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Senegal: homophobia and Islamic political
manipulation

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SPW Working Papers, No. 4, March 2008

Senegal: homophobia and Islamic political manipulation

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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 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 the magazine *Icône*¹ about a marriage between two homosexuals. According to the editor, the aim was to “alert authorities of the growing prevalence of homosexuality among young people.”

At dawn on Monday, February 4th, the Division of Criminal Investigations (DIC) arrested ten people who were said to have been present at the wedding 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 by the Collective of Senegalese Islamic Associations (CAIS), a group of approximately 15 Muslim organizations. In a communiqué, CAIS denounced “an increase in homosexuality in Senegal” and proclaimed, “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 reported on this subject daily during the entire month of February, fueling debates about homosexuality among sociologists, experts in *Qu’ranic* studies, legal experts and psychologists. Ordinary citizens were invited to express their opinions on the subject by mail or in interactive discussions. Their reactions showed that although the majority is openly homophobic and asks for restrictive legal action, a certain number do respect the right of people to live out their particular sexual orientation freely.

¹ *Icône*, No 20, February 2008

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

But a more diligent analysis of Senegalese fundamentalists over the past several years reveals a strategy, which they have used in 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 begin 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 group, 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 important to emphasize that during the 2007 elections the fundamentalist movement, although allied to the existing regime, did not win even 1% of the vote despite the fact that its constituency, the Senegalese Muslims, constitutes 94% of the entire population. Since local elections will be taking place in May 2008, it's time again for them to take a stand. Moreover, by seizing this opportunity to decry homosexuality—an opportunity furnished and shamelessly exploited by the press—they risk endangering the physical and moral integrity of homosexuals.

1. Summary of facts

At the beginning of February 2008, *Icône*, a "people" magazine, published an issue about homosexuality in Senegal. Its main article reported a wedding ceremony between two men, but mentioned no date. The issue was also complete with photos of men whose faces were hidden under masks. 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 natural marriage." They were held at the DIC and released four days later without any explanation.

The media jumped on the case the moment the magazine was published. "Specialists" from everywhere were invited to give their opinions. Muslim authorities described the marriage in terms of perversion and repudiation of Holy Scripture. Psychologists called it sickness and sexual deviation. Others blamed the evil influences of cultural globalization.

During this time, rumors spread 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 light of the 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 called attention to the fact that Senegal had signed, in 1978, the Convention on Civil and Political rights, which stipulates in Article 17 (1) that "*no one shall be subjected to arbitrary or unlawful interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honor and reputation*". They demanded the decriminalization of homosexuality so as not to penalize relations pertaining to private life³. Moreover, they argued that 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 make the issue of degenerating morals and of homosexuality the theme of their Friday sermons.
- Inauguration of a political campaign, to begin the following Friday after prayers, in which they would organize a major protest march against "moral degeneration and homosexual freedom." The march was to start from the Grand Mosque of Dakar.

This choice of who (imams and Muslim intellectuals), where (the mosques), when (Friday, the day of community prayer for Muslims), and how (spreading the message through sermons and utilizing excerpts from the *Qur'an*)—was deliberately planned to jolt people's conscience and bind them more closely to Islam. But the authorities forbade the march, since it would violate public law and disturb order. Around fifteen protesters were arrested and then freed some hours later. Nevertheless, the organizers had achieved one of their principal objectives, which was to become more visible than before. Profiting from the opportunity offered by radio and TV stations publicizing the demonstration (an opportunity that they do not usually take advantage of), the president of fundamentalist political party MRDS and head of the crusade informed the Senegalese that his party would take part in the upcoming local elections, to take place in three months.

Three days after the attempted march, CAIS circulated 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 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."

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.

As part of its battle, CAIS decided to visit the ambassadors of countries who were intending to participate in the Organization of Islamic Conference to take place in Dakar from March 8-14, to tell them about the decaying morality in Senegal.

At this stage, we must not omit several facts:

- Although the same-sex wedding 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 men wearing jewelry (earrings and large chains), or seen to evince “feminine behavior” have been harassed in many quarters of the city.
- Those who are working for homosexual rights are called “fags” and are even threatened with harm.

2. Manipulation of facts and construction of homosexuality as a novelty and menace

The event that caused such a stir, and which 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, the famous Senegalese singer who had attended the so-called wedding and who had been one of the people arrested and detained for four days, had said so publicly in an interview published in newspaper *Le Populaire*.⁴

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 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 proof of marriage.

The second CAIS argument has been to present the increasing prevalence of homosexuality in Senegal as a recent phenomenon, one that had never existed in traditional Africa, and one that 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.

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).

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 businesswomen surrounded themselves with homosexuals and transvestites who played the roles of master of ceremonies during family celebrations, including those taking place upon the return from pilgrimages to Mecca. They were showered with gifts by their benefactors who protected them from possible stigmatization and/or violence. Such relationships exist even today. Homosexuals are actively involved in 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 calls for the banishment of homosexuals from society, must worry us. Its advance aims to deny Senegalese homosexuals their full rights as Senegalese citizens, which have been 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 compared to the official rate (21.5% for the former, 0.7% for the general population). These offerings by the government have been weak and the resources allocated to reducing the incidence of HIV, modest. Nonetheless, Senegalese homosexuals have seized these opportunities to organize and defend their specific interests.

For a long time, fearing rejection and violence, many homosexuals have been leading a double life. They marry women, 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 so long to acquire, among them notably their right to good health.

3. Political positioning

Senegal is a secular country, which recognizes political pluralism and respects democratic freedoms. Among the Senegalese, 94% is Muslim, 4% Christian, and 2% belongs to traditional religions. Although the electoral code forbids basing political parties on religion, certain people who openly preach in favor of 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 council 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 broadcasts to all of Senegal, they shared their political, economic and social goals with the Muslim majority, whom they view as their constituency. However, they didn't even get 1% of the vote and their two deputies were elected only because they had allied themselves with the dominant party. With this meager showing of support, their chances of occupying important posts remain very slight. Thus, they needed a cause, which the media obligingly provided with the controversial "marriage" described above.

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

1. The Magal of Touba, the mainstay of the Mouride brotherhood, which will take place on February 27th.
2. The Organization of Islamic Conference meeting in Senegal from March 8-14 in which the heads of the Islamic Umma will participate. Many among its leaders have 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 win future elections. 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 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 lives below the poverty level⁶. In addition, the UNDP report on

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

human development ranks Senegal 160th in 175 countries, which places it among 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 attributed to a high level of corruption, as shown by the Senegalese section of Transparency International⁷, which ranks the country 70th out of 163 countries rated.

Because of this situation, many Senegalese seek refuge in religion or in older traditions. Thus, religion, whether Islam or Christianity, plays an ever more central role in our lives, both on the individual and collective level. Today, a growing number of Senegalese people, especially youth, are attracted to fundamentalism because it offers a solution 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. Urban high schools and universities began to abound with young veiled girls and young bearded men. 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 never 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 bend, religious tolerance has always existed, because Senegalese Muslims are Sufi. Historically, Sufism has been organized through brotherhoods whose founders established a religious system based on mysticism and a cult of saints believed to link God and worshipers.

But today the country is prey to the conservative forces, which take advantage of abject poverty, ignorance, and the incompetence of corrupt politicians in order to realize their objectives of gaining positions of power and authority.

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 women of their legal rights. The mobilization and visibility of the women’s movement in the heart of civil society are widely recognized. At the time as 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, the same Islamists who today are condemning homosexuals took action.

⁷ Forum Civil 2006

They started an organization called Islamic Committee for Senegalese Family Code Reform (CIRCOFS), which initiated 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 limbs as punishment for theft.

As in their current homophobic campaign, they were attempting to impact upon all Senegalese citizens regardless of religious affiliation, calling women who fight to defend their rights “westernized feminists” seeking to destroy the “Senegalese family.” They utilized the media and sought the support of religious and political authorities. But they failed in their attempt because the women’s organizations resisted, backed by human rights organizations, trade unions, and other groups fighting for the promotion of women’s rights. The head of the 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 flames. A videocassette filmed in a nightclub showed young women taking part in a dance contest that “right-wing” people considered to be 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 Muslim faith mobilized via media campaigns. They put up posters with photographs of the dancers and made fiery speeches against the “enemies of religion and moral values.” One of the organizations, a member of CAIS, joined the lawsuit against the dancers.

Just as in the ruckus about the same-sex “marriage”, the facts were skewed. The event was presented as having happened in the present, rather than when it actually happened the year before when no one was paying attention. It had also taken place in a private locale, which is subject to a less constraining set of laws.

The facts were presented as “new” evidence endangering the morality of Senegalese youth. Anyone who has seen African dances, Senegalese dances in particular, would know that there is nothing prudish about them. Moreover, it’s common during public dances for dancers to exhibit their lower parts (which would cause priests to become very pale indeed!). In fact, this is when 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, including 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.

⁸ In Wolof language: Night in the City

As one example, the abject poverty in which the majority of Senegalese families live has not compelled these moral crusaders to share their own wealth or to raise funds in order to help. Every year, thousands of young girls under the age of 10 are given away in marriage. Some of them die because of the blood loss associated with their first sexual encounter with their husbands. Others die during childbirth because their young bodies are not yet ready to bear a child. Has the defender of moral values mobilized to fight against forced marriages? Never.

They have not yet organized marches to defend children under the age of 5 who pass their days combing city streets to find loose change to bring to their *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 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."

Young girls are often raped by teachers at the *Qur'anic* schools. In 2000, the press noted that five young girls had been raped by a schoolteacher in the HLM quarter of Dakar. The U.S. State Department report mentioned above 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 serve as justification for abusing their wives.

CAIS and its leaders do not judge these crimes as any greater than the pornographic dances or exchange of wedding rings between men.

Moreover, with this intransigent discourse on the necessity of instituting Islamic law, they encourage division between Muslims and believers of other religions. They preach hatred and stigmatize certain groups such as women, homosexuals, and dancers. They strive mightily to make everyone believe that these groups have no rights at all.

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

However, there are many Senegalese Muslims, just like in all religions, 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 is 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”.