Since the early 1980s, the ideological landscape of Mauritania, dominated by an elite that originated from the political struggle for independence, has fallen into decline. In a time of economic and social crisis, and political power undermined since the independence, only reinforced economic and cultural dependency on the Western model. The failure of the national elite was blatant, and new social frameworks began to emerge in order to end the ‘state of grace’ enjoyed by the political power at the time.

From the beginning of the 1980s, and especially with the advent of political pluralism, religious leaders began to emerge in order to end the ‘state of grace’ dependency on the Western model. The failure of the political struggle for independence, has fallen into Britain, dominated by an elite that originated from the early 1980s, the ideological landscape of Mauritania, dominated by a religious elite that originated from the political struggle for independence, has fallen into decline. In a time of economic and social crisis, and political power undermined since the independence, only reinforced economic and cultural dependency on the Western model. The failure of the national elite was blatant, and new social frameworks began to emerge in order to end the ‘state of grace’ enjoyed by the political power at the time.

The political power thus made pragmatic choices and relied on traditional religious personalities, however, allowing them the opportunity to develop a notoriety that could go beyond its control. The second category of men of religion to which the authorities would turn were the leaders of brotherhoods, who until then had managed to keep a low profile. When the kingdom of Senegal, the State, while opting for Islam, carefully referred to its scriptural aspect, expressing concern for the models being excluded. This concealed its will to limit the influence of other traditional religious actors, notably the brotherhood leaders. These latter were dismantled and denounced officially by the state party at the time (Mauritanian People’s Party) at its 1968 congress. The marginalized brotherhood leaders of the post-colonial period were to return to the national political scene with the regional political crisis and the introduction of a multi-party system. During the blood-shattering events of 1989 between Senegal and Mauritania, the leaders were to play an important role in the reconciliation between the two countries. In fact, the ties of brotherhood between the two banks of the Senegal River are century-old. The leaders of the brotherhoods were close and held clear ties with their followers. Belonging to a brotherhood was more powerful and more concrete than belonging to a nation. The annual pilgrimages made by the faithful to the holy places of their brotherhoods were expressions of permanent spiritual connections. This transnational and trans-ethnic spiritual establishment allowed the network of brotherhoods to actively involve itself in the bloody conflict between the black African community and the Muslim community. Following the 1989 events, and before the opening of the official borders, the shaykh brotherhoods worked for reconciliation, not only by official means, but also from the base. Relations between the shaykhs (teachers) and their disciples from the two banks remained intact despite ethnic tensions. The transnational position of the brotherhood leaders earned them such subordinates as the man who traverses the two banks, attributed to Shaykh Abd al-aziz Ould Balb Bouya Ould Bash when the following question was posed to Shaykh Mohamadou Ould Hamahul (son of the founder of Hamahul): ‘Of what nationality are you?’. Shaykh Bouya Hamahul (son of the founder of Hamahul): ‘Of what nationality are you?’. Shaykh Bouya Hamahul (son of the founder of Hamahul): ‘Of what nationality are you?’: He responded: ‘My nationality is my own’. This displayed neutrality is only superficial, as towards the models being excluded. The people of this village asked me to advise them in their choice amongst the newly emerging parties. I suggested they go to the PDS in the following reasons: 1 – its leader is the president of the State. He won the presidential elections and is more experienced than the others. 2 – He has the support of the Tijani brotherhood. The situation provoked the returning to force of traditional religious personalities to reinforce their political enthusiasm, especially during the elections.

The traditional religious body is not homogeneous, religious dignitaries grant their support to one political party or another, depending on their personal interests. They react in a social tribal framework, and often play the role of intermediary between political forces andchoose their own tribes, at times in coordination, at others in competition, with tribal leaders. The support of the party or to the opposition is situated more within a traditional alliance between notables than it is in an electoral policy during the elections. This attitude is not unique to traditional followers of religion; it is also the attitude of modernist political personalities and the vast majority of the young intellectuals at the time. The leaders of political parties played the game, the most progressive amongst them and the most critical towards the tribalism, modernist alliances during their electoral campaigns.

The conservative Ijmas and the leaders of brotherhoods in majority chose for those already in power. While preaching a fundamental religious discourse strongly opposed to the Westernization of customs, they remained critical of the Islamic State. They felt in this hand, as represented by the new movements focusing on the young generation. Also, they situated their political and social actions in a new religious and political arena facilitated the emergence of traditional religious personalities to reinforce their political enthusiasm, especially during the elections. This attitude is not unique to traditional followers of religion; it is also the attitude of modernist political personalities and the vast majority of the young intellectuals at the time. The leaders of political parties played the game, the most progressive amongst them and the most critical towards the tribalism, modernist alliances during their electoral campaigns.

The conservative Ijmas and the leaders of brotherhoods in majority chose for those already in power. While preaching a fundamental religious discourse strongly opposed to the Westernization of customs, they remained critical of the Islamic State. They felt in this hand, as represented by the new movements focusing on the young generation. Also, they situated their political and social actions in a new religious and political arena facilitated the emergence of traditional religious personalities to reinforce their political enthusiasm, especially during the elections. This attitude is not unique to traditional followers of religion; it is also the attitude of modernist political personalities and the vast majority of the young intellectuals at the time. The leaders of political parties played the game, the most progressive amongst them and the most critical towards the tribalism, modernist alliances during their electoral campaigns.

The conservative Ijmas and the leaders of brotherhoods in majority chose for those already in power. While preaching a fundamental religious discourse strongly opposed to the Westernization of customs, they remained critical of the Islamic State. They felt in this hand, as represented by the new movements focusing on the young generation. Also, they situated their political and social actions in a new religious and political arena facilitated the emergence of traditional religious personalities to reinforce their political enthusiasm, especially during the elections. This attitude is not unique to traditional followers of religion; it is also the attitude of modernist political personalities and the vast majority of the young intellectuals at the time. The leaders of political parties played the game, the most progressive amongst them and the most critical towards the tribalism, modernist alliances during their electoral campaigns.

Traditional Men of Religion and Political Power in Mauritania

Rahal Boubrik is a fellow of the Berlin-based Working Group Modernity and Islam (Berlin, Germany) for the academic year 1998/99. E-mail: boubrik@gmx.net

Notes
1. The data for this article do not cover the period before 1995: certain parties and political figures have changed since then. However, the April 1995, 27/9/1995, by the Military Committee for National Salvation.

2. Am. 4, the regulation relating to promulgated political parties, 27/9/1995, by the Military Committee for National Salvation.


6. ‘A new wave of an unclear nature of our people realized within the PPM, State Ministry on national orientation, Ministry of Information and Telecommunications, Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 1975, p. 38.

7. Branch of the brotherhood Tijjaniyya, founded by Hamahul (1943).


10. Ibid, p. 20.