

Mali, Republic of: Keita, Modibo, Life and Era of

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President of Mali by Pierre Boilly

Modibo Keita (1915-1977) stood in the elections for the Assemblée constituante française (French Constituent Assembly) on October 21, 1945, but lost to Fily Dabo Sissoko. He then became involved in the Parti Démocratique soudanais (PDS, Sudanese Democratic Party), which was close to the Parti communiste français (PCF, French Communist Party). Next, he joined the Bloc soudanais (Sudanese Bloc), in opposition to Fily Dabo Sissoko's Parti soudanais progressiste (PSP, Sudanese Progressive Party), which was supported by the colonial administration. The PSP was victorious once again in the elections for the second Constituent Assembly, on June 2, 1946.

At the Congress of Bamako (October 18-21, 1946). Modibo Keita was a delegate from French Sudan and took part in the creation of the Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA, African Democratic Rally). Its section in French Sudan took the name of the Union soudanaise (US, Sudanese Union), and in January 1947 Keita became its general secretary. After he had denounced the "slave-master regime" of the French administrator in a speech at Sikasso, he was arrested on February 21, 1947, and transported to the Santé prison in Paris, but he was freed two months later. This allowed him to play an active role in the major railway workers' strike at the end of 1947.

In 1948 Keita was elected to the Territorial Assembly of French Sudan, and then, in 1953, he became an adviser to the French Union. In the legislative elections of January 1956, he was elected as a deputy to the French National Assembly, and he became its deputy speaker in October that year. Finally, in November, he was elected mayor of Bamako. This high standing in the political world led to his appointment in 1957 as secretary of state for France d'outre-mer (the French Overseas Territories). During the constitutional referendum campaign of 1958, Modibo Keita adopted a decidedly federalist position and called for a "Yes" vote.

After the proclamation of the République soudanaise (Sudanese Republic) in November 1958, Keita became the presiding officer of its Great Council, but he did not give up his preference for unification. However, the opponents of unification, notably Félix Houphouët – Boigny, ensured that the Fédération du Mali (Federation of Mali), established in April 1959, brought together only Senegal and the former French Sudan. Modibo Keita was appointed head of the federal government, while Léopold Sédar Senghor became the speaker of its Assembly. The Federation became independent on June 20, 1960, but rivalries within the government and political divergences led to its collapse soon afterward. Modibo Keita and the other representatives of the former French Sudan were expelled and sent to Bamako in August 1960, and Senegal unilaterally declared independence. On September 22, 1960, Mali, reduced to the former French Sudan alone, declared independence in its turn, with Modibo Keita as its president.

Keita's activities as leader of Mali, which he sought to lead in the direction of socialism, had uneven effects. He undoubtedly had some success in external relations. He never ceased to agitate for African unity, starting out by joining the Casablanca Group, and then taking part in

the conference that established the Organization of African Unity in May 1963. He also committed Mali to the movement of nonaligned countries, which selected him to represent them in talks with U. S. President John F. Kennedy in 1961. Mali also undeniably derived significant international recognition from the relations that Keita maintained with the Eastern Bloc, and from his international travels, not only to the Soviet Union and China, but also to many other countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. In addition, he successfully oversaw the orderly ending of French colonization, bringing about the departure of the last French soldiers in September 1961 and, in 1962, signing the first agreements with France on economic and cultural cooperation.

Keita's domestic policies were not as successful. Hoping to secure economic independence for Mali, he started a currency reform in July 1962: the country left the Franc Zone and the Malian franc was introduced instead. This initiative failed, however. The economic difficulties that arose from agricultural underproduction, low productivity, and the decline in the balance of trade were aggravated by the weakness of the Malian currency. In 1967 Mali was forced to rejoin the Franc Zone, and its currency was devalued by 50 per cent in the process.

The realization of the original currency reform had also revealed President Keita's authoritarian conception of government. When opposition by the merchants led to riots, the government put the former leaders of the independence movement, Fily Dabo Sissoko and Hamadou Dicko, on trial, and had them condemned to death. Their sentences were commuted to life imprisonment, but both prisoners met their deaths in 1964, in circumstances that remain unclear but do not reflect well on Modibo Keita. In 1963 a rebellion broke out among the Tuaregs of the Saharan massif of Adrar des Ifoghas, in the north of the country, who opposed the Malian government and its "socialist" reforms. Modibo Keita, anxious about the unity of the country, once again chose to adopt a policy of repression, and hundreds were killed. The revolt was crushed in 1964, but the lasting distrust that resulted from these events was to undermine relations between the nomads and the settled population for some time to come.

Excessive tendencies toward socialism and bureaucracy in society and the economy produced other forms of discontent. In particular, peasants objected to the granting of monopolies over the commercial sale of produce to state companies and a network of cooperatives, as well as to the creation of "collective fields" in every village. In June 1968 an uprising at Ouolossibougou was met with harsh repression, which helped to deepen existing tensions. Keita tried to reassert his grip on politics by creating a "Comité national de défense de la Révolution" (National Committee for the Defence of the Revolution) and, on January 22, 1968, replacing the National Assembly, which he had dissolved, with a legislative body of twenty-eight people. On November 19, 1968, he was overthrown by a group of army officers and placed in detention, first at Kati, and then at the prison in Kidal, where he remained until his death in May 1977. Nevertheless, Keita retains a significant positive reputation in Mali, where a center dedicated to his memory was recently opened.

Pierre Boilley

See also: Mali, Republic of: Nationalism, Federation, Independence.

Biography

Born in Bamako in 1915. Elementary school 1925-1931, higher elementary school 1931-1934, école normale William Ponty (William Ponty teacher-training school) 1934-1936. Elementary school teacher in Bamako and Sikasso. General secretary of the US-RDA from January 1947

onward. Arrested in February 1947 and released two months later. Elected to the Territorial Assembly of French Sudan. Adviser to the French Union in 1953. Elected as a deputy to the French National Assembly in January 1956; became its deputy speaker in October. Elected mayor of Bamako in November 1956. Twice appointed a secretary of state, 1957-1958 (in the governments of Bourguis-Maunoury and Gaillard). Elected president of the Great Council of the Fédration de l'Afrique Occidentale (AOF, West African Federation) in January 1959 and head of the government of the Federation of Mali in April. President of Mali from the declaration of independence onward. Received the Lenin Prize for Peace in May 1963. Arrested by a group of army officers on November 19, 1968 and interned in the prison at Kidal, in northern Mali, until his death. Funeral in Bamako on May 17, 1977.