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Senegal: A Democracy Caught up between Colonial Past and Radical Youth Advocacy

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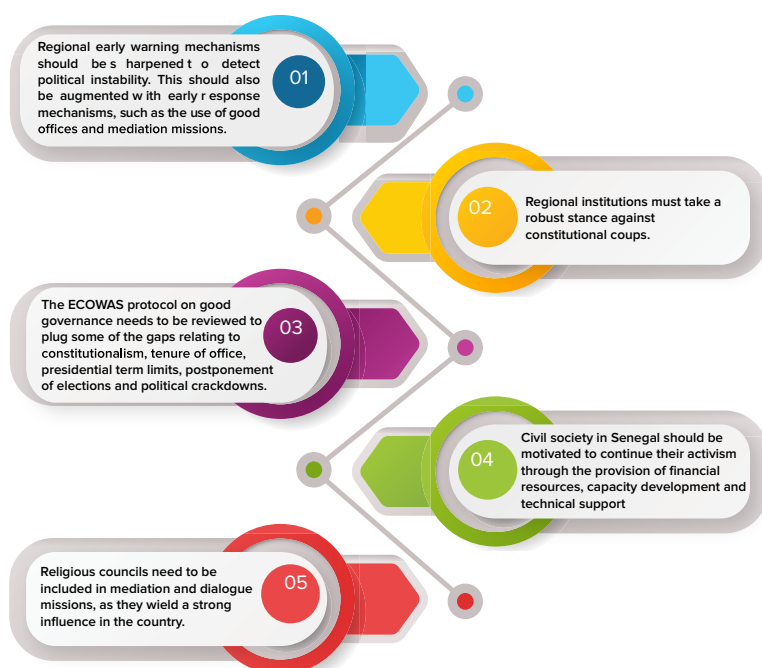
Abstract

Senegal has been considered one of the most stable countries in Africa, being the only country in West Africa without a record of coup d'état. However, the country's political turmoil has unfolded since 2016 with increasing intensity and corresponding alarm from regional and international actors. The policy brief discusses challenges of democratic transition processes in Senegal. It argues that the declining state of democracy in Senegal undermines the established democratic credentials of a country once noted for its democratic stability.

Introduction

Senegal's political turmoil has unfolded since 2016 with increasing intensity and corresponding alarm from regional and international actors. Several clashes have taken place between opposition members and state officials. Allegations of coups d'état, imprisonment of opposition members, activists and violent demonstrations have characterised the Senegal political landscape. Following the change in the constitution in 2016 in which the Presidential tenure was reduced from seven to five years, it was anticipated that the President, Macky Sall, would want to serve another term. This speculation led to several outbursts by the opposition parties amidst rising tensions. It was, therefore, widely welcomed when President Macky Sall gave a televised address in July 2023 in which he declared his intention not stand for a third term during the elections of February 2024.¹ This declaration was preceded by preventive diplomacy initiatives by diverse actors urging him not to undermine the democratic credential of the country. The July 2023 declaration was highly welcomed as it calmed nerves internally.

Recommendations



¹BBCNews (2023). Senegal President Macky Sall says he won't run for a third term. July 4. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66093983>

²Afrikajom Center. (nd). Senegal: An African Democratic Model in Decline. Dakar.

Senegal has been considered one of the most stable countries in Africa, being the only country in West Africa without a record of coup d'état.² Yet, the President's decision to postpone the 25 February 2024 elections has piled up the political pressure both on the President and on the country. National, regional and international actors have been left blindsided by the development. Regional institutions such as The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) appeared not prepared to apply the normative frameworks on democracy and good governance when President Sall started his constitutional maneuvering. Yet both AU and ECOWAS, which were preparing to conduct election observation missions into the country are now scrambling to determine their next course of action, including the deployment of members of the pan-African parliament.

As indicated, the country's political scene has been chaotic for several years. One key actor on the scene has been Senegal's vocal and vibrant civil society, which has been unequivocal in their activism, especially concerning the president's endeavours at a constitutional extension of his mandate. The policy brief makes the argument that the declining state of democracy in Senegal undermines the established democratic credentials of a country once noted for its democratic stability. The brief draws on secondary sources and primary data gathered in Dakar in October 2024.



A military personnel standing against a sculpting of the Senegalese flag.
Credit: media.licdn.com

Democratic Decline

The notion of democratic decline refers to the deterioration of democratic institutions and processes, such as free and fair elections or peaceful handovers of power, or the infringement on the fundamental rights of individuals that support democracies, including the right to free speech.³ Senegal, like most countries in the region has experienced democratic reversals in diverse forms since 2016. This is gradually giving way to frustrations and a sense of missed opportunity as West Africa is witnessing violent forms of resistance to failed governance processes with devastating consequences for human security.⁴ One major impediment to acceptable forms of political succession has been the unwillingness of leaders to freely relinquish power at the stipulated end of their tenure.⁵ The region is currently seeing democratic reversals where several political leaders have developed patterns for evading term limits.⁶

Despite the successive political turnovers, Senegal typifies a declining democracy. Local sources in Senegal point to the fact that *despite the changes of government, the quality of the changes has been zero. Governance has not changed, and corruption and human rights violations have remained the same...in Senegal, it is difficult for the opposition parties to organise press conferences or demonstrations. There are more than 1000 detainees due to political activism—mostly journalists, media, and political opponents.*⁷ These views are widely held by many Senegalese. Since 2019, the country has consistently performed poorly on many fundamental democracy indicators. There has been an increase in arbitrary detentions of activists, artists, journalists, protesters, and political opponents. Freedom of expression, opinion, and the press is stifled.⁸

There were signs of a possible attempt at tenure elongation by President Sall following constitutional amendments in 2016 and 2019 which sought to consolidate the powers of the incumbent president,

³Lindberg, S. I. (2021). The Nature of Democratic Backsliding in Europe. *Carnegie Europe*. April 13. Available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/07/24/nature-of-democratic-backsliding-in-europe-pub-76868>

⁴Aning, K, et al (2020). West African democracies are in reverse, but the solution must come from within. September 15. Available a. <https://www.diiis.dk/en/research/west-african-democracies-are-in-reverse-but-the-solution-must-come-from-within>

⁵Alumona, I.M. (2021). Political succession and regional integration in Africa. In Aniche, T.E., et al (Eds) *Regionalism, Security and Development in Africa*. London: Routledge. Pp.182-206.

⁶Salihu, N. & Moomin, R. (2022). Third Termism and Political Insecurity in West Africa: Cases of Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea. *Policy Brief* 10, Accra: KAIPTC.

⁷Interviews with a governance analyst in Dakar, October 4, 2023.

⁸Ndiaye, B. (2024). The Demise of Senegalese Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*. Online Exclusive. February. Available at <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/the-demise-of-senegalese-democracy/>

leading to political imbalance and regression in the democratisation process.⁹ The recurring political tenure reforms reflect the Senegalese regime's fluctuating trajectory between authoritarian and democratic proclivities. These reforms were often included in bigger constitutional reform packages when competition-restricting policies were paired with measures aimed at limiting political competition.¹⁰ In another twist, on February 3, 2024, with few hours before the start of the campaign to the scheduled presidential elections on 25 February 2024, President Sall abruptly announced an indefinite postponement of the elections. He argued that the country needed more time for national dialogue to resolve controversies over the disqualification of some candidates and a conflict between the legislative and judicial branches of government.¹¹ This delay was not anticipated but it is also not surprising because President Sall had flirted with a third-term agenda. This action has been likened to an institutional coup. Senegal's Constitutional Council later called the President's actions unconstitutional and demanded the elections be held.

The decision to delay elections reads as self-interest, imperious, and sets a bad precedent. It is also the culmination of the acute democratic backsliding that has characterised Senegal since the beginning of President Sall's second term in 2019. This has thrown the country into another uncertainty and constitutional crisis which tested its democratic institutions. The election delay was met with citizens' uproar, violent protests, deaths, destruction of property and a heavy-handed response from state security forces. Three civilian lives have been lost to protests in Dakar and other cities in the country.¹² This is an unfortunate development for a country that has experienced relative democratic stability. Many Senegalese now have little to no confidence in the country's institutions.¹³

Regional Responses

There have been divergent responses by international and regional bodies to the political developments. Notably, the UN, AU, ECOWAS, and the US and France have in rather soft-toned statements called on President Sall to respect democratic principles and restore the electoral calendar. However, ECOWAS, the regional body continues to face legitimacy crises as it struggles to deal with governance challenges in the region. It holds little leverage at a time when three nations (Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) led by military governments are already defying its demands and have served notice to exit ECOWAS. Senegal presents a test case for ECOWAS for the enforcement of regional norms on democracy and governance. Following weeks of political turmoil and violent protests, presidential elections are finally slated for March 24, 2024.

A Crisis of the Francophonie?

Considering the growing neo-colonial resentment against the French in Francophone West African states, the French role in the political crisis in Senegal is worth interrogating. Since independence, successive presidents from Léopold Sédar Senghor up to Macky Sall have maintained close and largely exclusive relations with France.¹⁴ Senegal's strong ties with France including a 1974 defence have arguably contributed to civil-military stability. The country has escaped coups partly due to the luxury of the neo-colonial protection it enjoys from France and the presence of a French military base.¹⁵ France is the leading investor in Senegal and its number one trading partner. In recent years, there have been increasing colonial resentment and suspicion of elite collusion with France among the younger generation of the Senegalese population. For example, a lot of French businesses and establishments were attacked during demonstrations in 2021 and 2022. This is because French businesses were perceived as virtual monopolies edging out the local competition as powerful symbols of the country's stark inequalities.¹⁶

⁹Jakubiak, Ł. (2022). Presidential politics of constitutional amendment in Francophone Africa: The case of Senegal. *Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies*, 61(4), 386-407. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2052.2021.00280>

¹⁰Ibid

¹¹Mednick, S. (2024). Senegal's president defends delaying elections in an exclusive interview as protests erupt nationwide. AP. February 10. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/senegal-president-macky-sall-elections-11adac8e3b926db260e9dee0cdb293e7>

¹²Ba, D. & Dione, N. (2024). Three dead in Senegal protests over delayed presidential election. Reuters, February 11. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/three-dead-senegal-protests-over-delayed-presidential-election-2024-02-11/>

¹³Afrobarometer, (2022). Résumé des résultats. Round 9. Available at https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Resume-des-resultats-Senegal_Afrobarometer-R9-11oct22.pdf.

¹⁴Chafer, T. (2013). Franco-Senegalese Relations 2000–2012. *African perspectives. Global insight*. South African Institute of International Affairs

¹⁵Salihu, N. (2021). West Africa: Civil–military Relations from a Colonial Perspective. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1930>

¹⁶Thomas-Johnson, A. (2021). Senegal: Anti-French sentiment on the rise as protests continue. Aljazeera, March 12. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/12/senegal-anti-french-sentiments-on-the-rise-amid-ongoing-protests>

French businesses accounts for 25 per cent of Senegalese gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁷

Senegalese youth who supported President Sall in the 2012 election had lost faith in him in the wake of growing youth unemployment and a crumbling education system. Notably, the rise of Ousmane Sonko in the political scene and his denouncing of French neocolonialism has changed the political narratives. Sonko's disbanded political party, PASTEF prides itself on being an anti-establishment—a pan-African reformist party that seeks to challenge political, administrative, and economic flaws, build alliances against neo-colonialism, and redefine the historical, economic, and financial partnerships between Senegal and the West, especially France.¹⁸ France has lost significant allies in Francophone West Africa, with the arrival of radical military regimes in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Over the past three years, France has seen its influence and credibility seriously damaged by the events in these countries. France needs some allies in the region and must maintain its hold on Dakar to protect its economic and geopolitical interests in the region. a respondent in Dakar puts it bluntly *The French are ready to die in order not to lose the two countries, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa. Accordingly, the French have always not liked Sonko, because he has anti-French sentiment.*¹⁹ Some respondents suspect Paris may be pulling some strings behind the scenes to prevent the emergence of an anti-French government in Dakar.²⁰ Controversially, amid the political uncertainty in Dakar, Paris tightened up its defence cooperation with Dakar.²¹



Senegalese youth protest in Dakar.
Credit: tabitalpulaaku.org

Conclusion

Senegal has been well noted for democratic stability in a very volatile West Africa. Nonetheless, recent trends in democratic decline in the country are worrying. The upcoming presidential election is crucial for the democratic consolidation process, with an incumbent president not contesting. However, events leading to the elections and the abrupt truncation of the electoral process by President Sall was an unfortunate and unprecedented dent in the country's political history. The Constitutional Council's decision to overturn the decree is a positive step. The country's political history has been marked by uncertainties and political tensions making its democracy fragile which has been preserved through robust dialogues and the contribution of civil society, religious elites, intellectuals and the press.²² The Senegalese state and society thus have the potential for a peaceful resolution of tensions due to the presence of formal and informal sources of resilience.²³

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ndiaye (2024). Op. cit.

¹⁹Interviews in Dakar, October 4, 2023.

²⁰Interviews in Dakar, October 3, 2023.

²¹Africa Intelligence (2024). Senegal Paris tightens up defence cooperation with Dakar. February 01. Available at <https://www.africaintelligence.com/>

²²Interviews in Dakar, October 4, 2023.

²³Amedzrator, L. (2022). Building Resilience and Supporting National Infrastructures for Peace: The Case of Senegal. *Occasional Paper*, Accra: KAIPTC.

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