

Report

Presidential Elections in Senegal: A Better Understanding of Recent Events

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On the night of 26th March 2012, Senegal proved once again that it is among the greatest democracies of our time. The second round of presidential elections was won by 50 year-old candidate Macky Sall who received more than 65.4% of the votes against the incumbent, President Abdoulaye Wade, who won only 34.2% of the votes. Honouring his pledge to respect the results of the polls, Wade acknowledged his defeat at 21:30, only three and a half hours after the votes were counted. Sall will be inaugurated as the 4th president of Senegal, an ex-French colony that gained its independence in 1960. The country has always had a peaceful handover of power, in line with its democratic constitution.

The Senegalese Political Landscape Following the 2012 Elections

Between 1960 and 2000, the Socialist Party of Senegal ruled the country undivided. At first headed by poet and president Léopold Sédar Senghor until 1981, the presidency and the party leadership was handed over by Senghor, upon his retirement from politics, to his rightful successor Abdou Diouf. This was done in respect of Article 37 of the constitution which states that, as the first person in the presidential line of succession, the Prime Minister is to ascend to the Presidency upon the death, retirement, resignation or removal of the President. By the time Abdou Diouf took over the presidency, Senegal was already a multi-party democracy. As early as 1974, Abdoulaye Wade had created the liberal Senegalese Democratic Party. Between the time of its creation and the alternation of parties that brought him to power in 2000, Abdoulaye Wade fought more than any other opposition leader for the consolidation of democracy in Senegal. Between 1980 and 1990, the Senegalese opposition, of which Wade was the figurehead, managed to secure substantial democratic victories for the country. These included a consensual electoral system, the creation of an independent electoral commission to safeguard free and fair elections and, lastly, contributing to the creation of an entirely multi-party state, which allowed for hundreds of political parties to exist in Senegal, the most important of which has been the result of divisions within the two most important parties.

The Socialist Party was the first to experience a split. Towards the end of the 1990s, when the second president of Senegal, Abdou Diouf, identified Ousmane Tanor Dieng as his successor two key political figures from within the party left to found their own parties: Djibo Leyti Ka who founded the Union for Democratic Renewal and Moustapha Niasse who created the Alliance of the Forces of Progress. The Democratic Party underwent the same when two of its greatest figureheads left: Macky Sall who created the Alliance for the Republic and Idrissa Seck who founded the Rewmi Party (or Senegalese Patriotic Rally). The fragmentation of the Senegalese political scene from 2000 onwards played a determining role in the formation of coalitions on the eve of the 2012 presidential elections. On 26 February 2012, at the end of the first round, five coalitions emerged on the Senegalese political stage: the Coalition of Allied Forces for Victory (FAL 2000) constituted around President Wade, with 35% of votes, the Coalition Benno Ak Macky under the leadership of Macky Sall holding 26% of the votes, Moustapha Niasse's Benno Siggil Sénégal Coalition with 14% of the votes, the Benno AK Tanor Coalition with 11% and lastly Idrissa Seck's Rewmi with 8%.

The Presidential elections were peaceful throughout both rounds, much to the delight of the political classes, the electorate and the independent observers. This relief followed after the pre-election turbulence of the last two years. President Abdoulaye Wade had succeeded in alienating himself from large sectors of the Senegalese political and civilian classes by undermining the democratic principles for which he had previously fought for, for most of his life. In 12 years as head of state he made 14 revisions to the Constitution motivated, for the most part, by his desire to prolong his stay in power.

The elevated lifestyle of members of the government; the increased taxation on essential items; the degradation of water and electricity infrastructure resulting in poor service delivery; the rapid enriching of Wade and his allies; the persecution of the opposition and; least but not least, the state's rampant nepotism; have all strongly contributed to general discontent in the country.

It is commonly accepted that Wade has been the cause of Senegal's pervading nepotism during his 12 years as head of state. Unknown in Senegal before Abdoulaye Wade's coming into power, his son from a French mother, Karim Wade, was propelled into a position of great power while not even able to speak Wolof, the national language of the country. By the 2012 elections, Karim Wade held four of the government's most important ministerial portfolios, earning him the local nickname of 'Minister of the Heavens and Earth'. Without any scruples, Wade got rid of all potential successors in favor of his son, including his previous two Prime Ministers, Idrissa Seck and Macky Sall, the latter of whom ultimately caused his downfall.

Between June 2008 and May 2009, Wade's mismanagement led the opposition, with the backing of the civic society of Senegal, to establish the 'National Assizes'. Boycotted by Abdoulaye Wade and his allies, this foundation aimed to find solutions to the country's multidimensional problems as well as redressing Wade's abuses of various Senegalese political and legal institutions. The Charter of the 'National Assizes' was signed by the opposition parties who, in doing so, committed themselves to abide by its rules should the country ever undergo an alternation of parties. For the most part, the charter focused on the need for separation of powers as well as decreased presidential power, something that has been at the root of Wade's authoritarian drift. It is no doubt because of the mobilization of the political and civic classes of the country under this charter that Wade's defeat turned out to be so significant in the recent elections.

Lessons from the Senegalese Elections

Amongst the most important lessons to be drawn from Senegal's recent elections is that the country is seeing the birth of a young Senegalese electorate that have been the primary contributors to the changed political landscape of the country. Between 1960 and 2000, the Socialist Party had maintained power by promoting policies biased towards its supporters. In other words, the party was willfully nurturing alliances with powerful figures of its constituency (religious leaders, traditional leaders, leading citizens, businessmen) that could secure votes in its favor from the majority of the Senegalese rural population. In exchange for their influence, these people would be granted various privileges from the state such as import licenses, loans (often left unpaid), subsidies and grants, various positions in the government, and study bursaries. With increased urbanisation and the resulting access to modern education, Senegal saw the emergence of an urban youth, who managed to emancipate itself from the hold of these influential citizens loyal to the party. This urban youth, organised around various social and civic movements (student associations, rap artists and others) was able to mobilise itself with enough power to save the country's democratic institutions and vote Wade out.

Another important role-player in the country's political life has been the press. During the first three decades following the country's independence the media was mostly state controlled. In the last two decades, however, Senegal has seen the rise of a dynamic and independent press which has proved competent in treating all political, social, economic and cultural issues of the country while it also recognized the utmost importance of its national languages. During the 2000 and 2012 presidential elections, the press was able to broadcast the counting of votes in real time, allowing the nation to remain informed of the results as they happened thereby inhibiting the possibility of any major counting scam or the fraudulent seizure of power. In that sense, the independent media of Senegal greatly contributed to the upholding of democracy during the elections.

The Senegalese Model

This third peaceful transition of power in the country makes Senegal a true model for democracy in West Africa. Senegal is the only continental West African country never to have undergone a military coup, neither before nor after what is called 'The Third Wave of Democratization' in the modern world. Even after this third wave dating back to the 1980's, West Africa in general and Senegal's neighbouring countries in particular, have undergone numerous military coups. In 2007, the army overthrew the democratically-

elected Mauritanian president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi. The next year, in 2008, the army rose to power in Guinea after the death of President Lansana Konté, who had himself usurped power following the death of Sékou Touré in 1984. More recently, as the second round of Senegal's elections was being held, a mutiny in Mali resulted in the ousting of democratically elected President Amadou Toumani Touré.

It has to be said that the third democratic transition in Senegal was never a given. President Wade did everything he could to stay in power. After having proclaimed in 2007 that he had locked the Senegalese constitution into prohibiting third presidential mandates, he made a turnabout by forcing the self-appointed Constitutional Council to ratify his candidacy for the upcoming 2012 presidential elections. In June 2011, he tried to pass a constitutional amendment to the National Assembly (which, in any case, was vested in his interests since the opposition boycotted it), allowing any presidential candidate with 25% of the votes after the first round of the upcoming elections to win the presidency. The amendment also sought to guarantee the concurrent election of the president and the vice-president so that the vice-president should become the immediate successor to the presidential post should the latter be vacant. It was obvious to all observers that, whereas Wade was unsure of winning the 2012 elections after the first round, he was at least confident of being in the lead by 25% of the votes. By siding with his son, he was hoping to manipulate Senegalese institutions in an effort to succeed in his desire for a dynastic succession. The strong opposition of the constituency and civic society united under a movement known as the 'June 23 Movement' forced him to abandon this project. So if the alternation of parties has been successful this March in Senegal, it is because a large coalition of political movements and strong civic action took to the streets forcing the party to withdraw an illegitimate and unjust law. One has to remember that all of this happened under the watchful eye of the international community, most notably the United States, France and more generally, the European Union (EU) which had their heart set on seeing democracy triumph in Senegal. The EU did not hesitate to send strong disapproving signals to the party in power each time the latter attempted to flagrantly violate the democratic principles at stake.

Challenges Facing President Macky Sall

Macky Sall won the elections thanks to the transfer of votes of candidates who fell out on the first round. These candidates, who represent numerous coalitions, no doubt expect to be rewarded with ministerial portfolios or other nominations to key political posts. The question then is to what extent Sall will be able to fulfill the expectations of his allies without falling into the same traps as the outgoing president, namely, the creation of an overpowering government and the funneling of state funds towards the payment of political allies.

Macky Sall has pledged a full audit of the state's coffers with the intent to hold those responsible for the bankruptcy of the state fully accountable. Given that he was himself a minister as well as Prime Minister under Wade (having incidentally run the 2007 presidential campaign for Wade) Sall takes some responsibility for the mismanagement of Wade's government. This further poses the question of how far he is able to take the auditing process of Senegal's public finances under the Democratic Party without shooting himself in the foot.

For the most part, the Senegalese people did approve of President Wade (whose record is not entirely negative since he contributed significantly to the development of the country's infrastructure), but have been swayed by the substantial rise in the cost of living. Today, the people want drastic changes: a drop in price for essential items and essential food items (rice, oil, sugar and petrol), more jobs for the younger segment of the population, the improvement of living conditions in rural areas, improvements in the health and education sectors etc. Should Sall fail to deliver on these issues, he will very soon have to face great opposition to his regime.

Considering the electorate's desire for change, a renewal of the political class is also in order. Yet, considering the current political configuration of Macky Sall's allies (the very

same ones who make-up the old order of Senegalese politics), it seems he will have little choice but to nominate a good number of them to important political posts. The question, then, is: to what extent will Sall be able to create a new order with the old political class?

Challenges Facing Senegalese Democracy

Democracy in Senegal faces two important challenges in the near future. The first will be to reform the existing state institutions. The National Assizes blames most of the current national problems on the excesses of Wade's government. One of their findings is that Senegalese institutions must be reformed in order to curb presidential power and advance the separation of powers. Will the new president keep his promise of reform by letting go of some of his power for the good of the country and upholding the principles of democracy? Or will he seek to consolidate his own power by strengthening the presidential majority around him while ensuring he stays the 'Master of the Game', to use an expression much favoured by former President Abdou Diouf?

A second important challenge for the new government will be to consolidate the unification of Senegal by finding a sustainable solution to the separatist claims of Casamance, a conflict that has been raging for 30 years without any prospective resolutions offered to this day. If one considers that the fall of neighboring Mali, which was beginning to earn some credit for its democratic strides, was largely brought about by the inability of the government to handle the Touareg rebellion in Northern Mali. Therefore there is much concern that the Casamance situation could pose a threat to national unity and to the upholding of democracy in Senegal.

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