Deserted

Feb 11, 2002

Articles & Testimony

As we walked along Timbuktu's sandy streets, past mud mosques and houses, warm winds from the Sahara whipped dust over the city, obscuring the sun and stinging my eyes. The wind did not bother my guide Muhammad, however. He wore sunglasses and a turban, shielding himself from sun, sand, and anything else the desert might throw at the residents of this increasingly tense and depressed city.

When President Clinton visited neighboring Senegal and nearby Ghana in 1998, Africans across the region heard him declare that "the United States is ready to help you." The New York Times opined that Clinton's "journey is a fine opportunity ... to show that America's support for democracy and development in Africa needs to be taken seriously." And many in Mali hoped it would. After all, Malians had overthrown a corrupt dictatorship in 1991 and organized multiparty democratic elections the following year. Perhaps even more impressive given many African countries' post-cold-war tendency to backslide into dictatorship, Mali held another democratic election in 1997. President Alpha Oumar Konare won a second term in balloting that international observers deemed fair. According to Freedom House's 2001-2002 "Freedom in the World" survey, Mali ranked as the only completely free country in the Islamic world.

But despite the best efforts of Konare and his people, the "new African renaissance" that Clinton promised on his March 1998 tour has not arrived in Mali. And September 11, ironically, makes it less likely that the United States will live up to its promises to help build it. For while the United States reaches out to African dictatorships like Sudan in hopes that they will mend their terrorism-supporting ways, African democracies -- majority-Muslim ones like Mali included -- are being ignored. It's a shortsighted strategy, and it may be leading moderate African Muslims to other -- less moderate -- alternatives.

Not long ago, American officials liked to talk about Mali. In October 1996, when Secretary of State Warren Christopher visited the country, he explained that "Mali was chosen, frankly, because of the tremendous progress made in some of the most difficult conditions in all of Africa." (In order for Christopher to visit a Peace Corps camp on his trip, Mali had to grade an entire road.) Three years later Secretary of State Madeleine Albright spent 18 hours in the country. She praised Mali's participation in peacekeeping efforts, and announced a $2 million scholarship for women and girls. The Grand Hotel in Bamako proudly displays a photograph of Albright alongside a letter from the local U.S. Embassy calling Albright's visit a "complete success."

The Clinton administration wasn't above patting itself on the back for its commitment to Africa. Speaking in Nigeria on October 20, 1999, Albright bragged, "I believe that our administration has spent more time, attention, and money on Africa than any other administration." But in Mali, those efforts don't look quite so impressive. Mali remains one of the world's ten poorest nations. In 2000 the United States imported less than $10 million in goods from the country. According to the Congressional Research Service, U.S. development assistance to Mali in fiscal year 2001 was just $33.7 million. Not surprisingly, therefore, Mali's citizens are growing cynical about American speechifying. Colin Powell visited Mali last May; but speaking to me at the National Museum in Bamako, a local resident named Amadou didn't seem overly impressed. "Of course there was great anticipation [of the various visits]. But people were

expecting much more." Muhammad, standing near the dunes of the Sahara, was blunter. "They promise and promise and promise, but never do anything."

In its despair, Mali has begun looking elsewhere. Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi has financed Bamako's high-profile Islamic Center. In 1999 the Malian foreign ministry thanked Iran for its assistance in building mosques and bridges. And a survey by the European Union's aid liaison with the Africa, Caribbean and Pacific Group found that the King Fahd Bridge -- which is used by most traffic in Bamako -- is the foreign aid project most recognized by Malians.

Along with such financial aid comes cultural influence. The puritanical version of Islam financed by Saudi Arabia -- Wahhabism -- is gaining ground here. According to one supporter of the current government, in 1998 Islamic fundamentalists marched through the streets of the religiously diverse capital city of Bamako demanding the government close restaurants and bars during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, when observant Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. Residents of Bamako and Timbuktu told me of similar Wahhabi activity in the city of Gao that was reportedly financed with Saudi money.

Such sympathies aren't hard to spot. Stalls throughout Bamako's main market sell Islamist literature published in Saudi Arabia. Just down the street from the capital's artisan market, where tourists flock to buy masks, mud cloth, and drums, lies the office of the Voix du Coran (Voice of the Koran) radio station, founded in 1993 by the Malian Association for the Promotion of Islam -- although nearby merchants say it's funded by Saudi Arabia. Portraits of Osama bin Laden cost just a few cents and hang in storefronts across from the main mosque. In another storefront, in the center of town, hang brightly painted Iraqi flags. In the city of Djenne, whose weekly market attracts traders from across the region, merchants discussed a report that, in early January near the northern Nigerian city of Zaria, a pregnant teen who claimed she had been raped by her uncle was buried up to her neck and stoned to death -- in keeping with an extreme Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law.

For his part, Muhammad keeps his distance from Wahhabism's spreading influence. Walking with me in Timbuktu, Muhammad told me of his six years studying Islam in Mecca: "The Saudis are not good Muslims. All they do is talk about Islam and drink whiskey." While Tuaregs (a largely nomadic people spread across the Sahara in Mali, Algeria, Libya, and Niger) like Muhammad consider themselves white, many have dark skin and, like other Africans and non-Arabs, are frequently harassed by the police while in Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, in a country where per capita income is less than $250 per year and only one-third of the population is literate, few Malians have Muhammad's broader perspective. Hordes of unemployed youth line the streets to hear preachers' promises of a better life, and they see results. In Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso's second-largest city, not far from the Malian border, a mullah at a local mosque offered to pay for my Catholic guide's wedding if he would accept Islam.

Throughout the Muslim world, the United States is facing a new ideological Iron Curtain. But, ironically, while the Bush administration coddles Muslim dictatorships and theocracies like Sudan and Saudi Arabia, which spread hatred of the United States, it is putting nascent and impoverished Muslim democracies out to pasture. Sixteen-year-old Issa, an English student who has never ventured outside Timbuktu, no longer even expects much from the country whose language he is studying. "At the very least," he says, "they [Washington] shouldn't make promises they can't keep." ❖

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