

Note to Editors

Please feel free to publish this piece, unedited and in its entirety, provided you do not change, cut or add any word or otherwise mutilate the piece, i.e.

publish as is or don't at all.

MAURITANIA – THE OTHER APARTHEID? (Excerpt)

by

GARBA DIALLO

Written 1993

Understanding the Mauritanian Crisis

In order to give a clear indication as to whether Mauritania is an apartheid state or not, I would like to focus on the more familiar conflict situations in the Sudan and South Africa. The racial and cultural conflicts in all three countries have been a permanent source of tension and destabilisation both within and across borders.

Mauritania compared to the Sudan

Mauritania is comparable with The Sudan in that there have been bloody ethno-racial wars between the indigenous black Africans on the one hand and the immigrating Arabs on the other. The Arabs began to arrive into both countries from the north following the emergence and triumph of Islam in the Middle East from the early 7th century onward. The immigrants have been pressuring the original populations towards the south since that time. This has resulted in chronic north-south ethnic conflicts for political power and economic control within both nations. The Arabs have false assumptions of the superiority of their culture over the local ones. This has been manifested by the forced Islamisation and Arabisation campaigns orchestrated by successive Arab regimes.

The history of Afro-Arab relations in the Sudan and Mauritania have mainly been characterized by brutal wars, slavery, forced Islamisation and Arabisation, the systematic destruction of indigenous cultures, values and civilizations coupled with insatiable territorial expansion on the part of the immigrants. As in the cases of South Africa and Zimbabwe, the colonial powers left power firmly in the hands of the settlers in both Mauritania and The Sudan (Markakis, 1985, Diallo, 1991a). It is common to hear black militants say that Mauritania's independence in 1960 was hijacked by the Arabs as the white settlers did with that of Zimbabwe in 1965 (Diallo, 1991a).

As the Arabs proceeded with the application of their visions of society, the natives set out to mobilize and resist the new imperialist yokes. This was the point of departure for the current civil strife, which broke out between the Arab north and African south in the Sudan on the eve of independence in 1956. The first Afro-Arab confrontation in Mauritania took place in 1961, a few months after Mauritania's independence was proclaimed. Since then, there have been constant tensions between the north and south, with the former being repeatedly accused of racial discrimination – or even genocide – as well as political, economic and cultural hegemony over the latter.

Both nations are located in Africa and surrounded by black nations. Yet their leadership behave as if they were not in the dark continent or had large black communities within their societies. These communities were neither consulted nor gave their consent when the Sudan and Mauritania joined the Arab League in 1956 and 1974, respectively. Successive Arab regimes in both countries have been accused of misusing Islam for imperialist ends. This claim was made valid when military regimes introduced Islamic Shari'a laws in Mauritania and the Sudan, in 1980 and 1983 respectively.

Unlike the Sudan however, religion has not played any significant role in the ethnic war in Mauritania. Thus, if used rationally, Islam could play a positive role in the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Mauritania and South Africa – a comparison

Mauritania and South Africa are similar in that:

- The colour divide between the whites and black is clear in both countries. The Arabs in Mauritania call themselves *Beydane* (Arabic for white) as the Boers refer to themselves as *Blanke*.
- As the Boers claim historical anteriority in South Africa, so the Arabs claim that they were the first inhabitants and the only true citizens of Mauritania.
- In both countries the settlers have used ruthless methods to gain territorial control through the forced displacement of the natives. Native territories are welcome as integral parts of the nations but the inhabitants of these territories are labeled foreigners.
- The Bantu Education Act of 1953 in South Africa and Arabisation Acts Nos. 65-025 & 65-026 of 1966 were introduced in order to secure cultural hegemony through the education of docile black servants.
- Land Act No. 27 of 1953 in South Africa and Land Act No. 83.127 of 1983 in Mauritania were adopted to give settlers access to and control over the most productive parts of the native lands.
- Banning and confining blacks to remote villages is a method used by both regimes, and
- Divide and rule policies are central in the maintenance of settler hegemony. South Africa has formed and armed black vigilante militia whereas Mauritania constituted a Haratin (slave) militia group in 1990 (*Africa Confidential*, 1989; Amnesty International, 1990, numbering 6,000-8,000; Diallo, 1991b).

Better than South Africa?

In contrast with South Africa, there are no straight forward racially discriminatory laws in Mauritania. For example there are no daily colour lines separating blacks from whites, there are no officially separate schools or housing for blacks and whites, or “independent homelands” whose citizens are foreigners in Mauritania. Blacks do not have to carry pass books in order to be allowed to move around the country, interracial marriage is not illegal; in principle, every mature citizen can vote and stand for election; there have always been 2 or 3 blacks in each government.

Black militants attribute this lack of strict colour lines to the fact that Mauritania has been ruled by weak and violent dictatorship regimes which not only oppress the blacks but also their own race. They do not bother to create laws and regulations.

Worse than South Africa?

Mauritanian regimes have surpassed South Africa in the following ways:

- Classical slavery against blacks is still common, despite its official abolition in 1980.
- Mauritania has deported tens of thousands of its citizens to neighbouring countries solely on account of their ethnic origin. Their number was at least 130,000 in mid-1989, and was increasing all the time, reports *Jeune Afrique* (July 5, 1989). South Africa has not deported black citizens to Zambia or Angola.
- Mauritania avoids even having diplomatic ties with black Africa.
- Mauritania has both introduced and applied religious laws in a discriminatory manner for political purposes.
- Mauritania has systematically refused to release population figures to support the claim that the country is overwhelmingly Arab despite evidence to the opposite.
- There has never been any real democracy even for the Arabs.

Apartheid practice in Mauritania?

According to Mauritanian laws it is illegal to discriminate against persons or groups because of their race or colour. While the country has ratified the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (adopted on June 26, 1981), it has not ratified the main international treaties adopted by the UN General Assembly to protect human rights throughout the world, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted in 1966) and the Covenant against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment (adopted in 1984).

By ratifying the African Charter, Mauritania has undertaken to respect the right to enjoy human and civil rights and freedoms without discrimination based on race, colour, language, sex, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status. Nevertheless there is ample evidence that blacks in the country have been the victims of racial discrimination at the hands of successive Arab regimes, who have denied them not only the most basic cultural, social, political and economic rights, but the right to life and citizenship.

1. Amnesty International has issued reports in 1989 and 1990. Amnesty International in 1990 writes: "Since the

publication of the Report, the human rights situation in Mauritania has considerably deteriorated. Extrajudicial executions, torture and the cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment of villagers have reached a very alarming level in the south of the country. The targets of government forces and Haratin [slave] militia are black African villagers who are singled out because they belong to a particular ethnic group, Haal-pulaar (Fulanis). Hundreds of black Mauritians have been arrested, persecuted and often assassinated on very wide pretexts ... A curfew whose timing varies in different regions and villages is in force” and Amnesty International in 1991 writes about the reported killing of 339 political prisoners between November 1990 and March 1991: “Details of the killings have only recently come to light, when those who remained alive in detention were released in March and April 1991. In November and December 1990 several thousand black Mauritians were arrested... Most of those arrested were members of the armed forces and civil servants, the majority belonging to a single black ethnic group from the south of the country, known as the Haal-pullar (Fulani)”

2. *Africa Watch* reports: “Persecution of black Mauritians – Summary executions, deprivation of citizenship, illegal expulsions and arbitrary arrests” News from AW, September 7, 1989; “Mauritania: Slavery – Alive and Well, 10 Years After it was Last Abolished” June 29, 1990; and “Mauritania: More Than 200 Black Political Detainees Tortured to Death” May 31, 1991.
3. In its Country Reports On Human Practices For 1990, the US State Department charged that “the human rights situation in Mauritania continued to deteriorate in 1990.”
4. After boasting in an interview with the Paris-based weekly, *Jeune Afrique Magazine* that “Mauritania is not going to be Liberia”, President Ould Taya confessed the killings of more than 300 black political detainees without any form of trial *Jeune Afrique* No. 1605: Oct. 2, 1991.

In its adoption of an unprecedented resolution on what it termed “the extraordinary record of human rights violations in Mauritania”, the US Congress points out that “the government of Colonel Taya has instituted an aggressive policy of Arabisation which has been used to persecute and marginalize black Mauritians...” The Congress strongly condemns, “the unexplained killing of over 500 black political prisoners, who were arrested in late 1990, the burning down of entire villages and confiscation of livestock, land and belongings of black Mauritians as well as the expulsion of tens of thousands of blacks to Senegal and Mali”. It adds that “execution, torture and forcible expulsion are only the visible signs of government abuses”. Non-Arabs

are discriminated against in all walks of life, including unequal access to education, employment, and health care” said the resolution. “Even the heinous practice of slavery, although formally abolished in 1980, continues in some parts of the country” (*Congressional Record*, 1991).

Features of Apartheid?

Mauritanian regimes have gone as far as to deny the existence of black people in the country. In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* on January 1, 1990, Ould Taya declared that “Mauritania cannot be in the process of arabisation as it is an Arab country” (*Jeune Afrique*, 199:37).

The implementation of Arabisation policies, and the imposition of Shari’a laws by Arab regimes on black Africans suggest that deliberate efforts are being made by these regimes to forcibly assimilate non-Arabs. The routine maltreatment of blacks in the country reminds one of black people’s situation in South Africa. The Mauritanian regime has been accused of ordering the massacres of at least 1,000 and more than 500 black citizens, in April 1989 and November 1990 respectively (*Africa Confidential*, 1989). Blacks have been singled out for deportation to refugee camps whereas Arabs from neighbouring countries have been welcomed to settle in Mauritania (US Department of State, 1990; FLAM, 1992a). Tuaregs from Mali and Berbers from the West Sahara have been invited to colonize expelled blacks’ villages in southern Mauritania. Slavery is practiced exclusively on blacks by Arabs in the country. Islamic shari’a Law has been exploited by Arab judges in the country to claim “blacks’ heads and limbs” (*Afrique International*, 1989:16).

The Amsterdam based “City Sun” wrote in its October 4, 1990 edition: “The massacre of black Mauritians continues in Mauritania. Blacks are dying and disappearing at the hands of the government forces on a scale never seen before in that country, says Amnesty International. A year ago we said the persecution of Mauritanian’s black community had reached a peak ... that appalling situation has now gone from bad to worse ... If the government wants to escape the charge of racial discrimination, it must take steps to calm the fears of the people of south and put an end to the conditions that have led to the disappearance and killing of prisoners, Amnesty International demanded” (*City Sun*, 1990). During a debate in the French National Assembly, representative Jean-Pierre Bouquet drew the attention of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Roland Dumas, to the situation in Mauritania. He told the minister that: “For some years violent confrontations have taken place between the main Mauritanian communities...

the black community has been the object of discriminatory measures which do no longer guarantee, for example, equal access to public employment... During the last few months numerous Mauritanian nationals have been expelled to Senegal under conditions which are difficult to accept.” Based on this he asked the foreign minister to explain France’s position on the issue (Assemblée Nationale, 1990: issue No. 27690-30/4-90).

In a reply letter concerning the situation in Mauritania to the MP, Bernard Stasi, another representative, Roland Dumas writes: “In response to your question on the grave violation of human rights, in Mauritania, whose victims are the black citizens... in the context of last April’s intercommunal confrontations, some 60,000 black Mauritians were arbitrarily expelled to Senegal while others have been subjected to vicious and discriminatory measures. The French government has intervened with the Mauritanian authorities in the most firm manner... we have a frank and permanent dialogue in order to put an end to these unacceptable practices. As you have indicated, France shall not continue its cooperation efforts in the Senegal Valley should the forced displacement of the population continue...” (R.Dumas, Paris, march 14, 1990, 000235CM)