

France and Africa: the End of the Affair? The View From Senegal

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Abstract: Links between Senegal and France go back more than three centuries. Senegal was France's oldest colony in black Africa, and the close links between the two countries, that were developed during the colonial period, have continued since political independence in 1960. In this article it is argued that decolonization actually reinforced the ties between Senegal and France, rather than the opposite, but that this "special relationship" is now changing. The reasons for this are analyzed. Recent efforts by Senegal to diversify its foreign relations, both within and outside Africa, are then examined. President Wade, who won the 2000 presidential election and whose party now controls the government, has sought closer relations, notably with Washington but also with London. As one of the leading promoters of the New Partnership for African Development, Wade has also sought to build stronger links within Africa, notably with the presidents of South Africa and Nigeria. In conclusion, it is suggested that the days of the Franco-Senegalese "special relationship" appear to be numbered.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal, died on December 20, 2001. Poet and statesman, "father of the nation", but also from 1984 a member of the Académie Française, the pinnacle of France's literary establishment, Senghor was an enthusiastic Francophile. He led his country through the turbulent post-war period of transition from French colonial rule to political independence in 1960 and served as its president until 1980, maintaining close relations with France throughout this period. As president of Senegal, he earned a reputation as an enlightened African leader who bequeathed to his country stability, a relatively open society with a vigorous free press, and a functioning democracy. Yet, in a

country where life expectancy barely reaches fifty, many of those who lined the streets of Dakar to watch Senghor's funeral procession were not yet born when he left office and would thus have known little of him. Even for those who were alive during the Senghor era, he remained a distant figure, part of a political élite that, literally, rarely spoke their language: although French is the country's official language and the links between the two countries date back three centuries, only some 20 percent of the population is actually literate in French. Wolof, not French, is the most widely spoken language.¹

Thus, many Senegalese knew him above all as "l'homme de la France" (the man of France), who had lived at his country house in Normandy since stepping down as president. They knew him more for his French poetry, which some of them studied at school, than for his politics. Many Senegalese therefore saw the absence of both the French president, Jacques Chirac, and prime minister, Lionel Jospin, at Senghor's funeral as a snub to their country, especially as François Mitterrand, then president of France, had attended the 1993 funeral of the other doyen of Francophone Africa, former president of Côte d'Ivoire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Making reference to the French devaluation of the CFA franc—the currency of Francophone Africa—in 1994, newspaper headlines described their absence as a "second devaluation of Francophone Africa."²

Senghor's death thus emerged as a cathartic moment in Senegal's post-colonial history, prompting a national debate about the choices Senegal made at independence and giving renewed impetus to an ongoing debate about its special relationship with its former colonial master, France. Senegal's close ties to France have contributed to its political stability, and given the country prestige on the international stage through its prominent role within the Organisation of Francophone States, which is now headed by Senghor's successor, Abdou Diouf. However, as the economic crisis affecting the country persists, many Senegalese have begun to wonder whether these privileged links with France have not prevented their country

from enjoying the benefits of a wider range of alliances and made it more difficult for Senegal to forge links with other countries in the region, such as the former British colonies in West Africa. In short, many Senegalese are asking whether Senegal would not benefit from diversifying its foreign relations, which has in turn led to questions about the nature of the “independence” that the country gained from France in 1960. Decolonization actually reinforced the ties between Senegal and France, rather than the opposite, and this choice—to support the relationship with France despite nominal independence—has had a major impact on Senegalese society.

Negotiating Decolonization

France emerged from World War II weak and divided. Many Senegalese, who had joined the French army expecting to fight against Germany in defense of the Republic, viewed France’s abandonment of the struggle against Germany in 1940 without a battle as a sign of weakness. The subsequent exactions of the war effort, which saw forced labor increase, incomes fall, and imported goods become virtually impossible to obtain, provoked renewed resistance to colonial rule. After the war the two new superpowers, the United States and the USSR, emerged, both avowedly anticolonial. These new realities put pressure on the French empire from within and without. Yet it was precisely at this moment that the empire took on unprecedented importance for France as it sought to maintain its world power status in the post-war world. Thus it was that France, emerging from the war economically, diplomatically, and militarily battered, found itself in the 1940s and 1950s desperately swimming against the anticolonial tide. This effort led it to repress an anticolonial uprising in Madagascar in 1947-1948, at a cost of some 90,000 lives, and into two highly damaging anticolonial wars, in Indochina and Algeria. Under threat of eviction elsewhere in its empire, the retention of black

Africa within its sphere of influence became crucial to France's strategy to maintain its world role. Senegal was a key lynchpin in this strategy. Not only was it France's oldest colony in black Africa, but Dakar was the seat of the federal Government-General of French West Africa and residents of the Four Communes of Senegal, who were French citizens, had been electing a deputy to the Chamber of Deputies in Paris since the previous century.³

Against this background, a group of well-intentioned French politicians and civil servants, in cooperation with a number of "enlightened" African leaders who were friendly towards France such as Senghor and Houphouët-Boigny, conceived a plan to create a modern Africa *within* the colonial system. They envisaged decolonization taking place through integration of the colonies into some kind of federation with France, rather than through the granting of political independence.⁴ This complicity between African and French governing élites was crucial to the largely smooth transition from colonial rule to independence in French Black Africa. Indeed, the fact that French Black Africa largely avoided the chaos and bloodshed of decolonization in other parts of the French empire has led many French politicians and some commentators to suggest that French decolonization in this part of the world was "successful" and exemplary.⁵ However, while the process succeeded from the French point of view—insofar as it transferred power to Francophile African leaders like Senghor who were keen to retain close links with the former metropole—this relatively smooth transition cannot be considered the product of a carefully planned policy. Certainly, French post-war governing élites displayed a consistent determination to hold onto empire, but this is not the same as following through a predetermined plan. France found itself on the defensive throughout the 1940s and 1950s in black Africa, buffeted by external events over which it had no control and at a loss how as to how to respond to nationalist demands for accelerated development and equality with Europeans. It could neither comply with such demands nor reject them out of hand, because of the need to maintain black Africa within the French sphere of influence.⁶ Moreover, involved in costly colonial wars elsewhere, France wanted above all to avoid opening a "second front" in black Africa. Thus France belatedly conceded limited

internal autonomy to its African territories under the provisions of the Loi-cadre of 1956. At the time, this was seen by the French government as an alternative to political independence and there was still, even at this late stage, no sense of preparing the colonies for imminent independence. However, with Britain on the verge of granting independence to the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), the Loi-cadre granted too little too late to satisfy African nationalist demands for full self-government. Instead, its main effect was to defuse nationalist pressure just long enough to afford France a breathing space in which to organize the transfer of power to friendly African leaders.⁷ But the collapse of the Fourth Republic shortly afterwards, under the threat of a military coup in Algiers, put in jeopardy France's plans to keep its black African colonies under French control.

It was against this background that the political choices made by African leaders like Senghor played a key role in the transition, determining the strategy and outcomes of decolonization. Just as the "French" presentation of the decolonization process in black Africa, as the product of an enlightened policy, is a *post hoc* rationalization that does not do justice to the untidy reality of what actually happened, so too is the "nationalist" of independence as the outcome of a struggle successfully waged against the colonial "enemy". The reality of what happened on the ground was much less clear-cut: on each side, different groups with changing objectives created shifting alliances in order to promote their own agenda and interests. Thus, in order to avoid being outflanked on the left, African leaders such as Senghor pursued a policy that often meant allying themselves with French leaders against the more radical elements within their own nationalist movements. So, for example, when President Charles De Gaulle offered Senghor the opportunity to take immediate independence in the 1958 referendum that established the Fifth Republic, he, together with all the other leaders of French Africa apart from Sekou Touré in Guinea, refused. Instead, he campaigned successfully to persuade the Senegalese to vote yes to the French Community and against immediate independence, arguing that this was the best way of maintaining the flow of French development funds.⁸ And less than

two years later, when the growing international tide against colonialism and the political and economic costs to France of maintaining colonial rule convinced De Gaulle to move rapidly to grant independence to black Africa, Senghor, in common with the leaders of a number of former French colonies in black Africa, chose to retain close political, military, and cultural links with France. The French retained a military base on the outskirts of Dakar after independence.⁹ The currency remained part of the Franc zone, pegged at a fixed rate to the French franc with two-thirds of the country's currency reserves held in Paris at the Bank of France.¹⁰ These close links with France guaranteed the continued flow of funds to help pay for French teachers and lecturers for Senegal's secondary schools and its university, as well as the French military and technical advisers who continued to work in most government ministries.

This policy reflected the interests of the small French-speaking élite in the country, of which Senghor was the leading figure and most powerful symbol. As the leader of a poor country, endowed with few large mineral deposits, few trained personnel, and a small army and police force, French support enabled the new government to hold onto power in the face of challenges from radical nationalists in the trade union and student movements, who rejected what they viewed as a pseudo-independence and demanded instead the real thing.¹¹ The continued links helped ensure the French ensure that the new government in Dakar was not replaced by a more radical, and much less friendly, regime.

In the late 1960s, with political control more or less consolidated, Senghor played a key role in promoting the idea of Francophonie. Playing on De Gaulle's fear of France being eclipsed as a major power, Senghor joined Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia in calling for the creation of an association of French-speaking nations. This led in 1968 to the establishment of the Agency for Cultural and Technological Cooperation by twenty-six Francophone nations, which was to become the Organisation of Francophone states (Haut Conseil de la Francophonie) in 1986.¹² Senghor's political choices thus locked Senegal into an exclusive, special relationship with France. France has remained a key bilateral aid donor and trade partner, French was made the official language—despite the fact that most Senegalese do not speak it—and Senegal has continued to occupy a privileged place within the Francophone world. For the Senegalese government, as for De Gaulle, decolonization was a strategy to ensure continuity in the Franco-Senegalese special relationship and avoid any radical break with the colonial past.

The Special Relationship

In contrast to decolonization in British Africa, which broke many of the ties that bound the colonies to the former colonial power, decolonization in black Africa consolidated France's relationship with key allies among its former colonial possessions, such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire in west Africa and Gabon in central Africa. Political independence in fact reconfigured the colonial relationship in a way that reduced the cost of empire to France. This was achieved by transferring responsibility for internal affairs, and in particular politically sensitive and expensive policy areas such as economic and social development, to African governments, while signing a plethora of technical, military, defense, and cultural cooperation accords with the newly-independent states that preserved the kernel of the relationship itself. This approach served France well in Senegal, as in most of its other former colonies in black Africa. These close links, combined with French development aid, enabled France to maintain control of the currency, of language policy through its role in education, and of large swathes of Senegal's foreign and economic policy.

Other institutional and semi-institutional links helped support the formal ties agreed to at independence, especially the annual Franco-African summits instituted in 1973.¹³ These meetings, which have traditionally had no formal published agenda, resemble family gatherings more than official summit meetings. They bring together the French president and leading figures in France's Francophone African "family", providing an opportunity to renew acquaintances, share problems and conduct deals.¹⁴ Even today, when the summits have expanded to include representatives from most of the countries of black Africa, special sessions for France's closest allies in Africa, the so-called "pré-carré" (closed circle) consisting mainly of France's former colonies, ensure that something of the old-style ties still survive today.

An array of clientelist networks underpinned the special relationship. These networks, linking African and French political, business, and military élites, thrived on French development aid and provided many opportunities for corrupt practices.¹⁵ In Africa, they benefited mainly the French-speaking élite, while in France the main beneficiaries were French political parties and certain French businesses.

With an economic crisis that persisted through the 1980s and deepened in the 1990s, these networks and their practices have become the focus of growing criticism, as their activities have increasingly been perceived as benefiting a small neo-colonial élite at the expense of the mass of the population. Moreover, with the decline in the French aid budget in the late 1990s (down from 0.64% to 0.31% of GDP between 1994 and 2000¹⁶), the funds available for onward distribution to a wider clientele within the country have also declined, along with the loyalty they bought. As a result, and thanks also to the death of leading figures in these networks such as Jacques Foccart, who was special adviser on African affairs to successive Gaullist presidents, these networks have begun to lose much of their force in recent years.¹⁷

Against this background of economic crisis, Senghor's death in 2001 triggered a national debate about the "special relationship" with France. While the relationship brought undoubted political, economic, military, and diplomatic benefits to France over many years, the benefits to Senegal have come under increasing scrutiny in Senegal. During decades of governmental instability and military coups in much of Africa, the special relationship no doubt contributed to the political stability Senegal has enjoyed since independence. The Franc zone also provided monetary stability. On the other hand, the increasingly over-valued currency made it difficult for Senegal to export onto world markets, resulting in persistent and growing trade deficits until France decided to devalue the currency by 50 percent in 1994. And Senegal's privileged links with France have been a disincentive to building wider alliances, both within the region and beyond. For the majority of Senegalese, French aid has done little: economic development has not taken off and the benefits of aid have failed to filter down to the population at large. Indeed, in recent years, illiteracy has increased and economic inequalities have widened, as certain groups within Senegalese society have become entrenched in poverty, while others, mainly among the French-speaking élite, have continued to derive economic and political benefits from the close ties with France.

Language policy has played a significant role in this state of affairs. The maintenance of French as the country's official language has traditionally excluded, and continues to exclude, the majority of the population from the best jobs in the public and private sectors and from participation in "official". Now, language politics are playing into the decline of French influence that has called the special relationship into question. As structural adjustment programs have downsized government and reduced job opportunities in the public sector, the government is no longer hiring new staff. As a result, French is today less important for social mobility and material success, leading one commentator to suggest that Wolof is now "the language of those who get on, the language of success."¹⁸ The spread of Wolof also needs to be set alongside the growing importance of English. Demand for English among the social élite has grown in recent years, not only as the language of international trade but also as an essential skill for those who aspire to work or study in the United States. At the same time, new French immigration controls have made it more difficult for Senegalese to get visas to study in France. These factors, taken together, have combined to erode the perceived importance of French for social and economic success within Senegalese society.

Moreover, since its implication in the genocide of some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in Rwanda in 1994, France has seemed less sure-footed in its African policy.¹⁹ It badly misjudged the situation in former Zaire and as a result found itself internationally isolated, thanks to its continued support for the country's late dictator Mobutu, long after his other Western backers had abandoned him. Shortly after this, a new, Socialist-led government was elected in France in 1997. Faced with growing public criticism of French African policy, both within the country and internationally, in the aftermath of the Rwanda tragedy and the Zaire fiasco, the newly-elected government adopted a new African policy that the Prime Minister Lionel Jospin characterised as "ni ingérence, ni indifférence" ("neither interference, nor indifference"). This was interpreted by many, both within France and outside, as a sign that France wished to break with its old-style, neo-colonial, "special relationship" with black Africa and move towards a normalization of Franco-African relations.²⁰

As a result of these developments, many Senegalese now look beyond France, to the United States, to the Middle East, or to the European Union, for international links and support. France no longer occupies the special place it once did, not only for the economic and

social reasons outlined above, but also because of a feeling that France has abandoned the special relationship. Many Senegalese perceived the 1994 devaluation of the CFA franc as a betrayal and the first sign of this abandonment by France. In December 2001, the absence of France's top political leaders at Senghor's funeral, followed—symbolically—just three days later by the introduction of the euro in France, was seen as a further sign of France's growing disinterest in its "special relationship" with Senegal. The recent expulsions from France of Senegalese illegal immigrants and their forced return to Senegal by specially chartered flights have further tarnished France's image in the country.²¹

New Government, New Priorities

A further factor in the changing nature of the relationship has been the coming to power of a new government under the leadership of President Abdoulaye Wade. Elected by a coalition of opposition parties under the campaign slogan "sopi" (change) in 2000, Wade has sought to diversify Senegal's foreign relations away from the Francophone focus of his predecessors Senghor and Diouf.²² He has visited London and Washington, and has sought to play a leading role as a peace-maker on the continent, notably in the Madagascar and Côte d'Ivoire conflicts. He is also the only political leader from Francophone black Africa among the main promoters of the New Partnership for African Development (NePAD), the success of which will depend crucially on the active support of the American and British governments. American military transport planes are now a regular sight at Dakar's international airport, US troops are involved in training Senegalese troops for peace-keeping missions and President George W. Bush is due to make an official visit to Senegal in July 2003. Following the earlier visit by President Clinton in 1998, this visit can be expected to reinforce the increasingly warm relations between the two countries. Wade has also cultivated good relations with Britain, for example through support for British army operations in Sierra Leone.²³

Perhaps the most significant sign of change in the special relationship with France was the Senegalese government's stance over the 2003 Iraq war. Despite widespread public opposition in Senegal, whose population is 95% Muslim, to the war, the government refused to support France in opposing the US-led attack on Iraq. Claiming that "Senegal could not prevent the United States going to war with Iraq", President Wade made a point of not taking sides in the conflict, a position that was widely interpreted within the country as effectively giving support to the United States.²⁴ This impression was reinforced when, shortly after the war, the prime minister, Idrissa Seck, returned from Washington with a promise of a substantial new aid package for Senegal, claiming that this was a vindication of the government's stance on the Iraq war. He followed this shortly afterwards with an attack, in an interview with a Radio France Internationale journalist, on French development cooperation for being slow to react to Senegal's recent problems, such as the series of poor harvests and, especially, the loss of

the Senegalese ferry, the *Joola*, off the coast of the Gambia in September 2002 with the loss of some 1800 lives. He criticised France for not having helped Senegal to replace the boat and deplored the fact that “France’s development cooperation does not, alas, possess the same rapid reaction capacity [as the United States]”²⁵. The era of close alignment between the French and Senegalese stances on major international issues of the day is, it seems, definitively over.

Conclusions

Several factors thus appear to be at work in the decline of Senegal’s special relationship with France. The Franco-African “special relationship” has been the subject of growing criticism in France, and the majority of Senegalese increasingly question its benefits to them. A generational shift in both countries’ political leaderships has also contributed. The previous generation of French political leaders, such as De Gaulle, Pompidou, and Mitterrand, who had a special affection for black Africa and its political leaders, as well as many of the first post-independence generation of Senegalese political leaders, have now passed away or left active politics. They have been replaced by a new generation of political leaders whose assessments of the foreign policy priorities and needs of their countries are shaped by different considerations. In a context of globalization and international liberalism, their choices are driven by economic pressures, and they are both more pragmatic and hard-headed, and also more constrained, than their predecessors. For these reasons, Senghor’s death may well mark a watershed in the special relationship between Senegal and France in a way that decolonization and political independence did not.

Notes

1Figures from the 1988 census, quoted by L. A. Villalón, *Islamic Society and State Power in Senegal* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 285.

2“Une deuxième dévaluation de l’Afrique francophone”, *L’Info*, 31 December 2001-1 January 2002.

3In contrast, the other French territories that made up the federation of French West Africa had been colonized relatively recently, in the last years of the nineteenth century. Apart from Senegal, the territories comprising the federation were: Soudan (present-day Mali), Mauritania, Niger, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, Dahomey (Benin) and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). Part of the former German colony of Togo was allocated to France under a League of Nations mandate by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. It was thereafter effectively administered as part of French West Africa.

4L.S. Senghor, “Pour une solution fédéraliste”, *La Nef*, June 1955, reproduced in his *Liberté 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 158.

5Cf. President François Mitterrand in his valedictory speech at the Franco-African summit in 1994: “France and its African partners organized a peaceful decolonization”, quoted in *Jeune Afrique Economie*, no 186, December 1994, 29.

6T. Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa. France’s Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 185-189.

7Chafer, *The End of Empire in French West Africa*, 227-229.

8J.G. Vaillant, *Black, French and African. A Life of Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 316.

9Five other former French colonies in black Africa concluded defense agreements with France, and twelve, including Senegal and several of the countries that had defense agreements with France, signed military assistance agreements.

10Twelve former French black African colonies remained in the Franc zone after independence.

11Cf. A. Bathily, *Mai 68 à Dakar* (Paris: Editions Chaka, 1992), 54-57 and F. Cooper, *Africa since 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 78-79.

12Vaillant, *Black, French and African*, 322.

13T. Chafer, "Franco-African relations: no longer so exceptional?", *African Affairs* 101 (2002): 346.

14In recent years, the exclusiveness of these gatherings has been reduced, as first the leaders of former Belgian and Portuguese African colonies and, at the most recent summit, in Paris in February 2003, the heads of every African country, apart from Somalia and the Western Sahara, were invited to attend. Despite the setbacks of the 1990s, most notably in Rwanda, it seems that France under a re-elected Chirac still aspires to play an active and distinctive role in Africa.

15See S. Smith and A. Glaser, *Ces Messieurs Afrique. Le Paris-village du continent noir* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1992) and *Ces Messieurs Afrique 2. Des réseaux aux lobbys* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1997).

16Observatoire Permanent de la Coopération Française, *Rapport 2001* (Paris: Karthala, 2001), 15.

17"Jacques is back", *Africa Confidential* 44, no 5 (2003): 6.

18D. Cruise O'Brien, "The shadow-politics of Wolofisation," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 1 (1998): 44. This decline in the perceived importance of French language needs to be understood against the background of economic decline and structural adjustment, which have since 1981 led to the closure of various state-run enterprises and an end to government hiring of staff. As a result, "there is not much incentive for the young to cultivate their French, the language of inaccessible officialdom", *ibid*, 31.

19 Cf. amongst others, P. Krop, *Le Génocide franco-africain* (Paris: Jean-Claude Lattès, 1994).

20It should be said that several commentators have detected signs of a return to old-style French interventionist policies in black Africa since the election of a right-wing government after Chirac's 2002 presidential election victory, cf. "France-Africa: Chirac's new partnership", *New African*, April 2003, 36-9.

21An indication of the strength of feeling in Senegal on this issue is the recent announcement by the Prime Minister that Senegal will retaliate by expelling illegal French immigrants from Senegal and repatriating them to France on special charter flights, "Réciprocité France-Senegal: Désormais ce sera charter contre charter", *Walfadjri*, 19 June 2003.

22"Wade's wide world", *Africa Confidential* 43, no 9 (2002), 5-6.

23"Wade's blue wave", *Ibid* 42, no 11 (2001), 6-7.

24"Wade dévoile la position du Sénégal", *Sud Quotidien*, 20 March 2003 and "Guerre américaine contre l'Irak: Wade s'assied sur les principes et s'aligne sur Bush", *Walfadjri*, 21 March 2003.

25"Idrissa Seck: la coopération française manque d'outils de réaction rapide", *Walfadjri*, 31 May 2003.