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# Democratic Reversals and Threats of Violent Extremism in Senegal

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**OCCASIONAL PAPER 63**



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## Introduction

Senegal's political turmoil has unfolded over the last few years 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 and violent demonstrations have characterised the Senegal political landscape. It was therefore widely acclaimed when President Macky Sall gave a televised address in July, 2023 in which he declared to the country that he would not stand for a third term during the elections of February, 2024.<sup>1</sup> Following the change in the constitution in which the Presidential tenure was reduced from seven to five years, it was anticipated that the President would want to add another term. This speculation led to several outbursts by the opposition parties. Thus, the July, 2023 declaration was highly welcomed as it calmed nerves internally.

Yet the President's decision to postpone the February, 2024 elections piled the political pressure on the country. National, regional and international actors were left blindsided by the development. The African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which were preparing to conduct election observation missions into the country, now scrambled to determine their next course of action. As indicated, the country's political scene has been chaotic for several years. One key actor on the scene is Senegal's vocal and vibrant civil society, which is unequivocal in their activism, especially concerning the presidency.

This paper examines the challenges in democratic transitions and potential threats of violent extremism in Senegal. The paper begins by tracing the country's political crises to the post-colonial era in which the type of democracy that was practised was more authoritarian than democratic. Due to the efforts of national, regional and international actors, democratic transitions have generally been smooth. However, the country exists within a context of insecurity, violent extremism, population movements, rural-urban migration and the negative effects of climate change. Thus, this worsening political crisis (1) exposes these cleavages in society; (2) creates avenues for non-state actors to infiltrate the borders of the country; (3) exacerbates regional insecurity; (4) radicalises young people; and (5) reduces confidence in democracy. More worryingly, within the region, political instability

has often preceded a coup d'état or attacks by violent extremist groups. Considering that Senegal shares borders with Mali, Mauritania, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia, all of which have varying security threats, the paper makes the argument that democratic transitions and the challenges therein, heighten the likelihood of violent extremism perpetuating and spreading in the country. The paper adopts a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis using both secondary and primary data. Interviews were conducted with key informants in Dakar in October, 2023. Following this introduction, the paper is structured into five main sections. The second section traces Senegal's democratic transition processes. The third section examines the threats of violent extremism beckoning Senegal amid its political challenges. Section four discusses the international dimension of the political crisis by interrogating the French connection in Senegal in the wake of growing neo-colonial resentment in Francophone West Africa. The paper concludes in section five and offers some recommendations.

## Democratic transitions in Senegal

Senegal is considered one of the most stable countries in Africa, being the only country without a record of coup d'état. The country experienced democratic governance much earlier than other Francophone countries in West Africa, as it was the testing ground for French representative democracy during the colonial era.<sup>2</sup> Following independence in 1960, the country was ruled for almost 40 years by single-party regimes of the Parti Socialiste du Senegal (PS) by Leopold Sedar Senghor (1960-1980); and Abdou Diouf (1981-2000).<sup>3</sup> The country has an ambivalent democratic legacy and has fluctuated between rather authoritarian periods that were not fully dictatorial and rather democratic periods that were not fully democratic.<sup>4</sup>

The country experienced its first democratic turnover in 2000 when Abdoulaye Wade defeated Abdou Diouf in the presidential election. The 2000 transition, which ended Diouf's 26-year rule, was considered the first genuine transition since independence. The 2001 constitution restricted the presidential terms of office to two consecutive terms and abolished the constitutional term limit instituted by the Socialist regime in 1999.<sup>5</sup> Another political transition occurred in 2012 when Macky Sall defeated Wade. The 2012

<sup>1</sup>BBCNews (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>

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

<sup>3</sup>Amedzrator, L. (2022). Building Resilience and Supporting National Infrastructures for Peace: The Case of Senegal. Occasional Paper, Accra: KAIPTC.

<sup>4</sup>Amedzrator, L. (2022). Building Resilience and Supporting National Infrastructures for Peace: The Case of Senegal. Occasional Paper, Accra: KAIPTC.

<sup>5</sup>Afrikajom Center op. cit.



presidential elections were momentous considering former president Wade's attempt at tenure elongation. The country is, however, experiencing a democratic reversal and is immersed in a difficult political transition characterised by political tensions, corruption and muddy power politics.<sup>6</sup> The coalition government, Benno Bokk Yakkar (BBY)<sup>7</sup> under incumbent President Sall, was re-elected in 2019. Events leading to Sall's re-election in 2019 created some credibility challenges for the government. Sall was accused of preventing some of his main rivals from running. The opposition got upset and even refused to contest the results before the Constitutional Council, which it considered as biased in favour of the incumbent president.<sup>8</sup> Sall's coalition lost the absolute majority of seats in the National Assembly at the parliamentary elections in 2022<sup>9</sup>.

Despite the successive political turnovers, Senegal typifies a 'transition without change.'<sup>10</sup> As argued by a respondent, "There have been changes of government. But 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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> For example, on July 28, 2023, Ousmane Sonko, the leader of the main opposition party "The Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics, and Fraternity" (PASTEF), was arrested and charged with allegations of having conducted serious crimes including immoral behaviour, rape and theft.<sup>13</sup> He had already faced a considerable number of legal woes since 2021 and was placed under house arrest.<sup>14</sup> The incident of his arrest was followed by demonstrations of opposition supporters resulting in at least 16 deaths and many injured people.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, days after the arrest, the interior minister announced the dissolution of the main opposition party PASTEF. Additionally, as a reaction to "hateful messages" on social media, as the country's minister said, the state suspended internet services across the country, heavily criticised by citizens and international watchers.<sup>16</sup>

Senegal, like most countries in the region, has experienced democratic reversals in diverse forms. This is gradually giving way to frustrations and a sense of missed opportunity as West Africa is witnessing violent forms of governance with devastating consequences for human security.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> The region is currently seeing a democratic reversal where some



A group of men demonstrating at the Palais de Justice de Dakar.  
Photo Credit: Aliou Mbaye/EPA via Aljazeera

<sup>6</sup>Kohnert, D. & Marfaing, L. (2019). Senegal: Presidential Elections 2019 - The Shining Example of Democratic Transition Immersed in Muddy Power-Politics. March 11. Available at <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3350710>

<sup>7</sup>Meaning 'united for the same hope'

<sup>8</sup>Kohnert and Marfaing (2019). Op.c it.

<sup>9</sup>Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. (n.d). Broad Development Programme. Available at <https://www.bmz.de/en/countries/senegal/political-situation-48598>.

<sup>10</sup>Gyimah-Boadi, E. (1991). Notes on Ghana's Current Transition to Constitutional Rule. *Africa Today*, 38(4), 5–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4186773>

<sup>11</sup>Interviews with a governance analyst in Dakar, October 4, 2023.

<sup>12</sup>Ndiaye, 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/>

<sup>13</sup>Aljazeera (2023). Senegal's Ousmane Sonko Charged with Fomenting Insurrection. July 30. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/30/senegal-ousmane-sonko-charged-with-fomenting-insurrection>.

<sup>14</sup>Aljazeera (2023). Top Senegalese Opposition Leader Ousmane Sonko Arrested: Lawyer. July 28. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/28/top-senegalese-opposition-leader-ousmane-sonko-arrested-lawyer>.

<sup>15</sup>Aljazeera (2023). Senegal's Ousmane Sonko Charged with Fomenting Insurrection. July 20. Available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/30/senegal-ousmane-sonko-charged-with-fomenting-insurrection>.

<sup>16</sup>Gavin, M. (2023). A Setback for Senegal. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 August 1. Council on Foreign Relations. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/setback-senegal>

<sup>17</sup>Aning, 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>

<sup>18</sup>Alumona, 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.

political leaders have developed an increased pattern of evading term limits.<sup>19</sup> One of the mechanisms used by political leaders is the continuous constitutional manipulation and amendments to give their stay in power some false legitimacy.<sup>20</sup> There were signs of a possible attempt at tenure elongation by President Sall following a constitutional amendment in 2016 and 2019, which sought to consolidate the powers of the incumbent president, leading to a political imbalance and regression in the democratization process.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Sall abolished the office of the prime minister and attempted to install a “fast track” government that would avoid unnecessary administrative delays.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the presidential term limit and term length rule have been subjected to nine reforms and one circumvention from 1970 to 2016 by successive leaders.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> For instance, former president Wade was elected to a seven-year term in 2000, but a new constitution in 2001 reduced the length of subsequent presidential terms to five years. Wade was re-elected in 2007, and the following year Senegal’s National Assembly approved a constitutional amendment reverting to seven-year presidential terms. Wade then went back on an earlier pledge and ran again in 2012, claiming that the constitutionally imposed two-term limit, passed in 2001, did not apply to his first term. Popular protests such as *Ne Touch Pas Mon Constitution* (Do not touch my constitution) could not prevent Wade’s quest for a third term but contributed to his electoral defeat to Macky Sall in 2012.<sup>25</sup>

The constitutional reform of 2016, which was initiated by President Sall, introduced a provision according to which no one can hold more than two consecutive presidential mandates.<sup>26</sup> But his supporters argued that he could still run for a third term as his first was under the previous constitution. To this end, speculations

were rife, especially by the opposition parties that Sall may seek an unconstitutional third term, like some of his peers in the Francophone region. Sall remained evasive on the issues until July 3, 2023, when he announced that he would not run for election for a third term in office, which partly calmed the people and the supporters of the opposition.<sup>27</sup> This would have been the first time in Senegal’s history that the incumbent president would organize the elections without running for a following term in office. Candidates for the presidential race include Idrissa Seck, who was in second place at the 2019 presidential elections, Aminata Touré, a previous prime minister under President Sall, Amadou Ba, another former prime minister backed by Sall and Bassirou Diomaye Faye, the radical running as Sonko’s stand-in candidate. Karim Wade of the opposition Senegalese Democratic Party was banned from running for president over his dual French citizenship which he renounced within a few months of the elections.<sup>28</sup>

In another twist, on February 3, 2024, with a few hours before the start of the campaign to the scheduled presidential elections on 25 February 2024, Sall abruptly announced an indefinite postponement of the elections. He argues 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.<sup>29</sup> He adds that the delay is to allow for an investigation into the Constitutional Council’s decision to bar certain candidates from running. This delay was not anticipated but it is also not surprising because Sall had flirted with a third-term agenda. However, it is unprecedented in political history and has been likened to an institutional coup. Subsequently, on February 5, 2024, after opposition members of parliament were forcibly removed from the National Assembly by police and gendarmerie, members of Sall’s ruling coalition passed legislation to postpone the elections until December 15, 2024, and extend the president’s term.

There are legal challenges in this process because

<sup>19</sup>Salihu, N. & Moomin, R. (2022). Third Termism and Political Insecurity in West Africa: Cases of Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea. *Policy Brief* 10, Accra: KAIPTC.

<sup>20</sup>Alumona (2021). Op cit.

<sup>21</sup>Jakubiak, 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>

<sup>22</sup>Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI (2022). Country Report — Senegal. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

<sup>23</sup>Heyl, C. (2019). Senegal (1970–2016): Presidential Term Limit Reforms Never Come Alone’, in Alexander Baturo, and Robert Elgie (eds), *The Politics of Presidential Term Limits* (Oxford, online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 Aug. 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198837404.003.0017>, accessed 7 Feb. 2024.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Thurston, A. (2016). Sall Maneuvers for Re-Election in Senegal With Term-Limit Referendum Win. *World Politics Review*, March 23. Available at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/sall-maneuvers-for-re-election-in-senegal-with-term-limit-referendum-win/>

<sup>26</sup>Fall, I. M., (2017). La réforme constitutionnelle du 20 mars 2016 au Sénégal. La revision consolidante record, L’Harmattan-Sénégal.

<sup>27</sup>Adeoye, A. & Joshua, F. (2023). Political Crisis Shakes Senegal’s Image of Stability in a Volatile Region. *Financial Times*, September 20. Available at <https://www.ft.com/content/995bbc6e-ef0b-421f-8730-e07c55b710bd>.

<sup>28</sup>Dione, B. (2024). Senegal presidential candidate renounces French nationality to run for office. *AP News*. January 18. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/kaim-wade-french-citizen-senegal-elections-1a36db61942c908cd912dd1d707bcfb7>

<sup>29</sup>Mednick, 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-11adac8e3b926db260e9dee0c9db293e7>

neither the president nor the National Assembly has the power to annul or change the date of elections. That authority solely rests with the Constitutional Council.<sup>30</sup> The decision to delay elections reads as self-interest, imperious, and bad precedent. It is also the culmination of the acute democratic backsliding that has characterized Senegal since the beginning of Sall's second term in 2019. If not addressed, this constitutional putsch undeniably marks the demise of Senegalese democracy.<sup>31</sup> Sall risked destroying the country to orchestrate his preferred electoral outcomes.<sup>32</sup> This occurrence threw the country into another uncertainty and constitutional crisis, which tested its democratic institutions. The election delay was met with citizens' uproar, violent protests and a heavy-handed response from state security forces. Three civilian lives were lost to protests in Dakar and other cities in the country.<sup>33</sup> This is an unfortunate development for a country that has experienced relative democratic stability.

Many Senegalese have little to no confidence in the country's institutions.<sup>34</sup> Despite low public confidence in state institutions, the Constitutional Council rose to the occasion when opposition parliamentarians appealed to the Council on 8 February to have the legislation delaying elections annulled. On February 15, 2024, the Constitutional Council ruled that the law delaying the elections was unconstitutional. The council also cancelled a presidential decree which initiated the process of postponing elections.<sup>35</sup> The action of the Council pointed to the resilience of countervailing institutions in Senegal despite a decline in democracy.<sup>36</sup> This decision, although a positive sign, still pitched the country into a new phase of electoral uncertainty. The Council did not specify when the election should be held, which means it is up to Sall to set a reasonable date as directed by the Council.<sup>37</sup> There were also disputes over the candidate list that could undermine the credibility of the poll. The presidency responded to the ruling by stating its full

compliance with the Council's decision and to hold the elections as soon as possible, though the government has yet to specify a new date.<sup>38</sup> As pressure mounts on the government by both civil society and citizens to hold elections, fifteen of the twenty candidates eligible to contest the delayed February presidential poll have called for the new vote to be held no later than 2 April, the day Sall's term officially ended.<sup>39</sup> The much-awaited presidential elections were held on March 24, which resulted in the overwhelming victory of Bassirou Diomaye Faye of the PASTEF party.<sup>40</sup> Despite PASTEF's dissolution by the government, Faye's campaign mobilised a large number of people, especially young people.<sup>41</sup>

There were responses by international and regional bodies to the political developments. Notably, the UN, AU, ECOWAS, and Western powers such as the US and France have in rather soft-toned statements called on 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. As usual, the regional bloc has sent a diplomatic mission to Dakar. The ECOWAS protocol on Democracy and Good Governance does not have provisions and sanctions on such development post-postponement of elections.

<sup>30</sup>Kelly, C.L. (2024). Making Sense of Senegal's Constitutional Crisis. Spotlight. February 7. Washington DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Available at <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/senegal-constitutional-crisis/>

<sup>31</sup>Ndiaye, 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/>

<sup>32</sup>Gavin, M. (2024). Democracy Deferred in Senegal. Council on Foreign Relations. February 7. Available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/democracy-deferred-senegal>

<sup>33</sup>Ba, 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/>

<sup>34</sup>Afrobarometer, (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](https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Resume-des-resultats-Senegal_Afrobarometer-R9-11oct22.pdf).

<sup>35</sup>Toupane, P.M & Seydou Daffe, S. (2024). Senegal: breaking the election deadlock. ISS Today. February 16. Available at [https://issafrica.org/iss-today/senegal-breaking-the-election-deadlock?utm\\_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm\\_campaign=ISS\\_Today&utm\\_medium=email](https://issafrica.org/iss-today/senegal-breaking-the-election-deadlock?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email)

<sup>36</sup>International IDEA, (2024). Global State of Democracy. Available at <https://www.idea.int/gsod/2024/chapters/global-trends/box/2024-election-in-senegal/>

<sup>37</sup>Daily Maverick (2024). Senegal Elections: Senegal constitutional council finds election delay was unlawful. *Reuters*. February 16. Available at [www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-02-16-senegal-constitutional-council-finds-election-delay-was-unlawful/?utm\\_source=Sailthru](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-02-16-senegal-constitutional-council-finds-election-delay-was-unlawful/?utm_source=Sailthru)

<sup>38</sup>Mednick, S. & Dione, B. (2024). Senegal's president says the election will be as soon as possible after the court overturns the delay. AP, February 16. Available at <https://apnews.com/article/senegal-election-macky-sall-delay-9e487fc59e63032d0cb8e3cb50181898>

<sup>39</sup>Cheman, M. (2024). Senegalese presidential candidates unite in call for new election date. Rfi, February 19. Available at <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20240219-senegalese-presidential-candidates-unite-in-call-for-new-election-date>

<sup>40</sup>Sonko and Faye were granted pardon and released from jail on March 14, 10 days before the election.

<sup>41</sup>Kelly, C. L. (2024). Key Takeaways from Senegal's Presidential Election. *Spotlight*. April 1. Available at <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/key-takeaways-from-senegals-presidential-election/>



## Threats for Violent Extremism

Amid its political challenges, Senegal faces threats of violent extremists like most countries in the Sahel region. Its proximity with countries worse affected increases the risk. The country is a predominantly Muslim nation, with about 90 per cent of the people being adherents of varied Islamic sects/brotherhoods. This arguably makes the country susceptible to radicalisation and extremism. However, Senegal has been immune from extremism despite the prevalence of factors which have given impetus to the rise of violent extremism in most of its neighbouring countries in the Sahel. Secularism and Islam's place in the political system have been the main topics of discussion and contention in Muslim-majority nations. The emergence of political Islam and violent extremism in the Sahel region of West Africa has raised serious concerns about this.<sup>42</sup> Although Senegal is a secular state, it has evolved and survived through a system of symbiotic ties inherited from the colonial era and based on the strong participation of Sufi leaders (Brotherhood) in an officially secular state. The state has been able to provide a sociopolitical balance to the competing impulses.<sup>43</sup> Senegal has been the regional hub for the Sufi Islamic sect. Sufism in Senegal constitutes a link between Islam and older African traditions and practices. Adherents are primarily linked to brotherhoods, especially Tijaniyya, Mouridism, Layenes and Qâdiriyya.

The Islamic brotherhoods have always been significant in shaping Senegal's political, economic and social structures. But over the last few years, the brotherhoods' political influence has strengthened significantly.<sup>44</sup> Politics is so mixed with religion. Many Senegalese believe that the Sufi Brotherhood has been the barrier to the operation of the jihadist groups in the country.<sup>45</sup> The Sufi Brotherhood is one of the most influential religious institutions in the country, and with the power it wields, it can ensure that people are shielded from radical and jihadist dialogue. and are still influential in the political realm. The Brotherhoods are supposedly moderate by nature and often partner with the government agencies to raise awareness at the local level.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, brotherhoods are not a homogenous group and are immune to radicalization. Some have been infiltrated by radicals.<sup>47</sup>

There has been the emergence of reformists or Salafists including Wahhabites such as Jamaatou Ibâdou Rahmân (JIR) (whose ideology is close to that of the Muslim Brothers with sub-groups of students on university campuses in Dakar and Saint-Louis) and Al-Falâh (of Wahhabite-Salafist leanings, of Saudi Arabia) have created fault lines for religious tensions in the country.<sup>48</sup> These groups continue to challenge the mode of Islam being practised by the Sufi sects. As noted earlier, most of the challenges that have fueled the growth of violent extremism in the Sahel also exist in Senegal. Security challenges in the Sahel, especially in neighbouring Mali and Mauritania, have increased the vulnerability of Senegal to violent extremism. On the contrary, violent extremism or Islamist violence has not taken root in Senegal partly because pro-Salafist groups like The JIR intend to build a more constructive relationship with the State and the brotherhoods while continuing to cast a critical eye on these two groups.<sup>49</sup> There is inter-religious harmony in Senegal and this has contributed to curbing extremism. Respondents in Dakar reiterated that the church also plays a big role, especially the catholic church, which has a good relationship with the imams.<sup>50</sup>

Despite the above sources of resilience, there are a few jihadist cells in Senegal and Senegalese foreign terrorist fights.<sup>51</sup> There have been the arrests of three alleged members of a sleeper militant cell linked to Katiba Macina, in the Kidira area, on the eastern



Young men protests on the streets amidst chaos.  
Photo Credit: Zohra Bensethemra/Reuters via Aljazeera

<sup>42</sup>Salihu, N. & and Duncan, D. (2022) . Potential Drivers of Jihadism and Radicalisation in Senegal. *Occasional Paper* 45, September, Accra: KAIPTC.

<sup>43</sup>Villalon, L.A (2018). Islam and Politics in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Islam and Politics around the World*. Esposito. J.L and Shahin, E.E. New York. Oxford.

<sup>44</sup>Volk, T. (2017). Heading towards Maraboutcracy?: Muslim Brotherhoods and their Influence in Senegal. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

<sup>45</sup>Interviews in Dakar, October 2023.

<sup>46</sup>Interviews in Dakar, October 2023.

<sup>47</sup>Châtelot, C. (2021). Senegal is torn between enemy brothers in Islam. *Le Monde*. December 3. Available at [https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/12/03/le-senegal-dechire-entre-les-freres-ennemis-en-islam\\_6104608\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/12/03/le-senegal-dechire-entre-les-freres-ennemis-en-islam_6104608_3210.html)

<sup>48</sup>Salihu and Duncan, (2022). Op. cit.

<sup>49</sup>Gomez-Perez, M. (2017). "Political" Islam in Senegal and Burkina Faso: contrasting approaches to mobilization since the 1990s. *Mediterranean Politics*, 22(1): 176–195 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2016.1230947>

<sup>50</sup>Interviews

<sup>51</sup>Interviews

border of Senegal and close to the Kayes region of Mali.<sup>52</sup> Notably, the Senegalese jihadist Souleymane Keita, leader of Ansar Dine (a group that later incorporated into JNIM), was arrested in the Wagadou forest by Malian services in 2016. He was one of the main leaders of jihadist forces in southern Mali.<sup>53</sup> The prevalence of smuggling and illegal trade in the border region with Mali could draw in additional extremists.<sup>54</sup> The Senegalese government has taken some steps to increase its military presence in areas along its eastern border close to known areas of terrorist threat in Mali, mainly around Tambacounda, to counteract any terrorist risks emanating from the Kayes region. Given the existence of mining reserves close to the southeast border region with Mali (Kédougou), there is real danger as illegal mining activities help fund violent extremism in the region.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, the interrelated issues of poverty, underdevelopment and youth employment remain rife in Senegal. The country had gone through modest economic growth in the past years (2014 and 2018) and rose to lower-middle-income status in 2019.<sup>56</sup> Sall successfully employed the overall positive image and exceptional recognition of a relatively small African country as a soft-power resource to attract loans, grants and foreign direct investments.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the impact of the economic transformation is not felt at the microeconomic level and has thus been criticized for excluding large segments of the population. Notably, Sall's focus on foreign direct investments largely ignores the needs of Senegal's massive informal sector.<sup>58</sup>

High rates of youth unemployment remain a challenge. This increased their vulnerability to radicalisation and recruitment. An additional factor behind recruitment exists in Senegal. The country is the historical cradle of the first West African Islamic jihads and empires that began in the 17th century. Jihadists could exploit this historical and religious sentiment to create a sense of pride in these great conquests among local populations.<sup>59</sup> For instance, the state has limited control in places like Touba, the seat of the Mourides,

one of the major Muslim brotherhoods. The town is believed to have its militias that provide security and enjoy (informal) autonomous status.<sup>60</sup> Illicit economic activities such as fake medication, smuggling and money laundering also thrive there.<sup>61</sup> This can be exploited by extremist groups. In December 2020, the Senegalese police discovered an illegal prison run by adherents to a religious leader, sparking discussions about the state of the government's monopoly on the use of force.<sup>62</sup>

Migration, internal and external, is very high in Senegal. The number of Senegalese, amongst other West Africans, who are searching for a better life in Europe has increased significantly from 2022 to 2023.<sup>63</sup> As noted by a respondent in Dakar, "there are large droves of young people leaving the country. Some are joining insurgents. The issue is to deal with the problems of the youth, unemployment, and education. The youth in the country are suffocating because of the political and social environment. They are migrating out of the country, through the boat. They feel hopeless."<sup>64</sup> Migration abroad is also linked to climate catastrophes and floods, which make people go out in regular and irregular periods. They pass the desert and go through Libya, Morocco, and other perceived favourable North African countries. With the decline of fishing arising from climate change, they go abroad to Spain and France to work in the local farms and fishing companies.<sup>65</sup>

Challenges of governance have been a principal cause of violent extremism in the region. Weak governance coupled with a lack of basic social services and youth unemployment exposes the youth to radicalisation and extremist recruitment. As noted by respondents, "new religious groups are coming up Senegal. Some have endeared themselves to local communities by building mosques and providing other social amenities in many communities."<sup>66</sup> The Senegalese people strongly support democratic governance. However, there is a significant proportion of the population that believes that democracy is working well. The country has a very youthful population but only about a quarter of Senegal's young adults

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Khalfoaui, M. (2023). Danger at Senegal's Gates: The Jihadist Expansion toward Southwestern Mali. October 13, Hudson Institute. Available at <https://www.hudson.org/danger-senegal-gates-jihadist-e>

<sup>54</sup>Raga, S., Lemma, A. and Keane, J. (2023) 'Spillover effects of the Sahel conflict on selected West African countries'. ODI Emerging analysis. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/the-sahel-conflicteconomic-security-spillovers-on-west-africa>)

<sup>55</sup>Raga et al, (2023).

<sup>56</sup>Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI (2022). 2022 Country Report — Senegal. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid.

<sup>59</sup>Paul E. & Lovejoy, P. E. (2015). The jihadist empires of West Africa in the 18th - 19th Centuries. *Critical History Review* [Online], 128. July 1. Available at <http://journals.openedition.org/chrhc/4592>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chrhc.4592> (Accessed on February 13, 2024)

<sup>60</sup>BTI (2022), op.cit.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid

<sup>63</sup>Adeoye & Joshua (2023). Op. cit.

<sup>64</sup>Interviews in Dakar, October 4, 2023.

<sup>65</sup>Birikorang, & Nelson, S. (2023). Climate Change, Migration and Insecurity in West Africa: The Case of Senegal: *Occasional Paper* 52, Accra: KAIPTC.

<sup>66</sup>Interviews in Dakar, October 2023

believe that their government is doing a good job in creating jobs or managing the economy.<sup>67</sup> There is a sense of growing frustration among Senegal youth and they are increasingly getting more aggrieved by the ongoing political challenges.<sup>68</sup>

## The Lingering Casamance Question

The disgruntled young generation concerning the Casamance conflict is a matter of concern for ensuring democratic stability in Senegal. Since 1982, the separatist Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de la Casamance (MFDC) has been fighting for an independent Casamance. Although this low-intensity conflict appears to have been nipped in the bud, it is best described as a 'no peace, no war' situation. The Casamance conflict remains a latent one after successive peace processes. Efforts so far at resolving the conflicts have been piecemeal, and without a serious attempt to tackle the underlying social and economic factors. The outcomes of peace processes initiated by Sall since 2012 have been mixed. Grievance emanating from the lack of education and opportunities for younger people has left many in the Casamance region still feeling marginalised.<sup>69</sup> The MFDC is significantly dissipated and has split into four factions due to internal disagreements, compromising the pursuit of peace efforts. Yet, they control the lucrative cashew trade as well as the illegal cannabis and timber trade.<sup>70</sup> This criminal enterprise has been a major driver of the conflict. Senegal may not be in grave danger from the Casamance separatist movement; however, jihadist organisations in the area could pose a threat if they were to collaborate with Casamance region actors and take advantage of social, economic, religious, and political divisions already present in the region.<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the political establishment in Senegal has adopted somewhat more divisive rhetoric since Sonko entered the political arena. As the mayor of Ziguinchor (Casamance), some have argued that his 2020 pronouncement that neither Sall nor his administration "liked" the Casamance was an attempt to stir up the long-simmering dispute to make headlines.<sup>72</sup>

## The French Connection

Since independence in 1960, Senegal has been among the most pro-Western African states. The geopolitical paradox of Senegal is that it symbolises the extent to which a predominantly Muslim country remains a traditional ally of the West, especially France. The relationship has some historical basis with Senegal being France's oldest colony in sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>73</sup> Senegal, which was seen as the preferred colony of French West Africa. It was the first colony before independence to have representation within the French National Assembly.<sup>74</sup> 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.<sup>75</sup> The Senegalese military has remained relatively professional.

France's post-independence Africa policy is different from other former colonial powers. It is argued that the French assimilation policy led to an incomplete decolonization, and hence France's post-colonial influence in Africa.<sup>76</sup> The concept of *Françafrique* in the immediate post-colonial period was essentially born out of the former colonizer's right of entitlement and allowed for direct influence in former French colonies. This policy ensured that African resources flowed into French coffers, in exchange for a degree of political and financial stability in the fledgling independent nations.<sup>77</sup> In recent years, citizens from former French colonies are questioning the exploitative and often condescending nature of the relations which often benefit the top of the social and political hierarchy.<sup>78</sup>

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 Sall have maintained close and largely exclusive relations with France.<sup>79</sup> France is the leading investor in Senegal and its number one trading partner. In recent years, there have been increasing colonial

<sup>67</sup>Afrobarometer (2022). Op. cit.

<sup>68</sup>Interviews in Dakar, October 2023.

<sup>69</sup>Simpson, C & Diallo, M.A. (2015). Between war and peace Forgotten Conflicts – Casamance. New Humanitarian, 3 August. Available at <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2015/08/03/between-war-and-peace>

<sup>70</sup>Mandic, D.(2022). Wheeling and Dealing in War: Smuggling, Stigma and Separatist Rebellions. *PACO*, Issue 15(1) 2022: 88-106

<sup>71</sup>Salihu and Duncan (2022).

<sup>72</sup>BTI (2022).

<sup>73</sup>Chafer, T. (2003). France and Senegal: The End of the Affair? *SAIS Review* (1989-2003), 23(2):155–167. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26996480>

<sup>74</sup>Lambert, R. (2006). Democracy in Senegal: A Case Study of Democratic Success in Africa. Western Washington University Honors Program. 239. Available at [https://cedar.wvu.edu/www\\_honors/239](https://cedar.wvu.edu/www_honors/239)

<sup>75</sup>Salihu, 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>

<sup>76</sup>McNamara, F. (1989) *France in Black Africa*, Washington, DC: National Defense University, p. 5.

<sup>77</sup>Calvin-Smith, G. (2023). Paris Perspective #40: The collapse of French influence in West Africa. Rfi. September 25. Available at <https://www.rfi.fr/en/podcasts/paris-perspective/20230925>

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Chafer, T. (2013). Franco–Senegalese Relations 2000–2012. *African perspectives. Global insight*. South African Institute of International Affairs

resentments 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 much as virtual monopolies edging out the local competition as powerful symbols of the country's stark inequalities.<sup>80</sup> French businesses targeted by protesters included TOTAL petrol stations, Orange mobile phone booths, Eiffage toll gates, and 21 Auchan supermarkets in Dakar, all part of a French sector that accounts for 25 per cent of Senegalese gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>81</sup>

Senegalese youth who supported 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 Sonko in the political scene and his denouncing of French neocolonialism has changed the political narratives. 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. In its engagement with regional governments over the past decade, Paris did not prioritize the strength of democratic institutions and good governance, necessary preconditions to long-term stability in the Sahel.<sup>82</sup> The extensive security assistance has not necessarily been effective in curbing violent extremism. France's role as a security partner in the fight against armed Islamist groups in the Sahel region has therefore been eroded.

These developments notwithstanding, 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 and Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa. The French have always not liked Sonko, because he has anti-French sentiments".<sup>83</sup> Sonko's 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.<sup>84</sup> Some respondents suspect Paris may be pulling some strings behind the scenes to prevent the emergence of an anti-French government in Dakar.<sup>85</sup> Despite these observations, Paris is forced to play a balancing act between Sall and new political forces led by Sonko.<sup>86</sup> For instance, following the announcement of the delayed election, Paris issued a statement calling on "...the authorities to remove the uncertainties regarding the electoral timetable so that the election can be held as soon as possible and in compliance with the rules of Senegalese democracy."<sup>87</sup> Such a statement purports neutrality on an interested actor in Senegalese politics. Amid the political uncertainty in Dakar, Paris tightens up defence cooperation with Dakar.<sup>88</sup>



The streets of Dakar erupt in turmoil with protesters.  
Photo Credit: Zohra Bensemra/Reuters via Aljazeera

<sup>80</sup>Thomas-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>

<sup>81</sup>Ibid.

<sup>82</sup>World Politics Review, (2023). Daily Review: France Withdraws From West Africa. September 25. Available at <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/daily-review-france-withdrawal-west-africa/>

<sup>83</sup>Interviews in Dakar October 2023.

<sup>84</sup>Ndiaye (2024). Op. cit.

<sup>85</sup>Interviews in Dakar October 2023.

<sup>86</sup>Kane, C., Kessous, M., & Ricard, P. (2023). France tries to display new 'neutrality' in Senegal ahead of the 2024 election. Le Monde, March 31. Available at [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/03/31/france-tries-to-display-new-neutrality-in-senegal-ahead-of-2024-election\\_6021332\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/03/31/france-tries-to-display-new-neutrality-in-senegal-ahead-of-2024-election_6021332_4.html)

<sup>87</sup>Senegal – Statement by the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs deputy spokesperson (4 February 2024). Available at <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/senegal/news/article/senegal-statement-by-the-ministry-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-deputy>

<sup>88</sup>Africa Intelligence (2024). Senegal Paris tightens up defence cooperation with Dakar. February 01. Available at <https://www.africaintelligence.com/>



## Conclusion

Senegal has been well noted for democratic stability in a very volatile West African and Sahel region. Nonetheless, recent trends in democratic decline in the country are worrying. The country finds itself near the arch of instability in the Sahel. Factors that have fueled the growth of violent extremists in neighbouring countries exist in Senegal. Despite the presence of few extremist cells and Senegalese foreign terrorist fights, the country has been immune to violent attacks due to both formal and informal resilient mechanisms. The country is not out of the woods yet and has questions about governance that can be exploited and conflated with people's socio-economic grievances to give agency to insurgencies and violent extremist groups.

The 2024 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 Sall is an unfortunate and unprecedented event in the country's political history. The continuous suppression of political freedoms, expression and civil space would severely damage the country's democracy. The Constitutional Council's decision to overturn Sall's decree is a positive step. There is uncertainty over the electoral process. The country's political history has been marked by uncertainties and political tensions, making its democracy fragile. Yet the fragile democracy has been preserved through robust dialogues and the contribution of civil society, religious elites, intellectuals and the press.<sup>89</sup> 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.<sup>90</sup> This notwithstanding a national dialogue process instituted by Sall's government in May 2023 to institutionalise exchange between government, opposition, civil society and academia ahead of the 2024 elections, did not produce substantial results.<sup>91</sup> The new government of Faye is faced with strong demands for governance-related reforms and socio-economic development.

## Recommendations

The authors offer the following approaches:

- Comprehensive reform processes should be pursued to address the long-standing challenges of governance and socio-economic development.
- The state should enhance its counter-extremism measures beyond kinetic or military solutions to include softer measures such as community engagement, meeting people's socio-economic needs
- Regional early warning mechanisms should be sharpened to detect political instability. This should also be augmented with early response mechanisms, such as the use of good offices and mediation missions.
- The ECOWAS protocol on good governance needs to be reviewed to plug some of the gaps relating to constitutionalism, tenure of office, presidential term limits, postponement of elections and political crackdowns.
- Civil society in Senegal should be motivated to continue their activism through the provision of financial resources, capacity development and technical support
- Religious councils need to be included in mediation and dialogue missions, as they wield a strong influence in the country.

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<sup>89</sup>Interviews in Dakar, October 2023.

<sup>90</sup>Amedzrator (2022). Op cit.

<sup>91</sup>BTI (2022), op. cit.



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