



SENEGALESE ISLAM: OLD STRENGTHS, NEW CHALLENGES

KEY POINTS

- **Islam in Senegal is based around sufi brotherhoods.** These have substantial connections across West Africa, including Mali, as well as in North Africa, including Morocco and Algeria. They are extremely popular and historically closely linked to the state. Salafism has had a small presence since the mid-twentieth century.
- **Established Islam in Senegal has lately faced new challenges:**
 - President Wade's (2000-2012) proximity to the sufi brotherhoods strained the division between the state and religion and compromised sufi legitimacy.
 - A twin-track education system. The state has a limited grip on the informal education sector, which is susceptible to extremist teaching.
 - A resurgence of salafism, evidenced by the growing influence of salafist community organisations and reports of support from the Gulf.
 - Events in Mali and Senegal's support to the French-led intervention have led to greater questioning about the place of Islam in regional identity.
- **Senegal is therefore vulnerable to growing Islamist extremism.** Its institutions and sufi brotherhoods put it in a strong position to resist it, but this should not be taken for granted.

DETAIL

Mali, 2012. Reports on the jihadist takeover of the North include references to around 20 speakers of Wolof, a language whose native speakers come almost exclusively from Senegal. Earlier reporting refers to a Senegalese contingent among the jihadist kidnappers of Canadian diplomat Robert Fowler. These and other reports (such as January 2013 when an imam found near the Senegal-Mali border was arrested for jihadist links) put into sharper focus the role of Islam in Senegal. Was Mali a one-off? Or is there a danger that other parts of the Sahel region are prone to Islamist extremism in the same way?

Senegalese Islam: the sufi brotherhoods

Islam came to Senegal a thousand years ago. Of the 90% of Senegalese who are Muslims today, most follow one of the sufi orders – congregations formed around *marabouts* (spiritual guides) and with their own religious practices – that were established after the 17th century. In each case, a hierarchical structure allows sufi leaders to exert substantial social influence. Almost all the brotherhoods have links across West Africa and up into North Africa.

Ahmed al-Tijani (1737-1815) established the **Tijaniyya** in Algeria. He was later based in Morocco, where his mausoleum in Fez has become a major pilgrimage site. A Senegalese follower of the brotherhood, Umar Tall (1797-1864), launched a violent *jihad* that spread the Tijaniyya from Senegal all the way to Segou (Mali).¹ Malick Sy (1855-1922) set up the main (ethnically wolof) branch of the brotherhood, based in the Senegalese town of Tivouane. Another branch was set up by Abdulaye Niass (1850-1922) in Kaolack (Senegal) and spread into Gambia and as far east as northern Nigeria.

Ahmadu Bamba (1850-1927) established the **Muridiyya**. This distinctly Senegalese brotherhood emphasises work, success, discipline and absolute obedience to *marabouts*. Fewer than the Tijanes, the Murides nevertheless boast superior organisation, discipline and economic engagement, giving them enormous influence. And they have a particular affinity among the largest ethnic group, the Wolof. Based in Touba, the Muridiyya dominated peanut production – a major source of French revenue – during colonial rule. It has been entrepreneurial ever since. One of its branches, Baay Fal, testifies to the diversity of West African Islam (dreadlocked followers drink alcohol, dance and are known for their art).

Originating in Baghdad, the **Qadiriyya** was the first sufi brotherhood to come to Senegal as part of a range of reforms imposed by Moctar al Kabir Kounta, an Islamic leader in 18th century Timbuktu (Mali). Several branches were set up, including in the town of Ndiassane, the centre of the Kounta Qadiriyya in Senegal and still deeply linked to northern Mauritania, Mali and eastern Niger. Finally, the **Layene** is the smallest brotherhood and is popular among ethnic Lebou. Centred in Yoff, it probably accounts for around 1% of the Muslim population.

The brotherhoods and the state

Despite early resistance to French incursion into Senegal – which began at the end of the 17th century and culminated in the establishment of French West Africa in 1895 – the brotherhood leaders developed a close relationship with the colonial state and its post-independence successor. By around 1910 they and the French saw the political and economic benefits of a more cooperative relationship. In return for the religious leaders' pacification of the population and acceptance of colonial rule, the French allowed them to reap immense rewards from business, notably peanut production, which remains one of Senegal's most important exports. The brotherhoods became gatekeepers between the population and the state, and conferred legitimacy on the latter. As one Muridiyya has said, "not many people actually choose the state. Everyone follows the

Senegal statistics

Population 13.3 million

Religion Christian (mostly Catholic) 5%, indigenous beliefs >1%
Muslim 90%, of which approx. 50% follow the Tijaniyya and around 30% follow the Muridiyya

Ethnicity Wolof 43.3% (mainly Muridiyya followers), Pular 23.8%, Serer 14.7%, Jola 3.7%, Mandinka 3%, Soninke 1.1%, European and Lebanese 1%, other 9.4%

¹ A sign that sufis have not always been as moderate as portrayed by some commentators.

brotherhoods.” It became a symbiotic relationship that built peace and security in Senegal, as well as economic growth.²

The relationship between the state and religion did not detract from the deep attachment that Senegal’s independence leaders had to secularism. As President, Léopold Senghor (1960-80) reinforced the dividing line between the secular and the sacred, as did a strong tradition of left-wing intellectualism. Yet there has also been something of a duality to Senegal’s international ties. History joins it to Europe and to its old colonial ruler. A sense of independence and of belonging to the world’s Muslim community has led it to play an active part in multi-lateral Islamic organisations (twice hosting the OIC summit) and to cultivate ties with the Middle East.

Reformism

Like much of West Africa, salafism grew in Senegal in the twentieth century. As travel became easier, pilgrimage to Mecca – and the exposure to new ideas that came with it – became easier. From around the 1950s, bursaries from Gulf states also funded Senegalese students to study in North Africa, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Mauritania, for some time a destination for Senegalese students, remained popular. Some graduates returned with a new conception of Islam that challenged Senegal’s traditional sufi traditions.

Notable salafist organisations in Senegal are the Association of Muslim Students of Dakar (AEMUD), Jama’at Ibadu-Rahman and Al Falah. They are particularly influential in the University of Dakar and in Dakar’s suburbs. One of the most prominent salafist figures in Senegal is Ahmed Lo, who has set up university-level Islamic faculties and is involved in social projects. Lo was named in a Senegalese journal in 2013 as the key non-state partner of Saudi Arabia in Senegal. Typically, these organisations and figures like Lo reject sufism and the adherence to marabouts that comes with it. They also call for the abandonment of a secular state and for the implementation of sharia law. But they do not preach violent jihad, which is not attractive in any widespread sense among Senegalese youth.

New challenges

The first concerns the 12 years that **President Abdoulaye Wade** spent in power. His predecessors, Senghor (1960-80) and Diouf (1980-2000), broadly kept the separation between the brotherhoods and the state – and while Senghor was a Catholic, Diouf did not publicly reveal his affiliation to any of the brotherhoods. At times lines were blurred, but Wade went further in this regard than his predecessors. In 1988, as an opposition politician, he publicly declared that he was a Murid and started to celebrate the Murid festivals in Touba. And when he finally won the presidential elections in 2000, he attributed his success to the Murides.

Wade’s first official act was to pay homage in Touba to his sheikh in front of the media. This was unprecedented. In office, Wade bestowed on the brotherhoods’ leaders money and appointments, and put one on an electoral list. Yet, if it looked like he was subordinating himself to the Muridiyya, he in fact exerted his own influence over them. During his first term

² Brotherhoods, especially the Murides, today control vast parts of Senegalese enterprise and even have international trading interests, eg in New York.

the Muride establishment defended him. And Wade became increasingly presidential in his dealings with them. His interaction had a deeper effect, however, by altering the social contract that had existed between the state and the brotherhoods. Crucially, Wade undermined the brotherhoods' distance from the state, a cornerstone of their legitimacy.

Two elites

Senegal has a two-track education sector. One group enters the formal secular system, composed of French or French-Arab schools, and can expect to secure jobs in the formal sector. Another group is educated in informal quranic schools, with some going on to study in Arab Gulf states. This is not a new phenomenon. In colonial times, the French tried to limit quranic teaching and emphasise Western education (with limited success). But more children are now entering the informal sector than ever before, the result of a growing and young population (over 40% of Senegalese are under the age of 15). There are now hundreds of thousands of boys attending quranic schools.

Three problems result. The two educational classes rarely mix. Many Arabic-based qualifications are not recognised by the state, meaning two elites are emerging from twin systems. The state also does not have enough grip on the informal sector. It is unclear how many informal schools exist across Senegal, nor precisely how many children attend them. Third is the potential for children to be indoctrinated with hardline views. Several private establishments across the educational spectrum teach salafist programmes. At a community level, salafist (among other) NGOs are stepping in where the state has not asserted control.

Resurgent salafism

Indeed, the past decade has seen more salafist organisations funding mosques and Islamic institutes. Typically these are placed in peripheral urban areas, such as Koloba, Dakar. The well-organised NGOs funding these religious and educational institutions are recruited from the region (teachers from Togo, Benin, Guinea and elsewhere) and have been described as working like "sects," taking charge of a range of other services, including health, building wells, burials and cemeteries.

Salafists have been more assertive in sufi heartlands. In Tivouane, the heart of the tijaniyya, a salafist mosque has recently been built. Salafist influence has grown also in Touba, home of the Muridiyya. Many in Senegal are concerned that the funding for salafist influence comes from Gulf Arab states, notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar. A prominent Muridiyya figure has said his brotherhood is experiencing a "tough battle" against the salafists.

Yet the split between sufis and salafists is not always neat. Some salafist imams come from sufi backgrounds. Some sufi leaders, rather than resisting Gulf-trained imams, adopt salafist practises like crossing their arms when they pray rather than keeping them at their sides or ending prayers with "Amin. Allahu Akbar!". And the speech of "neo-confrérique" (new brotherhood) organisations, which provide security for the brotherhoods, can closely resemble that of the salafists. These included *Moustarchidines* (for the Tijaniyya) and the *Thiantacounes* (for the Muridiyya).

Mali

Finally, recent developments in Mali have brought into sharper focus the role of religion in Senegal. Mali and Senegal are strongly linked historically and commercially including the symbolic (and still functioning) railway between Mali and the town of Thiès, near Dakar. The Qadiriyya connection, mentioned above, leads thousands of Malians to visit Senegal each year to celebrate the *Gamou* (Prophet Mohamed's birthday). Ethnically, some Senegalese see themselves in the same grouping as the Malians. Some say that it was only colonialism that had separated them (indeed, Malian and Senegal cultures first mixed under the Mali Empire (AD 1230-1600)).

Senegalese sufis were outraged by jihadist actions in Mali in 2012, including destruction of Timbuktu's sufi heritage. But a significant minority of Senegalese felt conflicted about France's intervention in Mali in early 2013 and by Senegalese assistance to it (400 Senegalese troops were deployed to Gao in April 2013). An Institute for Security Studies survey of 400 people in the Senegalese towns and cities of Dakar, St-Louis, Thiès and Mbour has found that some respondents, including members of the sufi brotherhoods, backed the jihadist cause. Some argued that extremist groups were implementing sharia law and that Senegal's intervention was an attack on Islam. The ISS makes clear that such sentiments were in a minority. But they chime with the view of one expert who says that events in Mali have underlined the failure of the state and had led people, especially youth, to seek security in extra-territorial, particularly religious, identities.

Senegal's response

Compared to its regional peers, Senegal is in a very strong position to resist Islamist extremism. Its civil society is strong, as are its institutions: Senegal has never had a dictator and it has not fought large-scale war on its territory. President Macky Sall, who came to power in 2012, has been careful to keep his distance from the sufi brotherhoods. He also has an ambitious new plan to diversify educational provision (modernising Islamic schools, introducing an Arabic baccalaureate and creating technical high schools).

The sufi brotherhoods have not been idle either. Marabouts warn their followers to be "vigilant" of outside influences. And senior figures are trying to stop their imams from picking up even slight traces of salafist practice, for fear it is be the thin end of the salafist wedge. The sufi brotherhoods are also in some cases mounting media projects to propagate their views.

Conclusion

Senegalese Islam is facing new challenges. Salafism is not new. But its influence has grown in the past 10 years, just as the problems in Senegal's education sector and questions about the relationship between state and religion come to the fore. There is still some debate around how serious this all is. But experts agree that Senegal is vulnerable to creeping extremism. Its strong institutions and moderate sufi brotherhoods will act as a powerful barrier. But their ultimate success should not be taken for granted.