The Movement for Justice and Equality in Mauritania

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***New Politics* interviews an MJEM activist in the United States**

Saidou Wane, who immigrated to the United States 15 years ago, resides in Cincinnati, Ohio where he is active in the Movement for Justice and Equality in Mauritania (MJEM, the French name of the Mauritanian parent organization is Touche pas à ma nationalité). *MJEM exists to resist the Mauritanian government's policy of discrimination against the country's black Africans. Mauritania is located in northwest Africa, in the Maghreb and West Africa; much of the country is part of the Sahara desert. The country's population is approximately 3.3 million: Berber-Arab peoples (sometimes called Moors), black Africans, and people of mixed race. (See the website* http://mjem.org/ *for more information.)*

New Politics: What are your organization's concerns about the situation in Mauritania?

Saidou Wane: We have several. First, we want to bring to justice the perpetrators of genocide who still are still high-ranking officials in the government of Mauritania. Second, we want to end discriminatory policies and slavery in Mauritania. The genocide took place from 1986 to 1992, during which time the government expelled over 100,000 African Mauritanians from the country, purged the administration and the army of black officers, killed thousands of black civilians, and erased hundreds of African villages in the south of Mauritania to make way for Arab villages. The government—the Mauritanian Army—organized and carried out the genocide. Those responsible have not been brought to justice.

The genocide began as a dispute with Senegal, our neighbor to the South, and the government used it as an excuse to accuse all Mauritanian blacks of being Senegalese. High ranking administrators, general and coronels, who remain in the government and the army orchestrated that genocide. In Mauritania there are really three different social groups, the white Arabs, the Haratines who are former slaves and culturally Arab, and then the black African community. In the past, during the genocide, the government used the Haratines to carry out their dirty work, though there is now a rapprochement between the Haratines and the black Africans.

NP: There was a great outcry by Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations at that time of the 1986-1992 genocide, but since then the issue seems to have dropped out of public consciousness. How and why did that happen?

SW: The government of Mauritania became better at communications and propaganda. The president, Ould Taya, the dictator at that time, passed an amnesty law. Also Mauritania was one of only three Arab nations having relations with Israel, and after 9/11 the dictator also committed Mauritania to fight alongside the U.S. The two forces came together when Bush was seeking forces to support and fight alongside the U.S. and Mauritania was trying to overcome the stigma of being a human rights violator. So they came together. It was perfect timing.

The current government passed a smokescreen resolution, organizing a prayer for the dead in a southern Mauritanian African village with a few African personalities present. They did this without any investigations of the genocide or whatever. The government now points to that act and says that this problem has been resolved.

Now the Mauritanian government seeks favor from European governments and from the U.S. by committing itself to fight Al-Qaida. Although there are only a few Al-Qaida supporters, the government is doing its best to exaggerate the threat and to show the world that it is the primary anti-Al-Qaida force in North Africa in order to gain more support from the West.

NP: What are the government's current policies that discriminate against Mauritania's black citizens?

SW: The government refuses to recognize the African languages (Wolof, Fulani, Soninke); it only recognizes Arabic. It only teaches French and Arabic and refuses to include the black languages in the school curriculum. The civil service administration hires in a discriminatory fashion, and while Arabs make up only 30 percent of the population they make up 90 percent of the civil services employees. The land reform of 1983, which rejected community owned property (common among the African population), allowed wealthy Arab businessmen, who were the only ones with access to bank loans, to come in and purchase these lands.

Most recently, in May of last year the government carried out a census and established a national registry of vital statistics which is the reason that we created the movement *Touche pas*. We objected to the fact that the government sent panels throughout the country to register Mauritanian citizens in the new system, but the panels rejected many black Africans because they could not speak Arabic or could not recite certain verses from the Quran. Hence the name of our movement: Don't Touch My Nationality. Since last May, then, we have been staging peaceful protests throughout the country.

NP: What are your movement's demands?

SW: The government is trying to change the ethnic make-up of the country. We want the government to bring the perpetrators of the genocide to justice. We want to end the land reform law. We want fair hiring. And we want African languages to be included in education and recognized in society. We also want to end the discriminatory census which is currently underway

There is also the issue of slavery. Slavery has been a problem for centuries and continued into modern times. There is no longer slavery in urban areas, but it continues in the rural areas. One fifth of Mauritanians are slaves. All of the slaves are black Africans who have become culturally Arab, because most of the owners are Arabs. The government has passed three laws abolishing slavery, but this is just lip service. They do not enforce these laws. So we are demanding an end to slavery. The Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA) is our ally.

NP: What has been the government's reaction to your movement?

SW: The government has been tone deaf. It has not heard our demands. It has been very repressive. Since we started our protests our activists have been tortured and jailed. One of our activists, Lamine Magane, 19 years old, was shot to death by the authorities. Yesterday the leader of our movement in the country, Abdul Birane Wane, was arrested. Right now our activists are occupying the police station—standing outside—where we believe he is being held. IRA activists are also harassed and jailed. We in the U.S. are organizing to put pressure on the U.S. government, since the Mauritanian regime is a recipient of both U.S. military cooperation and foreign aid.

Besides reacting violently, they have been trying to paint our movement as anti-Arab in order to pit the two communities against each other. This accusation is absurd, since many of us who are black Mauritanians have Arabs in our families; for example, I have a step-sister who is Arab. We have some allies among liberal Arabs here in the U.S., but we are fighting the powerful propaganda

of the Mauritanian regime.

NP: What are the next steps for your movement?

SW: We are getting organized in the U.S. to raise awareness of the Mauritanian issue, both among the public generally and to push U.S. lawmakers to do the right thing by demanding that Mauritania respect the basic human rights of black African Mauritanians. Many actions are being planned, including public events in Cincinnati and other cities throughout the country.