

# Poetic Injustice: The Senghor Myth and Senegal's Independence

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**The mythification of 'poet-president' Léopold Sédar Senghor has blurred our understanding of his real legacy. Recalling that he was both a poet and a president is a fact, but associating both, while refusing to recognize the authoritarianism he displayed, Florian Bobin argues, creates a dangerous historical myth.**

On 4 April, 2020, Radio France Internationale published literature professor and critic Boniface Mongo Mboussa's [portrait of Léopold Sédar Senghor](#), the first president of Senegal (1960-1980). For the country's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, the message was clear: 'Senghor ruled his country as a teacher, with method and organizational spirit. During the school season, he was president in Senegal; in summer, he was a poet in Normandy'. In short, Mboussa explains that Senghor's policy and poetry were inseparable because, 'poet-president, [he] was not one without the other'.

This narrative is dangerous because it implicitly praises 'he whose pen mattered more than his sword'. Although Senegal did not experience the same political crises as its neighbours, the mythification of 'poet-president' Senghor has blurred our understanding of his political action. Under the single-party rule of the Senegalese Progressive Union (UPS), authorities resorted to brutal methods; intimidating, arresting, imprisoning, torturing, and killing dissidents. [1] Recalling he was both a poet and a president is a matter of fact but associating both, while refusing to recognize the authoritarianism he displayed, is historical nonsense. This blogpost is an attempt to set the record straight.

Born in Joal in 1906, Senghor left Senegal for the first time at the age of 22. While in Paris in the late 1920s, he started frequenting Black literary circles. In the columns of the journal *L'Étudiant Noir*, alongside writers like Aimé Césaire and Léon-Gontran Damas, he expressed his desire to carry 'a cultural movement whose goal is the Black man, whose research instruments are Western reason and the Negro soul; because it takes reason and intuition.' [2] Senghor continued his studies as the *Négritude* movement developed, becoming professor of classical studies in 1935. According to his former collaborator Roland Colin, his own *négritude* was more of an ideal than a reality. Senghor's identity had been confiscated from an early age at mission school, and he sought, for the remainder of his life, to reclaim it. 'From the age of seven until the end of his life, Senghor was a man struggling with contradictions, with intimate sensitivities which led him to projects that he could not afford to implement in his personal life', Colin explains. [3]

At the end of the Second World War, Senghor joined the Monnerville commission, responsible for ensuring the representation in the French Constituent Assembly of territories under colonial occupation. The following year, he joined the ranks of the French Section of the Workers' International sitting, alongside Lamine Guèye, as representative of Senegal and Mauritania. In 1948, with Mamadou Dia and Ibrahima Seydou N'daw, Senghor participated in the creation of the Senegalese Democratic Bloc, the precursor of the UPS.

However, Senghor never fully positioned himself outside of the colonial framework. Aimé Césaire said of him that he 'knew the French would leave one day; he just took his time. At heart, he loved them.' [4] Honouring the [hundreds of innocent African soldiers killed](#) by the French army at the Thiaroye military camp on 1 December, 1944, Senghor expresses his regret of a France 'forgetful of its mission of yesterday' in his poem 'Tyaroye.' African literature professor and literary critic Lilyan Kesteloot argues that, through these lines, he 'admits that [France] still represents for him an ideal of justice, honour, and loyalty to its commitment.' [5] In that same poetry collection *Hosties Noires* (1948), Senghor indeed reaffirms his attachment to the French Republic by passionately praising Charles de Gaulle and Félix Éboué, two figures who helped lead resistance to German occupation.

When de Gaulle became France's president, Senghor was torn. The new institutional framework he advocated for was set to implement relative autonomy to colonies in Africa while maintaining them under French rule in community or union. Seeking a common position, several African political platforms met in Cotonou in July 1958. The UPS sent a delegation and agreed on voting 'no' to the upcoming referendum on maintaining French rule. It was a matter of time, however, before Senghor expressed his reservations, after a promise he had made to the French government. 'Yes, independence, of course, nobody can give that up, but let's take some time', he argued. 'How long?' his comrade Dia asked, surprised at his sudden change of position. 'Twenty years!' Senghor retorted before the two agreed on a four-year timeline. [6]

The agreements for the 'transfer of powers' from France to the Mali Federation were signed on 4 April, 1960, and implemented on 20 June. Two months in, internal divisions shattered the union. Senegal established a two-headed parliamentary system. While Senghor enjoyed the prestige of being the first President of the newly independent Republic, Dia presided over the Council of Ministers and was responsible for implementing national policies. Quickly, [tension grew](#) between the two.

Since independence, [Dia had been calling](#) for decentralizing public administration and empowering peasant communities. A faction within the UPS composed of sympathizers to Senghor decided to table a vote of no confidence against Dia's government, whose policy was deemed too radical. Provided that it was the only recognized political authority at the time, every decision went through the ruling party. Dia, therefore, opposed a motion he considered illegitimate. Senghor accused him of 'attempting a coup' and ordered his arrest alongside ministers Valdiodio N'diaye, Ibrahima Sarr, Alioune Tall and Joseph Mbaye. [7] Just two weeks after the events, [Senghor argued](#) that 'in an underdeveloped country, it is best to have, if not a single party, at least a unified party, a dominant party, where reality's contradictions are confronted within the dominant party, given that the party decides.' Dia gave into Senghor's arguments and revoked a vote of no confidence which members of the UPS had brought forward without giving room for any internal discussions. Though Dia no longer had Senghor's support, who repealed Dia's post of President of the Council the following year.

Discontent towards Senghor's administration escalated quickly. In 1968, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements threatened governments around the world and the University of Dakar concentrated [frustration in Senegal](#). Their country was a 'neo-colony', students argued, and Senghor a 'valet of French imperialism'. Army raids on the campus resulted in at least one death and hundreds of wounded. [8] Alongside trade unionists, many students were [arrested and deported](#) to military camps. Not only did Senghor call on French troops for support in crushing the rebellion, he also regularly corresponded with the French ambassador to Senegal on the situation's developments. [9] At the height of the crisis, the president even suggested that General Jean-Alfred Diallo take power if he wished. [10]

By February 1971, Senghor's embrace of France seemed to reach its peak with the state visit of

French President Georges Pompidou, a close friend and former classmate. Upon his arrival, [Senghor declared](#): 'The Senegalese people feel particularly honored to receive the President of the French Republic. [...] Because the French-Senegalese friendship dates back to nearly three centuries. [...] I am pleased to host in my country an old classmate from high school, and a friend.' [11] A few weeks prior, a group of young radical activists set fire to the French cultural centre in Dakar. For them, Senegal's reception of the French President was an open provocation, emblematic of the enduring remnants of colonialism. During the visit, they attempted to charge the presidential motorcade but [were arrested](#).

Upon learning about his brothers' involvement in the failed attack, Senegalese activist and artist [Omar Blondin Diop](#) embarked on military training. Months of travelling led him to Syria, Algeria, and Guinea before authorities in Mali arrested him in November 1971. Imprisoned on Gorée island for 'being a threat to national security', Blondin Diop was reported dead on 11 May, 1973, aged 26. The state of Senegal claimed he committed suicide, but several testimonies, including that of the [case's investigating judge](#), attest to a cover-up. Then interior minister Jean Collin, who vigorously maintained the myth of political prisoners' 'humane conditions of detention', was the president's nephew-in-law. [12] Senghor's poem 'Il est cinq heures', published in *Lettres d'hivernage* (1973), seems to recount the tragedy: 'There is Gorée, where bleeds my heart my hearts / [...] the Estrées fort / Color of blood clotted with anguish'. Two years later, activists from the anti-imperialist front And Jëf were arrested and [severely tortured](#) - hung upside down their skin burned and electric shocks applied to their genitals.

President Senghor announced his resignation on 31 December, 1980. After reinstating the post of Prime Minister (formerly President of the Council) in 1970, he amended Senegal's Constitution in 1976 to ensure his heir apparent Abdou Diouf could take over after his resignation. 'I told you that I wanted to make you my successor and that is why there is this article 35', [Senghor told Diouf](#) in 1977. 'I will be standing for election in February 1978 and, if I am elected, I intend to leave [...]. At that moment, you will continue, assert yourself and be elected afterwards'. Shortly after, Senghor left Senegal to settle in France, where he spent the rest of his life. The transition of his chosen heir was seamless.

By the end of his presidency, the time had long past when, in his poem 'Prière de Paix' (1948), Senghor praised the masses 'who face [...] the powerful and the torturers'. He was now the embodiment of the powerful, whose rule was the source of Senegal's neo-colonial governance. While [Senghor claimed](#) in 1963 that 'opposition is a necessity, [...] the dialectic of life, of history', political parties were only legalized in Senegal in 1981, after a period of limited multi-partyism. Until then, they were either dissolved or absorbed by the ruling party.

Senegal's independence sixty years ago is neither a coincidence of history nor a generous gift granted by France. It is an ideal for which successive generations have fought for, from [Lamine Arfang Senghor](#) to [Valdiodio N'diaye](#). Independence for many meant the full emancipation from the conquest of profit through lands, bodies, and spirits, which does not dwindle with time. If indeed, as Boniface Mongo Mboussa indicates, 'rigor and dignity' are the values that best characterize Léopold Sédar Senghor, then we must refuse complacency in how we remember his time in power. We must continue to uncover the buried secrets and explore the repression culture of Senegal's real history, as it continues to labour under the gaze of Western 'partners.' The hand that wrote poetry to empower was responsible for acts of great injustice.

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## Footnotes

[1] Research on revolutionary politics and political repression in Senegal under Léopold Sédar Senghor's presidency is still underway. Over the past decade, a significant number of works have deepened our understanding of the period. Among major ones: Pascal Bianchini, '[The 1968 years: revolutionary politics in Senegal](#)' (*Review of African Political Economy*, 2019); Ibrahima Wane, [Chanson populaire et conscience politique au Sénégal. L'art de penser la nation](#) (Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 2013); Roland Colin, [Sénégal notre pirogue: au soleil de la liberté](#) (Présence Africaine, 2007); Roland Alassane Diagne, [Momsarew ou le pari de l'indépendance](#) (2014); Sadio Camara, [L'épopée du Parti Africain de l'Indépendance au Sénégal \(1957-1980\)](#) (L'Harmattan, 2013); Moctar Fofana Niang, [Trajectoire et documents du Parti Africain de l'Indépendance \(P.A.I.\) au Sénégal](#) (Les Éditions de la Brousse, 2015); Pascal Bianchini, '[Les paradoxes du Parti africain de l'indépendance \(PAI\) au Sénégal autour de la décennie 1960](#)' (2016); Ousmane William Mbaye, [Président Dia](#) (2012); Omar Gueye, [Mai 1968 au Sénégal, Senghor face au mouvement syndical](#) (Éditions Karthala, 2017); Abdoulaye Bathily, [Mai 68 à Dakar ou la révolte universitaire et la démocratie. Le Sénégal cinquante ans après](#) (L'Harmattan, 2018); Françoise Blum, [Révolutions africaines : Congo, Sénégal, Madagascar, années 1960-1970](#) (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2014); Françoise Blum, '[Sénégal 1968 : révolte étudiante et grève générale](#)' (*Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2012); Bocar Niang and Pascal Scallon-Chouinard, '["Mai 68" au Sénégal et les médias : une mémoire en questions](#)' (*Le Temps des médias*, 2016); Yannek Simalla, [Sénégal contestataire](#) (2017-2020); Amadou Kah,

[2] See: Léopold Sédar Senghor, '[L'humanisme et nous : René Maran](#)' , *L'Étudiant Noir* 1, no. 1 (March 1935): 4

[3] Roland Colin declared this in an interview with Étienne Smith and Thomas Perrot for [Afrique contemporaine](#) (2010, p. 120). After being Senghor's student at the National School of Overseas France in the late 1940s, they reconnected in 1955 when Colin settled in Senegal. Following the 1956 Defferre Reform Act, Colin joined Senegal's first government in 1957, answering Senghor's request.

[4] See: Jean-Michel Djian, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: genèse d'un imaginaire francophone* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 223-224.

[5] See: Lilyan Kesteloot, *Comprendre les poèmes de Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Issy les Moulineaux: Les Classiques africains, 1986), 40.

[6] Roland Colin, Mamadou Dia's chief of staff at the time (1957-1962), described this encounter in an interview with Étienne Smith and Thomas Perrot for [Afrique contemporaine](#) (2010, pp. 117-118): 'A group of young intellectuals was in favour of the 'no', reinforced in this [position] by the ruling party's (Senegalese Progressive Union) rallying to it at the federalists' congress in Cotonou in July. The party's position was, however, jeopardized by Senghor's reservations, who did not want to derogate from an unacknowledged promise he had made to the French government - in fact to Pompidou [de Gaulle's chief of staff] and Debré [justice minister] - to remain in the Community. Mamadou Dia was informed of this only during an interview between him and Senghor in Normandy, at Gonneville-sur-Mer. There, Dia was in an extremely delicate position: either he broke with Senghor, and it would be a disaster for Senegal or he aligned himself with his positions and would be cantilevered with a whole current of his party and with his convictions. [...] Dia told me about their dialogue, hitherto kept secret, many years later, when he was released from prison. Senghor said to him at first: 'Yes, independence, of course, nobody can give that up, but let's take some time'. And Mamadou Dia replied: 'How long?' And Senghor: 'Twenty years!' And Dia: 'This is not possible!' He later reported this to me: 'We had an extremely tight discussion, and he said twenty years first, and then, finally, we got to four'. At the end of this historic compromise, we had to rebound, which was not easy at all facing party officials. The majority agreed on a conditional 'yes', but there were nevertheless worrying consequences'.

[7] Mansour Bouna Ndiaye (a young official within the ruling party in 1962) and Roland Colin (Mamadou Dia's chief of staff, 1957-1962) offer two thorough first-hand accounts of the 'December 1962 crisis' in their memoirs *Panorama politique du Sénégal ou Les mémoires d'un enfant du siècle* (Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1986, pp. 136-154) and *Sénégal notre pirogue : au soleil de la liberté* (Présence africaine, 2007, pp. 253-293). Colin also testified in [Archives d'Afrique](#) (Radio France Internationale, 2019).

[8] The tragedy of political repression is that it erases its victims' names and stories. We do know of some, though. Historian Omar Gueye describes the 29 May armed repression in his doctoral thesis [Mai 1968 au Sénégal, Senghor face au mouvement syndical](#) (University of Amsterdam, 2014, pp. 20 & 216): 'If we can note a difference in the number of injured, contradictory sources agree on the figure of 1 death in the 29 May campus repression: Lebanese student Hanna Salomon Houry. The latter, found lifeless in Pavilion A, was accidentally 'killed by the explosion of a Molotov cocktail with which he was armed and which he did not know how to handle', according to the official version, immediately denied by the camp opposite. [...] Trade unions announced four students killed while British sources also spoke of four young people killed during the urban riots'. Add to this, historian Françoise Blum details 31 May Medina events in her article '[Sénégal 1968 : révolte étudiante et grève générale](#)' (*Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2012, pp. 170-171): 'On the morning of the 31<sup>st</sup>, tension was very high in the Medina where obstacles blocked certain streets and where streams of pedestrians converged on the Labor Exchange. At 9 a.m., crowds were high and the red flag fluttered. It was then that security forces surrounded and blocked the Labor Exchange district, entrances coming from the Medina, and outlying districts. After some clashes, soldiers charged the Labor Exchange and arrested around 200 people, including all the union leaders. [...] It seems that the charge against the demonstrators left two dead and hundreds injured. Tear gas canisters were allegedly dropped from helicopters. As for the arrests, there were around 900'. Moreover, Omar Gueye relates (p. 39) the death of Moumar Sy in Pikine: 'In the morning [of 14 June, 1968], students from secondary classes in Pikine had tried to close some of the neighbourhood's primary schools. As he intervened to restore order, a peacekeeper shot the young people who were fleeing, fatally injuring one of them, Moumar Sy, aka Mandiaye, aged 17'.

[9] See Bocar Niang, Pascal Scallon-Chouinard, "['Mai 68' au Sénégal et les médias : une mémoire](#)

[en question](#), *Le Temps des médias* 26, no. 1 (2016): 166.

[10] See Omar Gueye, *Mai 1968 au Sénégal, Senghor face au mouvement syndical* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 2017), 81.

[11] Léopold Sédar Senghor and Georges Pompidou met in 1928 at the prestigious Louis-le-Grand secondary school. Maintaining a [a strong friendship](#) throughout the years, they later collaborated politically, practically non-stop, between 1962 and 1974; while Senghor was Senegal's President (1960-1980), Pompidou became France's Prime Minister (1962-1968) and President (1969-1974).

[12] See: Roland Colin, Thomas Perrot, Étienne Smith, '[Alors, tu ne m'embrasses plus Léopold ? Mamadou Dia et Léopold S. Senghor](#)', *Afrique Contemporaine* 233, no. 1 (2010): 123.