

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DH-2
Senegalese Background

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Dakar, Senegal

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Here are the major factors in the background of the country in which we will be spending the next few months:

Senegal (population about 3,000,000; area 76,000 square miles) lies at the western rim of the Sudanese climate zone that stretches across Africa south of the Sahara. Most of the country is flat, open savannah that gets no rain for eight months of the year, and too much rain in the other four months. Most of the Senegalese belong to the Sudanese ethnic groups of the savannah zone. The 1,000,000 Wolofs are the largest of six main ethnic groups; their language is (forgive the pun) the lingua franca of Senegal. Seventy percent of the Senegalese are Moslem, but they are not arabized in the North African sense.

Senegal's boundaries, like those of most African states, are artificial lines drawn partly for the convenience of colonial administration and partly by the fortunes of imperial competition. The southern province of Casamance has little in common with the rest of the nation; it is rain forest, not savannah, and its people are related to those of the Guineas rather than to the other Senegalese. And cutting right through the middle of Senegal is the tiny British riverbank colony of Gambia: a colonial gerrymander. Gambia's people and their economy are indistinguishable from those of Senegal. (What happens to Gambia after it gets self-government next year will be an interesting test of the problems of African unity.)

The Senegalese economy follows the familiar colonial pattern of dependence on a single cash crop sold for export; Senegal's peanut crop produces 80 to 90 percent of the nation's export earnings. Peanuts are in oversupply on the world market, and a given amount of peanuts buys less and less of the goods that Senegal imports. But, for the time being at least, Senegal is sheltered from the world market: France buys the peanut crop and pays above the world market price. Though Senegal is an agricultural country, it does not grow all its own food. Rice, a staple of the diet, must be imported. Industry, located mostly around Dakar, produces 15 percent of the national income.

Dakar has a special place in French imperial history. It was the gateway of French West Africa, its main port, its seat

of government, a town that boomed when the French started investing heavily here after World War II. Most of French Africa below the Sahara was under effective French rule for little more than half a century, but the French were on the coast of Senegal in the middle of the 17th Century. There is a class of Senegalese, residents of Dakar and three other coastal towns, who received French citizenship in 1848 (a century before the rest of Senegal and the rest of French West Africa), who have been attending French schools since the 1850's, and who are considered - by themselves and by other Africans - to have been uniquely influenced by French culture. But most of Senegal did not come under French rule until the great wave of conquest in the second half of the 19th Century. So a Senegalese historian working on pre-colonial African civilization was able to interview his grandmother, just a few years ago, on life before the French came. And a thirty-year-old woman can recall the stories told by her grandfather, a Moslem chief, about his defeat by the French.

Dakar's central position under the French has proved to be a mixed blessing since the breakup of French West Africa - the "balkanization" resented by many Africans. In 1956, France divided French West Africa (population 20,000,000) into eight countries, no one of them having a population of more than 4,000,000. Dakar was left as a great head with a little body, like Vienna after World War I. Grandiose government buildings, huge port installations, a railroad that runs nowhere (1), a university too large for the nation's present needs, and, most of all, a hothouse urban economy heavily dependent on France - this was part of Senegal's heritage from the breakup of West Africa and its aftermath. In 1960, Senegal promoted the Mali Federation with the French Sudan (now Mali), but the federation collapsed after four months. Thus the country that perhaps had the most to gain from unity was left relatively isolated in the politics of West Africa: this is the irony of Senegal's recent history.

Senegal also was the breeding ground of "negritude" - the cultural movement, started a generation ago, that sought to assert the African personality in response to the French ideal of assimilation, of creating black Frenchmen. The leader of this movement is, of course, Leopold Sedar Senghor, the poet-philosopher-philologist-professor-politician who is President of Senegal. What is the African personality that negritude asserts? Recently Senghor defined it as "a sense of community and a sense of rhythm". (Rhythm in living, not just keeping time to a drum.)

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The average age of the members of the Senegalese government - Senghor and his 16 cabinet ministers - is just under 45

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 (1) The line from Dakar to Bamako, capital of Mali, which has been closed at the border since the Federation collapsed.

years. Not old, certainly, but, in African terms, older than it seems. For political and social life have changed with dizzying speed over the past twenty years. It was only yesterday, after all, that colonial rule in Africa seemed eternal. So a few years' difference in age can make a revolutionary difference in the climate of opinion (and opportunity) in which a Senegalese politician was raised. This is particularly true of the French-educated elite, to which all the ministers belong. (There are men outside the cabinet who are more important politically than most ministers, and many of them are not part of the educated elite. But I think the point is still valid.)

The men now in office and their eventual successors can be divided logically into three generations: those who arrived at political awareness before the watershed of World War II; those who came on between the war and the transition to independence (1958-1960); and those who have been coming on since independence.

By this classification, all the members of the cabinet, except two borderline cases of 35, belong to the prewar generation. Senghor, at 55, is the oldest; the Prime Minister, Mamadou Dia, is 51. In the days when this generation was formed, independence was at best a distant dream, politics operated within the framework of French rule, good jobs for educated Africans were scarce in business and in government (except teaching). Senghor earned his living as a professor in France, and Dia was a school teacher and superintendent. The cabinet includes five other ex-teachers, four lawyers, four doctors or veterinarians, a labor leader, a bureaucrat and a journalist.

The next generation (now about 25 to 35 years old) was formed in an era when independence became first an issue, then an imminent prospect (1958), finally a fact (1960). This was not the only change: urban population boomed, new job opportunities opened up in government, it became easier to get an education. This generation was educated, went out to work and started in politics under French rule; but they could see, with increasing clarity, that the French were on their way out. The opposition to the Senghor government is led by members of this generation. In the opposition are some of the nation's best-known intellectuals (after Senghor himself): the geographer Assane Seck, who was jailed recently, and the historians Abdoulaye Ly and Cheikh Anta Diop. This same generation holds many of the upper and middle jobs in the government. One hears, in this group, a lot of grumbling against the government; but it is hard to say how important it is. What does seem clear, though, is that political issues find the educated elite divided by generations.

The next generation is, of course, coming on under very different circumstances. They are opening their political eyes

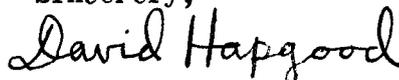
to independence. Political issues will be fought out between Africans, not between Africans and Frenchmen. A university training is increasingly easier to get (and may perhaps offer comparatively less reward). As education is "Africanized" in its content, the new elite will gain a different perspective on their heritage. Already job opportunities seem to be opening up faster in business than in government. For all these reasons, the politics of this generation is hard to forecast; but they will make post-colonial Africa.

In looking into the background of the elite, one is struck by the almost unbelievably difficult education they went through. Take, for example, a 37-year-old who now holds a high government job. He is a Wolof and a Moslem. From the age of seven (when he started school) to fifteen this was his daily routine: up at 5:30 A.M. to light the fire for his father's coffee, sweep up, eat breakfast; from 6:30 to 7:30 in the Koranic school; 8 to noon and 2:30 to 5:30 in the French school; back in the evening for an hour in the Koranic school. Note that he - and any child of a devout Moslem family who got a French education - had to make his way in three languages and three cultures, two of them alien. At home he spoke only Wolof. In the Koranic school, he memorized and transcribed the Koran in Arabic (many children do this without understanding the words they are speaking and writing): this was a new language, an alien and rigid culture. In the French school (its standards and curriculum exactly those of France, right down to the history text with the famous opening line: "Nos ancetres les Gaulois...") he was confronted with a third language, a second alphabet, another rigid and alien culture. To make it still tougher: promotion in the French system was by competitive examination; at times only a minority of the African students were admitted to the next level. So the one who finally succeeded - and to fail was to bring disgrace on the whole family - had to stay in the upper fraction of his class.

Africans who went through this say today: "Our children won't know what it was like for us; it will be easy for them." Comparatively easy, perhaps; at least the competition is less fierce now that there are more schools. But today's child still goes to the Koranic school; he still has to make his way through three cultures.

It is tempting to speculate on the effects of this upbringing.

Sincerely,



David Hapgood