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Author: Viktor Goncharov

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Senegal: from prison cell to the presidency Part One: The end of the “liberal democracy” regime?

In Senegal’s presidential elections held on 24 March this year, Bassirou Diomaye Faye, 44, won a convincing victory for the opposition forces with 54 per cent of the vote. Former Prime Minister Amadou Ba of the ruling Alliance for the Republic coalition of outgoing President Macky Sall came in second with 35 per cent of his supporters.

These elections were preceded by a period of intense internal political struggle between Macky Sall’s ruling “democratic regime” and the opposition, linked to the March 2021 arrest of Ousmane Sonko, leader of the African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity (PASTEF) party, a member of parliament and third-place finisher in the 2019 presidential election with 16 per cent of the vote, on charges of defamation and insulting the Minister of Tourism.

The opposition saw his arrest as another attempt by President Macky Sall to eliminate a serious political rival for the 2024 presidential election and staged protests in many cities across the country. During the crackdown, dozens of protesters were killed, hundreds were injured and about 1,000 people were arrested.

Al-Jazeera’s latest investigations into these events, conducted in conjunction with the Qatar-based Causa Foundation, reveal that the Senegalese government, led by Amadou Ba, with close ties to Washington, used a special unit of the Senegalese police for this purpose.

As it turned out, the Rapid Reaction Group known as GAR-SI, formed and trained by Western specialists with EU money from among the Senegalese police to fight armed gangs, smuggling, human trafficking and other cross-border crimes on the Mali-Senegal border, was in fact also used to repress in Senegal the protests of the opposition party PASTEF led by

Ousmane Sonko between 2021 and 2023. Amnesty International estimates that at least 60 people were victims of this repression.

Among the victims of this repression was President-elect Bassirou Diomaye Faye, who spent more than 11 months in detention over a Facebook post that was considered dangerous by the authorities to the sovereignty and security of the state.

Bassirou Diomaye Faye, a devout Muslim, obtained a master's degree in law from the University of Dakar after graduating from high school. In 2004, he enrolled in the National School of Public Administration, which trains senior government officials, and was appointed tax inspector after graduation.

While working in the tax authorities, he met his future political mentor, Ousmane Sonko, who gained a reputation as a tough fighter against corruption in the tax system. He joined the PASTEF party, which he founded, and quickly became its second most important functionary after Ousmane Sonko.

One of the reasons for Diomaye Faye's arrest, according to experts of the Canadian Digital Journal, is the rapid growth of his popularity in the ranks of the PASTEF party. While serving as its secretary general, he proved to be a fairly successful party organiser, skilfully balancing the interests of various factions through a compromise approach, while at the same time developing party programme documents from a left-wing pan-Africanist perspective, in which the ruling Macky Sall saw a threat to the dominance of its liberal establishment.

On 3 February, the incumbent President, whose second term at the head of state ended on 2 April 2024, announced the postponement of elections scheduled for 25 February to 15 December 2024, which was seen by the opposition as an attempt to extend his stay in power.

This sparked a new wave of anti-government demonstrations. Opposition representatives in Parliament attempting to block the adoption of the bill to postpone the elections were arrested, and tear gas was fired by police against supporters gathered outside Parliament.

Ultimately, the Constitutional Council of Senegal declared the postponement of the elections an illegitimate act and, under widespread pressure from Macky Sall, who had recently begun to lose the confidence of the population, had to schedule them for 24 March 2024.

Opinion polls show that during Macky Sall's rule, the number of respondents satisfied with the state of the level of democracy in the country has declined from 64 per cent in 2014 to 18 per cent in 2022, while the number of those dissatisfied with his authoritarian ways has increased from 19 per cent in 2017 to 57 per cent in 2022. At the same time, in 2021, more than half of Senegalese rated the French presence, or rather overreach, in their country as negative.

According to experts of the American publication Responsible Statecraft, the decline of Macky Sall's authority and his own undermining of the foundations of Senegalese democracy began after he began to force the justice system to imprison his political opponents on false charges, especially after the events of 2021.

As a consequence, and much to the surprise of many, the elections scheduled for 24 March brought to power a "non-system" politician who was released from prison on amnesty ten days before the elections. In this context, as The Economist notes, former Senegalese President Macky Sall, who had tried to unconstitutionally run for a third term, hailed the peaceful outcome of the vote as "a victory for Senegalese democracy".

This is coming from the President of a country long considered a bastion of democracy in Africa, who in April 2023, feeling threatened by his party's defeat in the upcoming elections, ordered the arrest of Diomaye Faye on charges of contempt of court and "undermining state security" following his social media posts criticising the falsification of charges against PASTEF leader Ousmane Sonko.

Diomaye Faye's undisputed victory in the first round of voting was an unexpected surprise for all parties involved. First and foremost, it came as a shock to the ruling political elite, which, as Le Monde notes, he intends to put on the back burner, launch an uncompromising fight against corruption and protect the country's "sovereignty" by renegotiating contracts with oil companies and establishing "balanced and respectful" relations with France, while not ruling out security co-operation with Russia.

As The Economist notes, Senegal's new President has joined the club of those African figures who, amid growing popular discontent with the policies of "greying leaders and corrupt political elites", have taken on the burden of responsibility for governing Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. But unlike military leaders, he came to power not through a military coup but through the ballot box.

Welcoming the election of Diomaye Faye as President, Burkina Faso's Captain Ibrahim Traoré said Faye's mandate represents a symbol of a new era of a relaxed, free and sovereign Africa. He added, however, that he was ready to work together to "strengthen sub-regional and international co-operation".

The new leaders of Senegal and the military leaders of these countries represent a broad populist reaction to the instability in the region, poverty, chronic unemployment and growing anti-French sentiment caused by Paris failed neo-colonial policies, concludes an author from The Economist.

In this regard, Business Day, a South African newspaper, emphasises that “the victory in the presidential election in Senegal of an opposition candidate who opposes excessive Western influence and prioritises national interests is a major breakthrough towards independent development, not only for the region but for the African continent as a whole”.

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Viktor GONCHAROV, african expert, candidate of sciences in economics, especially for online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”