

Mauritania
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Since the early 1980s, the ideological landscape of Mauritania, dominated by an elite that originated from the political struggle for independence, has fallen into decline. In a time of economic, social, and political crisis, neither the political elite nor the military was capable of meeting the expectations of Mauritanian society. The modernist projects, timidly undertaken since the independence, only reinforced economic and cultural dependency on the Western model. The failure of the national elite was blatant, and new social frameworks began to emerge in order to end the 'state of grace' enjoyed by the political power at the time.

From the beginning of the 1980s, and especially with the advent of political pluralism, religion became more than ever central to political, social, cultural, and identity-related issues in Mauritania. A 'religion of contestation' would gain territory not only by criticizing the political power-holders and the moral 'drifting' of society, but also by opposing other traditional religious representations of Islam. This conjunction provoked the returning to force of traditional models, either because those involved in these latter were looking to defend their symbolic space of action, or because they were reactivated by the political power to counteract the emergence of a militant Islam, which threatened the established order.¹

In denouncing the use of religion in politics under the pretext that the law forbade political parties based on religion: 'Islam can not be the exclusive prerogative of a political party',² those in power did not abstain from using religious personalities to reinforce their political legitimacy. The creation of an official institution echoed this; on 16 February 1992, a decree was promulgated concerning the organization and functioning of the 'Islamic High Council' (HCI – Haut Conseil Islamique), a body which had already been announced in article 94 of the 1991 constitution. The five members of the Council were appointed by the president, all belonging to tradition milieus: *fuqahā'* and leaders of brotherhoods. The president was Mohamed Salam Ould Addoud, descendant of an influential and educated family from Trarza, whose *mahdra* (traditional school) was one of the best known in the country. Addoud situated his official role in the HCI within the conservative sunni tradition, which had managed the rapport between scholar and monarch: 'Since the end of the reign of the four rashidun Califs, all the sovereigns lacked the necessary conduct. There were the just, but there were also the shameless. There were always pious scholars and guides at their side. All maintained, with the regime in power, relations based on integrity, devotion and the accomplishment of duty. They occupied various positions: judges, imams, guides, gatherers (...). They would give no credit to the lies of a sovereign, just as they would not validate his abuses. Nonetheless, they would not seek to plot against him, nor would they seek to incite disorder and anarchy to influence the scene. They limited themselves to enjoining people to do good and forbidding them to commit reprehensible acts.'³

President Ould Taya furthermore relied on independent religious figures, such as Boudah Ould Bousayri, imam of the principle mosque of Nouakchott who had distinguished himself since the eighties by his preaching, which was then to be heard on the radio each Friday. He was considered the unofficial advisor to the president. It was he who advocated peace at the time of the call to *jihād*, launched by Islamist leader Ould Sidi Yahya on the eve of the rejection of his party's (Omma) legislation (18 November 1991).⁴ Still in his role as mediator between civil society and the authorities, he intervened in the arrests of Islamist youths in 1994 and asked the president, during a Friday

sermon, to be merciful towards them. The president conceded. Moreover, according to certain sources, it was Ould Taya who asked the imam's intervention to resolve the crisis.⁵ The political power thus made pragmatic choices and relied on traditional religious personalities without, however, allowing them the opportunity to develop a notoriety that could go beyond its control.

The second category of men of religion to which the authorities would turn to were the leaders of brotherhoods, who until then had been kept at a distance. With the independence, the State, while opting for Islam, carefully referred to its scriptural aspect, other expressions and models being excluded indirectly. This concealed its will to limit the influence of other traditional religious actors, notably the brotherhood leaders. These latter were denigrated and denounced officially by the state party at the time (Mauritanian People's Party) at its 1968 congress.⁶

The marginalized brotherhood leaders of the post-colonial period were to return to the national political scene with the regional political crisis and the introduction of a multi-party system. During the blood-shattering events of 1989 between Senegal and Mauritania, the leaders were to play an important role in the reconciliation between the two countries. In fact, the ties of brotherhood between the two banks of the Senegal River are century-old. The descendants of the Moorish *shaykh(s)*, who had conquered a large population in Senegal at the beginning of the century, had retained close ties with their followers. Belonging to a brotherhood was more powerful and more concrete than belonging to a nation. The annual pilgrimages made by the faithful to the holy places of their brotherhood leaders were the expression of permanent spiritual connections. This transnational and trans-ethnic spiritual establishment allowed the network of brotherhoods to actively involve itself in the bloody conflict between the black-African community and the Moorish community. Following the 1989 events, and before the opening of the official borders, the *shaykh* brotherhoods worked for reconciliation, not only by official means, but also from the base. Relations between the *shaykh(s)* and their disciples from the two banks remained intact despite ethnic tensions. The transnational position of the brotherhood leaders earned them such sobriquets as 'the man who traverses the two banks', attributed to Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Ould Talib Bouya Ould Saad Bouh when the following question was posed to Shaykh Mohamadou Ould Hamahullāh – son of the founder of Hamallism:⁷ 'Of what nationality are you (Malian or Mauritanian)?'; he responded: 'My nationality is my brotherhood (*tariqa*) and all my disciples are of the same nationality as I am'.⁸

In the past few years, the brotherhoods have begun to conquer urban areas. They opened *zāwiyya* in the form of traditional educational centres in the cities of Nouakchott and Nouadibou. Although the brotherhood leaders are relatively reticent towards politicians, they have become involved during elections. They were

approached from all sides by parties and political personalities to take advantage of the political influence they had to offer. However, in majority, they supported those (already) in power. The son of Hamahullāh, Shaykh Muhammadou declared: 'Ahmed Ould Daddah [president of the UFD: opposition party] came to see me. Hamdi [Hamdi Ould Maknas president of the PPD: opposition party] phoned me. I have his written request for my support. I dedicated prayers to him, as I did for Ahmed Ould Daddah and Mouawiya Ould Sid'Ahmd Taya (PRDS: Parti Republique Democratique et Social). We are above these political divides'.⁹ This displayed neutrality is only superficial, as indicated by the *shaykh* himself when he then stated: 'The people of this village asked me to advise them in their choice amongst the newly emerging parties. I suggested they go to the PRDS for the following reasons: 1 – Its leader is the leader of the State. He won the presidential elections and is more experienced than the others. 2 – He holds something in his hands, as opposed to someone who is seeking'.¹⁰ The vilages under the direct influence of the Qādirī brotherhood leaders as well as the Tijānī vote massively in favour of the party in power, PRDS. The pluralism and opening of the – electoral – political arena facilitated the emergence of traditional leaders as important actors on the local and national political scene. The *fuqahā'*, the brotherhood leaders and tribal leaders were mobilized, above all, for electoral purposes. These three principal actors coordinated their work in certain domains, all the while remaining in competition and rivalry in order to obtain maximal advantages in return for their service. For this reason, the alliances were often temporary and vague. It should be noted that the tribal factor was very decisive in these alliances, especially during the elections.

The traditional religious body is not homogeneous, religious dignitaries grant their support to one political party or another, depending on their personal interests. They react in a social tribal framework, and often play the role of intermediary between political forces and their own tribes, at times in coordination, at others in competition, with tribal leaders. The support that some amongst them granted to the state party or to the opposition is situated more within a traditional alliance between notables than it is in an explicit political alliance. This attitude is not unique to traditional followers of religion; it is also the attitude of modernist political personalities and the vast majority of the young intellectual elite. The leaders of political parties played the game; the most progressive amongst them and the most critical towards tribalism turned to tribal alliances during their electoral campaigns.

The conservative *fuqahā'* and the leaders of brotherhoods in majority chose for those already in power. While preaching a fundamentalist religious discourse strongly opposed to the Westernization of customs, they remained critical of militant Islam. They felt the threat represented by the new movements focusing on the young generation. Also, they situated their political and social actions in a new reli-

gious register. The Islamists, on their side, avoided direct confrontation with the *fuqahā'* and brotherhood leaders. Nonetheless, they marked their distance with the religious interpretations and practices of that milieu; the declarations of certain streams in this respect are an open discrediting of the traditional religious order.

Thus the ulamas are accused of being 'official clerics good for legitimating any governmental action' (*Nouveaux Horizons*, N° 2, 1991, p. 5) in the same sense they are qualified as 'Ulamas of the Sultan closer to the Ummayyad period than to ours' (*Nouveaux Horizons*, N° 5, 1993, p. 4). The men of brotherhood are also criticized as having diffused an archaic *Islam de spectacle* in manipulating the collective religious imagination of the masses (*Nouveaux Horizons*, N° 6 n.d., p. 6).

Islam in its orthodox form transformed itself almost into an official Islam; the men of traditional religion became more or less civil servants of the State which aimed at monopolization and manipulation of the political, social, and cultural fields. Mosques, Qur'anic schools, and institutes for higher education, are controlled directly or indirectly by the authorities in power. The emergence of new religious actors emphasized the State's control over religion and on reactivating all categories of traditional men of religion. This policy cannot halt the development of an Islam of contestation encouraged by a quest for identity, a precarious economic and social situation, the obvious social disparities and a discredited political system. ◆

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Notes

1. The data for this article do not cover the period before 1995: certain parties and political figures have changed since then. However, the spirit remains the same.
2. Art. 4, the regulation relating to promulgated political parties, 25/7/1991, by the Military Committee of National Salvation.
3. *Mauritanie Nouvelle*, N° 103, from 6 to 13 November 1994, p. 7.
4. CLAUSEN, U., *Demokratisierung in Mauretanien*, Deutsche Orient-Institut, Hamburg, 1993, p. 87.
5. *Mauritanie Nouvelle*, N° 102, from 30 Oct. to 6 Nov. 1994, p. 9.
6. *National unity: an old aspiration of our people realized within the PPM*, State Ministry on national orientation, Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 1975, p. 38.
7. Branch of the brotherhood Tijāniyya, founded by Hamahullāh (d. 1943).
8. *Mauritanie Nouvelle*, N° 91, from 2 to 9 May 1994, p. 19.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 20.