

The Stakes in Senegal's 2024 Presidential Elections: Political Democracy and Young People's Growing Demand for Greater Freedom and Social Justice
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The unrest Senegal experienced between 2019 and 2024 has caused much concern about the democratic model that the country has been known for in Africa. The discussion that follows traces its course as a democracy, guaranteeing the exercise of citizens' freedoms to express their opinions without restriction and to choose those who are to be entrusted with the governance of the country. It evokes Senegal's democratic traditions dating back to colonial times and the exercise of power during the presidency of Macky Sall, marked to a large extent by authoritarian tendencies and citizen resistance.

A country with a long-standing democracy

In 2023, Senegal had a population of about 18,000,000, 75% of whom were under 35¹. It is known for its long democratic tradition and regular elections. The political scene has indeed been dominated by a bourgeois democracy beginning with the election of deputy Blaise Diagne in 1914, replaced by Galandou Diouf in 1938. Lamine Gueye and Léopold Sédar Senghor entered the political arena after World War II. In 1960, Senegal gained formal independence, preceded by the French Union in 1946, the Government Business Law (Loi Cadre) in 1956 and the Franco-African Community in 1958. It had a parliamentary government, with Léopold Sédar Senghor as President and Mamadou Dia as Vice-President. The first political crisis developed in December 1962 and led to the imprisonment of Mamadou Dia and the establishment of a presidential regime. The political system was formally based on pluralism, but civil liberties were being violated and opposition parties repressed. With the May 1968 crisis provoked by student uprisings, and a recurrence of it in 1969, Senegal's political landscape was in serious turmoil, ushering in a new political, social and cultural period.

A timid democratic opening began in 1974 with the recognition of the Senegalese Democratic Party founded by lawyer-academic Maitre Abdoulaye Wade. But President Senghor decided to authorize only four political parties, thus driving the other opposition political movements underground. Social and political unrest, combined with the economic crisis that led to the adoption of an adjustment program, precipitated President Senghor's departure. In 1981 Léopold Sédar Senghor had handed over power to Abdou Diouf without holding elections in accordance with article 35 of the constitution. The new President of the Republic extended the freedom to form political parties, but the electoral law encouraged fraud with multiple voting and the non-identification of voters at polling stations². The presidential elections of 1983 and 1988 were marked by strong protests and the arrest of opposition political leaders³. Following a dialogue between the political players facilitated by Judge Kéba Mbaye's team, an agreement was reached in 1992 and a consensual electoral law was adopted. It guarantees the revision of the electoral roll, the identification of voters at polling stations, the compulsory use of the voting booth, the presence of observers during

elections and the announcement of results on public and private radio stations. The consensus has been that there is a large gap between public policy and social demand. Life is becoming expensive, and governance is moving away from the development of the country's immense potential.

Two political alternations: democratic gains are reversible

In March 2000, political reforms against the backdrop of the economic crisis, triggered by structural adjustment, led to a change of government with Abdoulaye Wade taking over from Abdou Diouf. Having spearheaded democratization before coming to power, President Wade nonetheless took numerous decisions that ran counter to democratic gains, to the point where citizens equated him with an autocrat who is personalizing the management of the state by aiming to install his son as future vice-president. His former prime minister, Macky Sall, felt victimized by the confiscation of powers. As if on cue, a number of political, trade union, employer and civil society players convened the *Assises nationales* (June 01, 2008 - May 24, 2009) to overhaul the country's institutions, draw up a charter for democratic governance and implement a series of corrective measures for sectoral policies⁴. The *Assises nationales* played an important role in the emergence and consolidation of the protest movement that put an end to Abdoulaye Wade's regime.

The prelude to Maitre Abdoulaye Wade's defeat was heralded by the local elections of March 22, 2009, which were marked by the victory of the opposition Benno Siggil Sénégal (Unis pour un Sénégal Debout) in the major cities (Dakar, Pikine, Guediawaye, Kaolack, Fatick, Diourbel, Louga and Saint-Louis). The Senegalese Democratic Party remained strong in rural communities⁵.

With the mobilization of political players, changes were made at the institutional level and a two-term limit was enshrined in the new constitution of 2001. When Maitre Abdoulaye Wade nonetheless sought a third term in March 2012, his bid was rejected by voters⁶.

Macky Sall became the newly elected President in 2012. As the first president born after independence, he brought hope to the younger generation, most of whom are members of GEN Z. According to journalist Khalil Gueye "Generation Z [is] a generation that is misunderstood by politicians, and which is considered to be the most complex generation in any country in the world today. They are between 11 and 25 years of age, and in our country they span the education system from primary school to university. In everyday life, they are present in the crowds in stadiums and wrestling arenas, among the unemployed, and they share the ideas and feelings of the hard core of our society, which no longer believes in anything that any authority can promise"⁷.

This generation has been left out of Macky Sall's economic program, which is focused on building infrastructures and defending the interests of international companies so that its impact on the population, and especially on the youth, was insignificant. The statistics speak for themselves. From 3,273,000 inhabitants in 1960, the population multiplied by 6 in 64 years. But between 2012 and 2024, the situation of young people did not improve. Unemployment remains high, with a slight downward trend from 22.5% in 2015 to 18.6% in

2023. Underemployment is now more pronounced, with 90% of jobs insecure. Nationally, "in 2013, 28% of working people employed less than 40 hours a week would be available to work more. This rate is 21% for men, 40% for women, 32% in rural areas, 24% in Dakar and 26% in other urban centers".⁸ The integration of young people into the job market has decreased. With unemployment or underemployment experienced by young people as "social death"⁹, clandestine emigration appears to many as an escape from the employment crisis and professional instability, a possible shortcut to a real and above all dazzling economic ascent. Khalil Gueye is therefore on the mark when he points out that Generation Z fears neither the sea nor the desert to leave the country and go elsewhere to forge a better future¹⁰.

Macky Sall putting democracy and the rule of law to the test: Between authoritarianism and mobilization against presidential excesses

Against this backdrop of crisis, the political game is marked by the excesses of the authoritarian presidential regime, determined to "reduce the opposition to its simplest expression", tolerating no critical stance. As soon as he came to power, Macky Sall set his sights on winning the next election, scheduled for 2019, instead of thinking of the younger generations and ensuring their well-being. Under the pretext of accountability, two opponents are arrested, tried and imprisoned. One is Karim Meissa Wade, the son of former President Abdoulaye Wade, arrested in April 2013 and pardoned in 2018 after 38 months in prison, but deprived of his civil rights and therefore excluded from the 2019 presidential elections. The same scenario is applied to Ababacar Khalifa Sall, Mayor of the capital Dakar, arrested in 2017 and sentenced to five years in prison, pardoned a year later but also deprived of his civil rights.

Although President Macky Sall often compares himself to a wrestling champion seeking to preserve the title "king of the arena", he is not prepared to respect the rules of wrestling, which are known in advance. Before the game, he eliminates serious opponents by intrigues outside of the sport and chooses the referee of his own fights to be proclaimed champion.¹¹ As a result, the February 2019 presidential elections were a triumph for Macky Sall, in the absence of two of Senegal's leading political figures. But as the saying goes, "to conquer without peril, one triumphs without glory". Lacking legitimacy, the new President is sad about not being praised for his exploits in the political arena.

Idrissa Seck and Ousmane Sonko came in second and third respectively, behind Macky Sall. The tension remains palpable in the wake of the elections and is a source of concern for many observers and admirers of the democratic model that is still associated with Senegal. French-Guinean writer Tierno Monénembo, winner of the 2008 Prix Renaudot, reflects on the country's status as a symbol of democracy in Africa. "What's happened to Senegal?" he asks. In his column entitled: "Sénégal: le syndrome Sonko" (Senegal: the Sonko syndrome), published on March 03, 2019, he writes: "But what has happened to the fluid, refined society bequeathed to us by the scholar Senghor....Tolerance, the palaver, the *wakhtane*, the space for negotiation, this cardinal virtue of Senegalese society is shrinking under the double blow of pettiness and partisan ambitions".¹²

But the life lesson in the virtues of dialogue as a way of overcoming the country's difficulties contained in Tierno Monémbo's chronicle has been stripped of its meaning and put in the service of political maneuvers to consolidate a weakened power. Thus, thanks to the effects of COVID-19 and in the higher interests of a country declared to be "in danger", Idrissa Seck joined the presidential majority and was rewarded with the post of President of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council and two ministerial posts for his political party "Le Rewmi" on November 1, 2020. With Idrissa Seck's rallying to power, Macky Sall now believes that he can roll out his plan to run for a third term, especially since, according to him, the constitution adopted in 2016 allows him to do so. But for his plan to succeed, he needs to neutralize all opponents likely to stand in his way. Ousmane Sonko, MP and Mayor of Ziguinchor, the largest city in Casamance in the south of the country, is thus identified as the adversary to be brought down. Judicial cases are being prepared. First, the young massage therapist Adji Sarr accused Ousmane Sonko, declared candidate in the presidential election of February 24, 2024, of "repeated rapes" and "death threats" on February 6, 2021. On March 3, 2021, Sonko was officially implicated and summoned by the dean of judges at the court of Dakar. He responded to the summons, accompanied by his supporters. On the way, he was arrested for "disturbing the peace", then released under judicial supervision after several days of rioting and looting targeting French companies (Total, Auchan Supermarkets, Carrefour etc.) throughout the country. Fourteen (14) deaths were recorded. For Ousmane Sonko, the accusation constituted "a political manipulation designed to put him out of the running for any elective office because he would be ineligible if he were convicted"¹³. Tried in absentia, Sonko was acquitted of rape on June 01, 2023, but found guilty of "corruption of youth" and sentenced to two years in prison and a fine of 600,000 CFA francs. Violence broke out in several towns across the country when the verdict was announced. Nearly sixty people were killed. More than 1,500 people were arrested and imprisoned on a variety of charges, such as "insulting the Head of State", "contempt of court", "spreading false news", etc.

Senegalese scholar Felwine Sarr is therefore correct when he points out that "the judiciary has abused the rhetoric of state security, respect for institutions and the maintenance of public order, to organize the systematic repression of opponents, their intimidation and imprisonment, as well as the silencing of dissenting voices and justice-loving spirits".¹⁴

A second defamation case was then brought against the opponent Sonko, who also received a six-month suspended sentence, mortgaging his legal chances of being accepted as a candidate in the February 25, 2024, elections.

President Macky's melancholy, an element in his inertia

After more than a year of suspense, tensions, and political and religious pressure, Macky Sall announced on July 3, 2023, that he would not stand again in the presidential elections of February 2024. But on July 28, 2023, Ousmane Sonko was arrested in Dakar. "The public prosecutor states that he is under investigation for "various misdemeanors and crimes". The prosecutor considers that "for some time", "acts, declarations, writings, images and maneuvers" on the part of the opponent were "constitutive of criminally reprehensible facts"¹⁵.

Political scientist Pierre Sané calls Macky Sall "a melancholy and unloved President"¹⁶. President Sall is indeed desperate to see his project aborted: to establish an autocracy and, why not, a presidency for life, following the example of his Central African counterparts, to ensure control over the resources expected from the exploitation of oil and gas being developed. "Senegal as an oil emirate, infrastructure under construction, reform of the international financial system?", Pierre Sané asks ironically. No, it won't be under his watch. The disappointment runs deep. This melancholy feeds the inexhaustible rancor he cultivates against Ousmane Sonko, whose unshakeable popularity despite plots, kidnappings and imprisonments enrages an unloved president. Which in turn feeds his melancholy. He has tried everything in the last three years."¹⁷!

President Sall's tactics in the absence of a third mandate

The outcome seemed to become clearer on January 20, 2024, with the publication by the Constitutional Council of the list of 20 candidates, including two women¹⁸, selected on the basis of sponsorship from 70 applicants. Ousmane Sonko was replaced by Bassirou Diomaye Faye, Secretary General of his PASTEF-Les Patriotes party, dissolved on July 31, 2023, by the Minister of the Interior. On February 3, 2024, on the eve of the election campaign, the melancholy President abrogated the decree convening the electorate under the pretext of setting up a parliamentary commission to investigate two judges of the Constitutional Council. Their integrity in the electoral process was being challenged by the Senegalese Democratic Party because its candidate Karim Meissa Wade had not been admitted on the grounds of perjury concerning his dual Senegalese and French nationality. At the same time, the National Assembly passed a bill postponing the presidential elections to December 15, 2024, with the granting of an additional term to President Macky Sall. The bill was referred to the Constitutional Council by a group of candidates, who declared it unconstitutional and ordered the elections to be held "as soon as possible".

Guinean writer Tierno Monémbo appreciates the Constitutional Council's role as referee in the mechanism of the democratic game when he writes: "The action taken by the Constitutional Council after Macky Sall's attempt to roll back the presidential elections was a high point of democracy and, for Africans frustrated with everything, especially freedom, a real state of grace. It was a wonderful surprise, an event usually reserved for the best-established democracies, such as those in Scandinavia"¹⁹.

But Macky Sall continues to play the delaying tactic, announcing the convening of a "national dialogue" to determine the conditions for the organization of presidential elections. Boycotted by 17 candidates, this "national dialogue", held from February 26 to 28, 2024, adopted conclusions offering the possibility of reopening the list of candidates and proposing the date of June 2, 2024, for the presidential elections, while maintaining Macky Sall as president until the inauguration of the newly elected president. Once again, the Constitutional Council rejects these conclusions, sets the election date for March 31, 2024, and specifies that the term of office of the President of the Republic ends on April 2, 2024, and cannot be extended for any reason whatsoever²⁰. Faced with this double rejection by the Constitutional Council, Macky Sall decided to move the election date to March 24, 2024,

giving candidates two weeks for campaigning instead of the three provided for in the electoral code. On March 4, 2024, in a bid to calm the political climate after his departure as head of state, he passed a general amnesty law to free the 1,500 political prisoners languishing in prison²¹. This release allowed Ousmane Sonko and candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye to leave prison and head the campaign of the anti-system Macky Sall coalition.

The election took place calmly and serenely on March 24, 2024. Voters used their ballots to opt for the change embodied by the "Président DIOMAYE 2024" coalition, set up by Ousmane Sonko and his allies. The score was 54.28% in favor, with 35.79% against Amadou Ba, the candidate of the outgoing majority.

Some lessons from this social and political crisis

The third alternation of power enshrined in the results of the March 24, 2024, elections illustrates the vitality of democracy in Senegal. But it also reveals that the model of democracy still suffers from weaknesses linked to its youthfulness and the excesses generated by the presidential system. Between 2019 and 2023, the country experienced considerable political instability due to controversial interpretations of the constitution concerning the legitimacy of a new candidacy by President Macky Sall, who has already served two terms (2012-2019 and 2019-2024).

This crisis, marked by serious unrest, has had a major impact on the country's economy at a time when the exploitation of major oil and gas resources is scheduled for 2025. However, the dynamic of resistance embodied by citizens, and mainly by young people, and the regulatory role played by the Constitutional Council, prevented the country from descending into chaos. By breaking the tie between the competing political parties, the ballot indicated the direction of change in the country.

What's more, the showdown between the Abdoulaye Wade and Macky Sall regimes and the mobilized population showed that defending the constitution is no longer simply a matter for jurists, but for citizens committed to fighting any regime that wants to trample on the law to which it is supposed to be subject in order to guarantee the common will to live together. Young people have been at the forefront of this struggle to consolidate democracy.

At last, a strong wind is blowing from all sides in Senegal. Its messages are about sovereignty, institutional reform, youth employability, cultural anchoring, the quality of human capital, social justice, budgetary transparency and all kinds of accountability. For once, a new government will have only one choice: to reform the presidential system, implement virtuous governance, and respond to the aspirations of young people and women. But women's movements are already expressing their indignation at the low presence of women in the new government (13.33%), since Senegal adopted a gender parity law more than a decade ago. This is a telling sign of the progress that still needs to be made to deepen the Senegalese democratic model, so much appreciated in Africa.

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- ¹ Agence nationale de la statistique et de la démographie du Sénégal, *Résultats du 5^e Recensement Général de la Population et de l'Habitat*, Mai 2023 <https://www.ansd.sn/Indicateur/donnees-de-population>
- ² Robert Fatton Jr. 1987. *The Making of a Liberal Democracy: Senegal's Passive Revolution, 1975–1985*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- ³ Momar Coumba Diop et Mamadou Diouf, *Le Sénégal sous Abdou Diouf, État et société*, 1992, Paris Karthala.
- ⁴ https://books.google.sn/books/about/Assises_nationales.html?id=K-sA56_0aewC&redir_esc=y
- ⁵ <https://journaldoc.blogspot.com/2009/06/elections-locales-du-22-mars-2009.html>
- ⁶ Momar Coumba Diop, *Le Sénégal sous Abdoulaye Wade : le Sopi à l'épreuve du pouvoir*, 2013, Paris, Karthala.
- ⁷ Kalil Gueye, Chronique du 22 novembre 2023 : Les dangers du report de la présidentielle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjFbXOoyroc>
- ⁸ Eveline Baumann, 2016, *Sénégal, le travail dans tous ses états*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes & IRD Éditions, Rennes, Eveline Baumann, 2016, *Sénégal, le travail dans tous ses états*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes & IRD, p.84
- ⁹ Entretien avec Modou Diop, 24 ans, habitant le quartier des pêcheurs Thiaroye, Dakar, 15 mars 2023- Il a déjà effectué deux tentatives pour rejoindre l'Europe.
- ¹⁰ Kalil Gueye, Chronique du 22 novembre 2023 : Les dangers du report de la présidentielle. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjFbXOoyroc>
- ¹¹ Pierre Sané Chronique titrée : DE LA MÉLANCOLIE D'UN PRÉSIDENT MAL AIMÉ in *Sénéplus*, 16/01/2024, <https://www.senepius.com/opinions/de-la-melancolie-dun-president-mal-aime>
- ¹² https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/tierno-monenembo-senegal-le-syndrome-sonko-03-03-2019-2297679_3826.php
- ¹³ <https://www.dw.com/fr/s%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal-ousmane-sonko-adj-sarr-cit%C3%A9-keur-gorgui-macky-sall-pr%C3%A9sidentielle-de-2024-mamadou-dia/a-65706095>
- ¹⁴ Felwine Sarr, chronique : Nous tenir éveillés in https://www.seneweb.com/news/Contribution/nous-tenir-eveilles-par-felwine-sarr_n_418437.html
- ¹⁵ https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/07/28/au-senegal-l-opposant-ousmane-sonko-a-ete-arrete-selon-des-membres-de-son-parti_6183778_3212.html
- ¹⁶ Pierre Sané, Chronique titrée : DE LA MÉLANCOLIE D'UN PRÉSIDENT MAL AIMÉ in *Sénéplus*, 16/01/2024, <https://www.senepius.com/opinions/de-la-melancolie-dun-president-mal-aime>
- ¹⁷ Pierre Sané, Chronique titrée : DE LA MÉLANCOLIE D'UN PRÉSIDENT MAL AIMÉ in *Sénéplus*, 16/01/2024, <https://www.senepius.com/opinions/de-la-melancolie-dun-president-mal-aime>
- ¹⁸ One of the two women will be disqualified on the grounds of dual nationality, revealed after the publication of the list of candidates by the Constitutional Council. In total, nineteen candidates are vying for the Presidency of the Republic in 2024.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.lactuacho.com/senegal-une-democratie-saine-et-sauve-par-lecrivain-guineen-tierno-monenembo/>
- ²⁰ <https://icilome.com/2024/03/senegal-le-conseil-constitutionnel-desavoue-macky-sall-et-son-dialogue/>
- ²¹ <https://www.sudquotidien.sn/les-deputes-ont-vote-le-projet-de-loi-portant-amnistie-generale/>