L’ISLAM NE SE VEND PLUS: THE ISLAMIC REFORM MOVEMENT AND THE STATE IN SENEGAL

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a) Introduction

Islamic reform groups, in particular those claiming to have political ambitions which go beyond the struggle against supposed religious and social grievances, are often denounced in the literature pertaining to the theme, particularly the Western media, as fundamentalist extremists. Their appearance is interpreted as a sign of social instability and political crisis and the connections of these movements with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan or Libya are referred to as proof of their political radicalness. This presentation of Islamic reform movements as part of an extensive and potentially terrorist ‘Islamist Internationale’ omits from the account the fact that these movements have developed in rather different ways in the different countries of the Islamic world. Furthermore, their radicalness and role as movements expressing opposition to existing political and social structures in religious terms is directly connected with the degree to which they have been integrated into the political structures of their societies (see Rouadjia 1990 and Roy 1994). In addition, it must not be overlooked that Islamic reform movements have found support among the population not only on account of their role as carriers of political protest against authoritarian regimes. They have also been known for their eagerness to take up and criticize social grievances that have often been ignored by the authoritarian regimes of their respective countries. Finally, the polemic form of discourse which Islamic reform movements directed against the established religious scholars (‘ulama’, sg. ‘alim), frequently connected with Sufi brotherhoods, may be seen not only in the context of the reformers’ struggle against supposed unislamic innovations, the bida’. Such discourse should also be seen as a form of rivalry between the ‘alim, and a new type of
teacher of Islam, the so-called ustâdh (professor). These new scholars of Islam refuse to accept the ʿulamāʾ's claim of a monopoly on religious guidance (irshād) and interpretation. Thus, Islamic reform and opposition movements are often manifestations of conflicts of authority and conflicts of generation within a specific society.

However, the case of Senegal illustrates that Islamic reform and opposition movements can be integrated into the social and political structure of a society and thus develop in a rather peaceful way. In Senegal, the first generation of Islamic reformers developed in the early 1950s in the context of the struggle against French colonialism. This Islamic reform movement, founded by Cheikh Touré in 1953, was called the Ittihād ath-Thaqāfī al-Islāmī (ITI, Islamic Cultural Union, in French ‘Union Culturelle Musulmane’, UCM). After 1957, this organization became increasingly integrated into the political structures of the country where it was to be finally domesticated by President L.S. Senghor in the 1960s. Since the 1970s, a second generation of Islamic reformers has attempted to influence the religious and political development of Senegal. In the 1980s, these new Islamic reform groups, in particular the jamāʿat ʿIbād ar-Rahmān (The Society of the Servants of the Merciful), have gained considerable public attention and attained social influence, especially in the sphere of education. However, the second flourishing of Senegal’s Islamic reform movement was also to be short lived. In the 1990s, in the face of extensive economic problems and against the background of a Senegalese governmental policy which was again aimed at integrating the Islamic reform and opposition groups into the political system of the country, the attractiveness of the political face of Islam was to suffer severely. In an interview in 1991, Tidiane Kassé, editor-in-chief of the most influential journal of the Islamic reformers, Wal Fadjri, had thus to concede: ‘L’Islam ne se vend plus’, i.e., the brand of (political) Islam, represented by the reformers, ‘doesn’t sell any more’ (Tidiane Kassé, 17 April 1991).

b) The beginnings of the Islamic reform movement in Senegal

By the early colonial period, Muslim citoyens of the so-called quatre communes, i.e. the four municipalities of Dakar, Gorée, St. Louis and Rufisque, whose inhabitants enjoyed the status of French citizens, had already established petition movements that called for the institution of, for instance, Islamic courts of justice (ṣāriʿa courts) and the construction of mosques. For these associations of Muslim citizens Islam came to constitute an ideology of resistance against the policy of assimilation