

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

BSQ-5

Uncle Joe's Guest House  
P.O. Box 319  
Banjul, The Gambia  
April 16, 1980

Students in Command

Mr. Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Wheelock House  
4 West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, N.H.

Dear Peter,

The Casamance is a land of plenty to a visitor from the drier northern part of Senegambia. This fertile region lies at the edge of the tropical forests of the Guinea coast and offers the produce of both well-watered savannah and sunny woodland. In Ziguinchor, the area's largest city situated about halfway up the long estuary which makes up most of the length of the Casamance River, the streets are a tropical Les Halles. Giant baskets of bananas come in by the truck-load. Fruitsellers' tables are laden with mangoes, oranges, papayas and pineapples. On the ground are piles of round, green watermelons, small as bowling balls but very sweet. Lining the streets, women sit behind white circular trays filled with red and yellow cashew apples, a small, bitter fruit, shaped like a capsicum pepper, whose flesh is soft and juicy but which dries the mouth like cotton when chewed. At the bottom of the fruit grows the purple cashew, whose poisonous shell is burst in fires to expose the meat within. The acrid fumes from the roasting process will kill a chicken, the Africans say. Other women sell peanuts which they soak in salted water, shell and roast in pots filled with fine clay, giving them a pinkish-gray color. The staples of the Casamance diet, however, are rice and fish. The people grow a saltwater variety of rice in the river marshes and cultivate other rice paddies in the rainy season, but still much of the rice is imported from China. Many kinds of saltwater fish are sold in the market, from barracuda to catfish, but the ones eaten most often are tilapia, which they catch by the hundreds in shallow, brackish water, and another small fish they call bonga, which has sweet but bony flesh. The food is usually cooked in peanut or palm oil and often served with a bitter sauce of sorrel or okra.

Perhaps because food is so abundant and varied, Ziguinchor has a more relaxed atmosphere than the other cities I've visited here. With about 80,000 inhabitants it is twice the size of Banjul, but it does not have the constant rush of honking cars which torment the Gambian capital, nor is the white-skinned visitor a target for beggars and hucksters as in Dakar. One can walk almost undisturbed along the paved

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streets, lined with feathery neem trees, and through the quartiers of mudbrick houses with corrugated zinc roofs shaded by dense mango trees. A stroll through the downtown section at night is like visiting a movie set. One almost seems to recognize from some long-forgotten adventure film the two-story buildings with wide, railed balconies above and arched porticoes beneath, the hotel's crowded dining room, open to the street, with its white tablecloths and overhead fans, and the sylvan square in front of the governor's residence, lit by handsome lampposts in nineteenth-century style.

Until a few months ago most of the city was similarly illuminated and nighttime promenades must have had the charm of walks in a small town in the States on a summer evening, but now most of the city is in darkness after sunset because students broke almost every outdoor light in the city during riots in January. They also set fire to cars and buildings and looted the home of the mayor. Those disturbances were still much talked about when I visited, being the main issue in an election scheduled to take place a few days after I left. The mayor was running to keep his position as political coordinator for the area and everyone I talked with assured me he didn't have a chance. The people were angry at him for antagonizing the students and causing the riots, which resulted in the death of one youth, shot by a policeman.

I heard as many different versions of the events of those days as the number of times I asked about them. Accounts of the killing ranged from the act of self-defense of a single officer surrounded by a bloodthirsty mob to the cold-blooded murder by a group of policemen in hiding of a student who wasn't participating in the demonstrations. The explanation which had the ring of truth to me was given by a group of young men including two high school students, one of whom claimed to be present at the time of the fatal shooting. They said a group of demonstrators had gone to the high school to punish some students who were continuing to attend classes despite the call for a strike. Armed policemen guarded the school. The crowd began throwing rocks, the police retaliated first with tear gas and then, through the choking mists, a few men fired. One student fell dead, a few others were wounded and the crowd scattered.

The cause of the strike was the behavior of the school's principal, a man, apparently, of almost unbelievable arrogance and egotism. Many of the stories about his rudeness and condescension which I heard repeated several times were so extreme that they were probably exaggerations or fabrications, but it seems he was sufficiently obnoxious to be disliked by almost all who came in contact with him. However, although some students complained about poor conditions in the school, especially for boarders, I heard few accusations of outright mistreatment by the principal. The protestors claim they were joined by students in all the other schools in the city in a show of solidarity, which extended to sympathy strikes in schools in other parts of the country, and estimates of the number of protestors were put as high as six

thousand, but it appears, from the account of the shooting above and other comments I heard, that some of the high school students were not in favor of the strike but were intimidated by its leaders. It was also generally admitted that the strikers were joined by former students eager to retaliate for having been kicked out of school and by hooligans who saw an opportunity to loot and create mayhem.

In the beginning the teachers went to their classrooms and urged students to return to school, but when a government representative visited the high school and accused them of inciting the students the teachers became angry and joined the strike. The townspeople apparently feared the students and demanded that the government give in to them. They now accuse the mayor of protecting the principal in return for having received school money intended to support scholarship students. They blame the city's darkened streets not on the students who broke the lights but on the mayor for not acceding to the students' demands, and fault his administration for not having the lights repaired two months later.

The leaders of the strike have been expelled from school, but the principal also was removed. The students see the new desks in their classrooms and the whitewashing of classroom walls which was going on during the Easter vacation which coincided with my visit as a response to their protest over bad conditions. The new principal, they say, has gone out of his way to be friendly. The policeman who shot the boy was transferred but received no punishment, I was told. And the mayor, apparently, will lose his position as political patronage dispenser, but the rebuff seems a poor remedy to whatever legitimate complaints the students or the townspeople had, because the other candidate for the job is also a member of the ruling Parti Socialiste and surely it must have been the government in Dakar which was ultimately responsible for the decision to support the principal.

Violent student protests are not unique to Africa or the Third World, but they are especially valuable to study here because high school and university students are the vanguard of modern society in a developing country. I came away from Ziguinchor disappointed by the attitude of the students in light of the power they seem to have to work their will. So close to an election it was easy to get people to talk about politics, but the reaction was the same from students and townspeople: politics aren't worth getting involved in because all politicians are corrupt and concerned only with themselves. I would sympathize with that attitude if I viewed the students as victims, but the excesses of the strike and the comments I heard from the students gave me the impression that they neither are nor want to be any better than the leaders they deprecate. Some talked of change. One told me that if the voting age was lowered from 21 the student vote would overturn the government. Another talked of the students and the workers joining to tear down everything the government had done since independence because it was all worthless. But I think the most accurate expression of students' feelings came

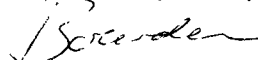
from one who told me that he cared for nothing but his studies. He didn't go on to explain why, but it was clear he was thinking more in terms of personal success than societal reform.

Moreover, no one I talked with expressed the slightest condemnation of the students' actions. I believe the reason for this, and for the students' lack of enthusiasm for a constructive reordering of society, is that they are a competitive elite which can profit from the present system. Education is their entitlement to a share of the spoils enjoyed by corrupt politicians and civil servants, and it is the only way that fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and all the other relatives who go by those names in the African system of extended families can escape from their crushing poverty. So not only every student but every man and woman who through family ties can lay claim to some of the wealth the student may someday receive has an interest in supporting the students. A perceptive analysis of this situation of competing elites can be found in The New Elites of Tropical Africa, published in 1966, in the introduction by the editor, P.C. Lloyd. He wrote:

Let us presume that the rate of growth (of African economies) will be less than that hoped for by African politicians and more in line with present-day rates of overseas aid and investment and internal savings. The expansion of the bureaucracies experienced in the past decade will slow down considerably, and the present elite will be able to fill a high proportion of the vacant posts with their own children.... Competition within the elite for the higher posts will become more intense; the aspirations of the sub-elite will be less frequently rewarded. The frustrated among the elite and the sub-elite will turn toward protest movements among the sub-elite and the masses, taking leadership positions. Such movements may adopt a socialist ideology of conflict, but much of their effectiveness will depend on the ability of their leaders to break free of the classic Marxist dogmas, largely unintelligible to African peasants and workers, and to reinterpret the basic principles of class conflict in an indigenous context.

Despite its revolutionary appeal, Lloyd's prognosis is optimistic when compared with the continuing coups and civil wars in Africa which bring little corrective action. The argument sounds logical, but, in Ziguinchor at least, the students still seem willing to play by the old rules.

Best regards,

  
Bowden Quinn