The Rise of Senegal’s Clientelist Democracy

According to the typology of political authority presented by Max Weber in his classic work *Economy and Society*, the initial basis for “legitimate domination” by a ruler is traditional authority that evolves from a gerontocracy to a patrimonial form of rule based on a mixture of traditional authority and clientelism, and ultimately to a legal-rational form of rule that he associated with the rise of Western modernity. Weber recognized, however, that these were theoretical ideal types and that in practice combinations of different bases of authority were likely to arise.

In sub-Saharan Africa, this hybrid basis for authority took the form of neo-patrimonialism in which the development of a bureaucratic state, introduced under colonialism, was distorted from legal-rational authority by the continuing reliance of the colonial state and its African successors on clientelism as their basis for political legitimacy. As in the rest of Africa, the clientelist nature of the contemporary Senegalese state is arguably rooted in the patrimonial authority of its precolonial societies, a form of clientelism “with a discount” (Lemarchand 1988) that strengthens patron–client relations beyond material interests and instrumentalist strategies. These precolonial structures of authority were of course distorted by the French colonial state to permit it to conquer and then govern this culturally diverse territory. Having inherited a neo-patrimonial political system, political legitimacy in Senegal’s postcolonial state has remained rooted in a clientelist basis for authority and governance that influenced both authoritarian rule under de facto one-party rule following independence and the rise of clientelist democracy at the end of the twentieth century.

Patrimonialism in Precolonial Senegal

In comparison to other African states with dozens, even hundreds of ethnic groups, Senegal has a relatively homogeneous society. Based
on its 1988 census (Republic of Senegal 1990), over 85 percent of its population belongs to five major ethnic groups: Wolof, Pulaar, Jola, Serer, and Mandinka (appendix 1). With the notable exception of the Jola and a few other Casamançais ethnic groups (chapter 5), Senegal’s precolonial societies were hierarchically structured and highly patrimonial.

In religious terms, almost 95 percent of the population is Muslim, though they are subdivided into various Sufi orders or brotherhoods to which all but a small though growing number of Senegalese Muslims belong. The three major brotherhoods are the Qadiriya, the Tijaniya, and the Muridiya. The Qadiriya, the oldest Muslim tariqa (Sufi order), was founded in the twelfth century by Abd al-Qadir Jilani in Bagdad, spreading across North Africa and then down into contemporary Senegal in the nineteenth century. Adhered to by a minority of Senegalese (10.9 percent) who live primarily in peripheral regions including the Casamance regions of Kolda and Ziguinchor, the Qadiriya historically influenced other Senegalese brotherhoods.

Founded in the eighteenth century by Ahmad al-Tijani in Morocco, the Tijaniya has the largest following in Senegal (47.4 percent) though it is split into various branches in Senegal associated with different charismatic religious leaders in different regions of the country,