

West Africa Burning

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In Senegal a manipulated ruling to allow power hungry President Abdoulaye Wade to run for a third term, in Nigeria fuel price increases that spurred a national crisis, general strikes and violent state repression, secession struggles in Mali in which scores have been killed and continued political instability in the Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso point to a region that is on fire politically.

West Africa is trembling, going through waves of tensions and outbursts of brutality and state repression as people express their growing frustrations over high unemployment, rising food prices and lack of democratic accountability. As some of Africa's most stable democracies seem on the edge and rocked by riots, could the region be prone to its own Arab Spring?

Mali

Escalated tensions between the Tuareg rebel group Azawad National Liberation Movement (MNLA) and the Mali government erupted in a series of violent clashes in the country's northern region from 17 January, breaking a 2009 agreement that had officially ended the Tuareg rebellion. As a result, thousands of people fled to nearby countries for safety, including ethnic Tuareg refugees who feared being targeted in the retaliation of the Malian military.

On 7 February, Adrian Edwards, spokesperson for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, stated that 'in the past three weeks at least 10 000 people are reported to have crossed to Niger, nine thousand have found refuge in Mauritania and three thousand in Burkina Faso'. The Red Cross put the figure of displaced citizens closer to thirty thousand, with large numbers living in 'dire conditions'.

The violence is thought to be the result of the MNLA's mission to gain autonomy in the country's northern region, but, fearing that the violence could re-ignite the country's history of ethnic tension with the Tuareg people, on 1 February Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré stressed in a televised address that Malians should not conflate the violence of the insurgents with their Tuareg compatriots. The next day, Ahmed Diane Semega, Mali's Minister for Infrastructure and Transportation, said that of 'nearly 3 600 Tuareg in the national army, fewer than 100 have deserted'. Both were commenting in the wake of demonstrations that turned violent in the country's southern regions, including the capital Bamako, as civilians retaliated following what they called the government's 'timid' response to the attacks in the north. During the demonstrations a number of Tuareg people were victimised and their businesses were looted, sending thousands more fleeing for safety.

The United Nations has urged refugees to relocate further away from the border where conditions are still volatile, but many insist that they are just waiting for things to settle before returning home.

Meanwhile a forum for peace and reconciliation has been requested by the leaders of Mali's political parties, during which they want to contain the violence in the north through creating a dialogue with the rebels, and assistance has been requested from certain neighbouring African states as well as the United States and the European Union.

Senegal and the Arab Spring?

The idea of the Arab Spring spreading to sub-Saharan Africa has given hope to many activists opposing dictatorship and authoritarianism. Things looked promising for brief moments in Zimbabwe or the DRC. But by and large the wait has been in vain. There is some irony in that the latest candidate mooted for 'people power' is Senegal, one of the few African countries with a genuine democratic tradition in the post-independence era.

Senegal has strong institutions, and is the only country in West Africa never to have suffered a military coup. The current president, Abdoulaye Wade, first came to power in 2000 when he defeated the incumbent in one of the most exciting and transparent African elections of the post-independence era. But now, to the fury of many, Senegal's constitutional court has ruled that Wade will be allowed to run for a third term in presidential elections due at the end of this month.

'Constitutional coup'

The court decided that Senegal's two-term limit does not apply to Mr Wade, because it took effect after he became president. (In fact, he introduced it himself.) This manipulation of the electoral rules is in violation of the spirit with which term-limits were conceived. The court also ruled that the world-famous singer Youssou N'dour could not stand as president, because of concerns about the alleged authenticity of the signatures on his application form. N'dour described the court's decisions as 'a constitutional coup'. He appealed to the international community 'to speak sense to Wade, otherwise we'll have a catastrophe in this country'.

Divided opposition

It is true there have been riots in several cities, and the extreme repression by the police has made an already volatile situation even worse. However, it is less certain that a popular uprising in Senegal is imminent. For a start, the opposition is divided, and somewhat confused. Some believe that Wade is beatable in the elections, and want to get on with the campaign. N'dour, on the other hand, believes the process is a sham, but even he is not advocating a boycott of the polls. Wade, who is believed to be 85 years old, shows a depressing determination to cling onto power. He has dismissed the protest movement as unrepresentative due to relatively limited mobilisation.

Nevertheless, there are similarities between some of the dictators of the Arab world who have been toppled in the past year: a partiality for garish monuments, the apparent grooming of a son as a successor, and the constitutional meddling. Another similarity is the huge number of unemployed, frustrated young men in the cities. But there are also differences. Wade is not a vicious dictator. Senegal has a more open tradition of parliamentary democracy than Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and, in fact, just about every Arab country. The next few weeks will be crucial. The presidential elections are due on 26 February. The country is divided. There is the risk of a violent campaign and a disputed election. Never mind superficial comparisons with the Arab Spring; the real story is that Senegal's democratic credentials are under threat.

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