, exemption from taxes on imports, Wade granted many privileges to the religious leaders, creating a bulimia of money. When you want to give to everyone, this is where the problems begin, because it is a bottomless well. During his last tour in Touba, Wade has distributed about 10 billion (Kebe, décembre 2011).*

### **Presidential election of 2012: the end of religion in politics?**

During the year 2011 the world was riveted to the popular demonstrations that occurred in several Arab countries. The riots of June 23 in Dakar went unnoticed. The media whirlwind surrounding the Arab spring really never focused on the events that have marked Senegal during recent months. The analysis of these riots, known as the revolt of the peanuts, remained too superficial. What happened in Dakar? The riots were triggered when a bill was adopted by the Council of Ministers on 16 June 2011, creating a presidential ticket with a quarter blocking. Fearing confiscation of power by Abdoulaye Wade and his son Karim, the bill was criticized by the political opposition, Benno Siggil Senegaal, and actively contested in the streets. Following these events, the bill was cancelled by President Wade on June 23 (RFI, 24 June 2011). Since that day, the social climate has remained tense in Dakar. The verdict of the Constitutional Council on the admissibility of the candidacy of President Wade would make the problem worse. It was no real surprise the Constitutional Council validated the application of Abdoulaye Wade and 13 other candidates. Riots erupted in Dakar and other cities around the country. Following the violence, the Mouridiya and the Tijaniya general caliphs intervened to call for calm and restraint (Le quotidien, January 30, 2012). Tensions persisted until the eve of the first round of the election. In their speeches, all the presidential candidates tried to attract the support of the religious leaders of the country. However, the great religious leaders of Senegal

abstained and continued to call for calm. The situation could have degenerated when the Minister of the Interior, Ousmane Ngom, was taken hostage in Tivaouane for more than nine hours by the disciples of the Tijaniya. Requests for the general caliph of Tijaniya to let the Minister leave the city were not heard by the crowd and only the intervention of the special Senegalese forces regulated the situation. (*L'Observateur*, 20 February 2012). During the last days of the campaign, the fear that the riots would grow if Abdoulaye Wade won at the first round was strong in the capital. However, the announcement of the preliminary results on the evening of February 26 did not leave any doubt for the second round between President Wade and his former Prime Minister, Macky Sall. Gathered around Macky Sall for the second round, the other presidential candidates renounced the coalition made by Wade two days after the proclamation of the first results. Alone on the political scene, Abdoulaye Wade tried to obtain other support from the influential marabouts. Although some marabouts responded to his appeal, the general caliphs of the Mouridiya and Tijaniya remained neutral. It was no real surprise when Macky Sall won the presidential elections of March 25, 2012. That same evening, the outgoing president contacted Macky Sall to congratulate him on his victory and thus bring an end to the unstable context in which Senegal had been plunged for several months.

## Conclusion

In Senegal, what is the role of the marabouts in politics today? The Senegalese social contract describes a mode of policy organization which was built during the colonial period and which seems to have been maintained until today. Of course, this form of organization has changed through different historical sequences and under the influence of various socio-economic contexts. As O'Brien has shown, it is through their popular legitimacy that marabouts have become privileged intermediaries between the State and the people. In the mid 1980s, in the areas most influenced by marabouts, the opinion of these spiritual leaders was globally respected. Followers have always thought by themselves, but as highlighted by Coulon (1982:264): "In Senegal you are marabout taalibe before being a citizen of a state". The political elections of 1988, however, marked a turning point in the political life of Senegal: the economic crisis and the release of the clientelistic networks of the Socialist Party, the proximity between some marabouts and political leaders, corrupt religious leaders and the will for change of the Senegalese people all caused a weakening of the social contract. Accordingly, the marabouts abandoned the politics of Senegal. For example, the general caliph of the Mouridiya declared in 1993: "You will vote as you want, just don't ask my ndïgel" (O'Brien, 2002: 92). President Wade knew that the links between the disciples and his marabouts were crumbling. However, Abdoulaye Wade sought the support of religious leaders during his term and during the presidential campaign. Abdoulaye Wade is a politician who has spent more than 30 years of his political career in

opposition. He knows all the ins and outs of Senegalese policy and knows that the Senegalese people are attached to the country's 'cultural values. In Senegal, a politician, and especially the President of the Republic, must display a deep respect for the marabouts even if they don't support him. This attitude is important for a population that is not prepared to sacrifice its cultural heritage for development and modernity.

What about the Senegalese social contract? If it is significantly weakened, it nevertheless remains an important component of Senegalese policy. On the one hand, because the marabouts are close to clientelistic networks that can still be useful for Senegalese politicians, and on the other hand, because this social contract refers to cultural values too anchored in Senegalese society to be neglected, as demonstrated by the incident on 19 February in Tivaouane. It was probably for these reasons that Macky Sall, once elected, quickly toured the holy cities and paid tribute to the great marabouts in Senegal.

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