A Conversation with President Abdou Diouf

Over the past several years, the CSIS African Studies Program has hosted a series of “conversations” with African heads of state. These two-hour meetings, chaired by Director of African Studies Helen Kitchen, feature brief opening remarks by the visiting leader followed by a lively question-and-answer exchange with a broad spectrum of invited guests from the executive and legislative branches of government, the media, corporations, academia, and other elements of the Washington community. This issue of CSIS Africa Notes shares with our subscribers the English translation of a “conversation” that took place on May 16, 1990 between President Abdou Diouf of Senegal and a group of more than 90 invited guests. (See page 3 for the text of U.S. Ambassador to Senegal George E. Moose’s introduction of President Diouf.)

Officials of the Senegalese government in the presidential party included Minister of Economy and Finance Moussa Touré; Minister-Delegate for Planning and Economic Policies Abdul Aziz Diop; Senegalese Ambassador to the United States Ibra Déguéne Ka; General Doudou Diop, chief of staff to the president’s cabinet; Bruno Diatta, chief of protocol; and Babacar Carlos Mbaye, diplomatic adviser to the president.

The following is a chronological account of President Diouf’s responses to the questions raised by participants in the discussion period following his opening remarks:

1. Senegal-Mauritania

Q. Mr. President, in the context of Senegal’s current difficulties with Mauritania, what do you see as the preconditions for the settlement of the current difficulties?

A. I’ve said that dialogue needs to be opened between the two countries without any preconditions whatsoever—no subject should be considered taboo, no subject should be excluded a priori. For more than a year now, the foreign ministers and interior ministers of the two countries have been meeting to try to resolve this problem, and nothing has come out of these efforts. Mediators, in particular the current chairman of the Organization of African Unity, President Mubarak of Egypt, have proposed that diplomatic relations be resumed, that air traffic be resumed, but especially that the two chiefs of state should get together, since the ministers couldn’t solve anything. And I immediately agreed because I am not afraid to sit down with my Mauritanian counterpart to talk about what is the matter, what is not going right. Let’s settle what we need to settle. And what we need to refer to our ministers and
experts, let’s refer. But Mauritania didn’t agree, didn’t accept this idea, and now we are going back to the other system of having the foreign and interior ministers meet. We Senegalese will go to any negotiating table, but let us please deal with the true problems. That’s all we ask, and that’s why I say there are no preconditions; there are no conditions. We will discuss anything. We have no prioritization to offer—no contention that we have first to discuss this before we discuss that. We can discuss the problems in any order that is wished. . . .

2. The IMF and the World Bank

Q. Mr. President, in many countries in Africa, the International Monetary Fund has come under great criticism for the structural adjustment policies that the IMF has proposed [on the grounds that these policies are] not reflective of African economic or political realities. I was wondering, from your experience, if you could comment on whether you believe the international financial organizations such as the IMF have been responsive to Africa’s needs and if not, why not?

A. I think that the problem is often badly stated. Let me talk about Senegal’s experience. I won’t talk about the experience of other countries. I have never had the feeling myself that the IMF or the World Bank wanted to impose any decision. The IMF and the Bank have proposed, or sometimes Senegal has proposed, and we have discussed. The IMF has said, “[We] can help you to reach this or that target, but you have to do this or that.” And we have said, “We want to achieve these targets, but we think that we can achieve them better this way and not the way you propose.” And very often in the debate, the discussion, we were able to establish a program on which we all agreed.

Let me give you an example. When the World Bank said “You have too many public officials; you have to reduce the number of government employees,” we said that “Senegalese tradition doesn’t allow us to do it the way it has been done in other countries, just by firing or dismissing. Help us to set up a system of voluntary departure or voluntary retirement.” And we agreed on such a system after some discussion. And we encouraged people, officials, by giving them bonuses. And these people were encouraged to go to the private sector to become businessmen, and this will help us also to reach another of our goals, which is privatization. So I think that is the way I would like to answer the question you raised.

3. Educational Priorities

Q. I’m an education and training specialist. Could you give me some idea, sir, of the educational and training needs of the Senegalese people? Both specifically and in a general sense, what are the educational needs of your colleagues on the African continent as you face the twenty-first century?

A. This is a broad question, really a big question. All we can do here is respond in a few words. Our needs in the field of education are mainly in the area of school attendance—universalization of education—at least for primary education. And hopefully, by the year 2000 or shortly thereafter, we will be able to get everyone in school—universal school attendance up through the primary level. But having said that, the other important aspect is professional training.

Beyond secondary and higher education, which will continue to be important as they are now, we should put special stress on primary education—mass literacy—in order to teach adults to read and write. But at the same time, we must stress something else—professional or vocational training—so that we won’t just have people with general ideas and a diploma, but we will have people who are true agents of development, who know their business, and who are able to change the conditions of our daily life in every sector. To go any farther would require a long speech. But, in summary, this is my concept of education and training.

4. Senegal in the Year 2000

Q. I’m sure, Mr. President, that you have a very clear conception of the type of developed state that you would like to see Senegal become. I’m sure, also, that you have a very precise idea of the type of investment you would like to attract. I know that you have had experience in trying to attract U.S. investment. Without being too encyclopedic, could you talk a little bit about what you would like Senegal to become economically in, say, 10 years, perhaps 25 years, but certainly the shorter term would be a useful target.

A. If I stressed professional training as much as I did, it was because I want Senegal’s economic projects to be carried out with capable and competent Senegalese workers. And I think you grasped that point very well.
Introduction of President Diouf
by U.S. Ambassador to Senegal George E. Moose

It is, indeed, a privilege for me to be able to introduce to you someone who, by virtue of his international stature and reputation, frankly needs no introduction...a leader whom the United States is pleased to count as one of its closest and most valued friends in Africa.

One of the principal foundations of the close relationship that has long existed between Senegal and the United States is a common commitment to political and economic liberalism. Those who are familiar with Senegal’s history know that it has been traveling the road to democracy for many years. Long before the tremendous changes now sweeping through Eastern Europe, Latin America, and other parts of Africa, Senegal had established a functioning multiparty democracy with regularly scheduled free elections, a vigorous free press, and a commendable record in human rights.

Since becoming chief of state in 1981, President Abdou Diouf has worked to strengthen and deepen Senegal’s tradition of political democracy, respect for human rights, and racial and religious tolerance. If one examines the rich record of both his pronouncements and his actions, one will find evidence of his firm belief that Senegal’s hopes for economic and social development can only be realized in the context of a vigorous, functioning democracy. Moreover, he has understood that the task of building a democracy is never finished and that it is an ongoing process that requires constant renewal and constant recommitment.

Similarly, with respect to the economy, President Diouf has, since the early 1980s, led his country through a rigorous and at times very difficult process of structural adjustment and economic reform designed to strengthen the role of market forces in the private sector in achieving sustained and balanced economic growth.

Recently, with considerable political courage, he has undertaken a series of measures to streamline the government, reduce public expenditures, restructure the banking sector, and encourage private investment—key elements in building a more secure foundation for a freer, growth-oriented economy.

The leadership that President Diouf has shown at home helps explain the stature and respect he has gained internationally. As 1985-1986 chairman of the Organization of African Unity, he was an articulate spokesman for Africa’s aspirations with respect to economic and social development. He was also a major force behind the OAU’s adoption of a charter on human rights. In 1987, he was invited to New York as one of the first recipients of the Hunger Project’s Africa Prize for Leadership—an award established to recognize those who have made major contributions to achieving food self-sufficiency in Africa. In 1989, he was the host of the third francophone summit. In 1991, he will assume the chairmanship of the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

Mr. President, you have warmly received in Dakar many U.S. leaders, including President Bush when he was then vice president. You have visited the United States on many occasions. You have three children who are studying here in the United States—a daughter at George Washington University, a son at American University, and another son who is this very day receiving his master’s degree in business administration at Columbia University. You also have a legion of friends in this town and, indeed, across the country. The United States is truly chez vous, and I join with Helen Kitchen in extending the teranga [welcome in Wolof] of the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

also want to attract private investment because, as I said, we don’t have enough capital of our own. We would not be able to develop if we did not have private investment in Senegal by friendly foreign investors, such as Americans. We would hope to receive a great deal of U.S. investment in the various sectors of our economy. To do this, besides the skilled labor force that we must put at the disposal of these investors, there is also a climate that needs to be created: an investment code concerning fiscal and customs facilities, labor codes, mobility of workers, the security of goods and persons in a more general fashion, and also political facilities in terms of a democratic climate that respects human rights. We are working on this, and we are consolidating this. We have already changed our investment code and we want to change it again to make it even more attractive. We have a Dakar duty-free zone statute that we are changing too, in order to make that status more attractive still....

What do I want Senegal to be like in 10 years? I would like, in the year 2000, for Senegal to enter the future going forward and not backward. I want Senegal to have finally taken off economically once and for all; I want us to have jump-started the economy in a healthy, energetic, and vigorous way. Once this economic take-off has occurred, I want the country to reach its cruising altitude and cruising speed quickly, taking giant steps toward the status of a semi-industrial, and then industrial, society. I would like that to take place thanks to well-conceived investment, [with special attention to] private investment. As my predecessor, President Senghor, said, we must stress more the word “democratic,” which is the adjective, and stress less the word “socialist,” which is the noun, when we
speak of “democratic socialism.” We are certainly becoming more democratic than socialist in the Marxist sense—if we ever were. We are socialist in the sense of ethics and morality. But for production, we don’t want any nationalization; we don’t want any state ownership. We want a free state, free of these obstacles; and we want production to be done by private investors so that there will be a proper distribution of wealth. . . .

5. Presidential Term of Office
Q [Senegalese student from Georgetown University]. You mentioned in your introduction that you had to change the 1981 constitution so that the number of parties would no longer be limited. My question is, do you think there will be need for another change in the constitution, for instance to limit the number of terms of a president?
A. That seems to be a sort of personal remark of yours. . . . Those of you who know me well—and you do, because I think I’m your cousin—know that I certainly do not want to stick to power unduly; power is up to the people to decide. . . . But what I can say is, if I knew someone today that I was sure—and you’re never 100 percent sure—could assume the duties of leading Senegal, I would seriously consider retiring, although I am 54, and thus one of the young democratic leaders. Perhaps I should say this in another way. There are chiefs of state who became president much later, at a much older age than I. I think even my main challenger is about 10 years older than I am.

6. Future of the CFA Franc
Q. Mr. President, we have to get around sooner or later, I think, to a question on devaluation prospects for the CFA franc. One of our experiences is that U.S. investors are very interested in Senegal because of the stable currency. However, the high value relative to other currencies makes production and exportation a bit more expensive. What are your feelings on an eventual devaluation, and would you consider, perhaps, other techniques such as debt conversions or other financial possibilities to make an investment cheaper?
A. I’m convinced that there must be other ways, and that’s what we are looking for—ways to make our investment code more attractive, to create a more favorable climate, to examine all questions that can possibly be posed by investors. But I have said very clearly, very clearly, that I am against any devaluation of the CFA franc. Such a devaluation would be a deception and would bring with it many more problems than it would resolve. I would really ask anybody who has such an idea to forget about it. This is a bad idea for our country, and while I’m the president of Senegal (and I know this is the view of all the presidents of the CFA group) there is no way we will devalue the CFA franc. I am very glad to say this loud and clear. Loud and clear.

7. Africa and Europe 1992
Q. Mr. President, I’d like to follow up that question by asking about Europe 1992, and how you see Senegal, and Africa generally, fitting in to a post-1992 community, with particular reference to monetary questions and the relationship of the CFA franc to European currencies.
A. We are delighted by the advent of the single market in 1992, but, as you can guess (and I can tell you can guess by your question), we are really worried about what repercussions this market will have on us. We are associates with the European Community, under the Lomé Convention. And, as far as I’m concerned, I think these African countries have really to get ready for the new conditions that will be created in Europe with the creation of the single market on January 1, 1993. But it will not affect the monetary problem because our currency is related to the French Treasury, not to the Bank of France. So we will not be affected, and this will not lead us to either delink or devalue our currency. I am quite sure of that.

8. The Role of Trade Unions
Q. Do you see any change in the role of trade unionism or industrial relations as part of the democracy movement you’re talking about? For example, some people think that trade unionism is part of the high-cost-of-production problem in Senegal.
A. No, I think this is a part of what I call normal democratic life—education of the citizens, education of the trade union people. The trade union people have to learn more about the economic realities of the modern world, and they have to see what their long-term interests are. In the face of certain measures having to do with the altering of working conditions in order to attract investment, trade unionists have protested. But when you talk to them and you show them by a convincing analysis that these changes will increase the number of jobs, promote greater prosperity in the country, and allow a larger number of Senegalese to work, they do go along. But this is very hard work. I had an experience recently where the dialogue lasted for days and days between my people and the trade unions, and I myself had to receive the National Confederation of Senegalese Workers for a meeting that lasted six hours without a break to convince them that this was really what needed doing.

You were right to raise this question. I think that it is one of the conditions of democracy to have strong trade unions, but healthy ones, with trained people and members who know the economic problems and understand the difficulties of the modern world. They have to know why the crisis exists and understand that their long-term interest is not necessarily their very short-term interest. . . . In Senegal, we’re going in the same direction. We do have a system of “responsible participation,” as we call it, between the government and the trade unions, but that’s another story. Perhaps I shouldn’t talk about it in this framework. But the system does allow us to have an ongoing dialogue with the trade unions. There are at least three meetings a year between the most representative confederation and the government, three meetings a year between the president of the Republic and the national trade owners, and a
9. Advice to the Young

Q [Senegalese national, resident in the United States]. Mr. President, perhaps this may seem a bit personal, but I would like to know what are the formalities for Senegalese who have received professional training in the United States, people who would like to go back to Senegal and work with you for the development of Senegal and also get political training. What are the formalities—or what are the steps—that need to be taken? Thank you.

A. There are no formalities!

Q. For more than five years, I've been trying. I've written to you, the university where I studied wrote, my dean wrote, my chairman has written to you, my adviser wrote, and we've never gotten an answer. Despite that, I keep on trying.

A. Imagine an American who has studied abroad in an open and democratic society and comes back here to his country. He would just come home. And he would try to get a job in the government or in the private sector. I don't know quite how the president of the Republic can a priori resolve an individual case like this.

I guess you have to realize that your country has changed. I can't promise you that, when you get home, you will become a public official; I'm trying to reduce the size of the government employee corps. I can't tell you that you'll be a teacher until you've visited the universities and applied for a job; we don't know if you fulfill the conditions, if they need you, if they have a budgetary allocation that will allow you to fit in. Perhaps you can set up your own company, in which case you will want to see what the laws are, what you need to do to set up a company, and how to look for financing—deciding if you're going to look for a Senegalese bank to help you or if you're going to go abroad.

The letter you sent me probably posed so many problems that it went to so many different offices that there was no way they could come up with a coordinated response. I think you've just got to get it into your head that this is a free society. It's not like what Guinea's late President Sekou Touré once said in Dakar. He said all students who finish university [were then] automatically hired by the government in Guinea. This was perhaps how things were during the colonial era and just afterward, but it's not possible anymore. You have to have initiative, have to have imagination. You have to solve your own problems by making your own proposals and see how far they get.

10. The Multiparty Government Issue

Q. Mr. President, I feel most of us here have watched with great admiration and interest the growth and development of multiparty democracy in Senegal. And I was particularly interested in your remarks concerning, if I get you right, the renewal of interest in Africa in ideas for multiparty democracy. But, although you have had great success, other African countries have been less fortunate. I don't, of course, expect you to comment specifically on the experiences of other African countries. Nevertheless, perhaps I could just mention the experience of Nigeria, which, in my opinion, created a very interesting and bold and sensible constitution under General Obasanjo [in the late 1970s]. Under this constitution, a president had to get a minimum number of votes from a certain number of states in order to be elected—that is to say, the constitution ensured that he would not be elected just by force of one ethnic bloc.

Now, I feel—many people here will agree and I think many in Africa as well—that the main problem of multipartyism in Africa is the fear that a multiparty system deteriorates into conflicting ethnic or tribal groups. And I would like your opinion, as a leading statesman and thinker, as to whether it is worth encouraging other Africans to contemplate creating constitutions whereby there is an inbuilt guarantee against one group dominating another. We had the example in Nigeria, and, of course, people are thinking about this in the context of South Africa. My question is, do you think that such constitutional guarantees are worth thinking about?

A. Thank you very much. As I said, democracy has to be built bearing in mind the specific conditions in each country. That doesn't mean that you can do just any old thing, because, if you go too far in that direction, you may build some juridical monster or other. There are some universal principles to democracy. There are certain things that are fundamental and basic and must exist. The fear of tribalism in the political life of a democracy is a real one, but we have to be careful that it not become an excuse to do nothing. There are others who are afraid of religious separatism—anything that can break national unity or create the domination of one group over another.

In Senegal, although we don't have this kind of problem, we have still said that now that we do have a multiparty system, we have to provide for all possible situations. In our constitution, we have clearly indicated what a political party is not or should not be. We have said that a political party must not be created on the basis of race or ethnic group (this is against the constitution); on the basis of religion or sect; on the basis of geographical or administrative region; on the basis of language; on the basis of gender (having a party for men and another one for women), . . . When some of my North African friends said that they wanted to start a multiparty system, I said that there must be provision for these prohibitions. Some followed my advice, and some did not. If all countries introduced these protections, and if they dissolved any party that violated such prohibitions, I think we would have made real progress toward democracy, and also would avoid overly complicated and encumbered constitutional texts.

Copying constitutions from other countries is perhaps not a good idea because what works in the United States may not work in Nigeria. There are problems of that sort.
I don't want to talk about the experience of any given country, but let me go back to what I said. Constitutional protections are needed in order to avoid any elements that could rupture national unity. That would be my answer to your question.

11. Optimism on South Africa
Q. Mr. President, I'm wondering how you regard the negotiation process that appears to be getting under way in South Africa. Have you been surprised that things have gone as far as they have? Do you expect that the talks can succeed, and do you see anything that the African countries and the OAU can do that might encourage the process?
A. I am very pleased that these negotiations have started, but I am not deceiving myself as to the difficulties. As I always say, in this historic situation which is very idiosyncratic to South Africa and to Africa, we have the great fortune of having two very prestigious men: President F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela. These are men of goodwill, men of vision, and men of determination and reserve who face obstacles along their way, especially from the [political] extremes. But despite this, we must trust them; we must help them to win in the end.

Although the whole world can encourage them, I think the problem is one that only they can resolve. When certain countries were preaching dialogue with South Africa, we in Senegal have always said no. True dialogue is dialogue among the various communities within South Africa, and that is what we say today.

We have promoted this and encouraged this. As you know, I brought together just a few years ago in Dakar the African National Congress and liberals from South Africa for talks about society following the dismantling of apartheid. From my vantage point, Mandela and de Klerk must be helped to win their bet.

And there is the question of sanctions. In my view, they should be maintained for some time still, until the negotiation process has become an irreversible one. But the sanctions shouldn't be increased. If they are, they might discourage—and certainly would not help—Mr. de Klerk. And if there is a point of no return in negotiations, I think we must consider reducing the sanctions or even eliminating them entirely.

In summary, I feel confidence. I think that we have never had such a good chance to see apartheid dismantled and a postapartheid society created—a nonracial society, a democratic society, one of equality and justice.

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