

A Journey with Cheddad into Mauritanian Revolutionary Activism

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Pascal Bianchini interviews Ahmed Salem El Moctar, also known as Cheddad, who was a leader of the Mauritanian student movement in the early 1970s, as well as an underground activist with the Kadihine party. Cheddad recounts his activism in Mauritania during the late 1960s and 1970s, providing insight into the period's school movements, strikes, and the fight against neocolonialism. He offers insight into the complexity of Mauritanian post-independence politics, the significance of the Kadihines and the National Democratic Movement.

Pascal Bianchini: Cheddad, thank you for this interview. Just before we start, a few words, perhaps to introduce yourself. Are you a former militant of the revolutionary left in the 70s?

Cheddad: Well, at the time, I was a pupil who entered school a bit late as we used to do in those days. First, I was an activist at Rosso secondary school, then at the national high school in Nouakchott.

So that was at the end of the 1960s...

I went to the Collège de Rosso in 67 perhaps. Then in 71-72, I went to the Lycée National for a few months. The situation was intense in terms of the school movement. I was expelled in January 72 with almost a third of the school's staff, because all [the students were involved in the strike movement](#).

Can you explain the reasons for these strikes?

Well, first of all, it has to be said that there was a ferment around independence, with Arab and Black African nationalist movements. Well, I was too young to be influenced by that. It was from Rosso that I began to evolve. It was the most modern town in Mauritania. There was a church in Rosso, with a large library of general literature, French newspapers, and cultural magazines. I read a lot of books by Rousseau, Diderot and Balzac. Having experienced certain dramas linked to racism when I was still very young, accelerated my maturity and enabled me to overcome these situations. Then, there were a number of events that were to have an impact on me. First of all, the 1967 war.

In Palestine?

Yes, when the Arab armies were defeated by Israel, and Nasser withdrew. Although I'm not an Arab nationalist, I was attached to Nasser's personality, with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the achievements he had in mind. Then came 1968 with the workers' movement that had called a strike in Zouérate and the army firing on them. They killed around ten workers.

For people who don't know Zouerate...

Zouerate is the town around which Mauritania's iron ore mines are operated, in the far north of the country. It was practically the only place where there were workers, and also in Nouadhibou, with the dockers, and at the same time, there were building sites and construction work. In fact, the movement never presented itself exclusively as an ideological movement but as a liberation movement. Liberation was incomplete during the 60s. It was an illusion. People realised that. There were people who engaged in a new struggle against neo-colonialism. In 1968, the poet in front of us got together with his friends to create a movement in a village in Gorgol called Tokomadji. One of them was assigned there as a teacher. As for me, I joined the movement in 1972.

What did your movement do?

Our action focused mainly on the economy, in particular the need to nationalise the mining companies, for example, copper in Akjoujt, iron in Zouerate and fish in Nouadhibou. There were also other demands, such as education, which called into question the French system that was imposed on us on the basis of agreements between France and Mauritania. I remember that when we demanded education reforms, we were told that we couldn't touch the French system under the cooperation agreements.

At the time, however, there was limited teaching of Arabic. How was the system organised then?

There have only been hours of Arabic in the education system since independence. Generally speaking, in a primary school, there were six French teachers for every two or three Arab teachers. So they taught several classes, whereas the French teachers taught one class. At the lycée, the teaching staff was mainly French, with a few black Africans or Moors. Initially, the baccalaureate was taken in Dakar or Saint Louis in Senegal, at a time when we still had cooperation agreements.

So there were French aid workers too?

Almost all the teachers were French development workers. When they came to the beach in the 60s and 70s, you'd have thought they were in Nice or somewhere in France.

And Moctar Ould Dadd's regime was, you might say, pro-French?

Yes, at the time of independence, there were two parties, roughly speaking. The first elements came out of French schools. They were interpreters, people who had just finished primary school. So they weren't trained. They were low-level people, academically speaking. Moctar was targeted by the French. He completed his secondary education. In 1957, he was one of five Mauritanian baccalaureates. Then they trained him to become a lawyer.

So, these baccalaureate holders went to Senegal to take their baccalaureate.

Yes, he passed his baccalaureate in Senegal in 1957. What I'm getting at is that some of these interpreters had close ties with the French, which was normal given their position as interpreters. There were also teachers and nurses, who were more independent from the French. They were the ones who started a youth movement that led to the formation of a party called Ennahda (Awakening), which was one of the first to demand independence.

But what was Mokhtar Ould Daddah's party called?

The PRM, Parti du regroupement mauritanien. Then, in 1961, the Nahda party and the PRM party merged to form the Mauritanian People's Party (PPM).

So there was no longer any opposition?

Well, strictly speaking, there was no longer any opposition. But there were often clashes between the pro-French and the anti-French, for example when Air Mauritanie was set up. The company was entrusted to a certain Bouyagui Ould Abidine who was the Minister of Transport at the time, the former leader of the opposition having joined the PPM. He did not agree with the French. He left to buy the first planes in Spain. He was sacked as a result. The fact remains that all Mauritians were marked by a certain nationalism in economic terms. Even those who were close to the French wanted to do something, even without upsetting the French. Well, there were also those who were against the system as a whole. Until 1972, it was said that it was the French ambassador who ran Mauritania. From 1972 onwards, the movement gained momentum and was able to bring the regime to heel. This could have led to an armed struggle, as happened in Chad. To avoid this, Mokhtar denounced the cooperation agreements in 1972. This paved the way for the nationalisation of MIFERMA and the creation of the ouguiya, the national currency, as well as reforms to the education system to pave the way for further decolonisation.

Coming back to the political parties, before the Kadihines, were there any other left-wing groups that existed underground?

First of all, the group that formed the Kadihines included pro-Nasser Arab nationalists. With the failure of the 1967 war, they were disappointed, like most revolutionaries in the Arab world. They no longer saw nationalism as a prospect for liberation. They turned to Marxism, as they did everywhere else in the world. However, others continued in Arab nationalism, either pro-Iraqi or pro-Syrian Baathists, but they were not combatants. We occupied all the space from the end of the 1960s until the overthrow of the Mokhtar regime in July 1978.

Was there a party equivalent to the African Independence Party (PAI) like there was in Senegal?

I think there were attempts in the 1950's. There were black African elements, including two survivors Ladjji Traoré and Daffa Bakari. Before joining the movement, they had their own party, a Marxist party, the Mauritanian Workers' Party (PTM). They were linked to the African Independence Party (PAI).

Did the movement publish a newspaper?

Yes, in the manner of Lenin's Pravda, which was intended to channel a general movement throughout Russia, we had a newspaper that was distributed throughout the country. It had to be read throughout the country at the same time. So we created Sayat El Madhloum. It was distributed all over the country, in French and Arabic.

What does Sayat El Madhloum mean in Arabic?

In Arabic, it's the cry of the oppressed. At the same time, there was poetry, because Arabic and popular poetry was in a way the traditional press. That's why practically three-quarters of the literary production at the time was linked to the movement. Even in music, All the songs were transformed into militant music.

So, The term Kadihine in Arabic means?

The working masses - those who live off the fruits of their labour.

And there was a manifesto, a founding text?

Not as such. In fact, the founding text was the publication of the first issue of Sayat el Madhloum. The Kadihine party, which published the newspaper, existed in total secrecy, so much so that the intelligence services were unaware of its existence. In October 1973, it was decided to declare the party's existence. So we had to prepare for several months, distributing the proclamation leaflet. I remember a sub-prefect in the Hodh region in the east of the country who, when he saw the leaflet proclaiming the party, sent the information to his superiors as if the movement had started in that region. The intelligence services were completely unaware of this. Even when they arrested people, they didn't know that there was an organised party. They thought it was just a movement.

Was there a lot of repression?

A prison was set up in a district of Nouakchott in a building that had been used as a prefecture in colonial times, where up to 400 people were held. At the time, there weren't even fifteen thousand inhabitants in Nouakchott. Can you imagine? Our poet friend here was one of them. He was detained there! I remember an issue of *Le Militant*, which was the party's internal organ. It said that out of 400 detainees, there were only five party members. The party was clandestine. They usually arrested teachers and intellectuals whom they thought were the inspiration behind the movement, when in reality the real pillars were the students, like me at the time. The dozens of students expelled from school who made up the fighting elite of the movement. In fact, the regime's mistake was to expel all these students for going on strike because they were the backbone of the movement. In fact, they were old enough to be students because most of them had gone to school late. But there were also younger generations with them.

There were also students, but who were outside?

Well, there were students who went on strike in 73 to support the students and workers on strike, but their grants were cut off. There were also civil servants who went on strike. And they were fired from the civil service. That was the peak of the movement, in 72-73. That's what prompted the regime to denounce the cooperation agreements.

It's often said that the Kadihines were Maoists. Is this true?

Well, internationally, Beijing was helping and the Eastern European countries were helping us. They were the socialist camp. It was normal to have sympathy for them. In the past, it was the great Western nations that oppressed us. So it was normal to distance ourselves from them and their Western democracy. The reference to Marxism was like a universal ideological reference against the arbitrariness of the West. We were slaves. We wanted to free ourselves. We used all the experiences of all the ideologies. We used everything to free ourselves. That was the case with [Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau](#). This was the case with all the Arab nationalists. Even Nasser was willing to cooperate with the West, but he was not forgiven for nationalising the Suez Canal. He was pushed to become a socialist. It was all part of the Cold War. So, it has to be said that we were very much inspired by Mao because we were in an underdeveloped country and our society was peasant. We saw ourselves as closer to the Chinese revolution than to the Soviet or French revolution because it was a peasant movement. Reading Mao's writings inspired us much more about this reality. We were thinking of carrying arms and Mao Tse Tung's military writings were references for all revolutionary movements. That's what Maoism was all about at the time. I remember Mao Tse Tung saying in the introduction to his military writings: "You learn war by waging war. You learn revolutionary war by waging revolutionary war. You learn revolutionary war in China by waging revolutionary war in China...". So, Mao is inviting you to adapt. He's not inviting you to be Maoist or to copy from others.

At the same time, there is another liberation struggle going on nearby, the Polisario, the Saharawis...Were there any links?

More than links. If you don't mind, the [Polisario](#) was a creation of the National Democratic Movement (MND). There were Mauritanian elements who originated from or were related to the Sahrawi populations, the Reguibat and others. It was these elements that inspired the Polisario, which was created in Zouerate, in the far north of Mauritania. When their movement was launched, the Polisario newspaper was printed in the Sayat El Madhloum printing works. It was then sent to the Polisario camps. [Their main support in the beginning was the MND](#). We collected money and medicines. The regime let it happen. In the beginning, it wasn't hostile to the Polisario. It just lets them get on with it. Even when we were campaigning to raise money or resources for them, the regime didn't punish us for that. It was only afterwards that the French and the Moroccans pushed it into a confrontation with the Polisario. So they dragged it into the Sahara war. With the war in the Sahara, the regime was dependent on weapons from the West and the Moroccan army. It no longer had any autonomy. At one point, the Polisario was encouraged to reach an agreement with Spain, just as Mauritania had sought support from France to avoid Moroccan demands. But that's when Hassan II had the intelligence to sabotage this agreement, with the Green March. The man was super-intelligent to effectively drag Mauritania into this war and sabotage the agreements between the Polisario and Spain. So, the link between Mauritania and the Polisario was direct.

In relation to the term Kadihines, how do you situate the term National Democratic Movement (MND)?

At the beginning, we were talking about the National Democratic Movement. But that gave rise to a debate. The D before the N meant that, given our feudal and tribal reality, we had to democratise our society. The term democratic didn't mainly refer to democratic freedoms and so on, but it meant democratising society, overcoming slavery, abolishing slavery, involving women and so on. In our minds, that was democratisation. But other comrades had said that we were a society under occupation. Therefore the most important task was the national task. We had to liberate the country. Then we have to develop democracy in all its aspects. After a debate lasting several months, people agreed on the term MND rather than National Democratic Movement. In other words, it wasn't the Marxist or ideological or Maoist option that took precedence. The first concern was that it was Mauritanian.

But was the MND a creation of the Kadihines?

Of course, it was. In terms of chronology, it comes after. 1968 was the start of the Kadihines

Yes, practically, it was the beginning of the Kadihines. The Kadihines was a bit of a pejorative! The movement was called the National Democratic Movement in Arabic. Now its militants were called the Kadihines, which had an ideological connotation.

And the MND was broader than that?

Exactly! All the movement's militants were called the Kadihines.. In fact, that was also the name of the party. But nobody knew it existed. The Kadihine party in Mauritania was clandestine

But how did the MND develop its activities?

The MND began with regional, local and sectoral structures, and so on. You had movements of revolutionary action committees. For example, here in Nouakchott, you had a local revolutionary action committee (CARL). In the North, I was active in another structure which covered Zouerate, Nouadhibou and Akjoujt, which was still a big mining town at the time, the Comité d'Action Révolutionnaire du Nord (CARN). In the east, there was a Revolutionary Action Committee. Moreover, within this structure, there were young people, there were women with a very strong

presence. I remember a report on Radio France Internationale in 1992 about an opposition demonstration at the time of the UFD. It was said to be the biggest demonstration in Nouakchott since 1972. It was a gigantic demonstration: on 29 May 1972 we commemorated the massacre of the Zouerate workers. It was commemorated every year. Nouakchott was still a small town: young people were invited to gather in one neighbourhood, women in another, workers in another. There were at least three or four thousand women present at the women's rally. The working-class neighbourhoods were called quartiers libres (free neighbourhoods), where the police couldn't dare wander in. The high school in Nouakchott, the national high school, was also called a "liberated zone".

So Mokhtar Ould Dadda's regime had to take steps to distance itself from France?

Yes, that's right. There was the denunciation of the cooperation agreements, then the nationalisation of MIFERMA in 1974, which operated the iron mines, and before the creation of the ouguiya in 1973.

And from then on, were there internal differences within the movement in relation to this new situation?

Yes, initially we thought that the regime would never give in. As elsewhere, we were of the opinion that we had to prepare an armed struggle to make the regime give way and that we even had to sweep it away. There may have been differences of opinion on the issue, but the general tendency was to take up arms. But from 1973, there was a tendency among us to take up arms against the regime, while there were more moderate people who thought that things were beginning to change. We pushed the regime into a confrontation with France. The poet here and I were among them, and we thought that in this context, we had to support the regime in this confrontation with France, to radicalise this effort. But for the others, it was all smoke and mirrors. I even remember an article in Sayat El Madhoum that read? "Down with the new CFA! So to say that there was nothing new and that we were deceiving public opinion and that there were no real concessions, that there had been major negotiations on details.

As a result, the movement no longer has the same momentum as before.

For me, the movement's historic mission was coming to an end. Our raison d'être was to complete the decolonisation of our country, to fight against French neo-colonialism. Now, of course, there were militants fighting. There were structures in place. All that was going to be affected and the movement broke up. Strangely enough, most of those who denounced the regime's support ended up getting closer to it. Those who were most virulent against the regime became agents of the regime or disbanded or disappeared from the scene. Some rushed to study abroad.

But which regime? Because there were several regimes afterwards.

I'm talking about the regime of Mokhtar Ould Daddah. But in fact, it's a bit more complicated. I was a bit hasty. In 1973, we had a debate but we managed to close ranks.

For those who don't know much about history, when the Mauritanian state went to war against the Polisario?

There was a secret agreement between Morocco, Spain and Mauritania to divide the Western Sahara, one part for Mauritania, and one part for Morocco. In fact, Mauritania only got a small part of the Sahrawi territory. When the agreement was signed, there was a meeting of the national assembly, which at the time was in fact a rump parliament. Officially, we voted to elect deputies, but

in reality, the members of the assembly were appointed. However, there was one Soninke parliamentarian, Camara Seydou Boubou, who dared to raise his finger. Mokhtar Ould Daddah, who was capable of irony, said: "A Soninké always has something to say! Go for it! Comrade. Talk!" He said it reminded him of a story their elders used to tell them when they were little. The lion, the hyena and the jackal got together to go hunting. In the evening, they must share the booty. But when evening came, only the hyena managed to bring back a cow, a sheep and a rat. The others had spent the day sleeping. The lion then asked the jackal: "What do we do?" The jackal said, "It's obvious: the cow for you, the sheep for me! And the rat for the hyena!" The audience burst out laughing. Well, the important thing is that during that period, the war plunged the country into another situation, which was then exacerbated by the drought. It was truly catastrophic! So I remember well at a tea party, when we heard Mokhtar's speech announcing the start of the war, it was the start of new differences for us on the question of support for the regime. It wasn't the debates on reforms that separated us. It was just the war.

So, some of your people supported the war?

Absolutely. Some were looking for justifications for the war. There's one element that we've perhaps overlooked a little too quickly, which will resurface in contemporary history, and that's the tensions between the Black Mauritians and the Moors. These tensions are not new. At the time of the colonial administration, the Moors were still nomads and there weren't many of them who went to school.

So, the administration's auxiliaries were often black Africans, often even Senegalese. In one school, almost all of the five or six teachers were Senegalese. Only the teachers who taught Arabic were Mauritians. At independence, most Moors didn't go to school. They were nomads. It was the drought from 1968-69 onwards that prompted the Moors to accept schooling. However, long before that, some Moors had attended school and Moors were beginning to emerge as managers. But they were up against an administration of black Africans who they tried to push around to take their places. So that's how it started. With the drought, school became the only way out. There were no more cattle, there was no more farming, and there was nothing left. You had to be a civil servant or an employee to survive. So the Moorish world switched over to the school system. And as the administration was still run by black Africans. So that made the confrontation worse. We, on the other hand, managed to mitigate it because we brought everyone together in the same framework.

How did you achieve this?

The united objective was the liberation of the country. And in neighbouring Senegal, there was a movement similar to ours, which also helped. It should also be said that Maoist ideology and the writings of Frantz Fanon and many others helped us. We gave people perspectives and solutions to their concerns. That eased the clash. There was a first clash in 1966 at the Rosso College and elsewhere over teaching in Arabic, but just after that, in 1968, came the events in Zouerate, which strengthened national unity. Finally, there was the MND, which brought everyone together. Now, the new exogenous dividing factor has been the war in the Sahara.

Can you explain why the problem has resurfaced?

When the military took power in 1978, it weakened the movement and its unitary ideas. Divisionist ideas began to flourish because the military had no political training. Most of them had a tribalist or regionalist ideology. They were not in a position to create a climate of unity in the country. Everyone came to get their piece of the pie, which created a climate conducive to communitarianism. You have to unite your community, your tribe, and your region, to get your share of the cake. It wasn't just us. It was a universal backlash that existed everywhere.

We're coming to the end of our interview. Is there still a memory of this period? Are there any commemorations? Has anything been written about it?

Well, I've had the advantage of having developed independently. Initially, as a student, I even led the movement in Rosso completely independently. I wasn't structured. People would send me their leaflets and statements and I would distribute them. Well, when I joined the movement, I kept this independence of mind and of observation and synthesis. This has helped me today to think about the situation and defend this heritage. The others have practically disappeared into thin air. With my friend Jemal Kaber, who has a huge library that you met yesterday, we keep track of everything that is written and that is of some importance about that period.

And aren't there any historians who have taken an interest in that period?

From time to time, students and lecturers at the University of Nouakchott ask me to write about that period. But I mainly see foreign visitors who are interested in the MND.

I only started talking about the Kadihines when I became interested in Senegal with And Jëf activists because there were links at the time I suppose...

Yes, very close. At the time, And Jëf used to send its activists to us for training. They would spend months or even a year with us. In organisational terms, we were further ahead of them. I remember at university in Dakar when Mauritanian students spoke, there was complete silence when they listened, unlike many others.

Finally, how did this revolutionary experience end for you?

That's a chapter in my book that I call "the painful break". I was following national and international events, and I was beginning to doubt our ideological references, particularly Marxist, socialist and others. And in 1979, after the end of the war, I decided to break with the movement on that basis, while maintaining relationships of friendship, contacts with everyone and exchanges. kept a militant side, working in the field on national issues and at the same time deepening my reflection on current international phenomena, including the evolution of ideologies.

This interview with Cheddad took place on 10 June 2023, in Nouakchott, in the home of the great poet Mauritanian Poet Ahmedou Ould Abdelkader.

Born in the 1950s, Ahmed Salem El Moctar, aka Cheddad, was a leader of the Mauritanian student movement in the early 1970s, as well as an underground activist with the Kadihines. For several years now, he has been [writing articles and memoirs](#) about this revolutionary period (notably *Les cris des sans-voix*, published by Editions Jousour Abdelaziz in Nouakchott).

Author

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