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Senegal: Homophobia and Islamic Political Manipulations

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Senegal: homophobia and Islamic political manipulation

An unprecedented homophobic wave began to surge over Senegal in early February, 2008. Reacting to a number of press articles about homosexuality in Senegal, a few numbers of imams, religious Muslim associations, male politicians known for their fundamentalist stances and journalists have all been leading an extremely virulent campaign against the supposed “degradation of morality and disrespect for religious values.” Their reaction follows the publication of an article in a February issue of Magazine Icone¹ about a supposed marriage between two homosexuals. According the editor, the aim was to “alert authorities on the growth of homosexuality among young people.”

At dawn on Monday of February 4th, the Division of Criminal Investigations (DIC) arrested about ten people present at the ceremony, including a popular singer. After being detained for four days, they were released without any explanation.

This event was followed by an onslaught of homophobic hysteria generated by the president of a fundamentalist² political party and around fifteen Muslim organizations (the Collective of Senegalese Islamic Associations (CAIS). In a communiqué, CAIS denounced “an increase in homosexuality in Senegal” and proclaimed that “for several years, homosexual lobbies have been leading an offensive aiming to destabilize our society. The recent escalation of this insidious homosexual campaign has led to a scandalous celebration of an unnatural marriage which gravely threatens to unbalance our moral values and our country’s stability.” The group called upon authorities to “fight against homosexuality before it will be too late.”

The media has highlighted this subject daily during the entire month of February, offering programs and debates about homosexuality among sociologists, experts in Qu’ranic studies, legal experts and psychologists. Ordinary citizens were invited to express their positions on the subject by mail or in interactive discussions. Their reactions showed that even if the great majority are openly homophobic and ask for restrictive legal action, a certain number do respect the right of people to live out their particular sexual orientation freely.

But a more diligent analysis of the actions of these past several years by Senegalese fundamentalists reveals a strategy which has been used in other similar instances. They always attack during a time of economic and social crisis. They target those vulnerable groups which, after mobilizing to win economic or sexual rights, have seen their efforts

¹ Icone, No 20, February 2008

² In this paper, fundamentalism or Islamism refers to the manipulation of Islam to meet political objectives

begun to bear fruit. First the focus was upon the issue of women's rights, and today, upon homosexuals, an even more vulnerable group because of the profound social stigma against them. The strategy is always the same: The fundamentalists select a current situation that will unleash popular vindictiveness. They designate a target, accusing its members of acting contrary to Islamic moral values or copying "perversions of Western societies." These same people manipulate the media to represent themselves as defenders of the faith and of the moral order (theirs, of course) and to present the State as weak or complicit.

Their attacks are most often carefully timed to occur as a political election is about to take place, another recurrent example of their strategy. It is to be emphasized that during the 2007 elections, the fundamentalist movement, although allied to the existing regime, did not win even 1% of the 94 % of Senegalese Muslims for whom they were supposed to be the champions. Since local elections will be taking place in May, 2008, it's time again for them to take a stand. For these reasons, seizing this opportunity to decry homosexuality that the press has furnished and exploited shamelessly, they risk endangering the physical and moral integrity of homosexuals.

1. Summary of facts

At the beginning of February, 2008, *Icone*, a "people" magazine, published an issue about homosexuality in Senegal. Its main article reported a supposed marriage between two men, but mentioned no date. It is illustrated abundantly with photos of men wearing masks on their faces. The editor claimed that he had received death threats from some of the people who were photographed, and lodged a complaint. On February 4th, ten people were arrested for "undermining decency and unnatural marriage," held at the DIC and released four days later without any explanation.

The media jumped onto the case the moment this journal was published. "Specialists" from everywhere were invited to give their opinions which included perversion and repudiation of Holy Scripture (religious Muslims), sickness and sexual deviation (most psychologists), evil influences because of cultural globalization, etc...

During this time, all sorts of rumors ran through the Senegalese capital. The DIC was suspected of requiring those arrested to submit to AIDS testing, and the names of political and religious personalities as well as individuals accused of homosexuality were widely circulated. A large number of those people sought by the DIC were obliged to flee to neighboring countries or go into hiding. In the light of this situation, many local and international organizations as well as individuals fighting for human rights (including sexual rights and the right to sexual orientation) rose up against these injustices. They recalled that Senegal has signed, in 1978, the Convention on Civil and Political rights, which stipulates in its article 17 (1) that "*no one will be the object of arbitrary or illegal interferences in his private life, his family, his residence or his correspondence, or of illegal attain to his honor and to his reputation*". They demanded the decriminalization

of homosexuality so as not to penalize relations pertaining to private life³. Moreover, any discriminatory law runs against the provisions of the African Charter of the Rights of Man and People, which stipulates in Article 3 that “all people benefit from total equality before the law.”

But these declarations did not halt the crusade for the defense of morality, whose organizers unveiled a plan:

- A call to all Senegalese imams to take the issue of degenerating morals and of homosexuality as the theme of their Friday sermons.
- Inauguration of a political campaign after the following Friday’s prayers, organizing a huge protest march against “moral degeneration and homosexual freedom,” to start from the Grand Mosque of Dakar.

It is obvious that the choice of day (Friday, day of community prayer for Muslims), place (mosques), speakers (imams and Muslim intellectuals), means of spreading the messages (sermons and excerpts from the Qur’an) – all was deliberately planned to jolt peoples’ consciences and bind them more closely to Islam. But the authorities forbade the march, as it would disturb public law and order. Around fifteen protesters were arrested and then freed some hours afterwards. Nevertheless, the organizers had achieved one of their principal objectives, which was to become more visible than before. Profiting from the opportunity offered by the cameras, radio and TV covering the demonstration (an opportunity that they do not take advantage of in ordinary times), the president of MRDS, (a fundamentalist political party) head of the crusade, informed the Senegalese that his party would take part in the coming local elections, to take place in three months.

Three days after its march, the CAIS put out a petition to “invite the active forces of the country to face what it considers to be the repeated assaults by the enemies of faith and morality, who unscrupulously attack those sacred values which constitute the very essence of the noblest virtues of our society.” The petition’s authors also stated that “the advent of so many forms of media in Senegal has led to a degradation of morality, because these radio and TV programs do not conform to our cultural and religious realities.”

As part of its battle, the CAIS decided to visit the ambassadors from countries which will take part in the Organization of Islamic Conference to take place in Dakar from the 8th to the 14th of March, and tell them about the decaying morality in Senegal.

At this stage, we must not omit several facts:

- Although this affair has been presented as an attack upon religious values, the Catholic Church has shown great restraint.
- People known to be homosexual have been attacked in the streets.
- Young people whose only mistake was to be wearing jewelry (earrings and large chains), or who were seen to evince “feminine behavior” have been harassed in many quarters of the city.

³According the Article 319 of the Senegalese Penal Code, homosexuality is punishable by one to five years in prison and 100,000 to 1.5 million CFA francs (153 to 2,300 euros) fine.

- Those who are working for homosexual rights are called “fags” and are even threatened with harm.

Manipulation of facts, and construction of homosexuality as a novelty and menace

The event which caused such a stir, and that the CAIS and the media presented as a recent happening, actually took place in November 2006, 14 months before the anti-homosexual mobilization was launched. Madame Ndèye Marie Ndiaye Gawlo, a famous Senegalese singer who had attended the so-called marriage and who had been one of the people arrested and detained for four days along with the homosexual guests, had said so publicly in an interview that she accorded to the newspaper “Le Populaire.”⁴

The CAIS based its crusade on the assertion that two people of the same sex got married. It isn't necessary to dwell too long upon the sex of the so-called married men because Senegalese law is clear on this subject: Marriage must consist of people of the opposite sex. Also, the law is very precise about the official nature of a marriage. It must concern two people of different sexes, united by a State registry officer or by a religious or traditional authority. Neither of these conditions existed in the “marriage” denounced by the CAIS, the members of which carped upon the exchange of wedding rings. Wearing wedding rings is not in Senegalese or Islamic tradition. So in no way is it a proof of marriage.

The second CAIS argument has been to present the worrying growth of homosexuality in Senegal as a recent phenomenon, one which had never existed in traditional Africa, and one which has been caused by copying and incorporating Western values. Relying upon anthropological sources from the 1950s⁵, a group from the university Cheikh Anta Diop (Niang 2004) researched men who had sexual relationships with men, and found that these practices have been long established within Wolof society.

In fact, Senegal, the first French colony in sub-Saharan Africa, became urbanized early on. In the Rufisque, Goree, Saint Louis and Dakar cities, rich businessmen surrounded themselves with homosexuals and transvestites who played the roles of master of ceremonies during family celebrations, including those taking place upon returning from pilgrimages to Mecca. They were showered with gifts by their benefactors who protected them both from possible stigmatization or violence. Such relationships exist even today. Homosexuals are openly present and part of family ceremonies, or play the role of master of ceremonies at political or sports events.

But with the growth of religious conservatism, Senegalese society is becoming more and more intolerant, as well as more and more hypocritical. Certainly homosexuality has never really been out in the open. However this homophobic campaign, which condemns homosexuals to be banned by society, must worry us. Its advance aims to deny Senegalese homosexuals their full rights as Senegalese citizens which have been

⁴ Le Pop. Quotidien d'Information de Proximité No 2464 Friday 8 February 2008, PP 3-6 and 7

⁵ Crowder, M. (1959) *Pagans and Politicians* (London: Hutchinson).

recognized by the Constitution. It deprives them both of the laws and protections accorded to all citizens.

In the struggle against the AIDS epidemic, the Senegalese government has made overtures to homosexuals, for whom the rate of infection is relatively high as compared to the official rate (21.5% for the former, and 0.7% for the general population). In spite of the weakness of the government's offerings and the modest resources allocated to reducing the incidence of HIV, Senegalese homosexuals have seized these opportunities to organize and defend their specific interests.

For a long while, fearing rejection and violence, many homosexuals have been leading a double life. They marry, become fathers and even attend religious services in mosques, all the while maintaining liaisons with other homosexuals. These practices have led to the feminization of AIDS in Africa, where women, above all married women, are now the group most affected by the HIV epidemic.

The Senegalese mullahs' campaigns will have bitter consequences for homosexuals, especially affecting their physical and moral integrity. It will contribute to the disintegration of the rights they have fought for so long to acquire, among them notably their right to good health.

Political Positioning

Senegal is a secular country which recognizes political pluralism and in which democratic freedoms are relatively respected. With 94% of believers, the Muslim religion is the most important, but 4% of Senegalese are Christians and 2% belong to traditional religions. Although the electoral code forbids basing political parties on religion, certain people promulgating programs that openly preach the creation of an Islamic republic have been able to ally themselves with recognized parties, participate in several electoral campaigns, present themselves as candidates and succeed in electing two deputies to the National Assembly.

The political reality which gives particular significance to the homophobic campaign led by these fundamentalist groups is the upcoming holding of local elections in May, 2008. Village and community mayors and rural counsel directors must be elected at that time. They will thus be in a position to determine the politics played out at the local level, giving the Islamists visibility, which heightens their chances to win votes.

The main actors of CAIS participated in legislative and presidential elections in 2007, as party leaders or as part of a coalition. During the entire electoral campaign, benefiting from the free media coverage that covered all of Senegal, they broadcast their political, economic and social programs directed towards the 94% of Muslim Senegalese, for whom they constituted themselves as spokesmen. However they didn't even get 1% of votes and their two deputies were elected only because they had allied themselves with the dominant party. With such a meager showing, their chances of occupying important

posts remain very slight. Thus, they needed a cause, which the media obligingly provided in the controversial “marriage” issue described above.

The religious reality in Senegal also provides some other opportunities which they do not want to miss:

1. The Magal of Touba which will take place on February 27th and the mainstay of the Mouride brotherhood
2. The Organization of Islamic Conference meeting in Senegal from the 8th to the 14th of March in which the heads of the Islamic Umma will participate. Many among its leaders profess the most conservative religious views. If they were rightly alerted by the local Islamic knights’ recent efforts, they would probably not hesitate to put their hands in their pockets. CAIS candidates are in great need of this financial help in order to fight future electoral tournaments. This same hope of receiving funds has certainly influenced their decision to visit the ambassadors planning to participate in the conference.

Like other countries in which Islamic fundamentalists have succeeded in winning the votes of populations aspiring to better their living conditions, Senegal’s present economic and social system may seem to facilitate their endeavors. Senegal experienced a serious economic crisis in 1981, which necessitated putting into effect structural adjustment policies controlled by international financial institutions like the international monetary fund. These developments resulted in aggravating living conditions for the vast majority of the population. According to the data of the Ministry of Economics and Finances, 57% of Senegalese households live below the poverty level⁶. In addition, the UNDP report on human development ranks Senegal 160th in 175 countries, in the batch of countries with “insufficient human development.”

If this sad Senegalese balance-sheet is the result of weak national economic performance and the terrible weight of the international debt, it in part can also be ascribed to a high level of corruption, as shown by the Senegalese section of Transparency International⁷, which places our country 70th out of 163 countries rated.

Because of this situation, many Senegalese seek refuge in religion or in older traditions. Thus, religion, whether it be Muslim or Christian, plays an ever more central role in our life, both on the individual and collective level. Today, a growing number of Senegalese people, especially the youths, are attracted by the fundamentalist line which makes them believe that religion is the only answer to the economic and social problems they encounter.

This economic, political and social climate became endemic during the 1980s, and enabled fundamentalist Islamic politics to emerge and consolidate itself. Big-city high schools and universities began to abound in young veiled girls and young bearded men.

⁶ République du Sénégal, Ministère de l’Economie et des Finances, Direction de la Prévision et de la Statistique et la Banque Mondiale, *La Pauvreté au Sénégal, de la Dévaluation de 1994 à 2001. Version Préliminaire*, 2004

⁷ Forum Civil 2006

Also, the rosary became an accessory exhibited ostentatiously to confirm one's religious identity.

Although Senegal has been in contact with Islam since the 9th century, the great majority of Muslims have not yet studied Islamic sacred texts such as the Qur'an or the Shari' a. Instead, these writings have been monopolized by scholars who interpret them in the most conservative way possible. In spite of this conservative bent, religious tolerance has always existed, because Senegalese Islam is of the Sufi kind organizes through brotherhoods whose founders established a religious system based on mysticism and a cult of the saints and are believed to serve as the link between God and worshipers.

But today our country is prey to the conservative forces which take advantage of abject poverty, of ignorance, and of the incompetency of corrupt politicians in order to realize their objective of winning decision-making positions of power.

Their strategy is not new. The Senegalese women's movement was threatened during a campaign organized in the 1990s by these same individuals and organizations aiming to deprive them of their legal rights. The mobilization and visibility of the women's movement in the heart of civil society are widely recognized. And at the time of the fundamentalist campaign, they were mobilizing to change the family code to advocate for parity in the family and in society.

Unable to imagine a society in which women would enjoy rights equal to those of men, these same Islamists who today are hunting homosexuals climbed to the battlements. They started an organization called Islamic Committee for Senegalese Family Code Reform (CIRCOFS) which required the adoption of an ordinance applicable only to Muslims. Derived from an extremely repressive interpretation of the Shari'a, this code mandated the creation of Islamic tribunals, the stoning of adulterous women and the amputation of thieves' limbs.

As in their current homophobic campaign, they were presenting the family code which governs Senegalese citizens without any religious distinctions, calling the women who fight to defend their rights "westernized feminists" seeking to destroy the "Senegalese family." They utilized the media, sought the support of the usual religious and political authorities. But they failed in their attempt because the women's organizations resisted, backed by human rights organizations, trade unions, and all groups fighting for the promotion of women's rights. The head of state made an official announcement in which he promised never to recognize the Code that applied only to Muslims. But that was only one victory in this continual battle led by Islamists to achieve a society in which women's only place is in the home under the control of men.

At the end of 2007, another event ignited the flames. A videocassette filmed in a nightclub showed young women taking part in a dance contest that "right-thinking"

people considered as pornographic. The “Guddi Town”⁸ affair was born. The police arrested the dancers, who were judged and freed with deferment.

Once again, the upholders of the faith mobilized via media campaigns, putting up posters with photographs of the dancers, making fiery speeches against the “enemies of religion and moral values.” One of the organizations, a member of the CAIS, joined in the lawsuit.

Just as in the homosexual ruckus, the facts were skewed. The event was presented as having happened in the present, rather than a year before when no one was even noticing. It had also taken place in a private locale, with adults who had not had any constraints placed upon them at all.

The facts were presented as “new” evidence endangering the morality of Senegalese youth. Anyone seeing African dances, Senegalese dances in particular, know that there is nothing prudish about them. Moreover, it’s generally in the public dances where the dancers exhibit their lower parts (which would cause priests to become very pale indeed!) that many Senegalese children see women’s genitals for the first time. It’s a matter for gentle laughter.

But really, and so obviously, the Senegalese society contains so many more damaging crimes -- among them, serious violations of women’s and children’s rights, against which “the defenders of the family and of religious and moral values” have never raised their voices.

First, the abject poverty in which the majority of Senegalese families live has not compelled these heroes to share their own wealth or to raise funds in order to help. Every year, thousands of little girls less than 10 years of age are given in marriage. Some of them die because of blood loss due to the violence caused by the brutality of their husbands upon their first sexual encounter. Others die during childbirth because their young bodies are not yet ready to bear a child. Have the defender of moral values mobilized to fight against forced marriages? Never.

They have not yet been remarked organizing marches to defend the little child beggars aged scarcely 5 years, who pass their days combing city streets to find loose change to bring to their the Qur’anic teachers in charge for their education. According to a U.S. State Department report⁹, “although the abuses committed upon Qur’anic school pupils are widely known and discussed; only three teachers have been arrested for this type of abuse during the year. In June, a student, aged between 10 and 15 years committed suicide, after having been beaten violently by his teacher for having fled and returned to his family. Again, in June, a boy of 14 years and two accomplices were arrested for the

⁸ In wolof language : Night in the City

⁹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor of the US Department (2007); Senegal Country Reports on Human Rights

murder of their teacher. According to this report, in the same month an Arab schoolteacher was accused of pedophilia with a student aged 15 years.”

Little girls are often raped by teachers at the Qur’anic schools. In 2000, the press noted that five little girls had been raped by the schoolteacher in the HLM quarter of Dakar. The U.S. State Department report already mentioned revealed that in 2006, “an eminent professor of Arabic from Mbour seriously beat up his brother’s pregnant wife because of a disagreement bearing on inheritance. On August 30th of the same year, a little 13-year-old girl said that she had been raped by the teacher who owned the house where she lived with her mother. The man denied this accusation.”

Violence against women has grown enormously. Some husbands rely upon certain verses in the Qur’an to give them leave to beat their wives.

The CAIS and its leaders have not judged any of these crimes to be any greater than pornographic dances or an exchange of wedding rings between men, homosexuals worthy of their attention.

But by this intransigent discourse on the necessity of instituting Islamic law, because, they say, the large majority of Senegalese is Muslim, they encourage division between Muslims and believers of other religions. They preach hatred, stigmatize certain groups of citizens, women, homosexuals, dancers, and they strive mightily to make everyone believe that these groups have no rights at all.

However, there are many Senegalese Muslims, just like believers in all religious disciplines, who are working to create a progressive Islam, centered upon the values of justice, love and equality. It is from one of them that we end the conclusion of this article: “The argument often expressed which consists of saying that the majority of Senegalese people are Muslim, is dangerous, in that it becomes an attack on religious freedom. In fact, what is the entitled authority, and according to which criteria can we establish the “Islam-ness” of an individual? The Koran teaches us that ‘Allah alone knows the depths of our hearts.’ When somebody erects himself or herself as the authority that certifies the Islam-ness of a person, is not he or she, in a certain manner, violating divine prerogatives?...Rules exist to enter into the political arena -- the sacred must be separated from the profane. Certainly, many Senegalese are Muslim and do not know much about their religion, but that does not legitimize religious fundamentalists’ taking charge of their social problems for the sole reason that they are the ones presumed to know about Islam and to work in their interest. This way to attain in power derives from a vision, which is, at once, ingenuous, reductive and old”.

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