

Senegal: an authoritarian drift

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The rise of a radical, pan-African left and repression by the liberal powers that be

Senegal has experienced the strongest political crisis in its history.

In fact, since 2021, the political leader of the Pastef party, Ousmane Sonko, had been falsely accused of rape. The entire liberal-socialist state apparatus BENNO BOKK YAKAR (Together with the same hope) has developed a hate campaign against Ousmane Sonko who has become the standard-bearer of African and Senegalese youth. His choices and leadership in the struggle against the post-colonial system of nepotism, corruption and selling of resources frightened Macky Sall and his government. Despite several attempts of arrest and violence against him and members of his party, the judges finally rejected the rape accusation that Ousmane Sonko has always denounced as a conspiracy. Then, the judges found a fanciful accusation of “corruption of youth”, a crime never uttered in Senegal and which makes no sense.

All these stages have been punctuated by violence by the police forces and even the gendarmerie, resulting in some fifty deaths and more than 600 political prisoners. In reality, behind this violence against Ousmane Sonko is Macky Sall, who has been in power for 12 years and has even tried to run for a third term, which is forbidden by the constitution. To maintain his control, he needs to eliminate Ousmane Sonko.

Unfortunately for him, Sonko’s lawyers and the families of the victims have filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court against Macky Sall accused of being linked to the violence that has caused so many deaths between 2021 and 2023.

People no longer want Macky Sall. All the polls give Sonko the winner in the first round. Macky Sall wants him out.

All of Senegal is holding its breath to know if Sonko will be free to participate in the presidential elections of February 2024 because he is currently in prison and on hunger strike.

Mbissane

Dakar, 18 August 2023.

Mbissane is a historian.

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María Gómez Garrido and Gnima Diouf

Senegal has entered a process of political instability in recent months, with no signs of a possible change in sight. The Macky Sall government’s recent manoeuvres against the now main opposition leader and his party denote a series of desperate moves, in which there seems to be more than just a

fear of losing old privileges.

The country that was the first anchor of French colonialism in West Africa has usually been considered a model for the stability of its institutions. Since independence in 1959 there has been no risk of a coup d'état; religious minorities such as Catholicism and animism have coexisted smoothly with the majority Islam. The ethnic and linguistic diversity of a country drawn square and square is sustained by a series of popular formulas *such as cousinage à plaisanterie* [1] and the cohesive force of religious brotherhoods. Or at least that is how it has been for a long time for the older generations.

But stability is not the same as democracy, transparency or rights. Corruption in Senegal is an endemic evil that permeates the entire over-burdened public system, which is at the same time extremely weak because it does not comply with the idea of public service, nor of guaranteeing equal access to rights. The country's impressive economic growth over the last ten years (with a year-on-year variation of 12% of GDP in 2022) has been staged in a series of pharaonic works and infrastructures, such as the new airport, the stadium area, or the long-awaited train, which effectively relieves the unbearable traffic from the *banlieue* to the centre of Dakar.

However, this economic growth has left other fundamental aspects of people's lives untouched. In particular, access to public health care remains an unresolved issue; and access to education is not guaranteed either. Senegal has a 40% illiteracy rate. In a very young country, with a fertility rate of 4.5, Koranic schools or *daaras* are shelters for children from poor families, and the government has never managed to penetrate behind these walls.

[2] Finally, the conflict over the Casamance Statute of Autonomy remains unresolved forty years later, with large numbers of displaced people.

In recent years, the country has seen its best agricultural and fishing resources handed over to European and Chinese companies and governments. The former fishermen are astonished by the progressive reduction of their daily work as a result of the large trawlers in the area. Nobody protects them. The agreements signed by the Senegalese government leave their people totally sold out.

The discovery of sources of gas and oil in the country between 2014 and 2016 put the population on guard against the possibility that these resources would not benefit the country, but only an elite that would benefit from them. Already then, street mobilisations took place. In 2017, Ousman Sonko, leader of the opposition party Senegalese Patriots for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF), published the book *Oil and Gas in Senegal: Chronicle of a Plunder*. A couple of years later, a 2019 BBC documentary on the Petro-Tim [3] case, involving the irregular awarding of gas exploration and exploitation concessions and the involvement of Aliou Sall, son of the current president, sparked a series of street demonstrations in the main cities. *The Aar Li Un Bokk* [4] movement, a broad citizens' front made up of social movements, trade union organisations and political parties, then called for the protection of the country's natural assets and responsible management of them for the common good. This movement joins the urban *Y'an e marre* [Enough is enough], a social movement with strong roots among young artists and journalists in Dakar, which in 2011 began to denounce the mismanagement of public resources, following a series of power cuts in the city, and after the then president Abdoulaye Wade announced that he would run for a third term in office. *Y'an en marre* criticised the then president's management, and today its leaders, no longer so young, have also criticised the repressive reaction carried out by Macky Sall's government.

But it is the leader of the Pastef party, Ousmane Sonko, who has best managed to channel the population's discontent. This tax inspector, with no previous connection to the state apparatus,

unlike most of the electoral candidates, managed already in 2019 to give visibility to a party built largely on voluntary contributions from the Senegalese diaspora.

Anyone who studies Senegalese migration to Europe today is sure to come across the name Sonko. It emerges easily in the discourses of the migrant, especially the male migrant. In a story of struggle, of enduring all kinds of violence in Europe, and of hardship at home, hope always appears with the name of this candidate.

With a firm anti-colonial discourse, Sonko already promised in his 2019 campaign to get the country out of the spiral of corruption, and to emancipate itself from the colonial yoke, understood in the Senegalese context as the French yoke. Several points of his political programme were along these lines: leaving the CEFA franc, the guarantee that natural resources will be managed by and for the Senegalese, and an emphasis on Islam as a sign of identity, which in many countries that were former colonies has become a symbol of anti-Europeanism, given the Islamophobic tendency in the old continent.

In relation to the first point, the exit from the CEFA franc, a measure that has already been very present in recent political debates in West African countries and against which France has shown signs of giving way.

[5]The fact that the currency continued to depend on the value set by the French Treasury was a loophole in the colonial heritage, read as a humiliation.

But it is above all the idea of ending the various trade agreements with Europe, and especially France, that is Sonko's strong line, as well as a firm programme to end corruption. The leader has achieved maximum popularity among the youth and among Senegalese in the diaspora. And it is perhaps for this very reason that the state apparatus, including the judiciary and the forces of law and order - police, military and gendarmerie - have acted virulently against the leader and his party. The spiral of state violence has been *in crescendo*.

In February 2021, in the midst of his growing popularity, Ousman Sonko was accused of raping a masseuse. His arrest in March of that year sparked a wave of protests in the country, which were harshly repressed, leaving 14 people dead, 12 of whom were shot by Senegalese law enforcement, according to [Amnesty International](#). This year, the political leader was finally acquitted of rape but charged with *corruption of youth*. This sentence, as well as his house arrest last July in Dakar, reignited protests, the repression of which led to 16 more deaths, in addition to the arrests of journalists, including Pape Ale diang, editor-in-chief of the Dakar Matin news portal, and Aliou Sané, coordinator of the [Y'en a marre](#) movement. The internet has also been suspended intermittently for days to prevent communication via social networks.

One of Sonko's lawyers, the Franco-Spanish Juan Branco, who had denounced the Senegalese government for crimes against humanity for the violent repression of dissidence, was arrested and subsequently expelled from the country. Sonko has been remanded in prison on 1 August. In addition to the charges of corruption of youth, he has been charged with insurrection, association of criminals linked to a terrorist enterprise, and plotting against state security. Pastef, who was the main leader of the opposition coalition Yewwi Askan Wi [*Free the People*], has been dissolved by decree.

In this authoritarian drift, Macky Sall's government is only fuelling criticism from younger sectors of the country, who no longer accept the inherited colonial legacy. As the writer Boubacar Boris Diop lucidly pointed out in a [recent interview](#), young people are tired of democracies that serve only a few elites. Moreover, the historical lack of European empathy means that Africans are increasingly

distrustful of operations carried out on their territory in the name of human rights.

Sonko starts from a pan-Africanist and anti-colonial discourse that manages to combine this critical spirit. However, its programme is also tinged with ambivalence: the emphasis is placed on work, but there is no mention of living wages (in fact, the party's "work" point states that work dignifies human beings regardless of their remuneration); there is no reference to social policies. Finally, the party's actions divide the women's movement, which has seen both the state and the opposition fight their battle over a woman's body, without her having a voice for herself [6].

Pastef was born as a party whose main hallmark would be anti-colonialism, through a vague idea of the country's autonomous development, i.e. without external dependence, but without clarifying what this country to be built would be like. This discourse has had a strong impact on a large part of young people, and university students in particular. It is worth remembering that the Senegalese education and university system is an almost identical copy of the French university system. Indeed, we find the same names, the same institutional organisations and almost the same curricular content. Since childhood, Senegalese students have had no curricular content that corresponds to their Senegalese and African cultures. Universities teach from French, Spanish, English, Portuguese, German and Arabic. But very rarely in African languages. This context makes the rupture even greater between elites who reproduce a neo-colonial system without questioning it and even presenting it as something "modern" as opposed to a "tradition" that would be useless in a globalised world, and young people who aspire for their teaching to be based on what they live and know. Sonko's programme, with all its ambivalences, alludes to this aspect and garners massive support from the student community. It is these young people who undoubtedly hold the key to the Senegalese outcome, as they have nothing to lose...

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] *Cousinage à plaisanterie* is a practice of communication between two strangers of different ethnicity (for example, between a Peul and a Serer, or between a Serer and a Diola), a way of greeting each other, in which jokes are made about the other ethnicity, while at the same time, in this moment of humour, the closeness of the supposed, fictitious kinship between the ethnic groups is established. About this practice,

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-raisons-politiques-2004-1-page-157.htm?contenu=article>.

[2] We know that in some of them there is care, and children are able to get on in their lives. In others, however, there is abuse, rape, and children are forced into begging. Child begging has been banned since 2005. And the Macky Sall government showed firmness by imprisoning some marabouts [Koranic teachers] on charges of child exploitation for forcing children into begging. However, in many of these cases, the population itself mobilised against the government's decision. Thus, the issue of daaras remains a sensitive and unresolved issue.

[3] The documentary [The \\$10 million energy scandal](#) examines the irregular awarding of the concession to businessman Frank Timis, in a non-transparent procedure that also involved British Petrol. When Macky Sall was elected president in April 2012, he opened an investigation into the case, only to end up keeping the two concessions.

[4] *Aar Li Un Bokk*, sometimes translated as "Protect our resources". Bokk is that which unites us, that which we share, i.e. rather "protect our commons".

[5] In December 2019, an agreement is signed between Macron and the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, in which France undertakes to stop intervening in the currency of the ACF. The creation of the Echo, a currency that would unite eight former West African nations, is announced.

[6] [A woman's body as a political stage](#). Text published by the [Senegalese Feminist Network](#), 15 June 2023.