



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Africa Programme Paper AFP PP 2012/02

Senegal's Elections: Towards Dictatorship or Consolidating Democracy?

Paul Melly

February 2012

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions, but the ultimate responsibility for accuracy lies with this document's author(s). The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Senegal's stability is being tested by President Abdoulaye Wade's intent to run for a third term in presidential elections on 26 February 2012. A Wade victory would prompt unrest in Dakar, especially if the elections are perceived to be fraudulent. Post-election instability may force change or simply peter out, depending on reactions in other regions and cities.
- Abdoulaye Wade is a president of international repute, but his bid for another term has badly divided Senegalese and has created growing concern among neighbours and allies. Senegal has been regarded as a political model in West Africa and a reference for democratic constitutional order; an anchor state in a rough neighbourhood. This election could undermine this record.
- At the heart of the issue is the president's singular personality and ruling style. Wade is 85 and he continues to see himself as the one man who can provide the leadership that Senegal needs. There is also a more basic truth about the Wade era: the concentration of decision-making power in the presidency, and particularly in the hands of Wade.
- A patchy development and economic record has generated popular discontent over long-standing socio-economic problems. The fragmentation of political alliances, the spread of corruption and Mr Wade's constitutional tinkering would all make for a heated electoral process. But there is no doubt that fundamental constitutional questions are at the heart of the current situation, and to some extent draw all the other issues together.

INTRODUCTION

For many, Senegal has long been an anchor of democracy in an unstable region; thus the current picture of mass demonstrations, opposition leaders on the street, and even the threat of critical instability in a country that has never seen a military coup is particularly alarming. Abdoulaye Wade is a president of genuine international renown, whose election in 2000 marked a real step forward for democracy. But his bid for a third term is now the target of ferocious criticism at home and worried scepticism abroad.

The first round of the contest is on 26 February. No one can predict what will happen: at this stage it is far from certain the vote will even take place, or if it does, whether many citizens will think it worth turning out. Prospects for a second-round run-off are even less predictable. Opponents may refuse to recognize the validity of the process or, if Wade wins, the outcome.

Bitter wrangles over elections and their conduct are almost routine in today's sub-Saharan Africa. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Guinea, Gabon – the list of states where the conduct of the polls has been questionable or overtly fraudulent, or the result has met with angry challenge, is a long one.

It is less than a year since military force was required to dislodge Laurent Gbagbo from the presidential residence in Côte d'Ivoire after he refused to accept his UN-certified defeat by Alassane Ouattara in the landmark elections of November 2010. In October 2011, Cameroon's 78-year old President Paul Biya secured a third seven-year stint in office in a poll shunned by much of the electorate, after a compliant national assembly voted to scrap the two-term limit set by the 1996 constitution. This paper charts how Senegal has come so close to the prospect of destabilization and what might now occur.

A singular nation

But the Senegalese have different expectations: they see their country – with some justification – as a political model and a reference for democratic constitutional order in West Africa. The press is free, vehemently so; civil society is lively. The military stays out of politics, and most state officials see themselves as the servants of the republic, not a particular political allegiance. The administrative machine is characterized by a culture of accountability and basic respect for citizens.

The historical roots of this outlook stretch back to the colonial era. A minority of Senegalese were voting in French elections even before the First World War and in 1914 Blaise Diagne became the first African to be elected to the French national assembly. Strikes by railway workers in the 1920s and the 1940s became landmarks in the development of the labour movement in Africa.

Moreover, such 'modern' institutional patterns were growing in a society that already had a strong sense of cohesion and cultural identity. The Wolof language is spoken almost everywhere except

the far south, while Sufi religious brotherhoods such as the Mourides and the Tijaniya play an influential role.

As anywhere, there are flaws, abuses of the system, corruption and failings in governance. After more than two decades a comprehensive and durable resolution of the unrest in the southern region of Casamance has yet to be found. There has been little progress since talks in 2005 between the government and the separatist Mouvement des Forces Démocratiques de Casamance (MFDC) failed to end this 30-year insurgency. Intensifying violence, compounded by MFDC factionalism and deterioration into criminal activity, make a durable resolution urgent but distant. Elsewhere there have been occasional instances of heavy-handedness by security forces.

But fundamentally, Senegal is right to see itself as one of Africa's most advanced countries in terms of democracy and the functioning of the state. That is what makes the crisis surrounding the 2012 election so significant – and potentially so dangerous for the stability and political development of West Africa as a whole.

'The bar should be set high for Senegal,' argued one senior Western diplomat in 2010, just as the potential for confrontation around the next presidential contest was becoming clear. In a practical reflection of this view, the European Union and the US readily responded to a request from Wade for technical expert assistance in carrying out a rigorous updating of the electoral roll.

But above all, it is the Senegalese themselves who set that bar high. Their strong self-image and pride in their country's distinctive political and governance culture, and their expectations of national leadership, largely explain why Abdoulaye Wade's bid for re-election is such an explosive issue.

Constitution

A range of factors has brought the country to the present impasse. A patchy development and economic record have generated popular discontent over long-standing problems such as the highcost of living, poor social welfare, unemployment and persistent power shortages in Dakar. The fragmentation of political alliances, demographic and social trends, the spread of corruption and Mr Wade's constitutional tinkering would all make for a heated electoral process. But there is no doubt that fundamental constitutional questions are at the heart of the current situation, and to some extent draw all the other issues together.

Senegal's move away from the one-party state model that had come to predominate in post-colonial Africa began in 1974, when President Léopold Sédar Senghor allowed Wade to form the Parti Démocratique Sénégalais (PDS), as part of a new limited pluralist system. The PDS took up the designated liberal berth, alongside Marxist-Leninists and Senghor's ruling socialists.

It was more than 15 years before most other francophone African states followed Senegal down the multi-party path, following the revolutions in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War. This

enhanced the sense of difference in Senegal – where the gradual process of democratization was effectively completed with the election of 2000, when Senghor's successor, Abdou Diouf, gracefully accepted his defeat at the hands of Wade and the PDS.

National pride in the country's traditions of peaceful political development and respect for governance rules is deep-rooted. '*Touchez-pas à ma constitution*' was one of the slogans of street protesters who in 2011 pressured Wade into abandoning plans to lower the threshold required for outright victory in the first round of a presidential election to just 25% and create a position of vice-president.

Over the past twelve years Wade has exploited the PDS dominance of parliament to push through numerous constitutional changes, for example cutting the presidential term from seven years to five, and then restoring it to seven. But last summer's abortive plans were seen as a self-interested step too far. They would have given the president, facing divided opponents, a chance to snatch another term in power on a minority vote and avoid the tougher test of a final round face-off against a single opposition standard-bearer. Equal antipathy was stirred by the proposed vice-presidency post. Despite Wade's denials, this was generally viewed as a device to line up his son Karim for the succession.

Anger at such a perceived distortion of core principles also fuelled recent protests at the decision taken by the constitutional council in January 2012 to allow Wade to run for a third term. This was on the grounds that the introduction of a new constitution in 2001 means that his first 2000-07 stint in office 'does not count' under the current legal limit of two consecutive terms.

Many constitutional experts dispute the view reached by the council, which is headed by a Wade appointee. There is also a widespread feeling that, regardless of legal technicalities, Senegal is too advanced a country to need a president who remains in office for decades or seeks to pass on the top job to his son.

Critics claim that Senegal is fundamentally different from countries such as Gabon, and that civil society will not accept a monarchical presidency of the type seen in some other African states. They claim that if eight years is enough for Obama, or 10 years for Sarkozy – if they are re-elected – no Senegalese president should need more than two terms.

However, those around Wade report that his self-belief in his own unique capacity to lead the country forward remains unshaken and he is unlikely to opt for an honourable retirement.

Concentration of power

At the heart of the issue is the president's singular personality and ruling style. Wade is 85 and he continues to see himself as the one man who can provide the leadership that Senegal needs. There is also a more basic truth about the Wade era: the concentration of decision-making power in the presidency, and particularly in the hands of Wade.

Administration insiders insist that over the last couple of years, prime minister Souleymane Ndéné Ndiaye has assumed much of the day-to-day work of government leadership. But this is certainly not how things are perceived by ordinary Senegalese. The president seems to be at the heart of everything: setting policy, negotiating political deals or leading the charge against his opponents, opening projects and presenting himself as the man who runs the country.

The evidence tends to confirm that Wade is still assertively in charge. A routine example illustrates his approach to government leadership. In November 2011 he suddenly scrapped plans to cooperate with the Czech Republic in developing a new tram network for Dakar, a partnership already negotiated at senior diplomatic level. His decision came out of the blue, catching the government's top transport planners, who had spent months working on the tram initiative, off-guard.

This episode typifies Wade's quixotic and hugely personalized handling of power. Combined with the massive responsibilities entrusted to his son Karim, this undermined Senegal's conventional policy-making structures and the authority of most key departmental ministers; it has even had an impact on the management of effective relations with donors.

Despite his repeated denials of a succession plan for Karim, the prominent role that he has already given his son is regarded by many Senegalese as an insult to the traditions of a nation where the offspring of previous heads of state have usually pursued their own careers out of the limelight. Summoned home by his father from a banking job in London to act as a presidential adviser, Karim Wade has overseen key infrastructure projects and headed the agency charged with arrangements for the 2008 Islamic summit. An attempt to establish himself in electoral politics with a run for the mayoralty of Dakar in 2009 ended in crushing defeat at the hands of the rising Parti Socialiste star Khalifa Sall. Yet despite this public rejection, Karim was then entrusted with one of the most powerful roles in government, as state minister for a sprawling new portfolio encompassing international cooperation, infrastructure, regional development and aviation.

In October 2010, with Dakar struggling with power cuts, the president added the energy department to Karim's ministerial empire. There have been suggestions that he may now control half of all government expenditure. This seems implausible, given the size of salary budgets at big-employer departments such as education and defence. However, Karim clearly holds sway over much of the capital investment by the Senegalese state – so where there is scope for government to make real political and development choices about spending he wields critical power. Such is his profile in the eyes of the public and the media that most other members of the government are barely noticed.

The prominence of this presidential son somehow echoes the intensely personal governing style of Abdoulaye Wade himself. Wade may have come to power through the democratic ballot box but his style of rule is in many ways that of a bygone era 'big man' African president – albeit without the authoritarian repression that typified such regimes. The personal focus of decision-making has amplified the impact of Wade's approach to the development of Senegal.

Ambition and *grands projets*

Coming to the presidency, Wade inherited a country with strong institutions and a large educated middle class but few mineral resources and a thin agricultural base vulnerable to the fragilities of the Sahelian climate. His response was hugely energizing. He raised Senegal's international profile, claiming a seat at the global summit table as one of the faces of 'NEPAD' – the New African Partnership for Development – alongside the likes of South Africa and Nigeria (although he later became highly critical of the initiative).

Nor was he afraid to show economic ambition. He planned a technology park for Dakar, and soon embarked on a wave of big infrastructure projects, entrusted to Karim, with the hope of establishing Senegal as a regional trade and service centre. The *grand projet* roll call is impressive, including a new international airport to develop the capital as a regional travel hub and attract more tourists, the construction of a sweeping boulevard along the city's Atlantic shoreline, and a toll motorway to speed up access to the rest of the country.

Other examples include a programme of one-off development grants to the mayors of large provincial towns. The road to Tambacounda in the far south-east was upgraded. A new container terminal has just opened in Dakar port and Wade has been exploring the possibility of Chinese help in revamping the decayed railway line between Dakar and Mali's capital city, Bamako. A third mobile telecoms licence has been awarded.

But the economic impact of this big project focus has been disputed and has stirred political antagonism, amid widespread evidence of an unprecedented upsurge in corruption. There have been allegations that many of the projects have been advanced through opaque deals with particular business interests – while others with whom the president has fallen out have found themselves excluded.

Two affairs in particular have highlighted these transparency concerns, and have attracted heavy coverage in the Dakar press. In 2010 the Senegalese magazine *La Gazette* alleged that information had emerged in a court in Dubai about payments of \$40 million made in connection with the award of the third GSM licence to the Sudatel group from Sudan. Meanwhile, Wade has been embroiled in a bitter political and legal dispute with Bara Tall, the owner of Senegal's largest indigenous construction firm, who is seen as an ally of Idrissa Seck, a former PDS minister now opposed to Wade and challenging for the presidency. The government has been accused of freezing Tall's company out of all public contracts, despite its long track record of competent delivery. Whatever the truth about these particular affairs, and despite some measures taken by Wade to combat corruption, evidence points strongly to a dramatic increase in unexplained wealth among some influential Senegalese closely linked to the government.

Moreover, both some domestic critics and some external development partners are concerned that the focus on prestige projects has led to a neglect of more fundamental development concerns and social service delivery. While there have been some grassroots successes, such as the Goana agricultural campaign launched in 2008, which has moved Senegal closer to self-sufficiency in

some food crops, critics complain of a lack of strategic thinking about long-term poverty reduction and basic socio-economic development. They feel Wade is distracted on his beloved prestige projects: for example, the money that would have funded the preparatory work for the previously mentioned tram system – a service that many ordinary Dakarrais could use – has been diverted to help fund the rail link to the new airport, which is of less use to ordinary citizens.

As the government struggled to mobilize cash to deal with the electorally incendiary issue of urban power cuts, it reduced the share of the budget allocated to health and education from 40% in 2010 to 35% in 2011. This came at a time when teachers' pay had been up to seven months in arrears and provoked repeated strikes. With the system still heavily reliant on poorly qualified, low-paid 'volunteer' teachers and almost no money left for school buildings, many children in some districts, even in Dakar, are effectively denied access to state education. Even when government initiatives are announced, shortcomings are widespread. Flooding, for instance, remains a persistent problem in some poor suburbs of Dakar, despite the president's public promotion of new housing projects.

Such neglect of basic needs has dismayed some donors. Sweden has shut down its main aid programme, while the Netherlands has dropped Senegal from its list of priority recipients. Other development partners have complained that Senegal failed to give adequate attention to the drafting of a detailed third-generation Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

The election challenge

Such development choices have a political impact, particularly in a country experiencing rapid rates of urbanization. Wade has maintained good relations with the influential leaders of the religious brotherhoods, and in rural areas his profile is likely to far outstrip that of most other politicians, particularly as Senegalese politics is not heavily shaped by regional or ethnic loyalties. However, the president is at risk of suffering a considerable loss of support among urban voters, particularly youth in Dakar and its suburbs, where the M23 and *Y'en a marre* campaigns, opposing his re-election bid and pressing for change, have been highly influential and mobilized many first-time voters to register on the electoral roll.

Wade's strongly personalized ruling style and the unpopularity of Karim leave him exposed to the risk of a powerful 'time for change' backlash. The focus on Wade himself allows him to claim credit for successes but leaves him to carry the blame for disappointments and failures. Most younger voters will not think of him as the battling opposition leader of the late 20th century who finally captured the presidency. For them he is the incumbent; one repeatedly accused of dynastic ambitions for his family.

Senegal – like much of West Africa – was decades ahead of the Arab world in moving down the democratic path. Even so, this election could sound the echoes of the Arab Spring; particularly the downfall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and his son and onetime succession favourite, Gamal. In this tough fight Wade finds himself with few powerful allies.

He has appointed numerous ministers to narrow technical briefs, but often they are relatively young and lack a significant political base of their own. Other than Karim, there are few government figures heading powerful departments and with real personal profile and authority of their own to deploy in the Wade cause. One by one, the president has fallen out with most of his heavyweight allies – some of whom have now re-emerged as his key rivals in the February 2012 presidential race.

The opposition is not without problems. The credibility of the Benno Siggil Senegaal alliance has been damaged by its failure to agree on its first objective, the selection of a common candidate. Instead, both socialist leader Ousmane Tanor Dieng and Moustapha Niasse, the choice of the other alliance parties, have entered the contest as rivals. But Idrissa Seck and the former prime minister Macky Sall, both originally from the PDS camp, could make a significant impact. Seck is a smooth media performer, while Sall has a genuinely popular touch and has spent years touring villages nationwide, to lay the foundations for his campaign.

One hard to measure factor is the impact of the singer Youssou N'Dour, whose candidacy was rejected by the constitutional council, on the grounds that he had failed to collect sufficient valid signatures of support. He has wide appeal among urban youth and is continuing to play a prominent role in the anti-Wade campaign.

It is impossible to reliably predict the election outcome, although it seems probable that Wade will top the poll in the first round. International partners, notably the US and France, have made plain their concern. But the president has already begun to use this as a campaign card, accusing them of interference.

Opposition prospects for a run-off challenge will depend largely on two factors. First, the candidate who qualifies to face Wade must be someone with the personal appeal to reach beyond his own supporters and attract votes from across the base of opposition support. Sall or Seck seem possibly the most likely to manage that. Secondly, the opposition must maintain the unity it has exhibited during the campaign. Early February 2012 demonstrations and campaign meetings have seen many candidates, and N'Dour, standing together and presenting a common front.

Because of the two-round voting system, opponents may be able to forge a sense of shared purpose that allows their electorate to unite in backing a single challenger in a second round – if the election goes that far. They have even talked of forming a 'national transition council', should Wade win, to challenge his right to rule.

The political temperature in Dakar and its suburbs is boiling. Any sense that the election has somehow been fixed, combined with the street anger over the president's candidacy, could fuel mass urban protest. But whether this has a major impact or peters out may depend on the mood in other regions and cities, and the degree to which Wade has retained the rural vote. If the opposition does mount a big street challenge to a questionably re-elected Abdoulaye Wade and mass popular dissent spreads to other regions, then all bets are off.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Melly is an Associate Fellow of the Africa Programme at Chatham House. He is an expert on sub-Saharan Africa, with a particular emphasis on politics and development issues in francophone countries. He also closely follows regional peacekeeping and governance issues, African relations with the international donor community, and the evolution of UK, French, US and EU policies towards Africa. Paul is a journalist and has reported extensively on the politics and economics of debates over development, the evolution of the major donors' policies and the handling of key issues such as grassroots poverty reduction, debt relief and donor conditionality.