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Portugal and Senegal: Don't Let the Tail Wag the Dog

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The latest political crisis in Guinea-Bissau confirmed the importance of West Africa to Portuguese foreign policy. Of course, it was not only with the recent developments in Bissau that Portugal became aware of the importance of the region. It is no coincidence that among the few embassies that the Portuguese government has today in Africa (apart from the embassies in the Portuguese-speaking countries) are Nigeria and Senegal. Lisbon is fully aware of the regional leadership roles of Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria and Senegal in West Africa. The latest crisis in Guinea-Bissau, however, showed that, while acknowledging the importance of the region, Portuguese diplomacy still has a distant relationship with those non-Lusophone states. A partial exception, however, can be found in the case of Senegal.

Following the regime change in Portugal, Lisbon and Dakar established diplomatic relations in September 1974. Between 1975 and 1980 the two countries signed a number of legal instruments framing bilateral relations in various fields. Subsequently, Portugal and Senegal have tried to maintain cordial diplomatic relations, even if with reduced substance to sustain them. Portuguese membership in the European Union (EU) since January 1986 and the founding of the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP) in July 1996 added new platforms for multilateral contact between the two countries, but bilateral relations remained invariably at a low level.

In recent years, though, relations between Portugal and Senegal received a renewed boost with diplomatic visits of government officials from both countries. In December 2007, for example, the Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade was in Lisbon during the second EU-Africa summit, held during the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the EU. Bilaterally, between 2007 and 2011, the Senegalese Minister for Foreign Affairs, Cheikh Tidiane Gadio (2000-2009), his successor, Madické Niang (2009-2012), their Portuguese counterpart, Luís Amado (2006-2011), and the Portuguese Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, João Gomes Cravinho (2005-2011) met several times both in Lisbon and Dakar. In a clear sign that Senegal wished to improve and deepen their bilateral and multilateral relations with the Portuguese-speaking countries, as well as to diversify international partnerships, Senegal re-opened its embassy in Lisbon and in 2008 Dakar became one of the few associated observers of CPLP and the only one from West Africa.

It should be noted that Senegal's observer status in CPLP is by no means the mere result of a political calculation. Senegal has genuine Lusophone roots, and not just because it is close to Cape Verde or Guinea-Bissau. Indeed, the southern province of Casamance belonged to the former Portuguese colony of Guinea until the late 19th century, and there is a lasting presence



of a Portuguese-derived Creole language in that region. Apart from those historical circumstances, the most striking demonstration of Senegal's Lusophone imprint is the fact that today there are more than 27,000 students of Portuguese in the official school system throughout the country.

Furthermore, from a bilateral point of view, in January 2011 Portugal and Senegal convened for the first time a meeting of their joint bilateral commission, which covered a broad agenda of political, economic and cooperation issues. They also signed, or decided to negotiate, a number of agreements aimed at strengthening their bilateral relationship. On the same occasion, a delegation of Portuguese companies and foreign trade officials met with their Senegalese counterparts to explore business opportunities.

Since then, relevant political developments occurred in both Portugal and Senegal. In June 2011, Pedro Passos Coelho was sworn-in as the new Prime Minister of Portugal. In turn, Senegal has also faced a change in political leadership with Macky Sall replacing Abdoulaye Wade (2000-2012) as the new President in April 2012. An easy, and as yet unanswered, question thus comes up: will the new political leaderships in both countries uphold the current momentum towards strengthening bilateral relations?

The choices ahead are clearer, though. Relations between the two countries can either return to their usual low-profile status or, while taking advantage of the new political leaderships, they can continue to be deepened. In any case, the expression of a mutual interest in strengthening common relations will surely make a difference. Thus, the Portuguese government should invite President Sall, Prime Minister Abdoul Mbaye, and Foreign Affairs Minister Alioune Badara Cissé for an official visit to Portugal. And, in turn, if invited, Foreign Affairs Minister Paulo Portas, or the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Luís Brites Pereira, should visit Senegal as soon as possible. The change of political leaderships should be seen as a renewed window of opportunity to strengthen the still unimpressive political, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations between the two countries.

The two countries can and must continue the momentum developed in recent years. At the bilateral level, for example, in 2011 Portugal and Senegal signed an Indicative Cooperation Programme (PIC) covering the period 2011-2013. It was the first time that Portugal signed a PIC with a non-Portuguese-speaking country and that alone perfectly illustrates the Portuguese political will to deepen relations with Senegal. Portugal's financial constraints, however, have prevented its implementation so far. In any case, and as soon as circumstances permit, Portugal and Senegal must renew their commitment in the context of development cooperation. Moreover, the two countries should also move forward with the second

meeting of the joint bilateral committee. This event could even provide the opportunity for the desired official visit of Alioune Badara Cissé to Lisbon.

The two countries also share a common interest in deepening their economic relations as already indicated by the bilateral business forum that took place in Dakar last year. Although both countries should continue to promote their economic relations, this should be done under no illusions regarding spectacular short-term results. In the next decade, trade will not be the driving force sustaining common interests between the two countries. Trade will lend some additional weight to the bilateral relationship, but always without assuming the leading role. In fact, the main added value in deepening the bilateral relationship lies in the political, diplomatic and strategic components.

At multilateral level, the Portuguese government could eventually comprise an additional ally of Senegal within the European Union (EU). Of course, the diplomatic relationship with Portugal would not replace in any way the historical, cultural, diplomatic, political, and economic links with France. From Dakar's point of view, however, strengthening the relationship with Lisbon could provide interesting additional contacts within the EU. Like Portugal, Senegal also has an interest in diversifying its international partnerships. By consolidating relations with Portugal, and with Portuguese-speaking countries in general, Senegal would simultaneously reinforce its relations with both the EU and CPLP. By doing so, Senegal would also create comparative advantages *vis-à-vis* other member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Together with Côte d'Ivoire and Nigeria, Senegal is a leading player within ECOWAS. However, the informal alliance currently in development between Abidjan and Lagos, and the fact that Senegal's traditional influence was diminished during the last years of President Wade's presidency have somewhat changed that balance. In order to restore its natural leading role within ECOWAS, Senegal could potentially find useful allies among CPLP countries.

In turn, Portugal also would not mind consolidating bilateral relations with Senegal, given its status within ECOWAS and the African Union. If Senegal is an important political player from the point of view of Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, or Angola, then it is also important to the Portuguese government. For obvious reasons, the strengthening of relations between Portugal and the states that matter to the Portuguese-speaking countries increases the weight of the Portuguese diplomacy *vis-à-vis* the Lusophone states, as well as within the EU. Moreover, from the point of view of Portugal (and CPLP), Senegal could be an important and useful ally within ECOWAS. As a consequence, Portugal has a clear interest that Senegal – the only associated observer of CPLP within ECOWAS – regains a more influential position within West Africa.



Apart from these considerations, Senegal is a country with established democratic credentials and stable institutions, and in general has played a constructive and respected role in international relations. It is therefore an intrinsically valuable interlocutor for Portugal.

Finally, one should not ignore the elephant in the room: in the foreseeable future Guinea-Bissau will continue to be a subject of common (and disproportionate) interest. Portugal and Senegal share a common goal of avoiding bilateral and multilateral friction as a consequence of the endless political crises in Guinea-Bissau. Guinea-Bissau today is not only a fragile state but also a potential source of regional insecurity. Unlike Côte d'Ivoire or Nigeria, Senegal has common borders with Guinea-Bissau, and, contrary to Abidjan and Lagos, Dakar has a strong interest in finding cooperative strategies and lasting solutions as far as Bissau is concerned, especially when considering Senegal's own internal problems with the separatist movement in the bordering Casamance region.

In this sense, Senegal should be made aware that it will always find in the Portuguese government a useful ally regarding the Security Sector Reform and the fight against drug trafficking in Guinea-Bissau. That said, and as this article has demonstrated, the bilateral relationship should be deepened with other interests as a backdrop. Guinea-Bissau should not be the tail that wags the dog.

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