

Macky Sall's coup in Senegal: an interview with Florian Bobin

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ROAPE's Leo Zeilig interviews researcher, writer and activist Florian Bobin on the deepening crisis in Senegal. Bobin describes the repression and bloodshed of the last few years, and the efforts to unseat the president. He analyses the potential for a radical left alternative emerging in the country, based on the "deep, systemic re-foundation" of society and its institutions. If this does not happen, Bobin argues, the ranks of the opposition once in power will have at their disposal the same powers that oppressed them.

Leo Zeilig: Comrade, can you introduce yourself to ROAPE's readers? Many of us know your work, and writing on [roape.net](#), but please outline your activism and research.

Florian Bobin: I am a researcher in history at the Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, and my work focuses on [liberation struggles](#) and state violence in Senegal under the rule of President Leopold Sedar Senghor (1960-1980).

I believe in going beyond the confines of academia and making radical histories, buried by national myths, accessible to a wider public as part of the toolkit of those fighting injustice today; by making my publications open access and available in French and English, by trying to disseminate their content through multimedia formats on social media platforms, and by participating in various non-academic events.

In recent years, I have also been active in promoting the life and work of revolutionary philosopher [Omar Blondin Diop](#). In 2023, on the 50th anniversary of his [death](#) in custody, we published, with his family, his selected writings, which resonates tremendously with contemporary struggles and are now available in Dakar. The biography I wrote about him will be published later this year.

Can you give us a quick overview of the situation, and the background to the political crisis in Senegal?

At the heart of the current crisis is President Macky Sall's desire to retain power for his clan. He sought a third term in office, but popular mobilisation forced him to renounce it. Sall then named Prime Minister Amadou Ba as *his* candidate for the upcoming presidential race, but Ba's unpopularity with the public, even within his own party, has created a crisis within the ruling coalition of Benno Bokk Yaakaar (BBY).

And while Sall's regime has sought to eradicate the opposition ('reducing it to its simplest expression', as he put it in 2015) and successfully disqualified his main opponent Ousmane Sonko from running, Sonko's number two in his party African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics, and Fraternity (PASTEF), Bassirou Diomaye Faye, was ruled eligible to run and is now considered one of the favourites. If free and fair elections were to be held, the current regime would likely fall and cede power to PASTEF. In such a case, Macky Sall and his clan would risk being prosecuted by a

party built on the fight against corruption, which could deviate from the usual impunity that prevails after party changeovers in Senegal.

So Macky Sall had to find a way to keep his coalition - or at least an objective ally - in control. On 3 February, a few hours before the start of the presidential campaign, he announced the annulment of an earlier decree "convening the electoral body", on the pretext of an alleged institutional crisis following unsubstantiated allegations of corruption in the Constitutional Council by Karim Wade (son of former president Abdoulaye Wade, for whom Macky Sall was a leading collaborator in the 2000s before taking his place in 2012), who had been disqualified for falsely declaring that he had renounced his French dual nationality.

Two days later, on 5 February, the government coalition of BBY joined forces with Karim Wade's Senegalese Democratic Party (PDS), despite the latter's official status as an opposition party. After calling on the gendarmerie [a military police force] in the chamber of the National Assembly to expel MPs who opposed the move, BBY and PDS voted unanimously in favour of a law cancelling the election and calling for a new vote 10 months later, in December 2024. In a sense, this sealed the reunification of the extended liberal political family, whose aim is to ensure the survival of the "[neo-colonial pact](#)" by eliminating serious contenders and selecting acceptable heirs.

On 15 February, however, the Constitutional Council declared this decision unconstitutional and called for elections to be held "as soon as possible". Since then, the president has refused to respect the electoral calendar (the first round was originally scheduled for 25 February), calling instead for a "national dialogue" to reach a "consensus".

The gap between Macky Sall's rhetoric - in part directed at his international partners - and the brutality of his rule is profoundly Orwellian. How can there be a "dialogue" with a president who has violated the Constitution by illegally seeking to extend his term in office, and who has then violently suppressed the voices denouncing his institutional coup? As a result of this crisis of the president's own making, at least four young men have been killed by the police since 9 February.

For more than two years, at least since 2021, there have been major disturbances, and unprecedented repression and killings of opposition supporters and opponents of the Macky Sall's government, and the ruling Benno Bokk Yaakaar (BBY) coalition. Can you please talk us through what has been going on, and efforts to record who has been killed?

Senegal has a long history of political repression, dating back to [Leopold Senghor's regime](#), itself an heir to the violent colonial administration. After a relative political opening under the Abdou Diouf and Abdoulaye Wade administrations - repressive in their own rights - Macky Sall has significantly strengthened the security apparatus.

Over the past four years, Senegal has witnessed the systematic persecution of dissenting voices, epitomised by the bloody repression of the [March 2021](#) and [June 2023](#) protests (over sixty people have been killed). The judiciary has been instrumentalised, journalists harassed, TV stations broadcasting protests were switched off, and internet access via mobile data cut. Demonstrations, almost all of which were banned in the past year, have been met with tear gas and sometimes live ammunition (much of it manufactured by French corporations), with the police backed up by plainclothes militiamen marauding through the streets. The main opposition party, PASTEF, has been dissolved; hundreds of national and local opposition figures have been imprisoned alongside demonstrators and bystanders in appalling conditions, some of them tortured. One of Macky Sall's legacies is undoubtedly the dramatic decay of fundamental rights in Senegal.

Together with journalists, cartographers, and data scientists, we launched an initiative last year

called [CartograFreeSenegal](#) to keep an accurate record of those killed in the government crackdown, and to put faces and stories behind the statistics. What we have found is that many are young, working-class men living on the outskirts of Dakar or in the southern region of Casamance. The authorities have not launched any official investigation (Macky Sall announced on 22 February an imminent amnesty law, presented as a measure to appease the opposition, but more likely an attempt to cover up his administration's involvement in the killings from 2021 to 2024), but the victims' families, along with collectives and organisations such as Amnesty International, are fighting for justice.

You have [written](#) about the closure of the main university in Dakar, and the student's struggle. Can you tell us a little about the role and involvement of students in the current action? I am always inspired by the solidarity, daring and action of students in Senegal. What are the links and connections between campus politics, and city, countrywide action?

The students at the University of Dakar have been a key force in social mobilisation, from independence struggles of the 1950s to the strikes of 1968 and 1988. The past four years have been no exception. Recognising that the campus was central to blocking the major roads of the capital and posed a serious political threat in the pre-electoral context, the authorities decided to close the university in June 2023, resulting in the dispersal of tens of thousands of students across the country and significantly weakening their mobilising potential.

This closure, together with the suffocating blockade of the southern region of Casamance through the suspension of the ferry line from Dakar to Ziguinchor (of which Ousmane Sonko is mayor), is undoubtedly an expression of the current regime's desire to dismantle the politicised student body and of the class war being waged against the most disadvantaged sections of society. Many students have since abandoned their studies and sought low-paying jobs to survive; others have already taken the dangerous routes of exile to Europe and North America, some at the cost of their lives.

On 9 February, the violent death of Alpha Yoro Tounkara, a student at the Gaston Berger University in Saint-Louis, in the north of the country, who was killed by a policeman during a demonstration on campus, sent shockwaves throughout the country (another student, Prosper Clédor Senghor, who had been in a coma for ten days, died of his injuries on 21 February). Despite the blockade in Dakar, student unions from all the other universities immediately announced the suspension of classes for several days, joined by high school students who also organised walkouts.

Can we talk about the left in Senegal? There are several important figures and associated coalitions, the principle anti-government leader is Ousmane Sonko, who has a great deal of support. Sonko's party African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics, and Fraternity (PASTEF) has been very active - can you tell us about his politics, and positions? Then there is also FRAPP (Front for an Anti-Imperialist, Popular, and Pan-African Revolution), led by Guy Marius Sagna, who is the group's administrative secretary. What does FRAPP represent? What sort of connection is there between Sagna and Sonko?

As Ndongo Samba Sylla pointed out at the recent Dakar [book](#) launch of *Revolutionary Movements in Africa* (Pluto Press, 2023): "In francophone Africa, we have the colonial legacy of 'hold elections, but don't go outside the box', and the left cannot exist from an electoral point of view. We have left-wing problems, but they cannot be solved by the parties in power because they form coalitions that pander to metropolitan or neo-colonial interests or pursue a neo-liberal agenda". A related phenomenon analysed by Pascal Bianchini, another co-editor of the volume, is how [historic left-wing](#) parties that fought underground under Senghor's one-party regime later formed alliances with neoliberal parties and suffered internal divisions over personal struggles for leadership. Today, most of these parties survive because of their alliance with the ruling coalition. A few voices have

cautiously expressed their disagreement with Macky Sall's annulment of the election, but none have come out to break their collaboration.

In the face of what Amadou Kah calls "the transition from class struggle to the struggle for seats", the Ousmane Sonko [phenomenon](#) has undoubtedly contributed to the politicisation of a youth - especially urban and poor - that had hitherto been excluded from political discourse, including that of the institutionalised left. Just look at the number of working-class Senegalese - from students and street vendors to tailors and bus drivers - wearing bracelets to show their support for his party.

PASTEUF is a mix of several ideological currents, some conservative, others progressive and openly left-wing. In 2021, the party changed its name from "Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity" to "African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity" in a [merger](#) of some 14 parties, including Yoonu Askan Wi (a split from the historic Maoist party *And Jëf*, now an ally of the ruling coalition) and the National Democratic Rally (a pan-Africanist party founded by the scholar Cheikh Anta Diop).

The newer generation is best represented by [Guy Marius Sagna](#). Sagna, who was Sonko's campaign director for the 2017 legislative elections and was elected as an MP in 2022 under the PASTEUF party, is one of the founders of the FRAPP movement (Front for an Anti-Imperialist, Popular and Pan-African Revolution), which campaigns on a pan-Africanist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist platform.

The struggle of working people has always been central to political change in Senegal. How active and what role have trade unions played in recent mobilisations?

On the whole, trade unions have expressed their concern about the crisis, but have played a minimal role in the recent mobilisations. Since the mass strike of [May 1968](#), the watchword of "responsible participation" has contributed to the weakening of unions, which have become even more fragmented since the first political change of power in 2000.

Today, they tend to express their dissatisfaction through statements and local actions linked to their sector (teachers on the blockade of the University of Dakar, students on the assassination of their comrades, telecommunications workers on the recurrent Internet cuts, etc.). As we see in Ndongo Samba Sylla's definition of [forms of protest](#), trade unions have become more "corporatist" and civil society platforms "republican", rather than "proletarian".

How would you assess the development of radical alternatives emerging, and developing in Senegal, and connecting these to a wider region and international anti-capitalist politics?

Some grassroots organisations, such as FRAPP, are at the crossroads of these protest logics, campaigning against the rising cost of living and for workers' rights, and against Macky Sall's planned third term and now institutional coup d'état. They have also developed pan-African networks through initiatives such as festivals and retreats with progressive movements from other West African countries. However, the ferocity of state repression has hampered the expansion of such initiatives.

Amid the current crisis and in its immediate aftermath, it seems crucial to assess its main cause: the extraordinary powers granted to Senegal's head of state - a lasting legacy of the presidential constitution of 1963 installed by Senghor - who can rule the country as an omnipotent monarch by militarising the police and instrumentalising the judiciary. How can leading opposition figures be accused of serious crimes such as "threatening state security", "conspiracy against state authority" and "criminal association in connection with a terrorist undertaking" and then be released at the

stroke of a simple presidential decree?

Without a deep, systemic re-foundation of the governing institutions - one that includes all the segments of society that have been excluded from the social contract since 1960 - the next president coming from the ranks of the opposition will have at his disposal the same powers that oppressed him. As we have seen with the examples of [Abdoulaye Wade in 2011-2012](#) and Macky Sall today, it is one thing to seize power in the midst of a public rejection of the incumbent regime; it is another to exercise it within the current inherently repressive institutional framework.

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