

Ute Gierczynski-Bocandé: Islam and Democracy in Senegal

Religion holds an eminent position in Senegal, the crisis of the last decades having given a boost especially to Islam which ninety percent of the population of this west African country profess. However, the adherents of other denominations, mostly catholic Christians and followers of African religions, do not feel threatened: Religious discrimination is unknown in Senegal, where the state and religion are clearly separated and politicians maintain good relations with all religious authorities, endeavouring to encourage peaceful coexistence between the religions.

Its relations with the Western world are as important to the Republic of Senegal as those with the Islamic countries. Thus, while President Wade condemned the attacks on the USA of September 11, 2001, the country will also offer Islamic states a platform for talks as it hosts the world conference of Islamic states in 2008. It is beyond doubt that Senegal is endeavouring to establish a symbiosis between Western democratic order principles and oriental religion.

Senegal's Sufism-oriented Islam is organised in brotherhoods with a dynastic and hierarchical order. Such a brotherhood is headed by a caliph who is succeeded by his brother or son. His regional and local representatives are called marabouts, and belonging to the family of a marabout may open many doors. Is this an encounter between a medieval feudal and a modern democratic society?

Islamic monks arrived in the region as early as the ninth century, but they only converted the ruling elite, giving Islam the reputation of being a 'religion of princes'. Kankou Moussa, the ruler of Mali, a flourishing gold kingdom until the 14th century, already knew well how to blend religion and economic interests. Similar to Mali, other later west African empires were also led by Islamic rulers who did not force their religion upon their subjects.

At the time of the slave trade and the European colonisation, Islam became the religion of the oppressed and the opponents of colonisation. While the caliphs and the marabouts never openly fomented rebellion against the colonial rulers, they did offer assistance and solidarity to the suffering population. During that time, when the foundations for a separation between the state and religion were laid, the Islam of the brotherhoods rose to become the religion of liberation that gave the people support and identity.

Islam gradually changed. The religion of the elites turned into a popular faith, with the four brotherhoods, all of them committed to Sufism, serving as social catalysts. The oldest brotherhood, the Qadiriyyah, was founded in Baghdad in the 15th century and is backed by ten percent of Senegal's population today. With a share of 50 percent of the population, the Tijaniyyah is the largest brotherhood. It was founded in Algeria by Sidi Ahmed al-Tidjani in the 18th century. Sheikh Amadou Bamba established the second-largest brotherhood, that of the Mourids, whose economic power attracts especially younger people. The fourth brotherhood is the Layene which goes back to Libasse Thiaw who himself is worshipped as a prophet.

The religious legitimacy of the brotherhoods is based on spiritual authority as well as on power structures taken over from pre-colonial times. During the colonial wars, almost all Senegalese kings embraced Islam, thus securing the support of the marabouts. After the death or forced integration of the pre-colonial rulers, the religious leaders were the only ones left to give the population a moral identity; they were now raised to the king's throne, so to speak. The situation in Senegal where, different from the Arab and north African countries, Islam has a rigid hierarchy, may seem anachronistic today. However, in this country it is lived reality.

As his deputies, the marabouts represent the religious line of the caliph. As they are said to perform miracles, you also see 'fake' paid marabouts – a situation that has prepared the ground for syncretism between Islam and African religions. The followers of the marabouts, called talibs, often operate their estates and carry out their instructions, the 'ndiguel', without reservation. Indeed, the 'ndiguel' of a marabout carries great weight, and that of a caliph even more. However, it has been a long time since political decisions in Senegal were made merely in response to the recommendations of a marabout. Criticism of religious dignitaries who interfere in political matters is growing among Senegal's population.

There are some facts in the history of Senegal's democracy that illustrate how deeply political and religious claims to power are intertwined: After the revolution of 1848, part of Senegal's population obtained French citizenship. In 1914, this group acquired the right to be represented by a Senegalese MP in the French parliament. When Blaise Diagne, a Catholic, and Galandou Diouf, a Muslim, competed for the seat in the parliamentary elections of 1928, the caliph of Touba recommended voting for Mr Diagne, while a member of his family supported Mr Diouf. During the election campaign, the latter invoked Islam so as to score over his competitor with the Muslim majority. Yet Mr Diagne won the elections. Joining forces in the 'supreme council of religious leaders' and demanding that 40 of 80 mandates in the national assembly go to religious leaders, the brotherhoods attempted to move the young republic towards an Islamic state in 1959, at the time of President Senghor. However, Mamadou Dia, a Muslim and socialist friend of President Senghor and an advocate of strict separation between the state and religion, was not willing to negotiate. Mr Senghor succeeded in persuading the members of the council to change their views in one-to-one talks: Senegal's laicist constitution was adopted in January 1959.

When the socialist government was voted out of office in March 2000 and Abdoulaye Wade, a liberal, came to power against the recommendation of the caliph of the Tijaniyyah brotherhood, many regarded this as a sign of the end of the interpenetration between the state and religion. However, this hope was deceptive. The first place Mr Wade, himself a follower of the Mourids, went to was Touba, where he thanked the caliph for his prayers. Mr Wade is succeeding in his endeavours to exploit his religious affiliation and the Mourids for his political purposes. This success is consolidated by the personality of the president, whose constant emphasis on work perfectly corresponds to the doctrine of the Mourids, to whom work is almost sacred.

One example of the privileges the brotherhoods are granted by the state is the special autonomous status of the city of Touba, the capital of the Mourids. Instead of a mayor, this city has a council president who must be a member of the family of the brotherhood's founder. The caliph's offer to give every Mourid some land in Touba for free caused the city to grow and achieve prosperity over time, especially because of the influx of wealthy Mourids. The situation is curious for other reasons as well: The city has many palaces but no school. Moreover, Senegal's police have no authority but take action only at the council's request to fight the escalating crime in the city.

Today, the Mourids predominantly attract the younger and the poorer population. This is due not only to the numerous privileges they grant their talibs but also to the identification potential the brotherhood offers to the losers in society, the victims of rural exodus, and the lowest occupations. On the other hand, the Mourids are also attractive to entrepreneurs, ministers, and international consultants. And finally, the Mourid talibs support the economy. The filling-station chain Touba Oil speaks for itself, as does the modern shopping centre named after the capital of the Mourids.

Today, there are many women who hold leading positions in the state and in society, such as ministers, MPs, directors, and chairpersons of the board. However, Senegal's family law does not reflect this development. Until recently, women could be insured only through their husbands and children only through their fathers. The fight of Senegal's women's-rights activists is not over yet. It is opposed by the agitation of reactionary Islamists, such as the Circofs, who argue that 90 percent of the population are Muslims who deserve an Islamic shariah-oriented family law. What is encouraging is that leading politicians and the head of state himself are resisting the attempt to erect an Islamic republic by way of the family law.

On the one hand, political and religious relations in Senegal are highly complex. On the other, the laws of the laicist state do not allow religiously motivated agitation. In the delicate network of Senegal's political, economic, religious, and societal life, the brotherhoods play a special role. Despite their negative impact on this network, they serve as a social refuge, offering values, stability, and identity. Senegal has so far been spared religious and ethnic unrest. It is now for the politicians and clerics of all shades to make sure that the delicately woven net of relations between the state and religion – and thus the societal balance – is preserved intact.