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Analysing the constraints to corporate land control: the influence of local power dynamics on a large-scale land deal in Senegal*

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ABSTRACT

In the last fifteen years, Senegal has been highly coveted by land-seeking investors. Yet despite the rise in the number of large-scale land acquisitions in this country, many projects never materialized, have experienced significant setbacks or collapsed altogether. By showing how local power dynamics can be reinforced by, and in turn impact on, attempts at corporate land control, this contribution advances our understanding of the constraints to farmland investments in Africa. It examines how the Senegalese government cancelled a high-profile agribusiness project in the Senegal River Valley due to a combination of party factionalism, intransigence on the part of the rural council president, intra-lineage rivalry, strong village pride and pastoralists' grievances. Based on extensive field research, this paper argues that the arrival of external investors can both amplify pre-existing cleavages and disrupt power arrangements in local communities, thereby undermining corporate land control and opportunities for profit-making.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des quinze dernières années, le Sénégal a fait l'objet de fortes convoitises de la part d'investisseurs à la recherche de terres. Malgré l'augmentation du nombre d'acquisitions de terres à grande échelle dans ce pays, plusieurs projets ne se sont jamais concrétisés, ont essuyé des revers considérables ou ont complètement échoué. En montrant comment les dynamiques locales de pouvoir peuvent être renforcées par les tentatives de contrôle des terres par les entreprises et, en retour, se répercuter sur celles-ci, cet article contribue à une meilleure compréhension des contraintes aux investissements dans les terres agricoles en Afrique. Cet article examine comment le gouvernement sénégalais a annulé un projet agro-industriel très médiatisé dans la vallée du fleuve Sénégal en raison d'une combinaison de factionnalisme politique, d'intransigence de la part du président du conseil rural, de rivalités intra-lignagères, d'une forte fierté villageoise et de récriminations parmi les éleveurs. Se basant sur une étude de terrain approfondie, cet article soutient que l'arrivée d'investisseurs externes peut à la fois amplifier les clivages préexistants et perturber les arrangements de pouvoir dans les communautés locales, minant ainsi la capacité des investisseurs à contrôler le foncier et à réaliser des profits.

KEYWORDS

Senegal; corporate land control; large-scale land acquisitions; political factionalism; local power dynamics

MOTS-CLÉS

Sénégal; contrôle foncier des entreprises; acquisitions de terres à grande échelle; factionnalisme politique; dynamiques locales de pouvoir

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Any voluntaristic external intervention – whether aimed at introducing new management methods, legal rules, forms of authority and legitimacy, or production techniques – never occurs on a blank institutional slate, but takes place in complex local socio-political arenas, already structured and traversed by strategic groups with multiple and sometimes contradictory interests. (Blundo 1998, 3, my translation)

Introduction

Ambitious land deals announced in the wake of the global 2007–2008 food, fuel and financial crises were expected to profoundly transform African agricultural systems, economies and societies. While proponents of these projects argued that they were conducive to development, opponents claimed that, on the contrary, they would dispossess and impoverish local land users (Kaag and Zoomers 2014). Despite their divergent views on the anticipated repercussions of the land rush, both sides of the debate implicitly assumed that investors could effortlessly seize land in Africa. Yet there is an increasing recognition that the global land rush is taking place on a smaller scale than initially predicted and that many land projects “announced to great fanfare” have stalled (Edelman, Oya, and Borras Jr. 2013, 1517; see also GRAIN 2018; Nolte 2020; Sulle 2020). Farmland investment is, as it turns out, a rather “risky business” that can easily be derailed (Li 2015).

Amid the ever-growing literature on land deals in Africa and elsewhere, scholars have only recently started to devote greater attention to projects that do not work out as planned. By showing that external investors and their government sponsors are more vulnerable to local power dynamics than usually assumed, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the limits to corporate land control, conceptualized here as the continued capacity to determine how and by whom land is being accessed, used and managed (Li 2015; Peluso and Lund 2011; Ribot and Peluso 2003).¹ This article argues that, due to attempts by domestic actors to assert or expand their interests, power and legitimacy, land projects can unexpectedly backfire. Paradoxically, the arrival of external investors can both amplify pre-existing cleavages and disrupt power arrangements in local communities, thereby undermining corporate land control and opportunities for profit-making.

Senegal represents a particularly apt case for exploring the limits to the land rush. Despite its small size, the country has, in the last fifteen years, been highly coveted by land-seeking investors (Cotula 2013; Faye et al. 2011; Gagné and Fent 2021). Both Presidents Abdoulaye Wade (in power from 2000 to 2012) and Macky Sall (in power since 2012) have actively encouraged private investment in the agricultural sector through an array of programmes and measures. International and national business people, seeing in agriculture an opportunity for seemingly easy profits, have been keen to exploit these new incentives. Yet despite the rise in the number of large-scale land acquisitions, many projects never materialized, have experienced significant setbacks or collapsed altogether. Original data that I have collected show that between 2000 and 2020, more than two-thirds of all tentative or actual land-based investments in agriculture appear to have failed in Senegal (Gagné 2020).² A major factor in the obstruction or termination of land deals has been coordinated social opposition, facilitated by Senegal’s democratic environment.

This contribution examines one such instance of a successful resistance movement. It illustrates how a coalition of opponents managed to force the Senegalese government to cancel the Senhuile-Senethanol project, a high-profile agribusiness venture funded by foreign and Senegalese investors on 20,000 hectares of land in the rural community of Fanaye.³ The

company's entry into Senegal, arranged under the central government's auspices, augured well. In Fanaye, however, the local government – called the rural council – was divided into two rival groups within the ruling Senegalese Democratic Party (*Parti démocratique sénégalais* – PDS).⁴ These two groups, designated here as Faction A and Faction B, were competing for recognition from PDS cadres above and political supporters below. The project, which was brokered exclusively by the rural council president and leader of Faction B, generated anxieties and resentment among Faction A members, who therefore endeavoured to sabotage it. An important segment of the population joined Faction A in its campaign against Senhuile-Senethanol, a struggle for which they received a fair amount of support from national civil society organizations (CSOs). Local divisions over the project tragically ended in two deaths during community clashes. To avoid further controversy, President Abdoulaye Wade decided to cancel the project in Fanaye and relocate the company to the Special Avifauna Reserve of Ndiaël, an area situated approximately 100 km away (I discuss the second phase of the project in Gagné [forthcoming]).⁵

The community dispute that prompted the central state to scrap the investment in Fanaye resulted from a combination of factors, which the arrival of Senhuile-Senethanol worsened in an ultimately fatal way. These factors included the existence of competing factions, as noted above, but also the intransigence of the rural council president, the strong collective identity of Fanaye Village's residents,⁶ disputes within a prominent lineage of the rural community, and substantive grievances against the project. Individually, none of these community fault lines would likely have been sufficient to stop the project. It was rather their mutual amplification that led to severe community polarization and set the scene for the "events of Fanaye," as they came to be commonly referred to in Senegal. In brief, the multifaceted local imbroglio was exacerbated by the arrival of Senhuile-Senethanol, but also contributed to the company's demise in a series of twisted ironies.

The findings of this paper are based on extensive field research conducted in Senegal over two years between 2013 and 2018, as part of a larger study that investigated seven land deals. To understand the motivations and actions of key stakeholders, I collected and analysed hundreds of government documents, official correspondence, business contracts, meeting minutes, personal and public audio-visual recordings, newspaper articles and CSOs' reports. I also interviewed more than 100 actors involved in Senhuile-Senethanol, including villagers, rural councillors, administrative authorities, ex-ministers, daily workers, senior staff and business insiders. Finally, I carried out field observations at land-related workshops and seminars in Dakar, as well as during extended stays in Fanaye. I canvassed both project opponents and supporters for their views on Senhuile-Senethanol.

This article is structured as follows. I first summarize the dominant literature on land deals and show that there is a need to better understand the impediments to these investments. I then introduce the concepts of conflict expansion and political arenas that I utilize to explain how local opponents succeeded in cancelling the Senhuile-Senethanol project. Next, I chronicle how, as a result of the project's arrival in Fanaye, community polarization gradually increased to reach an intractable point. Then I detail the conflicting roles, narratives and motivations of the main actors involved in the termination of the project. In the final section, I reflect on the broader implications of my findings for the understanding of corporate land control.

Theorizing corporate land acquisition and control

The suddenness, magnitude and implications of the contemporary wave of land deals have justifiably elicited widespread scholarly interest. In the beginning, the literature mainly attempted to identify the drivers of the land rush and to forecast their impacts on rural livelihoods (Gagné 2019). The approaches examining the driving factors behind the surge in land deals can be classified in two broad categories that I term the “exogenous” and “endogenous” perspectives.

The first wave of work, the exogenous approach, is primarily concerned with changes in the global economic environment that have led to the spatial relocation of capitalistic investments and, concomitantly, increased foreign demand for land in the Global South (Zoomers 2010). These perspectives contend that current land investments are reminiscent of the enclosure movement in early modern England (White et al. 2012) and the colonial scramble for Africa (Moyo, Yeros, and Jha 2012). Scholars also frequently cite David Harvey’s notion of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2004) to argue that land grabs contribute to the ongoing process of capitalist reproduction. In short, the exogenous approach conceptualizes land deals as an outlet for the expansion of investment frontiers and the restructuring of the global food regime (McMichael 2012; Sassen 2010).

Partially in response to this scholarship, a second stream of literature more attuned to “dynamics that operate on the side of the land ‘sellers’” has emerged (Woodhouse 2012, 779). Endogenous approaches emphasize that host states are partly responsible for the occurrence of land deals to the extent they have established measures to attract private investment in agriculture, such as generous tax exemptions, low land rents, the creation of land banks and assistance with community negotiations (Anseeuw et al. 2012; Cotula 2013; Wolford et al. 2013). These scholars also observe that African elites have often acted as intermediaries for international investors or have even acquired vast expanses of land for themselves (Cotula 2013; Fairbairn 2013; Faye et al. 2011; German, Schoneveld, and Mwangi 2013). Relatedly, several authors contend that companies and elites take advantage of Africa’s weak regulatory frameworks to exploit legal loopholes and snatch up customary land (Anseeuw et al. 2012; Deininger et al. 2011; German, Schoneveld, and Mwangi 2013; Kaag and Zoomers 2014; Nolte and Vāth 2015).

However, because they mostly look at the processes that induce land investments, both the exogenous and endogenous lines of inquiry tend to ignore the mechanisms that prevent land deals from proceeding. Despite its usefulness in elucidating the global underpinnings of large-scale land transactions, the exogenous perspective is largely unable to explain how these deals evolve on the ground and glosses over the role of political agency. Even the endogenous approach can be prone to deterministic biases, as it tends to suppose that states and elites naturally welcome and facilitate large-scale land projects.

In parallel to these approaches, a smaller yet growing number of scholars, having become aware that many land deals fail to materialize, have identified factors that hamper the pursuit of these projects. At the international level, oil price volatility and difficulties in obtaining funding on global markets have been invoked as reasons explaining the failure of several biofuel investments (Cotula 2013; Deininger et al. 2011). At the domestic level, many ventures also encounter problems arising from the contradictory motivations of host states, managerial deficiencies and social resistance (Gagné and Fent 2021).

For instance, in Madagascar, political actors have selectively applied land regulations in such a way as to enhance their authority (Burnod, Gingembre, and Ratsialonana 2013). Administrative hurdles have similarly hampered land projects in Tanzania despite the existence of a neoliberal policy framework committed to private investment in agriculture (Provini and Schlimmer 2016). Disappointing results are also linked to an underappreciation of the difficulties inherent in large-scale agriculture, which are frequently compounded by poor investor capabilities (Cotula 2013; Schönweger and Messerli 2015). Finally, research has documented how resistance and contestations can hinder project implementation and corporate land control (Gagné 2019; Gingembre 2015; Sulle 2020).

This paper draws on, and contributes to, this body of work by providing a fine-grained account of the ways in which the course and outcome of the Senhuile-Senethanol project were overdetermined by local plays for power. It also illustrates that, insofar as governments need to “facilitate private capital accumulation” while simultaneously preserving their “political legitimacy” (Hunsberger et al. 2014, 210), state support for investors should not be taken for granted.

Expanding the scope of conflict from the local to the national arena

The seminal work of E.E. Schattschneider (1960) provides a relevant lens to grasp how local opponents to Senhuile-Senethanol were able to gain visibility, scale up the conflict and ultimately cause the project to unravel. As Schattschneider argues, the outcome of a fight largely depends on the “expansion of the scope of conflict” beyond the nucleus of core opponents (“the fighting minority”) (Schattschneider 1960, 2). To modify the balance of power in its favour, the losing side in a conflict can “seek redress from public authority” or invite outsiders to join in the fight (Schattschneider 1960, 40). In contrast, dominant contestants typically have an incentive to keep the conflict private. If unsuccessful at the local level, disadvantaged groups can move the fight to the national level (Schattschneider 1960, 10–11) – or what I conceptualize here as a political arena.

Local and national arenas are populated by strategic groups and individuals who strive to defend their interests and influence the behaviour of others in order to achieve their goals (Bierschenk 1988; Blundo 1998). The empirically driven account that I provide here shows that land investments are the result of complex power relations between contending actors who pursue a mixture of self-serving and altruistic goals. These actors variously seek to extract benefits from land projects, attempt to avoid their detrimental repercussions or pursue the common good in a more disinterested manner. In sum, they carry out “their own respective projects” (Bierschenk 1988, 158) in their dealings with external investors.

In describing the misfortunes of Senhuile-Senethanol in Fanaye, my objective is not to inspire pity for the company or to dismiss local, legitimate concerns about the anticipated and concrete negative impacts of the project. In particular, the company had not communicated its plans regarding the future of pastoralists who resided within the limits of its planned concession. The brief presence of Senhuile-Senethanol in Fanaye also generated adverse effects that were still perceptible five years after the regrettable deaths of two individuals. Some people lost their loved ones, were fired from their jobs and/or were

physically assaulted by members of their extended family. In sum, events took an unfortunate turn for both the company and local populations.

A convoluted biofuel project in the Senegal River Valley

The waalo and the jeeri

The rural community of Fanaye is mostly inhabited by Fulani people (84.6%), followed by Wolof (10.6%) and Moorish (4.8%) people (FSD 2010, 14). It is situated in the Senegal River Valley, a Sahelian area that comprises two main ecological zones called in Fulani the *waalo* and the *jeeri*. These zones are characterized by different agricultural usages, rules of land tenure and forms of social organization. The *waalo* is the alluvial lowlands where people practice irrigated and flood-recession agriculture. The *jeeri*, where Senhuile-Senethanol's project was supposed to take place in its entirety, is the sandy highlands located farther away from the river. People living in the *jeeri* practice extensive pastoralism, which they sometimes combine with rainfed agriculture near their houses or irrigated agriculture in the *waalo*. Due to the environmental degradation of the *jeeri*, shepherds commonly walk herds to southern regions of Senegal, where they stay from November until May or June in search of green fodder.⁷

Fanaye's territory covers about 1851 km² or 185,100 hectares. The zone of the *jeeri* where Senhuile-Senethanol's plantation was located had a 2009 population estimated at 3354 inhabitants, the majority of whom were semi-nomadic pastoralists (FSD 2010, 13). Using project boundaries indicated in official documents, my research assistant calculated that the plantation would have encompassed two villages and approximately 40 hamlets, as well as two borewells and forests used in common by herders of the rural community. As can be seen in Figure 1, Senhuile-Senethanol's concession would have overlaid the entire width of the rural community from east to west over 20 km and stretched 10 km north to south.

The supporters of Senhuile-Senethanol tried to impose the project on populations of the *jeeri* in a manner that would have been inconceivable in the *waalo*, since the economic power of Fulani elites has historically rested on their capacity to control *waalo* lands. Through their role as managers of the land, which is transmitted by inheritance within lineages, members of the ruling class (the *toorobe*) appropriate the most fertile parcels and collect rental fees on land they lease to lower classes.⁸ In the *jeeri*, society is less rigidly stratified. Given that land in the *jeeri* is held in common, it is not subject to family or personal appropriation except for human habitations and fields surrounding houses. The *jeeri* is also less densely populated than the *waalo*, to ensure that cattle have enough grazing space. For these reasons, many community members saw the *jeeri* as a suitable area for the plantation despite substantial opposition from the people who resided there, as I explain further below.

The demise of Senhuile-Senethanol in Fanaye

The venture was initially undertaken by Senethanol with the aim of producing ethanol from sweet potatoes. The foreign founder of Senethanol was connected to an influential individual in Dakar who facilitated the establishment of the company through his acquaintance with Fanaye's rural council president and Faction B leader, Samba Sow.

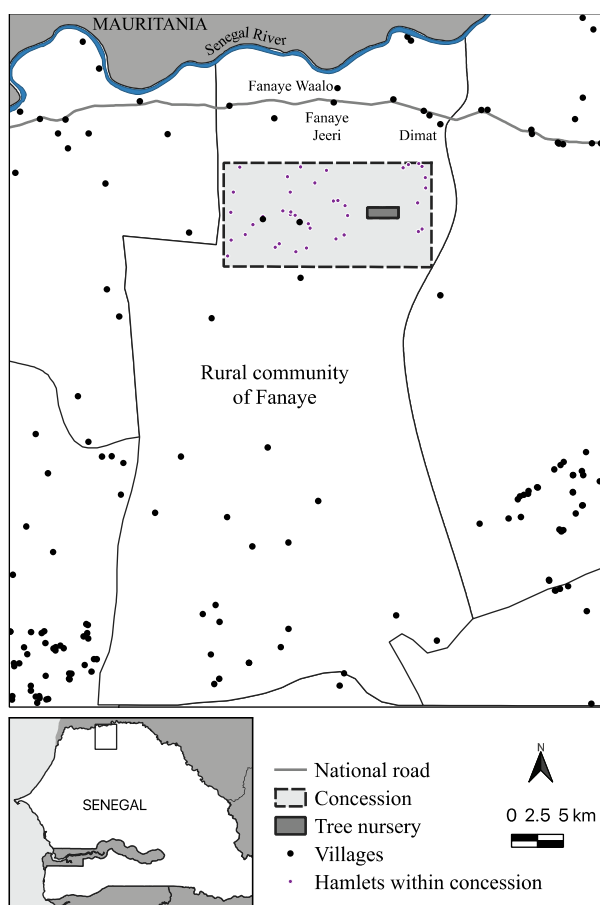


Figure 1. Senhuile-Senethanol's planned land concession in the rural community of Fanaye.
Source: Seydi Aliou Tall and Marie Gagné.

Negotiations between the company and Samba Sow started behind the scenes in July 2010, one year before the latter officially brought the project to the attention of the rural council. Samba Sow only informally briefed his Faction A opponents on the arrival of Senethanol around January or February of 2011. The opacity surrounding the project is best exemplified by the secret signature, on 30 March 2011, of a partnership agreement whereby the rural community was to free up 300 hectares of land for the creation of a tree nursery and to gradually allocate 20,000 hectares of land to Senethanol between 2011 and 2015. In exchange, the company pledged to pay CFA Franc 33,333,333 (US\$ 65,000) annually to the rural council, for a total sum of CFA Franc 500 million (US\$ 968,610). Senethanol also promised to invest CFA Franc 800 million (US\$1.5 million) in community infrastructure such as schools, mosques and health centres.⁹

The rural council president did not immediately disclose to rural councillors and the community that he had signed the contract. Instead, he undertook to secure the endorsement of the Minister of Decentralization, who also consulted with the Minister of Agriculture. After approval from higher authorities was sought and obtained, the rural

council's land commission, exclusively composed of Faction B members, toured the countryside to delimit the possible location of the plantation. On 15 June 2011, more than two months after the provisional agreement between the council president and the company was signed, the rural council convened to discuss the attribution of 20,000 hectares to Senethanol. According to the meeting minutes, a majority of councillors (26 of the 41 members present) voted to allocate 300 hectares to Senethanol to begin its tree nursery.¹⁰

Afterwards, the rural council president continued to facilitate the implementation of the project in taking care of administrative procedures, such as obtaining permission to clear the site for the tree nursery. In July 2011, the company partnered with the Italian firm Tampieri Financial Group in a joint venture called Senhuile-Senethanol and converted from sweet potatoes to sunflower seed farming for the production of biofuels.

At the same time, however, Faction A councillors started to organize village assemblies and mobilize residents against the company. In response to mounting opposition, a delegation of community members living in Dakar travelled to Fanaye Village in July in order to reconcile the “yes-camp” and the “no-camp,” as people called each group. After these mediation efforts to deflate community tension proved inconclusive, people in Fanaye and Dakar stepped up their mobilization. Opponents used to informally call themselves the “Refusal Front” (*Front du refus*). At this point, they modified their name to the Committee for the Defense of Fanaye's Land (*Collectif de défense des terres de Fanaye*, hereinafter called *Collectif*), a strategy to avoid connotations of factional politics and to evoke more high-minded aims (Hopson 2013). The *Collectif* started to appeal to diaspora members living abroad to fund protest activities.

Around this period, the company started to fell trees right next to the houses of several villages in the *jeeri*, to the consternation of pastoralists who told me that they had not been previously informed or consulted about its imminent arrival. Violent clashes between herders and Senhuile-Senethanol's workers occurred on two occasions, and were followed by police arresting and jailing project opponents. On 30 July 2011, the *Collectif* held a public demonstration that began in hamlets near Senhuile-Senethanol's tree nursery and concluded with a hundred people marching on the national road in Fanaye.

Instead of organizing popular consultations in the aftermath of these incidents, Samba Sow made an appearance on television to praise the project. Soon after, on 27 August 2011, a second rural council meeting was organized. After an exchange of invective between the two factions, infuriated Faction A councillors left the meeting before its adjournment “to meet the TV correspondent they had invited.”¹¹ Councillors who remained in the room voted unanimously in favour of attributing the remaining 19,700 hectares to Senhuile-Senethanol all at once – in contravention of the partnership agreement, as well as of instructions from the Ministry of Agriculture, which had advised a gradual land allocation. The council did not subsequently inform other rural councillors and the larger community that it had authorized a second land attribution.

For their part, opponents intensified their attempts to end the project and requested the support of a Senegalese anti-land grab network of CSOs called the Framework for Reflection and Action on Land in Senegal (*Cadre de réflexion et d'action sur le foncier au Sénégal* - CRAFS). On 27 September 2011, the *Collectif* released a “Memorandum on land grabbing in the rural community of Fanaye” which was relayed by *Le Soleil*, Senegal's national newspaper (Kaly 2011). Since their protests had so far failed to produce the

desired results, the *Collectif* also sought to organize a larger event. With the help of CRAFS, the *Collectif* staged demonstrations on 29 September and 1 October to rally religious and administrative authorities to their cause. They first paid a visit to an influential Tidjani *khalifa* to share their grievances,¹² and then went to submit their memorandum to the governor, prefect and sub-prefect. Villagers opposed to the project massed along the national road to greet the convoy. At night, two rural council councillors belonging to Factions A and B appeared on television to debate the project.¹³ A week later, a villager assaulted four employees of Senhuile-Senethanol who were working in the *jeeri*. Despite brewing tension in Fanaye, the company continued its activities unabated.

The situation turned truly sour after a high-ranking state official secretly informed Faction A's affiliates that, on 25 October, the rural council president had deposited two cheques issued by Senhuile-Senethanol at the regional Treasury. The cheques corresponded to the fees that the company had to pay for the remaining 19,700 hectares of land. The rural council president wanted to include this money entry in the budgetary debate that was scheduled for the following day. This event was the straw that broke the camel's back.¹⁴ Faction A members feared that approving the budget, which comprised Senhuile-Senethanol's payment for the land, would de facto authorize the venture to proceed (IPAR 2012). On the same night, they met at the village chief's house in Fanaye Village to elaborate a strategy for blocking the rural council meeting.¹⁵ Informed of their intentions, the rural council president reportedly started to mobilize thugs to attend the gathering the next day – an accusation he has firmly denied, though.

A few hours before the meeting, members of the *Collectif* falsely whispered on the streets that the company would carry out operations in the *waalo* in addition to the *jeeri*, spurring fear and outrage among farmers. Shortly after the meeting started, tension in the crowd that had congregated outside the municipal office escalated, gunshots were exchanged and people wrecked the communal house. Skirmishes led to two deaths and approximately twenty wounded.

Party factionalism, popular mobilization and state withdrawal

As discernible in the account above, the pre-existing elite split transformed the Senhuile-Senethanol project into an additional object of contention between the two PDS camps; the investment was “partly contrived for factional advantage” (Gulliver 1977, 59). The rural council president's social status and self-proclaimed birthright to command compounded these dynamics. Indeed, Samba Sow managed the establishment of the company in an uncompromising manner that sidelined his factional rivals. Due to Faction B's unwillingness to make concessions, the requests of Faction A eventually shifted from renegotiating the terms of the investment to scrapping it altogether. Factional competition and its tragic ending were necessary to finally incentivize the central state to halt the project.

The central government's role in backing and . . . interrupting the project

State support helped and eventually prevented Senhuile-Senethanol from controlling land. Strong government backing is illustrated by the fact that, on 30 May 2011, the Minister of Decentralization gave his written assent to Senhuile-Senethanol – before the rural council was consulted in a formal way. President Abdoulaye Wade also deemed the

project important enough to respond to Samba Sow's petition for a presidential audience and to give Senhuile-Senethanol's senior executives a private hearing. Furthermore, Senhuile-Senethanol signed a two-year agreement with the Senegalese Institute for Agricultural Research, which pledged to offer the company technical support and human resources for the production and processing of sunflower seeds (Dabo 2011).

The central state's endorsement of Senhuile-Senethanol is also apparent in its reluctance to intervene in the factional disagreement. The PDS government's initial refusal to take action, despite relentless requests by project opponents within its ranks, legitimized the firm attitude of the rural council president and condoned the company's activities. State backing for Senhuile-Senethanol accentuated Faction A members' feeling of political alienation and incited them to use more radical means to force attention to their cause.

Ultimately, the events in Fanaye drew previous bystanders to the side of people hostile to the investment, which increased the latter's leverage vis-à-vis the central government. The *Collectif* had pleaded for help from a Tidjani *khalifa*, who had at the time refused to intercede with political authorities on behalf of project opponents. After the deaths of two villagers, however, this *khalifa* openly sided with the *Collectif* by inviting them to the Friday prayer in Dakar, also attended by the then Prime Minister. After the prayer, the group started to protest on the mosque square, asking loudly that the project be abandoned. Under the clamour of the crowd, the Prime Minister paused the project on the spot. To their surprise, the company learned on TV that their business was interrupted.¹⁶

Despite the scandal, Abdoulaye Wade was apparently reluctant to cancel the Senhuile-Senethanol project. During a private meeting with eight members of the *Collectif* in early November 2011, Wade reportedly pressured them to agree to the continuation of the project, which they refused to do.¹⁷ A second presidential audience with 50 members of the *Collectif* was subsequently organized, after which Wade finally confirmed the definitive annulment of the Senhuile-Senethanol project in Fanaye.

According to attendees at the presidential audience, Abdoulaye Wade claimed he had not been informed about the problems in Fanaye. Perhaps, indeed, his aides and regional administrative agents had not accurately appraised him of the intensity of the community strife. However, it is improbable that Wade was completely unaware of repeated appeals from members of his own party, which were extensively covered by the media. He most likely hoped to postpone a definitive settlement of the problem until after the 2012 presidential elections to avoid alienating the project's supporters.¹⁸ Wade was already politically weakened by the upheaval created by his attempt to modify the constitution in June 2011 and his decision to run for re-election. The government was also criticized for corruption and land scandals that led Senegalese analysts and journalists to denounce the regime's "land bulimia" (e.g. Sidy 2011). These factors severely eroded Abdoulaye Wade's credibility as a presidential contender, and he probably did not want to be distracted from the electoral campaign by the Fanaye issue.

In the end, however, President Wade abandoned the company and sided with opponents because the "spread of the conflict" (Schattschneider 1960, 3) and ensuing escalation of violence rendered the project socially unacceptable, reflected poorly on the government and endangered Wade's electoral popularity.

Political factions in Fanaye

The central state's decision to terminate the Senhuile-Senethanol project in Fanaye is a response to social polarization in the rural community, itself largely a product of intense factional rivalry. Factionalism, a form of conflict that involves contending subgroups belonging to the same political party, is an enduring feature of Senegalese politics at all levels (Barker 1973; Blundo 1998).¹⁹ Typically, leaders of a particular faction, who compete in a given political arena for access to office and control of attendant resources, recruit followers, who receive material assistance or other forms of help in exchange for their political support (Cottingham 1970). The popularity of a leader at the local level thus "resides in large measure in his ability to mitigate the harms and increase the benefits received from on high. A leader's effectiveness in this is conditioned by the nature of his relationship to holders of power at higher levels" (Barker 1973, 294). When the political arena is structured around factions, leaders tend to allocate resources to members of their own faction to the exclusion of their rivals' clients.

In Senegal, institutional innovations that were supposed to improve good governance, like the introduction of multiparty elections and decentralization, have not eradicated factionalism (Blundo 1998). Instead, factionalism has been fuelled by what Senegalese metaphorically call political "transhumance" – that is, the propensity of leaders to change affiliation and join the party in power regardless of its programmatic agenda so they can reap patronage resources.

As in other parts of Senegal, factionalism is a fixture of Fanaye's political life. Fissures within the PDS had already emerged in 2002 due to Samba Sow leaving the Socialist Party for the PDS and eventually securing the highly sought-after position of secretary general at the district level, to the dismay of long-term PDS militants. These tensions were momentarily contained until the 2009 local elections, but at this point factional competition erupted into the open. In Fanaye, Factions A and B, both of which belonged to Abdoulaye Wade's PDS, competed against each other, and against candidates from an array of political parties gathered in the *Bennoo Siggil Senegaal* (BSS) coalition.²⁰ Faction A comprised a number of political veterans who had previously served as rural councillors, including its leader, Demba Sarr, who had been a PDS militant since the party was created in 1974. Faction A candidates and partisans mostly came from villages of the *waalo*, especially Fanaye Village.

Aspiring to the position of rural council president, Samba Sow refused for his part to side with Demba Sarr and started enlisting supporters to form his own faction. Several candidates came together under his leadership because they felt disenfranchised from local politics. Many had the impression that, as the administrative centre, Fanaye Village monopolized the bulk of funds and projects that were supposed to benefit the rural community as a whole, such as irrigation schemes or schools. In particular, Samba Sow recruited people from villages of the *jeeri* who considered that, in the past, the rural council did not adequately represent their interests.

Each faction proposed candidates on the electoral list and campaigned separately. At the poll, electors in favour of either of the two factions could vote for the PDS. Election results indicate a victory for the PDS, which obtained 37 of the 46 available seats (see Table 1). Faction A won 19 seats, Faction B gained 18 and BSS secured nine. After the election, the three groups maneuvered to nominate the board of directors. Eight BSS councillors joined Faction B in exchange for two positions of vice-presidents and five

Table 1. 2009 local election results in the rural community of Fanaye.

Political party \ Place of residence	Councillors from the <i>waalo</i>		Councillors from the <i>jeeri</i>	Total
	Fanaye Village	Other villages		
<i>Parti démocratique sénégalais</i> – Faction A (Demba Sarr)	12	5	2	19
<i>Parti démocratique sénégalais</i> – Faction B (Samba Sow)	1	10	7	18
<i>Bennoo Siggil Senegaal</i>	6	2	1	9
Total	19	17	10	46

positions of presidents on special commissions.²¹ This deal effectively gave Faction B a majority and enabled Samba Sow to become president of the rural council.

Once in power, Faction B worked to exclude its Faction A rivals from access to decision-making, government resources and PDS cadres. Faction A, many members of which were in power in the previous municipal government, resented having lost control of the rural council and its associated funds. In addition, Faction A members felt they had to continually fight against Faction B to be heard by the higher levels of the PDS.²² Several Faction A councillors who had been PDS members when the party was consigned to the opposition were bitter that a newer clique controlled the rural council now that Abdoulaye Wade was finally in power.²³ Their electoral defeat was already enraging as it was. The arrival of Senhuile-Senethanol and its promises of riches simply added insult to injury.

Members of Faction A were not necessarily averse to agribusiness and wished to develop their land, as many of them emphasized during my interviews.²⁴ But they calculated that, were Senhuile-Senethanol to succeed according to plans, it would provide an enormous influx of money that regular state resources or development projects could never match. Faction A was afraid that Faction B would build persistent political capital and privileged access to windfalls for their clientelistic networks, hence why Faction A wanted to derail the project. In addition to these strategic considerations, the reaction of some rural councillors indicates a genuine opposition motivated by substantive concerns over the project's implications. But, to repeat, their objection to the investment largely stemmed from their exclusion from the negotiation process with Senhuile-Senethanol and their fear that their followers would join the camp of their political opponents to benefit from the investment.

Due to their minority position and inability to influence council decisions, Faction A members deployed a two-pronged strategy to block the project. They initially attempted to appeal to higher authorities, but soon realized that the central government endorsed Senhuile-Senethanol and would not budge. Faction A therefore embarked on a grassroots campaign to generate “a categorical refusal by the population.”²⁵ To use Schattschneider's terminology, they tried to enlarge the number of participants and mobilize popular opinion in order to expand the scope of the conflict.

Actors, arguments and strategies in the local arena

The populations of Fanaye were divided on Senhuile-Senethanol. It is difficult to ascertain with precision the level of popular support for the project before Faction A started the resistance to it. However, it seems that many villagers were in favour of the investment or

Table 2. Community positions on Senhuile-Senethanol in Fanaye.

In favour	Against
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of Faction B headed by Samba Sow - Clients of Faction B (including in the <i>jeeri</i>) - Young people from the <i>waalo</i> - Some local elites from Fanaye 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Members of Faction A headed by Demba Sarr - Clients of Faction A (principally from Fanaye Village) - Members of the Sow lineage - Local elites living in Dakar and abroad - Pastoralists of the <i>jeeri</i>

did not have a strong opinion on it. Community polarization was increased by Faction A's vigorous mobilization efforts, which sought to enlist the uncommitted.

Faction A members enrolled their followers from Fanaye Village, members of the council president's extended family and natives of the rural community then living in Dakar and foreign countries. They were joined by *jeeri* pastoralists who feared losing their land to a private firm under uncertain terms. Senegalese CSOs fighting land grabs supported the protest activities of the *Collectif* and helped sway public opinion in the national arena.

While a considerable part of the population came to reject the investment, many community members continued to approve it, notably rural clients of Samba Sow, a number of elites from Fanaye and youngsters who saw in the Senhuile-Senethanol project a development opportunity. As shown in Table 2, the project antagonized people, thereby ultimately shaping the state's decision to move it elsewhere. I discuss below the respective tactics and narratives of the two camps.

Faction B's search for state approval and lack of community consultations

Senhuile-Senethanol's corporate executives had almost no direct interactions with the local population and were rarely seen in Fanaye. Instead they deferred to Samba Sow, the rural council president and leader of Faction B, to implement the project. At the onset of the project, Faction B was better positioned in the factional feud due to Samba Sow's privileged relationships with the PDS, its majority position in the rural council and the collaboration of administrative officials who supported the project and facilitated approval procedures. Faction B members organized a few information sessions, but these were insufficient to reach consensus and did not respect the principle of free, prior and informed consent. Instead, Faction B relied on the central state's approval of Senhuile-Senethanol, initially attempted to conceal its decisions from public scrutiny, turned to the media to build support once the project started, and used force to impose the investment.

Considering the geographic extent of the planned plantation, Samba Sow wanted to obtain some sort of validation from the authorities in Dakar. However, state support emboldened him to proceed with the project without discussing it with Faction A, involving most local dignitaries or consulting the larger population. Samba Sow was also reluctant to share the project documents with community members who wanted to study the terms of the investment. The rural council president's withholding documentation contributed to a climate of suspicion and incomprehension, making it easier for opponents to mobilize people. As many administrative officials, rural councillors and village notables approving of the project themselves recognized, the rural council president adopted a heavy-handed approach in overseeing the implementation of

Senhuile-Senethanol, an attitude that many villagers disliked. Several participants in my research reported that Samba Sow repeatedly claimed that, whether people wanted it or not, the project would go ahead.²⁶ Contrary to tradition, he also ignored the advice of elders and Imams on the best way to manage the project, going so far as leaving family members imprisoned to signal his intent to pursue the scheme at all costs.

While I do not excuse the inflexible attitude of Samba Sow, his education may partially explain his behaviour. The council president belongs to the lineage of a *toorodo* who rose as an influential political and religious leader in the early nineteenth century. As a descendant of this *toorodo*, the rural council president assimilated at a very young age a personal ethos according to which he was destined to assume responsibilities and demonstrate leadership. In our interview, while pointing to a photograph of his *toorodo* ancestor displayed at the entrance of his house, Samba Sow delineated his family history with great pride and declared that politics was in his “DNA,” in his “royal blood.” While he surely was sincerely convinced of the virtues of the investment, he also seemed to believe that his higher social status conferred on him a licence to impose the project on the residents of Fanaye. He also minimized the extent of local opposition in several media interviews.

Even though Samba Sow presented the project as a *fait accompli* to his fellow community members, many approved of Senhuile-Senethanol. The rural council president could count on at least three Faction B councillors to champion the project in their respective villages and neighbouring hamlets of the *jeeri*. But many villagers unconnected or remotely linked to Faction B also endorsed the investment. To justify the enclosure of such a large area to the profit of Senhuile-Senethanol, they claimed that land in the *jeeri* does not belong to anyone. This argument appealed to farmers because, to them, much of the *jeeri* land appears idle and unproductive as it is mostly used for extensive pastoralism (in contrast to land in the *waalo*, which is farmed and is therefore more valuable in their view). Project supporters who inhabit the *waalo* pictured the *jeeri* as a sort of no man’s land in need of assistance: “There is nothing over there,” “There is no water, no electricity, no food. [...] People suffer over there.”²⁷ “It makes no sense to see this vast tract of land serving no purpose.”²⁸

In the opinion of many villagers, the rural council president had also negotiated advantageous conditions with Senhuile-Senethanol. They appreciated the company’s promise to construct 12 borewells and a canal to bring water in the *jeeri* and irrigate crop fields, thus helping to solve a perennial problem in this zone. They also welcomed the company because it said it would build roads in the *jeeri* and electrify villages, as well as construct health infrastructure, schools, mosques and industrial units for processing milk and distilling ethanol. Senhuile-Senethanol was also supposed to provide local employment, an important consideration for many people because of massive youth emigration to Dakar and foreign countries due to the scarcity of jobs in rural areas. In sum, there were concrete reasons why the appeal made by supporters of the project found enthusiastic resonance among members of the public.

Faction A’s capacity to enlist the uncommitted

Rural councillors hostile to the project deployed an array of strategies such as the propagation of unsubstantiated information, release of memorandums, media interviews,

collective sessions of prayers, public announcements at the mosque on Fridays, organization of marches, visits to administrative authorities, a referral to the State Council,²⁹ and requests for support from national CSOs and religious figures. Due to their influence, they were even able to have a Faction B councillor fired from his job.

Faction A astutely formulated arguments that did not refer to their personal interests but appealed instead to the broader community.³⁰ Opponents organized their discourse around both the content of the project and the approach adopted. They condemned the extravagant geographical ambit of the plantation that risked compromising extensive pastoralism; the transformation of independent farmers into “agricultural slaves”; the threats posed by the project to the land tenure system in the *waalo*; the immoral production of “alcohol” in a Muslim community; the unavailability of documents explaining the contours of the project, such as a social and environmental impact assessment; inadequate community consultations; the patronizing attitude of the rural council president who abused his position of power; and procedural defects in the land allocation process. These arguments, which addressed local concerns and values, persuaded many pastoralists and farmers to oppose Senhuile-Senethanol.

For their part, the villagers living next to Senhuile-Senethanol’s tree nursery in the *jeeri* all indicated during interviews that they categorically rejected the project, which they viewed as an illegitimate enclosure of their pastures. Pastoralists’ objection to the project did not primarily arise from their affiliation with Faction A, but from the immediate risks that the plantation posed to their livelihoods. Although they communicated regularly with Faction A councillors, these residents were marginally involved in the resistance campaign and attended rallies and meetings in Fanaye only occasionally. Opposition in the *jeeri* mainly manifested as sporadic outbursts of violence rather than as organized resistance. Skirmishes between the company’s employees and local populations occurred in at least three villages of the *jeeri*.

Faction A could also rely on the support of residents of Fanaye Village, whose village pride was reinforced by the land deal. Many inhabitants of Fanaye Village resent being governed by lineage chiefs other than their own and have come over time to believe they ought to predominate in municipal affairs, partly because of their demographic weight compared to other villages. According to many, the fact that Senhuile-Senethanol established its local base of operations in the village of Dimat (where the Sow family governs) instead of Fanaye Village also increased Faction A’s sense of rivalry. This decision likely made them believe that the lion’s share of the investment would benefit residents of other localities, which helped Faction A convince people from Fanaye Village to refuse the project.

People who disagreed with Senhuile-Senethanol also requested the help of relatives living in Dakar and in foreign countries. These urban dwellers, including prosperous merchants, white-collar workers and university professors, were seemingly not associated with either of the two rural council factions, but they worried about the possible adverse reverberations of the project and anticipated community clashes if a solution was not found. Many also dreaded that the plantation would encroach on their landholdings in the *waalo*.

Furthermore, the behaviour of Samba Sow incited members of his own lineage to fight the project, as he transgressed established norms of local authority. Insofar as the Sow lineage traditionally owns vast areas of land and governs several villages in the rural

community, many felt excluded from a decision-making process in which they believed they were entitled to participate, thus fomenting their discontent with the project. A relative of Samba Sow who had initially endorsed the investment recalls: Samba “insisted on negotiating alone. We could not do anything with him! He was stubborn and, as a result, the people revolted! [...] When he plunged into the project, he no longer saw, no longer heard [others’ advice]!”³¹ Some Sow elites, fearing the loss of ancestral land upon which their power is based, also thought that Senhuile-Senethanol was a subterfuge that the government employed to confiscate their patrimony. As a result, several Sow family members rebelled against the rural council president and took part in protest activities.

National CSOs that supported local activists provided a “land grab vocabulary” to formulate complaints in a catchy way and helped publicize their struggle to a wider audience. CSOs’ actions in themselves did not stop the project, but drew attention to the fight of opponents. When two people died in the wake of the rural council meeting, media noise around Senhuile-Senethanol arguably incited the government to act promptly.

Conclusion

Scholarly interest in the contemporary wave of large-scale land acquisitions has produced an abundant and engaging corpus of work on the drivers and repercussions of this global phenomenon. So far, however, there has been insufficient discussion about delayed and failed land investments, despite their increasing prevalence.

By showing how local power dynamics are reinforced by, and in turn impact on, attempts at corporate land control, this contribution advances our comprehension of the constraints to the expansion of industrial agriculture and farmland investment in Africa. This article illustrates that the arrival of land investors can both calcify existing social divides *and* destabilize local hierarchies, thereby triggering unintended chain reactions. In other words, while land projects can have far-reaching and disruptive effects on host societies, the reverse is also true: the course of these investments is often inextricably shaped by domestic plays for power.

In Fanaye, multifaceted factors intersected with the Senhuile-Senethanol project. The investment reignited tensions between Factions A and B, as a result of which Faction A wanted to impede the project to prevent Faction B from entrenching itself in power. In the face of Faction B’s determination to go ahead with the Senhuile-Senethanol project, opponents began by urging the central state to cancel the deal. When this strategy failed, they encouraged popular mobilization from the local to the national level to expand the scope of conflict. Heightened factional conflict led to the cancellation of the Senhuile-Senethanol project in Fanaye. To reflect this point, one research participant described its discontinuation as the “logical outcome” of a decade of factional opposition.³² While both camps claimed to better represent the interests of their constituencies, they in fact largely politicized the project to bolster their power and legitimacy within the local arena.

Political factionalism combined with Fanaye Village’s pride, intra-lineage disagreements among the Sow family, and pastoralists’ grievances over the project. Faction A also found allies in natives of Fanaye residing in Dakar and in foreign countries who grew concerned with the foreseeable escalation of conflict. Their fears came true. Failure to inform and consult local populations created fertile ground for violence. Extreme community polarization prodded President Abdoulaye Wade into reconsidering his support to Senhuile-Senethanol in Fanaye, even though the project aligned with the state’s desire to

increase biofuel production. The course of this investment thus illustrates how societal pressures in local arenas can interact with national political dynamics – in this case, Abdoulaye Wade’s weakened position heading into the 2012 presidential elections – and, by implication, restrict international capital’s capacity to control land.

Senhuile-Senethanol now operates as Les Fermes de la Teranga in the Senegal River Delta. But there, too, sustained local opposition has hampered the conduct of its activities (Gagné [forthcoming](#)). The company’s suspension in Fanaye and ongoing difficulties force us to rethink our preconceived notions about all-powerful land investors in Africa. The above arguments suggest that companies can become entangled in pre-existing conflicts and that their attempts to acquire land can be successfully opposed to protect local interests. Africa, after all, might not be nearly so amenable to corporate takeover as implied by both proponents and critics of large-scale agriculture.

Notes

1. In this article, the term “external investors” refers to both domestic and foreign investors who are outsiders to the community where they seek land.
2. Among the 136 agricultural projects that I have inventoried, less than a third are known to operate (40, or 29.4%). In comparison, at least 52 land projects (38.2%), cumulatively covering at least 744,501 hectares, were aborted either before a deal was sealed (i.e. negotiations to acquire land failed) or after operations started on the ground (i.e. after land had been acquired). I could not find evidence that the remaining 44 projects (32.4%) were operational as of 2020. This data excludes mining, uncategorized and other non-agricultural projects.
3. I have retained the names of places, companies and organizations, but changed the names of people to preserve their anonymity.
4. In Senegal, rural councils were transformed into municipal councils with the adoption of the Law on Decentralization 2013–10 of 28 December 2013. I have kept the appellation “rural councils” as the Senhuile-Senethanol project took place before the institutional reform came into effect. These rural councils used to manage land under the national domain, which comprises all land that has not been registered as part of the private or state domain, and now covers approximately 80–85% of the territory. A rural council governed a rural community, a jurisdiction that contained several villages. Rural councillors represented not just their village, but the rural community as a whole.
5. Originally named Senethanol, the company changed its name to Senhuile-Senethanol when it created a joint venture with Tampieri Financial Group in 2011. It then called itself Senhuile after it moved from Fanaye to the Special Avifauna Reserve of Ndiaël and now operates under the name of Les Fermes de la Teranga. Except when discussing the company within a specific context, I hereinafter use the name Senhuile-Senethanol for the sake of simplicity.
6. The administrative centre of the rural community of Fanaye is located in the village of Fanaye Jeeri (hereinafter called Fanaye Village).
7. A *leydi*, the political territory corresponding to an autonomous agro-pastoral system, traditionally encompassed *waalo* farmland and *jeeri* pastures, but the links of interdependence between the two zones have gradually diminished since the colonial era.
8. The *toorobe* (plural of *toorodo*) are the ruling dynasties of the historical kingdom of the Fuuta Tooro, which corresponds approximately to what is now the administrative department of Podor. They are *Fulbe* (Fulani) people who converted to Islam and seized power in a political revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Although emigration and the decline of the agricultural sector have eroded the economic power of the *toorobe* (Beck 2008), the three main social orders of the Fuuta Tooro (nobles; artisans and griots; slaves and affranchised) largely continue to prevail.

9. These compensations far exceed the annual budget of the rural community. To provide an order of magnitude, in 2009, Fanaye's rural council had a budget of CFA Franc 13,671,300 (US\$ 27,372).
10. These 26 councillors presumably belonged to Faction B.
11. Communauté rurale de Fanaye. *Procès-verbal No 05 de la réunion du conseil rural en date du 27 août 2011*. No 005/CRF/11; Interview #206, Faction A councillor, February 2016.
12. The Tijaniyah is a Sufi brotherhood headed by a spiritual leader called *khalifa*. In August, opponents had unsuccessfully attempted to earn the support of another Tidjani *khalifa*.
13. It was the same television show in which the council president took part in August. Project opponents had asked to be invited to present their counterarguments.
14. Interviews #191, administrative agent, February 2016; #206, Faction A councillor, February 2016.
15. Interviews #206, Faction A councillor, February 2016; #207, Faction A councillor, February 2016; #220, current municipal councillor, March 2016; #222, Faction A councillor, March 2016.
16. Interview #251, former CEO of Senhuile-Senethanol, April 2016.
17. Interview #245, member of the *Collectif*, March 2016.
18. Interview #200, BSS/Faction B councillor, February 2016; IPAR (2012).
19. Factionalism is understood here as a struggle for the control of political parties, although factions can be found in a variety of environments, such as universities, worker unions, village cooperatives and development projects.
20. *Bennoo Siggil Senegaal* comprised 35 parties that joined forces to oppose Abdoulaye Wade's political party and alliance, the Sopi Coalition.
21. While these positions remain essentially symbolic, they constitute a way to gain a minimum of prestige and leverage in decision-making processes, as well as access to per diem allowances.
22. Even though Demba Sarr carries influence at the local level, PDS cadres viewed Samba Sow as a more palatable leader due to his extensive political network and considerable personal wealth.
23. Abdoulaye Wade was in the opposition from the creation of his party in 1974 until his election in 2000.
24. In May 2010, for instance, Faction A members had provisionally agreed to an agro-industrial venture over 10,000 hectares funded by a foreign company that had approached them (Interviews #206, Faction A councillor, February 2016; #254, village notable, July 2018; IPAR 2012). The company abandoned its project for unclear reasons.
25. Interview #206, Faction A councillor, February 2016.
26. Interviews #191, administrative agent, February 2016; #217, village chief, July 2018; #219, village chief, March 2016; #254, village notable, July 2018; IPAR (2012).
27. Interview #199, administrative agent, February 2016.
28. Interview #240, local notable, March 2016.
29. The State Council is the judicial organ in charge of settling disputes between the state and citizens in Senegal.
30. As Schattschneider notes, special interest groups often strategically "rationalize their specific interests as public interest" (Schattschneider 1960, 25).
31. Interview #240, local notable, March 2016.
32. Interview #200, BSS/Faction B councillor, February 2016.

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