

# The June Days - Senegal's struggle for justice

Saturday 10 February 2024, by [SYLLA Ndongo Samba](#), [ZEILIG Léo](#) (Date first published: 13 June 2023).

**Since the start of the month, Senegal has seen major demonstrations, rioting, and violence. In an interview with ROAPE's Leo Zeilig, Ndongo Sylla explains what is happening. Supporters of opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko, are furious at the regime's attempt to frustrate next year's elections by framing Sonko on false charges. Sylla examines the social and political forces that are engulfing the country and threatening to overturn the political class and the neo-colonial settlement.**

**Leo Zeilig: Senegal was rocked by protests last week after opposition figure Ousmane Sonko was sentenced to two years in prison on 1 June - yet he was not found guilty of rape. Can you briefly explain the background to the charges and what happened?**

**Ndongo Sylla:** In February 2021, Ousmane Sonko, Senegal's leading political opposition figure, was accused of repeated rape and death threats by Adjy Raby Sarr, a young employee of a massage salon he was visiting during the curfew period at the height of the covid-19 pandemic. His arrest in March 2021 led to violent demonstrations across most of the country for five days. [14 deaths were recorded](#). Calm was only restored when Macky Sall decided to release Sonko. Sonko and his lawyers claim that he is the victim of a state plot. What evidence did they put forward in favour of their hypothesis? The woman who owns the massage salon, despite the intimidation she had suffered, denied the plaintiff's accusations. To put pressure on her, during her interrogation, she was separated for several hours from her premature baby whose life was put at risk. According to her lawyer, she was offered money to change [her testimony](#). A woman who also worked for the massage salon contradicted the plaintiff's claim and revealed that the latter asked her to be left alone in the room with Sonko. The gynecologist who examined the plaintiff maintained that he had no material evidence to prove a possible rape. He was subsequently [intimidated](#). The gendarmerie officer in charge of investigating the complaint found the plaintiff's statements contradictory and suspected a political plot. He also claimed that his investigation [report had been falsified](#) with the aim of charging Sonko. He was eventually fired from the gendarmerie. The "unfalsified" investigation report that discharged Ousmane Sonko ended up with a famous Senegalese journalist, who commented on it extensively in a [video](#) that went viral. For this, he was jailed for [several months](#).

The plaintiff herself confided about the alleged rape intrigue to her marabout (religious guide), who recorded their telephone conversations without her knowledge. These recordings were widely circulated on social media. The plaintiff admitted to having contacts with important figures in the regime who want to see Sonko fall. Before the judge, the plaintiff confirmed that it was indeed her voice that could be heard on the phone recordings but specified that she was deliberately lying in order to cheat her marabout. She said she had also lied about her initial statement that she was ["pregnant"](#).

Between March 2021 and June 2023, the plaintiff and her lawyers claimed to have compromising videos. Before the judge, they produced no tangible evidence to support their accusation. According to Sonko's lawyers, given the absence of any material evidence, the case should have been dismissed from the outset. They saw the decision to hold a trial based solely on the plaintiff's statements and

alleged traces of sperm (unidentifiable) as part of an attempt to liquidate a political opponent.

Sensing that the rape charge was difficult to establish, the prosecutor, in his closing argument, asked the judge to re-characterise it as “corruption of youth”. Sonko, having chosen not to attend the trial, was tried in absentia. As a result, his lawyers were not allowed to speak in court. The [final verdict](#) acquitted Sonko of the charges of rape and death threats, but sentenced him to two years’ imprisonment for “corruption of youth”, a charge that had not previously been brought, and which came as a surprise to everyone, including Sonko’s lawyers. This conviction comes on top of another recent one for [“defamation”](#), which apparently renders Sonko ineligible to run in the forthcoming elections.

When the verdict was announced on 1 June, unprecedented violent demonstrations engulfed the country. Roads were blocked everywhere. Bank branches, supermarkets, petrol stations and public infrastructures were ransacked and looted. The homes and cars of certain politicians from the ruling coalition were torched, as were courthouses and public buses. The same applies to the premises and archives of the Faculty of Letters and Humanities at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar. Even if a complete assessment is not yet available, the economic losses are undoubtedly colossal.

Well-equipped but small in number the Forces of Defence and Security (FDS - police and gendarmerie) were subjected to the fury of demonstrators. Some members of the FDS were killed by the demonstrators or unwittingly by their own colleagues. Demonstrators sometimes managed to seize police vehicles and set them alight. Overwhelmed, the police sometimes used young people as human shields, as attested by a [viral video](#) investigated by the Al Jazeera TV channel. [UNICEF](#) has publicly called for an investigation into the matter. The FDS also attacked the demonstrators and fired live ammunition at them, resulting in a number of deaths. Despite the claims of the Senegalese authorities, it has been [established](#) that the FDS cooperated with armed henchmen who were recruited to suppress the demonstrators. The army came in to reinforce the FDS, notably to protect a few strategic locations, but without taking part in the repression. It received a triumphant welcome from demonstrators in some Dakar neighbourhoods, as online videos show.

**Can you talk us through the protests? Tragically at least 15 people were killed by the security services. Where have the protests been? What cities? Who has been in the streets, and are workers mobilising, and what has been the position of trade unions, and civil society?**

Demonstrations took place in most of Senegal’s 14 regions. Dakar and Ziguinchor (stronghold of Sonko, who is mayor of the region) were the epicenters of the protests. The 23 deaths - not 14 as you report - including three children, recorded between June 1 and 2 by [Amnesty International](#) came from these two regions. [The Red Cross](#) assisted around 360 people wounded in these two regions. As in March 2021, young people mobilised in early June this year.

In my opinion, the most symbolic image of this popular uprising is that of an ordinary woman, dressed in a loincloth, dragging, with difficulty, a tire to be burned.

The trade unions were not involved in the protests. Neither did the “official” civil society organisations - those in dialogue with the government and donor agencies, which opts for other modes of action. Sonko’s party, the [PASTEF](#), and his coalition (Yewwi Askan Wi) have called on the demonstrators to continue their “resistance”, arguing that this is a right recognised by the Senegalese Constitution. The same goes for the Y’en a Marre movement, which is now calling for Macky Sall’s resignation, and FRAPP (Front pour une Révolution Anti-impérialiste Populaire et Panafricain), a movement that has seen some of its members [unjustly imprisoned](#).

Demonstrations in support of Sonko have also been organised by the Senegalese diaspora in several cities: Washington, Paris, Milan, etc. Following some attacks, the Senegalese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has temporarily shut [consulates abroad](#). Social media have been an important place for information sharing (images, news and also how to circumvent state imposed restrictions on social media) and (emotional) mobilisation through the hashtag [#FreeSenegal](#). It's worth noting the recent emergence of diaspora-based cyberactivists who provide their numerous followers with information of varying quality on the situation in Senegal, while urging them to take to the streets to "get rid of" Macky Sall, or to orchestrate acts of sabotage against the property of those close to him or his supporters (e.g. burning down their homes). It should also be noted that, prior to the June events, hacker group [Anonymous](#) took down Senegalese government websites in "retaliation" for restrictions on liberties.

### **Who is responsible for the violence?**

In the face of numerous destructions and the unfortunate death toll, Senegalese intellectuals who have dared to point the finger of blame at the government have been subjected to violent ad hominem attacks by its hired pens. But are these intellectuals wrong? I don't think so. By calling for "resistance" and the law of retaliation, Sonko and his supporters have undoubtedly contributed to making things worse. But the worm was already in the fruit. Senegal would never have ended up in this situation if the current regime had behaved in a constitutional manner, was mindful of the law and had not developed the habit of [using the justice system against its opponents](#).

The unprecedented outpouring of violence from 'both camps' could have been prevented if Macky Sall managed in a fair manner, [as he promised](#) [see from 1h42], to "reduce the opposition to its simplest expression". Instead, his regime started relentlessly hunting down Sonko's party members as well as journalists and activists who dared to criticise his policies and rule. Before the events of June, over 400 people had been put in prison, a number that must have risen since then. Most of us know young people who, although not among the protesters, are languishing in prison because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The leader of Y'en a Marre, Aliou Sané, was arrested and put in prison for a few days by the prosecutor's office on the grounds that he was taking part in the demonstrations. Having been lucky enough to be assisted by a lawyer and to appear before a judge, he was able to produce a video clearing him of the [charges against him](#). But how many young people, unknown to the public and often detained in horrific conditions, are so lucky?

Against this backdrop of unprecedented government repression, freedom of expression has also been drastically curtailed. [Reporters without borders](#) released a report in early May showing a 31-place fall for Senegal between 2022 and 2023. A trend that has continued recently with the cutting off of mobile internet for several days, the suspension of the signal of the [Walf TV](#), reputed to be "the voice of the voiceless", and even of one of its [electronic accounts](#) where it is supposed to receive solidarity donations from ordinary Senegalese.

In French-speaking Africa, in the post-single-party context, the tendency of the regimes in power - faithful allies of Paris - is to use state power to choose their own opponents in elections. In the 2019 presidential election won by Macky Sall in the first round, his two main rivals - former Dakar mayor Khalifa Sall and President Wade's son Karim - were [eliminated](#) from the race following prison sentences handed down against them. To "rationalise" the number of presidential candidates, the regime introduced "citizen sponsorship", which [ECOWAS Justice Court](#) considered afterwards as a violation of "the right of free participation in elections" that should end. That is still not the case. Moreover, Macky Sall has in the past years repeatedly stated that he is not entitled to a [third term in office](#). This was confirmed in emphatic terms by his current [Minister of Justice](#), a professor of

constitutional law. But in an interview with a [French magazine](#), Macky Sall now maintains that he has the right to do so, and that he reserves [the right to decide](#) whether or not to run for another term.

In 2020, in Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara forced a third term, obtained an international arrest warrant for his main political opponent in exile and also introduced "citizen sponsorship" as an electoral guillotine. The same methods are still at work today. His rival Laurent Gbagbo is ineligible, having been struck off the electoral roll as a result of a well-timed judicial conviction.

When rulers abuse the law, persecute opponents and dissidents without a second thought, and restrict civil liberties, we should not be surprised to see a counter-power emerge in the form of popular protest and violence. This is not an excuse for violence, but a simple observation drawn from the lessons of history. As Mandela wrote in his autobiography [The Long Walk to Freedom](#), "it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor. At a point, one can only fight fire with fire."

**Many commentators have said that the movement in Senegal is the largest since 1988 (when former president Abdou Diouf declared a state of emergency as supporters of a defeated rival, Abdoulaye Wade, fought the police) - how do you measure the scale of the protest action, and how is it being organised on the ground? Can it be sustained?**

Although the 1988 events sent Senegal into a state of emergency, it's not the reference I'd choose. In terms of national scope, numbers mobilised and violence, the events of early June 2023 are, in my opinion, a repeat on a larger scale of the ["five days of anger"](#) of March 2021.

In terms of political significance, the events of early June are akin to the socio-political crisis of December 1962, which saw President Senghor, backed by France, get rid of Mamadou Dia, then President of the Council and head of the Executive. At the time, Mamadou Dia wanted to liquidate the colonial economy, and was banking on the creation of democratic rural cooperatives. His societal project collided with the interests of the dominant political class, the marabouts who controlled the groundnut economy, French capitalists and their government. [These various groups](#) set their sights on Senghor, a member of the Christian minority in a country whose population is officially over 90% Muslim.

Senghor had used the judicial system to imprison Mamadou Dia for over 11 years in [inhumane conditions](#). With Dia ousted, Senghor had free rein to create a monarchical constitution...at the cost of [forty dead and over 250 wounded](#) following the twin elections of 1963.

In my opinion, this is the same type of struggle that's being played out right now between Macky Sall and Sonko. But there are some differences. Unlike Dia, Sonko enjoys an enormous popularity rating among young people, a social group now numbering in the millions, most of them being ["idle"](#) (not in employment, education or training) and very much present on social media, a tool that enables a better circulation of information, whatever its quality, and helps to make visible the reprehensible acts that existing powers would be tempted to hide, censor or disguise.

**Some people have been arguing that Senegal is no longer the vibrant democracy it used to be. What do you make of this claim?**

Comrade, let me make it clear from the outset that so-called "representative democracy" was not originally designed to be representative of any "public interest". Its purpose was to block democracy, understood as a regime in which the working classes sit in (and numerically dominate) the sovereign bodies of legislation and control. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the regime we now call

“democracy” (representative/liberal) was known as “republic”, “elective aristocracy” and “bourgeois government”. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that this oligarchic regime came to be equated with democracy. That capitalism and democratic government were incompatible was self-evident to the American founding fathers, some of whom regarded democracy as “[the worst of all political evils](#)”. That’s why the words “democracy” and “democratic” are nowhere to be found in the current US Constitution, which was conceived against a backdrop of serious social unrest for which a constitutional antidote was needed. For those interested in this little-known history, I refer you to my [own work](#) on the topic and to those of [John Dunn](#), [Luciano Canfora](#) and [Francis Dupuis-Déri](#).

The so-called Western democratic countries have oligarchic *governments* (the rich make the sovereign decisions; note that it’s a mistake to consider the election of representatives as a “delegation of power”, it is rather a way of influencing the formation of a sovereign body), but they have managed to achieve *democratic performance* (the conquest of important freedoms and better living conditions for the majority) due to historical factors that cannot be reproduced in countries under imperialist domination, and which I cannot dwell on here for lack of space.

The point here is to say that the idea that Senegal is a “democracy” is farcical. If the Western countries that are supposed to be “models” are not, how can “mimicking student” Senegal be? As in most French-speaking countries, which have imitated the French Constitution of the Fifth Republic, the one that General de Gaulle carved out for himself, the Senegalese political system gives excessive powers to the president, who is a kind of monarch by electoral right for the duration of his term.

However, with that said, it has to be acknowledged that Senegal has succeeded in forming a nation: ethnic and religious pluralism has not been a source of discord as in some countries on the continent. So far, there has been a culture of tolerance, peace, and hospitality among the people. These laudable aspects have nothing to do with – and do not derive from – the nature of the political regime, which has been and remains fundamentally despotic in its current practice.

**Anger at President Macky Sall’s tenure is intense across the country, with very little support. What does Sall represent, and who does he represent. What is the balance of international (and specifically western) influence and power across Senegal and how are these dynamics impacting the political crisis?**

For his supporters, Macky Sall is the president with the best economic record in Senegal’s history. They cite economic growth rates of around 6% on average per year before the pandemic, visible through modern infrastructures – such as a toll highway, a regional express train, a new airport, etc. – and social programs such as cash transfers, a measure recommended by the World Bank, particularly with a view to making poor households more “resilient”, and presumably preventing a social explosion driven by popular frustrations. But there is [another way](#) of looking at it.

Senegal’s economic growth has been driven by foreign currency debt, which has more than doubled since 2012 as a proportion of GDP. It has not generated any [net creation of decent jobs](#), one of the main demands of the Senegalese people. Interestingly, the [French Treasury](#) noted in 2020 that Senegal’s Development blueprint – the *Plan Sénégal Emergent* – has been highly beneficial to the French economy.

Assessing Macky Sall’s economic policy from the point of view of economic and monetary sovereignty, I’d say he’s mainly been concerned with defending foreign interests. He agreed to sign the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the European Union, despite the fact that (i) most of the [existing studies](#) carried out by independent Senegalese experts and by ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] showed a significant negative impact, and (ii)

Senegal's status as a Least Developed Country (LDC) meant that he was under no [obligation to sign them](#). Better still, he defended the signing of such agreements by other West African countries. Another example is the trade and financial sanctions against Mali. In January 2022, the ECOWAS member countries, under the auspices of their French-speaking counterparts, themselves under the orders of France, decided to sanction Mali officially to put pressure on the military government to hold early elections. An unspoken motive was that the French government also wanted to punish the new Malian regime, which had resolved to drive out the French military troops present on its soil. As a result, the Malian government, a member of the CFA franc zone, was no longer able to [access its accounts](#) at the common central bank and to its domestic financial system. It had to default on its debts. The problem was that these commercial and financial sanctions were illegal under domestic law, franc CFA monetary union and ECOWAS provisions.

Worse still, in Senegal's case, imposing sanctions against Mali was tantamount to punishing itself. As an export destination for Senegalese products, Mali is more significant than [all the EU countries combined](#). No government concerned with legality and its economic interests would have agreed to sanction a neighbouring country just to please France and the EU.

A final example: the government of Senegal awarded oil and gas exploration licenses to Total, despite the fact that Total had initially not even been considered in the call for tenders, and that its late bid was apparently not advantageous for Senegal. Shocked by such an outcome, the then Minister of Hydrocarbons, Thierno Alassane Sall, resigned and subsequently accused President Macky Sall of "high treason" in a [book](#).

With the imminent exploitation of oil and gas, Senegal has become a popular destination for world leaders. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, President of the EU Commission Ursula Von der Leyen, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and others have all made the trip to Dakar. Each of them see Macky Sall as a valuable guardian of Western interests.

Unsurprisingly, the communiqués by Western countries in response to the recent uprising were as timid as those issued by ECOWAS and the African Union. They called for calm, but refrained from denouncing the government's handling of the crisis, unlike organisations such as [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#).

**Can 'the streets' - and the extraordinary history of social movements in the country - win out? Previously efforts to remake Senegal from below have failed, with (opposition) politicians, riding a wave of popular mobilisation, from opposition into government. Is there an alternative emerging from within the radicalising support base for Sonko?**

The "streets" can never win outright because the people - the popular and dominated classes - do not participate in the exercise of "institutional power", State power. Others must decide for them within the framework of the representative system. At best, the "streets" can act as a brake on despotic excesses and, if necessary, redistribute the cards within the political game. So far, this force has saved Sonko from prison on two occasions, in March 2021 and early June 2023. So far, Sonko enjoys "popular immunity".

Let me give you an example. The Secretary General of his party, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, was arrested without a warrant and put in prison for posting a text on Facebook in which he spoke of the "beggardisation of the judiciary" (*clochardisation de la justice* - in French). Sonko took the same text and posted it on his Facebook page. Nothing happened. Because the government knows what will happen if it tries to put him in prison. At the moment, even though he has been convicted by the Senegalese courts, he still hasn't been arrested...he is rather, according to his lawyers, 'illegally sequestered' at his home by the FDS since the end of May, without the possibility of leaving his

home, receiving his lawyers, his party members, and so on. The ultimate aim of the demonstrators is for Sonko to be the victorious candidate in the next presidential election scheduled for February 2024. There are fears of a new cycle of violence when the government tries to stop him or his candidacy. For the time being, a temporary peace will likely be “bought” in exchange for the pursuit of a regime of impunity. But for how long?

### **What sort of alternative does a Sonko government offer the poor?**

Sonko currently represents the hope of change for Senegalese youth and a significant part of the diaspora. Assuming he emerges from his legal troubles and becomes Senegal’s fifth president, he will be placed between the hammer of powerful enemies – the privileged inhabitants of the neo-colonial order and possibly the social groups and countries whose economic interests might be threatened – and the anvil of demands from the working classes, who expect an improvement in their living conditions, and from his own militants, who will want to be rewarded for their “sacrifices”.

To be frank, I fear that Senegal is heading for political instability. Why? Contrary to the “rosy” and apologetic analyses that extol the unshakeable strength of Senegal’s “social contract”, I understand Senegal’s relative political “stability” in two ways.

Firstly, until now the ruling class (including most intellectuals) has been satisfied with the neo-colonial pact with the French elites. As long as political struggles do not challenge this neo-colonial pact, the country can aspire to neo-colonial political stability. This is the same type of “stability” found in countries such as Cameroon, Gabon and Côte d’Ivoire (until the death of Houphouët Boigny). Before Sonko, the only challenge to this neo-colonial pact came from Mamadou Dia.

Secondly, Senegal’s political stability depended on one thing it didn’t have: strategic resources such as oil. All the oil-exporting countries that use the CFA franc have heads of state who are presidents for life: there are no presidential term limits (Gabon, Cameroon and the Republic of Congo), and often the simple majority system (one round) prevails.

A democratic jolt is therefore needed to prevent an undesirable scenario. However, I don’t see it coming from the “political class” or the intelligentsia, the vast majority of whom continue to demonstrate their inability to divorce themselves from the liberal thinking of Thomas Hobbes and Montesquieu, with a view to original, endogenous socio-political reflection.

As for young people, who make up the reality of the demos, the gerontocratic political system excludes them from decision-making bodies that decide their future. This leaves them only with the “streets” and social networks. And yet, beyond the partisan conflicts of the moment, we Senegalese should all listen carefully to the words of a [young demonstrator](#) (my translation from Wolof):

President Macky Sall [...] we don’t even have enough to treat our poor sick mothers. We are socially marginalised people! Our little brothers and sisters no longer go to school. Life is expensive: a loaf of bread costs 175 CFA francs, a kilo of sugar 700 CFA francs. What is the price of a bag of rice? What’s the price of gas? Macky take pity on us! We have resources like oil, gas, zircon, gold. We have everything we need to develop our country! As soon as the gold from Sabadola [located in south-eastern Senegal] is extracted, its destination is France. France is one of the countries with the largest gold reserves. Yet they have no natural resources [...] How many years has our oil been exploited? Our zircon? Our phosphate? We love our country! We believe in it!

Admittedly, the official destination of gold mined in Senegal is often Switzerland rather than France.

But the message is unequivocal and straightforward: Senegalese youth aspires to an economy that serves the needs of the masses.

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