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Gender parity in Senegal – A continuing struggle

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In 2010, the Senegalese women's movement, supported by political elites and international norms, managed to push for the adoption of one of the world's most radical gender quota laws to date. This was achieved without the support of the powerful religious leaders, the marabouts. However, the marabouts fought back in the 2014 local elections and thwarted the full implementation of parity. This CMI Insight explores the on-going fight for parity in Senegal.

The Senegalese Law on Parity:

- Signed in 2010 by the former president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade.
- The law obliges all political parties to place women and men in an alternating matter on candidate lists, aiming at a male-female ratio of 50%.
- In cases on non-compliance, the electoral commission (CENA) has the authority to reject lists, and thus exclude parties from competing in elections.
- The 2012 national election saw an increase of women representatives from 22,7% to 42,7% in the National Assembly, and from 16% to 47% in local legislatures in the 2014 local election.

Women's representation in Africa

The Law on Parity placed Senegal at the forefront globally in terms of women's representation.¹ The country follows an African trend towards fast-tracking women into political decision-making through gender quotas. But, unlike other African countries with high levels of women's representation, Senegal is not coming out of a civil war. Literature on women's representation in Africa finds that in the aftermath of a destructive civil war, an institutional vacuum appears. In this political space, new constitutions and electoral laws are implemented. Women's movements often use this opportunity to claim their rightful place in the new society and create women-friendly laws and institutions like gender quotas (Tripp 2015).

Interestingly, Senegal is considered one of the most stable countries in West Africa, and has never experienced a coup d'état or a military rule. Still, the women's movement pushed for one of the most radical quota laws in the world. The study of the evolution of this law thus provides useful insight to the process

of quota adoption in the absence of conflict. The Senegalese case also sheds light on the importance of following quota processes beyond their mere adoption, as religious forces have proved an obstacle to quota implementation in the holy city of Touba.

The primus motor: COSEF and the women's movement

The Senegalese women's movement is said to be among the strongest in Africa, and united under the banner of COSEF (Conseil Sénégalais des Femmes), founded in 1994. Many female politicians from across the political spectrum felt heavily marginalised within their own parties and saw the need for a common arena where women's presence in politics could be discussed. These women allied with other women's organizations and trade unions and fought together for the common cause of increased representation.

COSEF launched several campaigns over the following years. During these campaigns, the word quota was avoided and instead one

COSEF

*Conseil Sénégalais
des Femmes*
Women's movement
organization

talked actively about parity. Activists in COSEF lobbied for parity in the National Assembly, and focused on familiarising the public with the parity concept. This may have been a clever move, since the word quota remains somewhat controversial, and is viewed by some as a discriminatory practice. Parity, on the other hand, is a relatively new concept, and its proponents stress that it entails something philosophically different than gender quotas (Krook 2014). Also important were COSEF's broad alliances with other civil society organisations like the Senegalese Association of Jurists (AFJ) who helped develop proposals to the electoral code in order to achieve parity. Furthermore, COSEF's cooperation with media associations offered a mainstream media channel for the purpose of spreading the idea of parity.

The patron of parity: President Wade

COSEF found an ally when Abdoulaye Wade was elected president in 2000. Initially, Wade had the image of a modern reformer, and campaigned under the promise of change. He adopted a new constitution, which guaranteed women's rights and access to decision-making instances. In fact, Wade first proposed a gender quota of 50% in the African Union during a conference in Durban in 2002. Following this incident, Wade was awarded the African Gender Award, upon which occasion he expressed willingness to apply parity in Senegal as well.

This women-friendly behaviour fuelled COSEF's mobilisation for parity, and its jurist members started working on a parity model law. A specialised parity-committee, *Comité de Suivi*, was established in 2006,

Timeline: Main events on the road to parity

1994

- COSEF is established

1995

- The Beijing Conference

1998

- First COSEF-campaign: "Democracy, where are you?"
- Voluntary party quota of 30%

2000

- Second COSEF-campaign: the "Citizen Campaign" in partnership with other civil society groups.
- Abdoulaye Wade becomes president

2002

- Wade proposes a gender quota of 50% in the African Union

2005

- Third COSEF-campaign: "With parity, we consolidate democracy".
- Wade is awarded the African Gender Award

2006

- Comité de Suivi is established
- Wade establishes a National Committee for Parity

2007

- An early version of the Law on Parity is adopted, but later declared unconstitutional by the opposition

2010

- The Senate and National Assembly approves the legislation of gender parity in all elective and semi-elective institutions

2012

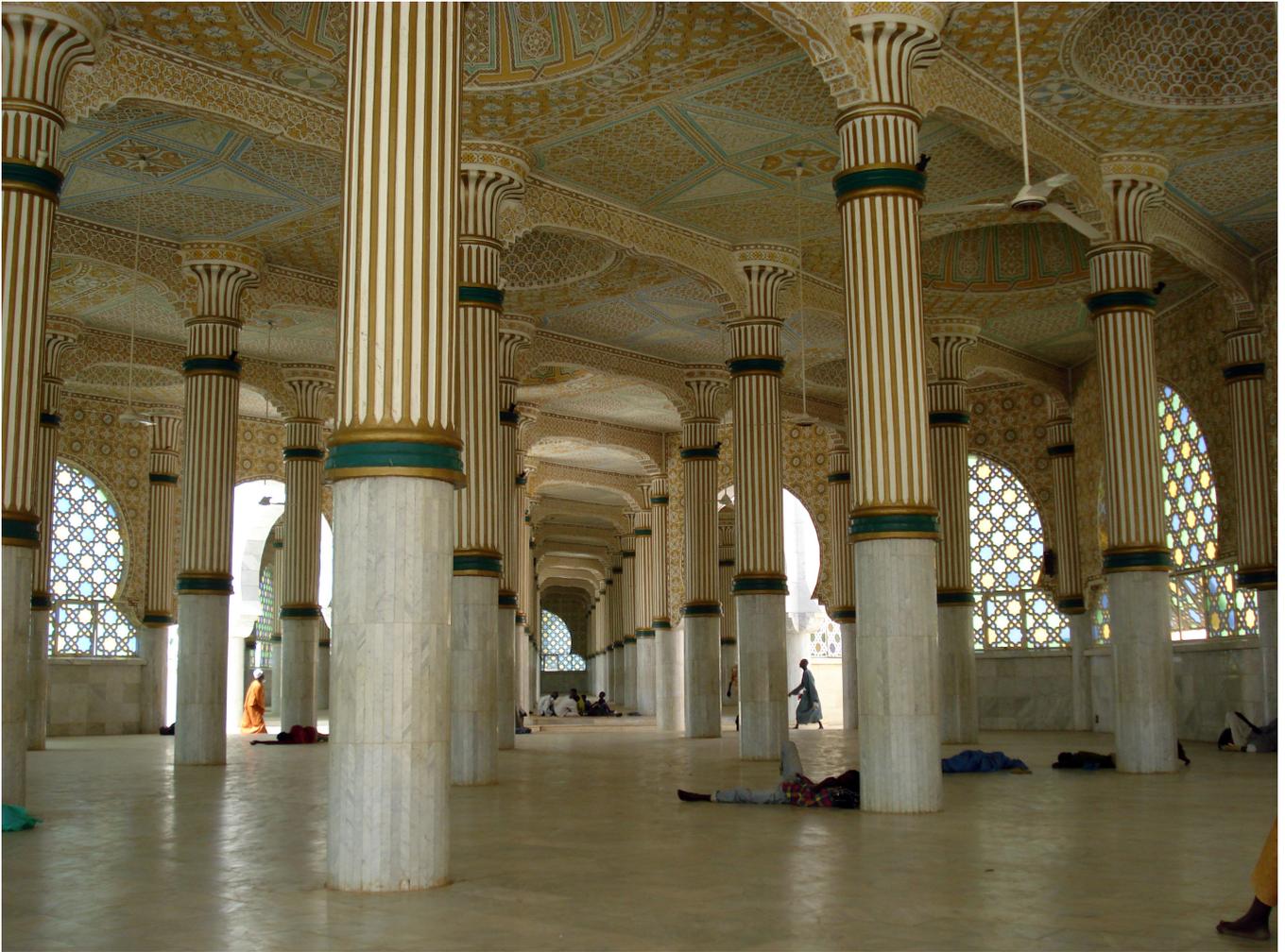
- National elections. Women representatives increase from 22,7% to 42,7%
- Macky Sall becomes president

2014

- Local elections. Women representatives increase from 16% to 47%
- Touba presents an all-male list of 100 candidates without any sanctions

July 2017 (forthcoming)

- National elections



Touba Mosque. Photo by Juan Falque. CC-license.

which allowed women's movements in the political parties to coordinate lobbying. On March 23 that same year almost 1000 women, all dressed in white, marched to the presidential palace and handed President Wade the model law. In response to this, Wade expressed his will to implement the modifications in the electoral law. However, the law was declared discriminatory and unconstitutional by the opposition, which delayed the process. COSEF continued campaigning with renewed vigour the next couple of years. In 2010, Wade finally adopted a draft legislation of absolute parity between men and women in all elective or semi-elective institutions. The jurists

in COSEF proposed an amendment, which included an alternation between men and women. This improved law on parity was passed with immediate application, and its consequences were seen two years later in the national election when the portion of female parliamentarians almost doubled.

The women's movement owes much of its success to president Wade. Not everyone was in favour of parity, so having the president on board was of vital importance. But why was he so eager to be the patron of parity?

Firstly, the parity law saw the light of day in a highly favourable international climate. After the UN

Beijing conference of 1995, women's organisations blossomed, and donors started focusing on increasing the presence of women in decision-making bodies. International norms promoting women's political representation gave COSEF extra leverage to their demands. Wade himself was very well aware of the fact that parity was in line with international norms. The inclusion of previously marginalised groups, like women, are usually seen by the international community as a way of moving away from "traditional" to "modern" state-formation. Political leaders sometimes adopt quotas with the purpose of presenting themselves and their countries as "modern" or "democratic" to the rest of the world. Countries like Senegal, which are heavily indebted, largely dependent on foreign aid and/or tourism, are more likely to adjust to adopt gender quotas than more financially independent countries.

Secondly, political leaders sometimes use gender quotas to increase electoral support by winning the women's vote, particularly when popularity is waning (Krook 2006). This was the case for Wade. He had become increasingly unpopular during his eight years in power, partly due to his incapability of tackling Senegal's serious infrastructure problems and rising costs of living. Despite his attempts, Wade failed at winning the majority vote and lost to Macky Sall in the 2012 presidential election. The responsibility of implementing parity was thus passed on to Sall.

The role of the marabouts

According to Htun and Weldon (2016), quotas are generally less controversial than many other gender-related measures, since

quotas do not touch upon questions of kinship and reproduction, which historically has been the domain of religious doctrine. Consequently, religious forces are nearly absent in discussions surrounding women's quotas. In Senegal, this is true when it comes to the *adoption* of parity: there were cases of religious opposition, but this was not strong enough to stop the project. The Sufi Muslim leaders, the *marabouts*, used religious arguments maintaining the "natural" inequality of man and woman. Most of the parity-critics within the National Assembly reportedly belonged to religious families. However, the Senegalese president holds great power, and the National Assembly rarely votes down his proposals. The president also exercises control over the parliament through the offer and possibility of patronage goods in the absence of a strong party discipline.

However, what is interesting about Senegal is how the *implementation* of parity has become highly controversial among religious forces, to the point where they have been exempted from following national law in practice.

In order to understand this, we need to look at the role the marabouts have played in the history of Senegal. The constitution defines Senegal as a secular state. Still, Islam remains an important part of people's everyday lives, and most Senegalese Muslims belong to a Sufi brotherhood. The marabouts are the leaders of these brotherhoods, and are said to exercise much indirect power. The followers of the marabouts are united in well-organised cells, which have "placed marabouts at the center of very highly structured and dynamic social networks with obvious political potential" (Villalon 1999, 134).

Marabout
"one who is attached/
garrisoned"
a Muslim religious
leader and teacher in
West Africa



At the newsagent. Photo by Graham Holliday. CC-license.

This political power dates back to colonial times, when the French colonists chose a cooperative approach with the marabouts in order to maintain control over parts of the rural Senegalese territory where their direct authority did not reach (Creevey 1996). As a consequence, the marabouts have since enjoyed political privileges. They also came to play an important economical role in Senegalese society when the French put them in charge of an extensive peanut production.

The collaborative relationship between the marabouts and the state continued after independence, when Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president as an independent state, gathered votes and legitimacy through the marabouts' approval

in exchange for services and gifts (Augis 2012). This is all part of the traditionally clientelist and patrimonial character of Senegalese politics, where power networks involving marabouts, local bosses, and politicians connect the political system to a local base. Recent presidents, Abdoulaye Wade and Macky Sall, have maintained contact with the marabouts, although in a less explicit manner. Villalón (1999) argues that the marabouts play an important part in the country's political stability, where Islamic institutions have coexisted peacefully with a secular state without trying to challenge its power. That is, until the 2014 local elections in the holy city of Touba.

The 'sociological realities' of Senegal: The case of Touba

Touba is the second most populated city in Senegal and was founded in 1887 by Cheikh Amadou Bamba, a Muslim Sufi religious leader. In addition to leading a pacifist rebellion against the French colonial rulers, Bamba founded the now popular and powerful Mouride brotherhood. The Mourides are known for emphasizing virtues such as hard work and industriousness, and Touba is their stronghold. Touba is considered a holy city, and receives between one and two million Muslim pilgrims from all over Senegal and beyond every year. The city also holds a special status with its own set of rules based on Sharia law, enforced by a special police force. The *General Khalif of the Mourides* is the supreme leader.

In the rest of Senegal, it is the political parties that are responsible for composing candidate lists for local and national elections. However, in Touba this responsibility lies with the Khalif himself. In 2014, in the first local election after the adoption of parity, the Khalif presented an all-male candidate list of 100 candidates. Not surprisingly, the Electoral Commission (CENA) concluded that the Touba list did not respect the law on parity. The Khalif however publicly refused to succumb, stating that there will never be parity in Touba, not in his lifetime or beyond, and that the only law the holy city has to follow is the Sharia.

Where there have been other cases of non-compliance to the law on parity, like in the communes of Keur Massal and Kaolack, CENA has rejected these lists. Yet, this has still not happened in Touba. In fact, in 2014, CENA and the Interior

Minister reached an agreement on the so-called "specificity of Touba" and stated that the "sociological realities of Senegal" should be taken into account in the development and implementation of new laws. As stated by a juridical scholar, Touba holds a special status *de facto*, not *de jure*: "In the juridical framework, there is no special status for the religious city. But it shows that in reality, on a sociological level, there is a part of the territory that is different"². Another source states that CENA had let Touba pass without sanctions because "...you do not touch the marabouts"³. Consequently, Touba is in fact exempted from following national law, which again leaves the women of the second largest city of Senegal unrepresented in local government.

The difficulties surrounding the implementation of parity effectively illustrates the so-called "lack of uniformity" in Senegalese society. On one side, there is the omnipresence of Islam and the importance of the marabouts, who have traditionally been a link between politicians and the people, particularly in rural areas. On the other side, politics are dominated by the often Western-educated urban elites whose main focus is the modernisation and development of Senegal. The pragmatism of political elites has put them in a position where they perhaps are more loyal to international women-friendly norms than their rural religious leaders. At the same time, the complete lack of sanctions in the wake of the Touba issue show that the secularly oriented political elites in Dakar remain highly dependent on support from religious elites in the implementation of their politics across the territory.

"You do not touch the marabouts"

Conclusion

The fight for parity does not yet seem to be over as it still faces the “sociological realities” of a patriarchal and deeply religious society. This CMI Insight points to the importance of following quota processes beyond its mere adoption. Although religious counter-mobilisation was not dominant when parity was *adopted* in Senegal, religious forces are still trying to stop parity from being *implemented*. One cannot talk about successful national legislation if parts of the country are exempted from following it in practice. It is remarkable how a secular state apparatus, like the one in Senegal, still succumbs to religious authority.

Another challenge to parity is the public’s attitudes towards the concept. This Insight suggests that the choice of words may have appeased violent opposition among political elites, but this does not mean that the parity-concept have been successfully transmitted to the population. In fact, in some parts of rural Senegal, *parité* has become a negative word in the local language Wolof, meaning, “I no longer accept my husband’s authority” (Hirsch 2012).

It is possible that, with the election of Macky Sall, parity lost its patron in the presidential palace. In fact, representatives from the women’s movement have accused Sall for not taking parity seriously, exemplified by the poor handling of the Touba case. It will be interesting to see which political issues will mark the forthcoming national election in July 2017, and whether the parity project will reappear on the agenda.

Endnotes

1. Fieldwork for this study took place in November 2015. The author carried out semi-structured interviews with 20 informants, including current and former parliamentarians of both gender, academics at the University of Dakar, and women activists.
2. Interview with Ricardo Carlete, November 2015
3. Interview with Mame Boussoc Samb Dia, interview, November 2015

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